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# Where are the Women in School Administration? Issues of Access, Acculturation, Advancement, Advocacy

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# **Where are the Women in School Administration? Issues of Access, Acculturation, Advancement, Advocacy**

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Despite widespread alarms about a growing shortage of school leaders, an obvious source of well-prepared talent continues to be overlooked. Women are still under-represented in school administration, particularly at the highest levels of responsibility. This paper presents findings of a study that examined issues for women in accessing administrative positions, acculturating into the organization, advancing on the hierarchical ladder, and advocating for other women who may follow. The results suggest that the administrative profession, including women themselves, would benefit from a more sophisticated understanding of the gender biases that still persist to keep women on the operational and cultural margins of school organizations.

Across the country, school officials struggle to attract and retain enough talented educational leaders. Increased demands for accountability, long hours, decreased autonomy, and lack of support are driving some to leave administrative roles, or to decide not to enter administration in the first place (Adams, 1999; Normore, 2004). Studies also reveal that many school leaders are nearing retirement (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella 2000; RAND Corporation, 2003), and states across the country report shrinking administrative applicant pools (NAESP, 2003). The shortage of school leaders, therefore, appears to be real, yet it is hard to imagine how this can be so. Our schools are full of talented teachers, and university leadership preparation programs are thriving. A properly prepared talent pool *does* exist, and statistics show that this pool consists increasingly of women, who for some time have represented the largest percentage of both the teaching profession and educational leadership preparation programs (Grogan &

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Brunner, 2005; Shakeshaft 1999). Yet women remain underrepresented in leadership roles, particularly in high school principalships and superintendencies, the positions that carry the most responsibility and influence (Grogan & Brunner 2005; Keller, 1999). It appears the shortage of administrators can only be explained if qualified women are going unnoticed. Where, then, *are* the women in school administration?

Studies suggest that female applicants often face ongoing misperceptions about their lack of leadership strength, particularly in non-academic areas such as facilities, athletics, and budget (Skrla, 2001). And some do not apply for leadership positions in the first place, finding themselves torn between the enormous demands of an administrative job and societal expectations for women in terms of family (Grogan, 1999; Tallerico, 2000). For those women who are successful in obtaining leadership positions, determining "how things are done here" and becoming accepted in the organization can be even more difficult. The newcomers must locate the boundaries between the cultural insiders and outsiders and identify the gatekeepers between those two domains (Gupton & Slick, 1996; Marshall & Kasten, 1994). Yet women

often find it difficult to locate the entry points to becoming cultural insiders, due to systemic norms that keep them on the margins (Johnson, 1997). Instead of seamless transitions, many female administrators face trials and frustrations as they attempt to simultaneously learn the job *and* the norms and culture of the organization, including who the players are, how best to fit in, and how to avoid the political and social land mines that can undermine their efforts to become accepted, successful members of the team.

The inherent challenges for anyone in educational leadership are compounded for women because school governance structures remain quite patriarchal (Tallerico, 2000). Johnson (1997) points out that white males still hold the majority of leadership positions in schools, particularly at the upper levels. Furthermore, the absence of mentoring or informal support systems for women may make integration and successful acculturation more difficult for them than for their male counterparts. Lacking this camaraderie and support, some women, in an attempt to gain a foothold, sacrifice their sense of self, consciously assuming traditionally masculine traits and behaviors—toughness, emotional detachment, and decisiveness. Some may even avoid association with women's groups that may be perceived as being divisive or separatist (Johnson, 1997; Tallerico, 2000). Facing “cultural and social discrimination,” coupled with feelings of “professional and organizational isolation” (Beekley, 1999, p. 173), some women leave their administrative positions altogether.

For those who stay in administration, obtaining positions as high school principals and superintendents can be an even greater challenge, as evidenced by the large under-representation of women in these roles. In 1999, for example, women constituted only about 12% of the superintendents in over 14,000 United States districts, an increase of only two percentage points since 1981 (Keller, 1999). By 2003, the percentage of female superintendents was still low at 18% nationwide (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Career patterns contribute to this, since the path to the superintendency usually passes through the high school principalship, a position that remains a bastion of male leaders (Shakeshaft, 1989). Public perception persists that men are more skilled at handling political and disciplinary issues better, especially at the high school level (Logan, 1998). Women themselves believe that in order to attain a superintendency, they need to travel the conventional path — teacher to principal (especially a high school principalship), to assistant superintendent, coupled with a doctoral degree, sponsorship, professional visibility, and business experience (Grogan, 1996).

