

# Female Superintendents' Longevity: Their Experiences

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## Abstract

*This paper describes a qualitative research study of the experiences of Texas female superintendents with longevity. Specifically, five superintendents with tenure of at least six years in one school district were interviewed to hear their voices. Findings show that a strong working relationship with their boards, a solid connection with their communities, a commitment and passion for the position, as well as a sense of achievement were factors in their longevity.*

**Keywords:** superintendent tenure, superintendent longevity, school board relationship, community connection, job satisfaction

The purpose of this study was to give voice to Texas female superintendents who achieved longevity in their position. The research question that guided this study was: What are the lived experiences that contribute to women superintendents' longevity? As a previous superintendent who is a woman, I was curious about the reasons that impact a person staying in the superintendent position. The literature shows mixed results for the tenure of superintendents in school districts as well as the factors that have led to longer tenure. Some researchers have used at least five years of tenure in a district to describe longevity (Asbury, 2008; Chance & Capps, 1952; Kamrath & Brunner, 2014; Rohlifing, 2011; Simpson, 2013; Talbert, 2011), while other researchers used at least six years of tenure (Arlt, 2016; Prezas, 2014; Sethna, 2014). Additionally, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) allege that there were no accurate numbers for women superintendents and their longevity. The American Association of School Administrators found that the mean tenure for superintendents staying in one school district was six years (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Lunenburg and Ornstein (2008) found that the average tenure of a superintendent was 6.7 years. The Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) found similar results for tenure of Texas superintendents. While there have been some studies on superintendent tenure and various factors, very few are specific to women as superintendents. Currently, there are 222 female superintendents in Texas, out of 1,028 superintendents. Of those 222 women, 43 (19%) have achieved over six years of tenure in one school district with a range of longevity from six to 19 years.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The longevity of superintendents has been studied, but primarily with all superintendents and not specific to gender. Many researchers use five years or more at one school district as the determinant for higher longevity (Asbury, 2008; Arlt, 2016; Chance & Capps, 1992; Kamrath & Brunner, 2014; Rohlifing, 2011; Simpson, 2013; Talbert, 2011). One factor related to superintendent tenure was district student achievement. Some researchers determined that the higher the student achievement in their districts, the longer the superintendent tenure (Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Johnson, Huffman, Madden & Shope, 2011; Kamrath & Brunner, 2014; Simpson, 2013). Pascopella (2011) argues that as a district has increased stability of programs, as well as cohesiveness of instructional strategies for increased student achievement, the more time a superintendent stays in the district. Conversely, Arlt (2016) found no statistical significance between student achievement and superintendent tenure.

Leadership characteristics are another determinant of superintendent longevity. Some research suggests that female superintendents tend to govern in a more democratic, team-oriented leadership approach that is collectively results-oriented (Ion & Fulch, 2009; Northouse, 2012). This collective orientation includes more people who give more support to a superintendent, which then leads to a longer tenure. Rohlfig (2011) researched five women superintendents with at least five years in their current positions. These female superintendents had leadership styles described as caring, interactive with a strong follow-up, and relational and power sharing (Rohlfig, 2011).

Talbert (2011) found a correlation between superintendent commitment and their longevity with a school district. The superintendents who stayed the longest in a district were those who had a strong affective commitment to stay in the district (Talbert, 2011).

The style of leading by example and dependability are strong factors for tenure (Prezas, 2014). These are followed by communication skills, high expectations, emotional stability, and high integrity as factors for longevity (Prezas, 2014). These observations concur with previous research that show that factors associated with *lower* superintendent tenure are poor school board president relationships, not getting decisions made at the school board level, and poor school board communication (Bryd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006).

The balance between professional and personal relationships is an additional aspect of superintendent endurance. Sethna (2014) conducted a qualitative case study with five women superintendents who had at least six years of experience in order to determine perceived barriers to longevity. The study showed that female superintendents had self-imposed barriers related to the glass ceiling, morale, and mentorships with their professional work. The professional environment was impacted by the district employees' morale, as many of the women superintendents were hired in low morale districts. The women attributed their longevity to the relationships they had developed and their process of self-reflection on their major decisions. Term length was increased when a female superintendent found a mentor to support her professional work (Sethna, 2014; Smith, 2015). Other school personnel relationships also impact their lastingness, as the superintendents felt a need to prove themselves as competent leaders. Additionally, the women in Sethna's (2014) study identified that their personal relationships of family support was important.

