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A Decade of Inquiry: The Status of Female Superintendents and Secondary Principals in the High Plains

Doreen Gosmire, Marcia Morrison and Joanne Van Osdel

This research provides insight into the status of female administrators from a particular geographical area in rural America. Findings reveal that some progress has been made across the United States but there is more effort needed especially in the High Plains states. The numbers of females in administrative positions in the High Plains states from 1997 to 2007 were collected from the Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota Departments of Education. The percentages of females in the High Plains states were compared to national numbers for the same time period. There has been a pattern of increased numbers and percentages of females serving as superintendents and secondary principals across the United States and High Plain states. The High Plains states consistently lag behind the United States in the percentage of increase of practicing female superintendents and secondary principals for the decade of 1997 to 2007. When considering the status of female administrators, numbers do not tell the whole story. Additional aspects studied through qualitative inquiry were the career tracks of these women, the barriers they encountered, and the support systems provided for them.

Introduction

The dearth of women in administrative positions has been a focus of concern and study for the past two decades (Karstens-Hansen, 2002). Hill and Raglund (1995) reported that the opportunities for women to assume positions are available and that the number of women superintendents and principals increased throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Rhodes (2001) concluded that the percent of women administrators does not reflect the same pattern of increasing percentages that match the teaching population.

Bjork (2001) describes four phases of research on women in school administration. In the 1970s descriptive information about the number of females in school administrative positions were reported during stage one. Also, in the 1970s a second stage of literature focused on the history of noteworthy women in educational leadership roles. Stage three occurred in the 1980s and unveiled factors that prevented women from obtaining and

older and have more years of teaching experience than their male counterparts. Karstens-Hansen (2002) examined women in a rural state who had obtained certification in secondary administration. The typical woman who held certification as a secondary school administrator is married, over the age of 50, and has between two and four children

Career Paths

Female educators become administrators serendipitously, frequently by chance and without a planned goal to become an administrator. Women school leaders began their careers as teachers and often an outside influence set the administrative career in motion. Young and McLeod (2001) found, after surveying 127 female administrators in Iowa and interviewing 20 of them, that not one interviewee entered education thinking she would become an administrator. Karstens-Hansen (2002) surveyed 85 women certified for secondary administration in South Dakota. The women in the Karstens-Hansen (2002) study typically started by teaching English and the decision to obtain a masters degree in administration was usually made in the first year of teaching; however, most (62%) were more interested in securing the advanced degree than an administrative position, 48% were motivated by an increase in pay, and of those women who were working as administrators, 25% had never sought out the job because they were promoted from within the school system, and 22.7% were asked to apply. Adams and Hambright (2004) studied their own female students seeking a masters degree in educational leadership. The researchers were struck by the number of students (45%) who reported that they would never consider becoming an administrator. The same held true for the eight California superintendents who shared their experiences in *Eight at the Top: A View Inside Public Education* (Johnston, Gross, Townsend, Lynch, Novotney, Roberts, Garcy, & Gill, 2002). Although the district size, years of experience and career paths varied for these California female leaders, none started out to become superintendents. Additionally, fifteen female superintendents studied by Garn and Brown (2008) did not begin their teaching careers with administrative goals.

Since female teachers do not set out to be administrators, an experience or event may change their thinking and start them down an administrative career path. Female administrators in Iowa identified three factors that affected their decision to become an administrator: (a) administrative role models with which these women either did or did not identify; (b) exposure to a nontraditional leadership style; and (c) the influence of endorsement and support they received (Young & McLeod, 2001, p. 16). The Rand corporation studied the career paths of female administrators and identified the importance of timing as a major factor in their professional decision making, suggesting that the "greatest barrier to female participation in school administration may exist at the point where an individual decides to switch from teaching to administration" (Gates, et al., 2004, p. 2). Montz and Wanat (2008) found that supervisors' support was evident by the fact

that “nearly half (45%) of female administrators were hired internally” (p. 33).

