Tamu Lucero, assistant superintendent in the 16,200-student Stamford Public Schools in Connecticut, was clearly moving on a fast track. She became a principal in Columbus, Ohio, at 26, inspired by the idea that “as an administrator, I could affect more children,” she says. “That stuck with me.”

So when her husband, who works in educational technology in another Ohio district, spotted a promotional notice on the AASA website about the association’s upcoming Women’s Leadership Consortium, he encouraged his wife to apply. The AASA initiative, funded through a $450,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, addresses the barriers to women reaching the superintendency and provides a network of support for aspirants. The consortium, launched in 2016, positions leaders in education and business as mentors to women seeking top posts leading local school districts. Through regular phone and e-mail contact and technology-assisted meetings, the coaches help the mentees complete projects relating to organizational leadership. (See related stories, pages 34 and 35.)

**Statistical Quandary**

Anyone who wonders why a program targeting women educators who aspire for higher office should be needed in 2017 ought to just consider the current numbers. AASA’s “Study of the American Superintendent: 2015 Mid-Decade Update” said women held 27 percent of the nation’s superintendencies, most in smaller rural and suburban districts. In 2000, that figure was 13 percent. By contrast, women today comprise 76 percent of K-12 teaching posts and 52 percent of all principalships nationwide, according to the National Education Association.

“You would think in 2017 the playing field would be even, and women would be able to secure senior positions in districts,” says Deborah Jewell-Sherman, professor of practice at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. However, she cautions, “There’s still a great deal of work needed...
to secure the position and a need for support in the position."

Many women still feel that unless they can check off every qualification for a superintendent job — managing a large operating budget, bringing a significant building project to completion, serving as a high school principal or as an assistant superintendent in pupil services or instruction and assessments — there’s no point even applying. It’s not that different from what classroom teachers often observe when girls sit quietly in class, raising their hands to contribute only when they’re certain of the answers while male classmates will shout out answers even when they don’t know them.

“You can surround yourself with talent,” says Melody Schopp, South Dakota’s secretary of education and a mentor in AASA’s program. “You don’t have to know everything. You need to walk into a room and own it.”

The AASA initiative, says Amy F. Sichel, a former AASA president and superintendent of the 8,000-student Abington, Pa., schools, “is really important to aspiring women. You can’t forget aspiring men, but … if you look at the tradition of selecting superintendents, women usually have a slower, longer route along the way. The reality is that there are the childbearing years, when it’s easier not to be in the top position.”

The value of a woman-centered program, adds Jewell-Sherman, a former superintendent in Richmond, Va., is “there are nuances that women have to provide or think about differently. Being with a group of women enables a critical analysis of their own behavior in a situation.” Women may face a subordinate who challenges their leadership or a school board president who thinks a woman will be easier to manage or manipulate. Managing the politics of the local community also can differ by gender.

Missionary Zeal

When many school boards consider potential district leadership candidates, they often look at
An Obligation to Share Tactics and Tools

BY RUTH PEREZ

In a profession where 72 percent of classroom teachers are women, according to AASA's latest study of the nation's 13,700 superintendents, 1,948 are women. Studies cite various reasons why disparities exist in these leadership positions. According to one gender-focused study, when men interview for leadership posts across many professions, they instill a greater level of confidence based on faulty perceptions that men can do a better job than women.

A closer examination of the facts in K-12 education would suggest the most effective superintendents are instructional leaders so, on this basis, the numbers would indicate many more women ought to be reaching the superintendent.

Two Advisees

As a female superintendent, I know I bring a much-needed perspective in my role as an instructional leader. But I am also a role model for our future female engineers, business managers, doctors, teachers and all of the professions where our nation can benefit from qualified women. As a minority who had to pursue the American dream. The recent movie "Hidden Figures" wonderfully illustrates the massive impact women can have on critical fields, yet they must struggle to be recognized for their efforts.

How do we break this cycle, to see women represented more equitably in leadership roles? Could lack of inspiration and role models be among the major obstacles?

As educators, we owe it to help women climb the career path. Those of us who have "cracked that invisible code" can use our experiences to see our female friends make a significant dent in these numbers.

AASA's Women in School Leadership Initiative, supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is designed to mitigate the impact of social barriers women face in ascending to the top leadership positions in our school systems. The program raises consciousness by exploring what a mentor/mentee relationship can provide.

Through this initiative, I met two outstanding female educators, one a high school principal and the other a chief academic officer in a mid-sized school district. Both are successful and aspire to move ahead in their careers. They want to reach their own potential and positively affect even more students. I am serving as their mentor.

With each conversation I have with my mentees, I am reminded of how the early-career struggles and intensity of our workplace issues can shake our confidence levels when handling complex matters. Every conversation has led to self-reflection of my own experiences.

Talking Strategy

Coaching and mentoring are different, and some confuse the two, leading to reluctance to reach out. Coaching is skill building, and it takes extensive time. Mentoring is about having someone to connect with, to talk to, to help you navigate through the numerous situations that call for insight and experience. Most of my conversations with my two mentees have taken place while in my car on the long drive home.

