# Women's Journey to the School Superintendency

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*Eighty percent of public school teachers are females, but only 24% of school superintendents are females. This upward trend from a low of 1.3% in the early 1970s has not mirrored the increase of females in executive level positions in other professions. A mixed-methods design identified the barriers that contribute to the under-representation and lack of growth of female superintendents. Participants in the study included active and retired female superintendents from a single Southern state. The quantitative phase consisted of a 29-item Likert-scale survey with 26 respondents. Qualitative follow-up included a three-part interview series design with four successful current and former female superintendents. The results have implications for institutions of higher education and professional organizations.*

> *Keywords:* female administrators, gender bias, minority recruitment, female superintendents, women under-representation

**Introduction**

A recently released national study stated the percentage of female superintendents increased nearly four times since 1992 (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2010). The study by the American Association of School Administrators is one of several reports conducted every few years beginning in the 1920s. The most recent outcomes found that from a survey of approximately 2,000 superintendents in the United States, 24% were women, an increase from 14% in 2000 (Kowalski et al., 2010). However, based on national trends for the current rate of change, female superintendents will not attain parity with male superintendents for three or more decades. Gender disparity in the role of the superintendency commands attention since females constitute the vast majority of the public education work force. In 2000, although 72% of all classroom teachers were female, only 14% of all superintendents in the U.S. were female (Hansen, 2011).

According to the archives of the Alabama Association of School Superintendents (E. Mackey, personal communication, October 30, 2012), Alabama appointed the first female superintendent in 1916; however, the job of superintendency remained dominated by males until the 1980s. The percentage of females in the Alabama superintendency fluctuated from 12% to 16% during the 1980s and 1990s and reached a high of 19% in 2010 (E. Mackey, personal communication, October 30, 2012). As changes occurred in proportionate numbers of males and females in states across the nation, Alabama's numbers remained below the national average. The disparity between the number of female superintendents in Alabama and the average number of female superintendents across the nation indicate obstacles for females with ambitions to lead school districts at the superintendent's level. Therefore, this study focused on female superintendents in Alabama.

**Female Employment Status and Trends**

A snapshot of the employment trends of females in administrative positions enhances the understanding of the barriers that females have overcome and identifies areas where work remains. Tallerico and Blount (2004) focused on the complexities associated with female inroads into historically male work and examined the proportional changes and patterns. Previous research of the advances of women in male-dominated work roles indicated two major factors as causes of gains. According to Matthaei (1982), the causes of the gains included a significant increase in job vacancies and/or the deterioration of the working conditions or rewards of a job. An increase in job vacancies normally resulted from occupational growth, turnovers, incumbent exits, wars, and/or major technological changes. A decrease in the working conditions or rewards of a job led males to lose interest in the job, which, increased job vacancies for females (Matthaei, 1982; Patterson & Engleberg, 1978).

Luxenberg (1985) and Leslie (1987) found specific factors that contributed to males' decreased interest in a job. For example, an increased exit of male physicians from the field resulted partially from increased bureaucratization and declining entrepreneurial potential and profitability. As the interest of men waned toward a job, opportunities for women increased. As illustrated in the field of education, the role of

teacher shifted from a predominately-male occupation to a predominately-female occupation as the number of public schools increased, and teachers' salaries and autonomy declined in comparison to other job opportunities for males (Blount, 1998).

The participation rate in the labor force for women (the percentage of all women working or looking for work) rose steadily during the latter half of the 20th century. The rate increased from approximately 33% in 1950 to 61% in 1999. The types of jobs women performed also changed as their market activity increased. As women increased their levels of education, the work of women grew exponentially in areas of management, professional, and related occupations (U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration & Executive Office of the President Office of Management and Budget, 2011). According to the Office of Management and Budget (2011),

> Among women age 25 - 64 in the labor force, 36 percent held college degrees in 2009 compared to 11 percent in 1970. Over the same period, the proportion of women with less than a high school diploma fell from 34 percent to 7 percent. (p. 27)

Females made substantial progress in the attainment of graduate level degrees, yet still earned fewer than half of the degrees in higher-paying fields. Between 1979 and 2001, the percentages of masters, doctoral, and first-professional degrees earned by females increased. However, advanced degrees followed traditional patterns with women receiving the majority of graduate degrees in education and health and men receiving the majority of graduate degrees in computer sciences, sciences, and engineering. Even though the past 30 years revealed much progress toward parity, females continued as underrepresented in first-professional programs, and gender differences in college majors persisted with females dominating the lower paying fields such as education (U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration & Executive Office of the President Office of Management and Budget, 2011).

According to Shakeshaft (1989), a summary of work-related trends revealed increased vacancies in administrative positions, female work force participation rate, levels of education for females, antidiscrimination legislation, and number of females in non-traditional occupational roles. In addition, the increased numbers of vacancies and dwindling applicant pools for school superintendent positions opened doors for women aspiring to the executive level job. Shakeshaft (1989) referred to this hiring opportunity as the "golden age for women in school administration" (p. 34). Based on these trends in the role of females in work force administrative positions, closing the disparity gap for females in the superintendency appears favorable. However, barriers remain that prevent upward mobility of females in the field of education administration.

**Barriers**

While increased job vacancies provided additional opportunities for women, some major roadblocks remained. Pinpointing barriers that contributed to the under representation of females in the superintendency was an essential first step in the identification and development of effective strategies to increase the number of women in all levels of leadership roles in education. Analyses of empirical studies, summarization of results, and categorization according to frequency and themes documented the barriers (Glass, 2000; Hoff & Mitchell, 2008). The research consistently identified barriers as gender

bias, lack of career planning and career path, lack of mentors and networks, limited mobility, family responsibilities, and recruitment and selection processes (gatekeepers).

