

Women Superintendents in Iowa: Where is the Momentum? Reflections of a National Malaise

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Abstract:

The United States Census Bureau characterized the position of school superintendent as being the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2001). Paul Houston, president of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) has stated that the future of school system leadership belongs to women (2004). Research completed in 2005, and updated in 2006, reflected that the representation of women in the superintendency in the state of Iowa is increasingly more discrepant than the national average. In the past two years the percentage of female superintendents in the state of Iowa has continued to decrease. Based on interviews with the three major search firms in the state, interviews with female superintendents and a quantitative statewide survey this paper articulates insights about why this discrepancy may be occurring. These findings could be applicable across the field of K-12 education. The issue extends beyond gender issues to a consideration of justice.

Overview

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Iowa is a state of approximately three million people, 95% of whom are Caucasian. As an agricultural state, most of the population is clustered in several cities, the largest of which has a population of 300,000 people. Education plays a major role in the state as a primary employer, with 322 school districts, three major public universities, 34 private colleges and universities, and a strong network of 15 state-run community colleges.

For years Iowa has shared national leadership in student achievement with the states of Wisconsin and Minnesota according to performance data from the American College Testing Program (ACT). Iowa remains the only state in the union, which does not have state-level curriculum standards, opting instead, to a long-held philosophy of local control to determine curriculum for students. The current director of the Iowa Department of Education is female and has been appointed to that position by two governors. First appointed in 2004, she is the fourth female director, following tenures of three earlier directors who served from 1923 to 1955 (Smith, 1969). The director did not serve as a superintendent prior to her present position.

With the profile just described, it would be logical to assume that Iowa is a leader, or at least keeps step with, gender equity in educational leadership positions. However, such is not the case.

Purpose

In 2004 I undertook doctoral research focusing on what attributes were necessary for a female to become a superintendent of schools in Iowa. The research centered on the question: What does it take for a female to become a superintendent in Iowa? By asking this question it

was my intent to identify any barriers women might face in accessing the superintendency, and then to discern what attributes female superintendents exhibited that allowed them to overcome the barriers. The question was predicated in light of the Iowa data that indicated a wide disparity between the number of male and female superintendents. The study was grounded in the seminal work of Jackie Blount (1998) who studied the history of female superintendency in the United States, along with her statistical analyses of female superintendent populations. Her well-documented findings revealed the gender bias evident in the power structure of U.S. public schools.

This paper is further warranted in light of more recent data available about gender balance in educational leadership in the State of Iowa. The perspective remains gloomy. This paper will share information about this issue through the presentation and discussion of results from the 2005 quantitative and qualitative research, updates of state data, and the informants' stories in their own words. Sharing and elaborating different aspects of the research will (hopefully) acquaint the reader with some of the realities of life for women seeking the superintendency in Iowa and to connect these realities with the wider national scene. This paper will address the selection process, including the barriers of the "think manager, think male" mindset (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, p.5), dispositions of school boards toward female candidates, barriers that seem specific to female aspirants along with their particular attributes which have allowed them to gain a superintendent position. These issues, though researched in Iowa, are borne out by the literature to be common across the United States.

Research

To access data about the women in Iowa superintendencies, a survey was electronically mailed to all 37 (2003-2004) Iowa female superintendents to compare their responses with 37 randomly selected male superintendents from an Iowa Department of Education list. The response rate to this survey was 97.2% for males and 75.6% for females. Frequency response tables and data analysis, primarily the Wilcoxon/Mann-Witney/U Test, were used to determine significant differences between the groups. Qualitative interviews were conducted with three female superintendents and representatives of the three major superintendent search firms in the state. Qualitative data were analyzed using iterations of the constant comparative method. Stories were represented using characteristics of the *testimonio* genre. *Testimonio* genre is a "politically and pedagogically conscious, counter hegemonic, educational research tool" (Haig-Brown, 2003,

p. 422). Tierney (2000) pointed to the fact that the *testimonio* genre is an inquiry tool that focuses on silenced or marginalized populations. Using the *testimonio* genre would most accurately represent the stories of the three female informants in the research.

