



Female Superintendent Perceptions of Challenges in Seeking and Serving in the Position of Superintendent of Schools

MASA Richard Green Scholar
Presentation

By Dr. Michelle Mortensen

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MASA Fall Conference

Nice to Meet You!

Long Pine ,Nebraska - 1992-1994

- Kindergarten
- 3rd & 4th Grade Social and Science
- Band Teacher
- K-8 Music Teacher

Albion, Nebraska –1995-1996

- K-6 Teacher (one room school house)

Halverson Elementary, Albert Lea, Minnesota – 1999-2010

- Grade 1
- Grade 5
- Grade 6

Lincoln HI, Ivanhoe, Minnesota – 2010-2013

- 7-12 Principal (2010)
- K-12 Principal / Superintendent (2011-2013)

Renville County West, Renville, Minnesota – 2013-Present

- Superintendent

Education

- Bachelor of Science – Mankato State University (1991)
- Masters of Teaching & Learning – Saint Mary's University (2004)
- K-12 Principal / Superintendent – St. Thomas University (2008) (2011)
- Doctorate in Educational Leadership – St. Cloud State University (2019)

Who are you?

- If you hold a Minnesota superintendent license (practicing or non-practicing) - please stand up
- If you are a non-practicing male with a superintendent licensure - please sit down
- If you are a practicing male superintendent – please sit down
- Look around the room - What do you notice?
- If you are a non-practicing female with a superintendent licensure – please sit down
- Do you notice anything else?

Licensed Minnesota Superintendents

1,564 Active Superintendent Licensures

912 Males

652 Females

“The most successful superintendent is male, Anglo-Saxon, middle-aged, Republican, intelligent, and a good student but not ‘gifted’.”

(Grogan, 2000; Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999).

Minnesota Female Superintendents

652 licensed female superintendents in Minnesota

- 2014-2015 = 53 / 324 16%
- 2015-2016 = 55 / 319 17%
- 2016-2017 = 54 / 325 17%
- 2017-2018 = 53 / 322 16%
- **2018-2019 = 52 / 321 16%**
- 2019-2020 = 55 / 327 17%

Only 8% of licensed females are practicing

Why Topic was Selected

I chose this topic for two reasons:

1.) As I sat in superintendent meetings or attended conferences, I couldn't help notice that there were very few females sitting in the room. Actually, most meetings had no more than one or two females present, and I was frequently the only superintendent. The others consisted of Directors of Special Education, department heads, business managers, and executive assistants.

2.) The second reason focuses on the struggles I faced after obtaining the position. Disrespect by board members and being made to feel inferior in relation to men. Condescending behaviors gave me a feeling of inadequacy, which has created a self-doubt attitude in my performance. Was I the only female superintendent experiencing this?

