SHE’S the Boss
Female administrators reveal what it’s like to be in a school leadership position

By Kaylen Tucker and Rachael George

While the education sector has long been more female-friendly than many occupations, unique challenges, unfair stereotypes, and even discrimination still exist when women assume leadership roles in schools. Principal recently asked several top women in educational leadership about their professional networks, work-life balance, and experiences to find out about the specific demands that the principalship holds for women. Here’s what they had to say:

**Principal:** Being an administrator is one of the best jobs in the world. However, it can also be one of the most challenging. How do you think being a woman impacts your job?

**Allyson Apsey:** It is a bit tricky as a woman, because what might be perceived as ambition can be perceived as family neglect. My husband is wonderful at taking care of things around the house, like doing the cooking and the laundry. I am grateful, and I know our family would not function without his efforts. [But] all of the things he does to help feel like things I “should” be doing. I have even had family members comment about how lucky I am that he does so much at home. I am lucky—it’s true. But I wonder if family members tell him how lucky he is that I work so hard outside the home?

**Liz Garden:** It has positively impacted my job at times because parents and students have viewed me as approachable and caring; they see me as a mom who understands them. But on the other hand, it can be hard when you are the only female in the room and you have to be a little more outspoken to get your point across; sometimes you are then viewed negatively.

**Ryan Daniel:** Being a woman impacts my work tremendously. It can be challenging to prove that you are equipped to lead and make decisions that impact others [with] the stereotype that women are more emotional and sensitive.
Doreen Martinez: It is sometimes difficult to advance into a higher position. The majority of superintendents are male, and being a female can [make it] difficult to compete. There is a perception that women are not as capable as males. [There is a] role conflict: Males have wives who take care of sick children, emergencies, etc., [and] they assume we will have to take off to take care of our families.

Erin Simpson: As a mother and principal, I want to be the best I can be. There are times when balancing [those] needs becomes challenging. I’ve gotten better at being confident enough to say “I need to be a mom first” and not feel that this [means] I am not giving my job and school family 100 percent, too.

Where do you turn when it comes to professional support? What are your thoughts on how to help build a professional network?

Apsey: For my first 11 years as a principal, I thought my job was to solve all the problems of the world inside my head. Once I got connected through Twitter, I realized that I don’t need to have the answers. I just need to know where to find the answers through the many resources and people who can help me. Getting connected was life-changing.

Jennifer Black: I have a PLN I turn to for support. I have met friends from all over the U.S. at NAESP conferences, and they are a great resource when I need advice or ideas. Many of them are male. We connect because we have a similar leadership style.

Daniel: As a female leader, you want to connect with other leaders who share your values and are open to contributing to your success. I have a close group of other principals I connect with constantly. We support each other through the ups and downs of the principalship.

Figuring out a work-life balance is always challenging for leaders, but being a woman can often lead to a “second shift.” What does your support system look like, and how do you find balance?

Apsey: My husband cooks dinner, and I clean up. He picks up the slack, and I am grateful for him. However, I’m lucky to sit down at 9 p.m. to relax or take care of personal and family things. It is not easy to prioritize what I need, and I often feel guilty about it, but I also know that I am no good to anyone unless I take care of myself. Self-care is listening to what my mind and body are telling me and taking action.

Black: I don’t have children of my own, so this is less difficult for me. However, there are times when I am not emotionally available to my husband after work because a work issue is weighing heavily on my mind. I do my best to eat healthy, work out, journal, and get the rest I need so I can be the best each and every day. The best strategy for me has been to make my to-do list and tackle it each day, knowing I gave it my all.

Lynmara Colón: I surround myself with strong female leaders and seek advice and support for them on a weekly basis—phone calls, gatherings, and intentional outings where we discuss books, current issues, and career goals.

Daniel: Finding balance as a mom of three and a leader is very difficult. My husband
has an equally high-demand job, so the load of parenting often falls solely on me. We are fortunate to have family that support us when needed. In order to find balance, I ensure that work stays at work as much as possible. I try as hard as I can to be present for my family when I get home, but it is challenging. I tend to work a lot late at night after everyone is asleep or early in the morning before everyone is awake.

**Simpson:** Balance is something I am still working on. My family, my friends, and my colleagues all help support me and my girls. Long hours, little sleep, and a messy house are common occurrences.

Women can often find themselves as the lone female at the table. How do you engage with administrative teams so your voice and perspective are heard and valued?

**Martinez:** If I am at the table, I deserve to be heard. I value others as they should value me.

**Daniel:** I participate in many focus groups and panel discussions around the county and state. It is important for me to represent my school district and the voice of the African American female leader. [At] the state level, I use this platform to advocate for the needs of our leaders and leverage my voice for minority leaders.

**Colón:** I’m intentional about the groups I belong to. I use Voozer and also meet up with female leaders from different levels—assistant principals, directors, principals, and superintendents—to learn how to conduct myself at the table and how to use my voice.

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> — Doreen Martinez

**Black:** I am involved in my district and serve as a director on our elementary administrators association board. We have equal representation of males and females. My voice is heard and valued because I have built a reputation of being someone who is solution-oriented.

**Apsey:** Over the past couple of years, I have gotten more involved in legislation in my state and have found that to be a sometimes uncomfortable but necessary role for female leaders. Having confidence in my own voice is extremely important to making sure my perspective is heard and valued.

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**Women in Leadership**

NAESP is developing a new series on Women in Educational Leadership. “The unique challenges that women administrators face will not defeat us, but rather define our leadership for those who look to us for hope, guidance, and support,” said Gracie Branch, NAESP’s associate executive director for professional learning. Through programming and targeted resources, NAESP will address women’s experiences with topics such as motherhood, self-care, and work-life balance; career paths, mentors, and advocating for pay and benefits; and developing a successful leadership style.

**Garden:** You have to be brave enough to speak up and make sure you are heard in that situation. I think showing that you are listening and respecting others’ perspectives will in turn help you receive the same listening and respect you seek.

**Schools are becoming more racially segregated—and achievement gaps still persist. Approximately 80 percent of principals and 80 percent of teachers are white, while the majority of students are racial minorities. What in particular can women leaders bring to the equity discussion?**

**Black:** I think this involves addressing the implicit bias we all have. The challenge is getting everyone to be self-reflective about their bias and do something about it.

**Martinez:** Women can bring a different perspective to an equity discussion. They can also share challenges they have faced in reaching their current positions.

**Daniel:** Women leaders can advocate that gender should not be an obstacle in achieving success. Women leaders can also help break down common misconceptions about women in leadership. They can help other leaders understand that by removing these misconceptions and barriers, we can provide intentional support and services to leaders.

**Colón:** As a Hispanic female leader, I am intentional about supporting and mentoring minority leaders, bringing equity to the discussion, [and] advocating for all.

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