The 2006 *Annual Condition of Education Report* (latest available data) characterized the teacher workforce in Iowa public schools as being 73.1% female and 26.9% male (p. 51). The gender breakdown of administrative positions is close to the reverse of the teacher workforce. The percent of female principals in public schools increased from 35.5% (435 of 1225 positions) in 2004-2005 to 36.6% (427 of 1166 positions) in 2005-2006. While the percentages have increased slightly, the number of females in principal positions has actually decreased. This fact is born out by the research of Young & McLeod (2001) who found that the school system is structured to ensure that women are less likely than men to serve in leadership positions. It is further corroborated by an analysis from the Rand Education Research Brief (Gates et al, 2004), which found a substantial difference between rates of promotion in men and women school administrators.

Since the initial research in 2005, there has been a slight trend downward in the percentage of female superintendents in the state. In 2004, the percentage was 10.3% (37 positions), 10.8% (36 positions) in 2005, and 9.3% (30 positions) in 2006 as compared to a loss of seven male superintendent positions between 2005 and 2006. The decline in the number of superintendent positions could be attributed to the closing or reorganization of districts; however, the reasons for the disproportionate loss of female-held positions over the loss of male-held superintendencies were not pinpointed. The percentage of women in superintendent positions in Iowa remains well under, what Brunner (1999) called the dismal swamp of national percentages-13.4%; as reported in the 2000 American Association of School Administrators (AASA) Report (Glass et al. 2001).

According to 2007 Iowa Department of Education statistics there are 467 women currently certified to serve as superintendents in the state. Thirty of these women are currently serving as superintendents; leaving 437 qualified women in the state who are not employed as a superintendent. The 2004 interviews with the search consultants did not indicate that their firms had female candidate pools commensurate with these numbers. The AASA study cited two reasons for the small number of women in the superintendency: (1) Females are discouraged from preparing for the superintendency, and (2) School boards would not hire women. In light of

the number of women certified in this state, and assuming that the reasons put forth in the 2000 AASA report, are still valid, the number of certified female candidates suggest that school boards in Iowa may be a major barrier to women successfully accessing the superintendency. These women may perceive they won't be considered, and therefore are unwilling to seek a position for which they invested time and money to become certified.

The superintendent selection process

The 2005 study indicated that search consultants and school board presidents are the gatekeepers in the selection process. There is a preponderance of literature about the androcentric tendencies of school boards. Even well-meaning decision makers often subtly advantage people like themselves (Linn, 1998, p 16). In discussing the hiring practices of school boards Bell (1988) noted that maleness signified "shared language and experience, predictability, connection with the power structure and leadership that satisfies stereotyped preferences" (p.50). A decade later Brunner observed that the superintendency across the U.S. is predominantly male, Caucasian, Protestant, married with children, and Republican (1999). Gossetti & Rusch (1995) found there were hidden assumptions about gender embedded in cultural discourses, which "invisibly or systematically reproduce male power in generation after generation,"(p.5).

The numbers of female superintendents and principals are not the only areas experiencing a decline in female representation. Data from the Iowa Association of School Boards indicated the number of women serving as school board members has trended downward for the past 8 years. At the current time women represent approximately a third of the total board membership statewide. Of the 365 board presidents in Iowa, 98 (26%) are women. While we cannot assume that women serving as presidents (or members) of the school board will ensure more women becoming superintendents, being the presiding officer or a member of the board may have an influence other members in terms of viewing a women as "equal" and capable of leadership.

The selection of the superintendent is one of the most important functions of a school board. Typically school boards engage a professional consultant to conduct the search for the superintendent. The search consultants rely on a pool of candidates from which to draw their recommendations for the board. These pools are most often drawn from professional networks. The salience of networks as an important determiner in accessing the superintendency was substantiated by numerous researchers (Grogan, 1996; Hudson, 1994; Tallerico, 2000a).

Networks, sometimes referred to as “old-boy” networks, are a critical determiner in accessing superintendencies.