The motivations which prompt female educators to become administrators appear to be a commitment to school improvement and dedication to students. Edson (1995) conducted a ten year, three-phase longitudinal study of 142 females aspiring to be principals. The first phase of the study provided insight into the dispositions and motivations of these women. Aspiring female principals often pushed the limits but believed that they had the skills and motivation to make a difference in schools (Edson, 1995). Hill and Ragland (1995) interviewed 34 female administrators who had been selected as outstanding administrators by others in similar positions. Hill and Ragland’s (1995) study was a broad sample from 19 states and 2 provinces and included women from rural, suburban and urban areas, women of color, as well as women from ages 30 to 60. The respondents’ motivation to pursue an administrative position was not because of ego but because of a desire to make positive improvement in schools for students.

The eight California superintendents interviewed by Johnston, et al. (2007) echoed the same motivation to improve schools and a dedication to students. Female superintendents explained that they loved being principals but believed they could do the job better than had been done and would have a greater sphere of influence as superintendent; they shared “. . . our caring for students is what got us going, what keeps us going and what provides us our ultimate job satisfaction” (Johnston, et al., 2007, p. 83). The dedication to students and to learning was summarized by one of the Iowa female administrators in the study conducted by Young and McLeod (2001). “I was convinced that as an administrator I would be able to make a difference, that I would be able to reach more students who could have or who might slip through the cracks” (p. 11).

A critical step on the career path of female administrators is securing an administrative position. The second phase of Edson’s (1995) research on the career paths of female principals was conducted five years after the female participants had begun their administrative careers. Edson (1995) found one-third of the participants were principals, one-third were in positions that advanced their careers, and one-third were in the same position. The female participants who had secured a principal position had done so mainly at the elementary level and held advanced degrees. The women who had not secured a principal position expressed being more realistic about the demands of family and the needs of their own children. At the ten year mark, 21% of the women were in pre-principal positions, such as an assistant principal; 34% were principals; and 21% had moved into administrative positions beyond the principalship (Edson, 1995).

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) examined the career paths of female superintendents. AASA collected six sets of survey data from superintendents over a thirty year time period. Women enter the superintendency later and are older than the average male superintendent with 40% of women between 41-50 years of age while only 31% of

men are between those same ages (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Glass, 1992; Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Brunner and Grogran (2007) echoed the findings of AASA by reporting that nearly half of the female superintendents (45%) begin their superintendency from within their school district.

The typical professional experience reported by both male and female superintendents in the AASA surveys include the following: (a) 68% of the superintendents had been central office administrators or district coordinators; (b) 46% had been high school principals; (c) 59% had been high school teachers; (d) 37% spent 6–10 years in the classroom with an average of 6–7 years; (e) 76% had the first administrative position before 35; and (f) 58% had experience coaching. Women have had a slightly different professional background from the general population of superintendents. Female superintendents have fewer years of overall educational experience, but, they have more years of classroom teaching experience. Fifty percent of males have 5 years in the classroom, 60% of females have at least 10 years of teaching experience (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Glass, 1992; Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

Montz and Wanat (2008) studied professional qualifications and the career paths of 31 female superintendents in a Midwestern state. Montz and Wanat (2008) found that the career paths of these women were similar to female superintendents in national studies. Of particular interest was their view that more opportunities for female superintendents are made possible due to the declining numbers of male applicants in a rural state. One woman commented, “I think the women are getting the jobs . . . but I think it’s because the pool . . . of men applicants has gone down. And so . . . (rural districts). . . they’ve got to have a superintendent” (Montz & Wanat, 2008, p. 36).

