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## The Critical Importance of Support Systems for Women Educational CEOs

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**Abstract:** Research has shown that effective support systems are key to an educational CEO for success and tenure in the position. This qualitative secondary analysis (QSA) of women educational CEOs from the United States and Canada allowed for the reexamination of interviews from 37 participants focused on the importance of support systems. Findings uncovered six different themes or areas of support/hindrances: three formal supports/hindrances, policy, school board, and staff, and three informal supports/hindrances, family, community, and mentors/other women educational CEOs.

**Keywords:** *Women, educational CEOs, superintendents, support systems.*

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### Introduction

Research has shown that effective support systems are key to an educational CEO for success and tenure in the position (Chan, Pool, & Strickland, 2001; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Harris, Lowery, Hopson & Marshall, 2004; Kowalski, 2006; Sheldon, 2011; Trimble, 2013). Studies also specifically dealt with support needs of female administrators (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000; Hill & Ragland, 1995; Mendez -Morse, 2004; Scherr, 1995; Smulyan, 2000; Wilmore, 1998; Young & McLeod, 2001). Based on these studies, support of the woman educational CEO continues to be an area that requires further exploration.

In a study by Grogan and Brunner (2005a), 45 percent of women superintendents they surveyed were promoted to the superintendency from within their districts and that frequently the larger the district, the more often the woman was promoted from inside. This leaves more than half of women searching for a position from the outside. Often these women get positions in small, rural districts, many times hundreds of miles from their homes and families (Robinson, 2013). With this new position also comes the presence of new co-workers, a new school board, as well as a new community. This complete life upheaval presents distinct challenges. The strength of support systems is what can often determine the length of tenure or level of success in her new position. Conversely, the strength of hindrances, described as prohibitive policies or procedures, can inhibit a woman's success as an educational CEO. Whether the women are in small, rural districts or larger urban or suburban ones, the need for strong support systems is imperative for the longevity of the female superintendent's tenure.

As we reviewed previous literature and hoped to put our own work into greater context, we realized that there were challenges in the naming conventions of the top educational position depending on the country in which the leader worked. In an attempt to make sense of the challenges that the top leadership position in education experiences, our paper will be looking at the experiences of female superintendents (United States term for top educational position in a district) as well as the experiences of female directors (Canadian term for top leadership position). As we attempt to talk about the position in wider terms, we decided to utilize the term educational CEO for the purpose of this analysis. While there may still be instances where we use the term superintendent or director based on previous literature or a finding from previous studies, we are interested in making the term more inclusive for the top women educational leader in the organization.

The position of superintendent in the United States is the highest-ranking position within a school district. This position is primarily appointed by a school board, in very rare cases it is an elected position. While all other employees in a school district work for the superintendent, the superintendent is only position that works for the school board.

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Similarly, the position of Director in Canada is the highest-ranking position in a school system. Director is solely appointed by the school board (never is an elected position), but it sits at the top of the school board and is an employee of the school board. In both instances, the job is extremely political and requires a great deal of school board support for success and longevity in the position.

### Review of the Literature

In reviewing previous research on the different types of support for women educational CEOs, we were interested in seeing what similarities and differences were identified in the types of support seen as most important for success and ultimately tenure in the position. Likewise, we explored the types of hindrances that minimized success and jeopardize tenure. We chose to focus on six different themes or areas of support/hindrances: three formal supports/hindrances, policy, school board, and staff, and three informal supports/hindrances, family, community, and mentors/other women educational CEOs.

#### *Formal Supports/hindrances*

Research demonstrates that there are many formal areas in which women educational CEO can either be supported or hindered (Higginbottom, 2018). Three that we focused on in this paper are policy, school board, and staff.

#### *Policy*

At the broadest level, internationally, policy has been found to influence gender diversity. More specifically, “the greatest predictor of a more gender-diverse board internationally seems to be the strength of any regulation mandating some minimum level of diversity” (d’Hoop-Azar, Sancho, Martens, & Papolis, 2017, para.6). This also means that in the absence of regulations mandating a minimum level of diversity, less diversity is seen (d’Hoop-Azar, et al., 2017). Research has found this true at a more micro level for educational leaders (Higginbottom, 2018). Affirmative action legislation passed by Ontario’s government in 1993 that has been credited as having narrowed the gender gap among middle management positions in Ontario’s public schools (Richter, 2007). Additionally, policy can have a direct effect on the trajectory of a woman administrator’s climb to educational CEO, both in a positive way and in a negative way (Higginbottom, 2018). Thus, much of a woman administrator’s success in her path to educational CEO has to do with formal policies/regulations which can either propel or prevent her.

