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Book Review

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Eight at the Top: A View Inside Public Education

EIGHT AT THE TOP: A VIEW INSIDE PUBLIC EDUCATION. Gloria L. Johnston, Gwen E. Gross, Rene S. Townsend, Peggy Lynch, Patiricia B. Novotney, Benita Roberts, Lorraine Garcy, Libia Gill. Lanham, Maryland and London: Scarecrow Press, 2002. 142 pp. Paper: \$17.95. ISBN 0-8108-4215-7.

Everyone loves a good story and *Eight at the Top: A View Inside Public Education* shares the stories of eight successful female superintendents' personal and professional experiences, insights, and lessons learned.

What began as a doctoral dissertation was expanded to ongoing discussions among eight female California superintendents. Their districts varied in size, as did their years of experience and career paths. What was consistent was their commitment to share what they had learned with others. They believed that their discussions, reflections, and writing provided for their own professional growth, as well.

The book is arranged around the five topics that emerged from conversations and writing sessions. These topics were expanded into chapters that offer stories from the careers of each superintendent. The chapters begin with the broad topics of: "Knowing Your Community", "Knowing Your Board", and "Knowing Your Organization and Its People." The last chapters narrow to the more personal topics of: "Knowing Your Students"; and, "Knowing Yourself." Each chapter offers about fifteen illustrative stories. Chapters conclude with a list of succinct, summarizing thoughts labeled, "Lessons Learned."

The first chapter focuses on the importance of knowing your community. A story about the prerequisite for applicants to research the community was expected; one about the backlash from community engineers regarding a "new math" adoption was familiar; and both of the stories relating experiences with media serve as cautionary tales. One story told of a community that established an organization that annually identified and recognized people who contributed to the community. This, in and of itself, is a com-

About the Author

Marcia Morrison is Assistant Professor of educational administration at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion, South Dakota. Her teaching and research foci are reading, the elementary principalship, and curriculum leadership. Marcia has more than 25 years of administrative experience at the building and central office level in the states of Colorado and Washington. Email: mmorriso@usd.edu.

mon practice in many communities; however, the story presents additional touches such as identifying these individuals as “Living Treasures.” “It’s a grass roots process that selects individuals with integrity who are willing to share their expertise with the community they love” (p.19). “Lessons Learned” reinforce the importance of taking an active role in the community, of inspiring and recruiting community members to actively participate in the schools, and the need to have a well planned media policy.

Chapter 2, a most interesting and instructive chapter, focuses on knowing your board. Situations each had experienced with schools boards were related. These situations pointed out the multiplicity of school board members’ intentions, skills, and knowledge. Stories provided the description of the “dream board” that turned out not to be; practical ways these women conducted board meetings; distinctions between policy and administration; processes to review board policy; and practical ways to build a team with your board. One story about working successfully with the board had a rocky beginning. “After the most recent election in my district, I learned that two new board members who defeated the incumbents did not want to spend any time touring the district with me. They both told me they believed they already knew everything they needed to know and were not interested in hearing anything from my perspective” (p. 42). “Lessons Learned” offer practical advice such as the need to treat all board members the same, to communicate continually, and to work for consensus.

Chapter 3 focuses on knowing your organization and its people. Several aspects of an organization are presented such as informal and formal networks, personnel practices, decision-making processes, internal and external policies, communication systems, and priority setting practices. The need to “figure out what’s going on” is demonstrated by stories about the need to listen first, the importance of showing up, and the need to shift the power structure if necessary. The need to shift the power structure was exemplified by a story about a new superintendent beginning her job only to realize that her secretary had disproportionate influence and power. After assessing the situation, she reassigned administrative responsibilities among herself and her assistant superintendents and secretarial responsibilities among other departments and staff. “The changes helped to shift the

power structure from an old paradigm to a new one. I know I made some mistakes in those early days. However, I learned a great deal about how power affects the structure of the organization” (p. 62). Just a few of the “Lessons Learned” in this chapter reinforce the importance of listening, not making assumptions, maintaining constancy of purpose, allowing people to learn from their mistakes, and affirming the work of staff and students by being visible at school events.

“First, we should never lose sight of our students. Second, we never fully know what it takes to touch a child. Finally, we must be careful with our power to ensure that we influence students positively” (p.83). Chapter 4, “Knowing Your Students”, emphasizes why these leaders became educators. “Our caring for students is what got us going, what keeps us going and what provides us our ultimate job satisfaction” (p.83). The related student experiences provided them encouragement, inspiration, and occasional sadness. Both the stories and “Lessons Learned” in this chapter reinforce dedication to students as the bedrock of their work.

As these women met, talked, listened and wrote, they came to a deeper understanding of themselves. Their insights are the focus of the chapter, “Knowing Yourself”. They share the personal qualities that they found to be most important to be a successful superintendent; and, they shared their doubts. “Sometimes I have days when I close the door to my office and wonder why anyone hired me to do this job. As a first-time superintendent, I am convinced you are never really prepared for what this job demands or for how to do it. What I have come to understand after a few years is the importance of trusting your intuition and knowing your own personal strengths” (p.108). They share their sources of guidance and inspiration. They reflect on how they were able to survive and thrive; how to take care of themselves; and, if necessary, know when it’s time to leave.

This is not a book of theory or research. Rather, this is a book of honest reflection. This is a book written to mentor others, as well as, the authors. The personal stories humanize the roles and responsibilities of the superintendent while the “Lessons Learned” summarizes crucial pieces of advice to be drawn from the stories. The women open up and honestly share what it is like to be a female school superintendent. They share their successes and failures and they do so with humor, wisdom, reflection, and candor.