Finally, women may not be supporting one another for leadership roles. Instead of “sisterhood,” women are perceived as being their own worst

enemies, using underhanded and often devastating ways to attack each other (Chesler, 2002). This has the dual effect of hindering women's chances for success and reinforcing unproductive, negative stereotypes.

This study extends the analysis of the under-representation of women in leadership roles, particularly at the highest levels of responsibility. It focuses on the social and political impediments to women's advancement and examines the extent to which women support other women. Finally, it explores how well women themselves understand the systemic nature of gender barriers, since women are not likely to achieve parity with men until they grasp the nature of the problem.

### **The Study**

The study was conducted in Maine, where the percentage of administrative positions held by women is 45%, which is an increase from 38% in 1995 (Maine Department of Education, 2004a). This statistic suggests to many, of course, that the faces of leadership are changing; thus, gender is not an issue in this state—at least in terms of school leadership. However, this finding is deceiving and fails to illustrate that the percentage of women holding administrative positions is just a small percentage (37%) of those who hold administrative certification. It also obfuscates the fact that the number of women who hold the most influential leadership positions—high school principalships and superintendencies—remains very low, at 17% for both roles (Maine Department of Education, 2004b).

Included in the study were nearly all K-12 female school administrators within the state of Maine. Surveys were sent to all female superintendents, high school principals, and middle school principals. However, for the purpose of providing number balance across administrative roles, stratified random sampling techniques were used to select the participants from the ranks of elementary principal and district mid-level administrators, which we defined as curriculum coordinators and special education directors.

The goal of the study was to elucidate women's perceptions of the barriers to acquiring and moving comfortably into school leadership roles. We examine career path and advancement issues for female administrators and explores the extent to which women are supporting one another. The total number of potential participants was 300, and our return rate was 58% (174), as follows:

Administrative Role	Number of Females in this Role Statewide	Statewide Percentage of the Total in This Role	Number of Surveys Sent	Number Responding to the Survey	Percentage Returning the Survey
Superintendents	30	17%	30	24	80%
High School Principals	28	17%	28	23	82%
Middle School Principals	82	58%	82	47	57%
Elementary Principals	235	51%	80*	43	54%
District Mid-Level Administrators	155	57%	80*	37	46%
Total			300	174	58%

\*Selected by stratified random sampling covering all 4 quadrants of the state

The guiding questions for the study included:

- What are the career paths of female school administrators, and what do these patterns illuminate about barriers for women in obtaining school leadership positions?
- What cultural and political boundaries influence women's ability to gain insider status within school organizations?
- What are the perceptions of barriers to advancing into the highest administrative roles?
- To what extent do female leaders support other women who aspire to leadership roles?

Because this was exploratory data analysis, descriptive statistics were used to organize, summarize, and describe measures of the population. The administrative level and experience of respondents were revealed on the survey, which allowed for comparisons by categories. Open-ended responses were coded first according to research question, then by categories and themes, and finally clustered according to administrative role.

## Findings

The women who responded identified a set of problems contributing to their under-representation in school leadership roles. These were in four categories, which we call The Four A's—access, acculturation, advancement, and advocacy.

### **Access to School Administrative Positions**

Though women make up more than half the teaching force, their representation in leadership positions continues to lag significantly behind that of men. This is especially evident among high school principals and superintendents, where, in Maine, women currently hold 17% of both the high school principalships and superintendencies. Findings related to access to administrative roles include:

*Women moved into their first administrative role either because an opportunity presented itself or because they were “nudged” into it.*

In the study, 76% (132) of all respondents reported that they were either fortuitous (a position suddenly appeared in the district at an opportune time) or nudged into their first administrative role (colleagues encouraged them to apply), showing little change from Ortiz's 1982 finding that women are “frequently pushed into the principalship by sponsors” (p. 69). Fewer than 20% (34) reported that they intended from the start of their teaching career eventually to become an administrator.

