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The Future of the Superintendency: Women Leaders Who Choose to Leave

Marilyn Tallerico and Joan N. Burstyn

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The superintendency represents what many consider the leadership apex of public school educational governance. We recently had the opportunity to interview 20 women who successfully prepared for and entered that leadership role, only to exit after an average of 3.3 years. Elsewhere we have discussed at length the factors contributing to those exits for the two-thirds of our informants who left the superintendency involuntarily.² Our purpose in this paper is to examine the circumstances and perspectives of the one-third who chose to leave (n=7). We believe their stories provide useful insights into how some women grapple with the demands of chief executive roles. They also shed light on the realities of educational leadership for today's women.

Definitions

"Unlike my case, the only ones I know have been driven out".

This verbatim quotation from one of the women in our study who chose to leave the superintendency captures in the vernacular a distinction we make between "voluntary" and

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involuntary" exiters from the position of superintendent. To begin, however, it is first necessary to define our use of "exit." Superintendents who retired or those who left one district to move to another superintendency were not considered to have "exited" the position. Rather, for the purposes of our research, exiters are women who, either voluntarily or under pressure, were non-renewed or resigned from the superintendency. They subsequently moved into other roles, internal or external to K-12 public education. More specifically, an exit was considered voluntary when it was the superintendent's choice to leave and when it was clear that the school board would have (or already had) renewed her contract.

Discussion of Findings

Taking our 20-person sample of exiters as a whole, we found that multiple factors contributed to their leaving the superintendency. These factors overlapped and accumulated over time. We did not find single trigger events or critical incidents that accounted for these women's decisions, if it was their decision, to leave. At work were both "pushes from" the superintendency and "pulls toward" other options or interests. Perhaps not surprisingly, the pulls were more influential in the cases of voluntary exiters; the pushes more salient for those who left involuntarily.

Although the purpose of this article is to focus on the insights of those who chose to leave (and, therefore, on the pulls they felt), we will briefly summarize those factors and conditions which served to push women out of the superintendency. We discovered four patterns that characterized our informants' cumulative disenchantment with the pervasiveness of what they termed the "politics" of the role: (a) deterioration of the superintendent-school board relationship; (b) dysfunctional union-district relationships; (c) over-emphasis on non-instructional issues; and (d) moral or ethical clashes with board members.

While voluntary exiters were likewise disenchanted by their derailment from instructional and curricular issues, and the relentless political and other demands of the role, they dealt with these issues with greater equanimity than did the involuntary exiters. Moreover, voluntary exiters were simultaneously pulled away by attractive new job opportunities, academic goals, or familial considerations. Those who chose to leave had good relationships with both their school boards and teacher unions, with few, if any, significant clashes among these key political stakeholder groups.

Comparisons With Involuntary Exiters

Although there is considerable diversity within each group, additional patterns became evident when we compared the experiences of these 13 involuntary and 7 voluntary exiters. For example, a higher proportion of those who chose to leave than those who were forced to leave occupied superintendencies in the smallest sized districts (300-2,999 students)³. Voluntary exiters were more likely to head districts in rural communities⁴. In the case of both voluntary and involuntary exiters, the percentage who left the role after one superintendency was high. However, whereas 85% (6 of 7) of the voluntary exiters had held only one superintendency in their career, just 60% (8 of 13) of the involuntary exiters found their first superintendency was also their last. Also, related to career path, voluntary exiters were more likely to have previously been principals than were those who left involuntarily⁵. A much higher proportion of voluntary than involuntary exiters had more "line" than "staff" experience in their career histories⁶. And voluntary exiters remained in their last superintendency, on average, slightly less time than their involuntary counterparts: 3.0 compared to 3.5 years.

