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*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Women Superintendents: Promotion of Other Women to Central Office Administration**

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**More women are leading schools in the role of superintendent, but numbers are still low when compared to men. There is limited research connecting women superintendents and the promotion of other women to leadership positions. Archival data from Texas schools showed that there is no difference between districts led by women superintendents or males for percentages of women central office leaders.**

**Keywords:** Superintendent, women, central office, promotion

### **Introduction**

Approximately 24.1% of superintendents in the United States were women in 2011 (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011; Muñoz, Pankake, Ramalho, Mills, & Simmonsson, 2014), and this number is an increase over the 13% revealed in 2002 (Brunner, Grogan, & Prince, 2003). Even though the numbers of women in the superintendency are showing an upward swing, the numbers remain low when compared to males. In 1993 Bell and Chase reported that 70% of all teaching positions were held by women. Glass (2000) concurred with the large number of women teachers and reported that about 75% of elementary classroom teachers in the nation were women. This is important because the position of teacher is often the beginning of the career pathway to the office of superintendent (Glass, 1992). Barriers of family, time, mobility, gender bias (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Gosmire, Morrison, & Van Osdel, 2010), and chosen career path may be some reasons why women numbers in the superintendency are consistently lower than male numbers (Whitaker, 2006).

Oftentimes a direct career pathway to the superintendency is a central office position. When women are not afforded an opportunity to work in a central office position, they may lack mentors and role models to help in their career development and advancement (Muñoz et al., 2014). One might consider that women superintendents would foster the development of women leaders. However, there is limited research on the connection of

women superintendents and the gender of the central office administrative team.

The purpose of this study was to determine if women superintendents in Texas school districts have larger percentages of women central office leaders when compared to men superintendents to ascertain if women support women to pursue leadership roles such as the superintendency more than male superintendents. This study is significant as it examines the gender composition of a districts' leadership team and examines whether women superintendents support other women in leadership roles and thus provide needed mentorship.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Grounding this study are political theory and frameworks of power. Political theory asserts that the culture of an organization as determined by gender of leaders reflects how the organization treats networking and support related to gender diversity. Promoting this theoretical framework are Franzway and Fonow (2011) who revealed gender is impacted by politics and viewed differently between genders. The majority of the work of Franzway and Fonow was with women in the politics of trade unions. However, they examined power and how women have attempted to achieve feminist goals in a formal network (p. 8). Further, Franzway and Fonow (2011) stated, "Power can't be understood in isolation from historic patterns of gender arrangements. Power is understood by productive networks that

reach into every part of the social field and everyday life” (p. 8). Interestingly, Franzway and Fonow (2011) shared that where men are seen as the norm, “their power is invisible and questions are rarely raised about how men achieved and maintained their dominance” (p. 9). Collins, Chafetz, Blumberg, Coltrane, and Turner (1993) also stated that organizations needed to examine the unequal power between men and women.

Further considering power, women, and the superintendency, Dana and Bourisaw’s framework of power issues (2006) presented by Muñoz, Pankake, Ramalho, Mills, and Simmonsson in 2014 directly related to this study. These authors consolidated the work of Dana and Bourisaw into four issues women superintendents navigate: (a) power of and over self; (b) power of social and cultural norms and expectations; (c) power in relationships with others; and (d) power through and to others. A review of each of these issues follows.

**Power of and over self.** The power of and over self relates to “those issues over which individuals have control, including the volition, and resiliency to fulfill and enact decisions” (Muñoz et al., 2014, p. 765). For a woman, those decisions might pertain to who to marry, what job or education to pursue, and whether to stay in the classroom or not. A woman, in contrast to a man, may face barriers of family, time, and mobility depending on their situation or marital status. A woman in the classroom may not believe she has power over self to pursue upward job mobility due to one or more of these barriers.