I've been able to equip them with the tools and tactics to get to the next level of their careers. We've talked strategy, confidence, human relations and professional connections. We didn't do this on a golf course, but on the highways and freeways we have been able to share and support one another.

As a superintendent for seven years, I myself have been blessed with four extraordinary women mentors — all retired from successful superintendent positions. As I reflect on what these women bring to my life, I must admit the phone calls and occasional meetings over a glass of wine have been heartwarming and helpful.

But, overall, what has been most impactful for me is just knowing of their existence, that other women have performed this job, walked in my shoes and did so successfully. This is what motivates and inspires me to stay the course. The least I can do is reciprocate and share my success with others.

RUTH PEREZ is superintendent of Paramount Unified School District in Paramount, Calif. E-mail: RPerez@paramount.k12.ca.us. Twitter: @PUSDSUPT

That's a concern for Judith Minor, an associate superintendent in Community Unit School District 208, an 18,000-student district in Oswego, Ill.

"There's a certain perception that you follow certain tracks" to school leadership, says Minor, who began her educational career as a substitute teacher in the Department of Defense schools on a U.S. military base in Germany where her husband was stationed. Her earlier professional life was in the newspaper and magazine industry.

Minor's mentor is Schopp, the chief state school officer in South Dakota who has worked...
in education for 23 years. It’s a fortuitous pairing because both have taken unconventional paths to educational leadership. They’ve discussed how to roll out online learning across schools, as well as the status of Minor’s career pursuits. Schopp, who spent nine years on the school board in Lemmon, S.D., helps her mentee prepare for interviews and for working with different types of boards. They use technology to communicate later at night, and Minor uses Google Docs to share her progress on assignments relating to the AASA consortium.

Schopp says she has made it a mission to grow the number of women superintendents. She was frustrated while attending a statewide meeting of high school principals to discover only one woman in the group of 40. Even though three of her state’s largest districts have been led at one point by women superintendents, the reality is that “a strong male cohort can be intimidating.”

Schopp adds, “I’ve had to break that on my own. I had a male superintendent verbally challenge me at a superintendent convention, (saying) ‘you have no idea what you’re doing and no idea what you’re talking about.’ He felt empowered to say that. As women, we have to learn not to be intimidated.”

As Minor moves forward on her career path, Schopp wants to ensure she has opportunities to have a larger impact on state and national education issues. Minor already -

Confidence on My Journey to the Superintendency

BY ROSALIE M. DACA

I always knew I wanted to become an educator. Growing up, I considered learning my passion, a passion I was destined to share with others.

I started my career in education as a secondary math teacher in a male-dominated department. I knew right away that working hard was a non-negotiable. Throughout my teaching journey, I had the privilege to meet strong women who always advised me to set my expectations high, and I credit those leaders for guiding, pushing and encouraging me to become whatever I wanted.

As a participant in AASA’s Women in School Leadership initiative, I’ve discovered the incalculable value of mentorship and professional guidance. Having an opportunity to network with like-minded women educators is a rare occasion. But being able also to lean on them and grow from their experiences is a remarkable asset.

Real-Time Support

Professionally, my goals include taking on the role of a K-12 district superintendent, so AASA’s initiative has introduced me to a personal mentor who guides me along my journey. She brings 34 years of experience in five different school leadership roles to the table, accompanied by a genuine desire to see me succeed.

Frequent conversations with my mentor focused on my specific needs in real time. Access to a mentor who can tailor a conversation, share examples of similar experiences and give professional advice without judging is something every female professional deserves.

Additionally, the role of a professional confidant is one my mentor assumes from time to time. Sometimes we don’t know what we don’t know. Not every question is one we may feel comfortable floating out to members of our own organization. The discretion in conversations of this nature with professionals outside of my own environment enables me to grow as a leader.

In addition, the AASA program’s cohort has 19 other women leaders with whom to share ideas, information and support. We come from various regions of the country and leadership positions, leading to an array of perspectives and experiences that contribute positively to discussions.

I have conversed with members of this group about implementing new reading programs, structuring our Response to Intervention framework and interviewing for new positions. It has been refreshing to have multiple viewpoints for gathering information and guiding decisions.

Nurturing Women

Our cohort recently shared an article on the small number of women in the superintendency. I realized how lucky I am to serve in a high-level role. I am privileged currently to work with a strong female leader in my school district from whom I have gained vast knowledge. As a student-centered educator, she is not afraid to make difficult decisions that break the cycle of the status quo.

My 19,000-student urban district has seen four superintendents in the eight years of my tenure. The longest serving, at four years, is the incumbent. Women hold two positions on our nine-person school board. At the executive level, 63 percent of the district’s leaders are female, and 14 of the 31 lead principals are women.

I always have had strong women to lean on, strong women who pushed me to be the best professional that I can be. Now, it is my turn. I want to be the guiding force for those strong women who will come after me. It is our responsibility to recognize and nurture strong women of today to be the leaders of tomorrow. AASA’s Women in School Leadership program is providing support and guidance for all women. I am grateful to be a part of this groundbreaking initiative.

