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## Voices of Women High School Principals

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## **Voices of Women High School Principals**

Ellen Wexler Eckman, Ph.D.

### **Abstract**

This study presents the challenges women face in educational administration from the perspective of female high school principals. Eight women high school principals participated in the qualitative study that focused on their careers, the conflicts between their personal and professional roles, and the impact of gender on the high school principalship. The participants acknowledged the importance of encouragement and mentoring in their decisions to become high school principals. They continued to be affected by the male image of the high school principal. They sought support from other female leaders as well as offered mentoring to women aspiring to administrative positions. The participants recognized that role conflict was a factor contributing to whether or not women would pursue the high school principalship.

### **Introduction**

The disproportionately low representation of women in the public high school principalship is a problem that has persisted (Bell & Chase, 1993; Mertz & McNeely, 1990; Porat, 1985; Schneider, 1986). In a study of three Midwestern states, only 15% of the high school principals were female, whereas 48% of the high school teachers were female (Eckman, 2002). These data indicate that the under-representation of women in the public high school principalship continues (Table 1).

Table 1

*Women High School Principals in Three States by Number and Percentage of Total*

	Number of High School Principals	Percent of High School Principals Female
Illinois	673	18.3
Minnesota	422	17.1
Wisconsin	458	9.2
Total	1553	15.2

By listening to women high school principals describe their careers, the conflicts between their personal and professional roles, and the impact of gender on the high school principalship, the challenges women experience becoming and serving as high school principals emerged. The findings are useful to other women educators who might consider the high school principalship as a career choice. As one participant commented, "to encourage more women to pursue the principalship, we need to put the whole gender issue more clearly on the table and work with women in terms of the differences that exist, and help them better understand what they're going to face ahead of time."

## Method

All of the female principals (N = 237) in Illinois, Minnesota, and Wisconsin were asked to participate in a survey designed to gather demographic data and to assess levels of role conflict, role commitment, and job satisfaction. The instruments used in the survey were the *Role Conflict Questionnaire* (Nevill & Damico, 1974), the *Role Commitment Question* (Napholz, 1995), and the *Job Satisfaction Survey* (Mendenhall, 1977, revised Schneider, 1984). The names of the women high school principals were obtained from the State Boards of Education in each of the three states. Of the 237 survey packets mailed, 164 were returned for a return rate of 69.2%.

The participants for this study were selected from 164 women high school principals who responded to the above described survey. In order to hear a variety of women's voices, women with both high and low scores on the survey instruments of role conflict, role commitment, and job satisfaction, were purposefully selected to participate in structured interviews. The selection process included principals from urban, suburban, and rural school districts. Eight women agreed to participate in open-ended interviews that were structured to allow them to describe their career paths and aspirations, to expand on their perspectives about role conflicts, articulate their leadership style and to discuss the impact of gender on the high school principalship. A follow-up phone interview to each participant was conducted to document reactions and allow for further clarification. These comments were included as part of the data collected for the study. A draft copy of the findings was sent to each of the participants for their final comments and feedback.

## Participants

The eight women principals in this study have been given pseudonyms and the names of their schools and communities have been omitted. The personal and professional attributes of the participants vary. Their ages ranged from 49 to 53. Seven of the 8 were married, and 3 of the 8 had children at home. The women, 7 Caucasian and 1 African-American, had from 1 to 8 years of experience in the principalship, and the buildings administered had from approximately 100 students to 2,000 students. Seven of the eight had been in more than one principal position; all but one had had previous experience as an administrator. These eight women represented urban, suburban, and rural communities. Their paths to the principalship differed, but all indicated that entry into the position was made after multiple years of teaching and after the age of 35. Seven of the eight have no aspirations to become a superintendent, and the 8th participant was somewhat ambivalent about such a move. Each female principal is presented individually based on data provided by the interviews and field notes.

### **Diane**

At the time of the study, Diane had been a principal for three years at a traditional suburban high school with 1,323 students. The career path that Diane followed to the high school principalship involved several administrative positions that required her to change school districts and move to new communities.

Diane began her career as a high school English teacher and then worked for ten years as a high school guidance counselor. She only considered becoming an administrator when the female superintendent of her school district encouraged her to take some administrative courses.

Her first administrative position was as a principal/counselor in the same district where she had been working. For the next 13 years she held a variety of administrative positions in that district's alternative high school programs.

At that point Diane decided to make a career change. She wanted to be the principal of a comprehensive high school, rather than continue to work in the alternative high school setting. She applied for a number of high school principal positions, but felt that her applications were not considered because her position as the district coordinator of alternative high school programs was not viewed as "real principal" work. As she said, "Well, let's just look at the reality. If I want to get back into a regular setting, what do I have to do? And I did it." She applied for an assistant high school principal position that had become available in the middle of the academic year in a different community. A few months after she was hired, the principalship position became available; Diane applied and became the high school principal.

Diane held administrative licenses as a secondary school principal and as a director of pupil services. Despite having earned many credits beyond her Master's degree, Diane had made a conscious decision not to pursue a doctoral degree. She expressed no regrets about that decision, though she recognized that the lack of a Ph.D. might have been detrimental when she was first pursuing a principalship position. "I don't know if it closed some doors, because you never know, when you send papers anywhere, you never know why you don't get an interview or a bite or anything."

