

THE BUSINESS OF WOMEN

Donnis H. Thompson

In 1839, the year before King Kamehameha III enacted the first public school laws in Hawaii, the king and the nobles approved a general law which included a section on schools entitled, "The Business of Females."

In 1840, another law elaborated on our "business" this way: "It is the appropriate business of all the females of these islands; to teach the children to read, cipher, and write, and other branches of learnings, to subject the children to good parental and school laws, to guide the children to right behavior, and place them in schools, that they may do better than their parents."

In 1841, still another public school law was enacted in Hawaii that provided for the Legislature to appoint annually "certain men of intelligence" as general school agents, similar to our present district superintendents, and one superintendent of the whole.

This is the paradox—that education has always been "the business of women." Historically, teaching was one of the very few occupations considered suitable for women. Teaching, that is—not the administration of schools, nor the supervision of those who teach.

Teaching is the heart of education, of course, and perhaps women should feel flattered that this most important role was delegated to them. But it is absurd to suggest that women who are capable of

teaching cannot also be capable of determining what to teach, to direct instruction, to make decisions about the education that our children receive.

The position of women in educational administration in Hawaii has varied up and down since those early days.

Looking back 50 years, for example, we find some interesting comparisons with the present. Fifty years ago, exactly 50 percent of all public school principals were women. Today, the figure is 27 percent.

Two out of eight supervising principals—like the former school agents, the forerunners of our present district superintendents—were women 50 years ago. Today, there are still only two female district superintendents, although the percentage has increased because there are only seven in total.

State office administration today is not comparable with that of the 1932-33 school year, but at the top administrative level 50 years ago, there were two women—one in charge of home economics and the other dental hygiene. There has not been much progress, if any, for today only 28 percent of our state officials and administrators are female. Seventy-two percent are male.

But there are signs of hope. At this time, 38 percent of the members of the Board of Education are female, the highest percentage in island history. And this is the Board that selected the first woman to be Superintendent of Education.

It begins to appear that education may yet become as much "the business of females" as of men—as it should be.

The Superintendent's Role

As this state's first female Superintendent, I do not feel that my role is any different from that of a man in the same position. The needs of public education continue to grow. The challenges of administering the eighth largest school system in the United States are still as great.

This does not mean that I try to operate like some might think a man would. Individual men have different management styles, and one's approach to administration is not dependent on sex so much as a combination of personal attributes. I bring my own style, not that of a woman, to the job.

My approach is to work together with both male and female colleagues as equals to address a task that demands the best minds and the most effective leadership skills available. Thus, in selecting my management team for the Department of Education, I looked for the best qualified individuals. Men do not have a monopoly on good qualities, although past inequities may give them an edge in terms of training and experience already acquired.

It is the effect of those past inequities that we seek to remedy with affirmative action. Our society can no longer afford not to make full

use of the human resources women comprise; but old patterns are slow to break down.

One of the advantages of being Superintendent of Education, I believe, is that it puts me in a position to make sure that women are not overlooked for administrative opportunities for which they are qualified.

I am in a position, even, to have some influence on the national scene as vice chairman of the Council of Chief State School Officers' standing committee on educational equity. It is a matter of national concern.

The National Picture

Despite a decade of affirmative action, Title VII, Title IX, and other equal opportunity laws and executive orders, men still constitute the overwhelming majority of educational administrators and policymakers nationwide.

Statistics published by the Council's Resource Center on Sex Equity in December, 1982, reveal significant imbalances. Women comprise 66 percent of all public school teachers in the United States, but they occupy only 25 percent of the administrative and policymaking positions at state and local levels. Women hold:

- 1.8 percent of the nation's local superintendencies
- .9 percent of local assistant or associate superintendencies
- 23 percent of elementary school principalships
- 10 percent of secondary school principalships
- 29 percent of local school board seats
- 30 percent of state school board seats
- 15 percent of first-line positions in state education agencies

Only four of the 50 states have female chief state school officers.

We can only wonder why such imbalances continue to exist, locally as well as nationally, in view of what I believe is a genuine commitment by educators to the principle of equal opportunity. It is not, as some may speculate, that women lack the qualifications or credentials for administrative positions. The Resource Center on Sex Equity points out, for example, that in 1981 women earned 43 percent of the masters degrees and 39 percent of the doctorates awarded in educational administration.

The Center's report concludes: "Access to jobs, not further training, is what women need most. An active commitment by governing boards and chief executive officers is the key to increasing the number of women in administrative positions."

My responsibility as chief in Hawaii, then, is to make sure that women do have access to administrative posts, to bring about better balance so that the best talents of both men and women may combine to bring about a fresh, creative approach that will revitalize public education in this state.

Hawaii's Commitment

The commitment of the Board and the Department of Education has been clear since 1975 when an affirmative action policy and plan were adopted in an effort to correct underrepresentation of women and ethnic groups in the workforce.

Following adoption of that plan, the department's personnel regulations and procedures were revised and an equal opportunity program for women and minorities established. Workshops have been held in all districts to develop awareness and train district specialists and principals in implementation of the procedures.

We have continued to prompt our middle-management people in the field to keep their eyes open for people with leadership abilities and to make a conscious effort to encourage women with potential to seek advancement into the administrative ranks.

A mailing list of women's rights organizations is maintained, and announcements of educational officer vacancies are sent to them. When I began the process of selecting my own management team of assistant and district superintendents, the search was announced publicly, as well as within the department, the first time that these top-level executives were not handpicked, but the positions were opened to all persons who were interested, and all qualified applicants were considered.

