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Women Leading Systems

What the latest facts and figures say about women in the superintendency today by Margaret Grogan and C. Cryss Brunner

Amid reports of superintendent shortages and concerns about equal opportunity, what place do women superintendents occupy in today's school districts? Are they sought after or are they struggling to break into a traditionally male-dominated profession?

What qualities, if any, do they bring to the office that may make them more desirable as education leaders? Do women even aspire to the superintendency?

To gather the most up-to-date, comprehensive information on women and the superintendency, AASA recently commissioned a nationwide study of women in the superintendency and women in central-office positions. Using the AASA membership database and data from Market Data Retrieval, 2,500 women superintendents were identified and mailed surveys. An additional 3,000 surveys were sent to women holding central-office positions of assistant superintendent or higher.

Responses came from 723 superintendents and 472 central-office personnel — nearly 30 percent of the total population of women superintendents.

Gender Comparisons

As expected, similarities and differences between male and female superintendents and between white superintendents and superintendents of color surface when the results of the latest survey are compared to those of “The 2000 AASA Study of the Superintendency” by Thomas Glass, Lars Björk and C. Cryss Brunner.

Women and men superintendents are about the same age: 70 percent of superintendents in both studies were 55 or younger. The proportion of women and men who serve in large, medium and small districts is roughly the same. However, contrary to popular belief, it is interesting to note that 72 percent of men serve in districts enrolling fewer than 3,000 students compared to 60 percent of women.

The job search for both genders is similar: 73 percent of women and 72 percent of men secured their jobs within a year of beginning the job search. The career path for men and women superintendents most often includes teaching, a principalship and a central-office position, although there are some differences in the paths, which we will address later.

Career Aspirations

Women *do* aspire to the superintendency — and they work to fulfill their aspirations. According to this study, women led 18 percent of the 13,728 districts nationwide in 2003. In this survey, 40 percent of the women in central-office administration identified themselves as aspiring to the

position. Toward that end, 74 percent had either earned their superintendent credential or were working toward certification.

The differences among men and women superintendents are more pronounced when we consider preparation for the position. Significantly more women superintendents than men held undergraduate degrees in education: 58 percent of women compared to 24 percent of men. In addition, women spent several more years in the classroom before moving into administration than men. Nearly 40 percent of men have five or fewer years' experience in the classroom.

All superintendents are more likely to be appointed from outside the district than promoted from within, although men are twice as likely as women to be appointed from the outside. Although 55 percent of the women respondents came from outside the district, it appeared that the larger the district, the better the chance of being hired from *inside*.

Women also have a better chance than men of being hired through professional search firms: 23 percent compared to 17 percent.

Women's academic preparation for the position is more current: 47 percent of women earned their highest degree within the past 10 years compared to 36 percent of men. More than 40 percent of men earned their highest degree 15 or more years ago.

Career Advancement

Women superintendents report more professional development activities in the curriculum and instruction area. For example, 73 percent of women participated in Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development-sponsored activities compared to 39 percent of men.

Both men and women superintendents cite interest in and focus on instruction and curriculum as beneficial for advancing career opportunities for women. Specifically, both groups identified emphasis on improving instruction and knowledge of the instructional process and curriculum as significant factors for women's advancement. They also considered the ability to maintain organizational relationships, interpersonal skills and responsiveness to community groups as being important for women's careers. These strengths may give women entry points into the superintendency in this current era of high-stakes testing and accountability.

Women superintendents' longer tenure in the classroom may play a role in their interest in and focus on curriculum and instruction. One respondent shared, "I'm in my sixth year as superintendent. I have been extremely successful and I love my job. I credit my long years of teaching and strong instructional background as a main reason for my success."

Contrasting Profiles

Of those who participated in the 2000 study, 8 percent identified themselves as superintendents of color, compared to 7 percent of the women superintendents and 10 percent of the women in central-office positions who responded in the 2003 study. While the profile of white men and women superintendents seems similar in many ways, there are sharp contrasts between the

general picture and the picture of superintendents of color — especially African-American women.

