

Staying close to home: women's life-choices and the superintendency

Women's
life-choices

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the importance of lifestyle factors including geographical relocation, accommodation for dual earner careers, and availability of family or non-family domestic help on the career choices of women assistant superintendents and superintendents in school districts in the USA. Women's access to the superintendency continues to make slow progress, a trend traditionally attributed to gender bias. However, working women increasingly make career choices based on perceptions of lifestyle and domestic responsibilities that may self-limit their access to positions that would further their careers.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is set in Pennsylvania, where women occupy 26 percent of superintendents' positions. Women superintendents and assistant superintendents in 2011-2012 were surveyed regarding their perceptions of the compatibility of the requirements of the position of superintendent with their lifestyle priorities.

Findings – The responses of 109 respondents suggest that the importance they attach to lifestyle factors limit the positions to which they apply. Most respondents would not consider family relocation or long commutes to access positions that would further their career goals. Consideration of partners/spouses work and career needs was rated as of high importance in making career decisions, and the respondents managed domestic household themselves with little expectation or recourse to extended family support or paid domestic help.

Originality/value – The findings suggest that the current demands and characteristics of the superintendency are at odds with lifestyle preferences of women qualified to hold the position, further exacerbating the effects of gender bias that maintain the lack of gender balance in educational decision making at the local level in the USA.

Keywords Administrators, Women, Job mobility, Dual earning households, School superintendents, Social change, Women's career choices, Commuting, Educational administration, Careers, Assistant superintendents, US superintendents

Paper type Research paper

Women's access and movement into the superintendency of US school districts mirrors the slow progress of women into management positions in all US workplaces (Glass, 2000; Glass and Bjork, 2003; Haveman and Beresford, 2012; Pirouznia, 2006). The most recent large scale study of the superintendency conducted in 2010 by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and Pearson Publishing (Kowalski *et al.*, 2011) indicated that women comprised just 24 percent of superintendents nationwide, with the number rising to 30 percent in districts with fewer than 300 students. This is an improvement from the early 1990s when only 6.6 percent of superintendents were female. However, when considered in the context of education as a female dominated occupation in which 72 percent of all kindergarten to grade twelve educators are women, a far higher percentage than the overall representation of women in the US workforce (47 percent in 2010), the absence of women in the highest management positions is the more remarkable and more difficult to explain.

This paper reviews current understandings of the continuing underrepresentation of women in the superintendency and the expectations regarding change. The results



of a survey of female superintendents and assistant superintendents in the state of Pennsylvania are used to explore the personal factors that influence women's actions and decisions. These factors include the availability of domestic support and willingness to relocate or undertake a long commute to a new workplace when considering career paths to the superintendency. The results from the survey are disaggregated by age group, to examine for changing perceptions by age and experience of the importance of lifestyle factors in the pursuit of a desired career goal, the position of school district superintendent, and to gain a better understanding of the limitations to their commitment to achieve that goal.

Barriers to women's movement to the superintendency

Studies of women's access to high level leadership positions have, to date, focussed on gendered perceptions of leadership that act as a barrier to women aspiring to these positions. Studies of women aspiring to and entering school district superintendencies have long maintained that external gender bias accounts for the slow movement of women into the position (Alston, 2000; Dana and Bourisaw, 2006; Bjork, 2000; Blount, 1998; Brunner, 2000, 2003; Brunner and Grogan, 2007; Brunner *et al.*, 2003, 2006; Grogan and Brunner, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1989, 1999), mirroring the patterns found in business organizations where women are similarly underrepresented. These studies suggest that leadership is still perceived as a male trait or role, and women competing with men for leadership roles are disadvantaged by such perceptions. In an analysis of studies examining the shifting fortunes of women aspiring to management in the private sector, Haveman and Beresford (2012) concluded that widely held gendered perceptions of appropriate roles and work for men and women remain the basic cause of gender differences in the rate of access to management positions in the national economy. The authors noted that human capital theory predicts that if three individual level variables – educational credentials, job preference, and accumulated work experience – are the same for men and women, the ability to access career positions should be gender neutral and equal numbers of men and women will occupy management positions. Haveman and Beresford (2012) argued that there are no longer significant differences between the educational credentials, job preferences and accumulated work experience of men and women in USA society today, so that the vertical gender gap in access to managerial positions must be attributed to ingrained societal understanding of who (men or women) should manage and lead.

Exploring career paths to the superintendency, Yong-Lyun and Brunner (2009) concluded that women's limited success in achieving their aspirations continues to be determined by deep-rooted gendered understandings that women found difficult to redefine. In a later study (Brunner and Yong-Lyun, 2010), a sample of women administrators in central office positions in US school districts were found to be formally, experientially, and personally prepared to become superintendents, yet had not been encouraged to seek promotion to the role. The researchers concluded that gendered norms around leadership and efficiency continued to create barriers during selection processes for women moving up through the ranks of educational leadership and these barriers limited their access to the superintendency. They suggested that many school board members, both men and women, and the search consultants they hire to find candidates, continue to hold deep-rooted beliefs that men will prove more competent leaders and that these beliefs influence their selection of district superintendents. These findings echoed those of earlier studies by Chase and Bell (1994), Tallerico (2000, 2003), Tallerico and Blount (2004), Skrla *et al.* (2000),

Newton, (2006), and Sharp *et al.* (2000) that explored the barriers to women applying for the position of superintendent.

