

WOMEN SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS: PERCEPTIONS OF BEST PRACTICES FOR LEADERSHIP

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Introduction

Since the creation of the public school superintendency in the United States in the mid 1800s, few women have held this public leadership position. Most studies before 1998 report that males constitute more than 90 percent of all superintendent positions. In 2002, women comprised about 13% of the nation's school superintendents (Brunner, Grogan & Prince, 2003). Since there have been limited numbers of women attaining the position, there has been limited research focusing on understanding the position from a woman's perspective.

The question of why are there so few women in the superintendency becomes even more puzzling when one considers three interesting paradoxical situations existing when investigating the low incidence of women in the superintendency. One situation has to do with the pathway toward the position of superintendent. Glass (1992) found that a typical pathway for women to the superintendency is from the position of teacher, to principal, to central office position, to superintendent. Since the position of teacher is the first position held in that path to the superintendency and since women comprise 70 percent of all teachers (Bell & Chase, 1993), one would expect women to hold more of the leadership positions in schools than they currently do.

The second paradoxical situation has to do with increased numbers of women in graduate programs of educational administration. Recent research has shown that while men have historically dominated the field of educational administration, there has been an increase in female enrollment in graduate programs in educational administration. In school administration programs, the percentage of female students now outnumbers males. A 1997 survey of member

institutions in the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) showed that 74 percent of certification programs in institutions responding to the survey had from 51 percent to 72 percent women (Logan, 1998). Results from this survey correspond to other research that shows women entering educational programs in increasing numbers since the 1970s (Grogan, 1996).

The third paradox exists because increasing numbers of women are moving into more central office positions and school principalships. Hodgkinson and Montenegro (1999) found that women occupied 33 percent of the positions of assistant, associate, deputy, or area superintendents. At 57 percent, representation of women in central office administration (such as curriculum directors and supervisors of special programs) surpasses that of men. In the principalship, women represent 20 percent at the secondary school level (still low in number) but 53 percent women reportedly are elementary school principals (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999).

There are barriers existing for women entering the superintendency. One barrier cited in the literature is the lack of role models for women and is believed to be part of the reason more women do not get into the superintendency (Brunner, 1998b). Another barrier occurs when researchers agree that many studies have approached leadership from a male perspective (Brunner, 1998a; Shakeshaft, 1989; Wesson & Grady, 1994a). Shakeshaft (1989) explains that educational theories developed from a male centered or andocentric framework are a result of imbalanced and inaccurate research and are not representative of the female paradigm. Campbell (1996) believes that “narrow definitions of leadership based on male models or theories need to be expanded to include women’s values, beliefs, and experiences” (p. 9).

Purpose of the Study

More studies exploring how women school superintendents perceive themselves leading their school districts are needed so that women who aspire to the superintendency are able to learn about various leadership practices as well as how women go about influencing others. Women aspiring to the superintendency need to understand what it is

like to approach the everyday problems inherent in such a position from a female perspective. Understanding leadership from a feminine view allows us to put into perspective practices of leadership that might be different yet profound enough to change current ideas of what leadership has been based on and how it might change the look of tomorrow's schools.

The purpose of this study was to generally add to the existing body of literature looking at women's work lives as superintendents through an investigation of their leadership practices and in particular to give voice to these extraordinary women existing as a minority group in the superintendency. By doing so, it is hoped that all of those women currently in the pipeline for the position will hear how women are "beating the odds" by leading in the top job in education and that those aspiring women will pursue the position even more seriously.

Kouzes and Posner (1995) who define leadership as "the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations" (p. 30) conducted extensive research on effective practices of leaders and have developed a list of five leadership practices. It is these five practices that are incorporated into their Leadership Practices Inventory-Self (LPI-Self) used in this study to measure the perceptions of women superintendents regarding their leadership practices. The five practices are **challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart.**

The study asked the following questions:

1. Are there differences in how women superintendents perceive their leadership practices based on age, years of administrative experience, and size and structure of their districts?
2. How do women superintendents describe effective leadership practices?
3. How do women describe their enactment of leadership practices?

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

All female public schools superintendents whose names appeared on superintendent lists in the states of Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan were contacted and asked to complete a

survey of perceived leadership practices and a demographic questionnaire. The demographic portion of the survey consisted of fifteen questions asking both personal and professional information. Questions regarding experience teaching, administrative experience, amount of time spent seeking the superintendency, degrees held, years in present position, population of the school district, and questions regarding central office administrators and school buildings made up the professional section of the demographic profile.

Of the 210 surveys that were mailed, 14 women superintendents had left their positions, which reduced the population for the study to 196 women superintendents among the four states. From that population, 76 percent (n = 148) returned usable surveys.

Of the 148 surveys used in the data analysis, 65 percent of the participants were between the ages of 50 and 56. The mean age of the participants was 52 years with a range in age of 38 to 65 years. Sixty-six percent of the participants held earned doctorates. In response to a question regarding length of time taken to achieve the superintendency, almost 50% of the participants indicated that it took less than one year after gaining certification. Almost 95% of the participants indicated that they were European-American. Regarding marital status, 85.1 percent reported they were married.

Further analysis of the demographic data enabled the creation of a profile of a woman superintendent practicing in the Midwest. Table 1 displays the data concerning this profile.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

Variables	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	Minimum	Maximum
Age	148	51.99	4.62	38	65
Age at first superintendency	148	45.70	5.67	30	59
# years in present position	148	5.40	3.76	1	20
# years teaching prior to administration	147	10.58	4.97	0	29
# administrative positions before superintendency	148	2.90	2.43	0	8
# superintendent jobs applied for before 1 st job	148	1.47	2.48	0	15

# school buildings	148	6.26	8.71	1	78
# building administrators	148	9.65	12.11	1	78
# central office staff	148	5.23	5.68	1	50
structure of district – ratio of # central office staff / # buildings	148	1.17	.75	.22	4.00

Design of the Study

The independent variables in the research questions were operationally defined to correspond with the survey questions and to assist with the data analysis. For example, years of administrative experience was defined as years of experience as a superintendent. Size of school district referred to student population. All 148 cases had student populations that fell within three categories: large districts of 10,000 to 29,999 students, mid-size districts of 2,500 to 9,999 students, and small districts of less than 2,500 students. Structure of the district was defined as the ratio of the number of central office staff to the number of school buildings in the district. Whenever possible, groups within the variables were empirically divided so there approximated an equal number of participants in each group, i.e., age, years of experience, structure of district.

In-depth interviews were conducted with a small sample of women superintendents from each of the four states of Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a better understanding of the women superintendents' responses on the Leadership Practices Inventory, an inventory that assesses the self-perceptions of leadership practices, and to allow the women to give descriptions of effective leadership practices and explain how they enact those practices. Since the data from the surveys felt rather "dry" to me, lifeless in a way, I was interested to find if the qualitative data from the interviews might confirm the findings of the quantitative data.

