

Women in

HIGH

Places

■ Although their numbers are still few, females elected to high-level positions bring unique qualities to job

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER — They make up more than 50% of registered voters, but only a handful are elected to serve in positions of power — either nationally, statewide, or locally.

Yet, when they do, studies say they bring to the job a host of qualities and abilities that are unique to their gender — qualities that are distinct and valuable, and decidedly female.

For women across the country and across the state, climbing the ladder to elected positions remains a rare event. And for Choctaw County, and other areas of the Deep South, the election of women to local offices is even more uncommon.

Yet in the 2006 election, two women were elected to serve in high-level local positions that have traditionally been held by men.

Circuit Clerk Donna Murphy office became the first female to hold the position in the county this year, and with the election of Superintendent of Education Sue Moore, the top education position in the county is now being headed by a woman — only the second to have ever served in that office.

Times have changed since Toreatha Johnson became Superintendent of Education in 1984. From increases in student population to new school facilities to extensive increases in state accountability requirements, the role of superintendent has seen massive changes.

But although the job has changed dramati-



Choctaw Sun photo by Dee Ann Campbell
Superintendent of Education Sue Moore was sworn into office in January, becoming only the 2nd female to hold the position in Choctaw County



Choctaw Sun photo by Tommy Campbell
Donna Murphy became the first women Circuit Clerk when she was sworn into office for this term.

cally, the numbers of women elected to that office have not.

Since the creation of the public school superintendency in the United States in the mid-1800s, few women have held the position. In 1909, Ella Flagg Young became the first woman superin-

tendent of the Chicago public schools, and the first woman to hold the office anywhere in the nation. But the gains of women in the superintendency over the following 70 years have been minimal.

By 1928, still only 1.6% of all superintendents in the country were

women, according to the Center for Women in Politics. Most studies before 1998 report that males constituted more than 90% of all superintendent positions. By 1998, not much had changed. Still only 12% of public school superintendents in the U.S. were women.

Nationally, men still hold more than 80% of all superintendent jobs, yet women comprise about 75% of most school systems' workforces — a fact that has changed relatively little over the past 50 years.

On the state and national level, women in powerful elected positions are still relatively few. Since 1916, 203 women have been elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, and 26 to the U.S. Senate. But eight states have still never elected a woman to the House of Representatives, including Alabama. Another 5 states have never sent a woman to the U.S. Senate.

Today, women make up just over 15% of the members of the U.S. Congress — the highest percentage ever. But since 1789, a total of only 2% of members of Congress have been women.

In Alabama, 28 women have been elected to the state legislature since Hattie Hooker Wilkins became the first female state representative in 1923.

When they do advance to high places, women typically bring a decidedly different approach to leadership, drawing on characteristics such as detail-orientation, the ability to collaborate with others, the ability to multi-task at detailed levels, and a people-oriented view of their jobs. While stereotypical generalizations about gender differences are not always true for either gender, there are some obvious differences

“Research on women in leadership shows a more collaborative style of working.”

-- Dr. Susan Lockwood,
SSA President

between male and female traits that are often evident in leadership positions.

“No doubt both women and men make outstanding superintendents and contribute a great deal to the leadership of K-12 for the state of Alabama,” says Dr. Susan Lockwood, president of the School Superintendents of Alabama (SSA). “Most of what is said that is gender specific are generalizations, and like all generalizations, not a true picture of a particular superintendent or a particular place. Women tend to bring a stronger focus on the instructional program, on the needs of teachers in the classroom, and on working collaboratively with staff and parents. Generally speaking, research on women in leadership shows a more collaborative style of working.”

When it comes to a detailed, people-oriented approach to leadership, local educators see having a woman in the superintendent's chair as an asset for those who work in the school system.

“I believe that women pay attention not just to the big picture but all the little details,” says local teacher Michelle Taylor, who worked closely with Moore's campaign for the superintendent's office last year. “They treat every employee and student as an individual and not as a whole group of people or a company.”

“Women have an innate nurturing instinct, the ability to comfort and support emotionally, organizational skills, the ability to multitask, and the natural ability to help others see and bring out the best in themselves,” adds Dr. Dana Rolison, School Improvement Specialist for the county school system.

By nature, there are definite and obvious personality differences between men and women that affect leadership styles in certain situations in particular. In times of transition, for example — whether in a local school system, at the state level, or in the national legislature — women are often more inclined to collaborate with others and lean toward a ‘shared decision-making’ style of leadership.

That style of leadership may, in the case of women superintendents, come from a long list of experiences at all levels of the school system. Most women who become superintendents have taught for significantly more years than have the men who make their way to the top position. Almost 60% of women who become superintendents have at least 5 or more years of experience in the classroom, compared to less than 40% of men.

Both men and women superintendents often see their primary focus as instruction and curriculum. Both also considered the ability to maintain organizational relationships, interper-

sonal skills and responsiveness to community groups as being important.

But women superintendents report more professional development activities in preparation for such issues — in particular, in the development of curriculum and instruction. For example, 73% of women superintendents regularly participate in curriculum development and leadership workshops compared to 39% of men.

There are, however, feminine personality traits that can often be detrimental to the careers of women in high places. Psychologists who study personality traits see women as less likely to negotiate for their personal needs and more likely to seek collaboration with others. When it comes to their careers, women are typically less likely to negotiate salaries and contracts, making them less likely to earn salaries as high as those of their male counterparts.

Society itself often plays a role in the struggles of women in high places. Women often struggle with career-long difficulties in trying to simultaneously meet societal expectations for women and fulfill the requirements of high-pressure jobs. Stereotypical gender roles are often used as a basis for questioning the abilities of women in such positions.

For women superintendents of education, for example, some voters might question a women's competence in areas that were non-instructional, such as finances and athletics.

According to Women in the Superintendency (copyright 2006 by Joyce A. Dana and Diana M. Bourisaw), “when women do exercise authority or behave in competitive or directive ways, they may receive negative evaluations because they have violated the feminine stereotype.”

However, with stereotypes of women's roles becoming less pronounced, women like Moore and Murphy may be joined by larger numbers of other women who hold such positions. Advances for women in high-level administrative roles may be changing dramatically in the coming years.

While men have dominated the field of educational administration, for example, there has been an increase in female enrollment in graduate programs in educational administration. Women have been entering educational administration degree programs in increasing numbers since the 1970s, and now make up over half of enrollments in such programs.

With the myriad of positive character traits brought to high-level positions by women, and gradually more females seeking and gaining elected position on a national, state, and local level, the playing field may be leveling for women in high places.

Bridal 2007

The Choctaw Sun

LOOK FOR OUR
Bridal Special Section
DUE OUT
MARCH 2007!

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADVERTISE IN THIS SECTION,
PLEASE CONTACT ASHLEY DOWNING AT 251-843-6397

7314@SUN07