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Case Study in the Power of Collaboration: Planning Process for the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute

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Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much. – Helen Keller

Systematic statewide support for the recruitment, development, and retention of quality leaders in schools and school districts was not a new idea in Kansas in late 2010, but at best it was at an elusive concept. Diverse groups had considered it among components of a long-range commitment to move Kansas education quality from good to great, but no plan for creating such a system was in place. What, then, would make the difference when another round of vision-makers gathered? The author presents the case that it was a strong sense of *collaboration* that made the difference and stimulated movement from vision making to implementation of a system to provide for support of educational leadership.

A spirit of collaboration had been building in Kansas over time. This was a state that had been focusing on improving student learning long before *No Child Left Behind* mandates were introduced, and various agencies and professional organizations had hosted conversations about the role of the state in providing the educational leadership needed for the 21st Century. The importance of quality leadership was becoming a shared value among diverse stakeholder groups, but the system was not changing.

The work of an 18-member commission created in July 2007, the Kansas Education Leadership Commission (KELC), illustrates the point. KELC was a partnership among government, public education, and private industry. Its membership was broad-based and represented the diverse size and geographic location of school districts, educational philanthropy, state administrator professional organizations, and administrator preparation programs. It included chairs of state governing bodies for K-12 and higher education systems, the president of the state teachers' association, two state legislators, a member of the governor's staff, and leaders from the private business sector. An educator and a private sector member co-chaired the Commission and funding for the work

came from the Wallace Foundation, the Kansas Health Foundation, and the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE). Dr. Joseph F. Murphy, Professor of Education, Department of Leadership, Policy & Organizations, Vanderbilt University, was engaged as facilitator of the Commission's work and authored the final recommendations based on the work of its members.

The Commission spent 10 months working on its charge: to develop a set of policy recommendations for the design, implementation, and improvement over time of a system of leadership for learning in Kansas. In May 2008, leaders of KELC presented 12 recommendations to the Kansas State Board of Education. Three of the Commission's recommendations involved a systematic approach to direct support for educational leadership (KELC, 2008, p. 14):

Recommendation 9: Construct and fund leadership initiatives to provide continuing education programs for school leaders.

Recommendation 10: Rebuild the induction program for school leaders across the first two years on the job including crafting policy to support the development of model programs.

Recommendation 11: Emphasize the importance of coaching to the professional development of school leaders.

The Kansas State Board of Education accepted the recommendations, but again, no plan for implementation was put in place. A year and a half later, pilots were underway to assess three principal mentoring models. While the opportunity to examine existing models was a step forward, a very small number of principal mentors were being trained and the number of new principals receiving the mentoring support was insignificant compared to the number of principals statewide. Further, there was little prospect of any funding beyond the three-year grant providing that mentor training. Nothing of lasting significance had been done related to mentoring of district superintendents. Again, agreement on a vision produced no large-scale change to the system in place.

However, the influence of the KELC work had not completely ended. Two years later, five district superintendents attended a weeklong seminar on mentoring new leaders at Harvard University. That fall the director of state licensure convened a small group of educational leaders to participate in a conversation exploring a state and possible national center supporting educational leadership. Those invited to the discussion were thoughtfully selected to determine if there was interest in establishment of a center supporting leadership, statewide and possibly beyond. The short list included top state department staff charged with implementing state policy on licensing school and district administrators, the Associate Dean of Education and Department Chair of educational leadership from a state research university, and executive leaders from the three major state professional organizations that represented school boards, school administrators, and civic leadership. University participants in the conversation were selected based on the strong leadership programs at that university, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and because of the leadership department's reputation for and experience

with collaborating with others. Those receiving the invitation may not have expected a different result, but they did observe this was bringing together a different mix of stakeholders.