**Gender bias.**  A review of the literature resulted in learning that for more than 30 years females aspiring for the superintendency and females serving as superintendents experienced gender bias (Banuelos, 2008; Björk, 2000; Brunner, 2000; Goffney & Edmonson, 2012; Hoff & Mitchell, 2008; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1989). Gender bias existed at the individual or institutional level and surfaced as blatant or concealed acts.  During the past decade, however, gender bias was subtle and barely recognizable (Polnick, Reed, Taube, & Butler, 2008).

Banuelos (2008) surveyed and interviewed 35 randomly selected female superintendents in California regarding their experiences of gender bias on the job.  The researcher found a discrepancy between the participants' responses on the survey and their responses during the follow-up interviews.  Their scaled responses indicated minimal emotional impact in their personal lives from gender bias.  However, during the interviews the females reported that gender bias created significant emotional distress ranging from sleep deprivation to depression.  Their explanations of the discrepancy between the responses on the survey and interviews ranged from denial to the desire to suppress negative experiences.  Inappropriate touching was the most frequent gender bias trait experienced by the females. Goffney and Edmonson (2012) found similar results regarding gender bias in a qualitative study of three novice female superintendents in Texas.  The three female subjects, including minorities, indicated that gender more than race had impeded their progress.

Hoff and Mitchell (2008) studied the perceptions of male and female superintendents.  A total of 404 superintendents, 57% males and 43% females, participated in the study.  The interesting finding was that males and females recognized that gender bias existed and negatively impacted women.  The bias presented itself in the recognition of a *good ol' boys'* network and the male dominated image of leadership.  To compensate, females reported consciously adopting masculine leadership traits such as decisiveness, appearing tougher, talking less, and putting relational distance between themselves and the staff.

However, Rico (2009) found different results regarding relationship development in a qualitative case study of one female superintendent in a Midwest school district.  The researcher triangulated data from multiple in-depth interviews, teacher surveys, field observations, district archives, and superintendent publications to describe the practices of a caring female leader.  The study indicated that caring leaders intentionally decided "to consider others in the decision-making process . . . [appreciate] relationships and community building . . . and [commit] to nurturing relationships" (Rico, 2009, p. i).

**Career planning and career paths.**   Lack of career planning and career paths affected women more negatively than men (Glass, 2000).   Traditionally, male-dominated positions provided a career path to the superintendency (Sharpe, Malone, Walter, & Supley, 2004).   Hoff and Mitchell (2008) found a lack of career planning as a barrier for women.   The researchers used a mixed-methods approach and collected quantitative and qualitative data from 404 participants.   Significantly fewer women than men planned to enter school administration after graduation from college.   As reported in the open ended responses, one woman wrote, "I thought I'd teach forever" (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008, p. 7).   These findings mirror another study in which no females planned to move into administration when they entered education (Young & McCleod, 2001).

Age of entry into the superintendency is another indication of a lack of career planning.   Dana and Bourisaw (2006) found that 72% of female superintendents were mothers.   This particular statistic, along with women staying in the classroom longer than their male counterparts, indicated that females entered the superintendency later in life with less leadership experience than their male counterparts.   Shakeshaft (1989) noted that males began their administrative careers approximately 10 years earlier than females, placing many females at a selection disadvantage before the process began. This age difference placed many women at a selection disadvantage before they even had their first interview (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Tallerico, 2000).

According to Sharpe et al. (2004), the role of high school principal is often a stepping stone on the *pathway* to the superintendency.   Many female elementary teachers become elementary principals, a position from which superintendents rarely emerge.   The greatest number of positions leading to the superintendency were in secondary schools or the central office.    Females historically served in areas of curriculum rather than in preferred, male-dominated roles of human resources or finance (Sharpe et al., 2004).

**Mentors and networks.**   Effective resources, such as mentoring and coaching, counteract barriers for minorities advancing to leadership positions; however, for more than 30 years a lack of mentors limited female entry into administration and advancement into the superintendency (e.g., Goffney & Edmonson, 2012; Haar, Raskin, & Robicheau, 2009; Hart, 1995; Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010; McGee, 2010; Nugent, 2008; Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, & Ballenger, 2007).   "Research has demonstrated that in general women lack mentoring since it has been more often associated with the male model of grooming the next generation of leaders" (Shakeshaft et al., 2007, p. 111).   For example, Berman (1999) surveyed the area of upward mobility for female administrators in international schools and concluded that mentoring is an important factor in female administrators' careers.   Mentors provide protégés with career direction and support and assist with career changes.   McNulty (2002) found similar results in a study of first-year superintendents in Texas public schools.   The superintendents identified the mentor program as having a positive effect on job success.

While numerous other studies identified the importance of mentors for females seeking the superintendency; the availability of mentors for females is only gradually changing (e.g., Campbell-Jones & Avelar-Lasalle, 2000; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Garn & Brown, 2008).   The limited availability of mentors and coaches relates closely to the ability of females to network with peers.   Katz (2006) found that females experienced difficulties networking with peers and were unwilling to relocate for an administrative

position because of their reluctance to leave the comfort and importance of established relationships and networks.

**Mobility.** Another challenge for many females is the difficulty of relocating for a new position (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Hoff and Mitchell (2008) found that females' reluctance to changing districts was one of the top barriers into administration, unlike the willingness of males to relocate. Reasons females cited for their refusal to relocate included the comfort and importance of established relationships and the concept of only moving for a spouse's job. Sixty-six percent of males moved to accept an administrative position compared to 45% of females.

Sharp et al. (2004) analyzed surveys from 118 female superintendents in Illinois, Indiana, and Texas and reported that females perceived males as more mobile in relocating for a superintendent's role. McGee (2010) studied 67 male and female public school administrators in Florida and found the same results. In both studies, job location ranked as fourth in the list of barriers encountered by females seeking the superintendency.