Literature Review Themes

Challenges and Barriers

The Glass Ceiling

Hiring Practices of Females in the Superintendency

Barriers to Job Success of Female Superintendents

Internal Barriers

External Barriers

Position Power and Gender

School Board Governance

Role of the Superintendent

Role of the School Board

School Board and Superintendent Relationships

Female Leadership

Female Superintendents and School Boards

Stereotypes of Leadership and Gender

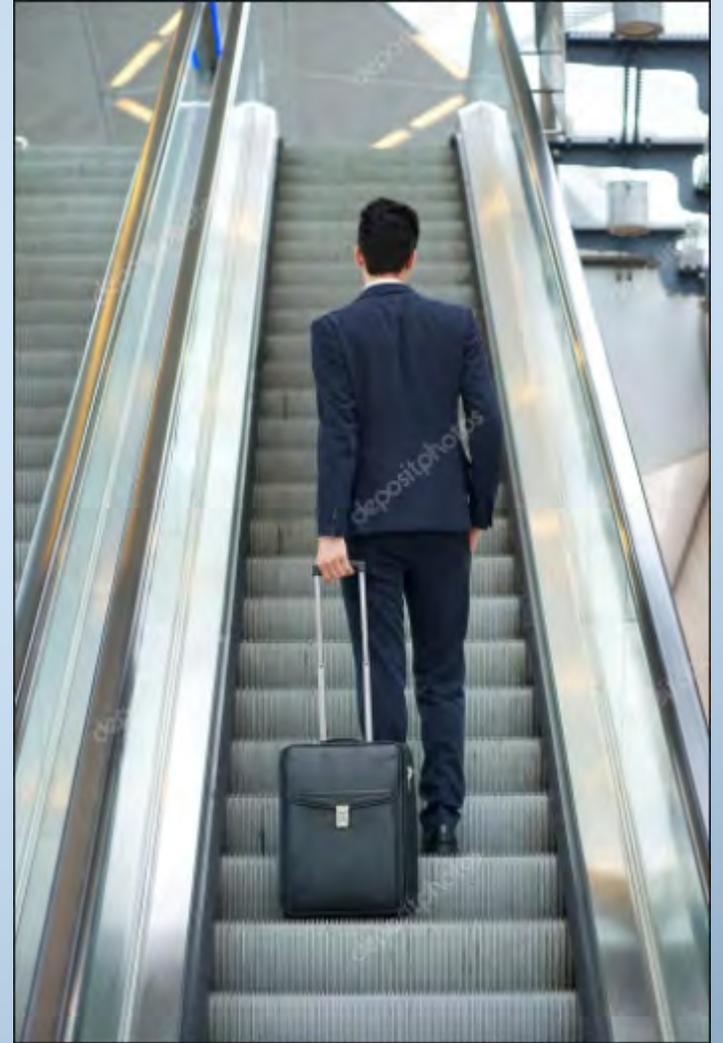
Feminist Theory

Conclusion

The Glass Ceiling



Eagly and Carli (2007) believed that instead of a glass ceiling, the challenges, and obstacles on a female's path to the executive level were more of a labyrinth, or a maze of walls.



Hiring Practices

“The evil we’ve shown would go something like this: Ten people apply for an administrator’s job - five men and five women, with equal credentials - and four of the men and only one of the women are chosen for an interview.”

“A couple of districts might as well have said, “No women need apply”.”

Charol Shakeshaft

Barriers

Internal

Self-imposed barriers include: lack of self-esteem; lack of assertiveness and demands for greater work ethic; job locations; unwillingness to relocate; lack of career planning and career path; responsibilities of families and home; lack of mentors and networks; delayed entry into administrative positions; and internalization of sex roles (Barker, 2012; Connell, Cobia & Hodge, 2015; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006, Fuller & Harford, 2016; Shakeshaft, 1989).

External

Individuals have no control over external barriers. Exterior barriers have been documented as lack of mentorship, the “good ole boy” network, sex-role stereotyping, school board behavior, and the selection process (Glass, 2001; Odum, 2012; Peters, 2008; Barker, 2012).

Role of the Superintendent

The superintendent position is one of the most difficult and most male-dominated chief executive positions of any profession in the United States (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999)



Role of the School Board



Relationships between School Board and the Superintendent

Roles and Responsibilities:

Three distinct concerns are noted:

1. the increase of single-issue board members focusing attention on limited and narrow objectives rather than on helping the entire system move forward
2. short term tenures of school superintendents while facing a diminishing pool of qualified applicants
3. "micromanagement" or the attempt by one or more board members to assume administrative matters that are rightfully the administrative responsibility.

School board turnover increased micromanagement and an altered school board agenda; female superintendents reported being more adversely affected by school board turnover than males (Natale, 2010; Place, 2014).

Female Superintendents

- 40 times less likely to advance from teaching to the superintendency than men as most females entered the teaching profession as elementary school teachers; a position that did not lead down the path to the superintendency (Glass, 2000).
- Females are also more likely than men to be punished for mistakes, discouraging females from taking risks in demonstrating leadership abilities (Rhode, 2017).
- Females were 1.4 times more likely to receive critical subjective feedback, as opposed to positive or critical objective feedback (Cecchi-Dimeglio, 2017)

Superintendent Measurable Progress Indicators (S.M.A.R.T. Goals Format)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ In May of 2019, the superintendent will complete dissertation on <i>Female Superintendent Perceptions of Challenges in Seeking and Serving in the Position of Superintendent of Schools.</i> ❖ In May of 2019, the superintendent will graduate with a Doctorate degree in Education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Final Defense - February 22, 2019 <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed black;"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Graduation Date = May 10, 2019
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School Board Member Ranking (check the appropriate response)			
4 <input type="checkbox"/> Distinguished	3 <input type="checkbox"/> Accomplished	2 <input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory	1 <input type="checkbox"/> Unsatisfactory

Unsatisfactory 2

The one thing that comes to mind is the topic of her dissertation. I would have hoped that it would have been about something educationally based, rather than about a working environment topic.

Statement of the Problem

- ❑ The problem of the study is the lack of female representation in the superintendency in the nation's school districts but specifically in Minnesota.
- ❑ Research is needed to explore the reasons females are not entering the superintendency and the challenges they experience when seeking and serving in the role of superintendent of schools.
- ❑ The study is needed to provide information to prospective female superintendent candidates about the challenges they may face when obtaining and serving in the superintendent role; this information may assist them in circumventing some of these challenges in their search for a superintendent position.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the mixed method study was to identify the perceptions of challenges Minnesota female superintendents reported they experienced in seeking and serving in the position of superintendent of schools, including their perception regarding school board - superintendent relations.

Research Questions

1. What did Minnesota female superintendents report as challenges they experienced in seeking and serving in their position as superintendent of schools?
2. What did Minnesota female superintendents report regarding the nature of their school board - superintendent relations?
3. What did Minnesota female superintendents perceive as challenges in school board-superintendent relationships that exist regardless of gender or due to gender?