The meeting included a discussion of benefits of such a system; connecting theory and practice; collaboration as innovation; research from others such as Ohio, Delaware, and the Alliance to Reform Educational Leadership; the connection to licensure renewal; engaging the community/business ties; and building leadership capacity. Those present quickly identified three points of shared commitment: 1) Post-licensure programs supporting the development of leadership were absent in Kansas; 2) Mentoring and induction programs should include introducing new leaders to functions and operations of the state board of education, the legislature, and professional organizations, and the development of advanced skills for writing/affecting policy issues; 3) Education leaders, particularly at the district level, need access to opportunities for professional growth in leadership and for a safe place to talk and network. Timing for this exploration was advantageous because a revision of state standards for leadership was scheduled to begin soon. The state's willingness to be an active partner was essential because any change would have to be compatible with state license policy regarding initial licenses and renewal of professional licenses for school administrators. The state department staff proposed the state's role was looking for active partners. In response to the invitation for collaboration, those attending agreed to engage a broader-based group of stakeholders in the conversation.

The Kansas State University College of Education and its Department of Educational Leadership committed support for such a leadership center, continuing a long-established and recognized practice of collaboration, innovation, and partnerships. Within a few weeks of the proposal discussion with KSDE, the Department Chair had secured the full support of the Dean of the College of Education and the pledged involvement of the entire department faculty. The College of Education agreed to provide space and administrative support, including a part-time executive director-like individual who would provide regular and systematic organization, support, and leadership. There were still major unknowns—uncertainty of funding sources for one, but the passion supporting the common goal and the collective belief in the power of collaboration provided the impetus for moving forward.

Invitation to others to join the initiative

To move the positive reception in the first conversation forward, the KSDE Director and the KSU Associate Dean agreed to co-chair an initiative seeking systematic support for educational leadership and issued an invitation to key leaders in the education community to further discuss the development of an Executive School Leadership Center in Kansas for both practicing executive leaders and aspiring school leaders. Those willing to attend would be considered the steering committee, so selecting whom to invite was critical. Others joining the KSDE and university leaders who had attended the first small group meeting, included the president and past president of the professional association representing school superintendents and the chairperson of a committee

appointed by that organization to identify a quality mentoring/induction program for first year superintendents. Chief executive officers from the school boards association, the united school administrators organization, and a center supporting civic leadership; plus two practicing superintendents and the five superintendents who had attended the Harvard seminar on mentoring at state department expense completed membership of the planners group. Wording of the invitation was carefully chosen to emphasize the common values and goals already identified. The initiative was described as an effort to form a collaborative relationship between KSDE, KSU, and the leading professional organizations representing district superintendents and school boards to unify support efforts.

The search for partners was expanding. To frame the conversation, research-based materials were distributed in advance to those planning to attend. Information was sent to provide background material on the concept of a centralized approach to supporting leadership. (Fullan, 2008; NASBE, 2009; Wallace Foundation, 2010; Miller, Devin & Shoop, 2005).

The first discussion item at the meeting exposed the shared interests of the 16 leaders assembled. Individuals were asked to respond to the question, "What are you looking for (from this initiative)?" Their responses fell into six general categories: mentoring (5), partnerships and networking (4), professional growth opportunities beyond mentoring (4), succession model (1), standards revision (1), and enhancing civic leadership (1). The group noted the connectedness of the expectations, reinforcing the need and the opportunity for working together to make a difference. Framework of a leadership center could include, but not be limited to, leadership preparation programs, mentoring, and induction as well as professional growth opportunities for veteran school leaders. Other agenda items included opportunities for the university staff to share examples or partnership experiences and for those attending the Harvard executive leadership seminar to review that experience and to report outcomes from committees formed to share important information with district leaders across the state. The intent of these agenda items was to pull together outcomes from efforts of the individual entities and use these collectively to move the idea of a leadership center forward. A collaborative leadership style was apparent as brainstorming for planning this initiative got underway.

One superintendent offered that such a center for leadership would be a flagship for providing growth for all educational leaders. A state department staff member added the need to think systemically, addressing both content and context, and another superintendent described such a center as a catalyst for developing continuous improvement among educational leaders, stretching them beyond comfort zones. There was consensus that a center for leadership could support new leaders, support current leaders, and attract new people into the system. Ultimately impact would spread to student performance, school boards, superintendents, principals, and would build leadership capacity throughout the educational system. It was evident the group shared a common commitment to the concept; now the challenge was to find a workable plan of implementation. This would be a test of the power of collaboration they hoped to maintain.

