

## Woman District Superintendents Still A Minority: We Have Not Yet Come A Long Way

By Marie V. Bañuelos



You would think that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century would bring more equity in every area of leadership. Yet, when we examine the research of women holding the top leadership positions in school districts, the data has not changed significantly in over 80 years. Women are still a minority in holding the position of school district superintendent in California. And, if you are a *minority* woman, your chances of obtaining the highest position in a district is even rarer.

In the Fall of 2006, there were 165 women superintendents in California. When you consider that there are 1050 superintendencies in the state, this is pretty dismal. Only 16% of superintendencies in the state are held by women. This percentage has not budged much in over 80 years and actually took a serious dip in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1990, the percentage of women superintendents rose to 17% from the dip of 6.6%.

Much research has been conducted to help women obtain top leadership positions in schools. Blount's research in Destined to Rule the Schools (1998) explores the history of women's roles in educational leadership; however, it does not account for why the superintendency still eludes many top women leaders. Much research has been done over 50 years to identify the skills, attitudes and behaviors needed for women to succeed in obtaining and remaining in the superintendency. And still, few women obtain or remain in the top position.

There are still barriers that women cannot overcome by learning new skills. There is still a glass ceiling where male attitudes and beliefs that women are not up to traditionally "male" jobs reign. According to Nijole Benokraitis and Joe Feagin in Modern Sexism (1986), "Few people wonder why women, but not men, need the workshops, magazines, and advice on how to survive the marketplace – especially since more than one-third of the labor force has been made up of women since 1940. Even fewer people recognize that many of the magazines and books portray fantasies about, not realities of, working women." It is common to read what women need to do to be effective leaders in male-dominated positions. That fact alone speaks to the stereotyping of the ability of women leaders and what they need to do to match their male counterparts.

Today women obtain their superintendencies after more years in education than men do when they first obtain their superintendencies. Women tend to have longer tenure in school leadership than men when they move into the superintendency. More men than women move directly to superintendencies from principalships than women who, more than likely serve in district positions first. Is this because men are more highly skilled and educated? When you consider that more women than men complete graduate school and have longer years of experience before reaching the superintendency, it seems not to be so.

According to Sue Headlee and Margery Elfin in The Cost of Being Female (1996), “The good news is that women are now allowed in – to schools, occupations, and professions previously denied them. The sad news is that they continue to confront barriers in those schools, occupations, and professions because so many are still dominated by outworn traditions. They are frequently invisible in the classroom, underutilized and underrated in occupations and professions.” As much as women would like to believe “we have come a long way, baby,” we haven’t come as far as some think. There are still major leadership positions in the schools that are still ruled by outdated male constructs, cultural stereotypes, and sexist attitudes and behaviors.

What do women do to overcome gender bias, discrimination, and continued sexist attitudes that keep them from the superintendency? Not much. A study conducted by Catherine Marshall in 1993, “The New Politics of Race and Gender,” found that women superintendents “learned to downplay isolation and sexism... They must not make trouble. They learned to deny the differences” (p. 173). In Patricia Schmuck’s and James Schubert’s article “Women principals’ views on sex equality: Exploring issues of integration and information” (1995), they found that women tend to talk about their experiences as individuals and do not seem to comprehend the role gender plays in the segregation of females in the culture of schools. Women’s experiences of gender bias are rarely explored in research as they relate to the organization that has sexist attitudes and beliefs.

Researchers have tried to present findings to enlighten the field so women can be successful in male-dominated roles in schools. The research addresses what women need to do to *fit*. But the real issue is still gender bias in the educational profession. Linda Skria, Pedro Reyes, and James Joseph Scheurich (*Sexism, Silence, and Solutions: Women Superintendents Speak Up and Speak Out*, February 2000) responded to the misconception that researchers know what affects sexism by stating, “all of these theories, in our view, offered incomplete explanations for the continued under-representation of women in the public school superintendency” (pg.47). Learning better leadership skills, getting more education, or learning to fit in a male dominated profession will not change how an organization functions.

Gender Bias is not always a conscious act. Sexist attitudes and behaviors are not necessarily those of individual men but of the educational organization itself. These behaviors are practiced by school boards, in organizational structures, and men as well as women in the organization. These are learned and cultural behaviors practiced throughout a lifetime. Malcolm Gladwell points out in Blink (2005) that gender bias can also be subconscious. These behaviors are part of our culture and beliefs for centuries. What is missing in our culture now is the discussion that brings these behaviors to light in our organizations. Only when we look at patterns of behaviors and inequity can we uncover sexist beliefs and behaviors. Generations of values and beliefs become second nature if we do not think about them and the results they produce.

So, how can this issue really be addressed? Women who hold the position of superintendent must address this issue within their own organizations. The silence must be broken regarding inappropriate sexist behaviors and attitudes in the workplace. Is this dangerous? Absolutely!

Many women fit in by taking on male-attitudes and behaviors to be successful. Some women fit in by becoming one of the “good old boys.” These women perpetuate the bias for women who follow. Many women are reluctant to speak of their experiences of gender bias and discrimination in their jobs, especially if they currently hold the position of superintendent. Fear of reprisal, fear of disapproval, fear of ostracism, and fear of losing their jobs prevent most from attacking the issue up front. And would their voices be heard if they did? If they are, it is common to be discounted as a “feminist” view as if that was a bad thing. If women educational leaders will ever be heard and, if

gender bias is ever to be eliminated, their voices must be loud and relentless. It is the organization that needs to address organizational gender issues, not address individual men or women.

Women administrators need to create a meeting place where discussions on gender bias can be explored. A forum for women leaders to meet together to engage in real conversations around real lived experiences of gender bias is important so experiences can be identified, explored and not ignored. This should not be a forum to “fix” women or men, but a forum to explore organizational leadership and responsibility to make our organizations gender sensitive and equitable for all leaders and staff.

Women leaders cannot perpetuate gender bias by remaining silent or by ignoring what is really happening (for centuries). Shedding light on experiences of gender bias can help our organizations respond appropriately to eliminate sexism and discrimination. Shining a bright light on sexist practices of districts and school boards has the potential to change the conscious and subconscious results of gender bias.

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#### **About the author:**

**Marie Bañuelos has been in education for 33 years. She taught high school, was assistant principal for secondary education, administrative coordinator in San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools serving 33 districts, principal of a middle school, assistant superintendent in educational services for Barstow Unified School District and superintendent in Hanford Joint Union High School District. Marie leads accreditation teams for the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, was a member of the California Distinguished Educator Initiative working with low performing schools, and is a cognitive coach and mentor to teachers and administrators.**

**Marie has an AA in Philosophy, BA in English and Philosophy, a Masters in Education, and is a doctoral candidate at the University of La Verne. She co-authored a curriculum with Jack Canfield on building self-esteem that won the Product News Award for best new publications. Marie has done consultant work with over 150 schools on building staff teamwork, morale, unlearning prejudice and moving toward equity for students, curriculum alignment, good instructional practices, and sound policies, procedures, and systems for effective schools.**

**Marie is dedicated to assuring that every student receives the best possible education so they will be successful, contributing adults.**