

The Perceptions of Female Superintendents within a Rural County in a Midwestern State

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This paper discusses the perceptions of seven of the eight women to serve as school superintendents within a rural county in a Midwestern state from 1986 to 2021. From interviews with the women, we identified themes and compared and connected the thematic perceptions of the rural female superintendents to the overall framework of extant literature on the female superintendent experience across the United States. Throughout this process, we found that much of what the rural female superintendents we interviewed experienced in their jobs matched the experiences of other women superintendents across the country. There were, however, some divergent experiences from established literature in key areas. This paper highlights many of those similarities and differences.

Keywords: rural, female, women, superintendents, administration

Historically, those who hold the position of school superintendent are, most often, men (Tallerico & Blount, 2004; Miller et al., 2006). Sawchuck (2022) decried that “women – the backbone and brain trust of America’s public schools – are vastly underrepresented in the superintendent’s chair” (para. 1). White (2021) discussed major gaps in the percentage of female superintendents versus male superintendents across the United States. Derrington and Sharrat (2009) noted that the percentage of female superintendents in the United States increased from 12% in the late 1990s to 22% by 2006. Despite that increase, across the United States it was clear that “the number of women achieving a superintendent position does not match the pool of talented women who are qualified for and would succeed in the job of superintendent” (Derrington & Sharrat, 2009, p. 8). Gammill and Vaughn (2011) noted that even within the framework of study on female superintendents, the perceptions of those women who hold superintendencies in rural areas are often underdocumented. So, although the “legacy of discrimination” (Miller et al., 2006, p. 11) when it comes to women in the role of school superintendent is pervasive across the United States, is it necessarily pervasive in every geographical setting within the country?

The geographical setting for this study was a county in a Midwestern state. The county is rural, classified officially by the United States Office of Management and Budget as “nonmetro” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019). As of 2020, the county had 21,241 total residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). The county seat was, by far, the largest population center in the county, with a population of 10,914—nearly half of the county total (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). The rest of the county’s population is scattered among various small towns and farmsteads. No other town in the county tops even 1,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

The county seat serves as the business hub of the area. It is to this city that people in the 878 square mile county come to shop at Walmart or eat at McDonalds. Although gas can be purchased in the outlying areas of the county, fuel prices are more affordable when one makes the drive to the county seat. Work among families in the school districts is often agriculture related, usually where corn and beans are grown. Cattle are raised on the rolling hillsides of the countryside.

The population throughout the county is declining, reflecting the decline prevalent in rural areas of the United States since at least the 1940s (Johnson & Lichter, 2019). This decline is particularly noticeable in the agriculture-based population of the smaller communities outside of the county seat. Overall, the population density of the county in 2020 was 24.2 individuals per square mile. This represents nearly a 10 percent decline from 2010, when the population density of the county was 26.6 individuals per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Across the United States, a school consolidation movement beginning in the 1930s reduced the number of school districts in the country from 128,000 to 16,000 by the 1980s with rural schools bearing the brunt of these consolidations (DeYoung & Howley, 1990, p. 63). In the rural county that is the geographical setting of this study, there are seven school districts situated either fully or partially inside the county’s borders. The seven current school districts were all born from this aforementioned consolidation movement during the 1950s and 1960s. This consolidation impacted attendance centers for the school districts. One of the districts in our study—the district centered in the county seat—serves a community with multiple attendance sites based on grade configuration: elementary, middle school, secondary school, and vocational school. Two districts in the study have K-12 grade buildings that are connected and share a gymnasium and lunchroom. Two of the small districts have attendance centers in two towns approximately 5 miles apart: an elementary attendance center and a secondary attendance center.

Each district represented in the study has athletic teams and music programs. The county seat district offers multiple highly successful sports, along with band and choir programs that successfully compete in show choir and marching exhibitions. The other districts’ students play eight-man football, basketball, track, volleyball, softball, and

baseball. Many of these athletic activities are shared programs involving two or three of the rural districts.

Each district struggles to attract and retain teachers. Student teachers have been hired to be the teacher of record in at least five of the county's school districts (C. Barr, personal communication, August 2022). Many teachers in the districts are members of families who have lived in the area their whole lives. Teachers in these districts hold well-paying jobs, providing insurance for those who live in the rural areas (Heller, 2021). Overall, these are not wealthy school districts. The state funding formula depends primarily on the assessed valuation of the property within the district borders (Rinehart, 2016).