#### *School Board*

Studies have also focused on the relationships between the superintendent and the school board and the reasons and implications for superintendent departure (Beekley, 1999; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011; Patillo, 2008; Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996; Tallerico, Burstyn, & Poole, 1993). Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella (2000) discovered that 90% of the superintendents in their study asserted the school board should give them “more help and support to ensure their well-being and job success” (p. 8). In contrast, McCurdy (1992) found that superintendents departed when school board members had an unrealistic expectation of the superintendent’s time. This issue of micromanagement was also echoed in studies by Higginbottom (2018), McKay and Grady (1994) and Mountford (2004). One issue specifically dealt with the tenure of the school board (Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000; Hess, 2002). If school board members were rotating out or not being reelected, this could prove problematic for the superintendent since the board that hired him/her may no longer be in place.

#### *District Staff*

Berkovich and Eyal (2015) found that school leaders regulate their emotions by talking with colleagues and friends – a luxury not afforded to top leaders. This often leaves women educational CEOs dependent on their colleagues. There is very little research in the area of support level of district staff, but it echoes the findings of community support in a number of ways. Members of the school district faculty and staff were often much more supportive if a superintendent had been in the district for an extended period of time. This group believed that she had already proven herself in the district through the other positions in which she served, so it was much easier to know what they would be getting with her at the helm (Haar, Palladino, Peery, & Grady, 2011).

One area where district staff support was identified as a factor was specifically in small, rural districts that had a very small central office staff. This often required the superintendent as well as other district leaders to be “wearing many hats” and take on responsibilities far beyond what other superintendents would be doing. The level of support by the superintendent’s staff in carrying out these wide variety of activities often determined whether or not a superintendent would remain in the small district or look to move somewhere where he/she would have more support, even if it just was by numbers of staff members (Copeland, 2013; Robinson; 2013; Tobin, 2006).

#### *Informal Supports/Hindrances*

Research demonstrates that there are many informal areas in which a woman educational CEO can either be supported or hindered (Higginbottom, 2018). Three that we focused on in this paper are family, community and mentors/other women educational CEOs.

### *Family*

The greatest external support a superintendent can receive is from family, most specifically a superintendent's partner (Higginbottom, 2018). Research on women's abilities to successfully navigate the superintendency has been tied directly to the relationship between the woman's work responsibilities in relation to her family responsibilities (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Grogan, 2000; Grogan & Brunner 2005b; Loder, 2005; Tallerico & Tingley, 2001). Many women speak of the "second shift" (Hochschild & Machung, 1989) that occurs once they arrive home. As one female superintendent explains, "most male superintendents have wives that stay home. They don't have careers. I think there is something to be said for that. I know when I was superintendent there were many times, I wished I had a stay-at-home wife" (Robinson, 2013).

Often, a woman may have to live in a commuter marriage once she has achieved the position of superintendent (Harris, Lowery, & Arnold, 2002; Watkins, Herrin, & McDonald, 1998). This living arrangement often proved challenging since this meant the superintendent was living apart from a major support system (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Robinson, 2013). These struggles at home are among the reasons that female superintendents tend to have higher divorce rates than their male counterparts (Funk, Pankake, & Schroth, 2002; Grogan & Brunner, 2005b; Gupton & Appelt-Slick, 1996; Kowalski, et al., 2011; Olsen, 2007; Robinson, Shakeshaft, Grogan, Newcomb, 2017; Terranova, et al., 2009).

### *Community*

Community support also appears in the research as a reason to stay or depart the superintendency. Most often, the determination is whether or not the superintendent was an "insider" or "outsider" before his/her appointment to the position. Some studies have found that superintendents that have been long time employees and residents of a district had already proved their commitment to the school system and were viewed favorably by the members of that community. This often had an effect on the superintendent having higher job satisfaction and staying in the position longer (Haar et al., 2011; Ramirez & Guzman, 1999).

A number of studies cite community factors as a reason for departure, but it is often a much lower percentage than other reasons for leaving (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski, et al., 2011; Patillo, 2008). Often community only plays a factor when collectively they do not agree with a superintendent's vision for the school district (Searby & Williams, 2007; Williams, 2007).

### *Mentors/Other Women Educational CEOs*

Most of the research on superintendents supporting one another has come through studies on mentoring and networking (Copeland, 2013; Eichman, 2009; Kay, 2012; Forner, 2010; January, 2006, Sheldon, 2011). Findings indicate that one issue of soliciting support and building social capital capacity is that men and women approach this process very differently. According to Renzulli, Aldrich, & Moody (2000), men want to build support systems that operate like coalitions. They are short-term connections for the purpose of advancement. Women on the other hand are more interested in developing long-term relations based on emotional ties with others.