**Family responsibilities.** Dana and Bourisaw (2006) suggested that a potential obstacle to the female superintendent included family responsibilities of females. In a similar study, Barrios (2004) surveyed 38 superintendents; 42 assistant, deputy, or interim superintendents; and 55 board members. The females in the sample identified eight major barriers with regard to their upper mobility to the superintendency. Three of the eight barriers related to family responsibilities: limited time for family and career, career aspirations lower priority than family responsibilities, and family commitments higher importance than career advancement. The findings were consistent with other researchers (e.g., Goffney & Edmonson, 2012; Polka, Litchka, & Davis, 2008; Sharp et al. 2004).

**Recruitment and selection process (gatekeepers).** Researchers identified the superintendent search and selection process as a potential barrier to females gaining access to the superintendency (e.g., Newton, 2006; Shoemaker, 1991; Skria, 1999; Tallerico, 1999). The pathway of the female leader was often fraught with gatekeepers her male counterpart had not faced. A school board member, a highly respected retired administrator, or some community advocate typically served as the gatekeeper. The *good ole boy* fraternity often excluded females by virtue of gender.

Research revealed that the language used in recruitment messages for superintendent searches influenced the hiring of males over females (Newton, 2006). Newton examined the impact of gender, superintendent roles, and district size on the recruitment message for a superintendent vacancy. The sample consisted of 360 randomly selected principals. The results of a 2 X 3 X 3 fixed factor ANOVA revealed, "Women rated position announcements depicting their perceived area of expertise (instructional leadership) significantly more positively than position announcements emphasizing managerial leadership" (Newton, 2006, p. 571). The findings were consistent with previous research that female ratings of recruitment messages depicting specified superintendent roles of instructional, managerial, and political leadership differed.

The values and culture of peers and colleagues excluded females from the *inner circle* of superintendency as well other individuals who represented barriers within the community. Historically, gatekeepers worried about a female in a position of power and

earning a salary possibly higher than any public worker in the district (Doyle, 2012). Dana and Bourisaw (2006) noted that "because women are not usually observed in the more powerful leadership positions, cultures generally will not consider options of electing or appointing a woman to a position that has always been filled by men" (p. 51).

## Summary

While the gender-disparity gap in the school superintendent position has narrowed, the trend does not mirror the increase of females in executive level positions in other professions. The decline of working conditions and rewards have contributed to males' deceased interest in the superintendency. Simultaneously, an increase of females in the labor market and level of education have created a golden opportunity to reduce the under-representation of females in the position. However, barriers still exist that limit opportunities for females in education administrative positions. The barriers identified in the literature included gender bias, lack of career planning and career paths, limited access to mentors and networks, restricted mobility, conflict of job requirements and family commitments, and restricted access by gatekeepers.

## Method

## Research Design

The researchers received approval from their university's Institutional Review Board to conduct the multi-phased, mixed-methods design. The quantitative phase accessed the frequency and magnitude of the barriers female superintendents encountered and the follow-up qualitative phase provided in-depth understanding of the barriers. According to Creswell (2012), a mixed-methods approach is appropriate "to obtain more detailed, specific information than can be gained from the results" (p. 535) of quantitative data alone. Creswell (2009) recommends the identification of a "few individuals [from the sample] to help explain" (p. 121) the quantitative results in more depth. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, researchers can construct a comprehensive model of a social phenomenon.

In the quantitative phase of the study, the researchers recruited all first-appointed female superintendents from a single Southern state to answer a Likert-scale survey. The researchers used descriptive statistics to analyze the results. According to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2006), "descriptive research, also referred to as *survey research,* determines and describes the way things are. It may also compare how sub groups (such as . . . females . . .) view issues" (p. 159). For phase two of the study, the researchers employed a phenomenological qualitative method and selected four of the superintendents to participate in a three-part interview series. The phenomenological method is appropriate to understand the meaning and structure of a lived experience by one or more individuals through in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2007).

## Participants

Based on information from the state department of education and the state superintendent association, the researchers developed a list of females who had served or were serving as

superintendents in the state from 1916 to 2013. From 1916 to 2012 there were 56 first-female superintendents in a district with 41 appointed and 15 elected to the position. At the time of the study, 26 of the 41 first-female appointed superintendents were either employed or retired. The researchers sent the survey to the 26 females. Three reminder email messages followed the initial email invitation. Of the 26 participants, 18 or 69% completed the survey.

For phase two, the researchers selected 4 of the 26 participants for interviewing based on their successful tenures as first-appointed females for their school districts. The researchers defined success as length of tenure in the districts, recognition from national and state organizations, and leadership service in professional organizations. Two of the participants were retired and two were currently serving as superintendents. Two participants were appointed to the position from within the districts, and two were appointed from outside their districts. Two females served in small city districts in rural counties, and two served in city districts within a large metropolitan area. All participants had five board members with four- or five-year rotating terms. Two participants had elected board members and two participants had appointed board members. The average student enrollment of the participants' districts was 2,858, similar to most districts in the state. Approximately 72% of school districts in the state had student enrollments below 5,000. The total number of superintendents in the state during their tenures as superintendent ranged from 125 to 134 and the total number of female superintendents ranged from 11 to 21or less than 17%.

**Instrument**

The researchers developed the survey instrument from an extensive review of the literature and their experiences as female superintendents. The survey consisted of 29 items; Questions 1 – 3 related to the participants' current status; Questions 4 – 11 involved nominal level data items designed to establish occupational, educational, and experiential background; and Questions 12 – 29 consisted of Likert-type scale items identified in the literature as barriers for female superintendents. The participants ranked these items on a 4-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). The researchers electronically communicated the survey to the participants utilizing the survey tool, Qualtrics. The survey took approximately five to eight minutes to complete.

