

Lean in and lift up: Female superintendents share their career path choices

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research was to inform professional practice pertaining to the preparation of female administrators as future school superintendents. Twenty female superintendents in Texas were interviewed using a qualitative research approach. Strategies, career experiences and perception of barriers were identified using open-ended questions. Qualitative analysis provided insight into how current female superintendents navigated their career paths, as well as recommendations for how to advance career opportunities for future female administrators and assist more women into the superintendency.

Keywords: female superintendent, educational leadership, school administrator

INTRODUCTION

Everything that helps wear away age-old prejudices contributes to the advancement of women and of humanity.

Annie Webb Blanton, 1870-1945

First Female State Superintendent of Public Instruction for Texas (Cottrell, 1993)

Male superintendents lead more school systems in the United States than women although women largely outnumber men as classroom teachers (Grogan and Brunner, 2005). In 1992, 6.6 percent of the superintendents were female, a percentage that increased to 13.2 percent in 2000 and gradually continued to increase to 18 percent in 2005 (Vogt, 2007). In 2011, 24.1 percent or one out of every four superintendents was female (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen Young & Ellerson, 2011). Continuing at this rate, 0.7 percent annual increase, it will take approximately 77 more years for women to no longer be underrepresented in the superintendency (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). The issue of gender inequities in educational leadership cannot be ignored (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010).

Similar statistics are reflected in Texas where male superintendents outnumber female superintendents. In 2011, there were 1029 school districts in the state of Texas with 189 of those districts or 18.4 percent being led by female superintendents (Texas Education Agency, 2011). This percentage increased in 2014 with female superintendents leading 278 or 25 percent of the 1,198 school districts in the state of Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2014).

Why are more women not being hired for the position of superintendent? According to Grogan & Shakeshaft (2011) the number of women achieving a superintendent position does not match the number of certified and qualified woman aspiring to the superintendency. Are there gender related differences in the strategies, experiences and barriers during a woman's career path that can preclude her from the superintendency? This study sought to gain an understanding of the career pathways and experiences of female superintendents so as to prepare and inform future female administrators more efficiently on obtaining a superintendency. Researchers involved in this study were also influenced by Sheryl Sandberg's book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (2013). Sandberg (2013) examines women's progress in achieving leadership roles and offers solutions to empower women to achieve their full potential. Despite the great achievements of women in the workforce, the number of females in top executive positions has barely changed in the last decade (Sandberg, 2013). Women constitute less than one-fourth (18 percent) of our elected congressional officials and there are only 4.2 percent or 21 female members of the Fortune 500 CEOs (Sellers, 2012).

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Women continue to be underrepresented among the ranks of public school superintendents despite having similar incentives and disincentives as men when considering a career as superintendent, outnumbering men as educators, and comprising at least half of the students in educational leadership programs. The purpose of this study was to examine the researchers' belief that gaining an understanding of the career path choices of those women that have successfully pursued and attained the role of superintendent in Texas might provide insight into better preparation of future female administrators and inform more women on how to attain the superintendency.

Gender Inequities in Educational Leadership

In 2008, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) sent an electronic survey to a random sample of 7,552 superintendents titled, “AASA Study: What's the Status of the Superintendent Pipeline?” With a 28 percent response rate, 85 percent of the respondents indicated there were not enough candidates to fill the anticipated job openings in the superintendency. Respondents said the top two initiatives to increase the supply of high-quality superintendent candidates are identifying and encouraging superintendent candidates and creating mentoring or coaching networks. Both initiatives could potentially increase the number of qualified female candidates to the leadership position of superintendent (Sutton, 2008).

The same survey instrument (AASA, 2008), asked respondents to identify and rank order the three most significant incentives and disincentives of the role of the superintendent. Respondents felt the top three incentives for those considering a career as a superintendent included (1) making a difference (74 percent); (2) leading learning (52 percent); and (3) compensation (41 percent). No significant difference existed in the ranking of incentives between the male superintendents and the female superintendents (Sutton, 2008).