**Power of social and cultural norms and expectations.** Traditionally, the office of superintendent is held by males. As Eagly and Karau (2002) explained, when a woman seeks the superintendency, she may find role incongruity where women are expected by organizations to be secondary to males in leadership and also more communal than men; yet they see themselves as strong leaders (Muñoz et al., 2014). It is the social and cultural expectations that the role of superintendent is filled by males (Muñoz et al., 2014). Women who rise to the office of superintendent are viewed negatively and assessed more stringently (Muñoz et al., 2014). When a woman is perceived as one who seeks the role of superintendent or is viewed as one moving toward that role, colleagues or supervisors may thwart opportunities for promotion (Chen, Langner, & Mendoza-Denton, 2009).

**Power in relationships with others.** A superintendent’s success is based on how well relationships are built with others such as staff, school board members, and community members. If a superintendent is female, it is imperative that she builds “strong social networks” (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Muñoz et al., 2014, p. 765). Nikkhah, Redzaun, and Abu-Samah (2012) stated that women should search for or take advantage of opportunities with other women leaders to consider their own personal strengths and areas to improve. If women have built strong relationships with colleagues and have strong networks, they may be encouraged to apply for higher positions if they are viewed as having great potential (Muñoz et al., 2014).

**Power through and to others.** According to Muñoz et al., (2014), this power refers to “power transference” (p. 766) and relates to a typically female trait to be communal. Brunner (1999) researched women superintendents and found they usually have a capacity to work collaboratively to build power. Walker, Hardi, McMahan, and Fennell (1996) cautioned that when women do show communal intent, this intent may cause a negative reaction of perceived weakness even if the woman is a competent leader. Although as Muñoz et al. (2014) indicated, the power of through and to others may foster student success and be a contributor to school improvement.

As women seek the office of superintendency, they are faced with the politics of power and the frameworks of power. As the researchers considered these issues as they related to women superintendents and how leaders supported the development of women leaders, a search of literature concerning women in superintendent roles and the barriers women face who pursue these roles was implemented. Additionally, the importance of networking to career advancement and the role of a central office or mid-level administrative position to the superintendency was investigated.

### Review of Literature

Women hold 75.9% of the teaching positions and 50.3% of the principal positions (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Also, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) indicated that women remain in the teaching position longer than males; men have more years in administrative positions prior to accepting a superintendent position. Women may attempt to increase their skills through advanced education since women superintendents hold more advanced degrees than male superintendents (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Kowalski et al. (2011) found that almost half of women superintendents were in rural schools. However, this was not supported in a more recent study where, nationally, women superintendents are more likely to serve in large suburban areas than mid-size and small suburbs or rural areas (Stuckey, 2012). Women also hold the majority of administrative positions excluding the superintendent position (Stuckey, 2012). However, the majority of those administrative positions were support positions such as program directors. Men held the majority of the assistant superintendent positions.

As researchers pondered reasons why women may not access the superintendent position, findings indicated barriers such as family constraints, limited mobility, perceived lack of skills in finance and facilities management by the school boards (Gosmire, Morrison, and Van Osdell, 2010). When considering the barrier of children or a family, Derrington and Sharratt (2009), termed this barrier the self-imposed barrier. These authors surveyed women superintendents and those aspiring to be superintendents in Washington state in 2005 to ascertain barriers to seeking the superintendency. They found that women determined to put family responsibilities ahead of their desire to be a superintendent. As reported by Derrington and Sharratt, women with young children through high school age represent

the smallest percentage of women in the role of the superintendent (2009).

Gender bias was found to be a barrier to women seeking the superintendency. Whitaker (2006) studied nine women superintendents and discovered that all nine had experienced gender bias. Grogan (1996) revealed that women who are categorized as those of color find that gender is a greater barrier than that of their race. When a candidate for superintendency is a woman, it is more difficult to be considered for the position (Muñoz et al., 2014). School boards sometimes block women from the role of superintendency (Muñoz et al., 2014). Oftentimes, school boards are not comfortable with a female leader because they do not see them as good managers nor as effective with finance management (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). Gatekeeping as described by Skrla, Reyes, and Scheurich (2000) comes into play. Unwritten criteria are implemented during the hiring process hindering women from being viable candidates.