After the development of the initial survey, a panel of five experts reviewed it for validation. The panel consisted of current or former superintendents not included in the population sample. Based on the experts' comments and suggestions, the researchers revised the survey instrument. The revisions included rewording of items for clarification and reclassification of possible responses (see Appendix A for the final version of the survey).

**Interviews**

The researchers collected data from an open-ended, three-part interview series design with first appointed superintendents. According to Creswell (2012) an open-ended interview design can be used as the sole data source or can be used in conjunction with other data sources. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the life experiences

of a particular phenomenon and the meaning participants derived from the experiences. The researchers developed a limited number of questions for each interview in the series and only asked additional questions for clarification or follow-up (Creswell, 2009). The first series of interviews explored the participants' initiation into the school superintendency, the second series concentrated on the resources available and/or provided to gain access to the superintendency, and the third series focused on the participants' reflection of the impact of being a female superintendent.

Each interview was conducted by one of the two researchers. The duration of each interview was approximately 45 minutes spaced 7 to 9 days apart in a location convenient to the participants. Each session was audio recorded and later transcribed.

**Data Analysis**

The survey instrument in phase one focused on the participants' career paths to the superintendency, descriptions of their districts, mentor experiences, networking opportunities, acquired knowledge and skills, resources available, and obstacles encountered. The researchers used descriptive statistics to analyze the surveys. The interviews focused on the participants' journey to the superintendency, experiences during their tenures, and reflections of their legacies. The researchers analyzed the interview transcripts by developing codes to reveal patterns and to identify themes. The codes, patterns, and themes were triangulated with secondary data, survey data from phase one, and a review of literature to gain insight into what the participants perceived as opportunities and barriers to their career paths.

**Results**

**Quantitative Phase**

The results of the survey are reported by the following topics: demographics and background; career planning and career paths; resources: mentors, networks, knowledge; obstacles: mobility, family, gender; and recruitment and selection process.

**Demographics and background.** When the 18 female participants completed the survey, only two were currently serving as superintendents, 15 were 60 years old or older, 16 were Caucasians, and two were African-Americans. The participants described the school districts for their first superintendent position as urban (33%), suburban (33%), and rural (33%). The majority of the participants (72%) reported student enrollments in their first district as 4,000 or less, and only two participants reported student enrollments of 8,000 or more  Immediately prior to their first superintendent appointment, 44% worked in the district, and 56% worked outside the district but in the same state.

**Career planning and career paths.** The majority of the participants were 49 years old or younger when appointed to their first superintendent position. Of the remaining seven participants, six were appointed before age 60 and only one was appointed after age 60. Prior to their appointments as superintendent, all 18 participants previously served as an administrator in the central office, and 15 previously served as a principal with seven at the  high school level, four at the middle school level, and five at the elementary school level. Only two participants did not have an earned doctorate

when appointed to their first superintendent position. The females received limited support for career planning from their professional organizations and their college or university professors with a mean ranking of 2.24 and 2.18 respectively.

A majority of the participants entered the superintendency before age 50. All participants previously served in a central office position, and one-half of the females previously served as a high school principal.

**Resources: mentors, networks, knowledge.** All of the participants had mentors, but the majority indicated that the mentors were not provided through a formal mentoring program. In fact, only one female participated in a formal mentoring program. All the participants had male mentors, and only one participant identified a female as one of her mentors. The majority of respondents (94%) credited their male mentors for guiding their career paths to the superintendency.

Most of the females (76%) agreed that their professional organizations provided opportunities to expand and strengthen their professional networks, but only 56% agreed that their college or university professors provided similar support. While 83% of the respondents credited their college or university course work for strengthening their leadership skills, only 66% agreed that their professional organizations provided similar support. Also, 67% agreed that they had an understanding of the political structure as it related to the position of school superintendent.

**Obstacles: mobility, family, gender.** The respondents did not identify geographic mobility or family responsibilities as a major obstacle in securing their first superintendent position. Only 11% identified family responsibilities, and 28% identified geographic mobility. The perceptions of participants were equally divided between the effectiveness of anti-discrimination legislation and increased opportunities for females in the school superintendent position.

**Recruitment and selection process.** Approximately 89% of the respondents disagreed that their mentors and/or professional networks helped establish relationships with superintendent search firms and/or consultants. All respondents received assistance in securing their first superintendent position from males rather than females. In addition, 28% of the females did not have an understanding or knowledge of the hiring practices and processes for the superintendent position, and 29% did not have knowledge of superintendent vacancies in their geographic preference areas. One or more of the following people and/or organizations contacted and/or identified females as candidates for their first superintendent positions: 61% by a member of the local school board, 39% by personal knowledge of the position, 17% by a professional colleague and/or mentor, 11% by school board organization, 11% by a private search firm or consultant, and none by a college professor.

**Qualitative Phase**

The results of the three-part interview series with four superintendents were reported by the following themes: career planning and career paths, mentors, mobility and family responsibilities, recruitment and selection process, networking, knowledge and skills, and gender bias. The interviewees were identified as Participants A – D.

**Career planning and career paths.** For all four participants, education was their first career, and they entered the profession as a K – 12 teacher. None of them

anticipated nor intended to be a superintendent during their undergraduate program or even when they began their graduate programs. Participant B had intended to pursue a career in law enforcement and Participant A had majored in English in undergraduate school and only pursued teacher certification on the advice of her father. "My father said to me, 'Why don't you just get a teacher's certificate while you are at it. So I did. . . . You know that is just what women did then. They were teachers or nurses." Both Participants C and D planned teaching careers and one taught in an elementary school and one taught in secondary schools.

