Female Superintendents: Serving the Needs of Rural School Districts

by

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Rural school districts have always been a part of the American educational system. In 2004, the United States finds rural schools educating a significant number of students. (http://www.ruraledu.org/newsroom/wrm_new.htm). The stability and the quality of a rural school can be affected by the person in the superintendent position. The position "has evolved from a position that included clerical as well as educational tasks, to one of business management, and finally to a position that integrates the tasks of chief executive officer and professional educational leader" (Chase, 1995, p. 34).

Rural school districts may find that female superintendents are a good match to their district needs. Studies related to female school leaders reveal the following characteristics: an emphasis on putting students first, a strong instructional focus, an empowered, relational style of interaction (Gupton & Slick, 1996; Ortiz, 1991). Couple these characteristics with qualities sought by school boards: introduce and manage change and provide structure, stability and organization for the district (Grady, Ourada-Sieb, Wesson, 1994) and the connection between district needs and women superintendent leadership becomes evident.

Purpose and methodology

The purpose of the study was to examine the leadership styles of female rural superintendents. Rural was identified as communities with fewer than 2,500 people (*Why Rural Matters*, 2003). The study was a qualitative, multiple-case study. Structured interviews were conducted based on 22 open-ended questions. The main research question was "How do rural, female superintendents administer in rural school districts?" Sub questions were framed around four areas: leadership, relationships, change, and

support. Participants were female superintendents employed with a rural school district in Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, and New Mexico. The names and locations of all possible participants were identified through the states' Departments of Education. The superintendents were invited to participate through telephone contacts. Fifteen were interviewed. The number interviewed was the result of the investigators' ability to contact the individuals and participants' willingness and availability to be interviewed during the timeframe of January through June 2004.

The interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed (Creswell, 2003). The data were separated into categories: career paths, circumstances, leadership, relationships, change, support, challenges and advice. Conclusions were drawn from the categories.

Findings and Discussion

Career path and circumstances

Garn (2003) noted, "48.5 % of superintendents progress through a career path that includes classroom teacher, building-level administrator, and central office administrator. The second most common career path is from teacher to building-level administrator to superintendent with 31.2 % of superintendents following this path" (p. 6). The majority of participants followed this career path, with only two bypassing the building-level position.

Seven of the participants only pursued the superintendency after they received encouragement from others or after they had an opportunity to experience what "being in charge" felt like. Only two specifically stated that it was their own personal interest that led them to pursue the superintendency.

Ten participants had fifteen or more years of experience in education before moving into the superintendency. They articulated that their years of experience provided them with a sense of confidence with handling the responsibilities of the superintendency.

Leadership and relationships

"A feminist leader works closely with personnel and develops personal relationships with co-workers that bond the members of the organization…Feminist organizations are characterized by practices such as participative decision making, systems of rotating leadership, promotion of community and cooperation, and power sharing" (Brown & Irby, 2003, p. 105).

Participants shared comments that display the characteristics of a feminist leader and a feminist organization. They described their collaborative leadership styles, how they worked with others, and the importance of open communications and of creating a caring atmosphere. They were not concerned about presenting themselves as "in control" but rather focused more on how much more could be accomplished by including others in the decision making process.

They were also not concerned about displaying genuine interest and concern about people's feelings. They considered the fact that they were able to "tune into feelings" as an asset to their leadership style. These characteristics of caring provided them with a level of comfort and commitment found by other women who have served in the role of superintendent. Brunner (2000) observed, "This view of their work came about because they had one primary focus—caring relationships with adults and children.

The development and support of caring relationships was the foundation of their work"
(pp. 117-118).

The leadership styles of the participants also involved building strong
relationships and open communications. They shared the strategies they used to establish
and maintain relationships and for communicating with others. As noted by Wallin and
Sackney (2003), "Because of this strong attachment between school and community, the
administrator of a rural school must be, 'constantly aware of the community, its leaders,
and its pressure points…" (p. 11). Because of the solid relationships these women had
established, they had gained the trust and respect needed for them to succeed as leaders.

Change

Participants were attuned to the importance of the change process in order to
garner support. Whether the changes were a result of mandates, budget constraints or
local needs, participants emphasized how they obtained buy-in from the various
individuals they considered as "key players." They worked hard to be inclusive and to
empower those with whom they worked. They equated empowerment with professional
respect.

