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Advancing Women in Leadership Online Journal  
Volume 23, Spring 2007

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Motivators and Inhibitors for Women Superintendents  
Sandra Harris

### Abstract

Findings indicated that the top five motivators for women were desire to make a difference, ability to initiate change, desire to positively impact people, and the personal and professional challenge. There were no significant differences for male superintendents. The top female inhibitors were increased time commitment, the amount of paperwork and bureaucracy, community politics, working with the school board, and isolation from the campus setting. Increased time commitment was significantly more important to females than to males.

### Motivators and Inhibitors for Women Superintendents

Today, the job of the superintendency is still mostly a male-dominated position with only 13% of superintendent positions in the United States held by women (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). This is an even more striking statistic considering the fact that over 75% of teachers are women and only 43% of principals are women (Shakeshaft, 1999; Skrla, 2001). In Texas, for example, 77% of teachers are women, while only 16% are superintendents (Price, 2003). Because of the low numbers of women in the superintendency, this study reviewed the literature on women as superintendents, then compared male and female factors that were considered motivators or inhibitors in deciding to stay or leave the superintendency. In other words, when women become superintendents what keeps them in the job and what causes them to retire and/or leave the job for other positions?

As the demands on all superintendents continue to grow, leaders are less interested in becoming superintendents or staying in this role once they have been in it for several years (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Houston, 2001). Exacerbating this already critical issue is the prospect of looming retirements because the overall median age of public school superintendents is 52.5 years old (American Association of School Administrators, 2000). Illinois reports that 47% of current school administrators will become eligible for retirement in the next three years (Rohn, 2001). Clearly, the position of superintendent is becoming harder and harder to fill with either men or women (Houston, 2001). In fact, Grogan (2000) wrote that it is "mind-numbing" to lead schools in this often "fragmented and contradictory environment" (p. 134).

Still, for women, the actual service of being a successful superintendent is not as difficult as is securing the position itself. For example, often school boards have selected male applicants over female applicants, even though there is evidence in the literature that females are often better at curriculum and instructional leadership

than males (Shakeshaft, 1999). In fact, gender has been such an issue in acquiring superintendent positions that obvious factors, such as certification, experience, and strong references, have proven to be of minimal benefit to females (Siegal, 1999). Likewise, women submit more applications, have more interviews, and search longer than men for these positions (Pavan, 1988). Grogan (1996) indicates that women feel they must have significant job experiences in order to deal with school board members who have reservations about hiring females, and Brunner (1999) suggests that it is "risky business" for females to even consider becoming superintendents. Additionally, women are more likely to become superintendents in the smallest districts with the smallest number of support staff help, more reported job stress, less satisfaction, and greatest vulnerability to negative school board conflict (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996).

Even though superintendencies are difficult for women to obtain, women continue to encourage other women to seek this role to "make the schools better for all kids" and to be able to provide leadership that "leads to improvement" (Lowery & Harris, 2000, p. 10). Despite the difficulties of the job and of obtaining the job, women are able to successfully meet the challenges of this extremely difficult position. After all, most individuals in the superintendency have found it to be "exhilarating and challenging" (Houston, 2001, p. 429), and Education Secretary, Rod Paige, said that "there is no more important job than that of leading effective public schools" (Paige, 2001, p. 26)

## Literature Review

### *The Role of the Superintendent Historically*

Grogan (2000) reported that the superintendent, historically conceived of in "distinctly male terms" (p. 121), was seen after World War II as the new executive in America . At that time, superintendent practices were borrowed from business, government, and the military. In fact, images of the warrior and community priest were often invoked in describing the symbolic power held by the man in this position. By the end of the 1960s, the superintendent role was seen as one of managing public resources efficiently. At the same time, the superintendent's role became more political. This led Lutz and Iannacone (1978) to consider the conflictive nature of the superintendent and the school board and the political maneuvering necessary to remain at the helm of the school district. The role of the superintendency beyond the business perspective was enhanced in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the superintendent began to address key school reform issues, such as restructuring, change, and effectiveness (Bjork, 1993; Holdaway & Genge, 1995; Hord, 1993; Murphy, 1991, 1993). Prior to this time, little work had been done on the relationship between the superintendent and learning (Grogan, 2000). Even into the 1990s, the language used to describe the superintendent was almost completely male, such as *statesman* or the pronoun *he*. However, during the decade of the late 1980s and early 1990s, gender issues surrounding the role of the superintendency began to be addressed (Bell & Chase, 1994; Brunner, 1995; Grogan, 1996).

