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Women in the Superintendency: Opting In or Opting Out?

Mimi Wolverton & R. Timothy Macdonald

The purpose of this article was to report the most common career path to the superintendency in the Northwest. We compared career paths across four subgroups of study participants—male and female superintendents and male and female certificate holders who were not superintendents. First, we sought commonalities in the routes chosen by current male and female superintendents in the study. Second, we examined the career choices of potential superintendency applicants to determine whether they were actually gaining the types of administrative experience required by school boards and search consultants. We concluded with implications for practice based on study findings.

Increasingly, popular literature suggests that the U.S. is experiencing, or will in the near future, a shortage of qualified applicants for the superintendent position (AASA, 1999). Highly qualified candidates often do not want the job (Cooper, Fusarelli & Carella, 2000; Cunningham & Burdick, 1999; McAdams, 1998). Current pools of administrative candidates come from practicing teachers (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski, 1999), and the majority of teachers are women. Yet few women are found in the superintendency. Of the 2,262 superintendents responding to the 2000 AASA superintendent survey, only 297 (13%) were women (Glass et al., 2000). The situation in the northwestern region of the country mirrors the survey results. In a regional study of superintendents in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington, only 13% of the 522 superintendents who participated were women (Wolverton, Rawls & Macdonald, 2000).

In school districts, there are several gateways an individual must pass through prior to the superintendency. Traditionally, a candidate must have survived the classroom as a teacher, engaged in a certification process, and experienced at least one intermediary administrative position before ascending to the superintendency. The types of positions assumed determine the experience gained, which in turn determines an individual's marketability as a viable superintendent candidate (Forbes & Piercy, 1991; Konrad & Pfeffer, 1991).

About the Author

Mimi Wolverton is an associate professor at the University of Nevada Las Vegas where she teaches in and coordinates the higher education leadership programs. Her research interests lie in the areas of professional development, organizational change, and leadership across gender, race/ethnicity, discipline, and industry.

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According to policy makers familiar with the situation in the Northwest, many superintendents are leaving their current positions via retirement (roughly 40% of the superintendents in the study planned to retire within three years). They have joined local consortia of superintendents who promote each other in the pursuit of positions in neighboring states. Increasingly, school boards and search consultants are using these consortia (consisting almost entirely of white men) to select candidates rather than selecting from younger, newly credentialed candidates. Retired superintendents are known to have experience; new certificate holders do not. Using local consortia decreases the likelihood of females gaining access to the superintendency because so few women currently are superintendents in the Northwest (Wolverton, Rawls, Macdonald & Nelson, 2000). Further, much of the research on women in the superintendency suggests that they take a different path to that position than do white males. That path could hamper their chances of gaining the administrative and leadership experience deemed necessary by boards and search consultants (Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Logan, 1999; Sharp, 1991; Shary, Malone, Walter & Supley, 2000; Tallerico, 2000b).

The purpose of this article was to report the most common path to the superintendency in the Northwest. We compared career paths across four subgroups of study participants—male and female superintendents and male and female certificate holders who were not superintendents. First, we sought commonalities in the routes chosen by current male and female superintendents in the study. Second, we examined the career choices of potential superintendency applicants to determine whether they were actually gaining the types of administrative experience required by school

boards and search consultants. We concluded with implications for practice based on study findings.

Conceptual Framework

Leadership development is a process that extends over many years (Gardner, 1987). It includes three components: (a) an *understanding of the desired position*, (b) *skill development*, and (c) practice and time to reflect that can only be gained through *experience* (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002). Schön (1983) contended that this third dimension is crucial. For leaders to be successful, they must engage in reflective practice. Their ability to reflect on what they do as they gain administrative experience is central to dealing with the uncertainty, instability, and conflict that occur in organizations (Gabarro, 1985; Kowalski, 1999; McAdams, 1995).

The roles and responsibilities of the superintendency have been reported (Blumberg, 1985; Kowalski, 1999; McAdams, 1995). We understand what they do. Similarly, we have developed highly sophisticated certification programs that focus on skill development. A common assumption is that aspirants to the superintendency gain the experience needed through a variety of school administrative posts. That is, they take positions that provide them with the experience and the opportunity to reflect on practices that relate to the superintendency.

