

Hoff, D. L., & Mitchell, S. N. (2008) *In Search of Leaders: Gender Factors in School Administration. Advancing Women in Leadership*, 26(2).

# **In Search of Leaders: Gender Factors in School Administration**

**By Dianne L. Hoff and Sidney N. Mitchell**

***Advancing Women in Leadership***

**Spring 2008**

## **Abstract**

Research points to a current and growing shortage of school leaders, yet qualified women are still under-represented in school administration. The purpose of this study was to examine the career paths of both male and female school leaders and their perceptions of gender factors that affect entry and advancement in leadership. Results reveal that gender socialization, belief in a meritocracy, and the influence of patriarchy create a cycle of discrimination that is hard to interrupt. Further, both men and women admitted the existence of gender barriers that disproportionately harm women. Implications for schools, university preparation programs, professional associations, and school leaders are discussed.

## IN SEARCH OF LEADERS: GENDER FACTORS IN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

Across the country, school districts face a struggle in attracting and retaining talented leaders. Several studies have suggested that the reasons for this attrition include long hours, poor salaries that are not commensurate with responsibilities, increased demands for accountability and an aging administrative workforce that is nearing retirement (Adams, 1999; Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella 2000; Normore, 2004; RAND, 2003). School districts report shrinking applicant pools (NAESP, 2003) at a time when turnover rates are increasing, a trend which threatens to “cut the legs out from under schools’ ability to improve” (Buckingham, Donaldson, & Marnik, 2006, p. 37). A leadership crisis appears to be on the horizon, which will challenge the entire profession to think differently about school leadership and who will fill leadership roles.

At the same time, university programs in educational leadership are thriving and schools are replete with talented teachers. There exists a puzzling disconnection between supply and demand for leaders that cannot be completely explained by the disincentives that accompany school administrative roles. The fact that women represent only 18% of the nation’s superintendents (Grogan & Brunner, 2005), in comparison to 75% of the nation’s teaching force (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), may shed light on the problem. Indeed, a qualified talent pool *does* exist, and statistics show that this pool consists primarily of women, who for some time have represented the largest percentage of both the teaching profession and educational leadership preparation programs (Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1999). Yet women remain underrepresented in leadership roles, particularly in high school principalships and superintendencies, the positions that carry the most responsibility and influence and the highest salaries (Grogan & Brunner 2005; Keller, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1999). Numerous scholars have argued that gender-related factors often deter women from entering school administrative roles and impede their progress toward advancement (e.g., Estler, 1975; Grady, 1992; Marshall & Kasten, 1994; Valian, 1999). A review of the literature reveals that many of these factors are attributable to the persistence of socialized gender norms, which are discussed briefly below.

*Persistence of Gender Norms*

Gender norms are the expectations society holds for masculine and feminine behavior, and which serve to limit what is, and is not, considered to be appropriate roles and behaviors for men and women (Allan, 2004; Bem, 1993; Kimmel, 2000). Gender norms are learned roles and behaviors, not genetically determined by sex, and yet become so ingrained that the line between the two becomes blurred and difficult to see. Valian (1999) refers to these norms as gender schemas, which are “a set of implicit, or nonconscious, hypotheses about sex differences [that play] a central role in shaping men’s and women’s professional lives” (p. 2). These norms or schemas have a profound impact on leadership in several ways. First, the type of behavior and character traits we expect from leaders is associated with masculine norms (Blount, 1998; Lugg, 2003). Further, as Bem (1993) points out, cultural expectations for masculine and feminine traits not only differ from one another, they are at polar opposites; masculinity is associated with action and strength, whereas femininity is associated with passivity, fragility, and vulnerability.

When men act with authority and decisiveness, therefore, they are usually viewed in a positive light, since these actions fall within the range of desirable behaviors our society holds for males. Women, acting the exact same way, risk being seen as too “mannish” or are imagined to be gay (Lugg, 2003). The very same behavior, then, can serve to enhance the esteem in which

men are held, and diminish the esteem held for a woman. Since authority and decisiveness are traits also associated with leadership, it follows that men are often viewed more positively as leaders. To illustrate, the perception persists that men are more skilled at handling school disciplinary, political, and budgetary issues, especially at the high school and superintendent levels, because these are issues that require the kind of authority often attributed to males. This gives men an advantage when competing with women for upper level administrative positions (Gewertz, 2006; Logan, 1998; Marshall & Kasten, 1994; Skrla, 2000 and 2001). To counteract these gender norms, many women consciously assume traits associated with masculinity and shun association with women's groups that may be perceived as being divisive or separatist (Johnson, 1997; Tallerico, 2000). However, these strategies do little to dismantle, as Catherine Marshall (2006) points out, "the white male norms embedded in the very definitions of leadership (p. 9). Instead of empowering women, this acquiescence to norms leads to a diminished sense of self and reinforces unproductive stereotypes.

Studies on women in leadership also suggest that women routinely find themselves torn between enormous demands of administration and societal expectations for women in terms of family responsibilities (Grogan, 1999; Hoff, Menard & Tuell, 2006; Johnson, 1997; Tallerico, 2000; Valian, 1999; Young & McLeod 2001). This tension is in part the result of a gender norm, which values men at work (the breadwinner) and women at home (the caregiver). Women, more so than men, must figure out how to balance family responsibilities and make choices about what will be "given up" in order to pursue leadership positions.

The result of these established gender norms is that women often hold lower expectancies for careers in administration. Expectancies are commonly defined as "beliefs about a future state of affairs" (Olson, Roese, & Zanna, 1996, p. 211). If there are expectancies, for example, that advancement to leadership positions requires becoming a high school principal, adopting masculine traits, and sacrificing time with the family, these can serve as disincentives to seeking a career in administration, particularly for women.

The literature, therefore, points to several gender-related factors that are correlated to the under-representation of women at the highest level of school administration. This study adds to the discourse by including the viewpoints of both male and female administrators, in a variety of roles, on the cultural and political factors they believe affect entry and advancement in school administration. The inclusion of both sexes allowed us to compare and contrast both their career paths and their perceptions. The data point to several factors that may be contributing to gender imbalance in school leadership.