### *Feminist Perspectives*

As the superintendency, the "most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States " (Glass, 1992, p. 8), began to include female leaders, the first superintendent gender literature focused on investigating and telling about the lives of women who had been superintendents. Some of these early superintendents included Carrie Chapman Catt, who later led the National American Women Suffrage Association; Betty Mix Cowles, the first superintendent in Canton, Ohio in the 1850s; and Ella Flagg Young, the superintendent of schools in Chicago in 1909 (Bjork, 2000).

The next stage of research, beginning in the 1970s and leading into the 21st century, began to explore experiences of women who aspired to become school administrators. These inquiries focused on issues such as discriminatory attitudes and stereotyping (Shakeshaft, 1989), gatekeepers (Tallerico, 1999), and mentoring (Hart, 1995). In fact, Skrla, Reyes, and Scheurich (2000) suggested that empirical studies presenting women superintendent responses might be flawed because samples and attitudes had been biased in favor of men, and thus, contributed to a knowledge base with unanswered questions regarding the ambitions of women and how they perceived their experience. Furthermore, Bjork (2000) suggested that common attributes of women leaders

studied within the past 30 years tended to be consistent with the call for school reform. Women in leadership appear to be relational, community-minded, and open to empowering decision making at all levels within the organization. They tend to be caring, collaborative, and reflective with a strong interest in bringing about change (Grogan, 1996).

Continuing this departure from male-dominated leadership literature, Grogan (2000) re-conceptualized the role of the superintendency by applying feminist concepts that considered gender by drawing on the experiences of women in the position and critically examining the social paradigm in which the job was practiced. Recognizing that the superintendency was filled with conflict, Grogan (2000) recommended that superintendents, whether male or female, must "be comfortable with contradiction, work through others, appreciate dissent, develop a critical awareness of how children are being served, and adopt an ethic of care" (p. 132-133). In the mid-1990s, Irby, Brown, and Trautman (1999) re-conceptualized leadership "inclusive of female perspectives" (p. 168), thus, contributing to a richer understanding of women as leaders and leadership as a whole.

### *Women's Experiences*

Skrla, et al. (2000) interviewed three women who left the superintendency for employment elsewhere after at least three years of experience in the same superintendency. All of the women described instances of "differential treatment" based on their gender by having their competence questioned, by enduring basic sex-role stereotyping, and by being intimidated (p. 57). They also reported that the denial of gender's role in the position of the superintendency played a negative part in their careers. Darragh (2004) had similar findings in a study of four women superintendents in rural Texas .

Brunner (2000) interviewed twelve women superintendents, along with others in the district, to gather information about professional work experiences. Her findings revealed that women superintendents frequently experienced inequality through gender bias. She also noted that when women broke norms of explicit talk about inequality, there were negative consequences. Lowery and Harris (2000) suggested that, in general, women tried to play down the gender issue by forgetting "that there are women superintendents and men superintendents" and just concentrating on being "a good superintendent." (p. 10). In fact, one female superintendent challenged other females by saying, "Don't get hung up on being a woman," identifying this tendency to lead to a change in significant ways of communicating so that women superintendents did not participate "in their own experiences of inequality" (Brunner, 2000, p. 107).

One female superintendent reported that the very fact of being told that she could not gave her a "burning desire" to become a superintendent (Harris, 2004, p. 26). However, Tallerico (2000) interviewed 75 persons (25 headhunters, 25 school board members, and 25 applicants for the superintendent) and found that there were clear barriers presented regarding gender stereotyping, such as "Can she do discipline? Can she do budget? Can she be tough enough to do whatever needs to be done? Do we have to pay her as much as the male contender?" (p. 32). Other factors that contribute to the shortage of women superintendents include career path trends. Typically, women spend more years in the classroom than men and enter administration in their 40s (Peters, 1986; Shakeshaft, 1989; Zemlicka, 2001), while the majority of male superintendents become administrators as young as 25 (Glass, 1992). Additionally, Allen (1996) suggested that women seem to be less tolerant of the politics found in the role of the superintendent, thus creating another barrier.

Clearly, family influences appear to have a greater influence on women in seeking and keeping the superintendency. Ernestine McWherter, a former Tennessee superintendent, commented, "Children are so much more of a factor than is a spouse because women feel strongly about spending time with their children" (Ramsey, 2000, Child Influences, para. 2). Consistent with this, Lowery and Harris (2000) reported that when women superintendents gave advice to women wanting to become superintendents, an important consideration was how to balance family and personal needs with such a demanding career.