Mentorship is noted as a support in the workplace that women leaders have difficulty finding (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Studies by Sherman (2002) and Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer (2006) found that mentors most often choose to mentor proteges that most resemble themselves. Since the superintendency has been identified by the United States Census Bureau as the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the country (Glass, 1992), this means the greater majority of mentors will, for the time being, continue to be men. Research tells us these men will be looking to develop and promote younger versions of themselves unless there is a concerted effort for things to be done differently.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Goal*

A qualitative secondary analysis (QSA) was seen as appropriate for this study as we were reviewing preexisting data on female CEOs from previous parent studies conducted by the authors, in this case to examine a phenomenon that was not as deeply addressed in the earlier work of either initial study (DuPlessis & Human, 2009). By utilizing data from multiple studies, we were able to conduct further analysis on a sample of women educational CEOs from both the United States and Ontario.

### *Sample*

Twenty-five women from the United States participated in the previous studies on female superintendents that would be used for the secondary analysis. These women were currently or previously superintendents in seven different states in the US. Some women had held multiple superintendencies in multiple states. These women served in school districts of varying sizes, with the classifications of rural, urban, and suburban divisions. While the group of women was predominantly White (21) instead of African American (4), this sample reflects the reality that the percentage of African American superintendents in the United States is significantly less than their White counterparts.

Twelve women from Ontario participated in a study on female Directors of Education. Participants needed to identify as women, currently work as or have very recently retired from the Director of Education position in an Ontario English school board. The group from which to draw potential participants was small to begin with, limited to 25 individuals, of whom I aimed to interview 12-15. Thus, although not ideal, women Directors of Education who were brand new that year to the position were included in the invitation to participate and in the final sample. Only one woman identified as a racial minority. Of the 12 participants who completed the interview in person or over the telephone, 5 had spent their careers in an Ontario English Catholic school board, while 7 had spent their careers in an Ontario English public-school board. The average length of time participants had served as Director was 6.04 years.

#### *Initial Data Collection*

Data used in this secondary analysis were generated between the years of 2011 – 2016. The data were generated from the results of transcripts from two separate qualitative studies that were conducted on female CEOs (superintendents/directors) utilizing semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The first data set consisted of 25 transcripts of female superintendents in the United States who had left the position of superintendent. The purpose of the initial study was to determine why female superintendents leave the position. The second data set was 12 transcripts of interviews of women Directors of Education from Ontario (Canada). The aim of this study was to explore how women Directors of Education manage the pressures associated with social expectations of women leaders. The authors of this manuscript were the researchers on the parent studies. Both original studies went through the process for ethical research (Institutional Review Board in the United States, Ethics Board in Canada).

#### *Analyzing of Data*

For the purpose of this paper, the two researchers conducted an amplified analysis of two existing qualitative datasets from their parent studies (Heaton, 2008). While the original two studies generated more than the 800+ pages of study transcripts, when conducting this secondary analysis, both researchers utilized the raw datasets from the initial studies when analyzing the data. While both researchers were familiar with the data from their own study, they were not familiar with the data from the other study. In addition, time had passed from when all initial interviews were collected and initial data was analyzed which allowed each researcher to be somewhat removed from the data, as opposed to when the study was initially conducted in both cases.

In order to address the methodological rigor of the SDA, each researcher worked independently with a clean set of uncoded data from both sets of studies and read through each interview multiple times before looking to identify specific codes that would address the aspects of support systems. Throughout the process, regular memoing occurred to create a codebook of codes identified in the transcripts. Through regular debriefing between the two researchers, opportunities to refine the terms across both codebooks until the themes were identified. Both researchers maintained separate audit trails to highlight how codes were collapsed, refined, or deleted as the work continued (Ruggiano & Perry, 2019).

### **Findings**

One challenge to providing support to the educational CEO is that very few people understand what the job entails. On top of that, the women in this study emphasized while they may have put all their effort into being the best CEO they could, there were still other aspects of their lives that people often did not think about. Not understanding the complexity of their multifaceted lives can sometimes make it difficult to provide exactly what the woman educational CEO needs most.

A lot of times people forget that superintendents have lives outside of the district. For example, I have very elderly parents that live next door to me. Well, every morning I go over and make sure that they have everything they need for the day before I leave. I gave my mother her shot. I put my dad's compression socks on. These things all occur before 7am. You know, we're people too and your staff and the community need to see that human side of you. People need to know that when you're a wife, and you're a mom, and a daughter, and a superintendent; you run everything. At the end of my day, I go home and do laundry and I cook. I do all those things. I go to the grocery store and we babysit grandkids. I do all those things. Believe it or not, I'm not just the superintendent.

Through the analysis of participant interviews, we identified six different supports/hindrances; three formal supports/hindrances and three informal supports/hindrances that affect women educational CEOs. The formal supports/hindrances were policy, school board, and staff; the informal supports/hindrances were family, community, and mentors/other women educational CEOs. The stories the women shared highlighted their beliefs in the needs for support systems. When women received support, they often flourished. When they did not receive those supports, they knew they had to adjust in their positions and in some cases, it contributed to their decision to leave the position of educational CEO.