Barriers

Female administrators have reported barriers encountered throughout their careers. The barriers appear to fit into the categories of family, time, mobility, and cultural gender bias. The demands of family has a long history as a barrier for females pursuing administrative careers. In interviews conducted by Edson (1995) and Karstens-Hansen (2002), many women reported that they waited for their children to get older before pursuing positions that made heavy demands on their time. As a result, these women generally enter their first administrative position later than men and begin the superintendency even later (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). Traditionally, Boards of Education silently prefer a ‘family’ person as superintendent, indicating a barrier for a single woman (U.S. Department of Education, 1982). Edson (1995) found that five years into their administrative careers women acknowledged the demands of family and their own children. The rural superintendents in Montz and Wanat’s (2008) research identified family concerns as the greatest barrier to career advancement. Derrington and Sharratt (2009) surveyed 140 women who reported that

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family obligations had definitely influenced their decision to seek a superintendency.

Hicks (1996) described the tremendous time commitment and stress for female school leaders:

A woman's guilt is powerful in the high school principalship. She brings to the role the collective guilt of her sex: that of not being able to be everything to everybody. The strong tendency of women to mother or parent those in their charge can place a female principal in the precarious position of trying to take care of everyone else at the expense of taking care of herself (p. 54).

Karstens-Hansen (2002) found that women seeking secondary principalships reported the long hours as the greatest barrier to the position. Adams and Hambright (2004) surveyed females seeking an administrative degree. The top three reasons that the respondents gave for not seeking a job as a principal were "low pay in comparison to the job responsibilities, too much stress, and too great a time commitment" (p. 209).

Another barrier to administrative careers for women has been the inability or unwillingness to move to get a job. Mims (1992) explained that among female educational administration graduate students only five percent were willing to relocate beyond 100 miles for a job, ten percent would move out of state, and 36% would not go further than 50 miles. Female administrators reported that they would have advanced professionally more quickly if they would have been willing to move; however, they were unable to do so because of husband and family (Hill and Ragland, 1995). Eighty-eight percent of the female superintendents in the AASA study reported that mobility was an "important factor" (41%) or "somewhat important factor" (47%) in limiting opportunities (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). In a national survey of 390 potential female superintendents, 37% were unwilling to relocate; however, 12% were willing to relocate to another state and 51% said they would be willing to relocate within the state (Christie, Jackson, & Bab, 2007). Eighty percent of the rural superintendents studied by Montz and Wanat (2008) identified the inability to move as a barrier.

Gender Bias

Gender bias is another barrier to an administrative career reported in the research. Women in Hill and Ragland's (1995) research represented a broad sample of outstanding female administrators. The participants were from 19 states and two provinces, worked in rural, suburban and urban schools, included women of color as well as women from ages 30 to 60. The outstanding female leaders felt that barriers to being a female leader included: (a) male dominance in key positions which created bias in promoting and hiring females; (b) females not recognizing the 'good old boy' system; (c) lack of career positioning; (d) lack of mentoring, and (e) internal barriers that represent long held gender bias in schools.

Females superintendents reported that they believe discriminatory hir-

ing practices exist. AASA surveyed superintendents and reported the following barriers related to administrative positions for females: (a) immobility, (b) stereotypical views of women by Boards of Education, (c) the 'glass ceiling', (d) lack of opportunities to gain experience, professional networks and mentors, and (e) the view that the superintendent's work is an unattractive career choices. The "... majority of men ... in the sample believed that most of the barriers listed are not factors limiting administrative opportunities for women, while the women themselves reported all to be either important or somewhat important factors" (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000, p. 89).

The 'good old boy' system is viewed as both a barrier and a benefit, depending on the definition. In a national study, female superintendents reported that they had benefitted from the 'old boy/old girl' network as it had significantly assisted them in securing their position (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). Eighty-seven percent of the rural female superintendents in Montz and Wanat's study (2008) agreed that the 'good old boy' network promoted men over women.