Diane was 50 years old, European-American, had never been married, and had no children. She expressed no interest in becoming a superintendent, "I like working in the buildings. I like being right where the kids are." Her aspiration was to finishing her career as a high school principal.

## **Karen**

Karen's traditional suburban high school of 1,120 students was the only one in her school district. When she was hired she was told that "they were really taking a chance on having a woman as the high school principal." At the time of the study she was in her third year as the high school principal.

Karen described her career path as one where she had "zigged and zagged and gone all over." She spent the first 12 years of her career as a special education teacher and supervisor. Her next position was as an assistant professor in a school of education at a small college. Karen explained the reason she decided to become a principal, "I watched the principals I worked with and I said I could do that." She spent the next 12 years as an assistant principal, a high school principal and then an elementary school principal, all within the same urban school district. Karen then accepted the position of assistant superintendent in a different urban school district. Her husband was not able to transfer his job to the new community and she was required to live in the district as a condition of her employment. After two years of maintaining two households, Karen again changed jobs and accepted the position of high school principal.

Though Karen recognized that she might change her job again, she did not have any specific career plan for the next five years. "I have no idea. I could be here . . . it just depends upon what happens and timing." The superintendent in the district would be retiring soon. She said she would leave the district if the new superintendent was difficult. Otherwise she might remain in the high school principalship for five more years, until her retirement.

Karen expressed no aspirations to become a superintendent. Her experiences as an assistant

superintendent made her understand how far removed she would be from students. "I need to be around students, whether they're big ones or little ones." She described the superintendent's role as basically one of "managing a school board" and dealing with the politics that surround school board operations.

Karen had a Ph.D. degree and held the following administrative licenses: superintendent, principal, director of curriculum, and director of special education/pupil services. She was 40 years old when she took her first position as a principal and was 53 at the time of the interview. She was European-American, married, and had adult children.

### **Sandra**

Sandra had been a high school principal for five years. Her high school had 788 students and was located in a rural community. Sandra had always been employed at that high school, first as a teacher, then as an assistant principal, and finally as the principal.

Sandra never developed a career plan to become a high school principal. When the school district created a new assistant high school principalship position, she was encouraged by her principal to apply. It was only after becoming an assistant principal that Sandra even began to take courses to be certified as a principal. Seven years later, when her principal neared retirement, he encouraged Sandra to consider applying for the principalship.

I didn't know if I really wanted to take on the high school position. And then the more I thought about it, do I want some young guy coming in here and setting the stage for what we've got going here? Or do I want to have the opportunity to make an impact on the direction we move?

Sandra was hired for that principalship, which was the only principal position for which she ever applied.

Sandra was not interested in pursuing a Ph.D. degree. She had completed the courses for the superintendent's license, and had made one, unsuccessful, bid for a superintendent position in a neighboring school district. The superintendent in her present district was to retire shortly and he had been encouraging her to consider applying for his position. Sandra expressed some apprehension about such a career move.

I don't know if I want to do the superintendency because that would require me moving and making some big changes, and I don't know that I'm willing to make that change at this point in my life. I can retire in five years. I don't know if I think of myself retiring, but what would I be doing the superintendency for? I mean, I have enough money. I have credibility, if that's significant. I know I can do it if I wanted to, so why would I do it?

Sandra was European-American, married and had one child in high school and one child in college. She was 49 years old at the time of her interview.

### **Linda**

Linda was in her second year as the head of an alternative charter high school. Her school of 94 students was one of four high schools in the school district. Linda had been an English teacher

and the coordinator of the at-risk program at the high school for 10 years. Her career path to the principalship was unplanned. When a grant Linda wrote to create an alternative charter school was funded, she was asked to take on the position of the director/principal of the new school. Linda admitted, "I just developed into the principalship. It wasn't something that I was actually looking for, but in order to run the school, we needed a principal."

The move to the position of principal had not been easy for Linda. She felt that as the principal she was more removed from her original program and her students. She was also painfully aware that the three male high school principals were receiving far more compensation than she was. She felt that the salary differential placed her at a disadvantage in her district; she saw her work as being less valued than that of the male high school principals.

Linda completed two Master's degrees—one in administration and one as a K-12 reading specialist. She was not involved in any additional education or certification programs at the time of the study. Linda was not interested in becoming a superintendent and was unsure of her future career direction. She was 43 years old, European-American, married and had three children, who were 15, 13, and 7 years old at the time of the study.

### **Lauren**

Lauren had been the principal of a high school with more than 2,028 students for 8 years. Her high school was one of five in an urban school district. Lauren's career path included working in several different teaching and administrative positions in the school district. She had been a music teacher, an assistant middle school principal, the district-wide fine arts coordinator, an elementary school principal and, finally, a high school principal. Lauren had actually been recruited for her present high school principalship by the faculty members of the school based on her strong background in the fine arts.

Lauren had no specific career aspirations, although she had begun thinking about new directions. "I do feel that it might be fun to explore some other stuff. I'm 45 years old and so I need at least another 10 to 12 years before I would be eligible to retire. But I don't think I could last another ten or twelve years in a principalship." Lauren had a license as a principal and as a director of curriculum. She was not pursuing any additional degrees or certifications. Lauren was married, European-American and had three children, only one still living at home.