### The Study

This study was conducted across the state of Maine and included female and male administrators from rural, suburban, and urban areas. Like other parts of the country, Maine has seen an increase in women holding school leadership positions at all levels, but Maine also mirrors the rest of the country in the low number of females in the most influential and visible administrative roles. Over the past three years, for example, the percentage of women in high school principalships in Maine has remained in the 18-19% range, and the percentage of women in the superintendency has hovered around 18-20% (Maine Department of Education, 2006), which is congruent with the national average of 18% (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). The low number of women in these key roles points to the fact that women face a "glass ceiling," as they attempt to advance in school leadership, and so we endeavored to uncover factors that may be contributing to the persistence of this phenomenon. Specifically, we explored the paths that

school administrators took as they moved into administration and the degree to which they believe cultural/political factors had an impact on advancement. The operating assumption was that by comparing the responses of female and male respondents, we might uncover new or ongoing reasons for the under-representation of women in the highest levels of administration. This information, then, could lead to strategies that could increase the recruitment and retention of women at all levels of school administration. This research builds on an earlier study (Hoff, Menard, and Tuell, 2006) that examined the views of *female* administrators by adding the viewpoints of their *male* counterparts. It provides both quantitative and qualitative evidence that supports and extends previous work on this topic.

Participants were drawn from the ranks of superintendents, high school principals, middle school principals, elementary principals, and district middle level administrators, which we defined as special education directors and curriculum coordinators. We first looked at the total number of people in a given role by gender. During the first round of data collection (the women of the study), we noted that there were 80 women or fewer serving in every role, except elementary principal, where there were 235. To balance the representation among administrative roles, we sent surveys to all female superintendents, high school principals, middle school principals, and district middle level administrators, but we used stratified random sampling to select 80 participants from the ranks of elementary principals. This kept the number among roles in better balance so that no one group was disproportionately represented in the study. It also ensured that within roles with proportionately fewer women, we had a more robust sample. We also stratified the sample within roles to make certain all areas of the state were represented. When the study was extended to include male participants, we used the same method, sending surveys to all the men in a given role if there were 80 or fewer in that group, but using stratified random sampling if the number exceeded 80.

The total number of participants including both Phase A (the women) and Phase B (the men) was 680. Our return rate was 59% for the women (175) and 60% for the men (229) for a total of 404 respondents. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of the participants.

Table 1: Phase A – Participants in the Gender Study: The Women

Administrative Role	Total Number of <i>Females</i> In This Role Statewide	Total Percentage of <i>Females</i> In This Role Statewide	Number Of Surveys Sent	Number Responding To The Survey	Percentage Responding To The Survey
Superintendents	30	19%	30	24	80%
High School Principals	28	18%	28	24	86%
Middle School Principals	80	56%	80	47	59%
Elementary Principals	235	51%	80*	43	54%
District Mid-Level Administrators	155	64%	80*	37	46%
Total:			298	175	59%

Table 2: Phase B – Participants in the Gender Study: The Men

Administrative Role	Total Number of <i>Males</i> In This Role Statewide	Total Percentage of <i>Males</i> In This Role Statewide	Number Of Surveys Sent	Number Responding To The Survey	Percentage Responding To The Survey
Superintendents	131	81%	80*	56	70%
High School Principals	129	82%	80*	59	74%
Middle School Principals	62	44%	62	34	55%
Elementary Principals	225	49%	80*	44	55%
District Mid-Level Administrators	88	36%	80*	36	45%
Total:			382	229	60%

\*Selected by stratified random sampling covering all 4 quadrants of the state.

The guiding questions for the study included:

- What are the career paths of female and male school administrators, and what do these patterns illuminate about gender factors in entering school leadership roles?
- What perceptions do male and female administrators hold about cultural and political boundaries that may inhibit advancement in educational leadership?

The data analysis proceeded in four steps. First, the quantitative data collected from the women were examined. Because this was exploratory data analysis, descriptive and inferential statistics were used to organize, summarize, and describe measures of the sample. Second, the open-ended responses were coded by research question and then by categories and themes. Once sorted, responses were also tallied under each theme. Third, the above steps were repeated using the data from the male participants. And finally, both the quantitative and qualitative data were compared and contrasted according to the sex, administrative level, and experience of respondents, which allowed us to uncover congruencies and incongruencies among participant groups. The mixed method approach, using quantitative and qualitative data, strengthened the interpretations and permitted greater generalization.

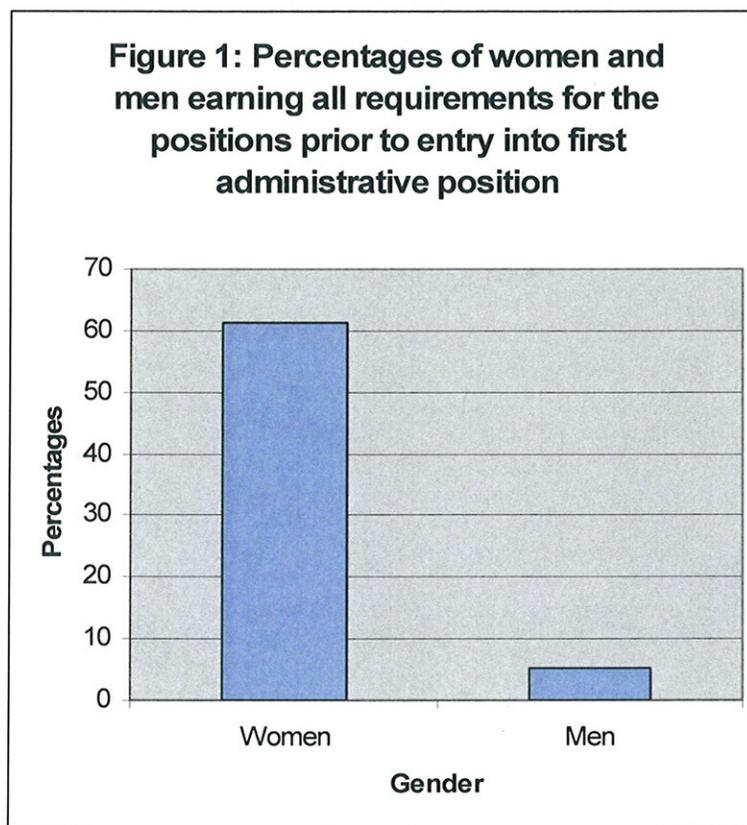
### Findings

The findings of this study are organized and presented according to the two main foci of this study – factors affecting entry into administration, and then factors affecting advancement.