### *Formal Supports/Hindrances*

Formal supports/hindrances were categorized as formal based on the fact they are mandatory parts of the educational CEO job. For example, policy, school board and staff are all categorized as formal supports/hindrances.

#### *Policy*

In Ontario, affirmative action legislation was passed in 1993 by the government. A direct impact of this policy is notable in the sizable increase in women administrators in Ontario by 1996. This policy has been credited as having narrowed the gender gap among middle management positions in Ontario's public schools (Richter, 2007). This narrowing of the gender gap continued up the organizational hierarchy in Ontario to the level of Director of Education, beginning after 1993's Affirmative Action movement, resulting in numbers close to parity at the level of educational CEO. In response to the question whether she would say that affirmative action played a role in her career success to date, one participant was clear,

Yes, I would. One day my principal who was a fantastic guy - a really good mentor and supporter, and a very good leader - gave me a letter of encouragement to go into administration, saying that we need female principals and, "I'm putting your name forward to the Board. You need to do this. You're amazing and blah blah blah."

Other women educational CEOs in Ontario, when asked, echoed that the affirmative action policy had an indirect effect on their career success.

I don't know if [Affirmative Action] directly helped. Certainly, I don't think that it hurt. Absolutely didn't hurt. I know the board had Affirmative Action policies in place, as well as a steering committee and the goal at the time was to have more women principals because the board was still predominantly male in that position. So certainly, that must have contributed to the pathway that unfolded. But to say directly that I got to the position I got to because of Affirmative Action, I don't think that I could say that.

Policy did not always have a positive effect on women in their career however. One participant pointed to the confidentiality policy, which caused them to feel isolated, noting

as a Director the isolation comes not only in the role and who you can talk to internally, but [also externally], so they're very few people that I could go to outside of the circle because everything was hot - confidential.... You are privy to a vast amount of information from budget information to the situations of people and you don't have the privilege to talk about that and nor should you. That barrier would be the isolation.

Isolation often led women to feel lonely in their position. Whether in a good or bad way, policy had an impact on women in their educational CEO roles. Some women may not have even reached their position of educational CEO had policy not been in place to help enable that.

#### *School Board*

One group that proved to be a very important determinant in the tenure of the educational CEO was the support (or lack of support) given by the school board. The women in this study whose school board members were supportive of them in the position of educational CEO wound up having tenures two to three times longer than the women who had school boards that did not provide the same level of support. One participant shared, "Our meetings, when we were on the same page, went smoothly, were focused, and always felt productive. I left feeling energized ready to continue doing the hard work." Many of the study participants classified their school boards as not supportive, however.

Most often, women educational CEOs have the support of their board at least at the beginning. Even that can be challenged when the new educational CEO was not the choice of everyone on the school board.

I was later told that one of the board members that was against me getting the position said that I was just taking a good man's job. There was nothing that I could bring to the position because it was a man's job. One of the other members that had not voted for me was because he wanted a man from another school division. So right from the start, I had two members who didn't want to work with me.

Another common belief of a number of the women was that the absence of support was due to the board members' lack of respect and appreciation for what the educational CEO was doing in the school system. These women shared that

while they were doing everything, they could to bring about positive change, the board would often disregard it. One educational CEO spoke about her frustration with the school board not knowing what her job entailed.

At times you feel with the school board that there is no appreciation of the hours that you put in. I really thought they have no idea the number of hours that I put in to do the job I was doing. Sometimes you feel unappreciated when people don't know the number of hours you put in.

This educational CEO explained that while all signs were showing growth and positive change since she became the district leader, she was missing not only support, but also the respect of the school board she worked for.

Other women found the challenge to have that support was contingent on how well the educational CEO did as she was told. These stories hinged on the differences in what was said in private versus what was reported in public. One woman struggled with the challenges that this type of communication caused.

I felt my personal communication with the board was really good. The thing that bothered me was I just felt like they weren't trustworthy with *their* communication. For example, they would have a meeting and they would say, "This is what we want you to do." Well, after I did what they told me to do, then they wouldn't support me on it. Of course, if I didn't do what they told me to do they didn't support me then either. I kind of felt like a puppet having her strings pulled. That was not a very comfortable position to be in.

Sometimes the school board election happened early in the educational CEO's tenure meaning it would be an uphill battle from the start.

Well my school board started out great, it really did. I had told them when they hired me that I was an independent thinker. I would certainly include them in my decision making, but the buck stops at my office. Right after I became superintendent, there was an election. I became superintendent in October and the election was in November. The board changed by three members. Any time a board changes, I don't care how good the superintendent is, the new board members feel their charge is to get rid of the current superintendent. So, you have that to begin with and that happened with me. The first board and I had like a honeymoon relationship and then three of my 'supporters' got ousted and replaced by three that had no loyalty or allegiance to me. So, from that point on it was difficult.