Participants were also quick to note that the majority of the changes occurring
within their districts were mandates or budgetary changes, thus making the issue of
obtaining buy-in and developing ownership that much more challenging. Howley and
Pendarvis (2002) summarized the situation:

> Federal and state mandates have placed many new demands on administrators.
> Much of the pressure created by these mandates is caused by the lack of resources
> needed to address them. Superintendents say inadequate resources detract most
> from their effectiveness…Shared governance requires school leaders to relinquish
> power as well as make use of highly developed skills in interpersonal
> communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution.

No matter how challenging the change was, participants were conscientious of being fiscally responsible and in compliance with mandates, identifying both as key responsibilities within their position.

Support

None of the participants hesitated to seek support for situations and issues that they felt warranted additional help or information. Professional organizations, especially the state level school administrator organization, and individuals were mentioned. Graduate programs did not receive the same accolades.

Participants realized the power of establishing strong networks of supporters. They did not view the need to seek out others for answers as a weakness. They identified the demands and stress of the position and the amount of continuous change within school settings, such as demographic changes and federal/state mandates, as legitimate reasons for anyone in the position to seek assistance. In fact, they viewed the lack of seeking out such assistance as irresponsible.

Quick to name individual colleagues and mentors, the participants also realized the value of those who were or had served in the role. They addressed the importance of networking and identifying a mentor in their advice to aspiring female superintendents. Wolverton and MacDonald (2004) agreed with their advice: "If states…want women superintendents they must embark on concerted efforts to identify and mentor female leaders. Mentors provide essential support and insights into the inner workings of the system" (p. 9).

A form of support not outwardly acknowledged by participants who had been long-time residents, but evident in their comments and examples, was the support they

received within their buildings and communities. This support was the result of the reputations the participants had developed from the years they had committed and the loyalty they displayed to their schools and their communities.

Challenges

The participants were not without their challenges. They readily shared the trials and tribulations of being a rural female superintendent and their words of advice echoed of personal experiences. Most of the challenges seemed to reflect issues surrounding rural settings. Wallin and Sackney (2003) explained, "It has often been observed that rural schools are more tightly connected to their local communities than urban schools. In essence, the rural school becomes a symbol of community unity, community survival, and community values" (p. 11).

Participant challenges seemed to center around the personal issues of privacy in their lives and around the professional issues of demographic and budgetary concerns. Both areas can be daunting. Participants handled the issues of maintaining a private life while holding a public position by identifying escape avenues—either internal ones such as reminding themselves to be true to who they were or external ones such as scheduling time for their families or intentionally shopping in another town.

The professional issues were viewed in a broader more visionary manner, and the participants' loyalty and commitment to the school and community became evident as they described strategies and solutions that they had been a part of that benefited both the school and the community. Their level of involvement within their communities, their representation on various local organizations, and their volunteerism were all a part meeting the needs of school and community alike.

Recommendations

"Current pools of administrative candidates come from practicing teachers and the majority of teachers are women. Yet few women are found in the superintendency" (Wolverton & MacDonald, 2004, p. 3). Therefore, the following recommendations are provided with the intent of increasing the pool of women willing to pursue the position:

- Provide more opportunities for females to broaden their experiences in the areas of leadership and governance;

- Provide situations for potential female leaders to establish networks with key leaders and organizations attuned to the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively lead schools;

- Encourage rural school districts to look to staff members who are committed to the school and the community and who have leadership ability as a means of obtaining and sustaining leadership;

- Develop mentorships and internships that expand potential candidates' experiences and skills;

- Encourage those recognized as having the knowledge, skills, and abilities to be successful in the superintendency to obtain the necessary licensure and degree;

- Provide more hands-on, realistic experiences and establish more opportunities for networking in graduate programs.

  Howley and Pendarvis (2002) acknowledged,

  Always demanding of time and energy, the administrative roles of rural superintendents and principals are more complex and perhaps more stressful than ever before. In the past 25 years, administrators have had to address increasing demands for special programs, collaborative decision making and accountability. In addition, potential for conflict with school boards and various constituencies is greater in the face of heightened diversity of many rural communities.

  The participants of this study are meeting the demands of being a female rural superintendent. They possess qualities that have served their districts and communities well. Hopefully, other females with leadership skills will join them.

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