

*Full Length Research Paper*

## Increasing the Proportion of Female Superintendents in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Accepted December 22, 2014

**With the proportion of females in the superintendency being 23% in 2012, and increasing by only 0.7% annually, it will take nearly 80 years for females to be proportionately represented in public schools. This study sample consisted of 63 female superintendents, representing 51% of the overall population of female superintendents in the 6 southeastern states where the study took place. The 6 states were chosen because each has approximately the national average of female superintendents. Female superintendents in the six southeastern states were asked what advice they would give to aspiring female superintendents and to recommend strategies for increasing the proportion of females in the superintendency. Participants offered valuable advice to aspiring female superintendents on how to navigate the system and be successful. They recommended practical strategies for attracting female candidates and increasing the proportion of females in the superintendency.**

**Keywords:** female superintendent, underrepresented, gender equity, feminist standpoint theory

### Introduction

In K-12 public education in the U.S., women dominate the workforce of teachers and staff members, but even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, women are grossly underrepresented in leadership roles (USDOE, 2008). According to the 2012 U.S. Department of Education Schools and Staff Survey Report, 76% of teachers and 52% of principals in public elementary and secondary schools were female in 2011-12. But, even though women constitute 76% of the teacher workforce, the pool from which superintendents normally begin their journey, only 23% of public school superintendents were female (USDOE, 2012). According to Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011), the underrepresentation of females in the superintendency is not due to females not being motivated or certified for the position. They reported 40% of the women in central office administrative positions identified themselves as aspiring to the superintendency while 74% had earned, or were working toward earning, the certification required to fulfill the job. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) contend the underrepresentation is a result of females' options being constrained by stereotypical expectations and beliefs.

Between 2008 and 2012, the percentage of female teachers in K-12 public schools in the United States increased from 75.6% to 76.3% while the percentage of female principals increased from 50.3% to 51.6% (USDOE, 2012). Despite this steady growth in female representation in the roles of teacher and principal, female representation in the superintendency has seen little increase in the past few decades as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Female Superintendents*

Year	Female Superintendents
1990	10.5%
2000	13.2%
2012	23.0%

U.S. Department of Education Schools and Staffing Survey, 2008 & 2012

At the current average annual increase of 0.7%, it will take another 77 years for females to be proportionately represented in the superintendency (USDOE, 2008). In his welcoming remarks to scholars attending a meeting about women in educational leadership at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Dr. Charles Daugherty stated:

For the sake of justice, we must make efforts to bring the number of women working in leadership positions into closer proportion with the number of women in education. We owe this effort especially to our daughters, but to all future generations who will benefit from more inclusive educational institutions. (Soberhart, 2009, p. xii)

Due to the continued underrepresentation of females in the male dominated profession of public school superintendent, there is a need for further research in this area. This study was

designed to find out more about the career paths of female superintendents, factors affecting females' decisions to become superintendents, advice female superintendents would give to females who aspire to become superintendent, and female superintendents' thoughts on how to increase the proportion of females serving in superintendent positions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A theory is defined as an explanation of observed phenomena that is organized into logical interrelated terms (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2008). A theoretical framework is a systematic explanation of phenomena related to variables within a given theory (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). The theoretical framework supporting this study is the feminist standpoint theory.

Feminist standpoint theory emerged in the 1980s as a feminist critical theory about relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power, and was proposed as a method to guide future feminist research (Harding, 2004). Specific foci of the feminist standpoint theory are (a) identifying cultural values and power dynamics that account for the subordination of girls and women and (b) highlighting the distinct knowledge cultivated by activities that are assigned to females (Wood, 2009). According to feminist standpoint theory, women's lives differ systematically and structurally from men's lives. Each group engages in distinct activities and the two groups are accorded different rights and opportunities. Women and men occupy different social locations, thus cultivating distinct kinds of knowledge (Wood, 2009).

According to Harding (2004), feminist standpoint theory was presented as a way of empowering oppressed groups and valuing their experiences. Feminist standpoint theory insists feminist concerns cannot be restricted to only social and political issues. We cannot pigeon-hole feminist issues and ignore them as only women's issues. Instead, feminist issues must be seen as valuably informing theoretical, methodological, and political thought in general.

