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The Influence of Mentoring on Developing Leaders: Participants Share Their Perspectives

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Learning requires feedback. When leaders ask, "How am I doing?" they gain valuable insights into how they affect the performance of others. – Kouzes & Posner

Introduction

In an age of continuous and rapid change, today's school superintendents face a litany of unique challenges as they lead individuals and organizations through tumultuous and unpredictable times. Superintendents must be extraordinary leaders, and preparation programs should equip district leaders with the skills necessary to lead their districts toward success. However, without an ongoing and structured mentoring program, superintendents in their first or second year of service may feel overwhelmed as they take on the daunting challenge of leading school districts through the inherent challenges and complexities of the job. Today's superintendent wears many hats and must master a variety of skills. Alan, Robin, William, and Craig (2005) stated, "Educational leaders are required to be knowledgeable not only in traditional areas of organizational management, board and community relations, resource management, and personnel, but increasingly in newer areas of classroom assessment and accountability systems - end quote (p. 77)."

Superintendent mentoring programs may help new administrators bridge the gap between what they enter their new leadership position knowing, and what they need to know in order to grow while on the job. All educational leaders must embrace and model the practice of lifelong learning.

Superintendents have a multitude of opportunities to impact organizations, influence children's lives, and improve entire communities (Houston, 2001). However, the complex responsibilities and stressors of the job may contribute to a high turnover rate that can be destructive to an educational environment. Superintendent longevity has a positive effect on student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006); yet, superintendent turnover rate is not well studied. Nonetheless, Sparks (2012) maintained, "stability at the central office has been linked to a greater likelihood of success for new education initiatives" (p. 2).

Many new superintendents quickly begin to feel out of touch with the day-to-day work of students and teachers as the routine demands related to administrative issues, political challenges, and emergency situations occupy the majority of their time (Hatch & Roegman, 2012). Kouzes and Posner (1995, 2007) described how successful leaders seek out opportunities to improve, innovate, and implement change. Unfortunately, many new district administrators have few opportunities to learn alongside seasoned mentors in the field. Superintendents must continue to learn on the job, but some may be working in isolated silos, miles away from colleagues who are able to identify with the work related challenges.

Moreover, many Kansas superintendents face the challenge of working hundreds of miles from colleagues who wear similar hats and work in comparable roles (see Figure 1). Often the closest professional mentors or peers live hours away, making face-to-face collaborative opportunities rare. Furthermore, many superintendents are simultaneously serving as campus principals and do not have fellow administrators in the district to collaborate with. The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute (KELI) is an organization designed to bridge this mentor/mentee gap through a framework of support intended to help novice school leaders grow and thrive.

Still in its second year of infancy, the KELI organization continues to receive strong, positive feedback from its mentees and mentors. Some second year superintendents stay on with KELI for an additional year of support, confirming the value and importance of a structured plan for developing

educational leaders. KELI's mission to share resources in support of the professional growth of educational leaders in Kansas may serve as a model for other states across the nation. The KELI participants demonstrate collaboration at its best. Through a structured framework, KELI mentors facilitate professional leadership development and significant learning opportunities with their mentees in a safe, reflective, and progressive environment.

Description of Kansas Mentees

In its first year of operation (2011-2012), KELI provided mentoring and induction to 26 first year Kansas superintendents. Thirteen of these first year superintendents held an initial Kansas license. The remaining 13 new superintendents held a professional Kansas license. At the conclusion of KELI's first year of support, all 26 superintendents completed requirements to gain a full professional Kansas license or earn credits towards professional license renewal (see Table 1, p. 26). Superintendents in KELI's cohort one led districts of varying enrollment (e.g., 69% districts with 1,000 students or less, 27% districts with 2,000-7,000 students, and 4% with over 10,000 students).