When this finding is examined by role, however, some startling contrasts can be seen. Among female superintendents, 33% (10) stated it had been their plan to become an administrator from the outset of their careers. Although not a large percentage, this was significantly higher than respondents in other leadership positions, where only 16% (24) reported a career plan to move into administration. This indicates that women who obtain superintendencies are more often those who were purposeful about planning their careers, as compared to the majority who tended to move into their roles because they were asked to do so, or who considered moving into administration when an opportunity presented itself.

*Women more often move into administration within the same district, rather than make inter-district career moves.*

Sixty-nine percent (46) of first-time female administrators and 45% (50) of experienced female administrators have remained in the district where they have spent most, if not all, of their educational careers. Respondents noted the importance of the relationships they had built as one factor influencing this “immobility.” For example, “I’ve taken a lot of time to establish myself and build strong relationships. I value these and wouldn’t want to start over in another district.” This finding suggests little change during the past two decades since Edson (1988) noted that women were less willing than men to change districts for an administrative post and very unlikely to change states to do so. The tendency among women to remain in the same district is also explained by the previous finding of this study, which revealed that most female administrators had moved into leadership either serendipitously or by sponsorship, both of which are more likely to occur within the existing district.

*Women reported internal barriers including their own need to be “super-prepared” before applying, and waiting for the time to be right in terms of family responsibilities.*

Well over half of the respondents (62%/108) indicated that they delayed considering a move to administration until they could gain experience through many years of teaching, finish their entire leadership preparation program, and get their children to (or through) school-age. One respondent captured the sentiment of many, saying, “I was a teacher for sixteen years before becoming an assistant principal. I felt I needed that level of experience, and I wanted to spend time with my own children.”

**Analysis and implications for access.** The comfort of established relationships, along with not having to move, are factors that women in the study reported as appealing, and help explain the high number of women in the study who moved into their current role from within the same school district. This may also help explain why women do not ascend to the highest levels of administration as frequently as men do. Attaining a superintendency, for example, usually requires progression through several leadership positions and a willingness to move to districts with openings, as opposed to waiting for a vacancy in the local superintendency.

Late entry into administration also contributes to the lower percentage of women in the highest positions of educational administration. Since many female administrators believe they must prove themselves as teachers, finish their preparation programs, and wait for family responsibilities to wane

before applying for an administrative position—they tend to enter the superintendent “pipeline” several years later than men do. Research indicates that men tend to say they are ready to do the job earlier and with less formal preparation or leadership experience, and without waiting for family responsibilities to subside. Grogan and Brunner (2005), for example, found that female superintendents had spent more time in the classroom than their male counterparts, 40% of whom had been in the classroom five years or fewer. Women represent the majority in educational leadership programs and often put tremendous effort into improving their knowledge, skills, and credibility to be worthy of consideration. Ironically, this attention to preparation may actually be impeding their professional advancement.

### **Acculturation Within the Organization**

In addition to women’s struggles in accessing positions, particularly at high levels of administration, this study revealed a perception by many women that they have a more difficult time than men in acculturating and gaining acceptance within the organization. Here are those findings:

*Female administrators have very few professional support structures.*

Despite the attention that mentors have been given among the ranks of teachers, 78% (136) of all respondents said they were not assigned a mentor when they moved into administration. We also cross-tabulated the data by years of experience, to see if providing mentors might be a newer phenomenon. However, 76% (150) of first time administrators reported they did not have a mentor (compared to 80% of experienced administrators), indicating that providing mentors for new administrators is not something that has gained a toe-hold within most school districts. Several respondents commented that this would have been helpful. One wrote, for example, that we need to “apply lessons of teacher induction to administration.”

Of those who were assigned a mentor, 68% (26) reported that the mentor had given them valuable insight about the “nuts and bolts” of the job, but only 29% (11) were given insight on more subtle cultural and political acculturation issues, such as the “potential land mines” they might confront. The study also revealed that support for women is not ongoing, with 97% (169) reporting they have no formal network that supports them as female administrators, and 40% (69) said they have no network at all, formal or informal.

