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Advancing Women in Leadership Online Journal
Volume 23, Spring 2007

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Women in Leadership: Rocky Road to the Superintendency

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Women in Leadership:

Rocky Road to the Superintendency

The inequities associated with gender imbalance in leadership require national attention. Wilson (2004) found that of 435 seats in the House of Representatives, only 59 are women; of the 100 senators, only 14 are women. Only 24 women have ever been governors in the United States. Women are nearly half the workforce, yet we make up only 12% of top executives and hold 12.4% of board seats in 500 of the country's largest companies. Although these statistics are significant, they are not nearly as staggering as the statistics about the positions held by women in the superintendency. Of our nation's 13,728 superintendents, 1,984 today are women. Although 72% of K-12 educators are women in the United States, 87% of the top leaders in the school districts, the superintendents, are males according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Many questions have been posed and researched about why there are so few women in the superintendent position. Also, search committees have been formed and new programs have been put into place to recruit women into administration. Yet, there has been an inconsequential increase nationally in identifying and hiring women to the superintendency (Nogay, 1996). In reviewing research on women in the superintendency, several common strands have been identified that speculate reasons why there are so few women in the superintendency and possible solutions to this significant issue.

Besides the commonly held belief that women are discouraged from the superintendency, there are six documented reasons that are substantiated across literature related to why women are not at the top of school districts. The six categories encompass a wide range of issues including credentials, school boards, positions held, job structure, age, and mentoring.

Credentials

In a review of women in the superintendency, Vail (1999) found that 99% of superintendents started their careers as teachers. This statistic would seem promising for this female dominated field, but when you head to the next step in the common ladder towards the superintendency, Shakeshaft (1987) found the high school

principalship was a common position held. With only 14% of secondary principal positions held by women in the country, it is evident where the track for the superintendency halts

to an abrupt stop. The position of a high school principal is complex, with a large staff, budget management, numerous stakeholders, night meetings, hiring, and staff development. They are almost seen as a school CEO because the responsibility of running a comprehensive high school includes academic arenas, sports programs, arts, special education, and vocational education. There is an aggressive recruitment of high school principals to become superintendents, although two thirds of the nation's schools are elementary where many women lead.

The road to the superintendency rarely follows the elementary school principal track. This is where 97% of teachers are women and 40% are principals (Gupton & Slick, 1996). This substantial number of positions held by women in the elementary schools poses a problem for them in the superintendency track because some of the other common ways to the superintendency are through head coaching, which is usually at the high school level, or taking on an assistant principalship position, where many elementary schools do not have such employment.

School Boards/Positions Held

The position of high school principal is viewed as training for a superintendent's position as Glass (2000) noted that school boards in districts value experience in large budget and financial decisions. Women often move from elementary principal to positions in the district office. This would seem to be a valuable way for women to get their foot in the door for the superintendency, but many women take positions in curriculum and instruction (Glass, 2000). According to Vail (1999), school boards find more worth in budget and financial experience than they do with curriculum development and leadership. This trend again favors males to become superintendents more than females.

Job Structure

The isolation of the superintendency is another area that is not conducive to most women's leadership style (Goleman, 2002). "Women administrators need support and a sense of connection with others who understand the world in which they live" (Tripses, 2004, p. 2). The role of superintendent is isolated in that there is no one else holding a similar position in the entire school district. Often the communication of the superintendent goes out by e-mail and internet. Shakeshaft (1987) conducted a research study that looked at four successful women in the superintendency where relationships with others were central to all actions. "These women administrators spent more time with people, communicated more, cared more about individual differences, and were concerned more with teachers and marginal students" (Shakeshaft, 1987, p. 4). The leadership role for women in the superintendency is difficult because their community style leadership does not fit well in a secluded position. This remoteness often does not interest women.

Another area that detracts women from the superintendency is the overall structure of the job: "The average superintendent spends more than 50 hours a week at work, including night meetings and sporting events. This type of work week is often not appealing because women prefer a better balance between work and family life" (Glass, 2000, p. 4). The role of mother is another central reason to why many women do not go after the superintendency. Many women are the figures that stay at home while their husband works at his career. It is more common for males to have the opportunities to work at the superintendency because their wife is raising their children.

Age

With women staying at home to raise their children, women are entering the leadership roles in education

later than men. The American Association of School Administrators ran a study on women superintendents over a ten year period and found that men start in school leadership roles around the age of 27, where women move into administrative positions in their early 30s. The study highlighted, "Many potential women candidates for the superintendency might reach the central office in their early

50s and really don't want to proceed further or move into a new career since retirement is just four of five years away" (Logan, 1999, p.7). Logan suggests that another reason women are entering administrative positions later is that on average women spend two to three years longer in the classroom than men do.

Mentoring

It is obvious that something needs to be done to recruit more women into top leadership positions in the field of education. It would be naive to think that to change the education system is going to be easy because "change invariably creates conflict" (Bolman, 2003, p. 376). The role of the superintendency must be changed. The demand of time, work load, isolation, and structure of the position is not inviting to a woman's leadership style. Mentoring, internships, and more time working in the schools are ways that might attract more women to this leadership role.

Mentoring supports women because it starts networks and provides role models for aspiring superintendents. "Mentorship and responsible internship placements assist women's transition into school administration and continue to be important" (Logan, 1999, p. 5). Gupton and Slick (1996) made recommendations to the board of Illinois Women Administrators to create a support system for women in the superintendency. This would allow women to create a family like support system, traditional to the male networks.

Future Direction

The views and values of education are changing. Many men that were hired as superintendents had experiences with budgets and politics from high school administration that was seen as the essential skill of the top school leader. With the current testing culture, the emphasis has been placed on instructional leadership. Women in district office almost always are in the Curriculum Director roles, which is the top instructional role in school districts (Glass, 2000). The times are changing from having a budget CEO of schools to a curriculum and instruction CEO of schools. This is a change that will most definitely benefit non-secondary candidates, usually women, because of their diverse knowledge in all curricular areas and their extensive experience in teaching.

Logan writes, "It is time for educational administration departments to reassess, adjust, and activate gender equity strategies that will bring about an equitable hiring context for all of our graduates. Change comes slowly, and "real change only comes with commitment and proactive involvement directed at the source of the problem" (Logan, 1999, p. 9). There is a high rate of principals and superintendents retiring across the country. Trend data reveal that the nation is facing a crisis level administrator shortage (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000, p.3). This is the time to make the change in the roles and structure of the superintendency to recruit and retain women.

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