FINDINGS

SURVEYS

Kouzes and Posner (1995) reported that of the five leadership practices on the Leadership Practices Inventory, inspiring a shared vision is the practice frequently applied the least and the one most people find uncomfortable to implement. Confirming their findings, women superintendents in this study perceived themselves to be using the five leadership practices in the following order: enabling others to act, modeling the way, challenging the process, encouraging the heart, and inspiring a shared vision.

Analyses of variance were conducted to determine if there were differences in the perceptions of women superintendents regarding their leadership practices based on age, years of administrative experience, and size and structure of their districts. There was a statistically significant difference in the size of the district and perceived leadership practices (Table 2). There were three categories of district size: large districts with a student population of 10,000 to 29,999 students; mid-size districts of 2,500 to 9,999 students; and small districts with a student population of less than 2,500 students. A post hoc analysis using Tamhane's T2 for unequal variances was conducted which revealed that women superintendents in the largest school districts perceived themselves to be using Challenging the Process and Inspiring a Shared Vision more than women in mid-size and small school districts. Women superintendents in mid-size school districts perceived themselves to be using Modeling the Way more than women superintendents in the other two groups (Table 3). No other significant differences were found.

Table 2. Leadership Practices and Size of District

<i>Leadership Practices</i>	<u>Df</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>
Challenging the Process	2, 145	4.16	.02*
Inspiring a Shared Vision	2, 145	7.32	.00**
Enabling Others to Act	2, 145	2.46	.09
Modeling the Way	2, 145	5.36	.01**
Encouraging the Heart	2, 145	1.02	.36

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3. Comparison of Size of District with Three Leadership Practices

Size of District	Challenging the Process			Inspiring a Shared Vision			Modeling the Way		
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>n</u>
10,000 - 29,999	51.45	5.16	11	52.27	4.24	11	53.27	4.08	11
2,500 - 9,999	51.05	5.23	37	50.78	6.49	37	54.32	3.35	37
less than 2,500	48.32	5.76	100	47.04	6.23	100	51.89	4.11	100

INTERVIEWS

Selection of sample

In the first phase of the study, size of school district was found to be related to differences in leadership practices. Therefore, the primary factor for selection of interview participants was size of school district and then secondarily, the interview participants were chosen for age differences and years of experience as a superintendent.

Participant profile

Of the nine women participants, two were superintendents of large school districts ranging in student population from 19,500 to 23,000; two were from mid-size districts ranging in student population from 5,600 to 6,700; and five were superintendents of small school districts ranging in student population from 100 students to 2,100 students. The mean ratio for structure of district (ratio of number of central office administrators per school building) for these interview participants was 1.39 with a range of .24 to 3.50. The mean age of the women was 51 years with a range of 42 to 62 years. Three of the women held master's degrees and six held doctorates. The number of administrative positions the participants held prior to obtaining a superintendency ranged from 0 to 5 positions with a mean of three positions. Years of experience in the superintendency ranged from 1 to 20 years with a mean of seven years. Time spent seeking a

superintendency after gaining certification ranged from 1 to 5 years with a mean of one year. It is interesting to note that women found positions soon after gaining certification.

Individual Profiles

A profile of each of the nine interview participants is presented in the next section. The purpose of including individual profiles is to establish the women's individuality initially before beginning a discussion of the results of the interview data. After the quantitative data analysis found significant differences in perceived leadership practices based on size of district, I wanted to hear firsthand from the women their ideas about those differences. One of the questions I asked had to do with their perceptions of leadership in different size districts. Those answers are presented below and contribute to the "portraits" of the women in the individual profiles. Names are pseudonyms to protect identities.

The following sections present the women superintendents according to the size of the district they lead: small, medium, and large districts. The first section profiles the women leading small districts. There were five women interviewed in this category; Laura in the smallest district of one building with 98 students, Ruth's district had 400 students; Vivian's student population was 700; Joan's district had 2 buildings housing just under 1,000 students, and Marilyn led a district with three buildings housing 2100 students.

Profiles of Superintendents Leading Small Districts

Laura. Laura is 49 years of age, European-American, and married. She has a Ph.D., taught 11 years before working in administration, and has held four administrative positions before becoming a superintendent. It took Laura one year to acquire a superintendency after receiving the certification. This superintendency is Laura's first and this is her third year as superintendent of a small, rural district consisting of one building housing grades K-8 with 98 students. Scoring the LPI-Self revealed that Laura perceived herself to use the leadership practice of encouraging the heart as the practice that she used the most of the five leadership practices. Laura was the only person on the LPI in the sample of women interviewed who perceived herself to be using encouraging the heart most often of the 5 leadership practices. This practice deals

with recognizing people when their work is well done and celebrating accomplishments as a team.

Laura described herself as the superintendent, principal, curriculum director, transportation director, business manager, etc. She said that she had worked as a central office administrator in a larger district of over 2000 students but that her position in this very small district gave her more of a sense of community.

Even though Laura expressed positive feelings for her position in a small district, she noted some of the problems. "I think in a small district the disadvantage is that you have to be everything and so you never feel like you do one thing particularly well. And that's problematic for me. In a small district there are so many hats to wear." But for Laura there were positives in leading a small district. "I don't have hours and I don't have contractual restraints. I can say, 'Why don't we go for pizza and get back together at 7:00 tonight to work on math?' and whoever can come, comes. And nobody's going to be harping at me. It's a luxury. We're all in it together." However, she still struggled with the smallness of her district when she questioned whether her superintendency is truly a "real" one.

Ruth. Ruth is 42, European-American, and single. She has a Ph.D. and taught school for 6 years prior to accepting her first administrative position as superintendent at age 30, the position that she presently holds. Ruth acquired her position less than one year after she received the certification. After scoring the LPI, the score Ruth obtained revealed that she perceived herself as using the leadership practice of enabling others to act more than the other four leadership practices. Enabling others to act involves building trust and offering support as followers develop competence.

Ruth talked about leading in a small school district of 400 students. "I want to be hands on. I don't want to sit at a desk; I want to be out with the children. When I first started this job, people would say, 'Don't you miss teaching?' and I would say that I teach every day; I'm with the children and no, I don't miss teaching." In response to a question asking about barriers to her success, Ruth felt age was a barrier when she began her position at age 30, which was relatively

young for a superintendent. She told me that she felt age discrimination from parents and community more than teachers but did not feel discriminated against due to her gender.

Vivian. I interviewed Vivian in her office. The district consists of one building housing 700 students in grades K-8. Vivian at age 62 is European-American and married. She has a master's degree and has been the superintendent for 20 years. Vivian taught for 10 years, was a principal, curriculum director, and administrative assistant all in her present district. She gained the superintendency in less than one year after earning certification. According to her score on the LPI-Self, Vivian perceives herself to be using the leadership practice of modeling the way more than the other four leadership practices. Modeling the way involves setting the example consistent with the belief in shared values.

Vivian is one of the oldest women in the population of this study and is also the one superintendent who has been at her position more years than any other participant in the study. Vivian talked about her age as possibly being a barrier to her continued success in her position. She felt that she still "clings to the old principles that I think are good." She was very adamant when she talked about her strong feelings of leadership and she tells her staff that she is in charge and if they don't like what she does, they need to "do something about it." I supposed she meant that staff needed to leave if they did not agree with her decisions. However, as evidenced below, Vivian questioned her strong stance on issues.