*Women tend to identify themselves as cultural outsiders when multiple factors of outsider-ism are present.*

The good news is that 77% (134) of the women in the study self-reported as cultural “insiders.” On closer examination, however, this picture is not quite as positive. People who have been in their role for three years or fewer, for example, were nearly twice as likely to report they were cultural “outsiders,” and the same was true for women who had switched districts. And despite this reported “insider status,” 55% (96) indicated that in terms of acceptance, they were clearly at a disadvantage compared to men. One respondent said, for example, “I am new to the district . . . new males are accepted more easily.”

When asked why they considered themselves cultural insiders or outsiders, their written comments were consistent. *Insiders* attributed their status to two factors. First, many said they had been in the district a long time, and so believed that longevity made them insiders. As one put it, “My entire career in education (31 years) has been in the same district, which contributes to my sense of being an insider.” Another said, “I was a well-respected teacher and department chair, and now logically I am an administrative insider.” The second factor named was their “competence,” indicating that many respondents equated skill with insider status. More than 30 comments resembled this one: “I’m very capable, which has helped me be an insider.” It is troubling that virtually none of the answers from the self-identified “insiders” spoke to issues of being valued, being heard, being politically savvy, or feeling safe to challenge established norms.

*Outsiders’* comments were also revealing. They indicated a perception that others resented them, particularly if they came from “away” (“It’s been hard to be accepted as a person who’s ‘new’ to the community”); or if they were named to a job that had been traditionally held by men (“The former superintendent was a male, so people seem suspicious of me”); or if they were young (“I am younger than most administrators—some seem to resent that”). When a respondent fell into several of these categories, she rated herself even lower on the insider/outsider continuum, indicating that combinations of these factors make outsider-ism worse.

*Women consciously adopt characteristics more typically identified with masculinity in order to be accepted on the administrative team.*

When asked whether they had to assume new leadership traits to achieve insider status, 80% (139) said they did. The traits selected were ones

traditionally associated with masculinity, including “decisiveness,” which was selected by 65% (115) of the respondents and “not showing emotion, appearing tougher,” selected by 40% (71). (The percentages reporting this were even higher with administrators who have been in their roles three years or fewer.) Other attributes named were “talking less” (20%), embracing traditionally masculine interests, e.g., sports (19%), and putting “relational distance between self and staff” (16%). On the flip side, written comments revealed a concern that “You can’t be a women’s libber and remain an insider,” expressing a fear that being seen as a vocal advocate for other women would cause them to be labeled as a “libber” or “feminist,” which would relegate them to the cultural periphery and hamper their ability to lead change.

It is also noteworthy that 52% (90) of respondents reported a perception that women have to be “better” or “more accomplished” than men to gain recognition and acceptance within the district, and in the case of high school and middle school principals, the number goes up to 58% and 59% respectively. As one respondent put it, “When I make a mistake, it’s brought up in an administrative team meeting, with an expectation that it will not happen again. When my male counterpart makes an error, there seems to be a “wink and smile” attitude, and someone else is assigned to pick up the slack.

*Female school leaders believe that a “Good Ol’ Boys’ Network” exists in educational administration.*

Seventy-four percent (128) said that a “good ol’ boys’ network” exists in school administration. In their comments, again and again, respondents qualified this by saying “not in my district, however,” expressing their belief that the network exists “elsewhere, not where I work,” or “not here, but across the state.” Further, respondents repeatedly named professional leadership associations as especially egregious.

**Analysis and implications for acculturation.** It is clear from the data that the mentoring picture, both formal and informal, is not improving for female administrators. Few reported the existence of a mentor, and for those who did, the mentor generally failed to inform them of important cultural and political insider information that would have helped them avoid pitfalls. Although we do not yet have comparative data for men, the finding is still especially problematic for women, who tend to depend on relationships for career advancement and enhancement.

From one perspective, however, the lack of mentoring could be viewed as a positive, in that women are not being “mentored” to be players in a system that perpetually disadvantages them and keeps them from top positions. However, this is only advantageous if women recognize these inequities and patterns, and there is little evidence from the responses we received that this level of awareness exists.