The top three disincentives identified by respondents to the AASA survey (2008) for those considering a career as a superintendent included (1) funding for public schools (54 percent); (2) family sacrifices (46 percent); and (3) school board relations/challenges (44 percent). Women (52 percent) ranked family sacrifices as a disincentive more often than males (45 percent), but the other top disincentives were closely ranked (Sutton, 2008).

Reports of forecasted superintendent shortages (Domenech, 2010) leads to the question of why more women are not hired for this position when 76.1% of educators are women (National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2011). According to Heilman (2001), much of society still believes certain genders are better suited for specific jobs and the main reason women are not leading organizations is due to gender bias. An existing stereotype is that successful leaders should portray masculine behaviors of authority and discipline, whereas women are considered to be emotional and collaborative (Krüger, 2008). Contrary to their male counterparts, women often delegate or lean toward facilitative leadership (Montgomery & Growe, 2003). This stereotypical frame of effective leadership has worked against aspiring female leaders in public schools (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010).

According to Blount (1998) historical factors beyond women’s control, such as men returning from war to fill positions, can be attributed to the lack of women in school administration. Heilman (2001) describes, in his Lack of Fit model, the barriers faced by women leading organizations based on society’s beliefs about which gender is better suited for specific jobs. Glass (2000) analyzed the data from AASA’s “2000 Study of the American School Superintendency,” and provided further insight into why the number of female superintendents lags in comparison to the number of male superintendents. He suggested the following seven reasons for why there are fewer female superintendents (Glass, 2000):

1. Women are not in positions that normally lead to the superintendency (p.28).

The majority of women are elementary teachers and the majority of men are secondary teachers. According to Glass (2000) being an elementary teacher is a disadvantage because elementary teachers have fewer opportunities for entry points into administration. Elementary teachers have to jump straight from the classroom to the principalship, whereas secondary teachers can move

up the ladder as an assistant principal or as a high school department chair which puts them in a better position that may lead to the superintendency.

2. Women are not gaining superintendent's credentials in preparation programs (p.29).

Glass (2000) states that “only 10 percent of women in doctoral programs are opting to earn the superintendency credential along with their educational specialist or doctoral degree” (par.2). Brunner and Kim (2010) have questioned the validity of Glass’s statement and believe it to be misleading. They believe the lack of women in the superintendency may not stem from the lack of credentialed women applicants but rather the need for an equitable selection process (Brunner & Kim, 2010).

3. Women are not as experienced or interested in district-wide fiscal management as men (p. 29).

Glass (2000) based this reasoning on the fact that the majority of female central-office administrators serve as instructional leaders rather than chief school business officials. Even though school boards are very interested in instructional programs and bringing up test scores, they do not want an inexperienced superintendent in fiscal management (Glass, 2000).

4. Women are not interested in the superintendency for personal reasons (p. 29).

According to Glass (2000), due to traditional gender socialization women choose to spend their non-working time with family rather than on work-related issues, while men have been socialized to aspire to be a leader at work and provide for their families.

5. School boards are reluctant to hire women superintendents (p. 30).

Glass (2000) based this reason on data from the AASA’s “2000 Study of the American School Superintendency,” in which 82 percent of the woman superintendents indicated school board members do not see them as strong managers, 76 percent of the woman superintendents felt school boards did not view them as capable of handling district finances, and 61 percent of the woman superintendents felt that a glass ceiling existed in school management, which lessened their chances of being selected. Forty-three percent of the male superintendents agreed that school boards tend to view women as incapable of managing a school district (Glass, 2000).

6. Women enter the field of education for different purposes than men (p. 31).

Women are no longer locked into nursing or education careers. Because more opportunities are being made available for women in more lucrative professions women may actually enter the teaching profession wanting to be teachers, not administrators (Glass, 2000).

7. Women enter education administration too late (p. 31).

According to Glass (2000), there are three positions to move through to the superintendency (assistant principal, principal, and central-office administrator). Glass (2000) suggests that since women spend more years teaching in the classroom than men and often take several years out for

child-rearing that by the time they reach the central office they really do not want a new career since retirement is only a few years away.