### **Barbara**

Barbara was in the second year of her principalship at a suburban high school of 1,483 students. Barbara actually served as a co-principal. According to Barbara, this unusual administrative structure had not reduced the workload of either co-principal. Indeed, the arrangement had created some conflicts and Barbara expressed some desire to leave the position. She had never planned on becoming a high school principal and was not sure how long she would remain in the position.

Barbara began her career in a southern state where she worked for 18 years as a high school teacher and guidance counselor. A female colleague of hers, who eventually became her mentor, recruited her for an assistant high school principalship in a midwestern state. Accepting this position meant a move for Barbara and her family. As Barbara recalled, her mentor said, "You've got to do this . . . I'm going to pay for you to come here, and I'm going to move you here." Barbara agreed and then worked in several administrative positions in this suburban

school district, moving from the assistant principal position to the chair of the guidance department and finally to the district's director of pupil services. Once again, Barbara was recruited by her mentor. This time she was asked to join her mentor as the director of the guidance department in a different suburban community in the same state. Within a few months of Barbara's move to that high school, she was appointed by her mentor to the position of assistant principal and shortly thereafter she became a co-principal.

Barbara expressed some concerns about her career changes. The position of director of pupil services had been a district-level administrative position that was at a different, and higher, administrative level than her current principalship. "I had been doing all the work an assistant superintendent would do, but I never knew that because I never was at the principalship level. I never understood that level." At the time of the study Barbara expressed no interest in becoming a superintendent.

Barbara held administrative licenses as a principal and director of pupil services. She was pursuing a Ph.D. degree in administrative leadership. She was 54 years old, African-American, married, and had two adult children.

### **Paula**

Paula's career path was different than the other participants. She taught school for only two years before entering a Masters program in school counseling that led her to positions in state government as a school-counseling consultant and then as the pupil services sections chief. Paula had also been the mayor of a small rural community and reported enjoying that managerial and leadership experience. In order to combine her interests in education and her experiences as a leader in the public sector, she entered a doctoral program in administrative leadership to prepare for a position as a public school superintendent. However, one of her professors pointed out that the traditional career path to the superintendency was from the high school principalship and that as a woman she would have to "jump through every hoop" in order to be considered a viable candidate for a superintendency. It was for that reason that Paula began looking for positions in high school administration.

Paula applied for an assistant principalship position, convinced that her lack of experience in a high school would be a major obstacle in her career path. She credited the high school principal for taking a chance on her. "There was a woman principal and she was gutsy enough to take a chance because . . . I mean, I really had only this bureaucratic background." Paula served as assistant principal for six years and then became the high school principal for a nearby school district. Two years later the faculty of the high school where she had been the assistant principal recruited her to return as their principal. She was in her second year of that principalship at the time of the study. Her high school of 2000 students was one of five in an urban school district.

An assistant superintendent position had just become available in her school district and Paula was being encouraged by the superintendent to consider applying for that position. Paula was conflicted because it was only her second year at the high school and she wanted to stay there for several more years before moving. She indicated that though she might consider an assistant superintendent position, the longer she studied the superintendent's role, the less certain she had become about that position. "It (the superintendency) strikes me as so much hand-holding with the board . . . a lot of playing with the guys out in the field. I don't know if that's me. I'm terribly hands on and I really do value my relationships with people. . . ." Paula was 51 years old, European-American, married, and had two adult children.

## **Carol**

Carol was in the third year as high school principal. She had been hired to open a new public magnet high school for an urban school district that had four other high schools. The school had 750 students but was expected to enroll 1,000 students when at full capacity.

Carol taught social studies for 20 years and then was encouraged by the only woman in the central office in her school district to become the coordinator of staff development. As Carol said, "I never saw myself moving into administration until this woman suggested something for me." She had, though, been taking courses in administrative leadership because she wanted to have some options. The position as coordinator of staff development led Carol to other district-wide coordinator positions.

Carol then decided to change the direction of her career and left central office administration. She became an assistant high school principal. "I felt that, especially with women, if you don't have one of the bases covered, you have to go back and get that base covered." From the assistant principal position, Carol moved onto a middle school principalship and then to her current position as a high school principal.

Carol was licensed as a director of curriculum and as a principal and had her Master's degree in administrative leadership. One of her professional regrets was that she had not completed a Ph.D. degree. Carol expressed no interest in becoming a superintendent. "I was in central administration for about three years, and I'm glad I did that, but I don't think I want to go back and do that again." She was committed to working at the high school for three to five more years. After that she had no specific career plans, other than possible retirement. Carol was 52 years old, European-American, married and had one adult child.

## **Findings**

A number of themes emerged from the data. Personal attributes will be discussed first, followed by professional issues and role conflict. Finally, the themes dealing with gender issues in the high school principalship will be presented.