School location and size of the school district are factors that negatively impacted a superintendent's longevity (Alsburry, 2008). Rural school superintendents face many challenges, such as working with limited resources, fewer administrators to share the workload, and resistance to change (Forner, Beirlen-Palmer, & Reeves, 2012; Hawk, 2011;

Kamratin & Brunner, 2014; Yates. 2016). Alsbury (2008) and Yates (2016) found that the smaller school districts had the highest turnover of superintendents, and they suggest that the superintendents often move to larger districts for higher-paying positions.

The school board and superintendent relationship is a strong indicator of the term-length of a superintendent (Alsbury, 2008; Goodman, 2012; Sethna, 2014). The school boards' desire to keep a superintendent or not are determined by many internal and external factors. Chen (2014) found that superintendents often did not feel well-prepared and were not given enough time to gain the skills that would lead to their success with their school boards. Some women feel threatened by internal administrators who have more knowledge of the community and the curriculum in a district, as well as knowing the school board (Grogan, 2000). This often leads to a stressful relationship between board members and the superintendent and then a higher turnover rate in the superintendent position.

There are many determining factors that impact a superintendent's longevity in a school district. Some of these factors are district student achievement, superintendent leadership characteristics, balance between professional and personal relationships, school board relationships, leadership styles, size and location of school districts. Some of the components studied connected to female superintendents but many studies did not look for the unique factors for women. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of five Texas female superintendents with at least six years of tenure.

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study examines the experiences of women superintendent who have had at least six years of tenure in a Texas school district. At the time of the study, there were forty-three Texas female superintendents with at least six years of tenure as superintendents in their district. All forty-three were contacted to participate in this study. Five responded to the request and agreed to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the participants. The approach of this study is a qualitative narrative inquiry to study the experiences of women superintendents with longevity. This type of approach gives voice to the women, and hopefully, the chance for other women to connect with their stories and increase the number of women superintendents as well as their longevity as superintendents (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007). In-depth interviews were conducted with each identified superintendent. The interviews were 60 minutes with an initial telephone contact with the superintendent to gain permission for the interviews. The interviews were then written as stories for each participant. Pseudonyms were chosen for each woman.

A limitation of the study was the small sample size. This sample size is often used in qualitative studies however, there is limited generalizability due to this small sample size. Trustworthiness was established as participants were asked to provide a retrospective account of their lived experiences. The reflective narrative of each female superintendent's lived experiences was carefully analyzed and retold, paying attention to the trustworthiness of the study. Each participant reviewed their own stories to ensure that the interpretations by the researcher were correct. Interviews were open-ended with each participant reflecting on what they perceived as most important in their career. Data analysis was a narrative analysis to keep the focus on the stories of each women superintendent's longevity story (Polkinghorne, 1995).

## FINDINGS

The findings of the five superintendents interviewed showed that emergent themes for factors that led to their longevity were a stable school board, strong connections with the community, a commitment to the job, a passion and love for what they were doing, and continual improvement.

One superintendent, Mrs. White, had been in her district for 12 years and planned to stay in that district as a central office administrator until her retirement. However, when the superintendent had health issues and needed to retire, the school board asked her to apply for the position. She has been the superintendent for 19 years. She was the first female superintendent in the district. The previous superintendent retired and remained in the community. That retired superintendent provided support and financial guidance her first year as superintendent. This allowed a easier transition for continuity with the school district. She strongly believes in the development of her own leaders. She provides training and has high expectations for her administrators. Further, she said, "my task was to make the district an exemplary district with a strong commitment to provide cutting edge practices with a vision that was unique to this district." Mrs. White shared, "I view the superintendent position as a calling, and my longevity is based on appreciating the work of others who shared my vision and passion for system improvement." She strongly valued approaching her work from that system view rather than piecemeal.