The lack of support by the school board often proved to be especially problematic for the tenure of the educational CEO. Once the school board provided more blockades than assistance, the CEO knew it was time to leave her position in the district.

### *Staff*

The women of this study are typical of women educational CEOs in that their career paths were long and winding on their way to the top position. Many had spent many years as teachers, building level administrators, and central office administrators before applying for the CEO position. Thinking of past experiences, many of the women felt sure that their assistant and associate educational CEO would operate in the same ways they had previously.

We did what we needed to do to get the job done. The other assistant and I did whatever we needed to do to make sure the superintendent could do his job. The superintendent's job is different than all others. You need a very strong staff to support you, and that's what we did. When I became superintendent, I thought my assistants would do the same thing.

A great deal of interviews that talked about supportive staffs mentioned the ideas behind teammates and "having each other's back." There was a belief by the collective group that they were in the work together all doing what needed to be done, for the good of the students.

In other instances, there were suggestions of internal conflicts and possible interference, many times it was the superintendent bemoaning her lack of staff support. In one instance, the staff member took the opportunity to not only derail the CEO, but to take her job once she departed.

Some people on my cabinet thought they were helping me by letting me know who I beat out to get the superintendency. I could tell within three days who was there to work with me and who was there to try and take my job. Apparently, it must have worked because as soon as I left, Frank got the superintendency. He spent my entire 2 ½ year tenure digging my grave so he could shove me in it the first chance he got.

Collectively, some of the women found not only were they not receiving support from staff, but they had to be concerned with staff that would oppose, neglect, and undermine. These educational CEOs found that not only was their new position time consuming, but the extra time devoted to "having to watch my back" with colleagues was not something they had anticipated.

### *Informal Supports/Hindrances*

Informal supports/hindrances were categorized as informal based on the fact they are not mandatory parts of the educational CEO job. For example, community, family and mentors/other women educational CEOs are all categorized as informal supports/hindrances.

#### *Community*

The support of a community can be what keeps a female educational CEO in a position for a longer tenure, especially when she has moved her way up through the school system. She is known by the employees, but also the members of the community at large. This makes it much easier for her to garner support once she moves into the position. As one woman shared, "I had spent 22 years in the district before becoming superintendent. I bought groceries, done my dry cleaning, went to the pool, was at games and fine arts festivals. People knew me before I ever sat in the 'big chair.'"

Conversely, in many smaller rural counties where a woman was hired from the outside, the hiring of a new educational CEO resulted in this woman being the highest paid employee in a county. This public information did not sit well, especially in small communities that prided themselves on a traditional way of life where the men were the breadwinners for the family. The introduction of a highly educated woman as the new school CEO was often met with anger and disgust.

It wasn't meant to be, even though the school board had chosen me, I wasn't what the community wanted. They really didn't want a woman; they wanted a good ol' boy. They wanted someone who was a farmer type of guy. They wanted someone who looked like them.

The experiences of these women highlighted the hostility that was always projected at them. While they would try and assimilate themselves into the community, they found themselves a repeated target. One woman explained her experience during a school board meeting.

I would get questioned by community members all the time. People would stand up and yell, "She doesn't go outside and know what it's like when it's snowing." "She is just calling off school drinking cocoa in her pajamas and this has just got to stop." It was a school board meeting, but it was a free for all. I had to sit there looking dignified and I had to listen and just take it. I'm sure none of my male colleagues ever got accused of sitting at home drinking cocoa in their pajamas!

While being a high paid woman was a challenge, this was many times compounded by the fact the new educational CEO was also an outsider. The women shared examples of a number of different ways people tried to dissuade the educational CEO from staying. First, there were attempts at hitting her in the pocketbook.

When we tried to buy a house in the community, the people that we were going to buy a house, they had jacked up the price of the house. They had told somebody that because I was a woman plus, I was a superintendent and I could afford it, they were just going to get whatever they wanted from me. Well luckily, one of my supporters shared that story with me so we walked away from the deal. That story just shows I know that there were people who were going to try and take advantage of me.

In all the cases of lack of community support, the vitriol could only be attributed to the double whammy of a female outsider. As one woman explained, "I know plenty of male superintendents who are outsiders, they don't tell any of these same stories of threats and intimidation."

#### *Family*

None of the educational CEOs interviewed mentioned a full-time paid childcare provider, such as a nanny. A common theme among educational CEOs with children was a supportive spouse or other supportive family members who assisted substantially with childcare. None of the CEOs mentioned anyone not related to them, who assisted substantially in this area. All educational CEOs who relied on the support of their spouse or other family for assistance in caring for their children, expressed gratitude for having had such understanding and supportive people in their lives.