Blount (1999) suggested that teaching became a career path for women and that administration has become a masculine career. Males were provided an avenue for job advancement to the administrative ranks after accessing the GI bill to enter university graduate programs. "Just as teaching is described as having been feminized, it is just as fitting to describe the administrative realm as having been masculinized" (Blount, 1999, p. 12). Several other researchers have affirmed this masculinized culture by studying the current practices of high school principals. Researchers reported that there is an either-or paradigm, suggesting that female high school principals feel compelled to think and act like their male counterparts or to step outside of the practiced culture and risk abandonment and isolation (Blackburn, Martin, & Hutchinson, 2006; Culver, 2007; Mertz & McNeely, 1998). Hargreaves (2009) conducted a naturalistic inquiry of five female high school principals and affirmed Blount's work (1999). "The descriptors for successful administrative attributes are masculine. Historical accounts of great leaders are stories of great men" (p. 54).

Support Systems

Mentors provide valuable support for female administrators. Pence (1995) followed teams of mentors and protégées and found that the factors for a successful mentorship include: (a) building a strong relationship through trust, (b) mutual respect, and (c) commitment. Other factors for success were similar educational philosophy and physical proximity (Pence, 1995). These factors were reported as more important than the age, race, position, or gender of the mentors and protégées. The gender and formality of the mentoring relationship was not as important as the fact that a mentor was present. Mentors were considered so important that female administrators felt an obligation to mentor others (Johnston, et al., 2002; Young & McLeod, 2001). In addition to professional mentors, family and friends,

especially friends in the field of education, were cited as providing support (Johnston, et al., 2002; Young & McLeod, 2001). A greater number (42%) of aspirants securing principal positions acknowledged having a mentor, while only 17% securing the position did not have mentors (Young & McLeod, 2001). Female superintendents identified the lack of a mentor as an important (16%) or somewhat important barrier (50.2%) limiting administrative opportunities for women (Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000). The percentage of female superintendents who had a mentor decreased from 71% in 2000 to 67.6% in 2006 (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Palladino, Grady, Harr, and Peery (2007) surveyed first-time female superintendents from rural school districts and reported that relationships were key to the success of these administrators. The role of the supervisor was critical to the decision of many females to become an administrator (Garn & Brown, 2008; Young & McLeod, 2001). Women were encouraged to seek a superintendency because of a mentor (Montz & Wanat, 2008). All the female superintendents in Garn and Brown's study (2008) reported having a mentor and emphasized the importance of the role.

Glass (1992) identified the importance of networking for female superintendents. Seventy-seven percent (76.9%) of the women surveyed by AASA believed that networking helped them secure their positions. At the same time, for those that did not have a mentor or network of support, 65% of the women in the study saw the lack of a support system as a barrier (Glass, 1992). Washington, Miller, and Fiene (2007) studied female superintendents in Kentucky with nine of the participants from rural school districts; the women interviewed reinforced the importance of both networking and mentoring. "They cultivated relationships with their peers while keeping one eye on those in leadership who could serve as sponsors or mentors" (Washington, Miller, & Fiene, 2007, p. 277).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the status of female superintendents and secondary principals in the High Plains states of Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota from 1997 to 2007. Two research questions guided this study and shaped the interview protocol: (a) How do the numbers of female secondary principals and superintendents in the United States compare to the number of female secondary principals and superintendents in the High Plains Region for years 1997 to 2007? (b) What are the career paths, support systems, and challenges experienced by selected female secondary principals and superintendents in the High Plains Region?

This study is a quantitative and qualitative inquiry about female secondary principals and superintendents. The quantitative part of the study relied on archival data collected over the decade from 1997 through 2007. Data on the number of superintendents, the number of secondary principals, and gender related to each position were collected from the Department of Education in Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Annual personnel re-

ports and records collected by each State Department of Education were retrieved for ten years. The data from each year was disaggregated by job title and gender. Survey data were also retrieved from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) regarding the number of superintendents in the United States, number of secondary principals in the United States, and gender specific to each position for the years 1997–2007. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for the High Plains region and the states of Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota. Data calculated for the High Plains states, as well as data collected from NCES and AASA were utilized to create a graphic comparison of the High Plains states to the United States regarding the number of females who serve as secondary principals and superintendents.