School boards of the smaller districts have discovered hiring local administrators of whom they have first-hand knowledge to be a solid practice to maintain quality superintendents. Many times, recruitment and promotion to the superintendency is from the building principal to the superintendent's desk (P. Warner, personal communication, July 2022).

From at least the time of district consolidation in the 1950s and 1960s until the 1980s, only men held superintendent positions across the county. The county's first female school superintendent was hired in 1986. Since then, eight different women have held the title of school superintendent in the county. Three of the county's school districts have employed two female school superintendents during that time. Two county school districts have employed one female school superintendent. Two districts within the county have employed only males in that position to date.

Four women who held superintendent positions in the county's school districts held the position at other districts as well in their careers, though to date, no woman has been a superintendent in more than one district within the county. The first woman to hold a superintendency in the county did so alone. No other woman was hired as a school superintendent in the county during the time she served. Every other woman who has served as superintendent at a county school has worked with at least one other woman at some point during her tenure.

Having employed eight women as superintendents in the previous 36 years, is this rural county in a Midwestern state ahead of the curve when it comes to trends across the United States involving female superintendents? What are the perceptions of the women who have actually held the job? We decided to go directly to the source and interview as many of these women as we could to compare their personal experiences as superintendents to those of other female superintendents around the nation.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore whether the perceptions of those women who have held the job of school superintendent within a rural county in a Midwestern state match the trends found in literature for female superintendents across the rest of the United States. Our research question was: Would the personal experiences of serving as superintendents, as shared by women in a rural county in a Midwestern state, dovetail with what other women superintendents have noticed and experienced around the nation?

Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework for this study revolves around synergistic leadership theory (SLT) (Brown & Irby, 2003). Whereas other leadership theories have maximized the experiences of white males while largely excluding the female experience in leadership positions (Holtkamp et al., 2007), SLT was “developed by female researchers, utilized a female sample, and included the female perspective” (Brown & Irby, 2003, p. 102). It is a theory approach “inclusive to female leaders’ experiences and voices yet applicable to both male and female leaders” (Brown & Irby, 2003, p. 103). SLT proposes that when considering leaders, “it is important to embrace a holistic perspective of the context of leadership and organizations” (Brown & Irby, 2003, p. 101).

There are four factors of leadership according to SLT:

Factor 1 – Attitudes, Beliefs, and Values.

Factor 2 – Leadership Behaviors.

Factor 3 – External Factors.

Factor 4 – Organizational Structure.

SLT posits that each of the four factors is interconnected with the others. Organizational and leadership success comes when the four factors are in harmony with one another. Strife in organizations or among leaders comes when any factor is out of balance in comparison to the other factors (Brown & Irby, 2003, p. 103).

The SLT method of examining attitudes, beliefs, and values was attractive to us as researchers on the rural female superintendent experience because it recognizes that “female leaders may be impacted by external forces, organizational structures, or values, attitudes, and beliefs in ways male leaders are not” (Brown & Irby, 2003, p. 102). Similarly, though we believe leadership behaviors that are traditionally thought of as either male or female exist, in fact, on a continuum and are not limited to any one particular gender, nonetheless, SLT recognizes that leadership behaviors of women in positions of authority may differ contextually from their male counterparts. This context means that external factors and organizational structure may impact women in different ways than men when

it comes to decision-making in leadership positions (Brown & Irby, 2003, p. 102). Thus, we sought to apply the factors of SLT to real-life situations when considering the responses of the rural female superintendents in our study.

Methodology

As previously mentioned, the following question guided our research: Would the personal experiences of serving as superintendents, as shared by women in a rural county in a Midwestern state, dovetail with what other women superintendents have noticed and experienced around the nation? At least in part, this study was born via our personal experiences. One author served as a teacher in two of the county's districts when they were led by female superintendents. The other author was a female superintendent in a neighboring county at the same time that many of the women we interviewed served. Therefore, we wanted the study to be qualitative in nature as we wished to delve into the mindsets of the rural county's female superintendents. Thus, we chose to engage our subjects in a process of "exploring and understanding the meaning individuals . . . ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). Because the study consisted of interviews with participants and personal responses to written questions, this study was a qualitative case study of a bounded system. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained "the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study" (p. 38). Because the study focused on a group of people in a specific location during a specified time period, it is a bounded system because one can "fence in" the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 38). In this study, the eight female superintendents in the rural county of the selected Midwestern state who served between 1986 and 2022 were approached for participation in the study. We contacted the women via email to determine their interest in participating. Of the eight women we contacted, seven agreed to participate in the study.