Lack of confidence or low self-efficacy is another barrier women face (Muñoz et al., 2014). Women often question their ability to hold the office of superintendent (Dobie & Hummel, 2006). Usually women have more experience with curriculum and instruction rather than finance and management which causes them to question their ability (Muñoz et al., 2014). Dobie and Hummel stated that women question their competency since they are defined as women and superintendents, not just superintendents (2006). The lack of role models impacts women's lack of confidence (Muñoz et al., 2014). Improved networking, especially with other women leaders, could improve women's lack of self-efficacy to take on the top role in a district.

Many studies have stressed the importance of networking to gain access to leadership roles (Beem, 2007; Gilmour & Kinsella, 2008; McCann & Johannessen, 2009; McClellan, Ivoryc & Dominiguez, 2008; Searby & Tripses, 2006). However, women often use networking as a means for social support while men use networking overtly to advance their careers (Singh, Vinnicombe, & Kumra, 2006). Additionally, mentoring and networks are defined as formal or informal. Formal networks are part of an organization and have some form of formal guidelines while informal networks have less structure and are more casual interactions (Wierzgac, 2005). Further, male leaders have traditionally mentored each other; while women leaders were often mentored by males (Searby & Tripses, 2006). Brunner and Grogan (2007) found differences in the networking and mentorship of women leaders who aspired to be superintendents and women leaders who had no aspiration for the superintendency. Women who aspired to the superintendency were more interested in networking and seeking mentors than non-aspiring superintendents (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Both groups of women leaders stated that administration required long hours; however, the non-aspiring superintendents stated the work was hard at a higher frequency. Dudek (2012) concurred with Brunner and Grogan (2007) that the majority of women superintendents had both men and women mentors; however,

women superintendents sought support and friendship from their mentors. These authors also determined that formal networks were as beneficial as informal networks. Peters (2010) found that women school leaders often had informal mentors that emphasized friendship with no set of preliminary guidelines for the mentorship. However, Searby and Tripses (2006) determined that women often did not receive mentorship and thus were reluctant to mentor other women. Whitaker (2006) indicated that women do not have strong mentorships and actually resisted feminism as it was seen as negative. Central office or mid-level administrative roles provide opportunities for mentorships.

Central office roles are often career pathways to the superintendency. Grogan & Brunner (2005) conducted a survey of women superintendents, and these authors revealed that many aspiring to the role of superintendent were assistant or associate superintendents for curriculum and instruction. Yong-Lyun and Brunner (2009) reported the normal pathway to that of superintendent was teacher to coach-like jobs such as athletic coach or club advisor, to principal, to central office director or supervisor, to assistant or associate superintendent, and then to superintendent. Glass (2000) relayed that women are not usually in positions that normally lead to the superintendency. Yong-Lyun and Brunner also stated that higher-ranking positions in organizations have more opportunity for upward mobility, thus, showing that holding central office positions is an advantage for women seeking the superintendency. To examine whether districts led by women superintendents have larger percentages of women central office leaders than districts led by male superintendents is the focus of this current study.

### Method

The study is exploratory research using archival data. The data for this study was collected from the Texas Education Agency website as well as district websites in Texas. This study used existing data from the 2013-2014 school year. There are 1,227 school districts in Texas. Only school districts categorized as *Major Urban, Major Suburban, Central City, and Other Central City Suburban* were included in this study as it is likely that smaller districts may not have a large central office. The gender of the following leadership positions was examined for each district: Business Manager or Chief Financial Officer, Human Resource Director, Curriculum and Instruction Director or Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, Deputy Superintendent, and Superintendent. Additionally, the organizational chart and leadership team as identified on school districts' websites were used for data collection and determination of the titles used by that school district for central office leadership team or senior leadership team composition. This was important as districts used different administrator titles for their leadership teams. The hypothesis of this study was that the gender of the superintendent will significantly relate to the gender composition of district central office administrators.