The fact that women self-report as cultural insiders is both a good news/bad news finding in regard to acculturation. It is positive that so many do feel comfortable as insiders within their organizations. However, most of the women who rated themselves as insiders have stayed within the same district for many years. They may have lost sight of what a new person might experience in terms of being on the cultural periphery. Longevity in any organization may cloud impartial judgment and blind employees to the cultural and political barriers that exist, not only for newcomers, but for particular individuals or groups of individuals within the organization, including women. This may explain why women comfortably remain in systems that are considered patriarchal by outsiders. Also telling is the degree to which women, including the “insiders,” reported that masculine traits (decisiveness, not showing emotion) equate with acceptance and insider status, and that most had consciously adopted one or more of these.

Perhaps most telling, was the degree to which a “not in my district” phenomenon arose throughout the data on acculturation issues. Women overwhelmingly agreed that a “good ol’ boys’ network exists, but we repeatedly received written clarification that this was happening “in other places, not here.” This narrow focus and separation of what goes on at the micro level compared to the macro level provides a way for women to ignore or dismiss a pattern of behavior that is detrimental to women’s entrance and acceptance into school organizations. Similarly, many reported that becoming an insider “isn’t a problem *here*,” failing to see that if a system seems to work for them, it may not be working for others within their own district, or that it may be operating in a broader context. This tendency to focus on one’s own experience and only at the micro level can be an avoidance strategy for having to see (and respond to) more systemic issues related to gender.

### **Advancement to the Highest Administrative Roles**

We asked current female administrators about their perceptions of barriers that may exist for women in moving up the career ladder. The findings are as follows:

*Female school leaders reported struggling with competing demands of family life.*

Sixty-eight percent (119) of respondents indicated the struggle of maintaining a balance between personal and professional lives was a significant challenge, and this was fairly evenly distributed across all administrative roles. It was especially pronounced among those who held their current position for four years or fewer, where 71% (70) reported that finding a balance was a persistent struggle. One principal said that entering female administrators need to understand that “with the tension between career and the demands of family—sacrifices will be made.”

There was a clear implication from respondents that family responsibilities are still not gender-balanced, supporting research indicating that most females continue to shoulder the bulk of responsibilities associated with family and home life (Brunner, 2000). One remarked, “I think the professional vs. personal demands are not spoken out loud but are HUGE conflicts for women—and women are surrounded by men who do not share these experiences.” Even among those with supportive partners or spouses, and those who said their children had grown, 68% (118) indicated it was difficult to maintain relationships in their personal life while accepting new challenges, expansive work days, and increased professional obligations that accompany administrative roles, particularly at the high school and superintendent’s level. This tension will not subside until the model for educational administrators evolves to include more consideration for women’s routes to leadership and the extra responsibility they often carry for child raising and maintaining a healthy home environment.

*The perception that there is one “correct route” to the superintendency may be contributing to the lack of advancement for women.*

In the survey, an overwhelming 92% (160) of the respondents felt that the two administrative positions from which an administrator is most likely to rise to the superintendency are the high school principalship and, less frequently, central office positions such as curriculum coordinator. This belief, coupled with such a small increase in the number of women (at least in Maine) who are high school principals (17% of current high school principals compared to 16% in 1995) may indicate that the pool of female candidates for superintendencies will remain small. Further, only 15% of responding female high school principals indicated that they entered

administration with a career ladder in mind, which brings into question whether many have plans of becoming superintendents in the future, and thus shrinking the pool even further.

*Respondents were divided on whether gender-related factors are still germane in terms of women advancing within the educational leadership hierarchy.*

Responses were almost evenly divided when asked whether gender is a factor that influences advancement to the superintendency. We called this the “dog bone” effect, since the responses were skewed so dramatically to both ends of the continuum. On one end, 40% (70) expressed a strong belief that there are still many barriers for women in attaining influence and positional power within school districts. One wrote, “Much more research on the reasons so few women ascend to the superintendency needs to happen. The whole issue of gender seems to have faded from discussion.” Most others (58%/101) took the polar opposite position, indicating their belief that gender has nothing to do with career advancement, and expressing a mixture of denial (“There is no problem”), disbelief (“I can’t believe you still think this is a problem”) and/or anger (“I earned this job, and research about women diminishes my achievement”).