Networks

Women’s access to these networks is often limited; therefore their access to search consultants may also be limited. How do aspiring superintendents gain access to a network? A sample of responses indicated the most common way was through socializing, either through golfing or “bellying up to the bar to buy the recruiter a drink”. Glass et al (2001) indicated about half the male superintendents in the 2000 AASA study felt an old boy/girl network had aided them in gaining the position. Interviews conducted in 2005 with the three major superintendent search firms in Iowa indicated their pools had only a few women candidates. Results from the 2005 Iowa survey indicated 26% of the female respondents indicated “very low” recruiter support, while a majority of their male counterparts indicated recruiter reports as “strong”.

Being a good “fit”

Being included in the recommended short list of candidates for board selection does not preclude women from facing more gender-based challenges. Calling the hiring process “fuzzy” Tallerico, (2000a) noted that “chemistry and personality” are part of either the invited or uninvited process on the part of the board (p.106). Boards seek candidates who “fit” with their school culture, which has been termed “homosocial reproduction” by Kanter (1993) and Marietti & Stout (1994). In discussing “fit”, Tallerico noted the subjectivities of this process were “more likely to favor male rather than female candidates”. She continued, “These analyses are supported by both social-psychological and organizational research that demonstrates a human affinity for interaction with those most like ourselves” (p 107). She continued these observations about the board selection process in another work:

A complex mix of unwritten selection criteria...manifest themselves behind the scenes, in the private conversations and interviews critical to applicants’ advancement in recruitment and selection processes. These unwritten rules `involve headhunters’ and school board members (a) defining quality in terms of hierarchies of particular job titles, (b) stereotyping by gender (c) complacency about acting affirmatively, and (d) hyper valuing feelings of comfort and interpersonal chemistry with the successful candidate (Tallerico 2000b p. 37).

A female superintendent and informant in the Iowa study shared this story of the selection of her successor:

There is a bunch [of women who are certified to be superintendents]. And a lot of them really want jobs. One of them applied for my job--really marvelous. [With a doctorate, she] would have taken my programs and run with them—but my board president put the kibosh on her. Two of my board members desperately wanted her. The other two followed the board president's...lead. They were really leaning [toward this candidate], but he forced them, basically, and I could hear them laugh, you know, when he got his way and everybody finally gave in. [So] they're hiring a man with no experience, has never worked with high school people. I've heard by the grapevine he has been fired from several jobs. Two people have already said, "If the board president wanted a stooge, they've found him".

Challenges

Marital status and family responsibilities

In order to answer the question, What does it take for a female to become a superintendent in Iowa; some common barriers for women were identified. In addition to barriers in the search process and recruiter support, the quantitative 2005 research disclosed some other challenges that were more specific to women than were indicated for the men respondents. Discrepancies emerged in the marital status between male and female superintendents. Approximately half of the female respondents (52%) were divorced as compared to their male counterparts (8%). According to statistics from Iowa Commission on the Status on Women Report (2000) this divorce rate is approximately 30% higher than the divorce rate for the general female population in Iowa. The level of stress inherent in administrative positions, compounded with caring for family could account for the higher divorce rate of female superintendents. These reasons are consistent with the findings in literature (Gupton & Appelt-Slick, 1998; Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

Forty percent of the female respondents were not married at the time of the survey. It has been said that the superintendency is a two-person (superintendent and spouse) job. The personal stories of the respondents corroborated the research. Women continue to carry the familial/nurturing role which Lindsey (1997) termed the "motherhood mandate" (p. 197). Studies indicate that this situation has not significantly changed in the past 25 years (Families and Work

Institute, 2004). Honoring Brunner's (2000) admonition to share compelling stories from the field, the following quote is taken from the interview of an informant in 2004:

I was interim [principal] that year. Two secretaries and a Saturday shift. At 5:30 in the morning I was there. I would bring my little baby—go put him in day care and I'd bring him back at 9:00 at night and put him to bed and then I started my [home] work for my doctorate.

Mobility

Iterations of the conversations from the female informants disclosed personal insights on the attributes needed to overcome the barriers to women accessing a superintendent position. The women informants shared commonalities of job mobility, being independent and resilient. The research depicted women as placing their careers at the periphery of family needs, or considering their professional work as secondary to caring for the family (Cassirer & Resking, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1991; Young & McLeod, 2001). Mobility is a plus. Historically women have been more place-bound than men. The search consultants, in the 2005 study, concurred that being willing and able to move to a job location increases the chances for attaining a position. Creative forms of mobility were found to exist among women superintendents. Coincidentally, two of the three informants in the 2004 study were "commuters", living in their districts during the week and traveling the hundred or so miles to their families on the weekends.