Tallerico's (2000a) study suggested that "moving through the ranks" does characterize the typical career path to the superintendent. Most superintendents began as teachers and then followed one of two administrative paths. More than 48% of Tallerico's respondents moved from positions as assistant principal or principal to central administration to superintendent. Another 31% transitioned directly from either assistant principal positions or principalships to superintendencies. Kowalski (1999) stated that, especially for men, the path to the superintendency is through the assistant high school principal and high school principal offices.

Respondents in a study (McAdams, 1995) named the high school principalship as the position in the district most clearly resembling the superintendency. These two positions are alike not only in the variety of complex issues that arise but in the degree of community visibility associated with them (Tallerico, 2000a). Applicants with experience in managing finances, facilities, operations, personnel, and board-community relations that might be gained as a high school principal, prove attractive to school boards (Vail, 1999). Consultants also viewed the rise to the superintendency from this position as being easier than moving from the elementary principal position that has traditionally been held by women

(Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Tallerico, 2000b). The rarity of women in the high school principal position has made it difficult for search consultants to recruit women for available positions. As a consequence, search consultants who continue to rely on the high school principalship as the path to the superintendency disenfranchise women applicants (Björk, 2000; Brunner, 1999, 2001; Chase & Bell, 1990).

The Study

Washington State University's Center for Academic Leadership surveyed more than 1,900 superintendents and superintendent certificate holders in the five-state region (Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington) served by the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory (Wolverton, Rawls & Macdonald, 2000).¹ The master list of potential participants included names of superintendents and superintendent certificate holders provided by each state's Department of Education. Surveys were mailed to prospective participants. The overall response rate was 61% (N = 1,180). Respondents were asked for demographic information including current position, education, types of administrative experience, whether they had ever applied for superintendent positions (and, if so, how many times), and whether they planned to apply for the superintendency within the next three years.

Methodology

We were particularly interested in determining whether certificate holders were gaining the type of administrative experience sought by districts. This interest was driven by the assumption that holding an administrative certificate merely gets you into the candidate pool; experience determines whether you are offered the position. Four of the five states in the Northwest Region require superintendent certificates upon application. Even though Washington does not require a certificate, 80% of its superintendents hold the credential.

To gain a clearer understanding of the career paths of superintendents and potential superintendents, we computed percentages of administrative experience held by four populations (male and female superintendents and male and female non-superintendents) across six positions: (a) elementary principal, (b) middle school principal, (c) high school vice principal, (d) high school principal, (e) assistant superintendent, and (f) other central administration. We then compared administrative experience across groups to answer two research questions: Do men and women pursue similar types of administrative experience? And, are certificate holders pursuing the

types of administrative experience that current superintendents possess and school boards deem necessary? We tested for differences between (a) male and female superintendents; (b) male and female non-superintendents; (c) differences among the subpopulations—male superintendents and non-superintendents, female superintendents and non-superintendents; and (d) superintendents and non-superintendents, using analysis of variance techniques (including post-hoc t-tests).

Results

Demographics

Of the 1,900 individuals surveyed, 1,180 (61%) participated in the study. Forty-four percent (N = 522) of the respondents were superintendents. Twenty percent (N = 240) of the respondents were women (173 nonsuperintendent certificate holders and 67 superintendents). The mean age of the respondents was 53 years—the youngest was 31 years old and the oldest was 78 years old. Most were married [88% (N = 459 of superintendents) and 87% (N = 572 of non-superintendents)]. The participant groups ranged in average years in current positions from 4.2 (women superintendents) to 7.4 (men non-superintendents).

Superintendents and non-superintendents bore similar profiles. They were close in age and education attainment. More men than women in both groups were married. Men in both groups averaged more than 19 years of administrative experience; current female superintendents worked in administration, on average, two years longer than women non-superintendents, however. In general, non-superintendents tended to be in their current positions longer than were superintendents.

Differences were noted for superintendents and non-superintendents when divided by gender. Women in both groups were less likely to be married than were their male counterparts. They had less administrative experience and had been in their current positions for shorter time periods. They also tended to be more highly educated with 52% of the female superintendents and 41% of the female non-superintendents possessing doctorates. Comparable percentages for men in the sample were 32% and 30%, respectively. All but one study participant had an administrative certificate; men held their certificates longer than women did.

Career Paths

Twenty-five percent (N = 259) planned to apply for the superintendency within the next four years. That percentage included some current

superintendents ($N = 140$) who planned to relocate to other districts in the near future. Only 18% ($N = 39$) of the potential women applicants planned to apply for a superintendency. Such a finding reflects the stance of Gupton and Slick (1996), who found that career aspirations of women typically fall short of the superintendency. Multiple studies confirm that limited career goals correlate with lack of career advancement (Bonuso & Shakeshaft, 1982; Thomas, 1986; Weber, Feldman & Poling, 1981).