**Analysis and discussion of advancement.** The data indicate that women generally agree about the tension many females face in juggling the demands of administration and family life. There was further agreement that time spent as a high school principal increased the likelihood of being successful in obtaining a superintendency. However, more than half of the respondents seemed to just accept this as “the way things are,” not seeing how gender patterns may be contributing to fewer female applicants, or indeed, limiting the choices they or their female colleagues may have.

Of greater concern was the number of respondents who clearly believe that educational leadership operates completely within a meritocracy that allows anyone with the proper skills to advance, despite the fact that the numbers argue otherwise. “Gender is not an issue,” one stated, “women who work hard enough will succeed. Period.” Some qualified this with remarks like, “gender is not the issue *here* that it might be elsewhere,” indicating a belief that at the local level all is well.

### **Advocacy For Other Women**

One important aspect of the study was to examine the degree to which women helped other women in terms of accessing, acculturating and advancing in leadership. The study reveals the following findings in terms of women advocating for each other:

*Respondents do not feel that women support one another. In fact, respondents identified men as more inclusionary and claimed other women were often more exclusionary.*

The survey reveals that 57% (86) reported that it was a male who had been the most inclusionary and tried to draw them into the organizational culture. This phenomenon was especially true for female superintendents and high school principals, where 73% and 70% respectively reported males to be the most inclusionary. This seems logical since there are more men in these roles, but consider that 57% (66) of the respondents also specifically named other women as “most exclusionary.” This troubling admission was particularly true again for superintendents (53%) and high school principals (65%).

One respondent noted, “I sometimes think that women are their own worst enemies because instead of encouraging one another, they gossip about one another—Women don’t leave matters behind, but carry a grudge too far.” Respondents used language such as “undercut,” “backbite,” or “weaken,” to describe the destructive behaviors women use toward one another. Competition among women was another theme that emerged, which many perceived as being an impediment to advocacy. One principal expressed this, saying, “Women need to really support each other instead of undercutting one another. [They need to] ‘move the cheese’ from competition to collaboration and respect.” Declared another, “Change will begin with women first, not the organization. When women become supportive of each other, the organization will reflect that support.”

*Women assert that they believe in the concept of advocacy, but their actions do not support this belief.*

Sixty percent (103) of the respondents reported that they have a responsibility to advocate for other women in terms of hiring, advancement, and/or acceptance into the organization, and this percentage was nearly equal among all roles. The percentages start to drop in terms of actually doing so, however; with 54% (94) indicating they are not currently proactive in

advocating for other women. Respondents appeared to deflect the question about their advocacy by hiding behind the legalities of hiring, with comments such as, "Gender cannot be considered when hiring. Isn't there a law regarding equal opportunity?" From another, "I believe in hiring the best candidate for the job—not related to gender." These responses failed to address the heart of the question, which specifically mentioned advocacy in terms of "encouraging, hiring, mentoring, and/or guiding."

Some women also seemed insulted, as if the concept of advocacy somehow took away from their own accomplishment. Example comments, such as, "I am proud to have been hired in all jobs because of my hard work and not because of my gender" were common throughout the responses. Several participants actually responded with hostile answers, including, "Please!!! I was qualified because I was a good administrator, not because I was a woman," or "It is a bit like playing the 'race' card. Gender can't be ignored, but let's not make it a bigger issue than it is."

*Women believe they can only advocate for other women once they are in a position of professional security themselves.*

Longevity in the school system was repeatedly invoked by respondents as important to being accepted and feeling comfortable in order to take professional risks, such as advocating for others. Seventy-nine percent (137) of the respondents expressed the need to learn the culture and/or to become a cultural insider in the system before advocating for other women. Among women who hold superintendencies, the most powerful position from which to advocate for other women, only 18% (32) indicated that they do so right from the beginning of taking the job. It is evident that women responding to the survey only felt secure in advocating for others when they were in an established, secure position themselves.