#### *Entry into Administrative Roles*

Timing, preparation, mobility, career planning, and career paths all emerged as factors that affect entry into school administration, and there were significant differences in how these played out for men and women in this study. In terms of timing, survey responses indicate that women tend to delay entry into administration compared to men, which may negatively affect their advancement opportunities. For example, the women, in this study, on average had taught for 13 years before moving into their first administrative role, compared to just 8 years in the

classroom among male participants. A univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) by gender revealed the difference to be significant  $F(1,403) = 116.37, p < .001$ . There was also evidence of a preparation disparity between women and men prior to taking their first administrative role. Women frequently had completed all requirements for administrative certification, earned an advanced degree, and waited for their children to be in or through school before applying for their first leadership role, which was in stark contrast to the preparation male respondents reported. To illustrate, 16% of men entered their first administrative job without meeting *any* of the requirements for a degree or certification, which is allowable in Maine by request of a superintendent, and allows the candidate one year to become minimally certified. In comparison, no woman entered administration without meeting some of the qualifications. In fact, 61.14% of women indicated that they waited until they met all of the educational requirements (certificate and advanced degree) and for their children to be grown before entering administration compared to only 5.21% of men. (See Figure 1.)



Women also expressed more tension between the time demands of job and their family responsibilities. When asked on a four point scale (1 “not at all” to 4 “very much”) about the tension between job and family responsibilities the mean for women was 3.04 compared to 2.57 for the men. A univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) by sex revealed the difference to be significant  $F(1, 403) = 29.19, p < .001, \eta^2 = .068$ .

In terms of mobility, male participants had switched districts to obtain their administrative position at significantly higher rates than females. On average, 66.5% of men reported that they had moved to get an administrative job compared to 44.5% of women.

Women also waited for someone else to “tap” them for the role and encourage them to apply, clearly needing more affirmation before proceeding into administration than men did. Responses further indicated a difference in career planfulness, with women in general not as planful about their careers as early or to the degree that men were. The data show, for example, that 41% of the male administrators reported it had been their intent from the outset of their educational careers to move into administration, whereas only 19% of the women said they had engaged in this early career planning.

Finally, men and women agreed that the most likely career path to the superintendency was through the high school principalship, with 65.41% of men and 67.20% of women sharing this belief. Considering the relatively low number of women who currently hold high school principalships, however, this is not a good sign for increasing the number of women in the superintendency.

### *Discussion on Entry into Administrative Roles*

Late entry into administration by women is clearly a contributing factor to their lower representation at the highest levels of school administrations. Three factors emerged that contributed to the delay. First, a large percentage of the women waited for the time to be right in terms of family responsibilities. Respondents were on both ends of the continuum in their interpretations of this finding. On the one end, there were men and women who saw an uneven burden for women in terms of family responsibilities. As one female respondent stated, “The expectations for women in terms of family are just accepted. Men do not face this.” In contrast, there were men and women in the study who indicated that this was a “choice” women make, rather than a “barrier.” One female respondent said “Many women want to stay home with their families and not take on the added pressures of administration.” And from one male respondent, “Women frequently choose family/personal values ahead of career advancement. This is a choice, not evidence of gender bias.”

Both viewpoints have some validity, of course. There are many women who choose to delay (or forego) administrative careers due to their desire to devote more time to family responsibilities, but there is also an unequal *expectation* to attend to family that falls on the shoulders of women. And both of these – personal choices and societal expectations – are linked to gender socialization about appropriate roles for women and men. The findings of this study suggest that these expectations for women and women’s perception of their own roles, priorities, and responsibilities have not changed much when compared to those that Shakeshaft (1987) reported twenty years ago. There is also irony in the fact that schools, the very institutions from which we would most expect a family-friendly and gender-neutral organizational structure, still seem steeped in administrative role expectations and time demands that favor men.

The second factor that contributed to women’s delayed entry into administration was their tendency to be “super-prepared” before applying, which supports the findings of Spencer and Kochan (2000), who found that women enter administration with greater professional preparation. The women in this study waited until they had the experience and expertise for others to notice – as evidenced by the number of women who went into their first administrative role because they were “tapped” for the position, rather than as a result of career planning. This aligns with previous research (Edson, 1988; Shakeshaft, 1987), as does our finding that the number of years in the classroom before applying was much higher for women than men (Lunenbergh & Orienstein, 1991). Indeed, the distribution of the data on this point is quite

startling. There were 52 (23%) of the male respondents who had taught 0 and 4 years prior to their first administrative role, whereas only 2 (.01%) of the women entered with so few years in the classroom.

Most women had also completed all requirements for certification and their entire degree program before entering their first leadership position. One woman stated, "I felt I needed to go into the job completely prepared, knowing as much as I could." Unfortunately, this attention to detail seems to be delaying women's entry, and thus impeding their advancement, and it was in stark contrast to men, some of whom had no "qualifications" (in terms of certificate held or advanced degree) prior to attaining their first position. The resulting perception – that the lack of full preparation does not impede the careers of men, yet it may for women – helps explain why many women wait. It also raises the question, "Were qualified women overlooked when men without certification were being hired?" Our discussion on the "Good Ol' Boy Network" in the next section sheds some light on this, but when we factor in that more women than men are in educational leadership programs, an affirmative answer seems likely.

The third factor affecting late entry into administration was that women were much less likely to switch districts than were men (45% for women compared to 66% for men). Women cited the comfort in established relationships as an important reason to remain in the current position. One female respondent said, for example, "I'd rather stay where I am comfortable than switch to a new setting." From another, "The relationships I have established are important to me." And from a third, "I'm always the one who doesn't want to move. When we do move, it's been for my spouse's job." This finding is consistent with previous research (Grogan, 1999, Spencer & Kochran, 2000), and reveals that little has changed over the previous two decades, when Edson (1988) noted that women were less likely to change districts for an administrative post than men. It suggests that another aspect of gender socialization (moving for the man's job, but usually not for the woman's) is still quite common and may be a factor in women's immobility.