Independence and resiliency

Independence and resiliency were necessary to "survive" the sexism these women encountered. Sexism is defined as discriminatory or abusive behavior towards members of the opposite sex (American Heritage Dictionary). According to the (2005) informants, sexism was the strongest barrier to women, not only in the board selection process, but also in their careers. Each of the informants shared stories about sexist occurrences in their professional lives. One shared this experience in a matter-of-fact manner:

I mean, things were very sexist. You were locked in closets and lived through sexual innuendo all the time. Women were paid less than men...even though you've got the same grade point. I was young and attractive and all that kind of stuff at the time so I was subject to a lot of that. But I finished that year out.

Although initially reluctant to talk about it, with encouragement, women superintendents each shared experiences which could be labeled sexist. One superintendent related when she was

offered the superintendency by the board; they shook her husband's hand instead of hers. Another superintendent related how she learned later, after the job was offered to another candidate, the male administrators in the district had called the board members to tell them their district was not ready for a female leader and they could not work for her.

Attributes for a female to become a superintendent: Iowa Portrait

The portrait of an Iowa female superintendent includes many characteristics which are also necessary for males. Women; however, need to be stronger in these traits, and need to have a preponderance of them. Perseverance, business acumen and "grit" were pinpointed as necessary traits to successfully access a superintendency. A woman must be highly qualified particularly in the stereotypically perceived feminine weaknesses of math and business. A female aspirant still needs to juggle home responsibilities with her professional responsibilities and be cognizant of the fact that this pursuit (among other factors) may jeopardize her marriage. She must be mobile, independent and patient. Women typically access superintendency later than do males. Reasons for this include: caring for children, unplanned career pathways and difficulty with career advancement, including episodes of sexist treatment. She must be able to "go it alone" without benefit of support structures in place for most males. She must be resourceful, fueled by challenges, assertive, and more intrinsically than extrinsically motivated. A sense of humor and a strong personal vision sustain her.

Discussion and Reflection

The informed constructions of female gender issues in accessing the superintendency discussed in this paper, should serve to prod our collective conscience to continually "remind all of us of the need to recognize challenge and change the andocentric constructions and discriminatory policies in our profession" (Skrla, 2000, p. 313). The injustice of discriminating against qualified and capable candidates because of gender denigrates the very system, which has for its purpose the perpetuation of our democratic way of life, including all the children it serves.

The field of education in Iowa does not favor women in leadership, and is, unfortunately, typical of the field at large. Silence tacitly perpetuates the injustice. By articulating the attributes and the barriers, by encouraging people to come forward to share their stories of struggle, by taking the risk to report unfair and unlawful occurrences, it is possible to reach a common ground where the priority is on good leadership regardless of the gender, ethnicity, race or

disposition of the candidate. Clearly, overt and covert discrimination against women still exists which inhibits the advancement of more women to positions of school leadership.

Additional research and discussion are critical to providing justice for women in leadership. Recommendations for further study include examining the following: The disparity between the number of females certified and those practicing as superintendents; The perceptions of school boards, especially school board presidents about hiring women as superintendents; Female superintendents' career stories, particularly about how they access the superintendency (to address what Brunner (2000, p. 181) calls the “intensely emotional stories that transfix and change us”, and documenting and “outing” the perpetrators of sexism in all its forms in schools.

Susan Chase, writing in *Sacred Dreams: Women and the Superintendency* (Brunner, 2000) captured the importance of women leading in education:

...women’s familiarity with the work of caring for others at home, in schools, and other work places—a familiarity produced by historical structural, and cultural conditions—help women educational leaders prioritize children’s needs (p.221).

We cannot wait until all the wrongs are righted. Advocacy must increase for those victimized by injustices. For many talented leaders and for the children who needed their leadership, we are already too late.

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