Furthermore, keeping in mind that 79% (138) indicated they would advocate for other women after they had learned the culture and/or had become a "cultural insider" themselves, and factoring in that 77% of the women had rated themselves as "cultural insiders," it is interesting that so few reported actually being active in advocating for other women. This again speaks to the disconnection between their espoused belief (that in the abstract advocacy is important) and their actions (admitting they are not advocates themselves).

*Women believe if they have a representative number of female administrators in their district, gender issues in school leadership are not a concern.*

Of the 58% (101) who reported that gender was no longer a concern, 42 wrote comments indicating that female representation on the administrative team was somewhat balanced; hence, no problem. For example, one wrote, "We have three very effective female administrators in this district—I do not see this as an issue," illustrating the viewpoint that numbers alone remove all other gender-related factors. Another respondent went one step further, saying, "We outnumber men . . . [gender is] no longer an issue unless you're a male!" They clearly ignored a closer examination of the district power base, whose voices are heard, and *which* roles women hold. At the other end of the continuum, among the 40% (70) who indicated that gender *is* a factor influencing advancement, there were eight whose comments demonstrated an understanding of this complexity. One of these respondents, for example, noted that the "power roles" in her district are still held by men, stating, "Five out of six district principals are women, BUT the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, and the high school principal are all men."

Overall, the responses support an earlier finding that many women believe gender-related issues are alive "elsewhere, but not here." It was not atypical to read responses such as, "Gender may be an issue other places, but it is not an issue in my district." Many women in the survey appeared to cling to the illusion that everything is basically alright because they have the numbers to support their claim, with comments like, "We have several female administrators on this administrative team." In these cases, the women deny there are deeper gender-related issues, especially within their own sphere of influence.

**Analysis and implications for advocacy.** Women in this study believed fully in the concept of advocacy, but in describing the actions of women toward one another, they used descriptors such as "backbiting and undercutting," far more often than "supportive and encouraging." Further, their stated belief in advocacy was not aligned to their actions. Many took themselves off the hook of "walking their talk" by only thinking of advocacy in terms of hiring, and then asserted that advocating for women would be "illegal." These comments did not reflect an understanding that advocacy can take the form of helping other women with career planning, helping them acculturate successfully into the organization, and speaking up for their advancement. Such simplistic views release them from the responsibility to

look deeper at their own motives and behaviors toward women and from taking action to alter existing stereotypes that impede women within organizations.

The common assertion that advocacy was either “not about gender” or that it somehow diminishes the accomplishments of women, indicates that many women are holding firm to a belief system that validates their own position and achievement. It was very evident that it was difficult for them to go beyond this thinking, for do so would force them to explore systems that keep women on the periphery of school organizations and in the lower ranks of administration.

Women in our study also believed if they had the “numbers” on their side, women equaling or outnumbering men on the administrative team in their district, that gender discrimination had in fact been overcome. Not only does this ignore inequalities by rank and influence, it allows women to fall into the trap of thinking that isolated success stories represent a broader truth. They are thinking locally, rather than globally, and of individual examples, rather than systems. Without an awareness of how gender issues might be playing out in their own sphere, they are unlikely to see broader patterns of discrimination, which can deny the reality of women’s struggles in a male-dominated profession and promote a false sense of equity.

Moreover, if women need to be secure in their positions prior to advocating for others, as the respondents indicated, they are surely missing opportunities to support up-and-coming women and build a stronger organization. It was clear that insecurity was keeping them from taking risks, which tends to keep individuals (and organizations) standing in the same place, unable to conceive of and explore new possibilities. The women responding to the survey were not stepping out of their comfort zone to advocate for other women, and even more noteworthy, many did not see it as important or necessary.

## CONCLUSION

This study confirms and extends previous research, which suggests that gender-related factors marginalize women in school leadership. These factors fall under four broad categories we have labeled The Four A’s: *access* to administrative positions, *acculturation* within the organization, *advancement* on the hierarchical ladder, and *advocacy* for other women who may follow in their footsteps.