In the next weeks, the co-chairs assigned each participant to one of three working subgroups. Again, collaboration was supported by thoughtful assignments; each subgroup was representative of the make-up of the larger group. Subgroups were to address specific charges as follows:

- a. *Professional learning*—Develop themes/strands/format for a professional development leadership institute.
- b. *Mentoring*—Identify a research-based mentoring plan for new superintendents.
- c. *Enterprise (structure/governance)*—Address priorities, timeline, and funding.

A current superintendent chaired each subgroup, reinforcing the connection between any implementation plan and field practice where the work occurs. The next meeting was set just five weeks away and each subgroup was to meet independently before then to prepare a report to share at that time. Given that period included the winter holiday season, the schedule would test participants commitment to the initiative.

Subgroups report on their work

The second whole group meeting was in a time slot during the annual statewide conference for district leaders, in keeping with the spirit of collaboration. As subgroups reported, overlapping topics revealed both similar and varying approaches to issues, but collaborative attitudes continued. The professional development subgroup was first to present its work:

- *Timeline*: Priority for professional development (beyond mentoring/induction of first year leaders) would target practicing superintendents in the first year.
- *Content*: Six areas of leadership responsibility were proposed as the framework for professional development programming for a leadership center: Vision/Goal Setting, Effective Resource Management, Superintendent/Board relations, Curriculum/Instruction/Assessment, Parent/Community Relationships, and Developing Leadership/Succession Planning.
- *Action*: Survey practicing superintendents and use the results to address guiding questions:

- 1) What are current problems/issues for school administrators? (Consider needs based on experience of leaders and demographics of districts;
- 2) What offerings are currently available (from professional organizations, agencies, etc.) and how can they be coordinated to provide effective professional development;
- 3) What additional support is needed to address problems/issues and to balance growth opportunities in the six areas of professional responsibility for leaders;
- 4) Where is the expertise needed to provide the professional development programming needed?

→ *Immediate action the committee proposes to undertake*: Conducting a survey of practicing superintendents to address the guiding questions.

Second, the Enterprise subgroup reported on its progress:

- **Priorities:** Professional development of both new and experienced leaders is the priority; programming should begin with superintendent mentoring. The proposed university position should be given specific responsibilities for coordination and training of mentors and others.
- **Timeline:** Proceed with hiring of the university position, hire two mentors and provide content and philosophy training to ensure consistency, work with stakeholder groups to schedule six professional development learning sessions during the year, assign mentors and hold the first professional learning session prior to the start of the new school year.
- **Funding:** The Kansas State College of Education should dedicate faculty responsibilities to the coordination duties and provide office space and meeting space. Funding is still needed for compensating mentors and general operations.
- **Other:** Create an advisory board to provide guidance (not governance) that is representative of the partners involved in the planning and representative of the demographics of Kansas school districts. Provide a monthly checklist/newsletter for new leaders. If funding for hiring mentors is not available, consider using practicing superintendents as mentors.

The third subgroup presented a PowerPoint describing a mentoring program for new superintendents. Their proposal was built on the work of a superintendents' association committee in place the past year that had been working on design of such a program and on activities from the Harvard Institute that five superintendents had attended the summer before. The sub-group's presentation was grounded in research and practice and based on a collaborative partnership involving the state department of education, the college of education, civic leadership center and the state professional associations respectively representing school boards and administrators.

- **Role of the Mentor**— providing support by phone, email and on-site, participating in the evaluation of the mentoring program, and assisting in preparation and delivery of professional development sessions.
- **Requirements for mentors**— Success as a Kansas superintendent and completion of mentor training.
- **Timeline**— Year 1: Focus on mentoring. Year 2: Add advanced seminar series.