Despite national promotion of gender-equal education, young women may still reflect early socialization around appropriate roles and career expectations for women when developing their career paths. Carter and Silva's (2010) study of female graduates from highly ranked MBA programs in the USA found that societal perceptions that leadership roles are best filled by men colored the self-perception of women aspiring to leadership. The female graduates in their study took jobs of lower status than did their male counterparts, even after accounting for years of work experience, children living at home, industry, region and aspirations to be senior executives. The study participants lagged behind their male counterparts at all stages of their career paths and the authors concluded this was the result of social conditioning that projected men as being better suited to leadership than women. This conditioning resulted in female participants in the study devaluing or underestimating their leadership and management skills, and being slower to seek out promotion than their male counterparts (Carter and Silva, 2010).

While there has been an increase in the numbers of women appointed to superintendents' positions nationwide since 1990, analysis of the reasons for this increase do not challenge contentions that gender bias still limit access. Rather, they suggest the increase is a result of the feminization of the applicant pool together with the impact of national economic factors that affect school district hiring practices. Addressing the 2010 AASA survey results, Kowalski *et al.* (2011) attributed the increase in the numbers of women appointed to superintendents' position from 6.0 percent in 1990 to 24-30 percent in 2010 to three factors. The first was that women had become the majority of doctoral students in educational administration programs that also credentialed for the superintendency, and thus there were more formally qualified women available for these positions. Second, school boards were more inclined to promote from within the district to lower recruitment costs in a time of spending constraints and economic crisis as has recently (2010 to the present) been experienced in the USA. Given the preponderance of women in lower level school management and the teaching profession, more women would be represented in the pool of internal candidates and hence increase the chances of a woman being appointed to the position. Third, the demands made on schools by national testing of students and ranking of schools placed a higher value on superintendents as instructional leaders, an area associated with women's experiences in teaching and curriculum development and oversight, rather than managers of school resources, perceived as a more traditional male role in school leadership.

Employment trends

Kowalski's *et al.* (2011) analysis does not support an assumption that there will be a more rapid, or even continued steady progress of women into the superintendency. At the national level, trends for women moving into management in the private sector have not shown a steady rise. Statistics from the US Census Bureau (1971, 1992, and 2011) indicate that in 1970, 12 percent of executives in the private sector were women; that figure rose in 1991 to 39 percent, and then dropped to 28 percent in 2010. The upward trend in women's representation in management was weaker for executives (12 to 39 percent) than for managers as a whole (12-45 percent), and the recent downward trend was more pronounced for executives (39-28 percent), than for managers as a whole (45-41 percent). These figures indicate an 11 percent decrease in female executives compared to the

4 percent decrease experienced by female managers overall. This would suggest that assuming a steady rise in the numbers of female superintendents is not borne out by national employment trends.

At the school level, increasing numbers of women holding formal superintendent's credentials together with a trend to hire from within the district and from those candidates with instructional leadership experience would indeed suggest a more rapid increase in the numbers of female superintendents. This would also indicate an increased access to the superintendency for many women with elementary school leadership, given that the traditional lead-in position to the assistant superintendent and then superintendent's position has been through the high school principalship, a position in which women are also underrepresented. Recent research (Polinchock, 2013) suggests that women aspiring to higher level decision making, particularly those who have held elementary school leadership positions do indeed seek out district level positions in curriculum and instructional management. However, if current economic austerity is replaced with greater financial security, school boards may well revert to seeking superintendents with high school experience and to considering candidates from outside the district and the larger pool of experienced superintendents currently male dominated, reducing the chances of selection of female aspirants.

Personal preference and lifestyle factors in career path visualization

As in any profession or occupation, women must make choices as they develop career goals aspirations; choices that related to both their final goal and to the overall balance of life/work activity, remuneration and security. Grogan (2000) detailed the heavy demands on the superintendent in terms of time, stressful decision making and personal interactions with stakeholders. Mahitivanichcha and Rorrer (2006) examined the characteristics of the superintendency identified by Grogan (2000) through the theoretical lens of the ideal worker norm, dominant time structure, and market structure that requires those in the role to adapt or conform to characteristics of ;a position best suited to someone free of family and non-working responsibilities. The authors noted the traditional willingness of male superintendent's wives to take a back seat role and handle domestic responsibilities for their husbands, and school board expectations that this would happen. Women applicants seeking superintendents' positions are still required to convince boards that they can meet both family and work expectations to become credible candidates for a position that juxtaposes family and career. These school board perceptions, that female applicants will undertake household labor in addition to their professional duties, are reflected in the findings of national surveys conducted by AASA that have indicated the high proportion of women superintendents who have no dependents, or who access the superintendency at a point where husbands are retiring or children have left home. In contrast, the typical profile of a superintendent is that of a white male in his forties, married with a family (Glass *et al.*, 2000). Mahitivanichcha and Rorrer (2006) suggested that women seeking the superintendency are in a forced choice situation; they are unlikely to be able to change the nature of the position, and so must adapt their family expectations and lifestyle to accommodate it.