Selection procedures are carefully monitored to make sure that objective, job-related criteria are used; that discriminatory questions and language are eliminated, and 50 percent of the committees interviewing applicants for educational officer positions must be composed of females.

A strong effort also has been made to qualify more women for school administration through participation in the Education Management Training Program (EMTP). The same tough criteria are applied to all trainees, men and women alike, and the result has been that a fair number of women have succeeded and advanced into vice principal and principal positions.

Still, progress has been slower than I would like. Statistics are kept and reported every year, and although there has been some improvement in specific areas, the overall gain is slight.

Built-In Barriers

We face a number of problems, most of which cannot be overcome easily.



Hawaii State Department of Education Superintendent Donniss Thompson, center, shares an informal moment with Noboru Higa, Head of the Adult and Early Childhood Section of the Department, and others. Photo by courtesy of the Department.

Upward mobility is somewhat restricted in our relatively small and geographically isolated state. Accessibility to administrative opportunities is limited by the small number of such positions and low turnover in these jobs. This situation can only be aggravated by the current economic picture which does not encourage people to risk movement or to retire, and declining enrollment in the secondary schools which may lead to a reduction in the number of vice principalships, the position through which EMTP graduates enter the administrative ranks.

Provisions of the educational officers' contract effectively block opportunities for anyone outside the system to any but appointive executive positions and even reduce opportunities for those inside the system who wish to move up by giving priority in selection of appointees to incumbents seeking demotion or lateral transfers.

The picture is even more complicated for women, since most of the openings for advancement occur on the neighbor islands. For women with families, such relocation is often difficult.

This year, we are working on improvements to the original affirmative action plan. In addition to updating workforce data, other

revisions include the presentation of the gender and ethnic composition of the department's workforce by organizational subdivisions, and refinement of the methodology of workforce utilization analysis.

Whether a plan remains a mere expression of commitment, however, or is translated into concrete actions that will bring the department closer to its goal of having a representative and diverse workforce will, in the final analysis, depend on all officers and administrators taking affirmative steps in the whole spectrum of employment transactions and decisions.

Responsibilities of Management

Fulfilling the commitment of this plan is a management responsibility. Management performance will be one of the key ingredients in the progress of women in educational administration in the Hawaii State DOE.

Beyond a plan that lays out the statistics for us and gives us a timetable and goals to shoot for, much more needs to be done. We must do more than analyze data; we need to find the causes behind the data so that more effective strategies can be worked out to remedy the imbalances that the statistics reveal.

Some of the problems have been identified, and we must find ways to overcome them. Further studies also should be made to uncover hidden barriers, to discover why, in a profession engaging a majority of women as teachers, women are not progressing into administrative positions at the same rate as they are advancing in other fields.

National research and models being developed in other areas can be of value to us, and we should actively participate in the network of organizations and agencies concerned with educational equity, both locally and nationwide.

Collective efforts are effective efforts, or as the saying goes, in unity there is strength. If change related to the attainment of sex equity in education is to be effective, all efforts need to be linked to a variety of organizations and groups at all levels. A coordinated effort among administrators' and teachers' organizations, state departments, districts, colleges and universities and community groups can best facilitate change.

Those who already occupy administrative positions bear a

specific responsibility to communicate with others that equal opportunity for women and minorities is a priority goal of education in this state. As individuals, each of us needs to reach out to women, to encourage them, to give them responsibilities in which they can develop and demonstrate their abilities, to serve in every sense as mentors helping women achieve real equality.

This is especially true for women who have succeeded in overcoming the barriers to advancement. They must recognize that they are seen as role models, whether or not they want to be, and that they must not only be effective in their work, they must pave the way for others by making their accomplishments as women known. By their example, they can raise the awareness of other women, as well as of society in general, to the fact that women can be equally as effective as men in administration and that such positions are, indeed, within the reach of women who would aspire to them.

Looking Ahead

Therein lies the true heart of the problem, for it is a societal one rooted in the values of the past, old habits of thought and patterns of doing things. Therefore, we cannot completely resolve the problem of equity for women in educational administration and governance until educators achieve success in their main arena—the classroom. It is there that we must all work the hardest to change the attitudes of society toward women and of women toward themselves and their opportunities.

The Department of Education has launched a continuous effort to eliminate sex bias and stereotyping from the curriculum and instructional materials, to raise teachers' awareness of unconscious

attitudes that continue to persist, to ensure equal opportunity for both male and female students in all educational programs, and to expose all students to the full range of opportunities open to them in their future lives.

If we can produce a new generation of citizens who respect each other as individuals, without regard to sex or ethnicity, we may be able to destroy many of the social barriers to women which now undeniably exist.

It may take a generation to accomplish this, but it must be done—and it is education's responsibility.

Donnis Hazel Thompson is Superintendent of Education, Hawaii State Department of Education. Receiving both her BS and MS degrees from George Williams College in Chicago, she earned her EdD in physical education and administration from the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley in 1967. Professor of Education and Director of Women's Athletics at the University of Hawaii at Manoa before being appointed to Superintendent, Dr. Thompson has also served as head coach for the US Women's Track and Field team that competed against Russia and Poland, in the 1975 University Women Athletes competition in Rome, and in the 1973 and 1975 World Games. In 1981 she received the most coveted award in women's sports, the Honor Fellow Award, which is given once a year to the person in the nation who has done the most for girls' and women's sports.