In 2012-2013 one year later, KELI provided mentoring and induction to 22 first year Kansas superintendents. Nine of the first year superintendents in KELI's second year of support held an initial Kansas license and 13 new superintendents held a professional Kansas license. All mentees in this second cohort were in-line to complete requirements for a full

Figure 1 | Location of 2011-2012 KELI Mentors and Mentees

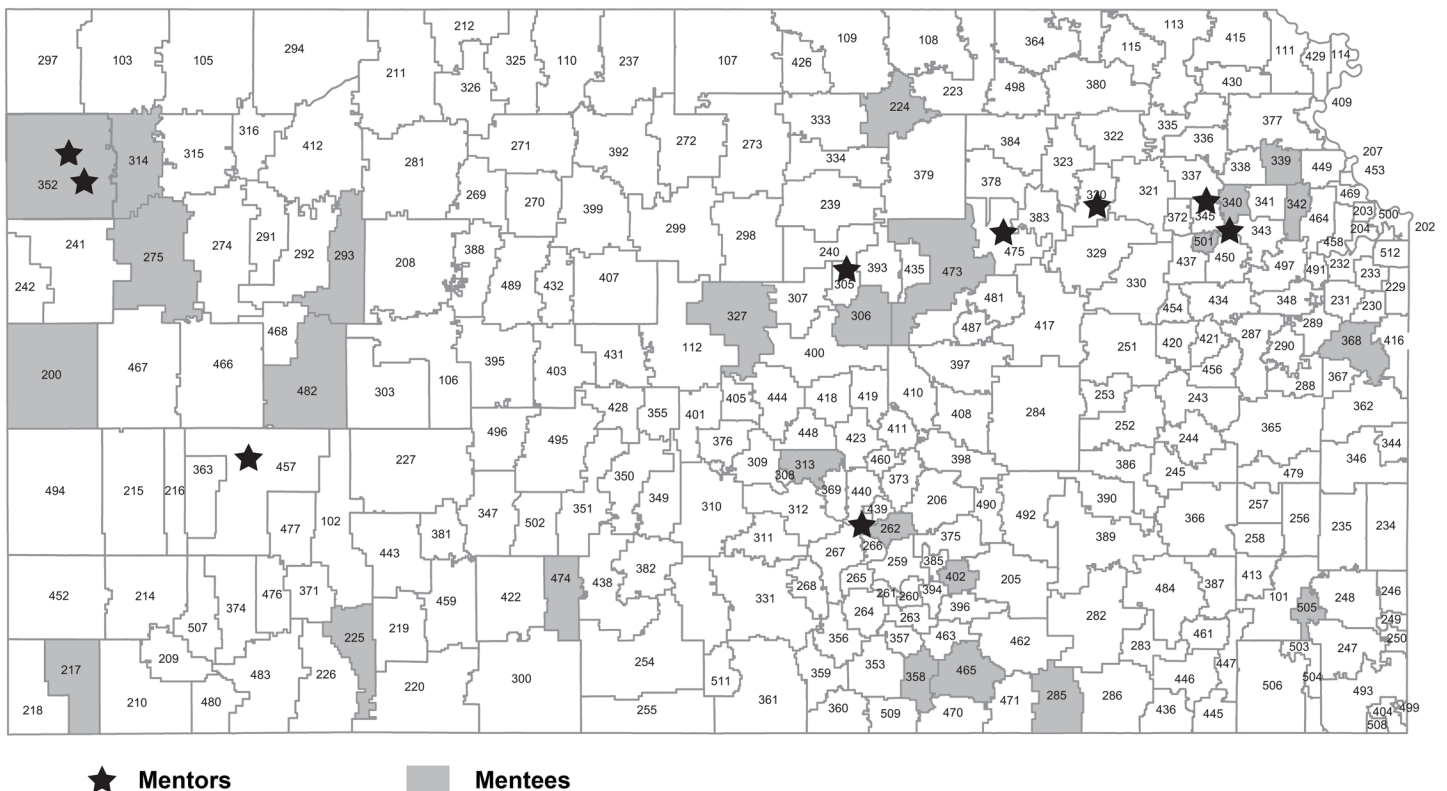
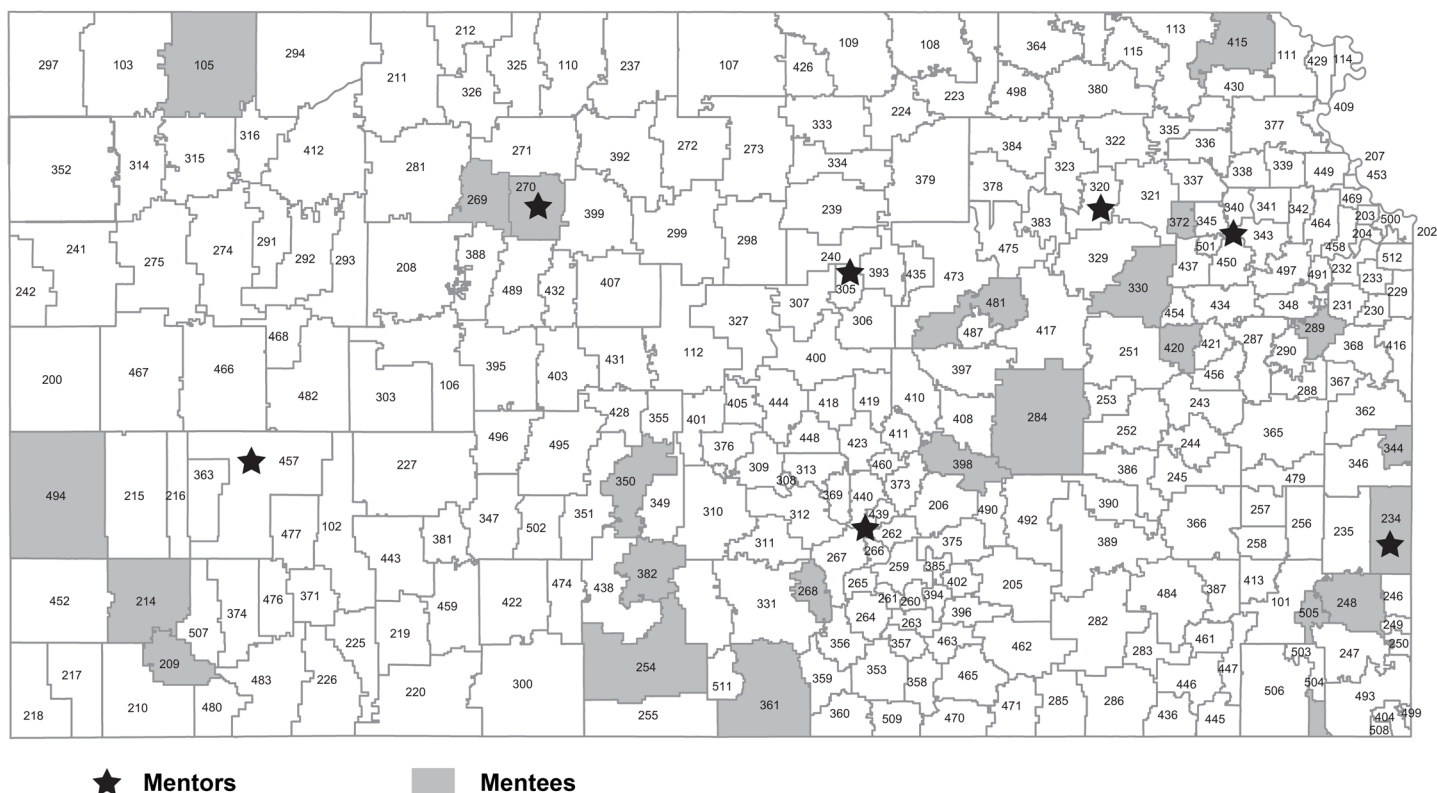


Figure 1 (continued) | Location of 2012-2013 KELI Mentors and Mentees



professional license or earn credits towards license renewal (see Table 1). Superintendents in KELI's cohort two led districts of slightly different enrollment categories (e.g., 82% districts with 1,000 students or less AND 18% districts with 1,000-2,000 students).