An additional characteristic of the superintendency that must be factor into career planning by aspiring school leaders is that the position can be accessed from within and outside the school district. Insider candidates from within the school district have worked their way up through school and central office positions and are known to the school district community. External or outsider candidates have gathered their experience in other school districts. This presents women aspiring to be superintendent

with choices regarding relocation and commuting. Carlson (1961, 1971) studied succession practices of a sample of superintendents, noting that insiders were place bound – they put place of employment above careers and were prepared to wait for a position to become vacant. Outsiders, placing their careers before place, moved to access positions as they became available. Carlson noted other differences between the two groups. Both insiders and outsiders were chosen when school boards wanted to maintain the status quo, but when school boards wanted change then the outsider was favored. The outsider was able to command a higher salary, and the ability to change the expectations of the position.

Carlson's (1961, 1971) studies were based on an analysis of male superintendents and it may well be that insider/outsider board preferences are different for female candidates. Carlson (1961) noted that women well known and trusted in the school district may have a greater chance of overcoming board gender biases where these exist. However, the willingness of superintendent aspirants to move or commute to access positions when hiring conditions favor external over internal candidates raises issues of personal preference and lifestyle choices in the process of career path visualization, that must affect women's representation in many different fields of employment. Among these are balancing the needs of spouse or partner and other family members.

Studies of working women in dual earner households in the higher socio-economic strata in which school superintendents are located, point to the complexity of decisions facing these women that complicate the attainment of their career aspirations (Clark and Huang, 2006; Epstein and Kalleberg, 2004; Jarvis, 1999). Examining life course patterns of career-prioritizing decisions and occupational attainment in dual-earner couples, Pixley (2008) noted that even in egalitarian relationships there are many ways in which one partner's work career can enable or constrain that of the other. The author noted that most working couples will have to make career prioritizing decisions that could require both partners to make major changes, such as moving or changing jobs. Studies undertaken throughout the 1990s and early 2000s confirmed that couples continued to prioritize the husband's career (Hardill, 2002; Hardill and Green, 2003; Gill and Haurin, 1998; Green, 1997), although a study conducted by Hiller and McCaig in 2007 indicated that married women were active participants in decisions about relocating to allow partners to better access their work. However, there is an absence of studies about wives who are "tied stayers," whose employment options and subsequent career development are limited by their husband's job location. Pixley (2008) concluded that although family roles are generally becoming less traditional over time, most married couples still prioritize the husband's career over the wife's career, with a negative effect on attainment of the wife's career goals.

Similar themes are drawn out by Vander Klis and Mulder (2008) in a study of couples with commuter partnerships in the Netherlands. The authors stated "combining commitments in the domains of work, family, and residence has become a complex puzzle for the contemporary (dual-earner) family, especially when these choices concern family migration" (p. 1). Analyzing the results of a group of regional studies, Vander Klis and Mulder noted that in order to run a household effectively, spouses have to make compromises between individual and common careers. In choosing a residential location, they negotiate about the distances to their jobs, the divisions in household responsibilities, and the type of setting in which they prefer to live. The authors concluded, citing Brannen (2005), and Brannen and Nilsen (2005), that despite the emphasis by late modernity social theorists on the role of choice, individual creativity and

personal responsibility shaping life course, there are in reality many constraints arising from societal factors that significantly diminish the actual choice options available to the individual, however, well qualified, experienced, and ambitious.

While gender discrimination as a barrier to women accessing the superintendency continues to be a focus of research, recent studies have considered the motivation of women aspiring to the position. Grogan (2005), and Grogan and Shakeshaft (2013), building on work by Noddings (1992) and others, spoke to the ethic of care for students that motivate women to become teachers and then to seek out roles where they have a direct influence on teaching and learning. They noted that many women seek to bring an instructional focus to leadership, a spiritual dimension to their work, and strive for balance between the personal and professional aspects of their lives. They argued that the superintendency must be seen to accommodate these preferences if women are to be motivated to seek the position.

In summary, research suggests that women are motivated to seek the superintendency by a compelling belief that they can improve teaching and learning in schools. Their underrepresentation in the position nationwide is a loss of the different approaches and perspectives they may bring to policy change, decision making and practice. The research literature suggests that the slow movement of women into the superintendency is attributable to three factors. There is continued gender bias at the school board and district level when considering women for leadership. Women themselves continue to undervalue their qualifications which inhibit them from actively seeking superintendents' positions. The choice of women in dual earning relationships to preference their partners careers rather than their own with regard to long commutes or relocation, may also limit their access to opportunities for promotion. Many states in the USA have comparatively few school districts so a willingness to relocate can be assumed to be an indicator of the strength of an educational leader's career aspirations to the superintendency. How willing women aspirants are to relocate or commute, and what other lifestyle and personal factors would cause them to modify their career paths or consider alternative career goals, remains an under-researched area, prompting the following research study.