Feminist standpoint theory was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study because the theory still holds true in the superintendency today. One way women's lives differ from men's lives is in the sexual division of labor, as is evident in the scant percentage of females serving as K-12 public school superintendents compared to the female representation in the roles of teacher and principal, even in the twenty-first century. Feminist standpoint theory asserts males and females are accorded different rights and opportunities. This is again evident in the fact that in the U.S., women are twice as likely to have earned a doctorate in education, yet men are five times more likely to hold the job of superintendent of schools (Sobehart, 2009).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The researcher believed that giving current female superintendents an opportunity to share factors that influenced

their decision to become a superintendent and advice for being successful in a male dominated role with females aspiring to become superintendents would motivate more females to pursue the job of superintendent in the future. The researcher further believed that allowing current female superintendents to share suggestions of ways to increase the proportion of females in the superintendency would have implications for university superintendent preparation programs and state and local agencies looking to recruit females for the position of superintendent. To this end, the researcher investigated:

1. Positions females held in the field of education prior to becoming superintendents;
2. Factors affecting a female's decision to become a superintendent;
3. Advice female superintendents would give aspiring female superintendents; and
4. Suggestions female superintendents offer to increase the proportion of females in the superintendency

Open-ended questions included:

1. What advice would you offer to a female aspiring to become a superintendent?
2. Which strategies for attracting female superintendent candidates do you think would be most effective?

Data were gathered using an online survey developed by the investigator specifically for this study. The survey was developed around the four issues to be investigated as listed above and included 17 multiple choice and two open-ended questions. In May of 2013, all female superintendents in Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia were invited to participate in the study. An invitation to participate, survey link, instructions, and a deadline for responses were emailed to all 123 female superintendents in those states. A reminder email was sent in June. Sixty-three superintendents, some from each of the 6 states, completed the survey with all participants remaining anonymous. After downloading data to a spreadsheet, each data element was carefully reviewed to identify emerging themes. Analysis of data was limited to descriptive statistics.

### **Results**

To investigate the four issues above, female superintendents responded to questions, developed specifically for this study. To determine the career path female superintendents follow, participants answered questions related to previous employment and the number of years they had spent as classroom teachers. Table 2 shows 67% of participants had served as assistant, deputy, or associate superintendent before securing a job as superintendent and 89% percent had served as a school-level administrator, either principal or assistant

principal. Almost 90% had spent at least five years as a classroom teacher as shown in Table 3.

Table 2

*Positions Held Prior to Becoming Superintendent*

Position	Percent Holding Position
Associate/Deputy Superintendent	17.46%
Assistant Superintendent	49.21%
District Level Director	52.38%
Principal	57.15%
High School	11.11%
Middle School	14.29%
Elementary School	31.75%
Assistant Principal	26.98%
High School	7.94%
Middle School	9.52%
Elementary School	9.52%
Teacher	73.01%
High School	22.22%
Middle School	22.22%
Elementary School	28.56%

Table 3

*Years as a Classroom Teacher*

Years as Teacher	Percent
Less Than 5	12.70%
5-10	47.62%
11-15	23.81%
16-20	14.29%
More Than 20	1.59%

To determine factors affecting a female’s decision to become a superintendent, participants answered two questions. (a) What factors influenced your decision to become a superintendent? (b) What are the three most important incentives for becoming a superintendent? As shown in Table 4, over 75% cited commitment to education as having the greatest influence on their decision and the opportunity to have an impact on student achievement as the second most influential. Table 5 shows

making a difference, leading learning, and team building as the top three incentives for becoming a superintendent.

Table 4

*Factors Influencing Decision to Become Superintendent*

Factor	Percent
Commitment to Education	75.81%
Opportunity to Have an Impact on Student Achievement	66.13%
Opportunity to Serve the Community	56.45%
Interest in Superintendent Work	40.32%
Opportunity to Serve in a Leadership Position	37.10%
Increase in Salary	14.52%
Prestige of the Position	4.84%
Desire to Leave Building-Level Administration	3.23%

Note: Participants were not limited to one response.

Table 5

*Most Important Incentives to Become a Superintendent*

Incentive	Percent
Making a Difference	74.60%
Leading Learning	66.67%
Team Building	49.21%
Addressing Challenges	39.68%
Opportunity to Manage a District	19.05%
Working With Students	15.87%
Working With Staff	9.52%
Compensation	7.94%
Prestige of the Position	0%

Note: Participants were asked to choose three incentives.

Female superintendents gave advice to aspiring female superintendents by responding to the following open-ended question. What advice would you offer to a female aspiring to become a superintendent? Participant advice was categorized by common themes as shown in Table 6. The top three categories by percent of responses were (a) learn how to do the job, (b) be aware of gender bias issues, and (c) prepare for job related stress.