Yet, women administrators "see themselves as teachers first" and are, therefore, powerful voices in leading communities about how to meet the needs of children (Tucker, 2000). Across the board, female superintendents



reported that making "the schools better for all kids" is the most positive aspect of the job. Other female superintendents listed the opportunity to provide leadership that "leads to improvement" and then being in the position to actually see "all your hard work. . . move from being an idea to a reality!" (Lowery & Harris, 2000). This is consistent with a study by Vaughan and Pankake (2005), which surveyed male and female superintendents in Texas and found that women scored significantly greater in inspirational motivation than males. This suggests that women were more involved in envisioning, demonstrating commitment to shared vision, and aligning individual and organizational goals; important qualities for successfully leading a school district.

## Methodology

### *Sample*

This study was part of a larger study which surveyed one third of the 1,041 superintendents in Texas . Two hundred thirty superintendents responded and 30 of these were women. There are approximately 92 female superintendents in Texas ( Littleton , 1997), consequently, these 30 respondents represented nearly one third of the women in Texas holding this very important position.

### *Data Collection*

Participating superintendents responded to a survey which consisted of three parts. The first part asked general demographic information about the respondents, such as age, qualifications, and length of time in the superintendency. Respondents were also asked to describe the school district, including its state rating. Part two asked respondents to discuss their future plans for remaining in the superintendency, which included questions about plans for retirement. The last section asked participants to indicate items as motivators or inhibitors for the superintendency on a forced choice Likert scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). Motivator selections from which to choose were increased salary and fringe benefits, desire to make a difference, ability to initiate change, desire to positively impact people, teacher of teachers, personal challenge, professional challenge, support/encouragement from others, relocate to a desired location, and increased prestige/status. Inhibitor selections were salary too small, lack of job security, increased time commitment, isolation/alienation from campus, amount of paperwork, working with the school board, increased emphasis on standardized tests, community politics, litigation surrounding education, fear of failure, and jobs outside of the superintendency.

### *Data Analysis*

Frequencies were tallied and measures of central tendency generated. After means were developed, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to test for significance at  $p < .05$  level when female responses were disaggregated and means compared with male responses.

## Results

### *Demographic Data*

Nearly half (46.7%) of the women superintendents were between the ages of 40 and 49 and 37% were between the ages of 50 and 55. Only 17% of the respondents were over 55. The men were both older and younger; 27% of the men were over age 55 and 6 of the male superintendents were between the ages of 30 and 39. Thirty-seven percent of the women held doctoral degrees, while only 29% of the men had terminal degrees. Eighty-seven percent of women respondents were White, as were 93% of the men.

Seventy percent (21) of the women had been a superintendent less than five years and only two had been a superintendent over ten years. In this category, only 38% of the men were in their first five years as a superintendent and 74 (37.3%) had been superintendents for over ten years. Forty percent (12) of responding female superintendents worked in a district of less than 1,000 students, while 20% (6) headed school systems

greater than 10,000 students. This was an especially interesting finding because only 8.5% (17) of male respondents were in districts greater than 10,000 students. Twenty-four of the female superintendents led districts with a Recognized or Exemplary Texas state rating, and only one superintendent indicated her district held a rating of low-performing.

Table 1

Side by Side

Demographics of Female and Male Superintendents by Percentages

n = 30 female n = 199 male

		Female	Male
Age	30-39	-	3.0%
	40-49	46.7%	25.1%
	50-55	36.7%	44.2%
	56+	16.6%	27.1%
Doctoral Degree		36.7%	29.7%
Anglo Ethnicity		86.7%	92.5%
Other Ethnicity		13.3%	7.5%
Yrs. as Superintendent	1-10	93.3%	72.4%
	11+	6.6%	37.2%
District Size	Less than 5000	76.7%	86.9%
	5000+	20.0%	14.0%
Location of District	Rural	56.7%	76.4%
	Suburban	33.3%	16.6%
	Urban	6.7%	5.0%
Retirement	55 years	30.0%	36.7%
	60 years	26.7%	33.2%
	65 years and older	36.7%	28.2%
Work after Retirement	Educational Consultant	33.3%	22.1%
	College Professor	33.3%	12.1%
	Business	3.3%	22.1%
	Other	13.3%	21.1%

Retirement Plans

When female superintendents were asked at what age they planned to retire, 30% indicated they planned to retire by age 55. Eight others indicated retirement plans at 60, and nine (30%) reported planning to stay on the job until they were 65. Over half of women indicated plans to work after retirement, while approximately 30% said they were undecided about working after retirement. Sixty-seven percent of women indicated an interest to remain in the field of education upon retirement, one third expressed an interest in educational consulting, and another one third indicated an interest in becoming a college professor (Table 1 has complete figures for retirement).

Motivators for the Superintendency

When listing motivators for the superintendency, women clearly indicated motivators that were intrinsic and focused on helping others. Means ranged from 3.83 for the item "desire to make a difference" to a low mean of

1.76 for the item "relocate to a desired location." The top five motivators for males and females were the same, although in a somewhat different order.

