

The Gender Agenda

by Diny Slamet



Kerrie Heenan is living proof that a woman's family commitments aren't necessarily an obstacle to becoming a school principal. The mother of two—one with a severe intellectual disability—set her sights on a leadership role when the children were still relatively young and demanding.

She had fire in her belly, the support of her husband, mentoring from strong women in senior positions and the opportunity to embark on a series of leadership development programs.

She achieved her ambition by becoming principal of Fawkner Secondary College, in Melbourne's northern suburbs, three years ago.

Unfortunately, Heenan is an exception to the rule. At a time when about 70 per cent of teachers are female, about 70 per cent of senior positions in schools and education departments are held by men.

Politicians and media commentators loudly lament the desperate need for more men in schools to provide role models for boys—particularly at the primary level—but they are noticeably silent about the fact that in most schools, the traditional roles continue to be played out: men are the leaders and women the subordinates.

One of the reasons is that experienced women teachers are simply not interested in applying for leadership jobs. Promotion is the way out of a limiting salary structure, but many women are reluctant to take the step because they love teaching in the

classroom, says the Australian Education Union's Jackie Bone-George. Men, it appears, are generally more willing to sacrifice contact with students for career progression.

Experienced women teachers are also sometimes reluctant to apply because they are put off by the job's administrative and financial aspects.

Family demands are also a barrier. Women eligible for principal positions are often dealing with the demands of ageing parents and their own children and partner. Childless women, of course, may also have parents to look after. And women with 10 years' teaching experience, who are emerging as candidates for principal, are commonly mothers of young children or thinking of starting a family.

The really important things

The reluctance could also be linked to the changing nature of the job, says Roberta Spreadbury, principal of Adelaide's Flagstaff Hill Junior Primary School. "You need to be careful that the principal's role as an administrator doesn't take you away from the really important things: children's learning needs, curriculum, and the social and emotional needs of the children. Administration and budgeting has always been part of the workload, but more so with the advent of self-governing schools. That's made a huge difference. You have to work hard to keep things in perspective."

The shift in emphasis from educational leadership to administration was

particularly acute in Victoria during the Kennett years, says the Victorian AEU's women's officer, Barb Jennings. Government demands made the principal's job more punitive. It was a management style women tended to be uncomfortable with, preferring to work in a collegiate way.

"Women say they are interested in being education leaders with links to the classroom," says Jennings. "The principal's job became a lot less attractive because of the overload of administrative work put on them. Principals were forced into making harsher decisions, such as having to declare enormous numbers of teachers surplus to schools' requirements."

Heenan has some words of encouragement for women reluctant to take on senior responsibilities for fear of losing touch with students. "The principal's position is the most influential in the school, so the frustrations you have as a curriculum coordinator, or a year-level coordinator—of having an idea and wanting to try something new, or take a risk—are gone. I can actually do that now, and I can encourage other people to do it. I'm in a position to put the support structures in place, whereas before I needed to rely on other people to have enough confidence in me to want to put up those supports.

"The influence for change, the difference I can make as a principal, is ten times what it was in the classroom. If we could get that message out to women, that you can make significant change in a very positive way, maybe more would take the risk."

Access to opportunities

The Queensland Teachers' Union is working with the education department to encourage women to apply for principal positions, through increased work-shadowing and mentoring programs, says its president, Julie-Ann McCullough. The union is urging the department to institute family-friendly policies, including trialling part-time promotional positions, so both men and women who have aspirations but are unable to work full-time can have access to opportunities. Funding for these initiatives remains the big question.

Research in Victoria for the Department of Education and Training shows a number of barriers—some self-imposed—to women aspiring to leadership roles. They include lack of confidence, and fear of rejection during the application process; reluctance to apply until they feel they can do all the tasks that might be required; and lack of exposure to management and financial reporting tasks.

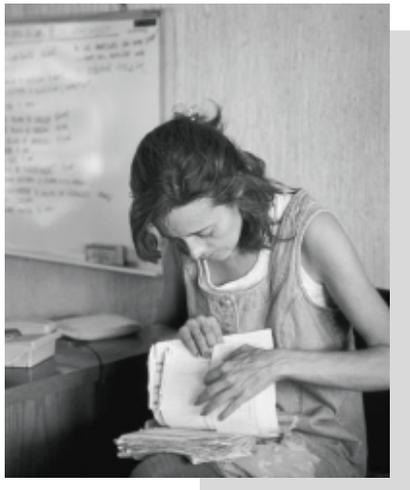
The research, by consultant Kathy Lacey, shows that women need to

be encouraged and supported because they often view themselves as inadequate for the role. Selection panels may be inadequately trained in gender equity issues and have stereotypical views of leadership and gender.

At a glance

- **Strategies to increase the number of women leaders in education must be made a priority**
- **While some 70 per cent of teachers are female, men hold about 70 per cent of senior educator positions**
- **More work-shadowing, experience in acting capacities, as well as part-time positions, are needed to give women encouragement and support**
- **Increased funding for leadership development and system-wide succession planning are also central to attracting women to senior roles**

The Victorian AEU endorsed Lacey's recommendations, which included: appointing women for short periods to acting senior positions to give them experience; school-based consultation to include staff in decision-making; increased funding for leadership development; reviewing levels of administrative support that allow principals to focus on educational concerns; and succession planning as a responsibility of the system, not just individual schools.



Says Jennings: "We need reporting on the numbers of women in promotional positions and for there to be consequences if improvements aren't made. This issue needs to be part of senior management's achievement plans so it becomes central business—a priority."

Heenan says potential female candidates for senior positions need not be turned off by perceptions that these jobs are a 22-hour day responsibility. "I learnt that the job wasn't as hard as I thought it was, that you didn't have to stay at school from eight in the morning to 10 at night. It was okay to have a balance.

"I don't think I work the long hours I did when I was a leading teacher. Yes, the decisions I make now take a lot more thinking through, because the buck stops with me. But the flexibility I have in not trying to balance a classroom component with a leadership role means that if I can't do it today, it can probably wait until tomorrow."

More recently debate has turned its focus on the numbers of male teachers in schools and has misapplied notions of the "feminisation" of the profession. This issue will be further explored in a future edition of the *Australian Educator*.

Diny Slamet is a freelance writer.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) policy on Gender Equity is available at: www.aeufederal.org.au/Policy/GenderEquity2003.pdf

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