The qualitative portion of this study involved twelve interviews with female superintendents and female high school principals in the High Plains states regarding academic preparation, career path, challenges and support systems. Individual telephone interviews were conducted for approximately one hour with seven female secondary principals who have been in their positions for more than three years and five female superintendents who have been in their positions for more than two years. An interview protocol was created based on the literature review and included the topics of career paths, barriers, and support systems. The qualitative analysis of interview data involved a thematic approach and was conducted horizontally and vertically. Verification of the qualitative data occurred through member checks and multiple data sources.

Findings

Data collected from the Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota Departments of Education, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), and the United States Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reveal that the number of females in the secondary principalship and the superintendency is on the rise. However, the High Plains states of Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota have not kept pace with the United States in terms of the percentage growth of females serving schools as secondary principals and superintendents. Data collected from the state departments of education is self reported by each school district. The format of data collection varied slightly from state to state. North Dakota collects information on the actual numbers of persons while Nebraska and South Dakota collect data by full time equivalency (FTE). The quantitative data is presented in tabular and chart format.

Table 1 presents information about the number of secondary school principals in the High Plains states. North Dakota has the highest percentage of female secondary principals in the High Plains states (13.45%). The number of secondary principals in North Dakota has been almost constant throughout the decade of 1997–2007. However, it should be noted that the

number of school districts in North Dakota has declined. Therefore, the actual percentage of females serving as secondary principals has only increased by 0.05 percent and actually declined for some years in North Dakota. South Dakota has the lowest percentage of females (9.11%) serving as secondary principals. Nebraska has the greatest percentage of growth (1997, 6.17%; 2007, 13.39%). The High Plains has seen a growth of females that serve as secondary principals from 1997 to 2007 (1997, 7.01; 2007, 12.32%).

South Dakota has the highest percentage of females serving as superintendents (16.27%). South Dakota also had the greatest percentage growth in the number of females who serve as a superintendent (1997, 1.65%; 2007, 16.27%). The High Plains States have seen a steady increase in the number of females who serve as superintendents (1997, 2.46%; 2007, 10.31%). The actual number of female superintendents has increased by 31.23 FTE from 13.42 FTE in 1997 to 44.65 FTE in 2007. The percentages of female superintendents in the High Plains and for the states of Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota are listed in Table 2.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) collects data every seven years related to the number of secondary and elementary principals by surveying the public and private school districts throughout the United States. Figure 1 provides an illustrative attempt to compare data collected by the NCES and the information presented in Table 1 regarding the percentage of females who serve as secondary principals in the High Plains. It should be noted that the axis point of 1997 is actually data collected by the NCES in the year 1994. There has been growth in the number

TABLE 1
Percentage of Female Secondary Principals in the High Plains.

Year	Percentage of Female Secondary Principals			Percentage of Female Secondary Principals High Plains	
	NE	ND	SD	N	Percent
2007	13.39	13.45	9.11	73.46	12.32
2006	14.60	17.09	9.64	81.36	14.07
2005	13.08	15.43	7.53	73.20	12.46
2004	14.20	16.36	8.82	81.72	13.58
2003	14.09	15.12	8.53	82.16	13.06
2002	12.60	13.53	9.31	79.38	11.92
2001	11.81	11.59	8.70	71.31	10.91
2000	10.81	11.32	5.81	62.03	9.55
1999	9.48	12.14	5.62	55.53	8.78
1998	6.52	12.85	4.64	51.39	7.67
1997	6.17	13.40	3.88	49.93	7.01

TABLE 2
Percentage of Female Superintendents in the High Plains.

Year	Percentage of Female Superintendents			Percentage of Female Superintendents High Plains	
	NE	ND	SD	N	Percent
2007	8.18	9.63	16.27	44.65	10.31
2006	6.82	7.14	16.97	41.68	9.04
2005	7.12	6.16	15.17	39.66	8.45
2004	6.48	5.96	15.69	39.42	8.17
2003	5.90	4.58	16.85	38.16	7.73
2002	5.74	5.16	4.74	27.99	5.36
2001	3.35	6.21	4.25	22.60	4.48
2000	3.15	5.78	4.58	23.49	4.34
1999	4.19	3.98	3.31	20.83	3.90
1998	2.68	2.86	1.98	14.55	2.69
1997	2.15	3.37	1.65	13.42	2.46

of females who serve as secondary principals in the United States and the High Plains. The percentage of females for the United States has been consistently higher than that of the High Plains. Figure 1 illustrates the difference in the percentage of females who serve as secondary principals in the United States and the percentage of females who serve as secondary principals in the High Plains states.