At the conclusion of the discussion, each subgroup agreed to accept a continuing assignment to be completed for the next session. Enterprise would prepare drafts of a vision statement, an organizational chart, an official name, a suggested logo, an update on the university job search, and recommendations related to needed changes in language in existing regulations. The professional development subgroup would prepare and administer the survey of current superintendents, analyze results, and prepare a recommendation related to programming for professional growth of leaders. Mentoring would prepare job descriptions, a timeline for mentor/mentee interaction, and describe training needs of mentors. All members would reflect on what words should be defined and

what additions to the timeline were needed. The subgroups would have two months to complete assignments before the next whole group meeting. Subgroups were to share work so connections would be in place and final decisions for taking action steps could be put in place at the next meeting.

Final planning session concludes with a decision for action

In the intervening period, members of each subgroup met as needed to continue the work. Perhaps because each group included representatives from all of the major partners participating in the conversation, communication across groups was exceptionally effective and when the whole group reassembled, it was ready to take action. At the final whole group meeting of the planners, the mentoring subgroup presented a description of an ideal mentoring program for superintendents, including definitions of terms; points of emphasis; job descriptions; and components of mentor training based on the Harvard Leadership plan. The professional development subgroup shared results of the survey of all Kansas superintendents, based on a 49% response rate across the 284 Kansas superintendents. Table 1 is a brief summary of results of the subgroup's survey, showing the top two choices for professional development from the six broad categories of leadership responsibility, by years of experience.

Table 1 | Results of a 2011 survey of practicing superintendents ranking professional development needs in 6 areas of leadership responsibility

Experience	First Choice Category	Second Choice Category
1 Year	Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment	Developing Leadership/ Effective Resource Management/ Vision (3-way tie)
2-4 Years	Effective Resource Management	Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment
5-10 Years	Effective Resource Management	Developing Leadership
10-15 Years	Effective Resource Management	Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment
15-20 Years	Effective Resource Management	Parent Community Relations/ Vision, Goal Setting (tie)
Over 20 Years	Effective Resource Management	Developing Leadership

The same survey also queried respondents on the subsequent descriptors in each of the six broad categories of leadership responsibilities (see Table 2).

The final report was presented by the Enterprise subgroup that proposed the name *Kansas Educational Leadership Institute*. The proposal was specific in describing structure and governance, yet was open to incorporating programming based on work of the other two subgroups. Significant in the proposal was a commitment by the College of Education to make a substantial fiscal investment in the new Institute. The final product of the planning process rested firmly on collaboration among the members and the entities they represented.

Table 2 | Results from a 2011 survey of practicing superintendents regarding descriptors of six broad categories of leadership responsibilities

Experience	Vision/Goal Setting	Effective Resource Management	Superintendent/BOE Relationships	Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment	Parent Community Relations	Developing Leadership
1 Year	Strategic Planning	Budget	Role of Supt. and BOE	Data Analysis/ Guaranteed Viable Curriculum	Partnerships	Team Building/ District Leadership
2-4 Years	Strategic Planning	Budget	Role of Supt. and BOE	Guaranteed Viable Curriculum	Partnerships	Team Building/ District Leadership
5-10 Years	Strategic Planning	Budget	Role of Supt. and BOE	Guaranteed Viable Curriculum	Partnerships	Team Building/ District Leadership
10-15 Years	Monitoring and Evaluate Progress	Time	Communication	Guaranteed Viable Curriculum	Advocacy	Team Building/ District Leadership
15-20 Years	Strategic Planning	Budget	Succession Planning	Guaranteed Viable Curriculum	Advocacy Partnerships (tie)	Succession Planning within Organization
Over 20 Years	Strategic Planning	Human Capital	Role of Supt. and BOE	Guaranteed Viable Curriculum	Advocacy	Team Building/ District Leadership

Major examples of this powerful collaboration included these excerpts from the Enterprise presentation:

- The mission statement: “...to collaborate and share resources to support professional growth of educational leaders needed in Kansas schools for the 21st Century.”
- A Statement of Collaboration At Its Best: *The KELI partners have entered into a collaborative agreement to provide advanced leadership development and mentoring for educational leaders, to be provided in a progressive, safe, and reflective environment. The collaborative calls for: retreats centered on deep learning, onsite mentoring by experienced professional mentors, ongoing support and professional development, expansion to Kansas education leaders at all levels, high quality collaboration for best inputs, and high quality assessment of outcomes.*
- Proposed logo: Six interlaced circles, each one representing the major color taken from the logo of each respective partner.
- Governance structure: Themes of partnership and collaboration that would direct the programs of the leadership institute are described in the figure (at right).