The participants' primary responsibilities in their first administrative roles were related to curriculum and instruction. Participant D: "In that role I coordinated all instructional programs including textbook adoptions, federal programs, observations of all non-tenured teachers, design and implementation of a tech-prep program . . . and a vocational center. . . . I was promoted to director of secondary schools. . . . [and] with all their instructional . . . issues under my purview of authority." Participant B moved from teacher to "curriculum director" for the school district. Participant C was hired from a teaching position to "start a new school" in another district and then "became assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction." Participant A was promoted from a middle school teacher to "an instructional specialist" in the same school "which was an assistant principal for instruction, essentially." Later Participant A was hired as a high school instructional specialist and director of instruction in two other districts.

However, of the four participants, only Participant B entered the superintendent position during the latter part of her career. She "spent 16 years" as a teacher and "11 years as curriculum and federal programs director" in a central office before becoming superintendent. Participants A, C, and D moved more rapidly than Participant B from teacher to central office position, to superintendent. Those three participants spent an average of 6 years as a teacher and an average of 7 years in a central office position before their appointment to a superintendent position. Participant C: "I was hired as a principal when I was 27 years old."

Early in their careers, all participants enrolled in graduate programs to qualify for additional certifications and/or earn graduate degrees. As Participant A stated, "I went to school a lot." Participant D: "After two years [in an administrative position] I decided to pursue a doctorate. . . . I entered a program in administration and planning to keep all options open." Participant C: "I went straight through school because I wanted to be a principal of a neighborhood school. . . I completed my PhD at age 27."

None of the participants planned to enter administration after completing their undergraduate degrees. Even when the participants moved up the ladder to administrative positions, they did not immediately consider the superintendency as a viable career option. Participant A: "It had never in my life occurred to me that I would be a superintendent . . . [until] the Board . . . made me assistant superintendent. There were no female superintendents in the . . . area. There were only . . . [a few] female superintendents in the state, but I did not know them. . . . While I was assistant superintendent, I thought, 'Maybe I can be superintendent.'" Participant D: "While attending [doctoral] classes, and especially the class on the Superintendency, I came to realize I could be successful as a superintendent."

**Mentor.** Participant C: I did not participate in any formal mentoring program." Participant A: "None of the mentors . . . said, 'I am your mentor' and I did not say 'Will

you be my mentor.' They were . . . all unofficial who just decided to help me." All the unofficial mentors were males in influential administrative positions, except for one male college professor.

All the participants credited their mentors for providing connections that enabled them to advance in leadership positions and/or gain acceptance in the community. Participant A: "They . . . gave me introductions to people in positions that could hire me or be helpful to me. . . . He [mentor] heard that a position was coming available in [district] . . . and called the superintendent and said that I would be good for the job." Participant C: "He [mentor] encouraged the board to recruit me to be their superintendent." Participant D: "He supported my intention to apply for the superintendent position and spoke positively to board members about my competence for the position." Participant B was appointed superintendent from outside the district and did not know the community. She described mentors that provided introductions in the community. "After I was named superintendent . . . I tried to find people . . . who knew the community and the ropes. I was lucky because [mentor] was a former superintendent . . . and called people. . . . He helped in that way." She described another mentor that helped with community introductions and background information. "He [mentor] knew everything about the people and community. . . He prepared the way for me."

Mentors provided encouragement for all the participants. Participant D: "The [mentor] told me on several occasions that I would make a good superintendent." Participant C talked about several different male mentors: "He believed in me at an early age, supported and guided me as a young principal, and used me on [state committees] when . . . I was a superintendent. I remember him saying . . . he knew me and that I was a good superintendent. His words and encouragement meant a lot to me. . . . He has always believed in me and supported me." She spoke about another male mentor: "When I was assistant superintendent . . . [mentor] . . . encouraged me to become a superintendent." Participant B's mentors offered support by encouraging her to seek superintendent positions. "Both mentors wanted me to be successful." Participant A's mentors provided similar encouragement. "[He] . . . tried to mentor me into the superintendency in [district]."

The mentors provided valuable opportunities for the participants to expand their knowledge. Participant C: "He gave me opportunities to expand my repertoire. I was responsible for curriculum and instruction; however, he assigned me to oversee the budget . . . He also spent time preparing me for a public interview. We actually reviewed possible questions and coached me on my responses. He also helped me to know what questions I needed to ask the board and how to tell if a system was a good fit for me." Participant D reported that her mentor expanded her authority and supervision, met with her regularly to provide feedback on her performance. "I met with him at least monthly. . . . He shared his thoughts and ideas on how to manage the work or the latest controversy. . . . He certainly helped me in my career."

**Mobility and family responsibilities.** Participants received support from their children and/or their spouses to continue their education and to serve in executive leadership positions. Not all colleges and universities offered doctorate programs so the participants had limited opportunities to earn a terminal degree. The university in Participant A's geographic location offered a joint doctoral program with a university in another part of the state. Participant A: "I had to do something in [city] because that was

where my children were." Participant C: "I got married and started in the master's program. Finished the master's degree and went into the doctoral program because . . . lived in [city] which is close proximity to the university." Participant D had teenage children when she began her doctoral program. "[University] was closer to [city], but their courses were two nights a week from 5:00 to 9:00. There was no way I could leave work [early] that often. . . . [University] had weekend college and although I had to drive [several hours] one way . . . it was doable." When Participant B needed to complete the necessary certification requirements, her family responsibilities had been reduced, and she was able to commute an extended distance. "I did not have the required certification and [Institution] was close, so I went there." Participant D: "During my tenure as superintendent, I had no children at home. My husband continued to commute to [city] for his job. However . . . my parents . . . had numerous [health] issues. Caring for both of them made it difficult to continue to serve [as superintendent]."