### ***Personal Attributes***

*Age.* Six of the eight women in this study first became high school principals when they were in their mid 40s. All of the participants, except Lauren and Linda, were serving as high school principals within five years of possible retirement dates. Proximity to retirement age may explain why the majority of the participants expressed few career aspirations. When asked what aspirations she had for her career Karen, who was 53, responded, "I don't know. I know what I want to do when I retire in terms of my next life, and I'm probably about five years away from that." This was repeated by Carol who, at age 52, commented, "I wanted to commit three to five years in getting this school off and running, and after that we'll see. It may be time for retirement." Lauren, who was 45 at the time of the study, noted that she had 10 to 12 more years before she would be eligible to retire and that she did not think she could work another ten years as a high school principal. Diane, at age 50, was more specific about the impact of age on her principalship. "I feel like you do reach a point in your age where you begin to wonder if you're connecting with the kids properly. I haven't reached that yet."



*Family support.* “I couldn’t have done it all alone.” This comment by Lauren articulated the theme of support from husbands, parents, and other relatives, that all of the participants recognized as an important element for their career development. Linda, in commenting on her husband’s support for her career, noted “we juggle things around between his schedule and mine; we have to be very organized. Try to plan weekdays for who’s got what.” Diane reported that it was her sister who provided support. Diane knew that without her sister she could not have balanced her role as a principal with the needs of her aging parents.

Despite having support from their families, the women still experienced conflicts between their personal and professional roles. Carol said she had not taken a “high powered” administrative position until her only child was in high school. Linda admitted that she would not attend professional conferences that took her away over night because of childcare demands. Barbara explained, “I go to work all the time and anytime, and if I had a husband who didn’t understand or some younger children of any age that really needed me, it never could have happened.”

Interestingly, Sandra said that it was not just support from families but also the perceptions that men held of their wives working that impacted the career paths that women followed. Sandra credited her mother-in-law, who had worked outside the home and attended college late in life, with being a role model for her son. “My husband grew up realizing that women can do anything.” Sandra indicated that her husband accepted her status as the high school principal and was not threatened by her position because of the attitudes and beliefs instilled by his mother. She expressed concern that this level of support and understanding were not always available for women and that conflicts can exist when women have a higher status position than their husbands.

## ***Professional Issues***

*Mentors and mentoring.* Researchers have recognized the importance of mentors in furthering women’s careers in educational administration by providing support, encouragement and networking opportunities (Cohn, 1989; Grogan, 1996; Mertz, 1987). In particular, women in educational administration were found to have benefited from having women as their mentors because female mentors could explain the unwritten rules of the organization and identify the informal networks (Fleming, 1991; Hill & Ragland, 1995). Seven of the eight women in this study said that mentors had helped them in their careers. Five of the participants indicated that it had been female administrators who had encouraged them to apply for administrative positions, to enroll in administrative certification programs, and who hired them for their first principalships. Only two women indicated that their mentors were men.

Carol’s mentor was the “token woman in the district . . . she was, of course, like many women who first got into higher level positions, superbly competent.” It was her mentor who first encouraged Carol to leave the classroom for a staff development position. Carol also said that her mentor had groomed her for other administrative positions. Diane had been encouraged to take her first courses in educational administration by a female administrator. Barbara’s female mentor had recruited and hired her for several administrative positions—from assistant principal, to guidance director, to co-principal. For Paula, it was a female high school principal who made it possible for her to move directly from a state department bureaucratic position to an assistant high school principalship. Lauren reported that she had been fortunate to have several female mentors who helped her “understand a lot of the gender games that are being played.” In

particular, a female high school principal who mentored Lauren would tell her, "You stick to your guns. You're doing the right thing! And you're going to make it."

Karen and Sandra reported that men had served as their mentors. "I think that what you do is you just find people you can trust," was the way Karen described developing a mentor relationship. She had a male mentor that she had turned to for advice in solving problems throughout her career. Sandra had been encouraged by the male principal in her school to consider administrative positions. She continued to rely on him as a mentor because, as she put it, "he knows the ropes at the next level."

The women in this study were mentored by women and in turn were actively mentoring other women for positions in educational administration. Diane's words reflected the responses of most of the participants, "I feel that it's important to mentor women who I work with, who might, with some encouragement, be interested (in the high school principalship)." Paula agreed that part of a principal's job "is going out there and tapping people on the shoulder and saying, 'Have you thought about going into administration? I've noticed that you do X, Y, Z really well.'" She found that women were very surprised when she noticed their leadership capabilities. Karen encouraged women by urging them to take leadership roles at the building and district level. Sandra encouraged two women at her high school to go into administration and was continuing to mentor them in their new positions in different school districts.

The participants also recognized that they served as role models for female students and teachers. As Diane noted, "I am very proud of being a high school principal. I'm very aware when I walk down the halls of being a role model for the girls." Sandra indicated that there were more women faculty members aspiring for leadership positions in her school now that they had a female principal, then when there had been a male principal. She was also aware of the positive effect that she had on both her female and male students. "I think it's good for our kids that someone like myself is here, so they can see that women can do a variety of things without standing there saying 'I can do this,' but just by virtue of doing it."

