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[Archives](#)

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“THEY HIRED A WOMAN AND A CATHOLIC!”  
Dismissal and the Superintendency, Lessons Learned  
Diana M. Bourisaw, Ph.D.

“The obstacle is the path.”  
Zen Proverb

## The Tale

The weather on the West Coast was wonderful. Days were sunny, scenery was beautiful, and the school district was challenging. Her responsibilities as area superintendent in this sprawling urban setting far exceeded those of a CEO in smaller school districts. But this west coast wonderland was not where she wanted to rear her children. Although Dr. Rita Clark had been recruited for this challenging position, she soon yearned to return home to the Midwest. So the job search began.

Through a network of friends and colleagues, headhunters learned of her interest in a superintendency and included Rita on the interview circuit. With an updated resume she began interviewing in the Midwest. The process was going well, but Dr. Clark was not on the receiving end of any job offers. It did not take long to realize that her inclusion in the interview pool was only as the token woman. The school districts, as well as the superintendent search firms, could then say they interviewed a diverse slate of candidates, including a woman. To expand her opportunities, Dr. Clark began interviewing in school districts with differing demographics than her urban roots.

The superintendent search soon led Dr. Clark to a sprawling school district within an hour's drive of her hometown. This school district was significant in size, 11,000 students. The previous superintendent had been dismissed, and a veteran assistant superintendent was serving as interim. Dr. Clark was eager to attain her first superintendency. The excitement of breaking through the glass ceiling, leading for success, and serving as the first female superintendent in the county led her to personally minimize some issues that would later resurface.

The urban school district she was leaving had a wealth of diversity and high poverty. That school district embraced change and accepted its culturally diverse community and representative leadership. Now Rita was relocating to a predominately Caucasian district with very few students receiving free or reduced price meals. The majority of community members were of the working class with a growing number of young

professionals. But more importantly, a large church's leadership and congregation dominated the power structure of the community, and many of its members filled district employment ranks. Local city and county government had a history of turmoil, and school board elections were plagued with dirty politics.

After several days of interviews with the school board, staff and students, Dr. Clark was offered the position. The minutes reported by the board of education meetings reflected a unanimous vote in favor of hiring Dr. Clark. Behind closed doors, the vote was 5 to 2, a division that would be significant later on. Although her three-year contract was signed in March, Dr. Clark did not begin her duties until July 1. School board elections were held in April, and before Dr. Clark arrived in the district, the composition of the board had changed. With each election this trend continued....

The district had a pattern of promoting through the ranks, teacher, and coach, athletic director, principal, then central office administrator. Position, relationship, and loyalty rather than performance and certification were criteria for promotions. Men dominated the promotion ranks, climbing the leadership hierarchy based on potential, not performance.

Within a few weeks of Dr. Clark's arrival, a veteran assistant superintendent approached her. Mr. O'Donnell was a typical central office administrator in this school district. He was born and reared in the school district and had gone from winning coach to Assistant Superintendent. Mr. O'Donnell was not certified for the position nor had he demonstrated the desire to expand his education credentials. He described important concerns such as sexual harassment as "boys will be boys" and wanted nothing to do with recruiting "outsiders" to fill school district administrative ranks. "Outsiders" referred to persons of color, not just women.

Dr. Clark tried working with the existing staff through in school district professional development and formal certification coursework. Knowing the relationship of these veteran administrators to school board members, Rita planned to wait for their retirement, including Mr. O'Donnell's. But Mr. O'Donnell's comments at that moment were defining and would shape the remainder of her superintendency in the school district. "Dr. Clark," he began, "We weren't so much surprised they hired a woman; we were surprised they hired a Catholic."

While she was shocked and surprised at his remarks, Rita minimized their significance. For a fleeting moment, she realized all previous school district superintendents attended the "church on the hill" and were male. Additionally, two former superintendents were related by marriage, one marrying another's niece. Dr. Clark assumed the new school board had decided to change this hiring pattern and would be supportive of other school district changes. Indeed, this assumption was correct. The school board that hired Rita would support change, but with each passing election the school board members who supported leadership from "outsiders" would become the minority.

In the weeks that followed, Dr. Clark met with the assistant superintendent for business to develop a five-year budget projection and present it to the Superintendent's Cabinet. He, too, had risen through the ranks from teacher and coach to principal and then business manager. Mr. Warren was not certified for his current position and received his training on the job from the former superintendent, another relative. While he was skeptical of making budget projections, Mr. Warren agreed to the task.

At the next cabinet meeting, budget projections were presented, indicating the school district would be bankrupt in four years. The school district per pupil expenditure was significantly below state average already. Additionally academic indicators reflected declining test scores, which would begin jeopardizing the school district and lead to reduced district accreditation.

