

Pathway to the SUPERINTENDENCY

Boards can take steps to encourage diversity among school leaders

Steven D. Hooker and Michael W. Kessinger

pathway to the superintendency

If you become the superintendent in rural America, it's often not because of what you know, but who you know that becomes the deciding factor. In order to become a superintendent, you would likely need to be politically or socially connected to the school leaders in the area.

When insiders are hired as rural school superintendents, their ties to the community already are established. People know their families, what church they belong to, and what political ties they may have.

"I looked back at the last superintendent search," commented Richard Smith, former member of the Vineland, New Jersey, school board. "The criteria were stout. We required that the individual have a Ph.D. and extensive administrative experience. But really the criteria for this search basically boiled down to whatever is on your resume is fine as long as someone knows who you are, you're a hometown boy, and we like you."

While there have been advances for equal opportunity in the workplace for diversity, there continues to be a need for much more progress in the male-dominated institutions of K-12 school systems in rural areas. Research on female superintendents published in *Education Research Quarterly* found that the superintendent position has traditionally been held by a white, heterosexual, Christian male.

The researchers suggested that some of the barriers to women, individuals of color, and others who are marginalized include a lack of encouragement, the lack of professional networks, and an exclusion from the "good old boy" network.

WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?

Researcher Camilia Anne Czubaj noted that, historically, women have dominated the instructional processes in school systems, but have not continued with this dominance in the superintendency. While most teachers are women, men dominate in power positions in the field of education.

Unlike most men, women typically tend not to strategically plan for career advancement. Furthermore, many women who want administrative positions are

inclined to hide their aspirations to avoid negative reactions from their peers.

Czubaj also mentioned that the proportion of women serving as school board members—less than 25 percent—is far lower than that of men. She goes on to suggest that, since the school boards hire superintendents, it is not surprising that women and other marginalized candidates for the superintendency remain a minority when the school board members who conduct the interviews and hire are predominately white males.

EASTERN RURAL KENTUCKY

Visit the eastern region of Kentucky and you will find a rich culture that supports the various communities. Deeply entrenched in the culture are the values of family, religion, and traditions. Visitors are greeted with open arms, but there is a degree of apprehension to the meaning of the visit. Those visitors who end up staying are never truly accepted as part of the community. They remain "foreigners."

One important aspect of many communities is the education system. The schools are central points of many counties, with traditions such as sports serving as the identity of the area. For several years, the school district was the main employment agency of many counties. Before the coal boom of the 1960s, school districts employed many of the families in their communities. This employment served as the foundation of the power structure of the school district. Now that the coal industry is all but gone, the school is again often the main employer in the county.

Breaking into administration was difficult for those moving from outside the area. One teacher



pathway to the superintendency

from Ohio remained a classroom teacher for more than 30 years, with no opportunities to move up in the administrative ranks despite his attempts and his certification.

Another “outsider” worked in a district for his whole career. Unlike the Ohio teacher, the “outsider” obtained a school level administrative position, and then took a position at the central office.

After eventually moving into an assistant superintendent’s position, though, he could never get an interview for the top position. The local opposition continued to voice its concerns: “He’s not from here.” The culture of the community dictated who would be the superintendent. They wanted an “insider.” The path to the superintendency is, in some ways, a function of the community’s tradition.

SURVEY SAYS

To look further at the pathways superintendents have taken, 30 superintendents responded to a request for their participation, using a workplace email account, for a response rate of 81 percent. A link to an online survey was provided so the respondent’s identity would remain anonymous.

The responses were tabulated, and information related to the individual superintendents’ paths to the superintendency were revealed. Eighty-five percent of the area superintendents were men, compared to 72 percent statewide. Of these superintendents, 48 percent were between 41 and 55 years old. All of the respondents were white. Sixty-nine percent had been a high school basketball coach and 37 percent had been a football coach, while only 19 percent had been an academic coach.

About 70 percent of the respondents reported that their first teaching position was either at the middle or high school level. Sixty-three percent had been a high school administrator, and 63 percent had been in their current job three years or less. Fifty-two percent had worked in the central office prior to becoming the superintendent, and 49 percent had been a building administrator.

Interestingly, the school boards who hired these superintendents were only made up of 54 percent men, providing some insight into the culture of the area, as perpetuated by the residents of these communities.

WHAT NEXT?

In the first decade of the 21st century, accountability

controls educational settings. Schools are increasingly held more accountable for student learning than ever before. Researchers Mary Lou Andrews and Carolyn S. Ridenour stated that the political landscape is one of increasing pressures on school administrators. These pressures are particularly visible and daunting in schools serving children from diverse backgrounds and those serving large proportions of minority children.

Often these minority children include those of a different ethnicity, race, or socioeconomic status from that of the majority. School leaders are responsible for developing a deeper understanding of diversity and discrimination if all children are to be served at the levels of excellence required by accountability standards.

Researchers Kathleen Nogay and Robert Beebe found that the differences in perceptions of leadership behaviors are important to the development of solutions to female career advancement complications. We have yet to see what actions might be taken by school boards to address the fact that, while women are rated more highly than men in comparable positions by subordinates, such as academic coaches and instructional supervisors, they do, however, continue to encounter challenges to becoming high school principals and superintendents.

Researcher and administrator Laura Seinfeld confirmed that many of the skills and dispositions that are essential for the successful superintendent include empathy, a strong work ethic, effective communication skills, and the ability to balance professional and personal lives. While these skills can be honed through experiences along one’s career path and nurtured by mentors, to a degree they must be innate as well.

Seinfeld concluded that these qualities match those that are typically associated with females and suggests that women may need to focus more on the identified quality of courage and assertiveness. She recommends that all applicants, including males, have the courage to make career moves in order to gain the necessary diverse experiences, and develop relationships with mentors and networks to access the superintendency.

Steven D. Hooker (hookersd@uncw.edu) is an assistant professor of educational leadership at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Michael W. Kessinger (m.kessinger@moreheadstate.edu) is an assistant professor of educational leadership at Kentucky’s Morehead State University.