Finally, career planning and career paths are factors that negatively affect women more than men. Far fewer women had planned to enter administration upon leaving college. As one woman put it, "I thought I'd teach forever." This is congruent with the findings of Young and McCleod (2001), who found that not a single woman in their study had planned to enter administration when they entered education as a career. It also suggests that women are not receiving career counseling beyond teaching, and that gender socialization still limits their perspective. The fact that the path to becoming a superintendent is still perceived as most likely proceeding from a high school principalship reinforces the current gender imbalance and lowers expectations among female administrators in terms of advancement.

#### *Advancement in Administrative Roles*

The data from the study provide evidence that women have a harder time becoming insiders on the administrative team, have fewer support structures, and do not fit the "image" of leadership, all of which are having a negative impact on their ability to advance.

When respondents were asked to place themselves on a continuum from 1 "cultural insider" to 4 "cultural outsider," the majority of both men and women indicated "insider status," but men still significantly outpaced women in this category ( $M = 1.67$  men;  $M = 1.85$  women),  $F(1,400) = 4.45, p < .03, \eta^2 = .011$ . When asked their perceptions about whether it is harder for men or for women to become cultural insiders (on a scale of 1 "not at all" to 4 "very much"),

women indicated they believe it is harder for women, whereas men were not as sure ( $M=2.41$  for women) compared to ( $M=1.91$  for men),  $F(1,393) = 23.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .057$ .

Although many of the respondents had not been part of a district mentoring program as a new administrator, there was gender disparity among those who had about the kind of information they had received from their mentors. Again, on a four point scale (1 “not at all” to 4 “very much”), the survey asked the extent to which respondents had received the following types of information when they were new administrators: “technical nuts and bolts,” “behavioral norms for administrators,” and/or “landmines they might face.” Women reported that their mentors had given them “nuts and bolts” information ( $M=2.95$ ) about their role, but not the more subtle inside information about the behavioral norms and landmines they might face ( $M=1.84$ ). Men uniformly reported that their mentors had provided this type of “insider” information (behavioral norms and landmines  $M=3.06$ ; and, nuts and bolts  $M=3.03$ ). Multivariate tests revealed that women and men did not significantly differ on receiving “nuts and bolts” information ( $p > .70$ ), but did significantly differ on receiving cultural “insider information” ( $p < .001$ ). Thus, at a time when making a good impression is important (i.e., at the start of the job) the data showed that women are placed at tremendous disadvantage when it comes to learning and dealing with cultural norms and potential landmines which can ultimately undermine their position and authority. Men in this study, on the other hand, reported no such disadvantage.

In terms of feeling isolated and receiving support, women reported feeling more isolation and receiving fewer support structures. For example, men indicated more support, with 85% indicating they have either (or both) a formal or informal network of support. This was definitely not the case for women; 97% reported they have no formal network and 40% said they have no network at all, formal or informal.

Women and men both believe that a “Good Ol’ Boy” still exists, which culturally marginalizes many administrators, especially women (45.71% of men and 73.72% of women). It was not too surprising that a majority of women reported the existence of such a network; however, what was somewhat surprising is that almost half of the male respondents agreed. The presence of a “Good ol’ boy” network may foster *action* (i.e., actively and deliberately providing information and assistance to males in the network regarding job opportunities), or *inaction* (i.e., actively and deliberately withholding vital information from women that keeps them outside the political “knowledge” loop). It also may result in a form of *complicity* (i.e., an awareness that there are forces at work that advantage some and disadvantage others with no steps taken to challenge or interrupt them.) As a consequence, if a “network” exists (which may be largely hidden, but has visible effects), it may serve as a disincentive and keep those on the outside (mostly women) from entering or trying to advance in leadership. Those who see themselves as outside the network may give up before they start.

Finally, there was clear evidence that the image of leadership (especially at highest levels) is still male-dominated. We asked respondents to indicate if they had consciously assumed characteristics in order to increase the likelihood of being accepted on the administrative team, and we provided a choice of eight traits – four that are associated with masculinity and four that are associated with femininity (Bem, 1993), plus the choice of indicating “other” or “none.” Perhaps not surprisingly, women indicated they had consciously adopted masculine characteristics (e.g. acting “tougher”), and interestingly so had the males. The structure and organization of school systems rewards masculine leadership traits, which makes them expected for both men and women. Connell (1996) reported that “gender is constructed

within institutional and cultural contexts that produce multiple forms of masculinity” (p.206). Furthermore, he argues, schools play an active role in both the formation and maintenance of masculine traits. These “masculinizing” practices are concentrated in certain areas: program divisions, discipline systems, and sports (p.206). In this study both males and females chose “decisiveness” as the trait consciously adopted most often (114 females/163 males), followed by “appearing tougher” (70 females/83 males), “talking less” (35 females/84 males), and “putting relational distance between themselves and the staff” (28 females/51 males). Only two of the characteristics associated with femininity were checked with any regularity (“collaboration” and “taking an interest in the lives of staff”), but these did not generate nearly the response the “masculine” characteristics did.

Overall, when asked on a scale of 1 – 4 (1 “not at all” to 4 “very much”) whether gender is a factor that influences advancement to the superintendency, a significant difference between the responses of men and women emerged  $F(1,400) = 57.80, p < .001, \eta^2 = .126$ . Overall, females were more inclined to respond that gender is a factor ( $M=2.56$ ), whereas males were less convinced ( $M=1.76$ ). Although both sexes gave responses on other portions of the survey that point to gender barriers, there were still many who did not acknowledge it when the question was asked outright.

#### *Discussion on Advancement into Administrative Roles*

In this study, three broad factors emerged that are having a negative impact on women’s advancement in educational leadership – their lack of insider status, fewer support structures, and an image of leadership that is still associated with masculinity. Each one is discussed below.