Acceptance of the Enterprise proposal presented on March 30, 2011 produced a partnership across six state organizations/agencies: the Kansas Association of School Boards, the Kansas Center for Leadership, the Kansas School Superintendents Association, the Kansas State Department of Education, the Kansas State University College of Education/Department of Educational Leadership, and the United School Administrators of Kansas.

Figure | Leadership Institute Governance Structure

Level of Responsibility	Membership	Responsibility
Steering Committee 8-10 members based on the partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two KSU representatives appointed by the Dean • One representative appointed by each of the other partners • Two members elected at large from the Advisory Council • Director as ex-officio (non-voting) facilitator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist Executive Director with strategic planning, development and articulation of vision, selection of program offerings and procedures and process to implement Institute programs • Coordinate sharing of partnership resources
Advisory Council 15-20 members depending on number of partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two representatives of each partner except KSSA (6) and USA (3) • 6 Superintendent members adequate to represent district leadership in small, medium, large, rural, urban settings as appointed by KSSA • Director as ex-officio (non-voting) facilitator <p><i>(Revised by St. Com. 5/23/11 and 6/16/11)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide recommendations to Steering Committee and Executive Director • Participate in two-way dialogue regarding vision, priorities, implementation, sharing of resources, and effectiveness of programming • Assist in collaboration between Institute and partners

Representing that partnership, the College of Education proceeded immediately to establish the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute. The Executive Director position was filled and work began to implement the structure and programs of service to educational leaders as outlined by the partners' agreement for the 2011-2012 school year.

Why the outcome was different this time

Planners were asked to share their thoughts on why this time, planning produced action. Responses included:

- "The process was successful because it involved the necessary people to get it off the ground. There were candid conversations about funding, participation, and the outcomes we hoped to achieve. There is never enough communication with a process such as this, but I felt we did a good job of keeping all the organizations involved."
- "I would encourage those interested in creating such a program to seriously consider putting a holistic team together. The success is born from having all the right voices at the table during the process. Careful consideration of the make-up of the planning team will pay great benefits down the road."
- "Our team was strong and very engaged. We collected artifacts and shared them with the larger team and also in a presentation to new superintendents."
- "Strong spirit of collaboration. Everyone saw the vision for what this could be and was excited to contribute."
- "It (the collaboration) was unprecedented."
- "It was critical to have the state department at the table. They are the driver related to program approvals, licensure applications and renewals. However, it is important the field sees (the state department) as more than an enforcer, but a true partner with their best interests in mind."
- "The right people were involved. All had the united passion of supporting Kansas's school leaders. This synergy allowed us to make progress, to value perspectives, and to dialogue freely."
- "The spirit of collaboration is alive and well! The turf wars that so often destroy a project such as this were minimal. The united mission allowed us all to look past what is best for me to what is best for us as we move this initiative forward."

Conclusion

What made the difference when this process began in 2010? DuFour defined collaboration as: "A *systematic* process in which people work together *interdependently*, to analyze and *impact* professional practice in order to improve individual and collective results (2008). Collaboration was the recurring theme throughout the planning process that produced the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute. McREL research on the result of collaboration (McREL, n.d. p.46) defined a *purposeful community* as one with the *collective efficacy* and capability to use *all available assets* to accomplish purposes and produce *outcomes that matter to all* community members

through *agreed upon processes*. The right voices had been invited to this conversation. The connection to the policy role of the state agency was essential, but it was the way everyone involved worked together that made the ultimate difference. The collaboration among the six partners produced a purposeful community that accomplished what other Kansas conversations had failed to do. The result was a structure on its way to being a systematic statewide support for the recruitment, development, and retention of quality leaders in schools and school districts, an outcome that will long matter to all members of the educational community. 📖

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