Of note regarding the minority population in the latest survey is that only 1 percent of the women superintendents surveyed identified themselves as Latina. This number seems small given the current demographic trends in the United States. African-American women do not obtain superintendencies as quickly as their white counterparts: 56 percent of African-American women were hired within the first year of actively seeking a superintendency compared with more than 70 percent of white aspirants. Moreover, 25 percent of African-American women report waiting five or more years to obtain a superintendency compared to only 8 percent of white women and 9 percent of white men.

One Latina superintendent related: “As a Spanish-speaking person, I felt the pressure of the ‘glass ceiling’ when I reached for the assistant superintendency. I received No. 1 ratings but not the job — it was a hard search. I am glad I did not give up. The superintendency was easier. I received two offers on my first search.”

Evidence indicates that superintendents of color are more likely to be hired if the school boards are relatively diverse. Among the minority women superintendents, 58 percent reported the school board included two or more members of color, but only 12 percent of white women superintendents and 9 percent of the general white population serve under similarly diverse boards.

Most white women superintendents and women superintendents of color believe their boards hired them to be instructional leaders, yet 8 percent of African-American women superintendents compared to 3 percent of white women believe they were hired to be community leaders as well. In addition, African-American women superintendents were twice as likely as white women to say they were hired as change agents and twice as likely as the general population of minority superintendents to say they were brought in to lead reform efforts.

Women superintendents of color generally believed they shouldered the burden of having to prove themselves over and over. One commented: “A woman of color always has to do a better job. There is little room for error. Her actions are watched and evaluated more closely.” Another shared, “The expectations are higher and the tools are not as available as for white counterparts.”

Perhaps the most intriguing difference between the white population of superintendents and their counterparts of color were their reported political leanings. Women leaders of color in both populations describe themselves as more politically liberal than their white counterparts. And a strong majority of women leaders of color consider themselves to be Democrats compared to white women — 78 percent compared to 53 percent. Interestingly, however, white women superintendents describe themselves as liberal nearly three times as often as white men serving in the role.

Road to the Top

Many of the aspirants in the survey were assistant or associate superintendents for curriculum and instruction. This is no surprise, as the majority of women superintendents report that their boards hired them to be educational leaders rather than managers, and many women superintendents believe the most important reason they were hired was their ability to be instructional leaders.

Other factors commonly reported as important to advancing career opportunities for women in the superintendency include interpersonal skills, ability to maintain organizational relationships and responsiveness to parents and community groups. One reason the latter is a strength is likely found in the fact that women superintendents generally come from elementary schools.

Although sometimes cited as a disadvantage, familiarity with elementary-level experience as teacher, principal and often central-office supervisor for elementary education actually prepares superintendents well. For example, they often are more knowledgeable about the fundamental instructional issues of literacy and numeracy — important considerations if superintendents are expected to be instructional leaders. They also have more experience working with diverse communities of parents and other caretakers who are more involved at the elementary school level than any other level.

Although 50 percent of women superintendents report their route to the superintendency included the traditional teacher/principal/central-office roles, some women, like their male counterparts, moved from teacher to principal to superintendent, bypassing the central office. Another group of women bypassed the principal role, going from teaching to central office to the superintendency. Few men seem to have taken this path. School boards are obviously prepared to open the aperture of possible qualifications for the superintendency if the candidate presents the right expertise for the district.

Family Life

Raising a family has long been considered at odds with effectively performing the duties of the superintendency. Today, as men and women superintendents are both confronting this issue, it is encouraging to note that raising a family does not disqualify women for the superintendency. The survey revealed that 35 percent of women superintendents had raised children under the age of 20 while they were in the position; 32 percent of those women raised children ages 15 or younger.

Obviously, women do find ways to manage the responsibilities of both family and executive-level leadership. Many reported their spouses or partners were willing to take a more accommodating job and help out with the household, and 30 percent reported waiting until their children were older to pursue a superintendency — yet not too old, it seems, as 36 percent of women superintendents were in the job by the time they were 45.

While women superintendents seemed to be able to do it all, there was one significant casualty — their marriages. In answer to an open-ended question, many of the 13 percent of divorced

superintendents cited divorce as a lifestyle change made to accommodate the demands of the superintendency. One female superintendent explained that she and her husband divorced because “he did not support my career.”