*Insider Status* – Feeling like an insider in the organization has important implications for advancement. When a person becomes the “go to person” in an organization, it is much more likely he/she will be considered for advancement when positions arise. Further, if someone perceives he/she is an insider, it raises job satisfaction and efficacy – both of which affect a person’s confidence in seeking advancement. Finally, being an insider alerts them to openings, politics, landmines, cultural norms, etc. This type of information is crucial for obtaining a position, working effectively once in the position, and for advancing. Although the majority of both men and women in the study identified themselves as insiders, more telling were the responses to the open-ended question on *why* they considered themselves insiders.

Men who identified themselves as insiders (186/81%) seemed to understand the political aspect of insider-ism. Over 50 responses spoke to issues of being valued (“I am included in district decisions”), of being heard (“My thoughts and insights are sought and respected by my administrative colleagues”), and of being kept informed (I’m in the communication loop – more than some”). Many men noted the connection they had with the superintendent and board members, with comments such as, “I work closely with the superintendent and board, who include me in decisions.” One even straightforwardly said, “I’m politically savvy.”

Women, on the other hand, typically appear to overlook or misunderstand the political nature of insider-ism. The majority of women who identified themselves as insiders (130/74%) equated insider status with experience in the district. Over 50 respondents spoke of longevity, with comments like, “My time in the school district and community is the major contributor to being an insider,” or “I’ve worked in the district over 20 years.” The fact that women stay in the same district a long time, and come to believe this makes them insiders, may translate into familiarity that blinds them to the ways in which cultural and political patterns are disadvantaging groups within their organization, including women, themselves.

The only other factor that regularly emerged as contributing to insider status, according to the women, was “competence,” with respondents stating, for example, “I am capable and stay current,” or “I always do my job giving 200%...” Virtually none of the women spoke to issues of being heard, of being valued, of being in the communication loop, or of being politically savvy. Women, therefore, much more than men, attached a more meritocratic explanation to insider status. What they did not see, and males seemed to grasp, was that being experienced and capable were not necessarily evidence of political currency.

*Lack of Support* – The issue of support (in terms of mentors and networks) also points to differences in the experiences of men and women. As noted above, women reported being isolated and without networks in much higher numbers than men, which is especially troubling since women are the ones who reported the need for affirmation (being “tapped” for the job) far more than their male counterparts. This finding supports earlier studies (Gupton & Slick, 1996; Marshall & Kasten, 1994), which suggested that women have traditionally had fewer mentors and networks than men. Among the women who did have mentors, few reported receiving insider information, compared to men, who nearly all reported receiving this kind of information. Lacking this knowledge makes it difficult for women to move from cultural outsider to insider. They find themselves without key information, which results in their having less to contribute in meetings. Their silence perpetuates their outsider status – a cycle that is very to interrupt.

In addition, the fact that more women are making inroads into administrative roles does not seem to be helping with the development of networks or support. Simply put, female leaders frequently do not support other women as they move into school administration. In fact, over half of the women in the survey (57%) named a *woman* as most exclusionary – the person who most kept them on the periphery of the organization. Instead of “sisterhood,” women described each other as “undercutting” and “backstabbing.” This can have devastating results in further alienating women, and in reinforcing unproductive, negative stereotypes. Overall, it was evident that many women felt that they had professional lifelines that could have supported them in advancement – neither from professional networks nor from other successful women – which helps explain why they may have been less likely to seek advancement.

Women may be further marginalized by the existence of a “Good Ol’ Boy” network, which both male and female respondents believe exists. Two things were particularly noteworthy about this finding, and they were brought up equally by men and women. The first was a tendency to distance themselves from this topic. Repeatedly, respondents qualified their remarks about the Good Ol’ Boy network’s existence by saying, “not among the people I know” or “not in my district.” By holding on to the belief that the network exists “elsewhere, not here,” it was clear that respondents felt little responsibility to confront or challenge it.

The second thread that emerged is that the Good Ol’ Boy network seems to have a particular stronghold among the ranks of H.S. principals and superintendents – the roles most under-represented by women. Additionally, and without prompting, respondents repeatedly named their professional associations as particularly problematic. One woman, for example, stated simply, “Have you been to principals’ association meetings? Enough said.” Another added that at the state level meetings, “the good ol’ boys gather in the lobby or in vendor areas and hold court.” Men actually see this as well. One said, “The [principals’] association needs to pay more attention to educational issues and get out of the sports business.” Another bluntly said, “The state associations are still a *hot bed* of good ol’ boy-ism.” In total, over 40 unsolicited comments pointed to state professional associations as problematic in this regard, even though

we asked no questions about these organizations and did not refer to them anywhere in the survey.

*Image of Leadership* – The final factor affecting the advancement of women was the prevalence of a masculine image of leadership. Both men and women in the study had consciously assumed traits associated with masculinity (toughness, decisiveness), and this was especially true for those in high school principalships and superintendencies. Both men and women felt the path to the superintendency was most likely to cross through the high school principalship – a position that remains dominated by males. Women in these roles wrote about the trouble that they have had shifting people’s perceptions about a female holding the position. One high school principal said, “I am often asked by parents to talk to the REAL principal.” Another said, “I have been asked why a women wants to deal with all these ‘high school’ issues. Men are not asked that.” Thus, it has been difficult to make a shift in this masculine mental model of leadership, which indicates little change since 2001, when Skrla noted that misperceptions persist about women’s lack leadership strength in areas such as athletics, facilities, and budget. A few women in this study also expressed reluctance to raise this issue as a topic for discussion for fear of being seen as a “complainer” or a “libber,” which they believe could result in being marginalized even further.

*Overall* – Responses were starkly polarized in response to whether gender is a factor that influences advancement, with men and women at both ends of the continuum. When these responses were charted it created what we call a “dog bone” effect; that is, responses fell into two large groups with vastly opposing opinions pro or con, with not many falling in the middle. The smaller of the two groups (35% of the total respondents) were strongly of the belief that many barriers still exist for women. One man wrote, for example, “Achieving gender equity is an ongoing process – we need to keep it in focus as a worthy goal.” A female respondent wrote, “Much more research on the reasons so few women ascend to the superintendency needs to happen. The whole issue of gender seems to have faded from discussion.” And from another, “I think the professional vs. personal demands are not spoken of out loud - but are HUGE conflicts for women - and the women are generally surrounded by men who do not share these experiences. Is gender a factor? YES!”