Description of Professional Mentors

Nine experienced Kansas superintendents delivered mentoring support to 26 new superintendents in the first operational year of KELI (2011-2012). Two of these superintendents were current practitioners and seven were former superintendents (see Table 2, p. 26). The nine mentors each had a combined average of 13 years of experience. Seven mentors served 22 first year superintendents in 2012-2013 and had a combined average of 15 years experience as a superintendent. As depicted in Table 2, all seven mentors were former Kansas superintendents. However, as recommended in the original program design, KELI was able to avoid staffing practicing superintendents in its second year. This recommendation was based on expectations for mentors working within the overwhelming time demands already placed on sitting district leaders.

KELI secures contracts with qualified mentors to provide support for first year superintendents. The executive director selects the cadre of mentors based on an application process and consideration of an applicant's professional qualifications including experience as a successful Kansas superintendent, executive mentoring/coaching skills, and interest in serving one to five mentees. Geographic proximity to current year mentees is an important and, at times, challenging consid-

eration (see Figure 1). The contractual agreement between KELI and each mentor establishes compensation guidelines. All mentees and mentors complete professional agreements delineating responsibilities, scope of work, and participation requirements.

Program Goals

The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute's mission is to collaborate and share resources to support professional growth of educational leaders needed in Kansas schools for the 21st century. A five-year plan guides the comprehensive planning efforts of KELI's partner-based steering committee. The advisory council's representation consisting of field practitioners forms a second tier in KELI's governance structure. KELI's mentoring and induction program targets mentoring experiences as the primary method of support. The mentoring experience involves veteran superintendents sharing knowledge and skills with novice leaders as the key element bridging the gap between limited support in Kansas and a program rooted in quality processes and research. Mentoring sessions between new leaders and experienced superintendents consist of on-site face-to-face interaction and are critical components of the program. (Initially mentors facilitated two monthly face-to-face sessions but adjusted expectations to one face-to-face session a month to honor the demanding schedules of new superintendents). Mentors agree to submit verification of face-to-face sessions with mentees through a written log.

In 2012-2013, mentors also scheduled an additional coaching phone call to follow-up on important items with mentees

and target questions to encourage deeper reflection. This additional phone contact was piloted and dropped following feedback from mentors that time and mentee needs warranted a more integrated approach. Mentees also had continuous access to the assigned mentor through phone calls or technology-assisted communication. Mentor planning and preparation for each session provided focus, targeted individualized needs, and utilized time effectively.

Quality training for KELI mentors incorporates formal coaching presentations and skill development customized to needs identified by program mentors. Coaching training in Year 1 included two and one-half days designed to build initial understanding of coaching skills and application in the educational leadership setting. In Year 2, coaching training involved one day of support focused on practicing and sustaining coaching skills. The focus and engaged learning provided in these training sessions strengthened the understanding and skill level of mentors. As a part of each training session, mentors also participated in a review of operational procedures, expectations, program design, and networking. These regularly scheduled meetings, planned by the executive director, provided an important resource for mentor learning, feedback, and sharing.

Unique resources and opportunities benefit mentees participating in the KELI program. First year superintendents receive a monthly checklist of timely topics and events composed by practicing superintendents. Checklists outline typical tasks and responsibilities common to the superintendent's role. In 2012-2013, a feature was added to better respond to the needs of smaller-sized school districts. Checklists incorporated topics for new Kansas superintendents leading smaller districts who often have multiple positions and responsibilities embedded in the superintendent's role.