Table 6

*Advice to Females Aspiring to Become a Superintendent*

Advice Category	Percent
Learn How to Do the Job	23%
Be Aware of Gender Bias Issues	13%
Prepare for Job Related Stress	12%
Consider Family Support	10%
Consider Moral and Ethical Aspects of the Job	10%
Expect Criticism	7%
Prepare to Deal with Politics of Job	7%
Prepare to Put Job Above Self	7%
Make Sure the District is a Good Fit	5%
Understand Board and Superintendent Rolls	3%
Take Advantage of Leadership Opportunities	3%

Within the responses, several made statements regarding the good of the students. Perhaps best said was, “Make all decisions on what you believe to be in the best interest of students. If you use this as your compass, even the most difficult decisions will be understood and accepted.”

An opportunity to provide suggestions on how to increase the proportion of females in the superintendency in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was offered. Participants were asked which strategies for attracting female superintendent candidates they thought would be most effective. The question gave four choices for participants to choose from and a comment box for them to make additional suggestions. Responses to the four choices given are shown in Table 7 below.

Table 7

*Ways to Increase the Proportion of Females in the Superintendency*

Choice	Percent
Change Nature of Superintendency by Funding More Central Office Positions	28.57%
Allow Female Superintendent to Excel in What She Likes To Do by Shifting Some Work to Other Employees	21.43%
Provide Incentives for Females to Gain Superintendent Certification	42.86%
States Reward Districts for Hiring Female Superintendents	35.71%

The five most frequently recommended additional strategies for attracting female superintendent candidates were in the areas of (a) establishing mentoring programs, (b) equal pay for females, (c) establishing support systems, (d) changing board perceptions of females, and (e) making the job more manageable. Through their additional comments, 71% of the participants made it clear they did not think there should be a consideration of gender when discussing the position of superintendent. They stated the board should hire the best person for the job, regardless of gender, and encouraged women to “throw their hats in the ring”.

**Discussion**

In this study, practicing female superintendents in 6 southeastern states completed an online survey. The survey consisted of 17 multiple choice and two open-ended questions. Participants responded to questions regarding jobs they held prior to becoming superintendents, factors that influenced their decision to become superintendents, advice they would give to females aspirin to become superintendents, and suggestions of ways to increase the proportion of females in the superintendency in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Findings are discussed below.

According to Kowalski et al. (2011), the general career path to the superintendency is the teacher-principal path. Findings of this study are no different. Seventy-three percent of participants had served as classroom teachers, with 71% of those spending 5 to 15 years in the classroom. Fifty-seven percent had served as principal, with 32% of those serving as at the elementary level. Not surprising, since the most frequent advice given by the participants to aspiring female superintendents was to learn as much as possible before applying for a position, 67% had served as either an associate, deputy, or assistant superintendent prior to securing a position as superintendent. This is consistent with the Feminist Standpoint Theory idea that knowledge is based on experience, and different situations result in different knowledge (Harding, 2004). These findings can assist females aspiring to become superintendents in planning their career path. They should pursue school-level administrative positions early enough in their career to work their way up to the superintendency.

The top three factors influencing participants’ decisions to become a superintendent were commitment to education (76%), opportunity to have an impact on student achievement (66%), and an opportunity to serve the community (56%). This could be explained by the Feminist Standpoint Theory as it identifies motherhood as part of women’s labor. Serving others by helping them to develop and grow are important features of women’s activity as mothers (Hartsock, 1983). In a 2007 AASA study, the top three incentives for females to become superintendents were making a difference (73%), leading learning (53%), and compensation (42%) (McCord, Jordan, & Jordan, 2008). Participants in this study identified making a difference (75%), leading learning (67%), and team building (49%) as the top three incentives for becoming a

superintendent. Compensation dropped from third to eighth with only 8% identifying that as an incentive. This could be a result of 67% of participants having served as assistant, associate, or deputy superintendent, all positions just below the superintendent on the salary schedule.

Advice given by participants to aspiring female superintendents through an open-ended question could be categorized by common themes. The most frequent advice, to learn and be prepared for the position, appears to be a result of gender bias that exists in the superintendency. Garn and Brown (2008) found that women believed gender bias created a major challenge to their path to the superintendency and to their performance after gaining the position. The majority of participants in this study appear to share the same belief.