I've told the board the same thing because I feel so strongly about some of those principles and sometimes I question myself and say, 'Are you carrying that a little too far?' So it might be my own self-evaluation that could be a barrier at this time and my age.

Vivian's feelings of finding community in a small district was similar to other superintendents' statements about small districts. They feel in a small district they are able to recognize students and families and can remember names. When Vivian first started as a teacher in the district, the student population was approximately 295 students. "Even at 300 and at 400 I knew every student by their first name. I don't anymore. I feel sorry for those superintendents who are isolated from the children because it is the children who make this job worthwhile. You know that whenever things look bad and when everything looks sort of gloomy, I just need to

walk over to that kindergarten room and I feel rejuvenated. I don't want to be isolated from children and I do not want to be isolated from staff." When I told Vivian about Laura's fear of not doing anything especially well in a small district, she concurred. "I wind up doing my board work at night, which can be very taxing and it builds up. We just had two days off and I spent those entire days in this office just trying to clear my desk, believe it or not. So I hear that too. I understand what she is saying."

Joan. When I contacted Joan for an interview, she wanted to meet over lunch at a local restaurant. We first met in Joan's office that is located at one end of the elementary school in a district that has two schools serving students in grades K-6 and 7-12. Student population is approximately 964 students.

Joan is 57, European-American, and married. She has a Ph.D. and taught for six years before serving in principal positions in four different buildings. She began her current position this year and it is her first superintendency. On the LPI-Self, Joan perceived herself as using enabling others to act as the leadership practice she uses more often than the other four practices in the inventory.

After the interview, Joan drove me around the district and showed me the new addition that was currently under construction at the high school. She talked about how she is enjoying her job.

I really enjoy it and wish I had done it sooner. I really do. I notice there's a good support base among superintendents for each other. It's a position where you can influence others. I just thoroughly love it. Working with the community and working with the board; I've really enjoyed [both].

Before Joan came to the superintendency, she was a high school principal for many years. Joan believes she can effect more change as a superintendent. "The places that you can effect change are the places that I enjoy. I thoroughly enjoyed working with the budget this year because it is the way that you [are able to] provide for programs."

I shared the results of the quantitative data with Joan and she believed there were differences in leading large vs. small districts as she talked about leading a small district.

One of the things that is very, very true in a situation with smaller numbers is that you pretty much do everything. You just are involved with it all. I like that kind of thing but

it is very demanding and it does keep you away sometimes from that modeling and that shared vision and so forth and that's interesting because those are two things that I would say are very important. And I think probably the vision that comes out that's very important for me is that I set those as priorities instead of just the day-to-day management.

Marilyn. Marilyn is 48, European-American, married and holds a master's degree and noted on her survey that she is ABD (all but dissertation). Marilyn taught for 5 years and then held several administrative positions before applying for a superintendency. She indicated that it took less than a year to obtain her position after earning certification. Marilyn has held her current position for four years.

Marilyn's responses on the LPI-Self revealed that she perceived herself to be using the leadership practice of enabling others to act more than the other four leadership practices. Marilyn talked about leading a small district and had different ideas than the other four superintendents in small districts. "You know the process of networking is the same. When I was the number two person in a district of 8600 students we had a staff of about 500 or so. Their needs were not a lot different than they are in a small district. People want to feel valued, they want to feel appreciated, they want to be heard and they want to be supported, especially as they come to grips with changes that they need to make. You know as adults, especially more mature adults, they're used to looking competent."

Marilyn like Joan is really enjoying her position as superintendent as evidenced by her statement below.

I would absolutely pursue this career path again. I love it. It's got its down moments but you have to keep a balance in your life. That's real key to it. You need that balance to recover and to have perspective. Perspective is critically important when you're looking from a bird's eye view at the whole dynamics of your district, trying to respond well to everything that's going on.

The next section profiles women superintendents leading mid-size school districts. There were two women interviewed in this category; Maxine whose district consisted of 5600 students and Barb whose district was slightly larger with 6700 students.

Profiles of Superintendents Leading Mid-Size Districts

Maxine. We met in Maxine's office for the interview. The central office for this district is in a separate building located near the downtown in the community. The student population

consists of 5600 students in grades K-12 in 13 school buildings. Maxine, at 53 has been in her present position for 6 years. This position is her first superintendency. She is European-American, married, and holds a master's degree. She taught for 15 years before serving in several school administrative positions, including principal, curriculum director, and assistant superintendent. It took Maxine less than a year to achieve a superintendency after earning certification. According to the LPI-Self Maxine perceives herself to be using inspiring a shared vision as her preferred leadership practice. Inspiring a shared vision involves enlisting followers to carry out the work of the organization. This is an interesting finding in that Maxine (in her own words below) was hired to "fix" a troubled district. She needed to solidify several groups in the district who had been at odds with each other in the past and the practice of inspiring a shared vision was Maxine's way to foster collaboration in the district.

Before the interview began, Maxine related her interview policy to me. "I usually don't grant interviews. But I do them on women's topics because I think that for those of us who are in leadership it may help other women determine what characteristics they have that might be a match for them and so that's one of the reasons I was willing to do it."

The community is diverse and Maxine who came from a position as an assistant superintendent in a large, urban district within the state wanted to work in a similar type of district.

We have a large Latino population. We're diverse in terms of socio-economic status. I was hired to bring a dysfunctional system together. There were several civil rights suits on the table. The board and the teachers were in contentious negotiations. I came from a very secure assistant superintendency that paid more than this job. I was secure there; I had twenty some years in the system. I came here to a system that everybody would have said was dysfunctional and was on its third superintendent in seven years. I guess that was a risk. I knew I had to move real fast because they hired me to fix things and they forget real fast what they want to fix.

Barb. Our interview was conducted in Barb's office that is located in an old school building that houses the central office for the school district as well as an early childhood center. Barb's district has 6700 students in grades K-12 housed in 16 school buildings with 22 administrators. Barb is 49, European-American, married, and has a Ph.D. She taught 10 years before obtaining administrative positions as principal, curriculum director, and assistant

superintendent. On the LPI-self, Barb's score revealed that she perceives herself to be using the leadership practice of enabling others to act more frequently than the other four practices. Barb's current superintendency is her second and she has been in her present position for three years. She indicated that she applied for six different superintendent positions and it took four years to gain her first superintendency after earning the certification.

Barb told me that her community is one of the poorest in the state and that half of the children are on free and reduced lunch. She feels that her staff is warm-hearted but she believes that many of the faculty enable the students when they pity them rather than hold them accountable for learning. Barb said that adults are the ones who will make the difference for students' achievement.

The new approach to student achievement is that the only thing that is going to happen is the change in adults. The parents are not keeping the good ones at home and sending the bad ones. The only reform that is going to happen is with us and meaning me too.