*Encouragement from other sources.* Researchers have reported the importance of encouragement from university professors and leadership training programs in the development of career aspirations for women (Gotwalt & Towns, 1986; Grady, 1992; Grady, Carlson & Brock, 1992). All of the participants in this study had been involved in programs in educational administration. However, they received inconsistent levels of support from their professors in educational administration. Carol noted that she received no encouragement from the faculty in her educational administration program to apply for administrative positions. Sandra was critical of some of the materials in her educational administration courses, "my thoughts as I read through it, they kept talking about men, men, men and I didn't fit in the style that men used, and as I read it, I felt incompetent." Paula was the only participant to mention that she had received support from her professors in the form of teaching assistantships and invitations to participate with faculty members in other university-related activities such as research projects and conferences.

Despite this support, Paula was critical of the educational administration programs at the university because they did not provide future principals with skills in conferencing, public speaking, facilitation and leadership. "I certainly think that there are things within the preparation program itself that could be more helpful . . . more practical things. My guess is that the great business schools that train CEOs don't leave them without tools. I think there is a lot of attention paid in business schools to presentation, not only oral, but also physical. That should be a part of it, because that's what we are! We're CEOs."

Both Karen and Sandra noted that their participation in leadership assessment centers had been one of the most helpful programs in terms of encouraging them to become principals. Karen noted "I got a very thorough report when I was done about what I was good at and what I needed some work on, and that was the best feedback I think I've ever gotten." Sandra found the assessment center was helpful even though "at first I didn't really like the results . . . it was like a good awakening to me in terms of some things to work on."

*Networks and support for women principals.* The "good old boy's network" has been recognized as a barrier for women in developing careers in educational administration (Grogan, 1996). The women in this study acknowledged that the "old boy's network" was alive and well. Sandra reported that the male principals in her athletic conference called each other for advice. "I don't think they intentionally don't call me. I just think they don't think of it. I mean, we're colleagues and we talk and we visit, but as far as calling for any suggestions—No."

A response to the "good old boy's network" has been for professional women to form their own networks to support each other in their careers (Johnson, 1991; Pancrazio, 1991; Schmuck, 1986). The women high school principals in this study reported varying degrees of success for such endeavors. Paula thought it would be seen as a sign of weakness to get support from workshops created specifically for women. Sandra recognized that there was a need to have professional women to talk with; "it's different having a woman to talk to than having a guy to talk to. Now I bond a lot with our curriculum person (a woman), and that's real important. But as far as outside of this building, boy, it's all men." Linda did not attend the monthly meetings for women administrators that her district held because of the demands on her time.

Diane had participated with a group of women who tried to develop a support group for women administrators within the state's association of school administrators. They wanted to have "women come together to talk about their mutual concerns." They felt that their concerns were different than those of the male administrators in terms of needing "people to talk to and mentors and all the family things, family responsibilities." At the time the state association did not support their efforts and the group "fell by the wayside." She said that recent efforts to provide support for women administrators through leadership workshop was motivated more by a concern over a shortage of administrators than a genuine concern for women's issues.

Both Carol and Lauren found support from women outside of their buildings. Lauren received support from a group of women who held leadership positions in local, county and state government. According to Lauren, this group of women "really wanted to see other women succeed." Carol met regularly with women principals from neighboring districts; "We still see each other for 'girl's night out,' about once every two or three months. And then, you know, we can sit and talk."

### ***Role Conflict and Role Balance***

Researchers have documented that women educational administrators experience role conflict as they work to balance their home and family responsibilities with their professional roles (Edson, 1988; Erickson, 1985; Goeller, 1995; Pavan, 1991; Shakeshaft, 1989). Women principals have indicated that they must be "superwomen" in order to balance the enormous workload with the demands of their personal lives (Curcio, Morsink & Bridges, 1989; Kochan, Spencer & Mathews, 2000). Linda summarized the conflicts created by the demands of personal and professional roles, "I would have to say the number one issue is the time commitment. Because no matter how much we say our husbands are helpful . . . Mom is usually the nurturer

and the caregiver and the worrywart. You know, you're the organizational person. I mean, it's stressful! It's stressful!"

One of the themes that emerged from the interviews was the incredible time demand the women faced as high school principals. Carol was quite clear about the hours involved in her position, "I work seventy hours every week. There is never a week I work less than seventy hours. It's a minimum of a twelve-hour day, and its very often fifteen hours and it's another eight hours on the weekends." Diane worked "two, three nights a week, 60-hour work weeks." Paula said, "I know that I can stay here 'til nine o'clock every night." In addition, she was aware that absences from work would not be tolerated. "People can be nice and understanding, but the reality is 'We want you here. You've got to be here.'"

Several of the women high school principals had directly confronted the extensive time demands of their positions. Karen was "very purposeful about balancing, trying to keep a focus. I do what I can. And beyond that I've got a family and I've got things that I'd like to do." Diane told her faculty that "I will not be the first person to arrive in the morning and I will not be the last one out every night. Some nights I will be." Paula reported, "I will attend as many activities as I can, but I don't . . . sometimes I don't stay for the entire thing. I'll go to a concert . . . sort of a high visibility thing."

The participants used different ways to relieve the stress resulting from their work schedules. The most common strategy was to get involved in exercise. Lauren walked at least two times a week; Paula belonged to a health club and took spur of the moment trips; and Karen swam and lifted weights. Barbara, on the other hand, brought balance to her life through her continued involvement in her church activities. "I really try not to compromise on church activities. I try to participate in Sunday school teaching, just as I've always done, because those things mean a lot to me. And they are the things that keep me centered." Diane explained in detail how she resolved the role conflicts presented by the demands of the principalship.