Table 2

*Top five motivators for males and females*

	Females	Males
Desire to make a difference	$M = 3.83,$ $SD = .38$	$M = 3.73,$ $SD = .48$
Ability to initiate change	$M = 3.73,$ $SD = .45$	$M = 3.56,$ $SD = .55$
Desire to positively impact people	$M = 3.73,$ $SD = .45$	$M = 3.70,$ $SD = .47$
Professional challenge	$M = 3.73,$ $SD = .64$	$M = 3.63,$ $SD = .57$
Personal challenge	$M = 3.67,$ $SD = .66$	$M = 3.60,$ $SD = .58$

Clearly, women were motivated by factors that focused on bringing about change and creating better opportunities for children through initiating change and positively impacting people. However, when male and female means were compared and independent samples *t*- tests calculated, there were no statistically significant differences at the *p* <.05 level between motivators for male and female superintendents.

*Inhibitors for the Superintendency*

When identifying inhibitors, female superintendents indicated that increased commitment of time was the most important issue in determining whether or not to accept the superintendency or stay in the job. Means ranged from 3.13 for "increased commitment" to a low mean of 1.77 for the item "fear of failure." The top five inhibiting issues for males and females were the same, although in a different order.

Table 3

*The top five inhibiting issues for males and females*

	Female	Male
Increased time commitment	$M = 2.12,$ $SD = .94$	$M = 2.75,$ $SD = .98$
Amount of paperwork	$M = 3.03,$	$M = 3.03,$

	<i>SD</i> .85	<i>SD</i> = .90
Community politics	<i>M</i> = 2.90,	<i>M</i> = 2.96,
	<i>SD</i> = 1.03	<i>SD</i> = .96
Working with the school board	<i>M</i> = 2.86,	<i>M</i> = 2.92,
	<i>SD</i> = 1.03	<i>SD</i> = .90
Isolation from the campus setting	<i>M</i> = 3.13,	<i>M</i> = 2.70,
	<i>SD</i> = .94	<i>SD</i> = .85

When female and male means were compared, only the category of "increased time commitment" was statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level.

### Discussion

Study findings were consistent with much of the prior research regarding why women are motivated, as well as inhibited, to remain in the superintendency. Consistent with other studies, women in this study tended to be older when they accepted their first superintendency, thus they did not have as many years in the superintendency as their male counterparts. This study also included women in Texas who were being considered for larger districts, suggesting that opportunities for women in larger districts are increasing, rather than having their opportunities limited to small, rural districts as was evidenced in prior years (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996). While the study did not identify reasons for this, one can hope that as women successfully lead school districts that are small, there reputation grows as school district leaders. This would lead to opportunities for leading larger districts.

Much of the literature focuses on whether there are gender differences in how men and women run the job of the superintendency, and this is an important consideration. However, the data from this study indicated that women and men shared much in common when identifying what encouraged them to stay in the superintendency and what caused them to leave. Women, as well as men, entered the superintendency and stayed because they wanted to change education for the better. Neither was particularly motivated by extrinsic factors, such as salary or prestige and status. Only when considering whether they should leave the superintendency was the increased time commitment for women more important than it was to men. Intuitively, this suggests that this is due to the strong demands of family that are made on women, especially those who have children still at home. Even other inhibitors, such as paperwork and bureaucratic demands that also strongly influenced the decision to leave the superintendency, reflected this increased time commitment. Likewise, workings within the political framework of the community and with the school board both require enormous amounts of time to develop and maintain the support of these constituents.

While there were some minor differences in retirement ages, none were significant. Although, surprisingly, men were more likely to retire at age 55 than women and more women than men were likely not to retire until age 65. Here again, this could be attributed to the fact that women achieve these jobs later than men.

### Recommendations

Because of the shortage that exists today in filling the position of the superintendency with qualified individuals, it is imperative to understand factors which influence women superintendents to stay in this position and to understand those factors which influence them to leave. It is equally important to understand the intent of current female superintendents regarding retirement. Identifying the positive and negative aspects of the superintendency provide a better understanding of the role itself. This can lead to stronger university preparation programs to

more effectively prepare men and women for this important leadership position. For example, preparation certification programs should emphasize strategies for effective time management. Other components of these programs should provide strategies in effective communication so that superintendents can build collaborative learning communities within the framework of the politics of the community. School boards that have a clearer understanding of the motivators and inhibitors of the job will also be able to provide more positive support for superintendents. Clearly, the position of the superintendency holds great promise for women, but most importantly it opens new possibilities for women in leadership roles.

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