Barb feels that her greatest accomplishment in her current position has helped to break down barriers that were erected in the district in the past. "This district has an image problem. This city is a depressed area. This district and one other [in the state] are probably the two most property poor districts. Well, that isn't good for self-esteem. Our whole community suffers this esteem problem. I had applied to be superintendent here before and someone else was chosen." Barb then took another superintendency in a smaller school district in the state. When her current position became vacant again, Barb reapplied.

I wanted to come back to some place that I felt I could do some things. This district needed someone who values them. I felt that if we can make a difference in this town, it can be done anywhere. If I can be part of mobilizing this district to overcome that poverty barrier and make the difference for these children, then that will be my most significant contribution.

The next section profiles women leading large school districts. There were two women interviewed in this category; Martha leading a district of approximately 19,000 students, and Geri who leads the largest district in this study of approximately 23,000 students.

Profiles of Superintendents Leading Large Districts

Martha. We met for lunch in a restaurant for the interview. Martha is African-American, married, and holds a Ph.D. She began her present position, her first superintendency, at age 43

and has been in the position for 3 years. She taught for three years and held administrative positions for 13 years, prior to taking a superintendency. Martha began holding school administrative positions at a young age. Martha's score on the LPI-Self reveal that she perceives herself to prefer using the leadership practice of modeling the way.

Martha applied for two positions before acquiring her current superintendency in less than a year after earning certification. She told me that as a teacher she was a leader in her building and her principal encouraged her to pursue educational administration. She is one of the youngest superintendents in the study but said that she has "enjoyed a pretty healthy successful leadership career," and she tries to encourage as many people she can "that I think possess the qualities of a good leader to move into the career path."

Martha's school district has a student population of approximately 19,500 students in grades K-12 housed in 45 buildings with 59 building administrators. Her central office staff consists of three assistant superintendents (support services, curriculum and instruction, and educational improvement and accountability) who each have responsibilities for many directors, coordinators, supervisors, and facilitators.

Martha thought that the processes of leadership are the same in leading small, medium or large districts. "You have got to build consensus for what you want to do and you've got to engender the support of the people that you work with no matter what the environment." Martha did feel that being in a large district dealing with more people did not allow her to be "intimately involved in the day-to-day operations of the school district."

I said to a principal applicant yesterday that one of the things that I regret most about being in a district this size is that I cannot hand pick principals. I have to rely on the recommendations of other people. I can pick a principal. I am good at that. And because I don't have the opportunity to get out in the schools and interface with and talk to the teachers about principal candidates, I'm not able to hand pick them. That would be something you could do in a smaller district vs. a larger district. Because I view the principalship to be the most important position in the school district, that's a little frustrating.

Gerri. Gerri is 54, European-American, married and holds a Ph.D. She taught 5 years before entering into school administration where she held several positions of principal, curriculum director, and assistant superintendent before obtaining a superintendency at age 41.

She has been in her present position for 6 years. It took five or more years to gain her first superintendency after earning certification and after applying for eight positions. Geri's scores on the LPI-Self revealed that she perceives herself to prefer using the leadership practice of modeling the way.

The interview was conducted in Geri's office that is in a newer building housing sixteen central office staff and an early childhood center. The building is close to one of the elementary schools and is located on an expanse of land in the center of a school district that serves three communities. Geri's district is in one of the fastest growing suburbs of a major metropolitan area. Geri talked about her district's increasing size in the six years that she has been there. "This district is change personified. We grew 1500 to 2000 students a year in the past 5 years. And with that has come the opening of 14 schools since I've been here. We are 28 buildings now. In this district we hired 380 people last year and we hired 340 some the year before. . . ."

In Geri's district are 47 building administrators in 28 buildings housing 23,000 students in grades K-12.

Geri is one superintendent who believes there are definite differences in leading large vs. small districts.

I was used to as a superintendent [of a smaller district] knowing absolutely every new teacher that came into the district. I could go up, call you by name and tell you where you were teaching. You can't do that here. You just begin to realize than when you are hiring 300+ people in a year it's not going to happen. And so it is very different. You have to figure out what you can insert yourself into and what you let those assistant superintendents and those building principals deal with.

Interview Data Analysis

During the interviews, I followed an interview guide consisting of 18 questions (Appendix A). Many of the questions were modeled after Kouzes and Posner's (1987) qualitative study of leaders' personal best. Kouzes and Posner asked leaders to describe their personal best times while leading their organizations. Their data analysis revealed themes that eventually developed into the five leadership practices incorporated into the Leadership Practices Inventory-Self (1997). The five leadership practices are: (1) challenging the process; (2) inspiring a shared vision; (3) enabling others to act; (4) modeling the way; and (5) encouraging the heart. Each

leadership practice has key behaviors associated with them. The section below gives descriptions of these key behaviors and details the interview data analysis regarding how women described their leadership practices organized around Kouzes and Posner's five practices.

Challenging the Process

The two key behaviors that characterize leaders who challenge the process include searching for opportunities and experimenting and taking risks (Kouzes & Posner, 1995).

One of the interview questions asked how women searched for opportunities to change the status quo. Geri told me that when she began her superintendency, she expected her staff to be asking for new programs. Geri's district has experienced tremendous growth and had opened 14 buildings in the six years that she had held her position. When she realized change was a way of life in her district, she knew she needed to help her administrators deal with the kind of change that comes with opening new buildings, reconstituting staff from other buildings, and hiring new staff members.

One of the things with that change, as a superintendent [is that] I have to decide how much change can we deal with and be sane. Because if you try too many different things you have people too stressed. In this district we hired 380 people last year and we hired 340 some [people] the year before so those are all new to us. When you have that kind of newness there's enough issues of just trying to get culture in the building down so you don't want to do more.

Marilyn expressed a similar idea about being careful not to push her staff too hard when effecting change.

You have to have a good bead on what's happening with people so that you know how hard and fast to push them on some institutional, organizational change that needs to take place. There's only so much [people at] different levels can handle. I'm very thoughtful when we're trying to make changes in terms of how much change can they make and how do we facilitate it. Risk is something that people will do if they feel safe and as the leader of the organization I find that people need to be reassured often that they're safe.

Barb feels strongly about changing the status quo and repeatedly asks two questions to challenge her staff. She asks, "What is your greatest fear and what is the worst that can happen?" By doing this, she helps her staff understand that the benefits outweigh the risks. "It's that comfort level; [I need] to shake them out of their comfort level." Barb wants educators to become more reflective about the efficacy of educational programs.

One of the things we don't do well in education is the reflective part where we actually sit down and say, 'Why didn't this work?' I think that one of the best ways to change the status quo is to give time for that reflection and have people actually intellectualize what happened.

When Barb talks about change, she feels it is important that everyone understand what she is talking about. She tries hard to create a common language so that everyone has an understanding of the framework of the change initiative. "And the more fun and humor you can put into it the better it is." One of the ways she does this is by having her administrative team read a book whose ideas about change are portrayed in a humorous way, as in the book, "Who Moved My Cheese."

