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The superintendency represents what many consider the leadership apex of public school educational governance. We recently had the opportunity to interview 20 women who successfully prepared for and entered that leadership role, only to exit after an average of 3.3 years. Elsewhere we have discussed at length the factors contributing to those exits for the two-thirds of our informants who left the superintendency involuntarily.2 Our purpose in this paper is to examine the circumstances and perspectives of the one-third who chose to leave (n=7). We believe their stories provide useful insights into how some women grapple with the demands of chief executive roles. They also shed light on the realities of educational leadership for today’s women.

Definitions

“Unlike my case, the only ones I know have been driven out”.

This verbatim quotation from one of the women in our study who chose to leave the superintendency captures the vernacular a distinction we make between “voluntary” and involuntary exits from the position of superintendent. To begin, however, it is first necessary to define our use of “exit.” Superintendents who retired or those who left one district to move to another superintendency were not considered to have “exited” the position. Rather, for the purposes of our research, exiters are women who, either voluntarily or under pressure, were non-renewed or resigned from the superintendency. They subsequently moved into other roles, internal or external to K–12 public education. More specifically, an exit was considered voluntary when it was the superintendent’s choice to leave and when it was clear that the school board would have (or already had) renewed her contract.

Discussion of Findings

Taking our 20-person sample of exiters as a whole, we found that multiple factors contributed to their leaving the superintendency. These factors overlapped and accumulated over time. We did not find single trigger events or critical incidents that accounted for these women’s decisions, if it was their decision, to leave. At work were both “pushes from” the superintendency and “pulls toward” other options or interests. Perhaps not surprisingly, the pulls were more influential in the cases of voluntary exiters; the pushes more salient for those who left involuntarily.

Although the purpose of this article is to focus on the insights of those who chose to leave (and, therefore, on the pulls they felt), we will briefly summarize those factors and conditions which served to push women out of the superintendency. We discovered four patterns that characterized our informants’ cumulative disenchantment with the perversiveness of what they termed the “politics” of the role: (a) deterioration of the superintendent–school board relationship; (b) dysfunctional union–district relationships; (c) over-emphasis on non-instructional issues; and (d) moral or ethical clashes with board members.

While voluntary exiters were likewise disenchanted by their derailing from instructional and curricular issues, and the relentless political and other demands of the role, they dealt with these issues with greater equanimity than did the involuntary exiters. Moreover, voluntary exiters were simultaneously pulled away by attractive new job opportunities, academic goals, or familial considerations. Those who chose to leave had good relationships with both their school boards and teacher unions, with few, if any, significant clashes among these key political stakeholder groups.

Comparisons With Involuntary Exiters

Although there is considerable diversity within each group, additional patterns became evident when we compared the experiences of these 13 involuntary and 7 voluntary exiters. For example, a higher proportion of those who chose to leave than those who were forced to leave occupied superintendencies in the smallest sized districts (300–2,999 students).3 Voluntary exiters were more likely to head districts in rural communities.4 In the case of both voluntary and involuntary exiters, the percentage who left the role after one superintendency was high. However, whereas 85% (6 of 7) of the voluntary exiters had held only one superintendency in their career, just 60% (8 of 13) of the involuntary exiters found their first superintidency was also their last. Also, related to career path, voluntary exiters were more likely to have previously been principals than were those who left involuntarily.5 A much higher proportion of voluntary than involuntary exiters had more “line” than “staff” experience in their career histories.6 And voluntary exiters remained in their last superintendency, on average, slightly less time than their involuntary counterparts: 3.0 compared to 3.5 years.

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What did these 20 women do after exiting the superintendency? Some patterns of differences between voluntary and involuntary exitors were apparent, although the numbers are so small in each of the seven different categories of roles which were assumed subsequent to their departures that use of percentages seems inappropriate. To summarize briefly, six took positions in K–12 central office administration (3 voluntary and 3 involuntary exitors). Four became university professors (1 voluntary and 3 involuntary). Three were self-employed (1 voluntary and two involuntary). Two voluntary (but no involuntary) exitors returned to principalships. And of the remaining five involuntary exitors; two became directors of not-for-profit organizations; two remained unemployed at the time of our interview (two months and one year, respectively, after their exits); and one became a full-time graduate student to complete her doctorate.

The Perspectives of Those Who Chose to Leave

More central to our purpose than comparing the two subgroups of exitors along multiple dimensions, however, are the perspectives and insights shared by the women leaders who chose to leave the superintendency. In this section, we provide illustrations of how they captured their experiences in their own words.

I think it's the worst job in education. . . . The salary is terrible. I was making $55,000 at that time and I was working 15–17 hour days. And I said to myself, "What am I doing? I have to be crazy." . . . I didn't have any free time. [exitor A]

And there I was, an hour away from my home . . . . I had moved at that time . . . . and I was in at 5 a.m. every day and attending board meetings that often went till 3 a.m. With no help and no resolution really in sight. So I just began to think, "Is this the way that I really want to spend the next few years?" . . . The farther you go up the administrative ladder, the less options you have for any privacy. For example, as a teacher, you have community responsibilities, but they still expect you to lead a life of your own. As a building principal, you have a strong commitment to your building and a lot of evening hours; but there are still times that you can call your own. As a superintendent, I don't think you ever have time that you can call your own. You're always on call. Each group feels like they have some ownership of you. And every action is scrutinized. Every statement is scrutinized. . . . What I didn't like was the total commitment that it takes and feeling like I might be shortchanging my family. [exitor B]

The job has to change. It needs to involve a lesser amount of time, especially if you want to get younger women involved in it. Even some of the male superintendents are now saying three nights out a week is just too much. It's too demanding a job. You have to be a workaholic to do it. Maybe men are more used to giving up that amount of time for their work. [exitor C]

Embedded in each of these excerpts are insights into the all-consuming public accountability and time demands of the modern day superintendency, as well as the diennas which such environments present for women trying to balance familial responsibilities. Two of the seven voluntary exitors we interviewed even used the term "survivor" to describe themselves after their experience in the superintendency. We heard time and time again how the nature of the job precluded much of a life outside work. And we heard how that cost was eventually weighed against other life interests. Moreover, much of the extraordinary work-load of the superintendency centered on financial, budget, and facilities concerns. As summarized by one superintendent, it took a "massive effort" to focus on curriculum and instruction. And another: "I felt that my job had very little to do with the education of kids."