Additional reasons for why the superintendency continues to be a traditionally male-dominated profession include discrimination, school boards not educated regarding the qualifications of female candidates, inability of candidates to relocate, and family responsibilities (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Another barrier is the glass ceiling effect, a phrase used to describe the limited access women have as superintendents (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

The study followed a grounded theory approach to qualitative research, involving semi-structured interview questions. Researchers purposely designed the questions to gain a better understanding of the strategies, career experiences, and perceptions of barriers experienced by female superintendents. The assumption held by the researchers was that the participants involved in the interviews would answer honestly and provide reliable and truthful information. The anonymity of the participants was protected by interview transcripts not being coded for personal identification. The researchers were unbiased and did not attempt to lead the interviewees in any direction. An inductive content analysis of the interview transcripts and field notes was used to identify response patterns to each research question. Collectively, the data assisted in providing an insight into the career paths of twenty female superintendents in Texas.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Questions were designed during the course of developing the research design and were used to guide the conduct of this study. The research design was divided into three sections. Each section had one central question and five supporting questions designed to elicit a more detailed response to the central question.

Section 1. How do we prepare female school administrators to achieve the highest levels of educational leadership rather than choosing to step back or be self-limiting?

Supporting Questions: What do you consider to be the strengths of your leadership style and how have you used those strengths?; what strategies did you use to increase your self-confidence and develop yourself into a strong leader?; how would you mentor a female teacher exhibiting strong leadership qualities and considering a future as a school administrator?; what were some of your professional goals prior to becoming a superintendent?; and what strategies did you use to increase your opportunities for networking, informal socialization, and visibility in professional circles?

Section 2. How do we help women achieve educational leadership positions that will give them a greater stake in the decision-making process that shapes our school system?

Supporting Questions: How has your approach to making organizational decisions helped to shape the culture of your school system?; how do your values affect the professional decisions you make?; what types of difficult decisions have you had to make in your career as an administrator and how have you handled the criticism resulting from those decisions?; what kinds of risks are you willing to take to see an idea through?; what do you consider to be your toughest communication situations?

Section 3. How do we help female school administrators resolve the conflict between career and family that may stop them from pursuing higher level administrative positions?

Supporting Questions: What was the most important issue for you when determining whether or not to pursue a career as a school superintendent; what do you consider to be the main barriers women face in becoming a school superintendent and how have you overcome those barriers? what advice would you share to a female school administrator wanting to be a school superintendent but concerned about balancing a career and a family?; describe the things about your job that bring you satisfaction; how can university preparation programs better prepare women to pursue higher level administrative positions?

DEMOGRAPHICS

The population for the study was 20 practicing female superintendents randomly selected from the pool of 278 female superintendents leading school districts in Texas during the 2013-2014 academic years. The criteria for selection to the study included: 1) female; 2) currently employed as a K-12 public education superintendent in Texas; and 3) willing to participate and answer the interview questions truthfully.

Personal information on female superintendents interviewed includes the following: age, marital status, number of children in school (K-12), age of youngest child, racial/ethnic origin, highest degree earned, ADA of district, number of years in education, how they were hired, and previous position held immediately preceding the superintendency. Of the respondents, 55 percent were between the ages of 50-59, 25 percent between the ages of 30 and 49, 15 percent ages 60 or above, and one superintendent reported being less than 30 years old. In regards to marital status, 90 percent were married and 10 percent were single or divorced. Of the 20 superintendents, four reported having children attending school (K-12). Five of the 20 superintendents reported having no children, two had children younger than five years old, four had children ages 13-19, and nine had children that were 20 years of older. All but one superintendent was White/non-Hispanic and she was Hispanic. With regard to degrees earned, 55 percent had earned their masters while 45% had earned their doctorate. The ADA of the districts was under 1,000 for 45 percent; 1,000-3,000 for 25 percent; 3,000-5,000 for 10 percent; and 10 percent for 5,000 to over 15,000. Years of experience in education included all respondents having at least 10 years' experience with 75 percent having over 20 years' experience.