Additionally, she shared, "it was important for administrators to revisit their value system to ensure that they were doing the best for kids and adults in the school." According to Mrs. White, "the stressors for the job are legislative issues as well as financial issues for my district." She shared "when she first started, the school board was not functioning well. The community had to turn that around." Mrs. White said, "I was able to involve the new

board in a strong vision to meet the needs of all students.” That commitment meant several new programs to meet the needs of all students. She elaborated, “I am very proud of the programs started in my district that let students develop and showcase their individual talents.” Some of these programs included athletics, while others were increased fine arts programs and career field programs. Mrs. White declared, “my excitement comes from the success of my students.”

The second superintendent we interviewed also had a strong connection with her community. Mrs. Key has been the superintendent for six years. She was the first female superintendent in her district. She had an extremely rough start in her position. Her first board evaluation was a “grueling process.” She shared, “my first board said I was not doing what they thought I should be doing.” The school board gave her this evaluation when she had been in the district only three months. Because of this poor evaluation, Mrs. Key said, “I went to two male superintendents for advice. Their advice was to go to the community and get their support.” She worked with these mentors and created a “battle plan.” Mrs. Key shared, “I joined community service organizations and asked to be put on administrative boards so I could fast track support for a school bond.” She also joined a church. Mrs. Key stated, “the community was more open than my board.... The school bond passed in the spring, and then in the summer of my first year the middle school students’ scores went up. The school board had little to say after that.” She shared that she battled until the second board allowed her to make a change in leadership that had been detrimental to her. Mrs. Key stated that “I had a bulldog tenacity and was not going to be beat.” Mrs. Key said,

*After reflecting on my first year, it was intimidating. The board had been used to a specific way things were done. There are pictures of men above my office door of previous superintendents. The first is standing by a wagon. They had long-term status. It was intimidating. I was naïve and so hungry for this first superintendent position. So many things I would do differently now.*

Mrs. Key described that “other stressors to the position were legislative decisions and the need to stay current on all changes. This took a lot of my time.” Mrs. Key’s advice for longevity is “to develop a network of people you can trust. Then you must find a critical friend that will help you assess if your actions are true to your words and beliefs.”

A third participant, Mrs. Mac, has been a superintendent for 12 years in one district. She was the first female superintendent in the district. She had been in the district seven years prior to being named the superintendent. She shared that “the salary increase was an important consideration to taking the position.” Further, she stated, “I was able to expand

my role to school board relations, finance, and human resources.” Mrs. Mac shared, that “self-confidence is essential to success and longevity of a superintendent.” She shared that “there are difficult days in the position.” Further, the things that caused her stress were “self-induced.” The things that stressed her were “board members when they over-meddle, inadequate school funding, parents who do not take their role of parent seriously or otherwise have no value in education, and employees who like to keep things stirred up.” She said, “On these days when you felt like a piñata, you have got to have some way to get back up.” Mrs. Mac stated that it was important to have good interpersonal skills and conflict resolution skills. Mrs. Mac said, “The role of a superintendent requires constant dealing with people.”

Another important skill, according to Mrs. Mac was to be patient. She said, “You do not need to speak up immediately or try to fix everything.” Mrs. Mac also said that she had a strong relationship with her board members because she respects their role. She emphasized that “many superintendents are asked to leave a district because of their egos.” She stated, “The board members are the link between the community and the superintendents. They know the history and needs of the community.” Mrs. Mac shared that “I am very transparent with my board.” Her major stressors have been inadequate funding and an occasional board member who “over-meddles.” But typically, she says the other board members can be enlisted to keep the board member “in line.” She also shared that “my longevity was based on a love for the community. Mrs. Mac stated, “I enjoy this community. We have our struggles, but they are ‘our’ struggles. I like the idea that I have watched students graduate that I have known since birth. As for the community, they have largely supported me. I think primarily because they know that I will ‘shoot them straight’.” The community supports her. They also appreciate her and understand that she “may not be able to fix it, but that she would tell them why it is that way.” Mrs. Mac stated, “superintendent turnover is based on poor school board and superintendent relations, retirement, and advancement to higher paying positions.” She advises others to maintain a balance to keep things in perspective. She shared “I love to go to work every day.”