What did these 20 women do **after** exiting the superintendency? Some patterns of differences between voluntary and involuntary exiters were apparent, although the numbers are so small in each of the seven different categories of roles which were assumed subsequent to their departures that use of percentages seems inappropriate. To summarize briefly, six took positions in K-12 central office administration (3 voluntary and 3 involuntary exiters). Four became university professors (1 voluntary and 3 involuntary). Three were self-employed (1 voluntary and two involuntary). Two voluntary (but no involuntary) exiters returned to principalships. And of the remaining five involuntary exiters: two became directors of not-for-profit organizations; two remained unemployed at the time of our interview (two months and one year, respectively, after their exits); and one became a full-time graduate student to complete her doctorate.

The Perspectives of Those Who Chose to Leave

More central to our purpose than comparing the two subgroups of exiters along multiple dimensions, however, are the perspectives and insights shared by the women leaders who chose to leave the superintendency. In this section, we provide illustrations of how they captured their experiences in their own words.

I think it's the worst job in education. . . . The salary is terrible. I was making \$55,000 at that time and I was working 15-17 hour days. And I said to myself, "What am I doing? I have to be crazy." . . . I didn't have any free time. [exiter A]

And there I was, an hour away from my home . . . I had moved at that time . . . and I was in at 6 a.m. every day and attending board meetings that often went till 3 a.m. With no help and no resolution really in sight. So I just began to think, "Is this the way that I really want to spend the next few years?" . . . The farther you go up the administrative ladder, the less options you have for any **privacy**. For example, as a teacher, you have community responsibilities, but they still expect you to lead a life of your own. As a building principal, you have a strong commitment to your building and a lot of evening hours; but there are still times that you can call your own. As a superintendent, I don't think you ever have time that you can call your own. You're **always** on call. Each group feels like they have some ownership of you. And every action is scrutinized. Every statement is scrutinized. . . . What I didn't like was the total commitment that it takes and feeling like I might be shortchanging my family. [exiter B]

The **job** has to change. It needs to involve a lesser amount of time, especially if you want to get younger women involved in it. Even some of the male superintendents are now saying three nights out a week is just too much. It's too demanding a job. You have to be a workaholic to do it. Maybe men are more used to giving up that amount of time for their work. [exiter C]

Embedded in each of these excerpts are insights into the all-consuming public accountability and time demands of the modern day superintendency, as well as the dilemmas which such environments present for women trying to balance familial responsibilities. Two of the seven voluntary exiters we interviewed even used the term "survivor" to describe themselves after their experience in the superintendency. We heard time and time again how the nature of the job precluded much of a life outside work. And we heard how that cost was eventually weighed against other life interests. Moreover, much of the extraordinary work-load of the superintendency centered on

financial, budget, and facilities concerns. As summarized by one superintendent, it took a "massive effort" to focus on curriculum and instruction. And another: "I felt that my job had very little to do with the education of kids."

Thus, the relentless nature of public scrutiny and the demands of the job, coupled with the centrality of what were viewed as non-educational issues, created a work setting incompatible with the private aspirations and relational worlds of these women. While single women, married women, and women with children were represented in our sample, it was the women with young children who found the balance of work and family most problematic. To wit:

I was never home. I went to a Parent Teacher Conference in my second year for my daughter, and her teacher said, "I want you to know that, when I asked your daughter what she wanted for Christmas, she said I want my mommy to get a new job." [exiter A]

Thus, voluntary exiters considered both professional and personal goals, as they deliberated their difficult decisions to exit the superintendency. Several described this broader perspective on their choices in terms of quality of life:

I reached a crossroads in my thinking. Why am I doing this? Is this the right role for me? [exiter E]

Others were concerned with longer-term life goals or academic objectives:

Also, by that time, I had finished all my coursework for both the superintendent certification and the Ph.D. So it was time to do the dissertation. Yet I found it impossible to do anything that required that much thought with the way my life and work was going. I felt that, if I ever was going to finish the doctorate, it wasn't going to be while I was being superintendent. [exiter C]