LIMITATIONS

This study was limited to the perceptions of 20 practicing female superintendents in one state who were willing to answer questions in a one hour interview. It was not assumed that responses from this small sample size accurately reflected the experiences of all women leaders holding the position of public school superintendent. Responsibilities of participants varied depending on school district size, possibly accounting for differences in experiences. Interview results may have been compromised by participants unconsciously or deliberately presenting a bias. The findings from these interviews cannot be generalized to all female superintendents.

RESULTS

Question one was focused on preparing female school administrators and how women superintendents identify and mentor other potential female leaders. The synthesis of question one centers on what female leaders should do for others, and the overarching response was *to be an encourager to those younger females*. Teaching them to believe in themselves and to strengthen their self-concepts are requirements to build future leaders. One respondent stated, “I have seen female teachers blossom when their leadership skills have been acknowledged and encouraged.”

When asked what the strengths of their leadership styles are, with only one exception the fourteen respondents reported that *building relationships and focusing on participatory leadership* were key to their successes. The terms “encourager”, “risk taker”, “visible role model”, “approachable”, “hands on”, “communicator”, “genuine”, “resilient”, “compassionate”, and “spiritual” were used frequently by the female superintendents to further describe their strengths. One respondent commented on the importance of being able to hide inner turmoil and another respondent summed it up by stating, “I want the surface to seem smooth, but trust me I am paddling like crazy underneath the water! I do not want the school to see me shaken.”

Three key components, *networking with other people; staying current in the field, and leading by servant leadership*, were identified most often by the respondents as strategies for increasing self-confidence and developing into a strong leader. Comments from respondents include: “I use my strengths to build relationships, communicate expectations and encourage autonomy,” “I learn a lot from non-examples or things that didn’t work well,” “I believe in myself, I know who I am, I know what I am capable of and I have the fortitude to get the job done,” and “humility, is a strong part of self-confidence; be knowledgeable or admit you need time to gather information.”

When asked what strategies were used to increase opportunities for networking, 12 of 14 reflected that being a member of a professional organization, such as the Texas Association for School Administrators and the Texas Council of Women School Executives, or participating in a superintendent’s group at the Education Service Center were frequently mentioned. Education Service Centers are non-regulatory agencies in Texas that serve as a liaison between the Texas Education Agency and the local school districts.

Not surprisingly, all but two respondents indicated they wanted to be a teacher or teacher leader when asked the survey question, “What were some of your professional goals prior to becoming a superintendent?” Seven respondents indicated wanting to be a principal but not one respondent indicated the professional goal of being a school superintendent. One respondent stated, “I wanted to teach and be a principal...being a Superintendent wasn’t in my playbook.”

The focus of question two and the corollary questions centered on helping new women leaders achieve positions that enable them to shape the school systems of tomorrow. As with question one, the overarching response for question two on how to help future leaders is *through encouraging, mentoring, and serving as a role model*. The question on how women’s leadership helped shape the culture of the school system did vary significantly from interviewee to interviewee.

According to one respondent, “Give (them) the opportunity to participate in the decisions. I was previously in a high school where there many capable, smart women that were not included in the decisions making process. That ‘old boy’ system effectively cut their percentage of good ideas and solutions in half.”

The most common response centered around *servicing the needs of the students* with a close second focused on the idea of *soliciting input from all stakeholders*. When asked how their values impacted the decisions they make, the women agreed that the *personal convictions, religious beliefs and their values* guided the decisions they made. Likewise, *keeping the students first* made it easier to stay focused on what is most important. The respondents did not provide specific examples of risks they were willing to make to see an idea through; however, all participants agreed they had to *take risks to do their jobs*. “I am risk taker by nature. My job is a calculated risk every day; I am responsible for the most important things to people....their children and spending their tax dollars wisely. I have 40 campuses and 26 charter schools; everyday there is a crisis somewhere,” reported one superintendent. The toughest communications situations were described using the “F” word, as in Facebook. According to one respondent, “Some teachers have had to be talked with about the misuse of Facebook and updating their status in a small town.