Tallerico (2000a, 2000b) suggested that school administrators move along one of two paths that culminate in the superintendency—through central administration or directly from the high school principalship. Others have suggested that the more desirable route is through the high school principal position. That, indeed, the high school principalship prepares individuals for the administrative rigors of the superintendency (Kowalski, 1999; McAdams, 1995).

In the Northwest, men tended to move from the high school principalship, and women from assistant superintendent and central administration positions, to the superintendency. Almost 60% of current male superintendents had been high school principals. In contrast, less than one-quarter of female superintendents had held the high school principal position. More women than men had been either assistant superintendents (43%) or in other central administrative positions (45%). Less than 30% of male superintendents had held either an assistant superintendent or served in a central administrative position prior to becoming a superintendent. If the high school principalship is the predominant path in the Northwest, then it might be the explanation for funding so few women in the superintendency.

Significant differences at $p \leq 0.05$ in career path positions between men and women were found. Among current superintendents, more men (56%) than women (24%) have held high school principalships. Conversely, more women (45%) than men (24%) served as central administrators. Among eligible, but not practicing superintendents, more men (44%) than women (23%) served as high school principals.

Significant differences at $p \leq 0.05$ in career path positions between current superintendents and those eligible but not practicing as superintendents were found. Significantly more members of the applicant pool, that is non-superintendents (40% men and 61% women) than current superintendents (24% men and 45% women) have spent time in central office. Conversely, significantly fewer members of the applicant pool, that is non-superintendents (44% men and 23% women) than current superintendents (56% men and 24% women) have spent time in the high

school principalship. Among men, more superintendents (56%) than non-superintendents (44%) have held high school principalships. Among women, more superintendents (43%) than non-superintendents (29%) have held assistant superintendencies, yet fewer superintendents (45%) than non-superintendents (61%) have held central administrative positions. More men non-superintendents (40%) than men superintendents (24%) served in central administration.

Significant differences at $p \leq 0.05$ in career path positions between those eligible but not practicing as superintendents were found. More women (61%) than men (40%) served in central administration.

The conclusion might be drawn that instead of aggressively pursuing high school principalships or assistant superintendencies in preparation for a superintendency, these potential applicants are finding that they can be involved at the district level but avoid the pitfalls and hassles of the superintendency by taking central administrative positions, such as director of curriculum and instruction or educational technology director. They may simply have learned vicariously the ins and outs of the superintendency and found the position wanting (Bandura, 1977).

Implications and Discussion

One implication is that the pool of viable candidates for the superintendency may actually become smaller over the next ten years as men and women opt out of spending time in a highly scrutinized, crisis-ridden position (Cunningham & Burdick, 2000). Candidates may be hesitant to enter a position in which authority is undermined by what they perceive as board and community interference and a lack of job security.

Female administrators may climb career ladders that do not reach the top. The myth exists that loyalty as an assistant superintendent will lead to “inheritance” of the superintendency when a current superintendent leaves the position (Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999). The reality is that when change does occur school boards often do not look within for a replacement. Rather, they look at existing superintendents in other districts or newly retired superintendents to serve as interims—most of whom are men. And, if they look beyond this pool, they often search for applicants who have had high school principal experience (Tallerico, 2000a, 2000b). If states in the Northwest want women superintendents they must embark on concerted efforts to identify and mentor female leaders. Mentors provide essential support and insights into the inner workings of the system. Those

who lack mentors often find themselves excluded and discounted as potential superintendents (Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan, 2000).

One of the main impediments to women's career advancement, however, seems to be the unstated and understood requirements that aspiring candidates must look and act like those already in power (Gupton & Slick, 1996). In fact, the U.S. Census Bureau describes the superintendency as the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States (Björk, 2000, p. 17). In career trajectory terms, matriculation to the superintendency occurs from highly visible administrative positions, like the high school principalship—a path increasing numbers of women are not taking (Grogan, 1996). Women are equipping themselves for top administrative positions as evidenced by the increased number of women in advanced degree programs and increased number of women in central office positions. The question remains: are they opting in or are they opting out?

End Notes

¹ Northwest Regional Education Laboratory sponsored this study.

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