At the other end of the continuum, however, the larger group (65%) held the opposite viewpoint, expressing a combination of denial (“There simply is no problem”), disbelief (“I can’t believe people are still focused on this”), and/or hostility (“How about a little cheese with your ‘I didn’t make it because I’m a women’ whine”).

### Conclusions

This study supports previous research, which suggests that gender-related factors affect women’s entry and advancement within school leadership (Beekley, 1999; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Grady, 1992; Grogan & Brunner 2005; Keller, 1999; Marshall & Kasten, 1994; Shakeshaft, 1999; Valian, 1999). The study provides both qualitative and quantitative evidence that later entry into administration, fewer supports, and prevailing images of leadership all contribute to gender imbalance. It also extends previous work by revealing men’s acknowledgement of gender factors in school leadership. Men in the study were clearly aware that gender factors still exist which disadvantage women, as evidenced, for example, by their recognition of a good ol’ boys’ network. However, awareness by both sexes is not enough to bring about significant change in the social structures which perpetuate these factors. To be sure, woven throughout the findings are three broad trends related to social structures that may

provide better insight into the systemic nature of the problem, as well as two patterns of behavior that may help explain its persistence.

### *Social Structures – Insight into the Problem*

The first trend related to social structure is that many participants held firmly to a belief that administrative positions are earned solely by merit, even when the numbers argue otherwise. Comments like this one by a male respondent were common, “I think any qualified individual who wants a superintendency can get one,” or from a female, “Gender is not an issue - women who work hard enough will succeed. Period.” It is clear that many of the administrators in the study held on to this belief in meritocracy because to do otherwise would challenge their own achievement. As one woman stated, “Please, I was qualified because I am a good administrator, not because I am a woman.” She and others are much more comfortable believing that merit was the only factor affecting their success. This despite evidence, for example, that men were often hired before fulfilling the requirements for the position, a phenomenon that not a single female respondent reported.

The second emergent trend is that school administration operates in a patriarchal environment. Johnson (1997) asserts that, “a society is patriarchal to the degree it is male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered” (p.5). The data show that school district leadership is still male-dominated, as evidenced by the disproportionate number of men holding the positions of most influence, visibility, and salary. There was also evidence of the more nuanced ways that school administration is male-identified and male-centered, where the “focus of attention is primarily on men and what they do” (p. 8). For example, men reported being sought out for their opinions and receiving insider information more often than women had. They also indicated a stronger understanding of the political nature of being an insider – a perspective women failed to see. Yet despite the unbalanced numbers and reported differences, 79% of the men and 51% of the women expressed their belief that gender does not affect advancement. Johnson (1997) says, “We are as stuck as we are because we can’t or won’t acknowledge the roots of patriarchy or our involvement in it” (p.18). Clearly, exploring social structures can be a painful because it forces administrators to acknowledge that they may have been privileged by the very system in question.

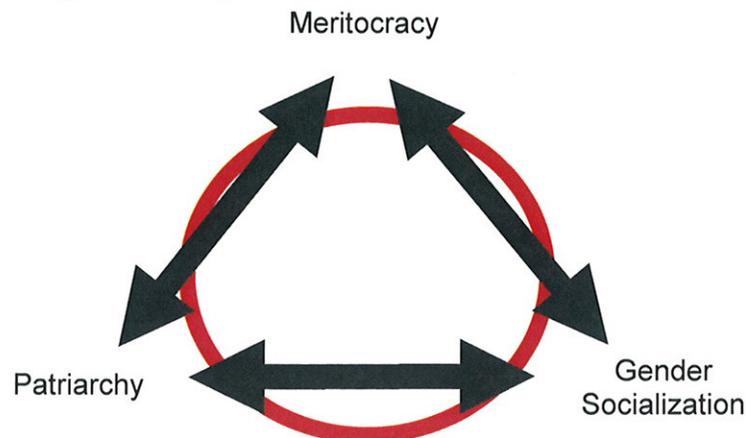
The third trend related to social structures is that gender socialization and privileging of masculinity still affect career advancement. For example, women indicated they had most often been encouraged or tapped for leadership and felt they had to be super-prepared before applying. This aligns with previous research (Young & McLeod, 2001) and reveals that traits such as modesty about one’s strengths still prevail as social norms for women (Skrla, 2000).

Respondents of both sexes admit that the mental model of leadership is often equated with masculine characteristics, and many indicated they had consciously adopted these traits. Women reported facing community members who had difficulty accepting them in the role, whereas no males reported a similar phenomenon. Furthermore, the data clearly showed that both male and female respondents believe that responsibilities of home and family fall disproportionately to women. Yet there was also acceptance of this as a woman’s choice, failing to see that this is a socially constructed choice. All of these examples point to the ways in which socialized roles have become so familiar they become unquestioned, the norm.

These three social dynamics– meritocracy, patriarchy, and gender socialization – contribute to the systemic nature of gender discrimination and are both cyclical and mutually reinforcing. As illustrated in the Reciprocal Model of Social Construction (Figure 2), belief in a

*meritocracy* removes responsibility to confront other causes for the disproportionately low number of females in the highest levels of school administration. For example, when people believe that advancement is based almost solely on merit (not seeing the invisible social network that promotes men's interests), they most likely will fail to consider that women are being disadvantaged. The number of men in upper administration is accepted without question. This feeds a *patriarchy*, in which the predominance of men, and their authority in the organization, go unchallenged. It seems natural for men to be in these positions, and power becomes associated with men. This fuels *gender socialization*, in which the mental image of a school leader, especially a superintendent, remains identified with male characteristics. While at the same time; the appropriateness of women in lower-level positions with more family responsibility is reinforced. Because gender socialization tends to be invisible, it is easy for people to fall into the trap of believing that women chose these roles, which fuels the illusion of a meritocracy. And the cycle starts over. Valian (1999) suggests that we have to "make the invisible visible" (p.1) if we hope to overcome patterns that may be reinforcing discrimination. What makes seeing and disrupting this pattern so difficult is that each construction influences and is influenced by the others in very dynamic ways.