The final set of questions attempted to address the resolution of conflict between work and family. The components of the respondents were *supportive spouse and a delay of career until their children are older make the time commitment to the job more bearable*. As a follow up, these women leaders were asked what the issue was that helped them pursue a degree in education leadership. The answers varied in meeting the expectations of home and work. One respondent stated: “Nothing wrong with serving a rotisserie chicken from the grocery store.” Likewise, another respondent provided the analogy, “My philosophy is that of the ‘milk stool’; it has three legs and if one leg is broken or weak you fall.”

When queried about why they applied for superintendent position, several agreed that the decision was “*right*” for their family or that they felt they were led by their faith. Barriers that women face in becoming a school superintendent continue to exist although this issue has been at the forefront of the media for well over 50 years. Three very common messages rose to the top of the comments—*stereotypes of women, the good ole’ boy system, and the short or long-term goals of the system*. When quizzed about what brings satisfaction in their current positions, the overwhelming majority agreed that *working for the children* was most important. One outlier indicated that satisfaction would come when 100% of entering ninth graders graduated from high school. Finally, when asked how university-based educator preparation programs could prepare young women for administrative positions, two responses resonated with the majority: *shadowing other female leaders and mentoring*. Susan B. Anthony once said, “Our job is not to make young women grateful. It is to make them ungrateful so they keep going.”

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Collecting data from 20 superintendents who hold positions around the state of Texas is no small task. As highlighted earlier, the women represent all age groups, all levels of experience, and all sizes of school districts. Still, finding common themes from the responses of these women was not difficult, which speaks to the relevance of the findings. Listed below are summative statements that emerged from the study:

- Women need to be encouragers to those younger females
- Women leaders focus on building relationships and participatory leadership
- Women build other women through encouraging, mentoring, and serving as role models
- Women leaders solicit input from all stakeholders
- Women are driven by personal convictions, religious beliefs and their values

- Women leaders believe in keeping the students first
- Women often must take risks to do their jobs
- Women leaders find that a supportive spouse and a delay of career until their children are older make the time commitment to the job more bearable
- Women leaders still struggle with stereotypes of women, the good ole' boy system, and struggles with the short or long-term goals of the system
- Women leaders often say they are working for the children
- Women benefit from shadowing other female leaders and from being mentored

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The study's findings provided a more comprehensive picture of the strategies, career experiences and perception of barriers experienced by current female superintendents in Texas. Three key components—networking with other people; staying current in the field, and leading by servant leadership—were identified most often by the respondents as strategies for increasing self-confidence and developing into a strong leader. Career opportunities in a job where men hold most of the positions are limited as the percentages cited at the beginning of the paper indicate. Stereotypes of women and the good ole' boy system continues to be clear barriers faced by the female superintendents interviewed in this study.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Information regarding the characteristics of females in the role of superintendent can be used in university preparation programs to address the issues female administrators may experience in their careers. Higher education institutions can provide scholarships for women to gain the superintendent's certificate. Paid internships in the form of a grant will encourage female administrators to pursue the superintendency. Professional development organizations and professional search firms can educate school boards regarding the professional qualities females be superintendents by making themselves available and serving as role models.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Recommendations for further study are limitless considering the vast disparity in the numbers of female superintendents compared to male superintendents. Suggested areas to be explored include the following: the hiring practices of school boards for recruiting and selecting superintendents; causes of gender disparity in the number of male and female superintendents; study of university preparation programs to examine how women are being prepared for the superintendency; leadership skills and behaviors of current practicing female superintendents; and comparative studies of male and female superintendents and their leadership styles.

CONCLUSION

The popular book by Sheryl Sandberg (2013), *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, inspired the discussion that led to the study of how women are faring in educational leadership and the K-12 world. Perhaps the most significant outcome of this qualitative study is that, while women have made strides in what has traditionally been a male-dominated

profession, substantial gains are critical before the divide diminishes. Faculty in educational administration programs in universities should embrace the results of this study and use them to establish a focused effort in recruiting bright young females to the field. As Sandberg (2013) states, “I’m sorry if this sounds harsh or surprises anyone, but this is where we are. If you want the outcome to be different, you will have to do something about it” (p. 52). Let’s step up and do something.

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