The study

To further understand the effects of choice constraints, specifically those of household support, mobility and increasing opportunity through relocation or commuting, for women aspiring to the superintendency or who have accessed the position and aspire to others, an exploratory study of women assistant superintendants and superintendents in the state of Pennsylvania was undertaken. The study was located in Pennsylvania for several reasons. In the 2011-2012 school year the state had a higher percentage of women superintendents than the national average (26 percent compared to the national average of 24 percent) and a large number of school districts, 501. In addition to 145 superintendents there were 108 assistant superintendents, a total of 253 women in these leadership positions (Education Names and Addresses (EDNA), 2011-2012), distributed across 501 school districts. The study further sought to discover if there was an interaction of unique features of school district number and organization in Pennsylvania and women administrators' personal preferences that favored women's access to higher level school district positions in the state.

States within the USA differ in their educational organization, geographic features and settlement patterns that affect the size of school districts, the number of superintendent and district office positions available, and the access of these positions by the pool of

qualified candidates. Pennsylvania, situated in the mid-eastern region of the USA, has an area of 46,000 square miles and a population of 13 million people (the sixth largest state by population in the nation). The state has 1.7 million students enrolled in public schools. School districts, which numbered 2,700 in the 1950s, were reduced by amalgamation to 501 during the 1960s (Sostek and Chute, 2009). In comparison, California has 977 school districts, Alabama 172 school districts, and Florida 74 school districts. While the state average enrollment for each school district in Pennsylvania is 3,400 students, the reality is that school districts range in size from those serving fewer than 1,000 students in two or three schools, to the large urban districts of Philadelphia and Pittsburg with many thousands of students in a multitude of schools. All but the smallest of districts typically have a superintendent, a business manager and an assistant superintendent, and the larger districts will have on their district administration team additional positions including a director of curriculum and instruction, and of special services.

In Pennsylvania, school superintendents are chosen by an elected school board and typically have employment contracts that range from three to five years. They receive a median salary of \$125,000 (Pennsylvania School Boards Association, 2011), with other negotiated benefits. Although nationwide superintendents typically stay in a position for approximately seven years, in small and large districts tenure drops to three years, a situation that has led to superintendents being characterized by Daniel Domenech, chief executive officer of AASA, as highly paid migrant workers (Pascopella, 2011). In the year 2011-2012, the turnover rate in Pennsylvania was 21 percent (Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, 2012). Given the large number of school districts and turnover rate, men and women motivated to pursue careers as superintendents could be expected to move frequently to access new positions when they become vacant, or as their existing contracts are not renewed. The study sought to discover whether women superintendents and assistant superintendents saw the large number of school districts and potential vacancies as opportunities to further their careers, or whether lifestyle choices, including giving preference to a partner's career, inhibited them from accessing these positions. In addition, the study sought to explore whether there were generational differences in these choices, given national trends to increasing male-partner involvement in household management, increasing numbers of women pursuing careers and in dual earner relationships.

Method

The study used an electronic survey, sent to all 253 female assistant superintendents and superintendents identified by the Pennsylvania Department of Education as appointed for the school year 2011-2012 (EDNA, 2011-2012). Survey questions were formulated using the research literature previously discussed around career choice and the characteristics and demands of the superintendent's position, together with informal discussions with women holding or aspiring to educational leadership positions, and the expert advice of two female superintendents (see below). The survey questions were designed to provide both quantitative data (yes/no answers, forced choice) and qualitative data in the form of explanations of forced choice answers.

As an initial step in developing the survey, informal discussions took place with groups of current female superintendents and assistant superintendents at the 2012 Pennsylvania Superintendents' Women's Caucus conference, and at local meeting of a superintendent's study council. Two female superintendents were consulted throughout the study, serving as expert checks on both our survey development and

interpretation of the results. One, under 40 years of age, in a dual earner relationship with a large family of young children, had at the time of the study been newly appointed in a school district in which she had previously served in a number of other capacities, including assistant superintendent. The other had recently retired from the superintendency of a high-ranking suburban school district, where she had served in a number of positions prior to becoming superintendent, while in a dual earner relationship and raising a family. In addition, a parallel study using interviews and survey to establish the use made by female elementary school principals of the position of district level curriculum director in Pennsylvania (Polinchock, 2013) provided further insights into the factors important in the career planning of women school administrators in the state.

The knowledge gathered from these sources (the literature, female administrators and expert advisors) produced a list of factors that a woman administrator might consider, based on age and family circumstances, when seeking a more influential position. These involved the expectation of long work hours, attendance at school and community activities that frequently took place at weekends or evenings, the need to be in the spotlight continually that eroded personal privacy – all negative aspects of the position that were offset by the potential of the position to provide an opportunity to “make a difference” to the education of all children in the school district. The factors that appeared most pertinent in the decision to seek the superintendent’s position given these realities were whether the position would require relocation, whether understandings with working partners around dual-career maintenance could be reached, availability of child care either waged or from family members, and help with domestic chores and commitment to family members such as aging parents. Recognizing that the importance of these factors would likely change at different stages of life, the first set of questions was situated in the context of participant’s application to their current position. Participants were asked to indicate, for their current position, whether: the involvement of spouse/partner in making the decision, the availability of family members to help with child care the availability of waged domestic help for the home the availability of child care facilities the geographic proximity of workplace to the existing household, were not important, important or very important. Additional open-ended questions asked about the current use of household help, its nature and frequency of use, the occupation of a spouse or partner and how it would impact a decision to relocate. Given the nature of the Pennsylvania school districts, where it is conceivable that an aspiring superintendent could obtain positions in several adjacent school districts without having to relocate, respondents were asked if they would consider commuting more than an hour from home to access a future position, and to explain their answer.