The Association of School Administrators (AASA) collects data from each public school superintendent regarding the status and condition of the superintendency through surveys distributed twice each decade. Figure 2 is an illustrative comparison of the data collected from AASA and the information presented in Table 2 regarding the percentage of female superintendents in the High Plains states. The number of females in the superintendency has increased in the United States and in the High Plains

Figure 1
Comparison of High Plains Secondary Principals to the United States.

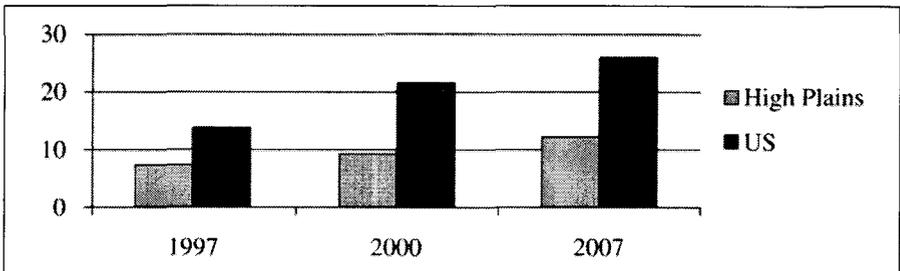
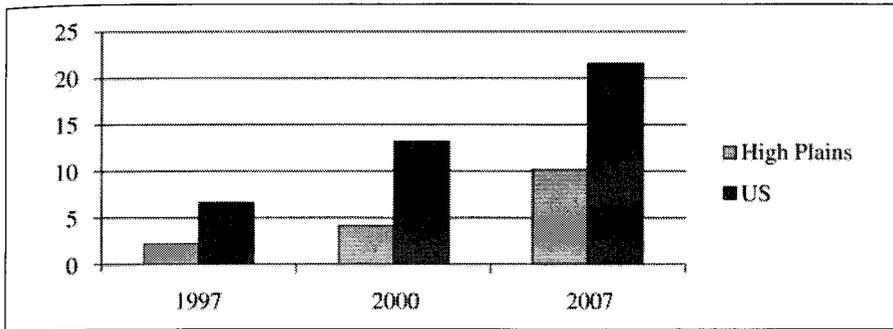


Figure 2
Comparison of Female Superintendents in the High Plains
to the United States.



states in the decade of 1997 to 2007. The percentage of females who serve as a superintendent in the High Plains has remained below the percentage of females who serve as a superintendent in the United States. The chart presented as Figure 2 visually displays that there is an increasing gap between the number of females in the United States who serve as superintendents and the number of females in the High Plains who serve as superintendents.

The qualitative portion of the study sought to identify the career paths, support systems, and challenges experienced by seven selected female high school principals and five female superintendents in the High Plains Region. The career paths for the principals encompassed an average of eight years of teaching experience followed by an assistant principal role. These females had various reasons for becoming a principal. Four of the seven did not set out to be a principal with one calling it “a fluke” and the others stating “that it just happened.” Three of the principals felt that gender had helped them secure the positions because of their districts’ desire for gender balance and due to an emphasis on collaboration. Two felt they had to overcome gender bias in order to secure their positions, especially regarding their ability to discipline students. “I think that they finally believed that I could handle the students.”