**Figure 2: Reciprocal Model of Social Construction**



#### *Patterns of Behavior - Explaining the Persistence*

In addition to existing social structures, two patterns of behavior emerged from the study that may help explain why gender-factors persist in impeding women's advancement. The first was the tendency for participants to "other" the issue of gender, saying problems happen "elsewhere, but not here." For example, women and men overwhelmingly agreed that a good ol' boy network exists, but just as often clarified this by saying it was happening "in other places." Responses were similar in terms of becoming an insider, with respondents reporting it "isn't a problem *here*," failing to see that if a system seems to work for them, it may not be working for others within their own district, or that it may be operating in a broader context. As Young and McLeod (2001) found, respondents tended to examine the issue from an individual perspective, rather than in terms of social systems. In our study there were 75 comments indicating that issues related to gender happened "someplace else, not in my district." What they did not grasp is that if *everyone* says it is happening everywhere but here, it is certainly happening here, too.

This narrow focus of what they see (or fail to see) at the local level provides a way for administrators to ignore or dismiss a pattern of behavior that is detrimental to women's entrance

and advancement in school organizations. Believing that gender issues are occurring outside their sphere of influence further relieves them of responsibility to examine broader contexts and the implications for every level. The tendency to “other” the problem may also help explain why women comfortably remain in systems that are considered patriarchal by others.

A second pattern of behavior that may explain the persistence of gender barriers was the over-simplification, or even denial, of gender as an issue. Both men and women pointed to the number of female administrators in their districts; thus, problem solved. “Our district has an equal number of women so it’s not an issue,” one respondent asserted, and this was representative of over 20 comments pointing to simple numbers as evidence of equity. There was a consistent failure to look holistically at the state and national numbers or more importantly to consider *which* roles women hold – usually not the highest in the hierarchy of the district. There was also a tendency to point to the one exception rather than the rule, “The superintendent in my district is a woman,” one female administrator pointed out as evidence that gender barriers do not exist. A male respondent said, “I have seen how [one particular female superintendent] has been very successful in bursting through the glass ceiling.” There is irony in pointing to the one successful superintendent (like pointing to the one exceptional female politician or CEO) in that it seems to “prove” to some that barriers don’t exist, while at the same time, making the point to others that women in upper administration is still not the norm.

Finally, oversimplification of gender as a factor was further evidenced by the frequent theme that gender *used* to be a factor – but is no longer. “This is not as much of a problem as it was 25 years ago,” said one superintendent – a response that is typical of many and indicates how easy it is to believe that times have changed. There was even denial that any issues exists at this time. One women said, “I can’t believe you still think this is a problem,” and from a male, “There is no issue and males get tired of hearing about it. It gets old.” These responses provide evidence to support previous research (Grogan, 1999; McLeod & Young, 2001; Skrla, 1999) that few women, and even fewer men, are applying gender lenses to examine the under-representation of women in school leadership roles.

#### Implications and Future Directions

Like any study based on survey data, this one has limitations. It cannot hope to reveal the totality of these administrators’ experiences and beliefs. Further, it is self-reported data from administrators in just one state, all of whom are Caucasian and generally middle class. In spite of such limits, however, this study does reveal subtle and not-so-subtle gender factors that are impeding women’s professional advancement. Unless these impediments are remedied, which Tallerico and Blount (2004) assert will require “continued vigilance” (p. 647), opportunities for emerging and existing female school leaders will remain uncommon, and schools will continue to have difficulty attracting and retaining the talented leaders they deserve. This study, therefore, has important implications for colleges of education, school districts, professional associations, and administrators themselves.

For colleges of education, the findings suggest that teacher education programs need to provide much more guidance regarding educational career development, so that our most talented teachers plan for administrative roles much earlier. This would help emerging teachers shift their thinking from entering a career in “teaching” to entering a career in “education” – a subtle but powerful difference in how they view the contributions of educators at all levels and how they plan their careers. The data from this study reveal that this is especially important for females, who are far less likely to enter teaching with a comprehensive career plan in mind. To

accomplish this, colleges of education would need to jettison the more common “job placement” model, and develop a more comprehensive “career counseling” model that is often used successfully in other academic areas.

In terms of leadership preparation, the challenge is to raise issues of gender so that students will start confronting their assumptions and questioning what seems normal. With over half of the participants believing that gender factors exist elsewhere or not at all (despite numbers to the contrary), it is clear that societal beliefs surrounding gender socialization, patriarchy, and meritocracy are going largely unchallenged. Leadership programs need to provide enough reading, discussion, and practice in viewing educational issues through a feminist lens. Only then will they be able to recognize and respond to gender factors that are operating all around them, often impeding women’s advancement.

For school districts, it is clear from the study that they need to make a concerted effort to hear the voices and ideas of all members of the administrative team, regardless of their role or gender, and to examine the culture regularly to be sure that it is safe to raise issues of equal opportunity and access for women. School districts must also confront the demands being placed on current school leaders and evaluate how these may be contributing to smaller applicant pools. Exploring ways to make administrative positions more family-friendly would benefit all applicants, but especially women. Districts, might, for example, adopt a more collaborative approach to leadership, in which teacher leader roles would be encouraged (and recompensed) to take on additional administrative responsibilities. This would reduce the long hours for principals and develop a cadre of leaders in training.

For state professional associations, which the respondents named as particularly problematic in terms of perpetuating “good ol’ boy” attitudes and behaviors, an open dialogue and examination of the norms and activities of these groups appears to be long overdue. Specifically, associations might frequently examine how open the organization is to new leadership, how decisions are actually made, and what topics are at the core of their work. Professional associations that model this form of critical reflection will certainly become more inclusive and serve as better models for equitable leadership.

Finally, the findings reveal that administrators themselves need to take more responsibility for recognizing gender issues and taking proactive steps to promote equity at all levels of educational administration. Men must step forward and be the ones to disrupt troubling discriminatory patterns, such as those seen within state professional associations, within search committees, and even within their own administrative teams. Women must make concerted efforts to support their talented female colleagues, squelching the unproductive stereotypes that they cannot get along. And all administrators, both women and men, must take on the challenge of redesigning leadership models to make the positions more supportive of family responsibility. Taken together, these steps would help attract and retain school leaders at every level.