A fourth participant, Mrs. Joe, has been the superintendent for 13 years in her district. She became the superintendent when she was an assistant superintendent in the district and the school board asked her to consider being the superintendent. She shared, “I am very laid back and do not take things personally.” Additionally, she stated, “I am highly organized and expect everyone to carry his or her own weight.” She went to school in this same district, so she knows the community well. She was a teacher, vice principal, and assistant superintendent prior to being the superintendent. Mrs. Joe shared, “I have a

good relationship with my school board.” Mrs. Joe said, “Tenure in a district is extended when superintendents are able to get along with various personalities on the school board.” She added that “school board members do need training.” Then she also revisits that training with her school board members. Mrs. Joe said, “I continue to provide training for our board. I invite lawyers and other consultant to provide training to the board. Once they know their roles and responsibility it helps. I have to revisit that training from time to time.” She stated that “the reasons for superintendent turnover were people advancing to larger districts or poor relations with their current school board.” According to Mrs. Joe, “my longevity is based on getting along with various members of the community, the school board, and the administrative team.” She stated, “It is important to keep quality teachers and administrators.”

The fifth participant, Ms. Anderson, has been the superintendent for nine years in one district. Prior to being hired as the superintendent, she was an assistant superintendent in the same district. She has worked in the same district for 31 years. She applied for the superintendent position because it felt like the “natural progression in her career.” She had been a teacher, principal, director of federal programs, and assistant superintendent. Her decision to be the superintendent was also based on her desire to give back to the community. Ms. Anderson said, “I take my role very seriously and I am very detail oriented.” She shared, “every decision I make is based on what is best for the students.” Her major strength is her ability to listen and put others first. She shared, “personal agendas and personal pride of others has been detrimental to the school district.” Ms. Anderson said, “a major stressor for my job is not enough time in the day.” Also, Ms. Anderson stated, “Adults can cause stress.” She said, “we expect students to have some problems, but we expect adults to make ethical decisions, so when that doesn’t happen, it is stressful.” She also shared the importance of team building exercises with her school board. Ms. Anderson stated that “team building with the board is important for building trust, honesty, cooperation, and transparency between me and the board.” Ms. Anderson stated that many superintendents leave because they are “working their way up the ladder.” She said, “another reason for leaving is that a superintendent finds he/she is not a good fit with the community.” Ms. Anderson added that female superintendents have to work harder than male superintendents, but that they also seem to be more vested in the community. She shared, “I take my role as superintendent very seriously. I want to ensure that every decision is made with what is best for our students as the overriding thought. You aren’t going to please everyone, but we must ensure that the students remain our number one priority.”

## CONCLUSION

The five female superintendents with longevity (at least six years) for this study display a passion and commitment to their jobs, their districts, and their communities, matching Talbert's (2011) findings for longevity of Texas superintendents in general. Three women in this study emphasized the importance of meeting the needs of the students. This was similar to findings that districts with higher student achievement had a positive impact on superintendent longevity (Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Johnson, Huffman, Madden & Shope, 2011; Kamrath & Brunner, 2014; Simpson, 2013).

All of the women who are superintendents in this study also discussed school board relations. Two of the women had difficult school board relations at the beginning of their tenure in the district. Both women were able to develop plans to improve this relationship. The plans involved the community and gaining their support so a more positive board could be established for the district. The board relationship with the superintendent as it relates to longevity is mentioned in other research studies (Bryd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Lere, 2004; Libka, 2012; Martiz, 2006; Waters, & Marzano, 2006). Two of the women superintendents said that their school boards needed training. One of these women shared that the training was specific to team building. Three women felt that superintendent turnover was actually based on poor school board relations. Other reasons for turnover were advancement to larger districts, retirement, or not a fit between the superintendent and the community. Stressors in the job were time, keeping up with legislative issues, and finances.

There was little mention of balance between professional work and personal relationships such as family, differing from Sethna's (2014) research that found women having difficulty with the balance between work and family. One woman said that mentorship and self-reflection were important to her longevity, which was similar to Sethna's (2014) findings. Another woman shared the importance of high expectations similar also to Sethna's work. Several women discussed the need for good communication. The female superintendents in this study still enjoyed their jobs and showed a commitment to their community and district. Female superintendents in Texas are staying in their positions longer with a commitment for improvement of schools and their communities. As women increase their superintendent longevity, they also increase their visibility and may help other women superintendents new to the position.

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