To establish the characteristics of the respondents, they were asked to indicate their age range (under 40, 40-50, 51 and above) and number of family members with whom they lived. Attitudes to child-rearing and promotion of careers, together with commitment to larger family might well be generational and thus to desegregating responses by age group would allow for identifying possible trends with regard to the impact of lifestyle factors. In addition, participants were asked to list previously held administrative positions, and the size of the school district both by number of students and number of schools in which they held their positions, to allow for comparisons with national patterns.

The electronic survey was distributed with a cover letter explaining the nature of the research, consent to participation and confidentiality of participant responses. Two follow up e-mails were sent as reminders to prompt further responses. The survey

responses were tabulated and descriptive statistics compiled. Open-ended responses that expanded on forced choice questions were examined for themes and subthemes, and the opinion of the two superintendents acting as expert advisors were sought to confirm or question conclusions drawn from the analysis of data.

Findings

Characteristics of respondents

The survey was completed by 109 respondents, a response rate of 47.4 percent with 64 participants identifying as superintendents, two as acting superintendents who were subsequently included in the category of superintendents, and 45 as assistant superintendents. When assigned by age group, 64 respondents identified as 51 or older (67.2 percent of the superintendents and 32.8 percent of the assistant superintendents), 40 respondents identified as 40-50 years of age (45.4 percent of the superintendents and 52.5 percent of the assistant superintendents), and two superintendents and three assistant superintendents identified as below 40 years of age. This pattern reflects previous national survey findings indicating few women below 40 hold the superintendency, but suggested that in Pennsylvania women are moving into superintendents positions in their forties, just as men have traditionally done. Of the 109 respondents, 72 (66 percent) acknowledged currently living with a partner or spouse, and 93 (84 percent) indicated that they were in households that included additional family members, most frequently a husband or/and or children.

The respondents held positions in school districts that ranged in size from <1,000 to 12,000 students. In all, 12 served in districts of under 1,000 students, 18 in districts of 1,000-1,999, 20 in districts of 2,000-2,999, 29 in districts of 3,000-3,999, and 26 in districts of between 4,000 and 12,000 students. This distribution reflected the distribution of women in all types of school districts noted by the 2012 AASA survey. The career paths to respondents' current positions were equally varied with no one route emerging as dominant, and suggesting these women had accumulated experience in many different positions ranging from assistant principals in elementary, middle and secondary schools and in the district office, and moved into positions as assistant superintendent and superintendent as opportunities arose.

Approximately a third of the respondents had held their current positions for two years or less, a third for between two and five years, and a third for five or more years. Of the 64 superintendents, only seven indicated having held the position in another school district prior to their current contract, but 47 indicated having held the position of assistant superintendent at some previous point in their career suggesting that this was the most favored gateway position to the superintendency. Eight superintendents indicated they would be retiring at the end of their current contract, reflecting the large group of respondents in the 50 and older age group.

Household support

Given the high demands on time for superintendents and assistant superintendents that includes evening and weekend events, and pre and post school meetings, it was hypothesized that women in these positions would anticipate the need for extensive domestic help, either waged or from other family members. It was further anticipated that the availability of such help would influence career choices. Respondents were asked to indicate, when they had applied for their current position, whether they considered the availability of waged home help as being not important, important or very important. The majority of respondents (94) indicated that this had not been

an important consideration, with only ten respondents (seven superintendents and three assistant superintendents in the 40 and above age group) indicating that this factor had been a very important consideration. Those respondents currently using paid household help indicated that this amounted to weekly or monthly cleaning services and yard work as needed. Of the 39 respondents who indicated they currently employed domestic help, this typically involved weekly or monthly cleaning services and yard work.

Responses to questions regarding extended family members living nearby to help with child care or provide other support indicated a similar pattern of low importance for this factor. The majority of respondents (88) indicated this was not an important consideration when applying for their current position, with six indicating it was important, and ten indicating it was a very important consideration. Of those indicating this had been a consideration, 11 were assistant superintendents and five were superintendents. An additional 11 respondents indicated that the availability of child care facilities was an important consideration when applying for their present position.

Overall, the responses and comments that expanded on the issue of need for and availability of household help and the need to stay close to extended family members for support when considering a career move indicated considerable self-reliance on the part of the respondents. The low importance assigned to both these factors reflected the low use of both sources of support as indicated by explanatory comments they provided. For a small group of respondents the need for reliable child care was a consideration in making their current career move, but the level of household help and child care indicated was modest, suggesting that most respondents, and their spouses/partners when these existed) coped with household chores and child care without seeking out additional help, while others found the level of service they required – day care for infants and after school supervision for older children, for example, – widespread enough to have little influence on career moves.