The primary way that I do it is I work very, very hard when I'm here in the building and I do my best to not take my work home. I rarely will take any work home during the week. That's one of the balances. I also take my vacations and I don't apologize for that. And when I do, I don't call in, unless there is something that I know is brewing to begin with . . . I do work very hard at keeping those separate (work and home), and I'm not afraid to take a sick day, which means I probably take three a year.

Carol had not been as successful as the other women in finding a healthy way to balance the demands of the principalship. She noted "my health has not been as good as I want it to be. I've gained weight in the three years that I've had this position. I stopped exercising, because I don't have time to do it. I get more colds and flu. . . . If I had to do this for a long, long time, I think that it would definitely have a more detrimental effect on my health." Linda was similarly concerned about the negative impact on her health created by the time demands of her position. "I look at the number of administrators lately who've had cancer and all this, and so I just want to make sure I'm not getting stressed out."

The women clearly articulated their personal struggles to prioritize work and family commitments. Carol had resolved the struggle by dividing up the week. "I'd say Monday through Friday, it's work first. On Saturday, it's family first. On Sunday, it's half-and-half. I'm able to do that because I'm at an age where I have an empty nest so I think that allows me some leeway. Until my child was a junior in high school, family came first." Sandra commented "I like to work

and I like to get things done . . . I guess I'm learning to let work—not slide, but take a backseat to some personal kinds of things. It's hard to do because I feel a commitment to both, a tremendous commitment." Karen said that "as a parent you're constantly torn between the job and your family. So, how do you balance that? Work your way through it the best you can. To me, family is the most important thing."

The struggle between family responsibilities and the work of the high school principal was also seen as being dependent on experience in the position. Lauren explained, "When you're new on a job, you have to prove yourself. There's no two ways about it. You have to sort of establish yourself. . . . The more self-confidence you have, I think you tend to sort of put things in balance." Paula agreed, "New principals tend to feel like they really do need to be everywhere all the time. If they're not here long after the parking lot is empty, it feels strange." Sandra recognized that after five years in her position she was finally "getting to the point where I'm more able to do the personal commitment kinds of things." Additionally, Barbara noted that "as the (academic) year progresses there's sometimes when it has to be work first, and sometimes when it's an option. . . . But sometimes there is no option. . . . You just make it happen and fit it around your life, fit it around your children. That's how it is."

The participants recognized that the struggle over role commitment was a factor contributing to whether or not women pursued the high school principalship. Karen said that it "has to do with the pull between families. Women feel it more than men do. The pull between family and your job." Barbara summarized the dilemma facing women in pursuing the high school principalship. "I think that for the most part, being away from home and doing all these things and being everything to everybody except your own children is something that moves a lot of professionals ahead and I can do that now, because I don't have children at home. But I wasn't willing to do that at the time that I had children at home."

## **Gender Issues**

*Image of the High School Principalship.* Diane expressed a common frustration over the negative role gender had played on the participants' career paths. "There is no doubt in my mind that my gender was affecting my career path, because I was interested in high school positions . . . I have no proof of this, but I sensed there have been two stacks of applications. I think they were just looking for men. Of course, they would never say that . . . I think token interviews have definitely happened." Carol, one of the finalists for a high school principal position in which the male candidate was hired, said, "I know he was far beneath my qualifications and experience. But I think they perceived that they needed somebody to come in there and take control, and they thought that would be a man." She noted that the people who hire high school principals "don't see a woman as capable of doing the job . . . They see the high school principalship as somebody who manages the building and deals with discipline. And they feel that men are better at that."

Karen agreed, "In high schools you tend to get this belief that you have to have the building under control. Control is linked to being a man. Men can control things better than women can. And so, if you're a woman, that building may get out of control." Sandra thought that the image of the male in the high school principal's office was related to the importance of athletics in the high schools, noting that men were high school principals because "they were the coaches, and the coaches become the leaders."

The women reported confronting a general perception that women have trouble handling discipline issues. What Paula noticed regarding her discipline style was that “most of the reactions I got were that I was a lot tougher than they ever thought I would be.” She commented that people assume women will “go for the easier way or the softer way.” According to Carol, school board members and superintendents did not understand that discipline can be a “little softer and more indirect.” Barbara argued that female high school principals handle discipline matters differently and actually more effectively than do men. “I mean, we just don’t necessarily get so bent out of shape about what kids do and don’t do. It’s not generally a power issue . . . it’s always a much kinder, gentler approach to discipline.” Sandra described her style of discipline as “killing them with kindness.” The way the participants handled discipline issues is consistent with research on assistant high school principals, whose major function is to control discipline. Female assistant high school principals handled discipline problems as well as male assistant high school principals did and the women assistant high school principals more frequently used the discipline encounter as a learning experience (Marshall & Mitchell 1989).