Martha has a weekly cabinet meeting to share information in areas that need improvement. "I call it push people out of their comfort zone. We identify where we think the risk may be in making a decision to do things differently and determine whether the risk is low or high and whether we are willing to do it. We decide as a cabinet, as a team whether or not we make those kinds of changes."

Kouzes and Posner (1995) believe that part of challenging the process comes from the leader's ability to take risks. Several women felt that the biggest risks came from their efforts to reorganize or make major changes in their districts. Martha said that her greatest risk created an opportunity to rebuild her organization.

The reorganization called for administrators to be notified that their contracts would not be renewed until they met with me. And through our dialogue we had to determine whether or not their philosophy and my philosophy as well as the vision of the district were a good match. That allowed me the opportunity to rebuild the staff based upon what I thought was in the best interest of the district.

Maxine reshaped her system in a month by removing an assistant superintendent of personnel and hiring a facilitator for multicultural education "in a community that didn't want to even deal with the term 'multicultural.'" Maxine told me that because of this change, she got hate letters. "Because there are people who still think the word 'multicultural' is a dirty word." Marilyn knew there were changes that needed to be made in her district when she was initially hired. But she had difficulty instigating change due to a difficult beginning with the union. Since Marilyn was the first woman superintendent hired by the district, she felt gender discrimination

played a role in her initial problems with the union president. “I think primarily because there was an old boys’ network here, there was a lot of posturing with me. It would have been the safe thing to do to let things just ride and not try to make changes in the district.” She had to reassure her administrative team that what she needed was “time to connect with people out in the trenches and that it was going to be just fine.”

For two of the women in small districts, risk-taking means being sensitive to what the risks are and preventing the fallout that might occur. Joan said that it is important to find out what is “strongly held belief and practice, especially when you are in a new situation” before taking on what might be a big risk. Vivian said she is a “strong believer in preventive medicine for everything” and I understood this to mean that she was cautious about risk-taking, preferring to understand the reasons behind current practices before risking negative consequences that might occur. In the interviews, women in large and mid-size districts talked about strategies they used to challenge the system, moving people out of their comfort level to learn about and implement new programs that have appeal and efficacy for all students. These women talked about taking risks such as reorganizing the school district in the first year of employment, re-applying for a superintendency in one of the two poorest districts in the state to make a difference, and hiring a multicultural facilitator in a district that didn’t want to own their diversity. Three of the four women in large and mid-size districts were hired to specifically reorganize their districts. Women in small districts talked about assessing the needs before taking on the risk to change the status quo and making an effort to solve any problems the risk might present before they occur. All of the women in small districts talked about approaching change slowly and methodically – one woman was happy that her staff implemented at least one big change although she would have preferred many more. She felt good about the work her staff had done prior to implementing the change.

It is interesting to note that the women were cautious in effecting change, preferring to build relationships first, helping the school community get to know them and what they were about, and assuring staff that they were in a protective environment before they were willing to take the risks needed to change educational practices and programs.

Inspiring a Shared Vision

Leaders who inspire a shared vision use the two main behaviors of envisioning the future and enlisting others to carry on the work of the organization (Kouzes and Posner, 1995).

All of the superintendents answered a direct question about vision. The question was asked in two parts: “Do you have a vision for your school district?” “How do you enlist others in sharing your vision?” Several women solicited input from stakeholders to craft the vision in their respective school districts. In terms of sharing the vision, and keeping it in the forefront of all the stakeholders, Maxine said, “When the vision is created synergistically you get a greater buy in and people have to believe that they can have a part in the positive outcomes towards that.” She noted that she continues to foster the “buy in” of the vision by giving staff credit for what they do “out there in the buildings.”

Before working to solidify the vision for her district, Martha talked about what she thought the role of the school district should be in providing for the community to continue to grow and thrive. She and her staff went out into the community and asked them what they believed to be important for the school district. As a result of that they built a vision “that was supported by anywhere from 25 to 50 individuals representing all segments in the community.” Joan also enlisted stakeholders to craft the vision. “One of the first things I did when I came was to sit down and meet with all of our employees.” She asked them what was good about the two school buildings in the district, what did they like about working there, and what meaning did it have for them. She summarized her findings and shared what she calls her “qualitative study” with the board. “In terms of taking a look at what our strengths were and what our desires were, we formulated a vision statement, formulated the mission and goals for the corporation and that’s been kind of the guideline for us.” This superintendent makes sure the vision and mission statements are “out there in the forefront” by doing a weekly memo to staff and “the mission statement is at the beginning of that memo every time and we have it there at board meetings. And we have had other retreats and we’ve always talked about how we are doing in terms of that.”

Maxine enlists her administrators to share in the vision and the mission in interesting ways. First she talks about the vision “all the time.”

What feels good to me is that I now hear it. What just amazed my administrators is that when they first came in to a meeting, I used to test them on things. We met on a monthly basis because I needed them to hear from me where I thought we needed to go. I used to have them come in and I basically said everybody stand up, form circles and I want you to tell the person across from you what the three focus areas are.

The three superintendents in small districts talked about their vision for their districts.

One’s vision is that “we continue to be a school district where kids learn.” She spoke of programmatic issues as impacting her vision. “When I came to the district, there weren’t many computers, veteran staff members had not been evaluated, and staff members had not been to a workshop outside the district in twenty years.” A vision was needed “right off the top that what we want to be about is improving ourselves as instructional people.” To share the vision, she works with the school board. “I suppose my tact has been to have some good conversations about what are my observations.” To share her vision with teachers, “We get together once a month on a social basis and have come to appreciate each other as people who are engaged in the profession of teaching.”

Several women spoke very directly about ways they build consensus among their staff. One builds consensus through a shared decision making model. “Part of my philosophy is that you walk your talk and you feel like all of your people are equally important. We are all leaders in our own unique way and it is our job to foster the leadership in everyone, in each of us. Each one of us in this organization is going to have ownership and control of what’s going on.” Geri, the superintendent whose district has grown by 14 buildings in six years talked about what she does to build consensus among her staff:

We do a lot of referendums in this district. There is a value to process and there is a value to allowing some processes to work. As much as you would like to just go tell them what the decision is, you know it wouldn’t be a success. You have to be willing for it not to be your decision. The superintendent makes relatively few decisions. It’s more making a decision to have a process to make it. Maybe the knowledge is knowing when you need the process.

Martha commented that whatever the size of the district is “the processes of leadership are the same. You have got to build consensus for what you want to do and you’ve got to

engender the support of the people that you work with no matter what the environment.”

Another builds consensus as a result of “getting people to own the system, the people in it, and the vision and mission of the organization, but stated, “I’m not afraid to take a strong stand when I have to.”

When Marilyn first came to her position she began to invite a few people who were prominent members of the community (mayor, ministers, police and fire officials) to talk “around the table.” And Marilyn is proud of what she began as she related to me the following:

One thing led to another and within 18 months we had a rotary club started. Now that rotary club was chartered and there are about 30 members and there are about 40 others who are just friends of rotary and they come together to do various projects and start to improve the community. This winter we are going to have several large community forums where we will invite 100 people to each one to come and talk about what do they like about being out here and what do we need to improve.