Before our interviews, we explored numerous books and journal articles to find emergent themes in literature about female superintendents across the United States. Based on this literature review, we developed an interview document focusing on the experiences encountered by female superintendents and/or superintendents serving in a rural area. We then interviewed seven of the eight women who held the position of superintendent in the county about their experiences in the role. Using the set of predetermined questions, we interviewed five of the individual participants in a face-to-face meeting. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by a transcription service. The two remaining participants were unable to schedule a time to meet with us and responded to the questions via email. From there, we revisited our conversations, seeking themes in the women's experiences. Finally, we determined which themes that emerged from our conversations matched the national narrative and which themes did not. Overall, we found that much of what the rural female superintendents we interviewed experienced in their jobs matched the experiences of other women superintendents across the

country. There were, however, some divergent experiences from established literature in key areas.

Literature Review

Different themes began to emerge as we processed and coded our interviews with the women superintendents of the county. In particular, our subjects expressed multiple thoughts around the areas of discrimination, leadership styles, career paths, and locations, and mentorship. This section highlights key points on each of these themes that we found in our review of national literature.

Discrimination

Sawchuck (2022) discussed the idea that education researchers have for many years tried to make sense of reasons why a field whose workforce is so heavily dominated by women should have such a low percentage of women in the top position. Much of the extant literature regarding female superintendents in the United States mentions the presence of discrimination in culture and attitudes or discriminatory practices in hiring as reasons why there are so many more men than women employed in the superintendent position. Shakeshaft (1989) noted that even those who research superintendent trends often fall into this mindset as “the funding of research, the objects of study, and the use of research have been to date dominated by white males” (p. 324). Shakeshaft also said that, as a “nondominant group,” women have often been “unrepresented” in research concerning those in school leadership positions (p. 324). Estler (1975) referred to a “deeply instilled pattern of societal discrimination that affects the aspirations of women” related to their seeking jobs as superintendents (p. 366). Sawchuck offered statistics to bolster this argument when he said that although women earn two-thirds of leadership degrees in education, only about one of every four superintendent jobs is held by a woman. Sharp et al. (2004) discussed the ideas of discrimination toward women as not necessarily being overt. Rather, discriminatory practices are built into systems that perpetuate the hiring of men as superintendents even though the overwhelming majority of teachers are women. Indeed, Webb (2018) noted that “women outnumber men nearly three-to-one in education; however, when it comes to educational administration, the statistics are nearly identically reversed” (p. 6).

Leadership Styles

Eagly et al. (2003) found that though women are often in the minority when it comes to holding top-level leadership positions, their overall leadership style tends to be more transformational in nature than their male counterparts, who tend to be more transactional in nature. Within the framework of existing literature, for the most part, female superintendents downplayed gender-based leadership styles. Instead, they believed multidimensional leadership styles allowed them to deal with the complexities of the superintendency. Reed and Patterson (2007) noted leadership styles were not

perceived to be based on gender but on feminine–masculine types of leadership traits found in both male and female superintendents. Pounder and Coleman (2002) echoed this sentiment when they wrote that “de-coupling gender from biological sex allows for the female leader to exhibit male gender qualities and vice versa” (p. 124). Although collaboration and caring are typically considered feminine traits, male superintendents also display skills in collaboration and caring. The leadership styles for both female and male superintendents appear to be based on the situation rather than on gender (Reed & Patterson, 2007, p. 92). There was a reference, however, to the perceived need for men to be the “winner” in the event of conflict whereas women are perhaps more comfortable trying something different to reach the goal (Reed & Patterson, 2007, p. 98). Another study of female superintendents confirmed the need for superintendents to deal with multitudes of situations, to be the “jack of all trades” as the top officer of a school district (McCabe, 2001). In that vein, Palladino et al. (2007) noted that successful rural superintendents commonly possess a myriad of skills in multiple areas, including relationship-building, moral responsibility, and instructional leadership while Wilson (2010) mentioned that rural superintendents must constantly balance the areas of management, administration, and communication in order to be effective leaders.