Dr. Clark assembled academic and fiscal task forces and began improvement efforts. Within four years,

school district fund balances climbed to 42%, all indicators of academic achievement improved, two new schools were completed ahead of schedule, class size was reduced, and the taxpayers' burden was lowered. Had Dr. Clark been CEO of a major corporation, the school board would have voted a sizable raise. However, this was not the case. In a closed session meeting with a 5-2 vote, the Board passed a resolution to terminate her contract effective June 30th!

## Warning Signs

Were there warning signs leading to this resolution? Why was Dr. Clark stunned by this seeming turn of events? Why would a school board fire its CEO when results were improving? Did the school board have to dismiss Dr. Clark? The list of district successes during Dr. Clark's tenure was significant. Why did the board choose this course of action?

Dr. Clark received her school board evaluation in January of the current school year. With minor exceptions, the board evaluation was extremely positive. The vote was 7-0 to extend Rita's contract. But school board elections were held each April and two new school board members from the "church on the hill" were seated. The balance of power on the Board shifted. The dismissal vote came seven weeks after the school board election, and at the beginning of her second three-year contract.

This vote to dismiss occurred at the June Board meeting, hardly a time to seek another superintendent or for Dr. Clark to begin job hunting. The school board had been micromanaging more than usual, becoming increasingly concerned about religious issues in the district. Now five of the current school board members attended the same large church and held the same mind set about women in leadership. To work with this new male dominated School Board and to address their concerns, Dr. Clark attended events at their church, with their pastor, and enrolled her two children in several church sponsored activities.

Dr. Clark was unaware of the church's stance regarding women. The church pastor believed a woman's place was in the home rearing children and taking care of her husband. The church's view of Christianity was also limited to a specific doctrine excluding Catholics such as Dr. Clark and her family. During the months that followed "church on the hill" members referred to Dr. Clark's children as atheists, and Rita was deemed a "bad mother" because she worked outside the home. The views of the church leadership were definitely different than those held by Rita.

Prior to the School Board's vote to dismiss Dr. Clark, topics such as teaching evolution, prayer at school board meetings, and other issues surfaced on school board agendas. School board members, after all, were concerned about the children. Even with the school board's new focus, Dr. Clark believed the school district was on the right path and changing course at this time would be disastrous. The school district's course of action was charted, and there were significant signs of progress. Why would the school board change captains when the ship was headed in the right course?

Rita's family had settled into life in the school district. Her husband opened a small business close to home, and the children had adjusted well to their new schools. The Clarks had no desire to relocate the family again.

Prior to Rita's entering the school building where the Board meeting was held, a reporter approached a school district principal, mistaking her for Dr. Clark. The reporter received a tip that the school board would fire Dr. Clark that evening. Was it true, the reporter asked? The principal thought the statement was misinformation and told the reporter so. The reporter stayed to write the story.

The business meeting was unusually short, and the school board went into closed session. This time the board told Dr. Clark to step out of the room. Rita had never been excluded from a closed session and was

surprised by the school board's request. Nervously, she waited outside the door. School district central office administrators waited as well. Like sharks in a feeding frenzy, these school district insiders were waiting for the smell of blood, waiting for the announcement of Rita's dismissal. They held inside information known only by school board members. These veterans knew what action would be taken that evening. The only one in the dark was Rita.

The closed session adjourned, and several school board members quickly exited the building. The school board attorney met with Dr. Clark to review the Board's discussion. The Board approved a resolution to release Dr. Clark at the end of the fiscal year, June 30th. And, if no leaks were made to the press prior to this date, the school board would pay Rita one year's salary, less than the three-year contract they approved in January. In shock, Rita left the meeting, confused and alone.

Over the next several days, Dr. Clark went to her school district office, limiting her communication with staff, debating and strategizing. She contacted a mentor and close friend to seek his advice regarding her course of action. Should she take the settlement? Her instinct was to reject the settlement, but she wanted to confirm her analysis with a trusted friend. This friend was a current superintendent and a former boss. Jim provided her the direction she thought he would, telling her to stay and fight. Rita respected Jim's opinion. She always had. He had helped her professionally and was a personal friend. Many times she watched Jim take the high road when the other path would have been easier on him.

The need to make a decision to fight or flee was prompted by a leak to the local media. A local newspaper published an editorial cartoon portraying the closed session school board meeting. The editorial section of this paper was well read by the school community, and the newspaper's veteran cartoonist had an uncanny flair for accuracy. Clearly, someone other than Dr. Clark had leaked the story to the press.