Changing the face of leadership at the highest levels will take a profound shift in how leadership is understood and practiced. Only with efforts on all fronts – and from both men and women – will schools and children be ensured of the best leaders possible – regardless of gender.

## References

- Adams, J. P. (1999). Good principals, good schools. *Educational Leadership*, 29(1), 8-11.
- Allan, E. J. (2004). Hazing and gender: Analyzing the obvious. In Newer, H. (ed.) *The Hazing Reader* (pp. 275- 294). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Beekley, C. (1999). Dancing in red shoes: Why women leave the superintendency. In C. C. Brunner (Ed.) *Sacred dreams: Women and the superintendency* (pp. 161-175). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Bem, S. L. (1993). *The lenses of gender: Transforming the debate on sexual inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Blount, J. M. (1998). *Destined to rule the schools*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Buckingham, D., Donaldson, G., & Marnik G. (2006). *Change and stability in school leadership 1997-2005*. Orono, ME: University of Maine.
- Connell, R. W. (1996). Teaching the boys: New research on masculinity and gender strategies for schools. *Teacher's College Record*, 98(2), 206-235.
- Cooper, B. S., Fusarelli, L. D., & Carella, V. A. (2000). *Career crisis in the superintendency? The results of a national survey*. Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 143 167).
- Edson, S. K. (1988). *Pushing the limits*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Estler, S. (1975). Women as leaders in public education. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1(2), 363-386.
- Gewertz, C. (2006, February 17). Race, gender, and the superintendency: Departures of black women spark frank talk of factors making a tough job harder. *Education Week*, 22-24.
- Glass, T., Bjork, L., & Brunner, C. (2000). *The study of the American school superintendency, 2000*, (pp. 33-52). Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators.
- Grady, M. L. (1992). Women in educational administration: Certified but not employed. *Educational Considerations*, 20(1), 33-36.
- Grogan, M. (1999). A feminist poststructuralist account of collaboration: A model for the superintendency. In C.C. Brunner (Ed.) *Sacred dreams: Women and the superintendency* (pp. 199-216). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Grogan, M., & Brunner, C. C. (2005). Women leading systems: Latest facts and figures on women and the superintendency. *The School Administrator*, 2(62), 46-50.

- Gupton, S. L., & Slick, G. A. (1996). *Highly successful women administrators: The inside stories of how they got there*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Hoff, D. L., Menard, C., & Tuell, J. (2006). Where are the women in school administration? Issues of access, acculturation, advancement, and advocacy. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*, 4(1), 43-60.
- Johnson, A. G. (1997). *The gender knot: Unraveling our patriarchal legacy*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Keller, B. (1999). *Women superintendents: Few and far between*. Retrieved online March 26, 2004, at [www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory/cfm?slug=11women.h19](http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory/cfm?slug=11women.h19).
- Kimmel, M. S. (2000). *The gendered society*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Logan, J. P. (1998). School leadership of the 90's and beyond: A window of opportunity for women educators. *Women in Leadership*, 1, (3), retrieved online March 25, 2004, at [www.advancingwomen.com/awl/summer98/awl\\_summer98.html](http://www.advancingwomen.com/awl/summer98/awl_summer98.html).
- Lugg, C. A. (2003). Sissies, faggots, lezzies, and dykes: Gender, sexual orientation, and a new politics of education? *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39(1), 95-134.
- Lunenberg, F., & Orienstein, A. (1991). *Educational administration: Concepts and practices*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Maine Department of Education. (2004). School System Contact Data. Retrieved online April 5, 2004, Oct. 2, 2005, & Jan. 29, 2006 at [www.maine.gov/education/eddir/schcontact.htm](http://www.maine.gov/education/eddir/schcontact.htm).
- Marshall, C. (2006, April). *How has feminist theory influenced education in the U.S.?* Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA.
- Marshall, C., & Kasten, K. L. (1994). *The administrative career*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- NAESP (2003), Fact Sheet on the Principal Shortage, #1097. Retrieved online September 20, 2005, at [www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1097](http://www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1097).
- Normore, A. H. (2004). Socializing school administrators to meet leadership challenges that doom all but the most heroic and talented leaders to failure. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 7(2), 107-125.
- Olson, J., Roese, N., & Zanna, M. (1996). Expectancies. In E. T. Higgins & A. W. Kruglanski (Eds.), *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles* (pp. 211-238). New York: Guilford Press.

- RAND Corporation, (2003). *Research Brief, #8021*. Retrieved online September 20, 2005, at [www.rand.org/publications/RB/RB8021/](http://www.rand.org/publications/RB/RB8021/).
- Shakeshaft, C. (1987). *Women in educational administration*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Shakeshaft, C. (1999). The struggle to create a more gender-inclusive profession. In J. Murphy & K. Seashore-Louis (eds.), *Handbook of research on educational Administration: A project of the American Educational Research Association 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (pp 99-118).
- Skrla, L. (2000). The social construction of gender in the superintendency. *Journal of Education Policy, 15*(3), 293-316.
- Skrla, L. (2001). Sexism, silence and solutions: Women superintendents speak up and speak out. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 6*(1), 44-75.
- Spencer, W. A., & Kochan, F. K. (2000). Gender related differences in career patterns of principals in Alabama: A statewide study. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 8*(9). Retrieved online July 1, 2006, at <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n9.html>.
- Tallerico, M. (2000). *Accessing the superintendency*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Tallerico, M., & Blount, J. M. (2004). Women and the superintendency: Insights from theory and history. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 40*(5), 633-662.
- U.S. Department of Education (2005). *Special analysis 2005: Mobility in the workplace*. National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). Retrieved online March 15, 2006, at [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2005/analysis/sa\\_table.asp?tableID=316](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2005/analysis/sa_table.asp?tableID=316).
- Valian, V. (1999). *Why so slow? The advancement of women*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Young, M. D., & McLeod, S. (2001). Flukes, opportunities, and planned interventions: Factors affecting women's decisions to become school administrators. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 37*(4), 462-502.