Career Paths, Family Considerations, and Location

Tallerico and Blount (2004) explored the reasons individuals seek certain positions. They cited Carlson’s perspective that individuals seek jobs based on the position’s desirability (p. 654). Gullo and Sperandio (2020) found, however, that the most desirable administrative positions in education are often closed off to women or, at the very least, harder to obtain. Speaking about all open superintendent jobs but especially about desirable jobs for women outside of the districts in which they currently worked, the authors specifically noted that “women must choose not to aspire (to the job of superintendent) or to prepare themselves for possible gender bias in hiring when applying as outsiders” (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020, p. 1).

Garn and Brown (2008) found the overwhelming number of female superintendents in their research had begun their careers as elementary teachers and that their first administrative jobs in education had most often been as elementary principals. This typical career arc for women in education had ample potential for closing them out of superintendent jobs. Glass (n.d.) noted that most superintendents had administrative jobs at the secondary level prior to coming into their superintendent positions.

Location and the idea of staying close to home might be a factor for how women seek superintendent positions as well. Sharp et al. (2004) indicated that in surveying women superintendents for their research, most of those women surveyed felt that men were more mobile than women in applying for superintendent positions. The majority agreed that women sometimes do not apply for superintendent positions because they

might not want to spend too much time away from home. Lack of encouragement from the community, family members, or peers was considered to be a barrier, but the majority of the women surveyed did not feel restricted by family to seek the superintendent position and would encourage their daughters and sons to become school superintendents (Sharp et al., 2004, p. 31). Of the women surveyed who were in central office positions, only 4.7% indicated their families would be unwilling to relocate (Brunner & Kim, 2010, p. 297). Nonetheless, Derrington and Sharratt (2009) indicated that family considerations were a major factor as to why many women chose not to pursue superintendent positions (p. 9), with Sandberg (2013) acknowledging that women were “more likely to accommodate a partner’s career than the other way around” (p. 62). Superville (2017) said the potential instability in a superintendent job in relation to family time meant that some women simply don’t want it. They prefer teaching and being close to students. The hours are punishing, school board politics can be brutal, and public scrutiny is intense. The average superintendent stays on the job less than five years. For some women, that uncertainty is not worth uprooting their families (p. 15).

Mentorship

A mentor is defined as a person “who offers knowledge, insight, perspective, or wisdom that is helpful to another person in a relationship which goes beyond duty or obligation” (University of California Davis, 2018). The various aspects of the mentor’s role include being an advisor, critical friend, guide, listener, role model, sounding board, strategist, supporter, and teacher who asks questions, challenges productively, encourages risk taking, offers encouragement, provides feedback, promotes independence, and shares critical knowledge. The Wallace Foundation (2006) espoused the need for support and development to meet the demand of the schools and communities they lead. The relationship is mutually beneficial as both the mentor and mentee benefit from the relationship in terms of increased satisfaction with, knowledge of, and wisdom to support the individual (Talley & Henry, 2008).

With a focus on leaders in rural regions, support in the form of mentoring, coaching, and peer networks are critical (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Developing sustainable leadership in rural areas is a challenge and should be a priority for state and national leaders (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). For schools to ride the waves of reform requires skilled, competent, and stable leadership. Support in the form of mentoring, coaching, and peer networks is therefore imperative. More specifically in studies of female superintendents, it was found that more than 70% of female superintendents indicated they have individuals to help them gain the competencies required of the position (Brunner & Kim, 2010, p. 293). In many cases, however, it is males who mentor female superintendents. For example, Reed and Patterson (2007) found that mentors for female superintendents in their study were all men (p. 96). The lack of a representative professional network was considered as detrimental in some circles. For example, 53%

of those who participated in Sharp et al.'s (2004) study considered the lack of an influential sponsor somewhat of a barrier (p. 29).

Findings

Discrimination - What We Found Within a Rural County in a Midwestern State

In the rural county in a Midwestern state, hiring practices for superintendents before the 1980s were, if anything, more draconian than in other schools across the United States. National trends saw a high of 11% of school superintendents as female in 1930, with a low of 1.3% in 1971 (Sharp et al., 2004, p. 22). As stated before, we found no evidence of superintendents in the county who were anything other than White and male prior to 1986. Therefore, did those women who occupied the superintendent positions in the county experience discrimination after 1986? If so, how?