Methodology – Type of Study

- Data collection included two phases: 1) a multiple-choice sixteen item survey distributed to survey respondents through electronic mail; and 2) open-ended interviews conducted with four volunteer interviewees. The multiple-choice survey provided quantitative information while the open-ended response interview questions presented qualitative data that allowed for clarifying survey responses and providing deeper understanding of the survey topics.

Methodology - Instruments

- During the first stage of the study data a survey, featuring 16 questions, utilizing the online survey tool, SurveyMonkey, and was distributed to survey respondents via electronic mail. This questionnaire was replicated in a modified form from Dr. Catherine A. Wyland's dissertation titled *Underrepresentation of Females in the Superintendency in Minnesota*.
- The final stage of the study involved face-to-face or phone interviews with four female superintendents. Interviews allowed the researcher to gain the interviewee's perspective through a series of in-depth questions focused on nine classifications examined by Guajardo (2015). The classifications focused on marriage and family, leadership, career path, mentors and role models, school board, tenure, dealing with discrimination, defining successes, and preparation for the superintendency. Each interview lasted forty-five minutes to an hour.

Methodology - Participants

- ❑ The researcher sought information from 51 of a possible 52 females currently serving as public school superintendents in the state of Minnesota in the 2018-2019 school year.
- ❑ All participants were active members of the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA).
- ❑ Possess a current Minnesota Superintendent Licensure
- ❑ 27 / 51 surveys were completed (52.9%).
- ❑ Four Minnesota female superintendents, who self-identified as willing to participate in an interview, were drawn from a hat. Of the 20 who volunteered to be interviewed, two participants representing rural school districts (300-2,999 student enrollment), and two females representing suburban school districts (3,000-24,999 student enrollment) were selected as interviewees. No study participants from urban school districts of 25,000 or more students' enrolled completed the survey or interview process.

1. What did Minnesota female superintendents report as challenges they experienced in seeking and retaining their position as superintendent of schools?

The question focused on seven identified barriers Wyland's (2014) impacting female superintendents pursuing the top leadership positions in Minnesota. In the study survey, respondents chose from one of three responses: definitely a barrier, somewhat of a barrier, or not a barrier for each barrier listed. If the item was identified as definitely a barrier, respondents were asked to further indicate the perceived degree of difficulty caused by the barrier as no difficulty, modest degree of difficulty, or severe degree of difficulty.

Gender discrimination

modest to severe barrier

Family responsibilities

Lack of peer / collegial support

Lack of employment opportunity and lack of self-confidence

What did Minnesota female superintendents report as challenges they experienced in seeking and retaining their position as superintendent of schools?

- ❑ While lack of employment opportunities was not mentioned as a barrier by any of respondents in the survey questions, employment issues were mentioned by all four interviewees.
 - ❑ There is a need to convince the school board during interviews that they were not only qualified to perform the duties, but had to prove that they were capable of taking charge and that a female could run a school district equal to a male candidate.
 - ❑ There is an important need to change the mindset of the community in order to believe in her leadership.

Gender Discrimination

- Dana and Bourisaw (2006) found school boards were more comfortable with men, as hiring male superintendents was common practice throughout history. Making the change to females was difficult for some boards, especially if the school board was male dominant (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006).
- Lemasters (2011) added that school boards and/or community members may hesitate to hire a female superintendent simply because it would be problematic that the highest paid public worker in the county or city was a female (Lemasters, 2011).

2. What did Minnesota female superintendents report regarding the nature of their school board - superintendent relations?

- ❑ Seventeen of the 25 survey respondents reported their relationships with their school board were exceptional; seven reported their relationships could use some work and only one respondent reported the relationship with school board member as problematic.
- ❑ Eighteen of the 25 respondents felt fully supported by their school boards; six indicated it was situational depending upon nature of the issue; and one did not feel supported at all.

- ❑ Name the one event or factor that had the greatest impact on your superintendent – school board relationships.
 - ❑ Trust and communication.
 - ❑ Student success or perceived success
 - ❑ Always having to prove myself each
 - ❑ Community perceptions, gender, longevity in the position, leadership experience, personal agendas, relationship with the board chair, elections, and evaluations were each reported by only one respondent

- ❑ List of major challenges believed to be faced by females seeking a superintendent position.
 - ❑ The need to change the paradigm in leadership from a “Good Old Boy” network to gender neutral leadership
 - ❑ The perceived lack of confidence or weaknesses in a female displayed by school board members and male superintendents
 - ❑ Double standards for gender
 - ❑ Gender biased interview process

What did Minnesota female superintendents report regarding the nature of their school board - superintendent relations?