 **Recruitment and selection process.** Two of the participants were hired from within the district and two were hired from outside the district. If a search firm selected the superintendent, a current board member or one of the participant's mentors referred the participant's name to the search firm. So the participants were either the inside candidate known for her knowledge and leadership skills or recommended by an influential male mentor. Participant C: "A school board member in [district] called me and asked me to consider applying to be their superintendent. She had toured my school when I was a principal. . . . An attorney . . . who had worked with me on a bond issue in [district], encouraged the [district] board to recruit me to be their superintendent." Participant D: "He . . . told the [district] board members he was grooming me to replace him one day." Participant B: "The board president came to me and asked why I did not have an application with them." When Participant A's superintendent notified the board he was searching for a new position, "the board made me assistant superintendent. . . . and said, 'We want you to' [assume superintendent responsibilities while he is searching for a new position]. . . . The board said they were going to look internally first and then look externally. . . . I think they wanted me [to apply]."

 **Networking.** Participation in state and national organizations provided opportunities to expand their knowledge, skills, influence, and recognition. Participant C: "I became a member of a [national] superintendents' network. . . . This is a group of likeminded, reformed oriented superintendents who meet a few times each year to learn together. We all were united by our desire to truly transform public schools. Their stories have encouraged and inspired me." Participant D: "I began attending [the state school superintendent association] meetings with our superintendent and gained a system-wide view of the challenges in running a school system."

 The participants, also, reflected how networking provided opportunities for them to re-connect with their mentors. Participant C: "I consult with the state school board association. . . . I have now come full circle and am co-consulting with [former mentor] with [district]." Participant A: "So it was like a circle, so then I was his mentor. . . . Interesting how those things come around."

 **Knowledge and skills.** The participants reported the following strengths: instructional leadership, collaboration and problem solving skills, relationship development, fairness, trustworthiness, and transparency. Some of the participants

reported knowledge and skill gaps in board governance, navigating the political culture, and managing the construction process.

Participant A: "While I was assistant superintendent, I solved a lot of [community and employee relation] issues and problems. . . . Forming relationships is important and I don't think women are better than men, but I think that women have to do it [to be successful]. . . . I had a good relationship with all of [the board members]." Participant D: "My greatest success was building a wonderful working relationship with the school board built on trust and shared goals. Together we [had] many successes that benefited the students and . . . community as a whole." Participant B reported one of her best accomplishments was the implementation of an instructional program that improved the graduation rate for at-risk students. She also resolved legal and personnel issues. "I did not expect . . . [some types] of problems. . . I was sued for discrimination and won . . . the cases because I had documented everything and followed everything to the letter of the law. . . . This was just common sense and not from any training in college courses." Participant C: "I worked with some of the greatest educators who had the same passion for student learning. Together we improved teaching and student learning."

The participants articulated knowledge gaps that were a hindrance in their careers. Participant B: "I did not know anything about interactions with a board. . . . I was not at all prepared . . . to handle all the board issues. . . . I learned [on the job] . . . I knew nothing about bids . . . the bid process and construction." Participant C reported inexperience in navigating the political culture. Her superintendent's network provided support and resources "through difficult political situations."

**Gender bias.** Overall the participants reported that board members and superintendent colleagues were supportive of females in the role of superintendent. Participant A reported that her board was not biased. "None of the board members was [biased] but . . . a strong community member, took me out to lunch and said, 'I don't know if you know it, but there was a strong push back before you were hired—not from the board but other community members—that they should not hire you because you are a woman.' No board member ever mentioned it to me."

All the participants indicated that their colleagues were supportive. Participant A: "I don't think men thought we were interested in the superintendency, it was not that they were against us. . . . When I started attending the district superintendent meetings, I was the only female. . . . they [superintendents] were very, very nice to me. They accepted me. . . . The first person who called me [after I was appointed to the superintendent position] was . . . a female superintendent. She said, 'Welcome to the club. Call me anytime you need me.'" Participant B reported relationships that she established with two female superintendents in the state. "I came to know both of these women. . . . I listened to [her] ideas and used several. She is a success story for me." Participant A: "The [district] superintendent . . . called me and said, 'Come talk to me and I will give you some advice about your contract.'"

The gender bias challenges usually came from a few community members or groups, male high school principals, and private contractors. Though there were a few blatant bias acts, most of the acts were subtle or concealed. However, over a period of time the participants were able to quiet most of the naysayers. Participant A: "One of the Rotary Club members . . . told me that his idea about the glass ceiling issue had totally changed and the reason was because his daughter was in a [male dominated] profession

and had run into those . . . issues." Participant C: "Because I had not been a coach, some assumed I was not supportive of athletics. No matter how much I did to support athletics . . . there were still some [community members] who continued to say I was not supportive." Participant D: "I never enjoyed the warm *good ol' boy* relationship with those in charge of the town; but they respected me."

Participant A: "He [principal] always insisted on calling me *Honey* and I just let it go." Participant D: "I did face the challenge from a few men that thought a woman couldn't do the job. A principal retired because he wasn't 'going to work for a woman' . . . . [Later] he apologized . . . and [said] that he had been unfair in his assumptions. . . . The question of a woman being able to do the job never surfaced again. Participant C: "I had some . . . contractors and subcontractors who initially treated me as if I was not knowledgeable. . . . I did have one vendor who told me that 'this was far too complicated' for me to understand." Participant B: I was . . . not prepared for the attitudes towards female superintendents [from certain employees and contractors]."

