

INTRODUCTION

I recently received a text from a former doctoral student, now serving as an assistant superintendent: “Dr. Ryder, did you hear? Another female superintendent was just let go by the board. That makes three in the last six months.”

That message, like many before it, lingered with me, a reflection of the hard truth that for women in leadership, earning the position is often just the beginning of the uphill battle to keep it.

As a university professor and chair of the Organizational Leadership Program, I serve as a study advisor to doctoral candidates as they research and write their dissertations. While I support students exploring a variety of topics, many of my female students choose to focus on the unique challenges faced by women in educational leadership.

Almost every dissertation includes the same disheartening statistics about how challenging it still is for women to rise and remain in top educational leadership roles. And nearly all of them reference Eliza Flagg. Mine did too, over twenty years ago.

Eliza Flagg was one of the earliest known female school superintendents in the U.S., appointed in 1857 in New York. Despite her groundbreaking role over 160 years ago, the percentage of women in superintendent positions remains disproportionately low. In many ways, the barriers she faced still exist—political scrutiny, gender bias, and job insecurity continue to challenge today’s women leaders in education (Blount, 1998).

Then come the grim statistics.

Women comprised just 9% of superintendents in 1910. By 1930, the number had risen slightly to 11%, but it fell again in 1950, and by 1971, it had reached a low of just 13%. Fast forward to 2025—after all the advocacy and effort—women still hold only 28% of superintendent roles (American Association of School Administrators (2025).

Now, contrast that with the teaching force. In 1999, 75% of teachers were women. By the 2020–21 school year, this figure had increased to 77%. While more recent data for 2025 is not yet available, the trend suggests a gradual increase in the proportion of female teachers over time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

The disparity is glaring. But here's the truth— despite the odds, women persist. We persist in climbing the ladder to become school superintendents, often with little guidance and even less support. Along the way, we learn to overcome self-sabotage, master effective communication, build our personal brands, and conquer our fears. We apply for a job, get it, and then show up on day one, only to suffer through Impostor Syndrome.

I remember my first day as superintendent. I picked up the phone and called my mentor, one of the women featured in this book.

“Hi,” I said, “I’m sitting at my desk here in Fresno County. Two of my assistant superintendents wanted this job, and they’ve made it clear they’re not happy I got it. Honestly, I feel like I landed this job by fluke.”

She laughed gently and said, “Any chance you’re wearing a black suit?”

“Of course,” I replied.

“Then get up from your desk, walk around the district, meet people, and act like you’ve been doing this for years. Before long, you’ll believe it yourself.”

It worked—at least for a while.

Eventually, the Impostor Syndrome faded, but the real work began. The man who once held my job made it clear he wasn't exactly cheering for my success. During the search process, he openly lobbied the board to hire his assistant superintendent. This local favorite was married to the high school football coach, whose father had just happened to have the district's new stadium named after him. His message was loud and clear: I didn't belong here, and they picked the wrong woman.

Then came the surprise: “Our new football stadium will open at Homecoming,” the board told me—in September. It was July. A quick visit to the site revealed that the stadium was nowhere near finished—at least a year behind schedule. Someone had overlooked a rather

significant detail that no one had ever mentioned. The board was upset and seemed to think this oversight was my fault.

On my second day on the job, the new HR director visited me. He'd been promoted by the previous superintendent from middle school principal to Human Resource Director just before I arrived. In fact, the outgoing superintendent had filled nearly every cabinet-level position in the weeks leading up to my start.

This man sat in my office for nearly two hours—his version of a welcome was a warning. “They don’t hire outsiders here,” he said. “You’re going to have to learn the Central Valley way.”

On day three, a Saturday, I was alone in my rental home. My husband wouldn’t be joining me for a few more weeks as we relocate from Huntington Beach to Fresno—quite a transition. I didn’t know anyone in Fresno County and had no connection with the educational community.

Then the doorbell rang.

A young woman stood there, holding a foil-covered plate of cookies.

“Hi,” she said. “I’m Sumer, the assistant principal at Riverbluff Elementary School. I live two streets over. I heard you just moved in and thought you might like a hand.”

Startled but touched, I invited her in.

We talked. I mentioned how hard it was adjusting to the heat and how much I missed the coastal breeze. I asked Sumer if she could look at my wardrobe and help me find something more Central Valley-friendly. She immediately gained my trust—not because of anything grand, but because of her smile, the cookies, and the genuine way she seemed to care about my success.

She told me she was thrilled that I was the first female superintendent in the district. She was excited to work for a woman leader. Oh, I liked her already. She was a kindred spirit, sharing a belief in lifting women up.

That moment has stayed with me for over a decade.

She reminded me that we are never truly alone—not when we stand in solidarity.

Solidarity among women is both strength and strategy. When we rise together, we stay standing.

So here's the sobering truth—despite decades of advocacy, the percentage of female superintendents has barely budged in over 100 years.

And yet,

We persist.

We show up to one another's homes with cookies.

We take phone calls from women who feel like they got the job by accident.

We write books about how to get the job, how to stay in the job, and how to want the job—even when we doubt ourselves.

We lift each other up. That's how we do it.

This book is for every woman who's thinking about leadership. Maybe you're one of the 83% of female teachers ready for the next step. Perhaps you're a principal eyeing the superintendency. Or maybe you're already in the chair, trying to survive the whirlwind.

If even one story in this book makes your journey easier, we've done our job.

Packed with real talk, practical advice, and hard-earned wisdom, this book offers mentorship through the voices of retired superintendents. We're storytellers, yes, but more importantly, we're mentors who've lived it, led it, and learned from it. Think of this book as a fireside chat, a field guide, a blueprint for success.

And maybe—just maybe—the stories you find here will be the “cookies” of encouragement you didn't even know you needed.

Dr. Marilou Ryder

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