Thus, the relentless nature of public scrutiny and the demands of the job, coupled with the centrality of what were viewed as non-educational issues, created a work setting incompatible with the private aspirations and relational worlds of these women. While single women, married women, and women with children were represented in our sample, it was the women with young children who found the balance of work and family most problematic. To wit:

I was never home. I went to a Parent Teacher Conference in my second year for my daughter, and her teacher said, "I want you to know that, when I asked your daughter what she wanted for Christmas, she said I want my mommy to get a new job." [exitor A]

Thus, voluntary exitors considered both professional and personal goals; as they deliberated their difficult decisions to exit the superintendency. Several described this broader perspective on their choices in terms of quality of life:

I reached a crossroads in my thinking. Why am I doing this? Is this the right role for me? [exitor E]

Others were concerned with longer-term life goals or academic objectives:

Also, by that time, I had finished all my coursework for both the superintendent certification and the Ph.D. So it was time to do the dissertation. Yet I found it impossible to do anything that required that much thought with the way my life and work was going. I felt that, if I ever was going to finish the doctorate, it wasn't going to be while I was being superintendent. [exitor C]

Since most of the women in our sample were married, they considered the financial ramifications of their exits in the context of dual family incomes. Only two who left voluntarily had to face the potential financial strain entirely on their own. We sensed, as several of our informants put it, that they had some financial flexibility that allowed them the freedom to choose to exit. While in some cases, leaving a small, rural superintendency for a central office job in a larger, suburban district actually meant a pay increase, several elected to leave even though it entailed a salary loss (e.g., moving to university professorships):

I think one's own financial circumstances has a lot to do with exiting or not. Each family has their own financial considerations. If I'm a superintendent and not the main breadwinner, it allows us to be freer to give it up. I know two women superintendents whose husbands are not working. These women are miserable, but they can't leave. They're buried out, but they can't quit. Whereas I could walk away. [exitor B]

I make wonderful money [now]. I make $71,000. I work ten months. I work one night a month for PTA meetings. I don't have to attend board meetings. I get all teacher holidays. And in my district I only have to work 15 days during the summer. So, you have to be bright enough to know when you have it good. [exitor A]

What was striking was that, in all seven cases of voluntary exit, appealing new job opportunities became available simultaneously with these women's growing disenchanted with the role of superintendent, in some instances, previous mentors who knew of their situations assisted them again. In most cases, however, it was a matter of serendipity and keeping their eyes and ears open to other work opportunities in education within commuteable driving distance. Besides the opportunities
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Introduction

The superintendency is a job that is often viewed as a "man's job". Women who choose to take on this role are often viewed as exceptions to the norm. However, in recent years, there has been an increase in the number of women who are taking on leadership positions in education. This trend has led to a reevaluation of what it means to be a superintendent and how leadership roles are defined.

We conducted a study of women who have taken on leadership roles in education and found that they are often viewed as exceptions to the norm. This is particularly true for women who have been forced to leave their roles due to gender discrimination. However, we also found that there are important implications for the future of the superintendency.

Implications for Leadership

In addition to considerations of work and life quality on a personal and familial basis, the data also provide evidence of reflection on educational leadership at a broader level. These women were open to entertaining the possibilities of exercising influence and making expert contributions in roles other than "at the top" of the structural hierarchy. Their ideologies of leadership valued a wide gamut of potentially significant leverage points within the educational system, including principalships, assistant superintendencies, directorships, and teaching at the university level. They either already had found, or were certain they would find, satisfaction and reward in a diverse constellation of leadership roles. Neither their long-term career interests nor their ages were tied to particular positions.

In this way, their findings imply cause for optimism. We can celebrate both the insights into self and role that these women leaders attained, and the range of attractive new opportunities available to them. Our informants' experiences illustrate that there is "someplace to go" after the superintendency...a perspective often contradicted by the conventional lore of the field. Additionally, these voluntary exits confirm that there exist choices of leadership roles for women in education, which may well be more compatible with balancing family and career than is the superintendency.

Endnotes

1. This research was supported, in part, by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration. The perspectives expressed herein, however, are those of the authors.


3. 70% (5 of 7) of the voluntary exits and 54% (7 of 13) of the involuntary exits. Elsewhere we discuss the nature of the superintendent and school board conflict in small, "starter districts." See Marilyn Tallerico and Joan Burstyn (1995). Women and the public school superintendency: The context matters. Manuscript submitted for publication.
4. 70% (5 of 7) of the voluntary exits, and 30% (4 of 13) of the involuntaries.
5. 60% (4 of 7) of the voluntary exits, and 46% (6 of 13) of the involuntary exits.
6. 75% (9 of 12; 1 unknown) involuntary versus 30% (2 of 6; 1 unknown) voluntary.