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Mary, Martha, and educational governance

Political scientists use the Biblical distinction between Mary and Martha to suggest starkly contrasting types of leadership — the charismatic or romantic v. the commonplace or functional. This paper applies this idea to a contemporary woman in educational administration.

The Biblical Mary is deep, intense, looking for holy perfection. She has a riveting way of talking, a capacity for stress, a rare spirit that Christ honors when visiting her family. Mary's self-effacing and unconventional actions of devotion to others thrusts her into a public place alone and brings her severe criticism. Her sister Martha lives more on the surface of things, attending excellently to domestic service, sometimes with a fussiness however that burdens her household's guests. Martha's sense of moral superiority over her sister earns her a rebuke from Christ.¹ And in modern politics, a Mary is said to focus hope in crisis, to meet issues head-on, to insist on principle, to articulate moral outrage. Heroically, she saves the state. But most of the business of government is handled by the Marthas, the moderate mechanics who patiently satisfy grievances, reconcile interests, maintain institutions, keep the wheels oiled.² It is considered unusual to find qualities of each united in one person. Is it likely, for example, that one wartime leader simultaneously could have had the incandescence of a Churchill and the diplomacy of an Eisenhower? Could one Quebecer combine the fire of a Levesque with the cool poise of a Bourassa?

Barbara A. Sizemore, the visionary and meticulous superintendent of schools in Washington, D.C., embodies both kinds of qualities.

In a city where dropout rates have reached crisis proportions, Mrs. Sizemore has been something of a stouthearted and dynamic Mary in public since her appointment in October, 1973. She has generated much discussion among laymen by calling for the reorganization of all public schools so that children of different ages could help each

other in the same classroom. She has urged the establishment of specialized schools for the performing arts and the sciences. She has advocated greater emphasis on mathematics and the introduction of a history and literature that better reflect her nation's multicultural past. Knowing that even less ambitious curricular reforms advanced by her predecessors have failed, Mrs. Sizemore has tried to get a bold conversation going, to give heightened expression to the possibility that disruptive, frustrated, and hard-to-reach youngsters can be salvaged, that schools in the District of Columbia can be models of urban education.

She also has revealed a careful Martha dimension, engaging in many trivial courtesies and signs of respect as she church-hops on Sundays, interacting with members of different congregations, not with perfunctory handshakes but by putting a few friendly words of encouragement in the ears of anyone who seeks her out. Weekdays, she may testify about the specifics of budgets or personnel ceilings before Congressional committees or she may visit classrooms, learning about resources that need to be attended to, attempting to bridge and meld habits of thought among groups as diverse as teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, custodians, and students. Her very visible "constituency work" has been enough to let school people know that their chief administrator appreciates their accomplishments and understands their difficulties.

With the eye for organizational routines and procedures of a Martha, she has been keen on adjusting and coordinating the components of her bulky bureaucracy. She has introduced the administrative-team concept to promote more collaboration and less hierarchical differentiation among the 14,000 members of the schools' staffs. In conferences with members of her own team, Mrs. Sizemore exhibits a commitment to democratic leadership: rather than striving to solve a problem herself, she tries to channel the energies of her associates into plans for cooperative efforts. Thus, her high-profile public image — assertive, positive, direct, action-oriented, and cutting to those who do not catch the ray of her thought or who disagree — differs markedly from her low-key managerial style, where she listens a great deal, shows consideration for others' ideas, recapitulates others' conclusions, and attempts to serve as a broker among factions.

The greatest turbulence connected with her incumbency has come from her Mary-like resistance to the subcontracting of instructional services to private organizations. For instance, she has opposed the renewal of a \$150,000 contract with the Friends of the District of Columbia Youth Orchestra, a nonprofit enterprise which provides training for students who aspire to chairs in symphony orchestras; often these students come from vastly richer and predominantly

white school systems *outside* the District. The majority of the members of her Board of Education have opted to continue providing the only public support for this Youth Orchestra, valuing it as a high-quality musical experience in an interracial setting. Yet since the students in the District's schools are virtually all black and predominantly low income, Mrs. Sizemore has strenuously questioned the propriety of so supporting a program that favors only a few students, especially when an over-representation of them are affluent whites, and from other systems to boot. Further, her schools have extremely limited material resources and far to go in development, prompting her to regard this aid as duplicating services that her schools already are geared to provide. So she has publicly repudiated the votes of those Board members who were responsible for extending the Youth Orchestra's funding. The bellicosity of her attack evoked criticism from those Board members, who almost brought charges of insubordination against her. But Mrs. Sizemore saw herself as taking a strongly principled position on behalf of lower-class blacks who had been deprived of \$150,000 of Board support. In a sense, she was not just acting as the manager of her system but as its head teacher, reminding other blacks that they can stand up fiercely to perceived injustices.

As the ranking professional in a big-city system, Mrs. Sizemore is a special case, an unanticipated contradiction to the general pattern of male domination in educational governance.³ If she can continue to mix her Mary and Martha qualities successfully in her job, she may become more than an interesting exception to a rule. Her example may help persuade publics elsewhere that other women are equipped to fill the crusading and the bureaucratic demands of high-level positions in schools.

FOOTNOTES

1. The sisters appear in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. For an interpretation, see *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Chicago: Harvard-Severance Company, 1915, pp. 2000-06.
2. See for instance, Ferdinand Mount, *The Theater of Politics*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972, pp. 125-29.
3. For analyses and data on why women are so grossly under-represented in principalships and central-office posts, see Joan D. Meskin, "The Performance of Women School Administrators — A Review of the Literature," *Administrator's Notebook*, Vol. XXIII, No. 1. Also see, Gerald Moeller and W. W. Charters, "Relation of Bureaucratization to Sense of Power among Teachers," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 10 (1966), p. 457.