



Building the next generation of women leaders

by Jill A. Baker

Coaching, confidence and clarity will attract more women to the superintendent role

In April 2020, I became the first female superintendent in the 135-year history of the Long Beach Unified School District. In the weeks following my appointment, reporters, staff and members of the community all wanted to know what it felt like to be “the first.” Even young elementary school students wanted to ask what it felt like to be the first woman to be “the boss” and why no one had done it before me. The questions led to rich discussions and opportunities to encourage even our youngest students about what is possible for them regardless of their gender.

Clearly, I was not the first woman who was prepared to lead my district as its superintendent. In fact, in the 28 years prior to becoming superintendent, I observed and interacted with numerous talented, smart and dedicated female leaders whose leadership of schools and central offices could easily have resulted in them becoming the district’s superintendent. And, while I was the first female superintendent in LBUSD, I definitely won’t be the last.

Available data about the percentage of fe-

male superintendents reveals a stark picture of leadership at the top. Among the largest 15 districts in California, in 2023 only four of them are led by women. Nationwide, 76 percent of teachers are women, yet less than 33 percent of superintendents are women and less than 11 percent of superintendents are women of color. A study released by the ILO Group in 2022 revealed that during the pandemic the percentage of women superintendents decreased significantly, as many women who left the superintendency were replaced by men.

These statistics have been the basis for many organizations that prepare aspiring superintendents to change their recruitment strategies, develop specialized programs to attract more women to the role of superintendent and elevate the voice of female superintendents to inspire other women into the role. What is clear is that women are not underprepared for the job. They are actually often overprepared and under-selected. We all have a role to play in changing these facts, especially those of us who serve as superintendents.

The role of all leaders

I have always believed that it is the role of all leaders to cultivate, prepare, coach and encourage the next generation of educators toward roles in leadership. While efforts to develop women as leaders may often rely upon many universal leadership development strategies, I believe that creating a greater awareness of the unique challenges that women face, and cultivating a culture where women support women (rather than competing against one another) has great potential to ensure that women have the same opportunities for leadership as their male counterparts. So, how do we go about creating a culture where women can thrive as leaders?

Women mentoring women

I have enjoyed and observed the positive impact of women mentoring women. In my own experience, I have mentored women in both professional and personal settings. Different from coaching, mentoring feels informal and more open-ended. I was recently sought out by a colleague in our organization. She approached me about a couple of things that she was trying out as a leader and asked me if I would provide some thought partnership. We explored ideas, laughed about some of our professional challenges and ended with a commitment to check back in within a couple of months. I sent a periodic text to encourage her and celebrated with a phone call when she reported a success that she experienced. When we eventually met again, she shared how even our informal interactions had given her the courage to try something new and that she felt a spirit of friendly accountability after making a commitment in our meeting.

As a cancer survivor, I also participate in a program called Women Guiding Women, which pairs cancer survivors with cancer patients to journey together. I use many of the same ideas from that program to guide myself in mentoring colleagues — most notably, assuming the role of trusted advisor, not necessarily there to build a person's specific skill set, but more to ensure that another woman feels a spirit of sisterhood for what she is facing. In my most recent opportunity to walk alongside a woman going through breast cancer treatment, my mentee



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shared that prior to our interaction, she felt alone even though she had many supporters. She further shared that having a mentor “allowed her to imagine a different future for herself and to feel confident in advocating for herself.” Women mentoring other women is a key strategy to ensuring that more women choose leadership positions and thrive in their lives.

Coaching as a way of being

I can easily trace my interest in coaching back to my first year as an elementary teacher. I was lucky enough to be surrounded by a group of master teachers, all of whom were women, who took me under their wings and coached me. I actually won a first-year teacher award, which I have always credited to being in the right place at the right time and being coached by some amazing colleagues. My experience in being coached led to me becoming a master teacher and a mentor teacher before beginning my administrative career.

After serving seven years as an elementary principal, in 2005 I was enticed to leave my school and join the central office to launch our district's first leadership development program. In my first and only year serving in that role, I coached seven first-year principals and began to develop a curriculum for future school leaders. Coaching is an incred-

ibly important method for developing all kinds of leaders, and I believe that it offers particular value for growing female leaders. Coaching builds leaders' confidence. Coaching builds deep relationships that often lead to supportive networks. Coaching allows for practice and the opportunity to break down “big, scary ideas” that might otherwise remain in a leader's mind. Coaching supports female leaders in finding their unique voice and style.

My work in LBusD has a strong connection to the building of a district-wide culture of coaching. Dr. Kelly An, director of Equity Leadership & Talent Development, and I have presented and written extensively on this topic. In our 2019 article, “Coaching as a Way of Being,” we told the story of how coaching became the foundation of our administrative evaluation systems and the heart of our improvement culture. We have taken great care in promoting the idea that “everyone deserves and needs a coach.” I have demonstrated my own commitment to this philosophy by having a coach at critical junctures in my career and sharing the many opportunities that I have to both be coached and to be a coach. Ensuring that women leaders are not just offered, but encouraged to have a coach at different points in their leadership journeys is imperative to building re-

flective, confident and empowered women leaders.

Leadership pipeline programming

As school districts across the country struggle to fill teacher and administrator vacancies, the need for supportive leadership development programming should be on every organization's radar. For the past 17 years, we have been creating, refining, reimagining and implementing pipeline programs designed to nurture teachers and administrators throughout their careers in LBUSD. What started as a single program to support new principals is now a sequence of 16 certificated programs each with its own curriculum, set of field experiences and embedded coaching. Central to our pipeline programming has been the thoughtful work of recruiting and developing leaders of color. In "To Create a Leadership Pipeline, Start with Where You Are," I described the need for all districts to have a strategy for developing leaders from within the organization. The research on this topic is clear: pipeline programs are a cost-effective way of positively impacting student achievement and retaining leaders. But specifically, pipeline programs provide some distinct strategies that are connected to female leaders' readiness to lead schools and central offices and to experience success in their roles.