The majority of those in our study felt they were not discriminated against during their time as superintendents, though the consensus of all participants was that such discrimination did exist, even if they had not experienced it themselves. No superintendent spoke of discrimination within the hiring process. One superintendent felt people "sometimes deferred to me because I was a woman in certain instances, but there was no harassment, nothing like that went on with other (female) superintendents."

Two women specifically said they experienced discrimination from colleagues in their roles as principals but not as superintendents. One interview subject said that, as a superintendent, neither she nor her male colleagues in the county ever worried about gender roles in their leadership positions.

Those gentlemen, when I first started my career as a superintendent, that were the surrounding superintendents, (were) just a great group of people. So I guess what I would say to being a superintendent in (the county), I didn't know that there was a gender. I mean, we were just all friends, we were all colleagues, we worked together for the students in the area, and that was a real priority for the group. I came into the group at a time when things were changing. And so we were all working together to try to provide opportunities for the kids and to better their educational experience. So as far as being a female or a male, I really wouldn't have much.

Of the seven women we were able to interview, only one spoke of discriminatory experiences while she was superintendent. For her, the experiences of discrimination were sometimes direct. For example, one board member "was extremely chauvinistic and would try to use the, 'honey, dear.' Call me up and advise me what I needed to do, but in a really condescending way that he would never do to a man."

Mostly, however, the discrimination this superintendent experienced was the result of a confidence gap in her abilities to lead as a woman versus if she had been a man.

Much of that confidence gap was in the areas of athletics, construction, and maintenance—areas that tend to be in the traditional male sphere of influence.

The school district that I was in was very sports-oriented, and that's always something. That's often some area that people aren't sure how you're going to feel about it. There's a difference there, too, about how you're approached about athletics versus academics, or however you want to look at that. Those are some of the things. Anything that had to do with construction, man jobs. I just felt that they weren't as confident in a female, at least at the beginning until I showed them I could communicate with big burly men, that kind of thing. Those are some examples. But, yes. And perhaps I'm sensitive, but I don't think so. I may be sensitive, but those were real things.

Leadership Styles - What We Found Within a Rural County in a Midwestern State

Six of the seven female superintendents in our study indicated beliefs that they, as individuals or through their work, were not perceived differently as a superintendent because of their gender. One female superintendent did voice that the school community was watchful to see if she supported athletics and could manage building projects. Another woman in our study indicated the board of education was helpful to her in building projects where she had little background. She asked the board members questions to build her knowledge as she was managing building maintenance projects.

Another female participant spoke of having leadership discussions with her successor, who was male, after she had moved on to another position. Refuting much of the literature we read, traditional gender roles regarding the perceived strengths of women and men in relation to the superintendency was sometimes a topic of discussion.

We would talk school sometimes, but he professed that he was, and I think this is true of a lot of males that become superintendents, that their strong suit is budget, buses, and basketball . . . I think that is kind of the same feeling that is out there a lot with . . . big schools and the superintendents that get into the big schools, that their main thing is those three things . . . that is where their strength is. I think most women have strengths in working with people and being able to relate to kids and their needs because that's the way women are. When a woman is looking for a leadership position, they're looking for a leadership position that wants what they have to offer.

Career Paths, Family Considerations, and Location - What We Found Within a Rural County in a Midwestern State

In our study, it appears that being known in the community was a factor in the hiring of the women to serve as school superintendent. Of the seven women we interviewed in our study, three had been elementary principals in the districts where they later served as superintendents. At least one female superintendent we interviewed recognized that being a “known commodity” was instrumental in leading her to the superintendent’s job.

I had been in the school district as an elementary principal for seven years. In a way it wasn't like a new situation because people knew me, I think they respected me, and there wasn't really any problems going into the superintendency that way and the questions that people might've had, if they had been hiring somebody they didn't know, those questions just didn't exist.

Two of the women we interviewed had been teachers in the district where they later became superintendents. Both former teachers were known in the community, went elsewhere to be administrators, and then came back to serve in the district’s top position. The remaining two female superintendents interviewed were unknown to the community when they came to the area under study, but one of those women was promoted to the superintendency in a previous district outside of the county where she was known as a teacher, an assistant middle school principal, and the high school principal.

Two of the superintendents in our survey indicated that family considerations were a factor in their decision of when and where to seek a superintendency. One expressed that the location of the superintendency where she served was a good fit for her family, whereas another, though approached by multiple districts to consider applying for the superintendency, expressed that she waited until her children were older before she sought the superintendency: “So I just continued as assistant superintendent until my kids were older and high-school age where they could manage themselves.”