The women in the study realized that they had been socialized in ways that hindered their career development. Diane voiced this concern, “I was not raised to be the center of attention.” Lauren also spoke about the “pain” associated with being at the center of attention, particularly “when you start getting that really personal criticism . . . when the newspaper article calls you ‘authoritarian’ . . . when the play is so dirty.” Diane noted, “You have to have a thick skin. And you can’t worry about the fact that they talk about you. ‘Cause they’re going to.” Sandra said that she had taken things more personally at the beginning of her tenure as a high school principal and later recognized that “we’ve got to train ourselves as ‘reculturing agents,’ because then I think you don’t take things as personally. But it takes awhile to recognize that.” Lauren noted that she was often accused of personalizing issues. “I was so pissed off! Typical males, you know! Oh, yeah, I’m too sensitive. I was so mad about that and I argued back.” During her eight years as high school principal she came to understand that “You can’t be fragile. You do have to have a sort of toughness of spirit, while retaining your sensitivity.”

However, Karen cautioned about placing too much emphasis on gender specific characterizations.

I think there are certain traits that do go along with your gender. But I think what’s a more powerful kind of thing is the perception on the part of the other people in terms of what goes along with your gender. So, it’s the perception part of it more so than the reality part of it. People think that women will act a certain way or react a certain way in some situations.

*Leadership styles.* The women referred to themselves as leaders who were collaborative, less directive, more collegial, shared in decision-making, and were concerned with family issues. These were the same terms and phrases found in the literature on feminine leadership styles (Brunner, 1997; Conner & Sharp, 1992; Erickson, 1985; Frasher & Frasher, 1979; Hurty, 1995; Roesner, 1990; Sherman & Repa, 1994). The women worked for and knew many male administrators and indicated that they had a different or more feminine style of leadership. Lauren was interested in “team building . . . I’ve put a lot of thought into how we operate as an administrative team . . . We’re very site-based here in our decision making, consensus, the whole deal.” Diane commented, “I do my best to be as collaborative as I possibly can be. We have a steering committee that we take some decisions to. . . . I really do view myself as much less directive and much less having to feel like I’m in control.” Sandra used the term “participatory”

when describing her leadership style. "I try to get people involved in what's going on so they understand . . . so then they support the direction we are moving."

Carol saw the difference in male and female leadership styles in terms of roles.

I try and lead by being a leader with instruction and curriculum. And many of the males that I work with and have worked with in the past were hired as principals who were managers. So their role had been very different. . . . They were very good managers. But my role is probably a lot different from that. It's much more instructional and it's much more consensus building and it's much more inter-personal relationship based.

Paula noted that she relied "more on relationships than the men I've worked for. I spend a lot more time listening than I do pontificating, and I think that's a female characteristic. . . . I use a lot more feeling words and terms and strategies."

The women said that they brought a different perspective to the principalship that was advantageous to their students, teachers, parents and communities. Linda found the advantage of being a female leader was that she had "a real relationship with the majority of my staff . . . being a woman. It's that nurturing, empathetic side." Barbara said that "there's a nuance that females bring to leadership that really understands family and the commitment to family." Both she and Karen noted that working for a female leader meant that family needs would be addressed. Karen told her staff, "if you've got an issue where you've got to go deal with something with your family, that's a priority. Go do it, because you won't be effective unless you are dealing with that."

The women reported that they defined and used power as high school principals differently than did male high school principals. Karen noted that "women are much less concerned about power and who's looking good or who is not looking good. They have less of that kind of ego connected to it [than men]." Diane commented, "I try not to operate from a perspective of my power by virtue of this office. . . . It's the title and I accept that, and I use it where I have to, but I don't use it because I believe I'm powerful." Several of the participants defined power in terms of developing personal relationships. Sandra noted, "power is relationships with people because you've got to have those trust relationships." Carol talked of using her power "gently, earning my people's respect . . . power emanates from that." Barbara described her power in terms of the "degree of confidence that people place in my ability to do what I do . . . I don't mind sharing power at all, because I think that when we go to the table together, it kind of makes it much better."

Carol summarized the difference a feminine leadership style can have on the high school principalship,

I think it's a real different position for a woman than it is for a man because she brings a different set of techniques with her. The job still has to get done, and I don't think that you could make a blanket statement and say the majority of women will bring one type of style, because it's going to be as varied as their personalities. But we do bring a female perspective and we have a little bit different approach often, but not always.

## ***Discussion***

Encouraging more women to pursue the high school principalship as a career goal is one way to address the under-representation of women in that position. Several important factors must be considered to make the high school principalship more attractive as a career goal for women. These factors include: (a) mentoring, encouragement and recruiting, (b) role responsibilities and the need for role balance, and (c) the impact of gender.

### ***Mentoring, Encouragement and Recruitment***

There is strong evidence of the importance of mentoring and, in particular, the importance of female mentors for women high school principals. The participants in this study discussed the value of their female mentors for their career development as well as a source of support for them in their roles as principals.

Schneider (1986) and Tonnsen and Truesdale (1993) called for an increased role for school district administrators in encouraging women to become high school principals as long ago as 1986. The women in this study acknowledged that they would never have considered the high school principalship if they had not been recruited and encouraged by educational administrators in their districts to apply for the position of high school principal. They said it was their responsibility to encourage women to become administrators in order to address the continued under-representation of women in the position. In the future, if more women attain the role of high school principal, it may mean that younger women will find more networks and support from women mentors. Until that time, male administrators may need to assume more responsibility for mentoring women and encouraging them to become high school principals.