ROSALIE DACA is chief academic officer in the Racine Unified School District in Racine, Wis. E-mail: rosalie.daca@rusd.org
Recognizing that women pursuing leadership roles face particular challenges, AASA launched its Women in School Leadership initiative two years ago, bolstered by a $450,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The initiative’s most distinctive facet combines mentoring and coaching with an online digital learning platform, Edu-Planet21. The Women’s Leadership Consortium brings together women leaders from the education and business worlds to work with female educators who are eager to move into the superintendency of local school systems.

The association received 100 applicants for the 20 mentee slots with each of the 10 mentors assigned to work with two mentees. The pairings were matched by areas of expertise and interest, with some geographic considerations as well. Accordingly, AASA named the initiative “More than a Power Lunch: Building Networks to Support and Advance Women in School Leadership.”

**Monthly Check-ins**
The scale of the program means that “the goals are specific” to each mentor and mentee pairing, says Vera Turner, a project manager at AASA. Abington, Pa.’s superintendent Amy Sichel, a coach in the program, calls it “a two-way street.”

In her suburban Philadelphia district, Sichel has been putting in place a new K-6 language arts program so she’s tapped into the curricular experiences of her mentees to help her make some decisions.

The expectation is that the mentor will commit at least two hours each month to coaching each of her assigned mentees with the latter receiving assignments on realistic projects. Through Edu-Planet21, the mentors and mentees can have ongoing, protected conversations about issues that arise, from budgeting and personnel matters to instructional issues and community relations.

“Using Edu-Planet21, Skype, Zoom and other conferencing services, mentors can lead collaborative mentoring sessions, share their networks with their mentees and effectively mentor women in different locations across the country,” says Turner. “We’re building networks to support and advance women. Technology allows us to bring them together.”

**Corporate Aspects**
MaryAnn Jobe, AASA’s director of leadership development, says the association’s program differs from others in its use of national thought leaders from education and business. She hopes the business leaders will encourage the aspiring superintendents to think about succession planning and envisioning long-term career goals, which are common in the corporate world but less so in K-12 education.

The mentors are superintendents in dis-

Melody Schopp, South Dakota’s secretary of education, coaches aspiring superintendents through a program run by AASA.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, PIERRE, S.D.
unofficial mentors. When Sichel became superintendent in her suburban Philadelphia district in 2001, only three women were superintendents in her region. Now eight of the area’s 22 districts are led by females.

The two women she is coaching are both district-level directors, one overseeing curriculum and the other, elementary education. During Google hangouts, says Sichel, they discuss superintendent and board relations and the need for women to be “assertive and work around obstacles.” She shares advice on how to manage committee work as a way to delegate, but also how to be in charge and “make cogent presentations,” even how to dress like a CEO.

A Comfort Level
It’s these powerful mentor/mentee relationships that distinguish the Women’s Leadership Consortium, participants in both roles attest. Take Lucero’s experience. She had maintained strong, ongoing relationships with the superintendents under whom she had worked in Ohio, yet she saw a potential benefit in “having a mentor who doesn’t know me and can see something different in me. We can dig into different areas.”

Even though her mentor, Judith Rattner, is a superintendent of a school district in New Jersey that’s five times smaller than hers in Connecticut, “the problems are the same,” says Lucero. “I have a laundry list of things I’m working on — building a new school, budgeting, special education, being efficient in providing support.”

Some issues, such as managing struggling English language learners, dealing with parents of high school seniors who don’t have enough credits to graduate or developing a community of practice for principals, transcend district profiles.

Rattner, a superintendent for 12 years who has served in an array of leadership posts in her state’s professional association, has discussed with Lucero her next step as she pursues a district of her own to lead. Lucero says she’s been encouraged to “talk about a district that’s a good fit. … [T]’t’s a calling to be an educator. It’s a lifestyle. We believe in living in the community we’re working in.”

Lucero believes she’ll continue to reach out to Rattner because of the comfort level she’s established “if I’m ever struggling.” Or, she adds, “I may run something by her to get her thoughts. It’s the best form of professional development, with coaching that’s specific to you. It’s invaluable. I can’t get it somewhere else.”

MERRI ROSENBERG is a freelance education writer in Ardsley, N.Y. E-mail: merri.rosenberg@gmail.com

AASA convened 18 mentors and mentees at the association’s 2017 national conference in New Orleans.

will contribute what they’ve learned to the final report about the project that will be provided to the Gates Foundation.

Connecting Candidates
Recognizing there is keen competition for the top leadership jobs, the idea is that mentors will share their networks with the mentees to expand opportunities.

Although the Gates Foundation grant ends in October, Jobe says “we’ll still follow up if mentees get positions.” Certainly, the mentors who’ve already formed relationships with their mentees have no intention of ending these connections.

“I see this as a long-term relationship,” says Sichel. “When I get off the phone, I feel as rejuvenated as they do.”

— MERRI ROSENBERG