Respondents comments on the limited nature of outside family help, and the sharing of domestic responsibilities with spouses/partners included those from a young superintendent who explained she had “ a cleaning service every other month, lawn care, child care for a three year old and summer camps for older children, but a baby-sitter only when we (she and her husband) went out – no regular schedule,” while another in the 40-50 age group noted “my husband has to assume full responsibility for the chauffeuring of our daughter’s extra-curricular activities” while another in the same age group noted the use of a once weekly cleaning service but commented “my husband completes the remaining domestic work.” In the over 50 age group, a superintendent noted that she no longer employed help, and stated her husband undertook child care and domestic help for the first 15 years of her children growing up which were all administrative years for her, continuing “Couldn’t have done it any other way. You can’t leave a high school building when you’re the principal.” While such comments suggest that for some women child care responsibilities require negotiating needed help and support from domestic partners, the majority of the women in this study who indicated they have school aged children did not indicate this being a major inhibitor in accessing career positions.

Spouse/partner considerations

A similar variation in partner involvement in respondent’s career planning and development was indicated by responses to the question “How important was the involvement and agreement of your spouse/partner in making the decision around

applying for your current position?" Of the 103 participants who acknowledged a spouse or partner's involvement in decision making around the choice to apply or accept the current position, 32 noted the involvement as not important, 36 as important and 35 as very important, with no clear pattern by age of respondents, or by their position as superintendent or assistant superintendent (see Table II).

Mobility

Studies of the superintendency and its characteristic three year employment contract note the development of the role in relation to a traditional preference by school boards and search agencies for male candidates with trailing wives willing to relocate to further their careers (Chase and Bell, 1994; Kan, 2007; Newton, 2006; Tallerico and Blount, 2004). The expectations of school boards and the search committees they hire, that a woman would undertake child and household care and follow a husband when his career required relocation has been put forward as an explanation for their reluctance to hire women to the superintendency. Other studies suggest that women's "ethos of care" discourage them from uprooting family for their own pursuit of career goals, a self-limiting behavior that places them at a disadvantage when seeking a position that has traditionally required relocation. To gain deeper insights into women's attitudes to relocation to access a career position and the factors that influenced these attitudes, participants were asked the following: "Did you relocate to access your current position, and if so, how far did you move?" and "How important was the geographical proximity of your household to your workplace when you applied for your current position?" In addition, participants were asked to indicate if, when considering a future position, they would be prepared to relocate or commute more than an hour from their current home, and to explain their answer.

None of the participants below 40 years of age had moved to a different geographic location to access their current positions (see Table I). Five (12.5 percent) of the 40 respondents in the 40-50 age group reported having moved to access their current leadership position, but the moves had involved relatively small distances from eight to 68 miles. In the 51 and above age group, nine respondents had moved their household for their current positions, with only two participants undertaking a move of more than 60 miles. When asked to consider the influence of the proximity of their current position to their home on their decision to accept the position, 19 noted it had not been important, 54 stated it had been an important consideration, and 36 that it had been very important. The pattern suggested by these responses indicates that the

| Age group | Not important | Important | Very important |
|-----------------------|---------------|-----------|----------------|
| <i>Age < 40</i> | 0 (0%) | 4 (80%) | 1 (20%) |
| Superintendents | 0 (0%) | 1 (2%) | 1 (2%) |
| Asst. Superintendents | 0 (0%) | 3 (7%) | 0 (0%) |
| <i>Age 40-50</i> | 8 (20%) | 18 (45%) | 14 (35%) |
| Superintendents | 7 (11%) | 7 (11%) | 5 (8%) |
| Asst. Superintendents | 1 (2%) | 11 (24%) | 9 (20%) |
| <i>Age 50 plus</i> | 11 (17%) | 32 (50%) | 20 (33%) |
| Superintendents | 5 (8%) | 28 (44%) | 10 (16%) |
| Asst. Superintendents | 6 (13%) | 4 (9%) | 10 (22%) |
| Total | 19 | 54 | 35 |

Table I.
Mobility: importance of proximity of administrative position to participant's home

majority of women in the study have developed their careers in school districts close to where they live, with career moves limited to school buildings and district offices within a range of commuting defined by the women involved as acceptable given the priorities in their work/life balance at a certain point in time.

Respondents' answers to the questions regarding their willingness to relocate or commute more than an hour (a maximum of 50 miles) for future career positions, indicated a preference for remaining in the area in which they are currently located (see Table II). Although 31 women (39 percent) indicated they would be prepared to commute an hour or longer, they qualified their response with comments on three themes. The first, career advancement, included seven comments that addressed accessing positions that either provided higher financial remuneration and benefits or an alignment of educational philosophy and practice. Typical explanations of a willingness to relocate or commute for these reasons included "yes, if it were a district committed to student achievement," "yes, if the position provided an opportunity for growth and career advancement" and "yes, because I am only interested in certain types of school districts." Five respondents affirmative answers were qualified by reference to their children, including "yes, when my children are grown, maybe, but while they are still in school absolutely not!," "yes, I would consider this when my children are older" and "yes, but only after my children are grown." A third set of nine comments indicated that respondents already travelled an hour or more and would be willing to travel the same or more for another position.

Several themes also emerged from the comments of 78 (71 percent) respondents who indicated they would not be prepared to commute for longer than an hour. One theme was the loss of time involved in travel for non-work activities, with typical comments including "the time invested in the work on top of travel time would represent too much time away from family," "absolutely not, it would be too difficult with the kids," and beyond an hour "is too much time away from home; too far away if there is an emergency in the school district."