The women in this study noted that the textbooks and readings in their graduate courses did not present information on the special challenges facing women in educational leadership positions. One participant reported that in her university course work she had not read anything that spoke directly to her experiences as a woman high school principal until Grogan's (1996) *Voices of Women Aspiring to the Superintendency* was required for a course in her administrative leadership coursework. She commented, "This book offered me one of my first strong affirmations of normalcy." Interestingly the professor for that course was a woman who had been a school administrator. Materials and textbooks that balance "the perspectives and voices of white males with perspectives and voices that have traditionally been silenced or marginalized" need to be published and used in principal preparation programs (Gosetti & Rusch, 1995, p. 24). A single chapter or subsection on women and minorities does not provide the type of balance that is needed (Gosetti & Rusch, 1995).

### ***Role Responsibilities and Role Balance***

The participants acknowledged that there was an incompatibility between their personal lives and their lives as high school principals. They commented about the role conflicts caused by the struggle between the needs of their families and the time demands imposed on them as high school principals. Some of the women had even delayed considering being a high school principal until their children were older. These types of role conflicts make the high school principalship a difficult career choice for younger women.



High school principals today hold an arduous position as they face increasingly complex demands from school board members, parent groups, community members, and students and staff (Fenwick & Pierce, 2001; Houston, 2001; Kochan et al., 2000). This is a demanding job for both men and women. Calls for restructuring the high school principalship have included increasing the support staff, rewriting the job description to emphasize more instructional leadership, and increasing the compensation (Cooley & Shen, 2000). Further research is needed to determine if these suggestions for restructuring the high school principalship will make it a more attractive position for women.

Most of the women in this study became high school principals in their late forties or fifties. Entering the high school principalship at that age may have altered their career aspirations. They discussed their future plans not in terms of aspiring for the superintendency or other administrative positions, but rather in terms of considering retirement. This finding is problematic because there is a need to attract more women to the position of superintendent, where they are also under-represented (Blount, 1998; Brunner, 1997; Grogan, 1996).

Tenure as a high school principal is another factor that impacts on role conflict (Eckman, 2002). When the women first became high school principals they indicated that they had to prove themselves and would choose their work first. Those women who had been in the position for more than three years explained that their self-confidence increased and their level of role conflict decreased during their tenure in their positions. They recognized that the longer they served as principals the more they knew what was important in their lives and the easier it became to balance the expectations of their family with the expectations of their positions as high school principals. Though this is not a surprising finding, it is an important reminder to school board members and superintendents that high school principals need time to adjust to the demands of their position. Further research on the high school principalship might reveal whether women need more time to adjust to the demands of the position than do men.

### ***Impact of Gender***

The women reported the impact of the “old boy’s network.” Despite being qualified and experienced, they continued to face the perception that there should be a man in the principal’s office. The women said they brought another perspective to the role of the high school principal, approaching the position in a different way than did most of the male high school principals for whom they worked. Unfortunately, they reported that their male colleagues often chose not to consult with them and did not recognize and use their expertise. They noted that when they attended meetings and conferences they were often the only women high school principals present and that conversations frequently changed as they arrived. This chilly environment toward women as high school principals must be changed for the position to be one for which women will aspire.

In describing their style of leadership and their use of power, the women used terms and phrases associated with a feminine style of leadership (Brunner, 1997; Hurty, 1995; Roesner, 1990; Shakeshaft, 1989). The concept of a feminine leadership style developed from feminist theory that states that women have a different approach to leadership and management. Some researchers have argued that there is no distinct feminine leadership style that differs from that of male leadership (Eagly, Karau & Johnson, 1992; Epstein, 1991; Klenke, 1996; Mansbridge, 1991). In particular, Klenke (1996) claimed that leadership styles are directly related to the political, social and historical context within which leaders operate. The women high school

principals recognized the significance of the political and social context of their school districts as they discussed finding schools that would “match” their personal and professional attributes. Two participants described operating as high school principals in a political and social context that accepted and valued women in leadership positions. In their community, women had been elected as local, state and national officers. Further research is needed on the leadership styles of high school principals. Are female and male high school principals different in how they lead high schools? Or is the way principals lead high schools more closely related to the political, social and historical context of the school district? Is there a leadership style that is more effective for high school principals and one that is used more frequently by women?

## Conclusion

The representation of women in the high school principalship will not improve unless there is a concerted effort to encourage women to consider careers in educational administration. Female teachers who exhibit a potential for administration need to be identified early by administrators in their buildings and offered leadership experiences and mentoring so that they might begin to consider becoming high school principals. School administrators, school board members and professors of educational administration must consider that women educators consider role conflicts and role responsibilities when making decisions regarding the desirability of the high school principalship as a career goal. To increase the number of women in the high school principalship attention must be paid to the impact of these issues as well as to the negative effect gender has on the career paths of women. Having more women high school principals will demonstrate to teachers and students alike that educational administration is a career choice that is available for both women and men. The high school need not continue to be a place where women teach and men lead.

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