Interwoven across all four topics covered by this study were several troubling themes that help explain the persistence of a shortage of women in

school leadership, particularly at the highest levels. First, there is evidence that women oversimplified gender as an issue, thinking mostly in terms of the *number* of female administrators in *their* district. They often failed to consider where these women were in the hierarchy of the organization, whose voices were heard, how other women entering the district would fare within the existing culture, or how statewide and national statistics still point to inequities. There is also evidence that the respondents have limited understanding of the patriarchal system in which they operate. For example, they noted the lack of mentoring but did not consider that mentoring may be counter to changing patterns that systematically limit options for women. Only with a more sophisticated awareness of gender issues will women school leaders be able to consider that it's not about shoring up a "weakness" in women, but about fixing a male-dominated system and changing the status quo.

Additionally, it was clear that many embrace a belief that they are part of a meritocracy, where anyone who works hard enough and has the right skills will succeed—thus removing their responsibility to confront other causes for the small number of women in the highest administrative roles. Ignoring issues centered on gender can lead to denial of existing social structures. Johnson (1997) suggests that we are stuck with a patriarchal society because we cannot acknowledge its social roots and our own involvement in it. Clearly, exploring the roots of social structures can be a painful and insecure place for women to be, especially if the outcomes reveal some women have been privileged by the same system in question.

Perhaps of most concern was the repeated and emphatic insistence that barriers for women in school administration occur "somewhere else, not here." What they have not considered is that if *everyone* says it is happening everywhere but here, it is happening here, too. There certainly seems to be a blindness (and perhaps unwillingness) among many women administrators to look beyond the position they are in now and evaluate how the barriers they identified elsewhere connect to a system that affect women everywhere.

This study is based on survey data, and thus cannot possibly reflect the individual personal stories and beliefs of all female administrators across one state. Nevertheless, there are powerful implications for colleges of education, school districts, professional associations, and women themselves as they strive to create equitable opportunities for existing and upcoming school leaders. For colleges of education the study suggests that women have not been provided enough reading, discussion, and practice in viewing educational issues through a variety of lenses. Many women suggested that their *leadership* classes needed to explore gender differences more

systematically and help women be prepared to recognize and respond to gender issues they will face within the culture and politics of schooling. Due to the low number of women who had engaged in serious career planning, we would add that *teacher* preparation programs also need to infuse more feminist literature into the curriculum and add career counseling specifically focused on helping women think about their path to advancement much earlier.

For school districts, it is clear from the study that more mentoring is needed for female leaders (and perhaps for all leaders), as well as the need to mitigate the negative impact for women who come to the district from outside, or who are younger, or who hold a role that has been previously held by a man. This is not to suggest that women need to be “acculturated” blindly into a system just to fit in. But rather, they should be given the tools to succeed so they can become the kind of leaders who will work toward creating a more equitable system for everyone. School districts also need to make a concerted effort to hear the voices and ideas of all members of the administrative team, regardless of their role or gender, and to examine the culture regularly to be sure that it is safe to raise issues of equal opportunity and access for women. School districts must also confront the demands being placed on current school leaders and evaluate how these may be contributing to smaller applicant pools. Exploring ways to make these positions more family-friendly would benefit all applicants, but especially women. And certainly, for state professional associations, which were named as particularly problematic in terms of perpetuating “good ol’ boy” attitudes and behaviors, an open dialogue and examination of the norms and activities of these groups is long overdue.

Finally, the findings reveal that women need to take more responsibility for recognizing gender issues and taking proactive steps to promote equity at all levels of educational administration. Rather than feeding the stereotype that they gossip, compete, and generally do not get along, women must genuinely support their talented female colleagues and develop networks of support.

The study, therefore, underscores the need for a multi-pronged approach to correct gender inequities that are contributing to the shortage of talented school administrators. It includes: (a) exploring gender issues and patterns of discrimination as central themes within teacher preparation and educational leadership courses; (b) making conscious efforts within school districts to recognize and remove barriers that limit women’s opportunities for access, acculturation, and advancement; (c) providing genuine (and equal) support for women within professional associations; and (d) raising the level of

advocacy for women by women. It will take this kind of systematic approach to bring about change, along with a willingness among all educators to recognize that there is still a long way to go. As one respondent said, “This study, sadly, is still needed. We should certainly be past this—but we’re not.”

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