The already high time demands of the position was another theme that emerged from respondents comments which included "the job is too demanding to add that kind of travel time onto the hours," "too many evening functions to be driving more than two hours a day," and "I already put in 75-80 hours per week on the job. Although time to myself in the car is an opportunity for undisturbed reflection, I would not consider a longer commute." Other respondents referenced previous or current long commutes

Table II.
Participants' willingness to relocate or commute for career

| | No | Yes | Maybe |
|-----------------------|----------|----------|--------|
| <i>Age < 40</i> | 4 (80%) | 1 (20%) | 0 (0%) |
| Superintendents | 1 (2%) | 1 (2%) | 0 (0%) |
| Asst. Superintendents | 3 (7%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| <i>Age 40-50</i> | 26 (65%) | 13 (33%) | 0 (0%) |
| Superintendents | 10 (16%) | 8 (12%) | 0 (0%) |
| Asst. Superintendents | 16 (36%) | 5 (11%) | 0 (0%) |
| <i>Age 50 plus</i> | 44 (67%) | 18 (28%) | 1 (2%) |
| Superintendents | 33 (56%) | 9 (14%) | 0 (0%) |
| Asst. Superintendents | 11 (24%) | 9 (20%) | 1 (2%) |
| Total | 74 | 32 | 1 |

that would discourage them from ever travelling more than an hour for a future position: "Doing a 70 minute commute one way now, and would not consider it again," "no, I do so in my current position as assistant superintendent, and I have found it to be too exhausting." Another group of respondents (5) cited the need to be visible in the district in which they worked as a reason to reject a long commute: "As a superintendent it is more beneficial to live in the community," and "I think it is a good idea to reside in the community where you work." One respondent explained that she had chosen to commute "90+ miles for two years" but had recently decided to move closer to her point of employment. Together these comments suggest that while women may initially be prepared to undertake commutes of an hour or more to access positions they believe are important for their careers, the experience for most was negative, affecting their time at home and their visibility and availability in their workplace. As such, most had developed a clear understanding that commuting distance and relocation would be a factor that would limit their consideration of future positions.

Of the 13 superintendents and assistant superintendents with fewer family commitments nine indicated they would not commute more than an hour, while four indicated they would. The reasons given for this choice mirrored those provided by the group as a whole and noted above. The responses speak to individual stress levels, importance placed on reducing time spent in non-productive activity, and the importance of accessing positions that promised to fulfill personal understandings of educational excellence.

To further gauge participant's perceptions on limitations accessing future positions, they were asked if the occupation of a spouse/partner allowed for relocation should the participant's career aspirations require it. Of the 84 respondents who answered this question, nine indicated "maybe" while 72 committed to a definitive yes or no. Of these, responses were divided evenly between affirmative and negative (34 no/38 yes) and between age groups (under 40; no = 1, yes = 2; 40 - 51; no = 13, yes = 15; 51 and above: no = 34, yes = 38). Of the 43 participants who gave explanations for their responses, eight indicated having husbands who have retired and could thus relocate, and others that husbands or partners were self-employed. Those responding that their spouses/partners could not relocate indicated positions ranging from college careers to business owners to positions in local companies.

Several participants made direct reference to the adjustments made to accommodate spouse/partner's careers or living preferences. A superintendent in the 40-50 age groups noted "his position does not allow a move. I would have to pass on taking the position if offered." Another commented "Yes, I can move now because he is retired, but previously no, because he was a superintendent where we live." A third described long distance commuting arrangement: "I keep an apartment where I am employed and commute home on weekends and holidays." Another group of respondents indicated that although having no family constraints on relocating, their attachment to a house, geographical area or larger community would limit their interest in applying for positions that required them to move, regardless of the career advancement such a move might bring.

In summary, participants aspiring to the superintendency or advancing careers within it indicated a reluctance to consider positions that would require them to commute more than an hour from home or to relocate their homes or families. This suggested that the higher than national average of women accessing the superintendency was related to the large number of school districts in the state, allowing women apply to positions in more than one district within a manageable commute from their current home. Those

women with partners/spouses most frequently cited the careers or employment of these family members as limiting their willingness to consider positions requiring relocation. Unwillingness to seek access to positions that required more than an hour commute was ascribed by participants to the heavy time demands of the superintendent's position, need to maintain life and work balance, and necessity to be visible and accessible to the school district community in which they served. Neither considerations of the availability of household help and child care facilities nor geographical proximity to other family members and current support groups were perceived as important in influencing career advancement decisions. Additionally no clear pattern emerged regarding the importance of spouse/partner input into such advancement decisions based on respondents' recollections of decision making to accept their current positions. When responses were desegregated by age group, no differences between respondents in the under 40, 40-50, and 51 and above age groups were found with regard to willingness to commute or relocate, positions accessed on the career path to the superintendency, or importance given to partner/spouse in decisions about potential career moves and preferencing partner/spouses careers. Similarly, no difference was found regarding decisions to commute and relocate between those participants with families and partners, and those without.