The participants addressed how gender bias impacted their leadership style. Participant A reported that she had to be assertive in a "softer way than men. . . . In order to get people to do things or to tell them they can't do things, [females] cannot be as outwardly assertive as a man. . . . So my challenge was how to do that and . . . [do] it successfully. . . . I probably did get more assertive in certain areas. . . . but I still could not let go of the Southern niceness." Participant D tended to be less aggressive on pursuing certain projects if it could ignite negative female leadership perception. "In the superintendency, timing is everything. . . . Initially this group was opposed to [the project], so instead of pushing it through 4-1, we worked with the issue over time. . . . [It] took two years . . . until I had a 5-0 vote. . . . Afterwards . . . the [person] said he was wrong and I was right about the [project]."

## Discussion

Mentor relationships and support emerged as the primary reason for the females' successful career paths. Secondary support resources included networking opportunities, collaboration skills, instructional leadership, fairness, and transparency. Family responsibilities and gender bias presented challenges on their journeys to the superintendency; however, the largest obstacles were lack of career planning and inadequate preparation and knowledge of board governance, the political culture, and the construction process.

### Opportunities

While none of the females participated in a formal mentoring program, all had one or more mentors. All the participants credited their mentors for their successful career path. The research studies of McNulty (2002) and Goffney and Edmonson (2012) supported their claims of mentors providing access to the superintendency. The lack of formal mentoring programs is documented in the literature (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). None of these participants had formal mentors despite the trend of increased mentorships for females as reported by Brunner and Kim (2010).

Often the mentors were their link to networking opportunities. The participants identified networking as a resource that provided opportunities for them to expand their knowledge, increase their sphere of influence, and collaborate with likeminded colleagues.

The participants' attributed their success as superintendents to their knowledge and skills in instructional leadership, collaboration, and relationship development and their management of fairness, trustworthiness, and transparency. Others (e.g., Korcheck, 2002; Rio, 2009) reported similar leadership strengths for female superintendents.

**Obstacles**

Limited mobility due to family responsibilities was an obstacle for the participants in their pursuit of advanced degrees and additional certifications. The participants' selection of a university or college was based on geographic location and flexibility of the instructional delivery model. These findings were consistent with the results of Dana and Bourisan (2006). However, only one participant reported family responsibilities interfering with job responsibilities. Since the participants received support from their families, this barrier had limited negative impact on their career paths (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006).

The increased visibility of women in management and non-traditional occupational roles (U.S. Department of Commerce Economics, 2011) resulted in a reduction of gender bias the participants experienced from the community. Polnick et al. (2008) reported similar findings in their research. The females' awareness of gender bias influenced their leadership style. However, instead of adopting masculine leadership traits as reported in other research (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008), they compensated by capitalizing on perceived feminine traits of consensus building and relationship development. Likewise, Rico (2009) found female superintendents consciously built a caring culture in the district and community.

The female participants entered the profession as K – 12 teachers. Their primary job responsibilities for their first administrative position were curriculum and instruction, and they did not plan a career path to the school superintendency. These experiences are consistent with findings from other studies (e.g., Glass, 2000; Hoff & Mitchell, 2008; Sharpe et al., 2004; Young & McCleod, 2001). However, in contrast to previous studies (i.e. Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tallerico, 2000), three of the four participants moved quickly from teacher to an administrative position and then to the superintendency. Their timelines to the superintendent positions were similar to their male counterparts. In addition, none of the participants had served as a secondary principal, which was inconsistent to the career path documented in previous studies (Sharp et al., 2004). The participants followed the education trends as reported by the U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics (2011). They were enrolled in graduate programs and obtained certification in multiple areas early in their careers.

The participants reported a need for practical experience and knowledge in the areas of board governance, political culture, and the construction process. These knowledge and skills gaps were expected since females' typical job responsibilities were related to curriculum and instruction and not finance, maintenance, and human resources (Glass, 2000; Sharpe et al., 2004).

## Conclusion

Since the study was limited to first-appointed female superintendents in one Southern state, use caution regarding generalization of the findings.  The obstacles and opportunities reported by first-appointed female superintendents in Alabama might only be representative of females who were first to break the gender barrier in school districts in Alabama or the Southeastern United States in appointed rather than elected positions. Because Alabama is only one of three states with elected and appointed superintendents, first-elected female superintendents were not included in the study (E. Mackey, personal communication, August 3, 2015).

Since mentors continue identification as one of the most significant factors for females' successful entry into the superintendency, representatives from state departments of education, universities and colleges, and professional organizations could collaborate and establish formal mentoring programs with specific structures for issues related to females.  An important first step in supporting females new to the superintendency could include the identification of a pool of influential mentors to provide connections, opportunities to expand their knowledge and skills, encouragement, and feedback on performance.  The collaboration among the institutions could extend to the development of networking opportunities for aspiring female leaders.

Career planning could begin in undergraduate education programs and continue through all levels of graduate programs.  Creating forums and other opportunities for students to interact with females in influential leadership positions could encourage potential future leaders in education, support them in developing their skills, and remove some of the barriers to females in leadership.  Collaboration among institutions could provide students explicit information on career paths, and knowledge about gender bias in the workplace.

As education leadership graduate programs restructure instructional delivery models to include greater flexibility that accommodates students in remote geographic locations and with limited flexibility in work hours, females could access the graduate degrees and certifications required for advancement.  Course objectives or standards should include students' working knowledge of board governance, the political culture of a school district, the construction process, and gender bias in the work place.

