

More Women Set Sights On Educational Leadership Roles

With change, comes opportunity. Perhaps even equal opportunity.

Change is imminent for professionals in educational leadership roles, due primarily to retirements over the next several years. Most of those retirees will be males, and the reason, of course, is simple: Many more males than females currently hold those positions.

Although women comprise over 70 percent of K-12 teachers in the United States, they hold only 35 percent of the principalships. In an informal survey of 156 principalships in 10 larger West Michigan School districts, female elementary principalships were found to be well under half, female secondary principalships well under a third. In smaller districts, those percentages are even lower.

An offshoot of the School of Education's popular programs in educational leadership has been the formation of a forum to encourage female educators to seek out and succeed in the highly competitive arena of administration — whether leading individual schools or entire school districts. In the past, however, school districts have hired mostly men for these positions.

The Women in Educational Leadership Forum, which began in February, is co-organized by graduate faculty members Lisabeth Margulus, Ed.D. and Randy Remenap, both former high school principals. Three sessions — featuring platform presentations and candid round-table discussions with colleagues who have been suc-



Discussing issues at a Women in Educational Leadership Forum are, from left to right, Catherine Ceglarek, Gloria Graber, Marcia Bishop and Terre Davis.

Barriers Confronting Women In Pursuit of Leadership Posts

Cynthia Mader, Ph.D., School of Education Assistant Dean, cites four common barriers from the research on women in leadership roles:

- Comfort Level. Even today, many people are uncomfortable with women in leadership roles. They often feel threatened—especially if the woman is extremely competent.

- The Clone Factor. We all tend to surround ourselves with others like ourselves. The very human result is that white males have hired more white males.

- The Superstar Mind Set. Promotion to administrative positions is seen as ordinary and normal for men. People who happen to be female have to be superstars.

- Proof vs. Potential. Women often have to prove their competence by serving in every single position on every rung of the ladder—whereas men are able to leapfrog through the ranks if they are believed to have administrative potential.

“Untested assumptions limit everyone,” Mader says. “The stereotype has been that men should lead; women should teach. This stereotype limits women, but it also limits men. Perhaps worst of all, it devalues the importance of teaching.”

Mader also notes encouraging research.

“The barriers are gradually falling,” she says. “The biggest benefit to everyone is that having women in growing numbers is helping all of us change our traditional definitions of what leadership is.”

cessful in breaking down traditional barriers — were scheduled for the spring semester of 2000. An additional series is being scheduled for fall.

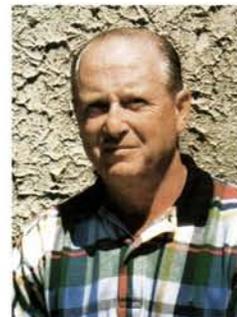
“An increasing awareness is critical,” says Patricia Oldt, who was recently appointed as the university's first Special Assistant to the President for Campus Equity and Planning.



Cynthia Mader

“The impetus for starting the program is that there are still some districts out there — and very good districts — that just haven't hired female administrators for whatever reason,” said Remenap, a former principal at Grandville High School. “There is a refusal to change, and that often rests at the superintendent level. Some of them just absolutely refuse to accept the fact that females can lead more than an elementary school.”

“That has led to frustrations for our students as they've applied for jobs. We want to give every advantage for our graduates to compete for these jobs by bringing in successful women in the field who, in



Randy Remenap

turn, share their expertise and their experiences.”

The tide is turning, however slowly. The number of female students in educational leadership programs continues to grow and, likewise, so does the number of women being appointed to key K-12 administrative posts.

“At Grand Valley, there are more females in our leadership in education programs than males,” Remenap said. “We placed 31 principals and assistant principals last summer, which is an outstanding number for a university. About half of those placements were females. There are some very sound women who are middle school, high school and central office administrators.”

Among the guest panelists sharing their triumphs and tribulations during the winter forum series have been Dr. Terre Davis of the search firm Davis & Associates, Allendale Public Schools superintendent Catherine Ceglarek, Forest Hills Northern High School principal Gloria Graber, and Oldt. All have overcome obstacles and stereotypes of some form while successfully laying the groundwork for future administrators. They shared their stories, listened to others and offered advice on how to beat the odds.

“Our female students are facing real challenges,” Margulus said. “We want to help by providing a network. We're meeting a huge need.”