## Results and Findings

There are 11 school districts categorized as *Major Urban*. There are 79 school districts categorized as *Major Suburban* and 40 districts categorized as *Central City*. There are 164 school districts categorized as *Other Central City Suburban*. The other categories not used in this study were *Independent Town*, *Non-metropolitan: Fast Growing*, *Non-metropolitan: Stable*, *Rural*, and *Charter School Districts*.

Findings of all *Major Urban* school districts in Texas showed that nine of the eleven urban districts had easily determined data on their leadership teams. Two of the nine districts (22%) were led by women superintendents although one of the women superintendents was the interim superintendent. The two districts led by women superintendents had central office leadership teams consisting of 36% women and 50% women, respectively, with an average of 43% women. The seven districts led by male superintendents (78%) had central office leadership teams consisting of women leadership ranging from 25% - 64% of their identified leadership with an average of 46% women. The findings with the urban districts showed very little differences in the averages of women central office administrators in districts led by women or male superintendents.

The 79 school districts (one district was consolidated with another district) for a total of 78 school districts categorized as *Major Suburban* showing 66 districts led by men (85%) and 12 districts led by women (15%). The districts led by women had central office leadership teams consisting of an average of 53% women. The districts led by male superintendents had central office leadership teams consisting of women leaders with an average of 52%. The findings with the *Major Suburban* districts showed very little differences in the average of women central office administrators in districts led by women or male superintendents.

The 41 school districts categorized as *Central City* showed 36 districts led by men (88%) and five districts led by women (12%). The districts led by women had central office leadership teams that consisted of an average of 47% women. The districts led by male superintendents had central office leadership teams consisting of women leaders with an average of 54%. The findings with *Central City* districts showed a moderate increase in the average of women central office administrators in districts led by male superintendents over those led by women superintendents.

The 164 school districts categorized as *Other Central City Suburban* showed 121 districts led by men (74%) and 43 districts led by women (26%). The districts led by women had central office leadership teams that consisted of an average of 63% women. The districts led by male superintendents had central office leadership teams consisting of women leaders with an average of 64%. Findings of the *Other Central City Suburban* districts showed very little differences in the average of women central office administrators in districts led by women or male superintendents.

## Conclusion

The largest percentages of women as superintendents were found in major urban districts (22%) and central suburban districts (26%) in Texas. There were minimal differences in percentages of gender for central office positions when compared within the same category of districts. The largest difference was seen in districts categorized as *Central City*. This category had seven percentage point differences with more women central office administrators in districts led by male superintendents.

The current study mirrored and contrasted findings of previous research. Franzway and Fonow (2011) indicated that men leaders are seen as the norm. This present study supported their data by showing that more superintendents are male. In addition, Stuckey (2012) found that women superintendents were more likely to serve in large suburban area when compared to mid-size and rural areas. This study differed slightly from Stuckey's findings in that the largest percentages of women superintendents were discovered in major urban districts.

As Grogan and Brunner (2005) expressed, the central office is a general pathway to the superintendency. If a central office position is a stepping stone to that of the superintendency, the current study showed that women are not supporting other women more than men as reflected in the composition of central office leadership positions. Supporting the research of Brunner and Grogan (2007) and Dudek (2012), women central office administrators have found more men mentors helping in their career advancement than that of women. This shows that women may lack women mentors and role models to help in their career development and advancement which was revealed by Muñoz, Pankake, Ramalho, Mills, & Simmonsson, 2014. So, not having opportunities for female mentorship will thwart women from seeking the superintendency, and the numbers of women in the role of superintendent will remain lower than men numbers.

In this study, we did not attempt to explore the reasons for differences in gender between superintendents and central office administrators. The hypothesis that central office administrators would have more women in districts led by women superintendents was not supported by this exploratory research. Additionally, this research did not support previous research that found more women superintendents in central administration positions than males. Further research is needed to explore the reasons for advancement to central office administration by gender issues.

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