Women who remained in marriages were strongly supported by their partners in managing family responsibilities. One explained, “My husband increased his assistance and support so I could be a successful superintendent.” Another shared, “My spouse stays home to care for our toddler. I handle the school district, he handles the bulk of social/community engagements and volunteer committees. This job takes a team.”

Commuter marriages have become common in these times of dual professional households and 20 percent of women superintendents report this change in their lifestyle. They also report having to relocate to take a superintendent’s position, although relocation is still considered by 88 percent as one of the major barriers for women aspiring to the position.

Here and Now

On average, women who responded to the survey have been superintendents for six years — whether in their first or subsequent positions. Based on the 2000 survey, the average number of years for men is nine.

On the whole, men and women seem to like being superintendents, and the majority say if they were to do it over again, they would want to be superintendents. In fact, more women than men (74 percent compared to 67 percent) say they would choose the same profession, and significantly more women superintendents than men (74 percent compared to 56 percent) describe their jobs as self-fulfilling. This is comforting news for those who aspire to the position, because despite the tolls such stressful positions take on the individual, obviously there are important professional and personal gains.

On the other hand, the lack of job security at the hands of dysfunctional boards of education, the politically charged environment and the 24/7 nature of the job make it a daunting prospect, especially in the eyes of those who argue that superintendents are generally poorly compensated for their onerous responsibilities.

In the 2003 study, women superintendents’ annual salaries ranged from \$25,000 to more than \$250,000 with the majority falling between \$75,000 and \$125,000. We do not have comparative figures from the previous study, and while it is possible that men’s and women’s salaries are equitable, a June 2004 article in the Morris County, N.J., *Daily Record* casts some doubts.

In the article, “Women Lag Behind Men in Top District Posts,” staff writer Laura Bruno reveals that a list of the 10 best-paid superintendents in Morris County included only one woman, Rosalie Lamonte. Her \$154,960 salary put her at the bottom of the list, which topped out at \$178,000. District size was not a factor because, according to New Jersey Department of Education, only two of the districts listed are larger than Lamonte’s.

Compensation also is an important issue for central-office administrators who aspire to the superintendency. According to the latest study, aspirants were between ages 46 and 55 and already were earning between \$75,000 and \$125,000. Depending on size and location of the school district, ascending to a superintendency may not be accompanied by a sufficiently attractive increase in salary and benefits.

Implications for Women

What are the study's implications for women considering the superintendency? How do the new data inform those who are preparing the next generation of women superintendents?

This study has gained significant media attention, prompting outsiders as well as insiders to take a hard look at *why* are there so few women in the top position when the majority of educators are women and women comprise at least half of the students in educational leadership programs. Women *do* aspire to the superintendency. Not only that, but they are successful in the position and they enjoy the work.

At meetings of education professionals, gender has been considered a non-issue. But the fact remains that in 2004 only about 2,500 women serve as superintendents in the country.

Women have not traditionally been considered seriously for the superintendency. Coursework in higher education is still based primarily on the traditional male model of leadership, which has stressed managerial efficiency over instruction and community engagement. And, unlike men, women are not often encouraged to think of the superintendency as a career goal.

This study indicates that attitudes are changing. As more women serve as superintendents in more districts, school boards may consider women superintendents less of an anomaly, especially as women take on their second and third superintendencies. Indeed, as this survey suggests, school boards already are viewing women with backgrounds in curriculum and instruction as attractive candidates. As more teachers and administrators work with more women superintendents, women will be seen more often as role models for others.

But, simply occupying the role is not enough. Women superintendents and women central-office administrators must network. The superintendency is a lonely, highly public profession that can be dangerously stressful without adequate relief systems.

Many women identified mentoring and support systems as crucial to their success. One woman shared, "It sure is a visible job — definitely the eye of the hurricane on many days. We need more support as we start out in the field instead of trial by fire, especially women." If being connected is important for women in general, these data reveal how much more important it is for women of color to form and maintain professional and personal networks.

Women superintendents in this study emerge as community builders, grounded in knowledge of curriculum and instruction and prepared to stay the course of leading school districts across the country. There is no doubt they have the expertise to lead systems in these challenging times.

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