Immediately the school board accused Dr. Clark of leaking the story. Why would Rita want information about her impending dismissal in the local paper, she asked? The media leak provided the school board a reason to remove Dr. Clark as their superintendent and not honor their "offer". The day following the editorial cartoon, a courier knocked at the Clark residence to deliver a letter from the school board attorney banning Dr. Clark from all school property. The school district's director of safety and security would escort Rita to her office to pack her personal effects. The school board was delivering dismissal charges. If Dr. Clark refused to vacate her position, the school board would proceed with dismissal. Rita could not recall anything she had done or did not do as superintendent to warrant charges. What were these charges? Moving a school district from bankruptcy to financial solvency? Raising student achievement? Lowering class size? Dr. Clark was banned from school grounds and from her own children's school. She could no longer take the children to school or pick them up from school or school events. To remedy the situation, the school district director of safety and security escorted her children to and from her car while she parked on the side of the road off school grounds. The children attended a summer enrichment program and were confused and upset by this new routine.

At the Clark residence, the phone continuously rang. Reporters, friends, and colleagues called to offer support and seek information. Newfound friends arrived at the residence. Letters, flowers, and cards poured into the Clark home. Rita's was energized by this support. She decided to stay and fight.

## The Dismissal

Rita's phone rang from early in the morning until late at night. The word was out. A superintendent was going to fight dismissal. It was rarely done and rarely successful. It had every aspect of a good story: gender and religious discrimination. Media calls poured in from all over the country.

Radio, television, and newspapers kept this story alive. Dr. Clark and her attorney were featured on every

local radio talk show and television station in the area. Additionally, a nationally recognized editorial writer and cartoonist supported Rita by keeping the issue in the daily media and obviously lampooning the school board. Groups from left to right covered this event. Anytime Dr. Clark's attorney called a press conference, it was well attended.

The school board majority worked diligently to develop a list of charges upon which to base Rita's dismissal. They searched her computer for inappropriate emails. They scoured school district financial records to seek improprieties. They sought staff member accusations. The result was 19 allegations, and the charges were published in the paper for all to see. The conflict was heating up.

Dr. Clark decided to let the community try her case. She was not guilty of any of these allegations. They were twisted statements about not hiring someone or promotion issues. Rita knew they could be easily dismissed and decided to exercise her right to a public hearing. The school board attempted to limit attendance at the public hearings. Tickets were issued and the event was scheduled at the school district's small board office. The media coverage generated extensive public interest resulting in the need to move the hearing to the school district's 1,500-seat auditorium.

Meanwhile, students and patrons picketed school board meetings protesting Dr. Clark's dismissal. Letters flew back and forth in the media, and a barrage of editorials, cartoons, and articles appeared in numerous publications. A grass roots group emerged to support Rita's battle and resulted in rallies, distribution of t-shirts focusing on Dr. Clark's experience, and websites devoted to her dismissal.

At the first scheduled hearing, people waited outside the auditorium for three hours in order to secure a seat. Newspaper columnists, patrons, staff, and television stations filled the seats and lined the corridors. Signs and banners were seen throughout this large facility. While Dr. Clark maintained her innocence, she was aware the school board would not rest until they were vindicated in their dismissal decision. They had financial resources to do so, dollars Rita had helped secure for the school district, and the 42% fund balance that existed as a result of Rita's leadership.

Dr. Clark and her attorney arrived shortly before the first hearing began. It was difficult to locate a parking place and even more difficult for Dr. Clark to walk into the auditorium. The church the five school board members attended was powerful and demonstrated the ability to secure large crowds at any community event. The tone of those seated in the auditorium could impact the outcome of this public hearing.

Dr. Clark walked into the auditorium to rounds of applause bringing the crowd to its feet. While there were supporters of the school board majority, they were in the minority during the hearings. And, as suspected, the school board's allegations against Dr. Clark lacked substance.

The hearings continued for several nights. Eventually the school board dropped the charges and paid Dr. Clark the remaining amount on her contract, three years salary. Within two months of her dismissal, Dr. Clark was offered a position as an interim state supervisor, supervising the school district that dismissed her. While Dr. Clark weathered the financial storm, the impact to her professional and personal life has yet to be determined.

## Dealing with Dismissal

Historically the dismissal or forced resignation of school district superintendents was a rare event and occurred with minimal public awareness. The departure of a superintendent was the result of the superintendent's choice, not based on political conflict with the school board. Now superintendents are fired or forced out by their school board at alarming rates. Of those that do leave, 16.7% leave as a result of school board conflict, and 10% to 12% are forced out through resignation or retirement (Pardini, 1999).

