



Patching the Pipeline

Equitable principal preparation programs offer women training in administrative skills and pathways to promotion

BY ANDREA THOMPSON

While many school districts have focused closely on the development of impactful principal pipelines in recent years, these efforts have lacked an emphasis on representing and targeting all genders for gaining experience and promotion. There are still disproportionately fewer women in the upper echelons of leadership than in the teacher workforce, according to the “American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study,” so being intentional about gender equity in leadership preparation and promotion is essential.

School districts can mitigate this disparity if they are driven by a gender equity focus and mechanisms guaranteeing that more women are at the training table, not only at the building level but also at the district level. Equitable pathways for

promotion will elevate women into the upper echelons of leadership at a rate equal to or greater than that of their male counterparts.

Needing New Skills

According to research performed by Sacred Heart Schools Louisville president Karen Thomas McNay while at the University of Kentucky, female superintendents need experience in political leadership and district-level

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fiscal management, in addition to instructional leadership experience. Equitable leadership pipelines can provide training in these areas through apprenticeships, coaching, and mentoring.

Women who have broken the glass ceiling in the absence of an equitable leadership pipeline designed their own experience pathways. For example, Lori Gonzalez, superintendent of El Nido Elementary School District in California, says she realized early in her career that the leadership experiences she was being given would be insufficient to reach the leadership echelon where she wanted to be. As a result, she intentionally mapped out her pathway from building level to the superintendency.

“Once in the field of administration, I was quickly funneled in the areas of curriculum and instruction, English learners, categoricals, family engagement, and the writing of plans such as the Local Control and Accountability Plan,” Gonzalez says. “These areas are the essence of education and are so important to me, so I was quick to accept my focus areas, yet I knew if I wanted to grow in my career, I also had to gain experience in the areas of finance, operations, facilities, athletics, maintenance, and especially construction.”

Gonzalez attended extra conferences, meetings, webinars, and other training opportunities to “learn the trade.” She also asked to take on projects just to gain experience, asked lots of questions, and refused to be judged for a lack of knowledge in the pursuit of it. When she became superintendent, she had experience in a variety of areas

and was recognized as a person who wasn’t afraid to collaborate or ask questions. Administrators who start out as teachers “learned to teach, not train teachers, develop a budget, build a gym, or run meetings,” she says. “So it is up to us to learn how to be educational administrators.”

Structural Setbacks

While Gonzalez didn’t allow herself to be pigeonholed as a teacher, women who aspire to building and district leadership and who gain the experience necessary to do the jobs often confront systems that don’t distribute promotion opportunities equitably. In “Held Down and Held Back: Systematically Delayed Principal Promotions by Race and Gender,” authors Lauren P. Bailes and Sarah Guthery followed more than 4,000 equally qualified Texas educators from their promotion to an assistant principal position to examine the likelihood of promotion to principal and how long it took by school level and gender.

“The findings are clear: Men and women experience the principal pathway differently,” they wrote. “Women assistant principals have, on average, more professional experience prior to reaching the assistant principalship than do men. Despite being more experienced prior to the assistantship, women also wait longer, on average, for promotions to the principalship than do men: Women are likely to spend 5.62 years in an assistant principal position, while men are likely to spend just 4.94 years in that role.”

In addition to the extra two-thirds of a year in the assistant principalship and additional year of experience, women were more likely to accept principalships in elementary and middle schools in spite of holding more than half of all assistant principalships in the state, the study found. “There are clearly structural and systematic barriers to women’s promotion to principalships that are not related to their years of experience or aspiration to the position,” Bailes and Guthery concluded.

In view of these findings, educators must appeal to decision-makers to make school leadership development pipelines more equitable. And while advocating for that change, women should continue to aspire toward the roles they want, set goals and timelines for achieving the experiences they will need, and network with current female leaders.

Women in leadership should also inform each other of the specific leadership skills required, support and mentor each other, function as sounding boards when facing challenges, and most of all, elevate each other when opportunities arise. It is your sister in leadership who will be there to support and guide you as you grow your wings. If you are among the sisters who have already made it, reach back and pull someone up. ●

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