Like Marilyn, Joan builds consensus for the vision, mission, and goals created for her district by being visible in and seeking input from the community. She has toured the two major factories, met with business people and city officials in her small town. She wants to “see what they’re thinking about the town and how they see themselves.” She also works with the county committee “to see how we fit together with the people in the county and the bicounty district area.”

These women did a lot of work in shaping and creating vision and mission statements for their districts. They seemed to know intuitively that they needed to build consensus in the community for shared ideas about what people wanted for their students educationally. And several women had unique ways of ensuring that the vision was routinely thought about and talked about among the administrators in the districts.

Enabling Others to Act

The key leadership behaviors that enable others to act are fostering collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust and strengthening others by giving power away, providing choice, developing competence, assigning critical tasks, and offering visible support (Kouzes & Posner, 1995).

Geri said that her philosophy of leadership was to be able to “provide the environment and resources, [and] the climate for people to be able to utilize their strengths and abilities.” She talked about a conversation she had recently with one of her staff members who told her that “what’s really good about working for you is that you allow us to do our jobs and that you have confidence in us that we will make good decisions.”

After Martha’s first year of reorganization in her school district, she had to spend time rebuilding “security and confidence in the people who are in the district.” She brought in people who she believed shared her beliefs about how to “operationalize the goals of the district.”

And then I had to assure those who were not new employees that we respected them, that we valued them as employees, and that we would not try to change absolutely everything in the district. Together we would forge the path toward improvement and it’s a work in progress. We make some leeway and then we lose some ground. But by and large I think I can say that people as a whole know and understand that we’re working as a team in the best interests of children.

Marilyn talked about servant leadership and engaging the staff and enlisting the community members as partners in moving the organization forward. She sees herself as “someone who is here to serve, both internally our staff who are on the front line with kids as well as in the larger community for whom we work and represent.” Marilyn talks to her staff about the importance of teamwork. “Our greatest opportunity to make an impact on kids hinges on how greatly we work together as a team on what we’re trying to accomplish.” She looks for alignment of teaching behaviors – do they match with the curriculum? “I’m always in the district looking for how closely are we aligned in our behaviors. And if we’re not, then I invite conversations about what could we do to change, involving everyone.”

There was a consensus among most of the women that to enable others to act, they needed to build key relationships with the school board, staff members, and community. We see this theme of building relationships repeated here, as in how vision and mission statements were developed in the various districts – through relationship building. Consistent with the literature on women leaders, building relationships is highly important (Blackmore, 1999, Brunner, 1999, Chase, 1995, Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995, Gardner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000). Marilyn again talked about her philosophy of servant leadership when she made a statement concerning

relationships with the school board. “One of the critical things that a new superintendent needs to do whether they are male or female is to develop and nurture that relationship with their board members first and foremost. A mentor taught me that a role of the superintendent is to serve the board and to serve the community.” One of her objectives is to form a common language regarding key components of a quality district and to do that she talked about building relationships. “We know that relationships are critical, and that all of our relationships should be built on respect and responsibility.” For one woman, Barb, “relationship are it.”

If you have a good relationship with the teacher, with the school, with the neighboring school district, with the county, with the politicians, if you have a good relationship with them then you are going to move. If you don’t have good relationships, the conflict stays at the adult level and the organization spins. There’s no forward movement.

When I asked Maxine what her most significant contribution as a superintendent has been, she answered this way.

Building relationships, getting the community to own the system, internal and external. I have a business and industry forum every month. I meet with pastors every month. I meet with parents every month. So I do a lot of large and small group meetings. One of the members of the negotiating team said to me not too long ago that the most significant contribution I’ve made to the system was teaching them how to work with the board. And I think that’s really a relationship piece.”

In describing how they enable others to act, the women superintendents used words such as “provide,” “commit to,” “create” when they talked about providing opportunities for their staff to do their best work. They also again stressed relationship building as key to encouraging staff to find the motivation to search for new ways of teaching and to provide new programs for students.

Modeling the Way

The two key leadership behaviors of modeling the way are setting the example through behavior consistent with belief in shared values and through the planning of small wins that promote consistent progress and build commitment (Kouzes & Posner, 1995).

All of the women superintendents believed themselves to be role models for their staff and students, particularly when they talked about letting others know their ideas about how people should be treated. Joan models how she treats others in actions but also in her written

communication. “This is school bus safety week. The lead off in my memo was that it is school bus safety week and let’s thank the bus drivers for all the good things they do; not only getting you safely to your destination but thank them for all of the extras they do.” If she sees something occurring in the school buildings, Joan told me that she would handle the situation after the incident. “I would never put a teacher or administrator down in front of a parent or student, but later I would talk to them and ask them what were they thinking about and what’s the outcome of acting that way and so forth.”

Maxine tries to demonstrate her ideas about how people should be treated. “I think I probably model it more than I demand it.” She said that she will say to someone on occasion, “Your expectation is that I treat you with dignity and respect; mine is that you treat others with dignity and respect.” She told me that she isn’t afraid to demonstrate her ideas about proper treatment of students and staff through contract nonrenewal. “Coaches [who don’t treat students with respect] find themselves no longer able to coach here. Administrators find themselves no longer able to administrate here. So I think that sends a pretty clear message.” Vivian stated that her philosophy of leadership is to be a role model who other people can follow. “I’ve always said that you get from other people what you expect. So if you expect a lot and give a lot, you get a lot.” She believes that she treats her staff with respect and gets the same in return. Since she has been in her district for thirty years as a teacher, principal, and superintendent for twenty of those years, she feels that people by now understand what she is about. “I’ve been around for a long time so I’ve built a reputation so there’s no question in their minds. I’m the very strong disciplinarian here and kids know what I expect.” However, she said that her staff would most likely say that she is very compassionate. “I love my staff and I love my job and I love my kids.”

Geri talked about herself as a role model for female administrators as well as for female students. “My female administrators pay a whole lot of attention to how I do things.” When talking about female high school students’ interests in understanding her role, Geri said that when she was a high school principal there were female students who would come into her office, would ask her personal questions and then would ask the question: “Could I do this?” And Geri

said she felt strongly about letting young people know that it was possible as females to lead large schools and large school districts, and she felt she was a good example.

Laura believes it is best not to draw lines when performing her job. “I think that good leaders can do the grunt work as well as the top work. I don’t think you draw lines. If it needs to be done, you aren’t necessarily better than anyone else.” Laura had an interesting perspective about role modeling. For her, modeling all aspects of her job is important. She said, “I don’t think of myself as better than anyone else. I have a different role, a different job to do but eventually it all has to get done and sometimes you just have to model even the baser pieces of the job.” Laura is another person who believes in modeling fair treatment of people. “I model that all the time. How I talk to the custodian, how I talk to the parents, how I talk to the kids, how I take phone calls. It is all visible and it is all observed and it’s commented on and it’s noticed.”