School board and superintendent conflict can be traced to differences in values and philosophy. Prior to seeking a school superintendency, Dr. Clark sought guidance from her mentor and friend, Jim. Jim advised Rita that performance had little to do with longevity in the school superintendency. Contract renewal was political, not performance driven. While Jim's words resonated in her ears, Dr. Clark chose to work hard, focusing on the needs of the district and children. Rita worked diligently, without regard to the political changes occurring around her including her evolving school board.

As with Dr. Clark's changing school board, more and more school board candidates are running on special interest platforms (Pardini, 1999). With a changing school board comes a changing district focus. School district superintendents are often hired by one school board then fired by another. Today's school boards are not the rubber stamp boards they once were. Instead, these new school board members want to micromanage, becoming involved in day-to-day operations. Dr. Clark's school board was no different.

### Board Members, Motives and Conflict

*"Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power."*  
- Abraham Lincoln

Power in the hands of those with personal agendas can result in actions that have negative results for the organization. School boards and school board members have become increasingly self-focused, creating conflict between the school district superintendent and the school board (Mountford, 2004). This conflict can be compounded when the school board is predominately male and the superintendent is a woman (Hess, 2002).

Female and male school board members exhibit differing styles of power. Male school board members are more authoritarian in their leadership style while female school board members use a collaborative approach to decision making (Mountford, 2004). This same style of power applies to men and women in the school superintendency. Male school superintendents tend to have an authoritarian approach to leadership and decision making while women are more collaborative. The top down leadership style of many male superintendent candidates appeals to these male dominated school boards. This leadership match increases the potential for selection of male superintendent candidates.

No matter what their religious or gender beliefs, a male dominated school board and a female superintendent can have a natural conflict of style. The male dominance of school boards is a barrier to the hiring of female superintendents with male board members searching for leaders who mirror their own leadership tendencies. Mountford's (2004) research suggests that an increase in female board members could result in an increase in the hiring of female school district superintendents. Until that time, female superintendent candidates have a reduced opportunity for selection and, after attaining the position, have a limited opportunity for success.

### Finding the Fit

Female superintendent candidates have limited opportunities for selection and fewer opportunities to find the right district for their leadership style. Finding the right school district superintendency is much like finding the right pair of shoes. School districts, like shoes, come in many sizes and styles - small, medium, large, rural, suburban, and urban. A school board should find the candidate that fits their superintendent vacancy. Evaluating the candidate match includes reviewing previous experience, education and training, and success in similar districts. The superintendent selection criteria should not include exclusion based on gender.

Where are all the women in the superintendent selection process? Has the number of women in educational

leadership positions improved? There are an increasing number of women in the educational administration pipeline (Ringel, Gates, Chaung, Brown & Ghosh-Dastidar, 2004), but the number of female superintendents has remained fairly stagnant over the years, at about 13% (Glass, 2000). Women superintendents continue to be hired at a lesser rate than those of their male counterparts. Where are these courageous women leaders?

As Dr. Clark experienced, during the interview process women are often part of a diversity slate of school superintendent candidates. A school board interviews their slate of candidates searching for the right leader for their school district. School board members ask each superintendent candidate questions trying to determine the individual's values, beliefs, and leadership style. The school board members, and often search consultant, try to find the perfect match for their school district's vacancy. While candidate gender is rarely discussed during this selection process, it is an underlying criterion for many school boards (Tallerico, 2000). School boards continue to select male superintendent candidates at an overwhelming rate.

Dr. Clark was accepted a superintendency that appeared to fit, at least for a brief period. The school board making the job offer seemed eager for a change to a collaborative leadership style. Dr. Clark's natural leadership emerged as she charged forward, building teams and trying to work with existing district staff. A deeper district analysis by Rita would have uncovered a strong layer of resistance to this type of leadership, especially from a woman.

## Epilogue

During the several months following this experience, Dr. Clark joined the interview circuit again, making it to the final rounds of superintendent selection for several prestigious school districts. Rita had lost her passion for the job, however, but not for education and children. While her gender and religion interfered with her longevity as superintendent of schools in the district she was in, it contributed to her life long passion as an educator who cares deeply for all children and their future.

Educating children is not about gender or religion – but it is about beliefs and values. Dr. Clark may have lost her job, but she did not lose her commitment to education. Should Dr. Clark seek another superintendency, she now has knowledge about the role of gender and leadership, gender and school boards, and the power of a changing school board. Most importantly Rita has determined the importance of fit in the superintendency. Prepared with this new knowledge, Dr. Clark has increased her chances of success in her next district. But more importantly, her leadership can once again benefit those that drew her to the profession – the children.

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