Since most of the women in our sample were married, they considered the financial ramifications of their exits in the context of dual family incomes. Only two who left voluntarily had to face the potential financial strain entirely on their own. We sensed, as several of our informants put it, that they had some financial flexibility that allowed them the freedom to choose to exit. While in some cases, leaving a small, rural superintendency for a central office job in a larger, suburban district actually meant a pay **increase**, several elected to leave even though it entailed a salary loss (e.g., moving to university professorships):

I think one's own financial circumstances has a lot to do with exiting or not. Each family has their own financial considerations. If I'm a superintendent and not the main breadwinner, it allows us to be freer to give it up. I know two women superintendents whose husbands are not working. These women are **miserable**, but they can't leave. They're burned out, but they can't quit. Whereas I could walk away. [exiter B]

I make wonderful money [now]. I make \$71,000. I work ten months. I work one night a month: for PTA meetings. I don't have to attend board meetings. I get all teacher holidays. And in my district I only have to work 15 days during the summer. So, you have to be bright enough to know when you have it good. [exiter A]

What was striking was that, in all seven cases of voluntary exit, appealing new job opportunities became available simultaneously with these women's growing disenchantment with the role of superintendent. In some instances, previous mentors who knew of their situations assisted them again. In most cases, however, it was a matter of serendipity and keeping their eyes and ears open to other work opportunities in education within commutable driving distance. Besides the opportunities

mentioned, the following excerpts also reveal that these women moved to a less stressful and more autonomous work environment, when compared to the superintendency:

So I just began to think, "Is this the way that I really want to spend the next few years?" And, **out of the blue** . . . and I **do** mean out of the blue . . . I had a phone call from the district that I had been a teacher in for eight years. It was from the present superintendent, and he said, "What would it take to get you back here and have you do curriculum work for us? We're designing a new position for Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum. You're the person who we'd like to fill it, but what do we have to offer you to make you consider it?" It was like an announcement from **heaven!** [exiter C]

I got a call from the superintendent [in her original district] who said something like, "Well, if it's a principalship that you now want, we have one here for you." [exiter F]

Soon after my intended resignation was announced in the newspaper, I got a call from a nearby university pursuing me. Even though my original intent was to start up my own business. [exiter G]

It's a **very** interesting position because I do a lot of the **fun** things that I had done as a superintendent, but without the **stress!** [laugh] I can see how this job is very, very attractive to many people. It's about teaching and curriculum, and people really want to get things done, and there it is, kind of served up on a platter to me. [exiter B]

I'd be nuts not to be happy here. Now you see what the whole picture is. They give me plenty of money. They let me run the building. And they stay out of my hair. Now, I **love** going to work. [exiter A]

Conclusions

Taken together, the findings indicate that all seven women examined their lives holistically as they made their decisions to exit the superintendency. That is, they viewed their careers as just one aspect of their social worlds. They carefully deliberated quality-of-life issues and asked themselves, "Is the nature of the superintendent's job something that I want for myself for the long term?" They usually considered such inquiry in a collective context as well: "Are the stresses and demands of this leadership role worth it to me and my family?"

Implications for Leadership

In addition to considerations of work and life quality on a personal and familial basis, the data also provide evidence of reflection on educational leadership at a broader level. These women were open to entertaining the possibilities of exercising influence and making expert contributions in roles other than "at the top" of the structural hierarchy. Their ideologies of leadership valued a wide gamut of potentially significant leverage points within the educational system, including principalships, assistant superintendencies, directorships, and teaching at the university level. They either already had found, or were certain they would find, satisfaction and reward in a diverse constellation of leadership roles. Neither their long-term career interests nor their egos were tied to particular positions.

In this way, then, our findings imply cause for optimism. We can celebrate both the insights into self and role that these women leaders attained, and the range of attractive new opportunities available to them. Our informants' experiences illustrate that there is "someplace to go" after the superintendency . . . a perspective often contradicted by the conventional

lore of the field. Additionally, these voluntary exiters confirm that there exist choices of leadership roles for women in education, which may well be more compatible with balancing family and career than is the superintendency.