- ❑ The importance of trust and respect
 - ❑ The superintendent struggles with a particular board member that doesn't respect, trust, or listen to me. "It can make my job very difficult."
- ❑ "Good Old Boy" network
 - ❑ This challenge to school board-superintendent relationships was noted not only in the hiring process by school boards and gatekeepers, but also in the difficulties experienced once practicing as a superintendent. Female superintendents added, "There is a double standard for men and women." "Having my voice heard and affirmed by the "boys' club" group. I frequently feel as though my opinions are not valued...I perceive a definite difference between the way new men are gathered into the group versus the way I am."
 - ❑ "The good old boys clubs on some school boards and who exist to a degree within the superintendent ranks make it appear that there is no place for women in...big important things like: finance, building a school, maintenance and ground work and law"
 - ❑ "We never get to be in the best buddy group as we don't fit into the group."

❑ Hiring

- ❑ School board members fear hiring females due to the perception that females lack of confidence, are unable to make decisions, are emotional, or are weak in finance and personnel management.
- ❑ “I continue to see superintendent searches that bring forward five men and one woman to the interview table. While I do not know if that represents the ratio of men to women candidates, I worry that it doesn't.”
“Retired, white male leaders (of a previous generation) are running the search firms that lead superintendent searches in Minnesota. They are absolutely part of a “good old boys” network and pretend to be about equity and change, but they are not.”

❑ Barriers

- ❑ “Women tend to feel like they don’t have the skill set or they’re not confident in and so they tend not to apply for positions because they feel like they can’t do it, so they don’t. **Men might think that they don’t know enough but they will apply and learn as they go, but women feel like they need to have the knowledge before they can apply.** We don’t give ourselves as much credit on our knowledge or our ability; therefore, we hold ourselves back.”
- ❑ “Females have to earn credibility with the board and the community in different ways than males. **It appears that males are granted credibility until they lose it. Females don’t have it, until they’ve earned it.**” “Men can be seen as confident and assertive, while women are viewed as pushy and emotional even though the two groups might be saying and acting in the same manner.” **“The perception that when a female in a leadership position is forceful in stating positions, expectations, etc., she is perceived as being ‘bossy’ or ‘bitchy’, while a male leader doing the exactly same thing would be regarded as ‘taking charge’.”**

- [Dream Crazier](#)

3. What did Minnesota female superintendents perceive as challenges in school board-superintendent relationships that exist regardless of gender or due to gender?

Because of Gender

- The “Good Old Boy” network
- Respect
- Work and home balance

Regardless of Gender.

- All** study participants identified both school board turnover and student achievement as regardless of gender.
- Micromanagement
- Role Uncertainty
- Open communication
- Trust
- Superintendent performance
- Decision making and lack of collaboration

Final Analysis

- Minimal findings in Research Question Three compared with the research. When examining what was reported as because of gender rather than because of gender, only three categories were noteworthy: “Good Old Boy” network, work and home balance, and respect, or lack thereof. As “Good Old Boy” network and respect were reported strongly in question two, work and home balance does play a significant reason for a lack of females in the superintendency in the state of Minnesota, as well as across the nation.

Recommendations for Practice

- ❑ Make dissertation study results available to school boards and superintendents to promote discussion regarding the importance of developing equitable relationships within school districts, and maintaining fair and equitable hiring standards, assisted by professional organizations such as the Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA) and Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA).
- ❑ Policy-makers should explore developing means to promote school board stability and purposeful training on superintendent and school board roles in order to reduce school board and superintendent turnover.

Recommendations for Practice (cont.)

- ❑ Establish local coalitions to promote the importance of school board service and mentor quality candidates in the position prior to an election.
- ❑ Professional organizations should be encouraged to do more mentorship and networking opportunities to effectively eliminate “Good Old Boy” mentalities.

Recommendations for Practice (cont.)

- Universities should be encouraged to make sure that students are exposed to diverse groups of superintendents with various levels of experience and should ensure that females are identified, recruited, mentored, and supported from graduate work through job inception. Career planning could begin in undergraduate programs and continue through graduate programs.
- What is studied in graduate school (textbooks) is leadership knowledge, disposition, and performance in school districts from a male perspective, since most superintendencies are filled predominantly by men. This message to women who are studying school and school district leadership in graduate school is: “This is what men do to succeed. If you will learn and practice this, behave the way that men who want to be successful behave, you might succeed in the leadership position – if you can acquire it.” (Dana, J. A., & Bourisaw, D., 2006).

Final Thoughts

In order to increase the number of females entering into the field of superintendency, we need to know what barriers are limiting this from happening. While it may be hard or uncomfortable for some, we need to engage more people into the conversation in order to change the paradigm that women cannot handle the position of superintendency as well as men can, if at all.



Thank you to the female superintendents that participated in my study. The valuable time that you gave to me was very much appreciated!

Thank you to Cunningham Group Architects and MASA for this recognition and for supporting research within our profession.