In a recent publication released by Women Leading Ed's, "The Time is Now: A New Playbook for Women in Education," the concepts of coaching, sponsorship, networking and diversity in hiring are reinforced as methods for increasing the percentage of females in leadership positions. Each of these methods has proven to be effective in our district's leadership development programming. Program participants learn from a diverse group of leaders, including equal numbers of female and male leaders. Program participants are assigned a coach who helps them connect their "classroom" learning to their work in the field. In addition to their immediate supervisor, the director of Equity Leadership & Talent Development "tells their story" when we are making hiring and promotional decisions, adding sponsorship to their profile. The use of affinity groups and the development of support networks

are intentionally cultivated through program experiences. The combination of experiences ensures that women leaders, and especially women of color who are more often overlooked for leadership positions, are intentionally sought out, coached, developed and supported in their journeys. Intentionally developing programs that feature strong female leaders of color, and incorporating job-embedded coaching and sponsorship have great potential for building a pipeline of diverse female leaders.

The unique role of superintendents

In my first three years as superintendent, I have enjoyed working hard to ensure that the female leaders in my midst are empowered to seek promotional opportunities, including the superintendency. I offer these three ideas to fellow superintendents who may be looking for their own way of influencing leaders within their districts.

Participate in developing future district leaders

In LBUSD, one of our pipeline programs is called Exploring District Leadership. This program creates a space for effective principals who are curious about the idea of becoming a central office leader to interact with a number of district leaders, including me. The curriculum includes: readings and discussion about the differences in leading a school and leading in a central office; an examination of the role of equity leadership in the central office; and a study of the "ways of being" that successful central office leaders embody. In addition to teaching the program curriculum alongside our Equity Leadership & Talent Development director, the program allows me to share a more human side of myself, to tell stories about my work and to be transparent about the challenges of being a female superintendent. In our recent exit interviews with this year's program participants, one participant shared her appreciation for "hearing a candid perspective about being the first female superintendent in LBUSD" and how being able to talk openly with both male and female colleagues about "the challenges of being a female leader" opened up new awareness, greater confidence and new

thinking for her. She shared that she is "taking this thinking back to her school to create similar experiences for her staff."

As superintendents, we are in unique positions to ensure that there is space for candid conversations that elevate issues of race and gender and the role that both play in our work as school leaders. Creating and participating in programs that create this space have great potential for ensuring the success of female leaders.

Professional development in the company of other women

As a number of organizations (i.e., AASA, ACSA, Chiefs for Change, Council of Great City Schools) prioritize ways of developing future superintendents, I have made it a priority to ensure that members of my senior team all have opportunities to network and learn outside of their daily work. Not only is it healthy to step away to reflect and learn, but in my career, I have noticed that women leaders often "stay back to hold down the fort," while their male counterparts leave for conferences and other learning opportunities. One of the ways that we can ensure that women are confident, benefit from networking with other women leaders and have opportunities to be coached and mentored, is to encourage their participation in experiences such as AASA's Aspiring Superintendents Academy for Female Leaders, the Women Leading Ed Annual Summit or ACSA's Women in School Leadership Forum. We should also be nominating our female colleagues into programs like the Broad Fellowship for Public Education Leadership, Chiefs for Change Future Chiefs or the Council of the Great City Schools Casserly Institute for Aspiring Superintendents. Ensuring that women leaders are encouraged, nominated or pursue leadership learning outside of their daily role is a worthy commitment and should be a part of every superintendent's work.

Developing our own teams

Over the past three years, I have had deep learning experiences with my senior team (e.g., executive cabinet). We have studied how excellent teams operate, analyzed ourselves as culturally competent leaders, worked to dis-

rupt the presence of White Dominant Culture and reimagined what it means to lead our district for both excellence and equity. All of these experiences have contributed to a culture where female leaders' voices, experiences and ideas are heard and valued.

With the daily demands on a superintendent, the development of a senior team can easily be left to chance. Based on my experience, this should be an area of great intention for all superintendents. Perhaps it is finding a team coach that can push the group's thinking and notice things that are hard to see when you're leading the work. This was a critical decision for me. Perhaps it is supporting each senior leader in finding a learning experience outside of their day-to-day role. This has been a critical feature of my team's learning because as each individual leader grows, we all benefit. Perhaps it is examining the brutal facts of power within the team and creating a path forward so that female leaders are not only "in the room where it happens," but also finding equal air time and participation in creating the future. In order to ensure that women leaders thrive in senior leadership roles and pursue the superintendency, we must cultivate our own teams in ways that model the way for others.

Twenty-five years ago, then assistant superintendent Dorothy T. Harper visited my classroom at the recommendation of my principal, Barbara Richardson. Dorothy saw something in me that turned into a decade-long professional relationship that included mentorship, coaching and sponsorship. She saw something in me that I didn't yet see in myself, and she subsequently developed me into that leader that she believed that I could become.

While we are busy doing the work of leading schools, central offices and districts, it is incumbent on us, especially as female leaders, to "see something in others" and then to strategically and intentionally develop them to lead into the future. With 76 percent of educators across the nation being women, the question isn't, "Are there enough women to draw from?" The question should be, "What are we willing to do differently to ensure that women, and especially women of color, have the opportunities and support they need to take on all of the leadership roles that our students deserve?" Our stu-

dents are counting on us.

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