Implications for the Future of the Superintendency

Despite these optimistic interpretations, however, there are important implications of these data that are much less sanguine. There is ample evidence, both from our study of exited women and previous research, that the superintendency has become evermore distant from the instructional and curricular heart of the educational enterprise. Instead, it is characterized by isolation, political conflict, financial pressures, inexorable scrutiny, and vulnerability.⁷

We argue for reforming the superintendent's role, in ways that would re-connect it to the core tasks of teaching and learning, and diminish the relentless demands on its individual occupant. Although we are not sure how to operationalize such change, one way to begin is by raising this issue for discussion and linking it to other current reform initiatives. Our rationale is based on the belief that such reform harbors potential for both attracting and retaining more women in this important leadership role. As Marshall hypothesized some ten years ago, women in male sex-typed careers may be "rejecting a patriarchal, political, manipulative model of school leadership . . . seeing [such models] as disconnected to the core technology of schooling".⁸

We have argued elsewhere that attention to issues of retaining women in the superintendency is as crucial as entry-level considerations, if we are ever to remedy the imbalance of male predominance in this position.⁹ There has been surprisingly little research on superintendents' attrition or retention, despite the obvious link between those factors and improving the numerical representation of women in this leadership role.¹⁰ As we have learned, however, from studies of college student attrition, exclusive focus on minority **recruitment** without equal attention to issues of retention, does little more than create a revolving door.

In the study reported in this article, the women leaders who chose to leave shed light on a revolving door phenomenon for women in the present-day superintendency. We contend that the future of our schools warrants the retention of capable leaders of both sexes. The data presented here suggest that this can only be done by reforming the superintendent's role. In this era of re-thinking teaching and leadership roles in less hierarchical ways, sharing decision-making among broader collectivities, and flattening organizations, the time seems right for reconceptualizing the superintendency.

Endnotes

1. This research was supported, in part, by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration. The perspectives expressed herein, however, are those of the authors.
2. See Marilyn Tallerico, Joan N. Burstyn, and Wendy Poole. (1993). *Gender and politics at work: Why women exit the superintendency*. Fairfax, VA: The National Policy Board for Educational Administration. See also Marilyn Tallerico, Wendy Poole, and Joan N. Burstyn (1994). Exits from urban superintendencies: The intersection of politics, race, and gender. *Urban Education*, 28 (4), 439-454.
3. 70% (5 of 7) of the voluntary exiters and 54% (7 of 13) of the involuntary exiters. Elsewhere we discuss the nature of the superintendency and school board conflict in small, "starter districts". See Marilyn Tallerico and Joan Burstyn (1995). Women and the public school superintendency: The context matters. Manuscript submitted for publication.

4. 70% (5 of 7) of the voluntary exiters and 50% (4 of 13) of the involuntaries.
5. 60% (4 of 7) of the voluntary exiters, and 46% (6 of 13) of the involuntary exiters.
6. 75% (9 of 12; 1 unknown) involuntary versus 30% (2 of 6; 1 unknown) voluntary.
7. See, for example, Arthur Blumberg (1985). *The school superintendent: Living with conflict*. New York: Teachers College Press. See also Larry Cuban (1976). *Urban school chiefs under fire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Larry Cuban (1985). Conflict and leadership in the superintendency. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 67 (1), 28-30. And see Marilyn Tallerico, Joan N. Burstyn, and Wendy Poole (1993). *Gender and politics at work: Why women exit the superintendency*. Fairfax, VA: The National Policy Board for Educational Administration.
8. See Catherine Marshall (1985). The stigmatized woman: The professional woman in a male sex-typed career. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 23 (2), p. 150.
9. Marilyn Tallerico, Joan N. Burstyn, and Wendy Poole (1993). *Gender and politics at work: Why women exit the superintendency*. Fairfax, VA: The National Policy Board for Educational Administration.
10. See, for example, Joan Curcio (1992, April). *Vulnerability of the school district superintendent*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco. See also Gene Hall (1992, April). *State administrators association directors' perceptions of the exiting superintendent phenomenon*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.