After a long, challenging day, many women wanted nothing more than to head home. Under the best scenarios, a supportive partner was there waiting with dinner and a listening ear. Often, the woman educational CEO went home to an empty house since they were living in commuter marriages. The only way they were able to secure their position as an educational CEO was to apply for a position far away from where they currently reside and previously worked. This usually meant living apart from a partner during the week, but having weekends together. With the responsibilities of the position of educational CEO, weekends together regularly meant attending school district functions.

We do Friday night football. That was our Friday night "date"...That was just one way of becoming part of the community, and when you're a superintendent you do that. You should do that. You should be there, just like the high school principal, they need to know you're part of that community, and we were.

When things are not going well in the job, the strain over being so many miles away from her partner becomes even more apparent than usual.

I think one of the hardest things is my husband kept telling me what I should do. And that became very difficult. He kept saying, "Well, you should do this, or you're not doing that," or whatever. So that made me really lonely. I was lonely to begin with, because I was in a place where I didn't have any friends. I only had working colleagues and associations.

Even in the best situations where the job is going well, the strain on a marriage is inevitable because of choices that need to be made, especially in long distance relationships.

"A superintendent is 24/7. You've got to be everywhere, all the time. I couldn't drive every weekend back to see him. I had to stay and work. It was hard to be away from my biggest supporter." These "supportive" husbands often get frustrated because of the choices their wives were making. Many times, these spouses wondered if their wives are married to them or to their jobs.

For many women, the bigger challenge is when that support from a spouse changes or disappears altogether. During the interviews, five different women asked us if we knew about the percentages of women superintendents who were divorced. From our sample, over half have been divorced at least one time. One participant shared that her divorces were due to always putting her job first.

Well, it's been hard. I've been divorced more than once. I was in the doctoral program and I was working full time which is very demanding. I felt like I had to completely give up my social life. It was hard and I wound up getting divorced because of it...I got divorced again when I realized how unsupportive my husband was while I was working as the superintendent. He said he would be there for me, but he wasn't. I think he didn't like the fact that I cared more about my job than wanting to take care of him.

For some women, the missing daily support from their long-distance partner was enough of a reason to consider leaving the job of educational CEO. In contrast, other women found divorce to be the way to keep the job. While there was not support coming from a spouse at home, there now was the freedom to put work first and focus solely on their job.

#### *Mentors/Other Women Educational CEOs*

Whether the educational CEO has a supportive partner at home or not, that person could not possibly understand what a CEO has to go through every day. For that level of support, the women educational CEOs spoke about the camaraderie (or lack of) with mentors and other women educational CEOs.

I've always had really good mentors. I have had people be really supportive and have encouraged me even when I didn't think I was up to the job or I wouldn't have even considered it. They saw the potential before I even did. I wouldn't be in this position if it hadn't been for two individuals in particular. I said "are you crazy, I couldn't do that" and I've tried to be that for people.

Another participant's principal was her first mentor. "I was fortunate to have a female principal who was doing a really good job and so the job was appealing and you're thinking, yeah I could do that". For this participant, having a female role model and mentor made envisioning her own ability to do the job more possible

A number of the women spoke very highly of the strong network of support that were provided to one another by the other female educational CEOs. They knew that they had the support of one another whether it be "in person, by email, or phone, whatever, my 'superintendent sister' needed." The rise of social media has made it even easier for women to keep those connections going. As one educational CEO shared, "our [women's superintendent's group] has a private Facebook group where we find ways to support one another. It may be notes of encouragement, or funny memes, or whatever we need. The important thing is that it's a place for us!"

At times when there were fewer female educational CEOs in the position and those women felt more like trailblazers, a great deal of support was not felt in navigating the position. Mentors and other women educational CEOs were available for support. This proved difficult. While relationships with individual educational CEOs never proved a problem, it was the larger organizational structures that made them feel uncomfortable. The state superintendent had difficulty remembering there were now going to be female superintendents in the ranks.

I can remember I'd be at the meetings with other superintendents and Joseph Franklin was the state superintendent at the time and every time he would get up to talk to the group he would say, "Now Gentlemen," and then he would stop himself and say, "Oh, and Lady." That got to be so awkward, but he made the point to keep doing that for several years. Then I think he finally got used to it himself.

The state school board association also proved to be challenging to some. In many cases, these were the gatekeepers that had worked against them aiming to prevent them from achieving the position of educational CEO. Now that they had reached the position, the relationship was uncomfortable, at best.



When there were just a few women who were in the superintendency, I can remember Rudy Pastrana, the Executive Director, he was the one concerned about women superintendents. He'd say, "Now don't you all go into the bathroom at the same time. The men out here will think you're talking about them." We thought that was the silliest thing. We didn't pay attention to it, but you could tell that he really was concerned about this.

The power of the state organization also proved problematic. Even years after women were in the position, they were still being viewed as a novelty by many.