Barb also talks about treating people with dignity. She said that she values her staff for what they bring to the organization and it is important to her that she demonstrates it. “It’s simple things like if someone wants to have a meeting with you, you arrange your schedule so that you can get that meeting in. Instead of two weeks, try to get it scheduled in two days.” Barb expects people to be open with her if they disagree with decisions she’s made. “And if you screw up and you are bound to do so, then you can be more open because it fits into the idea of treating others with dignity and respect.”

The idea of modeling the way and particularly of being a role model was a repeated theme throughout many of the interviews. I think the women felt a particular importance of modeling good practices both personally and professionally since they knew their gender was in the minority as superintendents. And because of this, they might have felt they were under closer scrutiny than men would be.

Encouraging the Heart

The two key behaviors associated with encouraging the heart are recognizing individual contributions to the success of every project and celebrating team accomplishments regularly (Kouzes & Posner, 1995).

Several of the superintendents spoke about their practice of encouraging the heart. They stated very directly that celebrating staff accomplishments was something that did not come easy to them and they had to work at doing it. Martha felt that her nurturing skills were overshadowed by her attention to detail and her orientation to task completion. She has hired people close to her who could fulfill that nurturing role better than she has been able to do.

In an answer to a question about how she might celebrate everyone's efforts, one superintendent said:

I might sometimes just send somebody an email or a note. I have to admit that that's probably my greatest weakness. This doesn't sound real and I don't mean it to sound anything but a reflection of who I am. I've not needed a lot of rewards. My reward is in doing. That's how I've always been. So I expect people to be happy once they've accomplished their goal. I have to continue to re-learn that that's not how some people function, that they need rewards along the way. So I work at it but one of my assistant superintendents is much better at it than I am and she is willing to share it. And so I have to practice it.

Ruth stated also that she "is not a person to receive accolades. In fact, I'd rather not receive them myself. I don't need those rewards, that constant reassuring that you're OK." And because of this, Ruth said that rewarding others is hard for her to do. But she does find herself "identifying people who need that and that keeps me at least more alert to a special pat on the back that they might need."

Three women, on the other hand, talked about encouraging people, finding ways to value staff, and celebrating accomplishments with their respective staff members. Marilyn put it this way. "[I believe that] people's spiritual energy devoted to [a cause] happens by either hunkering down together and surviving something awful or it hinges on ways that people have fun and celebrate their accomplishments together. I'm always looking for those opportunities." At the end of each of their monthly administrative meetings, she has a gratitude jar that she passes around the table. She explained how it is used. "After we've conducted all of our business, the last thing we do is pass the jar around and people will put in a quarter or more and thank somebody specifically around the table for something they did that was helpful." She then matches the money in the jar and "we spend it celebrating."

Laura was the only interview participant who perceived that she used encouraging the heart as her preferred leadership practice on the LPI-Self. More than any of the superintendents interviewed, she frequently talked about celebrating with her staff. She said that she and her staff members routinely got together to mark special family events but that they also celebrated their work together as professionals. “As mundane as a box of donuts seems, it goes a long way.” Barb said that she sends lots of handwritten notes to individuals. She seemed to prefer this type of quiet, private acknowledgement rather than the larger celebration.

“I’ve always thought that if you take a minute and you just write down something that you want that person to know and that you value what that person has done for the organization, for a colleague, for a child, it goes so far.”

To Barb, that type of celebration is meaningful. She said that because she worried about being fiscally conscious, she was not apt to sponsor large-scale celebrations. She used an instrument designed to find people’s strengths and needs with her administrative staff. A part of this strength perceiver revealed that some of her staff members “love the hoopla.” Those people will get a plaque and she will recognize them on the cable channel at the board meeting. “You need to know what people like and what they appreciate.” she added, “I really don’t like that kind of thing and I tend to minimize it.” She was adamant in her ideas about liberating the leadership in everyone. “People don’t come to work and stand outside the door and say, ‘Well today I’m gong to give 90 percent today.’ They don’t. They come in and give 100 percent, 110 percent sometimes.” She feels that it is her job “to notice and to acknowledge” everyone’s efforts and “to encourage them to keep making those very genuine, unique, and sincere contributions on behalf of themselves for the good of the kids and the organization.”

Possibly a reason for several of the women feeling inadequate in this practice of encouraging the heart has something to do with gender. If women feel they need to “act more like a man” because as stated earlier, about 87% of superintendents across the U.S. are men, then women might feel this particular leadership practice is too “feminine.” Or a similar issue arises in terms of positive reinforcement for work that is well done. A couple of the women felt that they didn’t need compliments or accolades in doing their work. Is the issue that women “suppress” their accomplishments, or that they minimize their accomplishments in some way?

Another question comes to mind based on these findings. Do women feel that they must fulfill the role of superwoman, i.e., spouse, mother, mentor, superintendent? And that this role is expected, therefore one should not receive rewards for participating in an “expectation” even though it might be extraordinary. These are interesting suppositions and possible areas to explore in future research.

New Findings

Two additional findings that went beyond the theoretical framework of the five leadership practices used for analysis were discovered. Women superintendents felt that their hiring practices was an important component of how well they led. Additionally they believed that effective leaders must possess specific qualities to be successful. These findings are discussed below.

Hiring practices. Several of the women felt strongly that hiring good people was a key component of leadership. Geri told me that she surrounded herself with what she called, “heterogeneous people.” She related that when she hired people, she looked to build a team of people who had different strengths to be better equipped and knowledgeable in working with a diverse population of staff, students, and parents.

I really try to build a team of people who have different strengths in terms of dealing with people. This is a people business and you have to have those people who are good at different aspects of that working on your team. And if it is this heterogeneous group then you will be able to have really good give and take discussions of issues you need to talk about and they [staff members] will do it at a very professional level. It won't become personal to any one person.

She explained that one aspect of her job is to provide the resources to create the environment to make things happen. “You need to have really good people and let them make those possibilities happen . . . and I guess most important to me is that you have people who are loyal to you. That is very important in a system.” One of the reasons one superintendent preferred leading a large school district vs. a small district was her ability to have a larger central office staff. She had hired several central office staff members who were bright, capable administrators and who each had a specialty to bring to her cabinet. “The reason I like a larger district is because I am a person who likes to be surrounded by very bright people. I absolutely

think that is a key to success. I want the very best and brightest in what they do in my organization.” Ruth looks for team players when she hires. Since she has been the superintendent in her district for 12 years, she has had the “luxury” of hiring most of her teaching staff during her tenure. Martha hires people with beliefs similar to hers concerning how to provide an environment conducive to engaging all children as learners and all that goes with what she calls her “bottom line.” She feels that because of her orientation to focus and task completion, she might not be as nurturing as she would like to be. Therefore, she has hired staff members who are close to her in position who exhibit that nurturing side. She gave her unique perspective on women as leaders.