The five superintendents interviewed had an average of 12 years of teaching experience. Administratively, one participant held a combined administrative position of high school principal and superintendent; the second participant held the combined administrative position of special education director and superintendent; a third was an elementary principal; another had been an administrator in health services, and the fifth participant had been a principal, then a central office director and assistant superintendent before becoming a superintendent. Three of the superintendents did not intentionally become an administrator. “I never intended to be superintendent it just happened.” One had been asked by her superintendent

to become a principal and later the Board of Education asked her to be superintendent. One felt “called to lead” and pursued an administrative career.

There were barriers and challenges to overcome. Three of the principals encountered unaccepting male staff and one encountered unaccepting female staff. “Many of the male staff just didn’t come to me. One female teacher still ignores me.” Two faced concerns about their ability to discipline students. “A lot of people on staff and in the community just feel like a woman can’t handle the discipline issues.” They all felt these barriers were specific to them as females and still exist for future administrators. Two of the superintendents did not feel they had faced any gender related barriers. The other participants indicated that there were barriers specific to them as women. The need to invest more time and effort than a male superintendent was identified as a barrier, as well as the emphasis on the traditional roles for women in rural communities. They expressed that these barriers are still present. “I have worked harder than any man to get where I am. I think that is still the expectation for females, you must be better and work harder.”

All of the principals and superintendents felt that they benefited from some type of support system. All the principals indicated that their supervisors had been supportive; three stated that mixed gender professional organizations had provided support; and all participants indicated that they had developed supportive friendships with other professionals. Four shared that they had received personal support from husbands and family members. Likewise, all of the superintendents felt that their supervisors had supported their advancements into administrative positions. However, two indicated that they had never benefited from any organized support system such as a professional organization or mentoring relationship. The other participants indicated that professional organizations, college professors and other superintendents had been supportive. Families, husbands and parents provided support for all these women. One participant expressed that her faith and personal God provided support for her.

Discussion and Conclusions

The number of female superintendents and high school principals has steadily increased from 1997 to 2007. The High Plains states are behind the percentage of female superintendents and the percentage of female secondary principals in the United States. This gap causes concerns and requires the attention of school boards and their stakeholders. In addition, the discrepancy in numbers in the High Plains is of particular relevance for the authors, who are faculty members in educational administration programs in the High Plains with enrollments of 60% female graduate students.

The percentage of female superintendents in the High Plains (10%) is much lower than the nation (22%) for 2007. In addition, the number of female secondary principals in the High Plains states (12%) was much lower than the number of female secondary principals in the United States (26%)

during the 2007 school year. The numbers leave one to wonder about what is happening to students who pursue a degree but are not employed as school administrators.

The women in this study provided insight to career paths, barriers, and support systems they experience as practicing superintendents and secondary principals. All of the women in this study reported that they did not have a defined career path to become a school administrator. This was parallel to the findings of Young and McLeod (2001); and Gates, et al., (2004). The barriers described by the twelve women in this study included (a) gender bias attitudes of male faculty and female faculty, (b) concern for a female's ability to handle discipline, and (c) higher expectations for females in terms of time and work effort. These barriers described by the women interviewed in this study were similar to the findings of Karstens-Hansen (2002); Blount (1999); and Hill and Raglund, (1995). All of the females interviewed in this study identified their supervisor or former supervisor as an informal mentor and source of support for their current position as a superintendent or secondary principal. Garn and Brown (2008), Montz and Wanat (2008), and Young and McLeod (2001) reported that the supervisor served as a strong mentor to females who enter administration even though this mentoring occurred on an informal level. Interviewees in this study indicated that their family was a support system for them. This finding was of specific importance to the women in the High Plains.

Female superintendents and secondary principals in the High Plains states would benefit from a more deliberate mentoring system. Mentoring should begin with faculty in the graduate programs of educational administration who model gender equity and cultural socialization of female leadership. Professional organizations need to encourage women to develop a clear career path to the superintendency and secondary principalship. The numbers will only increase for the High Plains states if specific, deliberate actions are implemented. A decade from now the numbers, career paths, barriers, and support systems will remain the same without intentional action by programs of educational administration and professionals currently in the field.

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