Discussion

Several of the findings from this study raise questions regarding existing assumptions around women's underrepresentation in the superintendency and ongoing progress toward rectifying the gender balance in this most important of educational administrative positions in the US educational system. Women intent on pursuing the superintendent position could be expected to maximize their opportunities to obtain a position by applying for all vacant positions regardless of geographical location and the need to commute or relocate, as has traditionally been the practice of male candidates. The Pennsylvania context, with its many school districts and 21 percent turnover rate for superintendents that guarantees a high number of vacancies in any given year would seem to further encourage this career development strategy. However, the findings from this study of women superintendents and assistant superintendents suggest this is not a preferred strategy for them, with the majority of the participants reluctant to take positions more than an hour's drive from home, or to relocate, regardless of whether they have family commitments. In this reluctance, the study participants may reflect a societal trend to decreased mobility (US Census Bureau, 2013). This in turn suggests these women are acknowledging personal preferences and applying emotional intelligence with regard to life and work satisfaction and balance as suggested by Grogan and Shakeshaft (2013), rather than blindly following traditional paths to goal achievement or career focussed decision making. Further research is needed to determine the incentives that must be provided to encourage women to consider relocation or commuting as an option.

Alternative explanations of the preference to stay close to home when considering career moves may be found in Carlson's (1961, 1971) theories regarding place bound insiders and career bound outsiders. In the context of a school boards' lack of confidence in the ability of women to lead, aspiring female administrators who have demonstrated competent leadership in a number of positions and are well known in the local community become credible insider candidates. In the unique context of Pennsylvania's large number of small districts, many in close proximity, women may extend their network of support and recognition in a group of school districts,

increasing their opportunities to access superintendents' positions when they emerge. They, in effect, become "career bound insiders." Further research on the geographic location of the positions selected by women accessing the superintendency to advance their career, and on insider/outsider characteristics as they apply to women, is warranted.

The findings from this study question the types of strategies adopted by the women superintendents who were reluctant to relocate when at the end of an existing superintendent's contract. If female assistant superintendents are only considering insider positions, there is an absence of knowledge as to how they maximize their chances of selection when competing with other equally qualified insider and potential outsider candidates. The work of Grogan (2008) and Polinchock (2013) suggest that women may not have the superintendency as the ultimate career goal. Motivated by an ethic of care, they seek out positions where they perceive they can improve student experiences, and see multiple opportunities to do this. They may feel confident that they can apply their knowledge and experience of education and leadership to a number of situations inside and outside of school districts; that they are not constrained to seek a demanding role that favors those with a life style they do not choose to emulate. Further research around these aspects of choice and decision making in this context is needed establish whether women aspiring to the superintendency see themselves as victimized by the characteristics of the position, or empowered by their ability to qualify for similar positions in other fields.

The finding that many of the survey participants are constrained from seeking the superintendency in areas other than their current location by spouse/partner career or employment considerations is also open to multiple explanations. Some may see it as evidence of the ongoing socialization of women to take primary responsibility for domestic functions and preference a partner's career over their own. However, the decision-making process in egalitarian dual-earner households where two highly qualified individuals seek to maximize personal work and life satisfaction and the wellbeing of the household, both long term and short term, is inevitably complex (Green, 1997; Kan, 2007). The evidence from this study that indicates many single women make similar choices to those in dual earner relationships suggests that choices are determined more by the requirements of the superintendent's position than by gendered partner expectations. Further research to probe the willingness or lack thereof to relocation to access assistant superintendent and superintendent positions is needed, and to learn about the level of challenge needed to keep them professionally stimulated. Additionally, examining career preferences in relation to gendered role expectations that still dominate household career decisions and discourage women from applying for the position can add credence to the role of gender, gendered expectations, and career preferences in the superintendency.

Conclusion

In a time of societal change that has transformed both work and workplace in many professions and public institutions offering opportunities for flexible working hours and work from home, the role of the school superintendent has retained its traditional characteristic features. These include the need to be physically present in many school district activities that take place in evenings and weekends, and to be on call 24 hours a day in the event of emergencies affecting students and facilities, high demands on those who choose and are selected to undertake it. The ongoing underrepresentation of women into this position must continue to be a societal concern; in an egalitarian

society women must have equal input into the determination of the direction and quality of education, and the education system must have the benefit of the different perceptions and modes of operation that women have been shown to bring to leadership. However, the causes of women's underrepresentation may also be changing. Empowered by high levels of education and accumulated experience, women have developed alternative strategies and career paths to circumnavigate the now well recognized gender barriers that have previously excluded them from the position. Many of these alternative career paths to the superintendency equip them with organizational leadership skills valued in many other careers besides those in education, opening other career opportunities. This may lead to a questioning of whether the demands of the superintendency are at odds with the achievement of a satisfactory work/life balance that may include accommodating a dual earner career relationship.

If the requirements of the superintendency are unattractive to well-qualified women across a range of age groups, they may be equally so to men with different expectations of domestic responsibility and spousal support than those from whom the position developed its characteristic features. If this is the case, school districts will face increasing difficulty in recruiting well-qualified men or women. While this study illustrates the importance of continued monitoring of the causes of underrepresentation of women in the superintendency, and of greater understanding of women's career planning and choices in a changing society, it also illustrates the need for initiatives to make the position of superintendent more compatible with current lifestyle choices of both the men and women qualified to undertake it.

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Further reading

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