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## What Elementary School Administrators Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Utah Girls

**UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP Project**

Utah is full of engaged, passionate individuals who frequently ask the question, “What can I personally and/or professionally do to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women?” To provide answers to that question, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP)** hosted a series of “think tank” gatherings to collect best practices for various stakeholders interested in supporting and empowering Utah girls and women.

This idea sheet is based on a 2019 gathering of 25 elementary school principals and other administrators who met to discuss ways they can support girls in Utah, both in educational success and in many other areas of life.

### CULTURE & AWARENESS

Elementary administrators play an important role in influencing the overall culture in their schools, including educating stakeholders on the challenges and opportunities common among school girls in Utah. Administrators can recognize, evaluate, and even shape the cultural messages that affect female students by doing the following:

- Emphasize higher education and lifelong learning for all students from an early age (e.g., kindergartners could receive a bracelet showing their college graduation year; teachers and staff could wear/display their own college clothing and gear).
- Encourage girls to dream big while providing the information they need to begin planning for the future; help them develop both a vision and potential pathways for achieving their goals.
- Be deliberate in creating a culture of universal respect, regardless of gender or any other factor.
- Share research and best practices surrounding gender dynamics in school settings; identify when it is best to have mixed-gender groups and when single-gender groups are more conducive to learning and growth.
- Prioritize frequent, open conversations with faculty and staff about challenges specific to girls, including cultural norms that may be limiting or negative; this will raise awareness and give occasions to brainstorm and problem solve.
- Pay attention to gender assumptions/stereotypes in every day conversations; without making accusations, draw attention to such comments and encourage new ways of envisioning and communicating.
- Identify and eliminate meaningless gender distinctions (e.g., girls are equally capable of putting up chairs).
- Assess curricular materials for gender bias/stereotypes and replace materials that are problematic; examine dress code and other behavioral guidelines to spot unfair gender biases.
- Look for chances to discuss important issues surrounding girls' education with the entire school community: PTA meetings, assemblies, daily announcements, and parent nights.
- Ensure students see diverse role models (gender, race/ethnicity, religion, etc.) at assemblies, as guest speakers, and in other settings.
- Highlight accomplishments, credentials, and endorsements of teachers, which will elevate the status of these professionals (the majority of whom are women).
- Work to diversify representation on school community councils, PTA boards, and similar groups (by gender and other factors). These organizations can model for students the value that comes from including a range of voices and experiences.

## PROGRAMS & ACTIVITIES

Elementary administrators can choose from a wide variety of programs and activities that complement classroom instruction. Through careful consideration, they can maximize the benefit of these programs for all students:

- Take advantage of existing community programs, both girl-only and mixed group (e.g., Girl Scouts, Girls on the Run, Expanding Your Horizons, Hope Squad, Lego League, STEAM fairs, robotics).
- Evaluate current extracurricular programs (including costs, gender balance, and variety) and see what adjustments could be beneficial; ensure certain groups aren't being excluded; help all students recognize and see potential in the options available.
- Consider various types of student leadership, including traditional student councils, "house" system leadership, and leadership clubs; offer training and find ways to ensure opportunities for both girls and boys to lead.
- Hold college fairs, host visits from higher education institutions, and visit nearby campuses, where practical, to foster girls' excitement about college.
- Plan career exploration activities, including diverse presenters from a wide variety of fields, that incorporate curricular elements (e.g., how they use math in their jobs) to connect school to future life.
- Leverage innovative technologies to benefit all students, while being judicious in their use.

## CAPACITY BUILDING

Girls start developing lifelong learning skills, as well as other core competencies, from very early ages. Elementary administrators can use the following strategies to facilitate capacity building in girls:

- Explicitly support the notion of a "growth" versus a "fixed" mindset, praising effort and risk-taking over perfect results.
- Include instruction in emotional intelligence, communication skills, character education, social skills, and conflict resolution, in addition to the standard academic curriculum.
- Give girls the opportunity to imagine, design, and build; facilitate the chance to learn the satisfaction that comes from hard work and delayed gratification.
- Create opportunities for girls to find and use their voices, including public speaking and presenting.
- Identify key drop-off points in interest and achievement for girls in specific subjects (e.g., math and science); commit necessary resources and focus on reducing this decline.
- Find ways for girls to interact with and learn from successful adult women, including those filling both private and public roles.
- Be proactive in understanding and mitigating the negative effects of social media on self-image, self-scrutiny, and confidence, as well as mental health concerns. Help girls develop the ability to use technology effectively and recognize when it is better to step away.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

One of the most influential roles played by administrators comes in mentoring and training teachers. Girls will benefit as teachers and other staff participate in targeted professional development:

- Ensure staff members receive training in unconscious bias, differences between girls' and boys' development and learning styles, and the negative effects of gender biases in language and other stereotypes.
- Make gender considerations an ongoing part of school improvement plans and examine key performance metrics by gender to identify and remedy gaps.
- Train teachers in the effective use of praise (e.g., praising effort and grit rather than outcome or appearances).
- Help teachers understand the importance of pointing girls toward education and economic self-reliance, as demographic shifts dictate this will be critical for many girls as they become adults.
- Advocate for on-site childcare to attract and retain successful female teachers.
- Encourage top performing women to advance into supervisory roles at school, district, and state levels.

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Finally, elementary administrators know that their influence extends beyond the walls of their schools. Principals and other leaders can advocate for their female students by doing the following:

- Engage parents in critical conversations about their daughters' academic success, future educational options, and potential career pathways. Recognizing that parents will vary widely in their level of engagement, find ways to partner and best meet girls' needs.
- Gather and share resources to help bolster girls' educational success; ensure students and parents have access to all available tools and support.
- Inform key stakeholders about existing education and achievement gaps between genders and enlist support in addressing these challenges from both school and community partners (e.g., higher education, business, nonprofit, and government).

## CONCLUSION

Girls spend a good portion of their formative years in elementary school, and principals and other administrators play an important role. As administrators become more aware of the specific challenges faced by Utah girls, they can proactively engage their entire school communities in working toward solutions and positive change. By so doing, elementary administrators can be a powerful force in assuring the increased success of Utah girls, not just in their educational pursuits, but in all aspects of their lives.

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