I think women are very capable of managing the business of a district as those of us who have been in this position have demonstrated. But I think we bring a quality that is unique to the socialization of females. We have been taught to nurture and be concerned about the people who work with us and so are more likely to do that. That [nurturing quality], however, happens to be one of my weaknesses. While I think I possess some of those qualities I’m also very logical, sequential and task oriented and so therefore I’m focused on the target and sometimes at the expense of looking at the nurturing role I need to play. But what I’ve attempted to do in my leadership role both as a principal and as a superintendent is to try to put someone as close to me as possible that will have more of those qualities.”

Joan places utmost importance on hiring staff. “I think that the most important task an administrator has is hiring; most definitely. It just makes a big difference. For the most part those people are going to be with you for a long time and so you have to do a good job with that.” All four of the women in mid-size and large school districts believe that hiring principals has been crucial to the success of their districts. Barb convinced the board that she needed to retain the ability to hire principals even though past practice in her district had been that committees made up of teachers, parents, and other staff members hired principals. Because of the size of their districts, Martha and Geri have to rely on assistant superintendents to hire principals and both women felt that is one of the disadvantages of leading large districts.

Qualities of a leader. Most of the women had ideas about the special qualities leaders should possess. Joan stated that leaders must have qualities of integrity, character, and strong values. For her, integrity is a big issue. “There’s a fine line with getting the word out and having integrity and political correctness at the same time, politically expedient, not correctness.”

Geri felt strongly about leaders needing to be risk-takers. “I think the barrier to being successful is to remind yourself that this is a very risk taking job and if you don’t like risks you don’t want this one.” Martha thinks that leaders need to have compassion when leading organizations. Martha talked about a speech she gave to a group of principals regarding whether leaders innately possess those qualities essential for leadership or can they be taught.

I believe that most effective leaders probably have as part of their make-up the innate characteristic of leading and can probably go back and identify every instance in which they have been thrust into leadership and that they emerged as a leader. I do think that there are some things that can be taught for people who want to be leaders, but I’m not sure that if the characteristics are not there, can you truly become an effective leader.

Laura’s idea of quality leaders is that they be logical thinkers who can balance the “incredible control, power, and responsibility” that comes with the job. Maxine stated that a leader needs to be centered so as not to “get off the track” and she should be someone who is extremely focused. Barb talked about focus as being important. She wants to see the leader begin to focus on specific goals and then remain relentless in pursuit of those goals, and she sees herself as a prime example. Vivian talked about maintaining high standards and in doing so leaders will command respect from others. Her belief is that if you treat others with respect, you will get the same in return.

Marilyn’s response to a final question about what she would like to add to the interview is a good way to end this section. She believes that our schools deserve quality leaders.

Just that quality is never an accident. Our schools deserve quality leaders. I think that in today’s age, public schools particularly have to look at what they’re doing with very close scrutiny and they have to learn how to be more quickly responsive to making changes internally that they need to make. In order to get the adults to make those changes to take those risks to look incompetent while they’re learning something different, it takes strong soft-touch leadership to do that. And I see a high need for that out there.

Discussion

There were differences in how women perceived their leadership based on the size of their districts. Both quantitative and qualitative data confirmed this finding. Women in small districts talked about the appeal of a more intimate involvement with staff and students than women in larger school districts who miss those personal connections.

The women are successful with different patterns of a couple of the same practices. Although women in large districts perceived themselves to be using challenging the process and inspiring a shared vision when responding to the survey, all the women who were interviewed used those practices in different ways. In larger districts, they talked of involving stakeholders, shared decision making, and taking risks regarding personnel. In small districts, they talked of involving community in bond issues for facility funding, programming issues, and taking risks regarding programs.

The women interviewed are not all cut from the same cloth; however there are certain things they have in common. They all talked about the importance of the leader maintaining high standards as they served as role models for staff, students, school board and community members. Some of the women modeled their beliefs in championing the value of diversity, while others modeled behaviors they want followers to emulate, i.e., dignity and respect. All of the women talked about building relationships in some way, whether those relationships were at the level of students and teachers, or at the level of a cabinet staff. Building relationships was a repeated theme in many of the answers to the interview questions.

One voice stands out among the nine interviewed. Vivian belongs to a different era. She is sixty-two years old with no plans to retire anytime soon. Vivian is the pathfinder with over twenty years of experience as a superintendent and over thirty years of experience as a teacher and then principal in the same district. She talked about how she still clings to what she calls the “old principles.” She makes it clear to the staff and to her school board that as “long as I am here, that’s the way it’s going to be and if you don’t like it you better do something about it.” Vivian said that although her staff and students know her as a strict disciplinarian, they also know that she will always be there for them if they are in trouble. She fears that her age is possibly a barrier to her success and worries that she may be carrying her ideas a little too far. I heard her struggle when she talked about wanting to show her staff her strong beliefs and principles in working with students as a “strict disciplinarian,” an old fashioned way, according to Vivian. On the one hand she wanted people to know that she stood staunchly behind those principles, but on the other hand she worried if she was too “hard” in her approach. Her initial comment to me before we began

her interview was, “Are you sure you want to interview me?” I took this to mean that I might not find her contemporary in her ideas and views, given the fact that she has been in the district so long – 30 years. But Vivian showed her unique style of leadership in several ways. One way was her belief in remaining cautious when taking risks to “challenge the process.” When other superintendents talked of the risks they took to change the status quo in their districts; Vivian talked about determining what the risks might be to try to prevent any fallout from taking the risk. And here again, Vivian related her belief system as she said, “I’m a strong believer in preventive medicine for everything.”

When I asked how they would challenge staff to try new approaches, most of the women related that they felt building consensus, creating a common language, providing time to team and discuss the issues, and assuring people that they are safe before taking risks were all important aspects of their practice. Vivian believed she needed to prepare and expose staff to new techniques, but sometimes “you just have to say this is the way it’s going to be.”

All of the women were asked what advice they would give to women seeking a superintendency. The answers varied from “Just do it, it’s not that hard,” to Vivian’s advice. She said, “You have to want to do it.” She believed that a superintendent should not divorce herself from the classroom because once she did do so, her decisions became unaffected by kids and after all, “That’s what we’re about – we’re about the kids.” And Vivian was the woman who said that when her day was going poorly, all she had to do was go into the kindergarten room and sit with the children and then she would remember how rewarding her job truly was.

Concluding Remarks

As mentioned previously, it was my plan to give these remarkable women the voice to describe how they led their districts as superintendents. It is my hope that the reader clearly sees that the women in this study were impressive and far surpass Brunner’s (1998a) point that “women can be superintendents, are superintendents, and are able to perform the tasks required of anyone in the role” (p.2). Borrowing from Brunner’s list of pathbreaking insights drawn from the chapters in her book, *Sacred Dreams: Women and the Superintendency* (1999), I list my own insights drawn from this study of the perceptions of women superintendents regarding how they

lead their school districts. And they are: 1) Women in this study view relational leadership as a key component of their leadership style. (2) Women have ways to talk about how they have succeeded in their roles as superintendents, and this talk can be useful to women aspiring to the superintendency and those in the pipeline who aren't sure. As one woman said when asked what advice she would give to women aspiring to the superintendency, "Just do it, it's not that hard!"

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