Derrington and Sharratt (2009) offered recommendations from female superintendents. They recommended a strong determination and an iron will, recognizing that women have to fight harder, wait longer, and survive more scrutiny to become a superintendent. The second most frequent advice participants in this study offered related to gender bias, and included a warning to females that the superintendency is still a majority male field and females should be aware that gender bias still exists, echoed this recommendation. Females aspiring to the superintendency should be aware of this gender bias and realize they may have to work harder to get the job and even harder to keep it. This should be discussed in superintendent preparation programs at the university level.

Derrington and Sharratt (2009) advised females to balance their personal and professional life, making time for family, self, and work. The third most frequent area of advice given by participants was just that; be aware of the long hours and stress of the job and the effect it may have on family. One participant advised taking a realistic look at the balance between work and personal life to determine a willingness to accept the demands of the job before pursuing a superintendency. This finding has implications for the university superintendent preparation program, also. Practicing or retired superintendents should be invited to speak to the students, making them aware of the demands of the job and answering questions on how to manage the long hours and stress and how to balance personal and professional responsibilities.

Participants suggested ways to increase the proportion of females in the superintendency. De Santa Ana (2008) found mentors to be of paramount importance in navigating the superintendency. Participants in this study verified this need. Several offered the suggestion of finding a current female superintendent to serve as a mentor. Magdaleno (2006) found that same gender mentors can provide support for personal experiences with gender barriers. This finding should be considered by state superintendent associations and universities as they recruit mentors for new female superintendents. They should keep in mind female mentors can help new female superintendents with the balance between their personal and professional lives.

The most recent figures on superintendent salary indicate females still earn an average of \$4,000 to \$18,000 less than their male counterparts ([www.payscale.com/research/US/Country=United\\_States/Salary](http://www.payscale.com/research/US/Country=United_States/Salary)). Several participants in this study recommended equal pay for females as a strategy for attracting female superintendent candidates and increasing the proportion of females in the superintendency. Another recommendation was to consider females for the largest, not just the smallest districts, which could have an effect on average salary. State superintendent associations should lobby for a salary schedule that is based on educational level and experience as with other public school administrators. Gender should not play a role in who gets the job or the rate of pay.

In interviewing more than 50 successful female superintendents about their strategies for success, Gilmour and Kinsella (2009) found a critical piece to the success of female superintendents was the match between the superintendent and the school district. Another critical piece was the relationships with all stakeholders, including the community and staff, and especially with members of the board of education. Kowlaski et al. (2011) found superintendents considered family support as essential for success. Participants in this study agreed with all three; recommending a supportive board, community, staff, and family as a strategy for attracting female superintendent candidates and increasing the proportion of females in the superintendency. Before applying for a superintendent position, female candidates should research the district and determine if it is a good fit. If they find there is no support for a female superintendent from the board, staff, or community, then they should keep looking until they find a district that is a good fit. They should not apply just because there is an opening and they want to be a superintendent. Without support, they cannot be successful.

Brunner and Grogan (2007) surveyed 1,195 female superintendents and assistant/associate/deputy superintendents and identified major limitations on the advancement of females in educational leadership. They found board member perceptions of females were that they were not good managers and were unqualified to handle budget and finance. The females surveyed felt the good-ole-boy network still existed in the superintendency. Participants in this study identified a change in board member perceptions of the effectiveness of female superintendents as a strategy for attracting female superintendent candidates and increasing the proportion of females in the superintendency. This may take board members having experience with a female superintendent and her having a chance to prove her ability before a change in attitude takes place.

The role of the superintendent is all encompassing; including collective bargaining, personnel, budget and finance, policy development and implementation, effective communication with stakeholders, strategic planning, and instructional leadership (Callan & Levinson, 2011). Currently being in the

position of superintendent, the participants in this study recommended co-superintendency as a strategy for attracting female superintendent candidates and increasing the proportion of females in the superintendency. Participants felt the job to be big enough for two people regardless of the gender of the superintendent.

### Conclusion

This study confirms previous research in the areas of gender bias, career paths of female superintendents, the need for mentors, the necessity of a supportive board that is compatible with the superintendent, and a balance between personal and professional responsibilities. The study extends previous work by revealing valuable advice to aspiring female superintendents on how to navigate the system and become successful superintendents and by sharing effective strategies for attracting female superintendents, thus increasing the proportion of females in the superintendency. This study adds to the literature on females in the superintendency to be used in future research. The findings from this study benefit university superintendent preparation programs, state superintendent associations, and females aspiring to the superintendency. The advice and strategies shared can improve university superintendent preparation programs, better prepare females for the superintendency, and hopefully motivate and encourage more females to pursue the superintendency. As one participant stated, "If you would like to become a superintendent, do it! It will change your life."

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