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Appendix A
# Women's Journey to the School Superintendency Survey
Authors: Peggy H. Connell and F. Jane Cobia
Developed July 2013
Online Survey in Qualtrics


**Directions: Select the correct answer for each item below. Follow the instructions to submit.**

1. Have you served as an appointed school superintendent? (If the answer is no, please do not continue the survey.)
   o Yes
   o No

2. Are you presently a school superintendent?
   o Yes
   o No

3. Current age
   o 39 or younger
   o 40 to 44
   o 45 to 49
   o 50 to 54
   o 55 to 59
   o 60 or over

4. Age when first appointed to a superintendent position
   o 39 or younger
   o 40 to 44
   o 45 to 49
   o 50 to 54
   o 55 to 59
   o 60 or over

5. Educational experience prior to the superintendent position; select all that apply
   o Elementary School Principal
   o Middle School Principal
   o High School Principal
   o Asst. Superintendent/Director/Supervisor
   o None of the responses

6. How were you contacted and/or identified as a candidate for your first superintendent position? Select all that apply.
   o Private search firm or consultant
   o School board or school superintendent organization
   o Local board solicited

- Personal knowledge of position opening/self-referral
- Professional colleague/mentor
- College professor
- Life coach
- Other

7. What was the highest degree held when appointed to your first superintendent position?
- M.A./M.S
- Ed.S./6-year degree
- Ed.D./Ph.D.

8. Where did you work immediately prior to your first appointed superintendent position?
- Worked in the district
- Worked outside the district, but in the same state
- Worked outside the district and outside the state
- Other

9. Description of the school district for your first superintendent position
- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural

10. Student enrollment of the school district for your first superintendent position.
- 2,500 or less
- 2,501 – 4,000
- 4,001 – 8,000
- Over 8,000

11. Select the response that best describes your race/ethnicity.
- Caucasian
- African-American
- Latina
- Asian
- Other
- Do not wish to respond

**Directions: Read each statement carefully. Indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the statements below by clicking the appropriate response for your choice.**

12. My mentor(s) was/were instrumental in guiding my career path to the superintendency.
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree

- o Agree
- o Strongly Agree

13. My mentor(s) was/were female(s).
   - o Strongly Disagree
   - o Disagree
   - o Agree
   - o Strongly Agree

14. My mentor(s) was/were male(s)
   - o Strongly Disagree
   - o Disagree
   - o Agree
   - o Strongly Agree

15. Male mentors and/or colleagues provided more assistance in securing my first superintendent position than female mentors and/or colleagues provided
   - o Strongly Disagree
   - o Disagree
   - o Agree
   - o Strongly Agree

16. My mentor(s) was/were provided through a formal mentoring program.
   - o Strongly Disagree
   - o Disagree
   - o Agree
   - o Strongly Agree

17. My mentor(s) and/or professional network helped me establish relationships with superintendent search firms and/or consultants.
   - o Strongly Disagree
   - o Disagree
   - o Agree
   - o Strongly Agree

18. My professional organization(s) provided opportunities to expand and strengthen my professional network.
   - o Strongly Disagree
   - o Disagree
   - o Agree
   - o Strongly Agree

19. My college/university professor(s) provided opportunities to expand and strengthen my professional network.
   - o Strongly Disagree
   - o Disagree

o Agree
o Strongly Agree

20. My professional organization(s) assisted in my career planning and career path to the school superintendent position.
   o Strongly Disagree
   o Disagree
   o Agree
   o Strongly Agree

21. My college/university professor(s) assisted in my career planning and career path to the school superintendent position.
   o Strongly Disagree
   o Disagree
   o Agree
   o Strongly Agree

22. My professional organization(s) provided leadership activities and/or opportunities that strengthened my leadership skills for the superintendent position.
   o Strongly Disagree
   o Disagree
   o Agree
   o Strongly Agree

23. My college/university course work strengthened my leadership skills for the superintendent position.
   o Strongly Disagree
   o Disagree
   o Agree
   o Strongly Agree

24. Prior to my first superintendent appointment, I had a thorough understanding and knowledge of the hiring practices and processes for the superintendent position.
   o Strongly Disagree
   o Disagree
   o Agree
   o Strongly Agree

25. Prior to my first superintendent appointment, I had an understanding of the political structure as it relates to the position of school superintendent.
   o Strongly Disagree
   o Disagree
   o Agree
   o Strongly Agree

26. Prior to my first superintendent appointment, I had knowledge of superintendent vacancies in my geography preferences.
    o   Strongly Disagree
    o   Disagree
    o   Agree
    o   Strongly Agree

27. Anti-discrimination legislation has increased the opportunities for females in the school superintendent position.
    o   Strongly Disagree
    o   Disagree
    o   Agree
    o   Strongly Agree

28. Geographic mobility was a hindrance to securing my first superintendent appointment.
    o   Strongly Disagree
    o   Disagree
    o   Agree
    o   Strongly Agree

29. Family responsibilities were a hindrance to securing my first superintendent appointment.
    o   Strongly Disagree
    o   Disagree
    o   Agree
    o   Strongly Agree

# Appendix B

## Tables B1 and B2

Table B1
*Survey Summary of Demographics and Background Responses*

| Current Superintendent | | | Current Age | | | Age First Appointed | | | Ethnicity | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 2 | 11% | 45 – 49 | 1 | 6% | 39/under 11% | 2 | | White 89% | 16 |
| No | 16 | 89% | 50 – 54 | 1 | 6% | 40 - 44 28% | 5 | | Black 11% | 2 |
| | | | 55 – 59 | 1 | 6% | 45 – 49 22% | 4 | | | |
| | | | 60+ | 15 | 83% | 50 - 55 8% | 5 | | | |
| | | | | | | 55– 59 6% | 1 | | | |
| | | | | | | 60+ 6% | 1 | | | |

Table B2
*Survey Summary of Educational Experience*

| Degree First Appointment | | Prior Educational Experiences | | | Location Prior to Appointment | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ed. S. 11% | 2 | Principal | 16 | 89% | District 44% | 8 |
| 6+ Degree | | Elementary | 5 | 28% | | |
| | | Middle | 4 | 22% | | |
| | | Secondary | 7 | 39% | Other District 56% | 10 |
| EdD 89% | 16 | | | | | |
| PhD | | Asst./Director/ Supervisor | 18 | 100% | Same State | |