We weren't going to pour the punch or put the cookies out. I wasn't going to fetch people's coffee. We just simply said, "Do not see us as your secretary, or your mother, your wife, or your maid. You go get your own stuff. We're not going to assume that role." You have to, in certain situations, be a little bossy. Sometimes, I really think the men didn't think there was anything wrong with saying, "Oh c'mon Honey..." Wait, I'm not your Honey. You had to make sure you dealt with it.

Making associations with other educational CEOs proved paramount, especially for the female educational CEO who were working in small rural districts where they were geographically isolated from many of their peers. The connection with others proved challenging in all instances.

The main difference I believe is physical isolation. It takes so long to go to a meeting so I would say I'm not physically present to develop the relationships. I'm very physically isolated from everyone. Even my closest neighboring district is a haul. I don't have the same relationship with colleagues. I do try to go to the regional meetings when I can and I do try to call other superintendents when I can, but I suppose I have built a tolerance for there is nobody else close by to talk to who understands.

Without the luxury of reaching out to other women educational CEOs, the loneliness of the job really proved to be difficult. Some women tried their best to persevere in that isolating setting, but many wanted to find a way to get to a new situation where support had to be better.

### Discussion

The women who participated in this study all spoke about the need of support systems in order to successfully navigate the position of superintendent. While there were six specific areas that the women had identified as potential support systems or potential hindrances (three formal supports/hindrances: policy, school board, staff; and three informal supports/hindrances: family, community, mentors/other women educational CEOs), it appeared that there was not one specific area that kept them in the position, or conversely, caused them to depart the position. Several educational CEOs referred to it as the need for a circle of support around them in order for them to succeed.

It is not surprising that policy had an impact on women's careers - especially those participants in Ontario who experienced affirmative action on their paths to CEO. By 2016 women occupied 43.4% of Director of Education positions in Ontario. Though it is important to bring up the importance of complementary good attitudes and social norms surrounding gender diversity - which support policy, as hard fast policy is not sufficient (d'Hoop-Azar, et al., 2017). The school board proved to be a particularly important support system in determining whether a woman stayed in her position or left. Since all superintendents answer to their school boards, dissatisfaction and lack of support from this group was often a strong indicator of how long the women's tenure would be in their positions. While there is nothing a superintendent can do to affect who is elected or appointed to a school board, she does have the ability to work closely with a board that may prove to be relatively stable or increasingly rotating. School board associations can also provide assistance in fostering the relationship between board and superintendents.

It is important to discuss loneliness in this position. isolation at the top is quite common among top-level leaders, mainly because they cannot share their fears and stresses with anyone else in the company (Ravindran, 2009). In fact, Larcker, Tayan & Trust (2013) notes that two thirds of CEOs do not get leadership advice *despite wanting it*, making the feeling that one has no help a common trend among top-level leaders. Feelings of isolation can have detrimental effects on a leader's ability to develop and manage their leadership identity (Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011).

Ironically, one of the primary determinants for aspiring females appears to not be a topic deemed worth including in most of these programs. A partner is the only support system (from the findings generated from this study) that an educational CEO may have before she gets the position of CEO. As research has shown, many times marriages do not survive the job (Funk, Pankake, & Schroth, 2002; Grogan & Brunner, 2005a; 2005b; Gupton & Appelt-Slick, 1996; Olsen, 2007; Terranova et al., 2009). Providing the realities of the personal aspect of the position is important for both the aspiring superintendent as well as her partner. The couple needs to understand ahead of time the likelihood of a woman having to move to find a superintendency and hear stories of commuter marriages, with examples of both success stories as well as problematic situations.

According to Baker, Orr, and Young (2007), colleges and universities offering school administrator preparation includes 503 Master's degree, 169 Ed specialist degree, and 195 doctoral degree in leadership preparation programs that

produce 16,000 masters' degree graduates and almost 6,000 specialist and doctoral graduates annually. Only a very small fraction of these programs has an educational CEO preparation component. Having a course presenting the reality of the educational CEO job is vital in allowing aspiring educational leaders to understand what the position really entails. Women aspiring to the educational CEO position also need to be presented with the understanding of the complexity of the role. This includes not only the multifaceted layers of the politics of the position, the added challenge of maneuvering through gendered expectations, as well as the need for delving into the more personal aspects of family support for both men and women as they aspire to and achieve the position.

Most of the support systems do not in fact come into play until the superintendent has applied for the position. While an aspiring candidate can be proactive to try and learn as much as possible about the school district, community, and school board as possible prior to arriving for the position, she really needs to consider the importance of fit. Is she interested in getting a job as an educational CEO anywhere, or is she trying to find a district with needs which most closely match her skill set?