Mentorship – What We Found Within a Rural County in a Midwestern State

Two individuals who were serving as principals in their previous districts indicated their bosses at the time urged them to become superintendents. In one district, a female superintendent was actively involved in assisting the female principal in learning budgeting and other aspects of school management.

(When) I was a principal, I worked with (another female superintendent in the rural county), and she encouraged me to go onto my superintendency, just worked really closely with her. And was always interested in budgeting and just asked a lot of questions. And I think she just saw that as maybe someone who should go into that. So I did that and then applied for a little tiny school and they happened to hire me.

In another district within the rural county, a male superintendent became a strong advocate and mentor once he learned that our interview subject, who was principal of the district's elementary school at the time, was interested in assuming the superintendency after some initial reluctance.

(Members of the school board) asked me if I was going to apply. And I was like, uh, no, I don't know anything about being a superintendent, I don't want any part of that. And a couple of weeks went by and they interviewed a couple of candidates. And while they were good candidates, they weren't really what they thought they wanted. But I think what they wanted was for me to say I would do it. So then I became fearful. I remember being fearful that, oh my gosh, all these people that I work with and myself may not like what we get. So, okay, I'm going to talk to him, I'm going to do it . . .

And they pretty much led me to do that. (The previous superintendent) didn't want to leave me to do anything I didn't want to do. But then once I said I would do it, he was like, it's going to be fine. You need to do this. And so then he was very helpful. He just thought I really didn't want to do it. And then I told him, I went and confided in him that I would do it if he thought I could. And then he was like, uh, yeah, I think you'd be fine. And the rest is history, I guess.

A third woman in our study was also an elementary principal in her district when the previous male superintendent announced his plan to retire. His public support and advocacy helped convince the school board to hire her as his successor although his later election to the district's school board complicated their relationship.

My predecessor is probably the reason that I was (selected) as well because when he retired, he gave them my support. He encouraged me to apply for (the job), and he supported me. The turbulent times came when he wanted to do the job . . . I didn't do things exactly the way that he would have wanted them done, and I had my own ideas and sometimes they didn't match with his.

Discussion

Overall, we can say the perceptions of female superintendents within a rural county in a Midwestern state regarding their jobs much of the time followed the general thematic trend of literature from around the United States. Within those themes, however, there were occasional deviations or nuanced differences worth noting. For example, although the women interviewed recognized that discrimination and bias exist in the hiring process for female superintendents, none of our subjects spoke of this bias within the context of their own hiring. Only one spoke of the discrimination she experienced on the job itself. In the area of leadership style, at least one of our interview subjects passionately spoke of separate female and male traits that she felt influenced women and men in how they approached the superintendent position although much of the national literature has not

spoken of female- or male-style leadership but of leadership styles on a masculine/feminine continuum.

When speaking of career paths and family considerations, a majority of the female superintendents indicated being previously known within the community preceded their hirings in the county. Those local ties also created family considerations that likely affected employment mobility for the majority of the women we interviewed. This situation matched much of what we read in the national literature.

Regarding mentorship, in at least one district in the rural county, there was one strong female-to-female mentor/mentee relationship that eventually led the mentee to seek her own superintendency. Most mentor/mentee relationships the participants highlighted were male superintendents mentoring women who would eventually assume superintendent positions. The majority of the women we interviewed did not mention specific mentors. This situation also matched much of what we read in the national literature.

Conclusion

For our research, we were able to successfully interview seven of the eight women who have served as superintendents in school districts within a rural county in a Midwestern state. Some of what they told us bucked national trends, especially their own perceptions regarding the theme of discrimination toward women seeking superintendent positions. We recognize, however, that we were able to interview only the women who “broke through” and earned their positions. Perhaps there were women who interviewed for superintendent jobs in the county and were not hired. Furthermore, there are likely many women who would be wonderful fits as superintendents in the county but, for various systemic reasons, have been unable to pursue those positions. It seems likely the perceptions of these women who were either passed over, or never got their chance, would differ from those who have served. Further research would be beneficial to shed light on these women’s stories. In addition, more research on the perceptions of female superintendents in other rural counties around the nation would serve to highlight potential nuances of the rural female superintendent experience versus that of women who have served as superintendents of urban or suburban districts.

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