The role of outsider is one that several the women said proved particularly challenging, especially due to their gender. While the women who worked in these small rural districts explained they did everything they could to demonstrate themselves as a member of their new community, they received hostile responses. In contrast, while male superintendents may be viewed as outsiders, they are never verbally chastised or attacked in the same means these women were. Community lack of support seemed to be a tipping point for many of the women. If the community was not happy, but she felt she had the support of the school board and her staff, she would be more likely to stay and attempt to work on establishing greater connections with the community. If there was no support in the community, school board, and her staff, the woman realized she needed to leave the district. This again emphasizes the importance to leaders of relationships with others; even professional relationships (rather than friendships) serve to foster a sense of belonging for the leader (Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011).

The women in this study all shared stories describing the long hours and the stressful nature of the position. Because of this, aspiring, novice, and veteran superintendents need support from their professional organizations by addressing topics like work/life balance as well as mentoring and networking as well as formal and informal support from other female CEOs on an ongoing basis, not just during scheduled meetings of the organization. It is that simple phone call that can help make the position feel less lonely and isolating.

### **Conclusion**

As we noted in this paper, one challenge to providing support to the female educational CEO whether she works in the United States or in Canada, is that very few people understand truly what the job entails. We have discovered through the stories of our participants, the educational CEO is a complex, demanding and stressful position in general, but it is even more challenging when supports are not in place for the woman in the job. Putting on a brave face for the outside world may have been a coping mechanism utilized by some women, but ultimately it never got them the assistance they needed. While it is certainly encouraged that a woman not be afraid to ask for help when she's struggling, she also should take the time to reach out when she just wants to talk. Ultimately, there should be systems put into place so that she does not need to spend all her time searching for allies and associates. Instead, she may devote that time to be the educational CEO and lead her district.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While our research was primarily focused on conducting a SDA specifically looking to address the phenomenon of support systems, as is the nature of all qualitative inquiry, our findings are not representative of all female educational CEOs. What is important is the information we gained in relation to the necessity of support systems and their effectiveness in determining a woman educational CEO's level of success or tenure. Another limitation may be perceived that both of the researchers who were conducting the secondary data analysis were involved in the parent studies and have self-cited in this manuscript based on findings from the initial parent studies.

### **Recommendations for Practitioners and Researchers**

When making recommendations for practitioners, it makes sense female educational CEOs and women aspiring towards this position adapt their practice to ensure strong support systems where possible. Our findings reveal a need to focus on relationship building and management with school board, staff and community. Managing relationships involved participants spending a great deal of time listening and consulting with others, making compromises and ensuring that all felt their voices were being heard. A common theme in interviews was collaborative decision making; welcoming and requesting feedback/input from many before reaching any decisions, which participants felt helped their relationships with others. An emphasis on being proactive helps ensure people feel heard. One participant described a conscious effort to listen to her team before anything arose. Listening built trust between participants and their co-workers, which led to co-workers feeling involved in a group.

Another strategy that participants mentioned as effective in managing relationships was maintaining an “emotional bank account” with others. Covey’s (1989) belief that there are six ways to make an “emotional bank account deposit:” understanding the individual, attending to the little things, keeping commitments, clarifying expectations, showing personal integrity and apologizing sincerely when making a withdrawal. Using these six ways to maintain an emotional bank account with colleagues helps others come to trust as well as like the leader. Those positive feelings create “padding” if ever something less positive – an “emotional bank account withdrawal” - (such as the boss informing the employee of a decision that is not desirable to the employee) occurs between those two people. Many participants emphasized the importance of being trusted over being liked. Trust, more than being liked, is at the core of managing relationships, as individuals need to know they can rely on the other person, before they will cooperate with them.

A final strategy towards managing relationships that a few participants noted was finding common ground between themselves and others. Focusing on the building of relationships and relationship management is at the foundation of having supportive individuals around the educational CEO. Relationships are give and take and educational CEOs are wise to focus on investing in those relationships, specifically with individuals on the school board, their staff and in the community. In this very same vein, women educational CEOs and those aspiring towards the position are wise to find mentors as well as to connect with other women leaders who are managing the same pressures they are.

As we know policy can have a strong effect on a women’s career trajectory (Higginbottom, 2018), women educational CEOs may wish to aim to devise policies in their workplace which enable other women to reach top levels of leadership. Policies that are known to directly affect a woman’s career success are often those which accommodate motherhood. As such women educational CEOs would be contributing to greater gender equity in the workplace, overall, by considering the adoption of family-friendly policies.

In providing future recommendations for research, possibilities to continue exploring the topic of support systems for educational CEOs might look to compare the experiences of female CEOs to their male counterparts. Another area worth mentioning is that in comparison to research on the principalship, research on the educational CEO is very narrow. It would be a wonderful opportunity to expand the study to see if the experiences of both female educational CEOs in Nordic countries have identified the same support systems and barriers for support.

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