In addition to the monthly checklists, mentors attend two performance demonstrations in the academic year and provide timely feedback to the mentee on their observations. Mentees and mentors typically recognize a local board of education meeting as a critical performance demonstration activity for the new superintendent. Observing a board of education meeting provides the mentor with a first-hand glimpse of superintendent/board relations, important political nuances, and priorities of the district. Furthermore, initial experiences outlined in KELI program requirements include an opportunity to attend key Kansas professional organization and association meetings to increase networking and connections with other leaders. Mentees attend one state board of education meeting and one superintendent organization meeting, culminating the experiences with a narrative reflection of their learning. Mentees also offer a final reflection on their experience as a first year superintendent in May.

Another component of the KELI structure provides the mentee with exposure to deep learning opportunities each spring. In 2012-2013 potential resources for mentees were expanded through required attendance at four training/executive learning sessions to encourage growth and networking. Two meetings included options for new superintendent workshops, regional meetings, and annual conferences. Cohort group meetings and other executive leadership training sessions ful-

fill this requirement. Upon successful completion of the KELI mentoring and induction program, first year superintendents may apply for their professional license or earn credits toward renewal of their professional license. The sending district is also eligible for reimbursement of the \$500 participation fee upon successful program completion.

KELI offers superintendents completing the first year program with an opportunity to participate in an additional year of less intensive support. In this model, KELI mentors formally contact mentees once each quarter. Whenever possible, the original mentor is assigned to continue work with the mentee during Year 2. Additionally, mentees can contact mentors as needed throughout the year. As the focus of these contacts, mentors of second year superintendents help the mentees discover resources to address issues or challenges they face. Second year superintendents continued to receive monthly checklists and are invited to attend KELI cohort sessions and professional learning activities at a reduced rate. Seven of KELI's former first year superintendents enrolled in the second year program.

Participant Perceptions

In January 2013, all mentees and mentors in the KELI program received questionnaires and were asked to share perceptions regarding the program of support offered by KELI. Fifty-one percent (51%) of former mentees/mentors responded to the questionnaire, providing keen insight into participant perceptions. Each group had the opportunity to respond to a total of five open-ended questions of similar emphasis.

The first question posed to KELI mentees and mentors asked them to share their perceptions on how mentoring experiences influenced the professional practice of mentees. Mentoring experiences were defined as face-to-face, on-site observations, and phone contact. In the second question, respondents shared how KELI activities (i.e., professional organization meetings, conferences, and training) and KELI resources (i.e., monthly checklists, research support, and coaching tools) provided a means for reflection on the impact of these activities and resources on mentee professional relationships and work, and mentor skills. In their reflections on the third question, mentees and mentors specifically commented on how involvement in the KELI program guided future thinking, confidence, and leadership preparation. KELI mentees and mentors commented on program activities providing the most help and having the greatest impact on question four. The last question targeted second year superintendents and mentors and asked if their perceptions changed from Year 1 regarding the support offered or needed. Four mentors and ten mentees responded with reflections to help define Year 2 program needs.

Perceptions from program participants were analyzed for common themes. Building leadership capacity through interaction with experienced mentors, structured networking, and expectations for learning exemplified the alignment in KELI's program goals and the expectations important to achieve a professional Kansas license. Increasing confidence through these experiences became a positive theme in mentee/mentor responses. Additional themes emerged around a safe

and trusting environment, face-to-face mentoring, reflective practice, and networking. Mentees overwhelmingly noted the helpfulness of face-to-face mentoring as impacting their practice, while mentors consistently affirmed the value of professional training to develop deeper coaching skills. KELI mentees shared thoughts around recommended program participation, avowing personal commitment to the significance of the program.

Safe and Trusting Environment

A prominent theme that emerged from the collected data centered on a safe and trusting environment. Both mentees and mentors agreed the formation of a trusting relationship provided the catalyst for mentees to feel "safe" and supported. The KELI mentor, through training and expertise, understood the importance of this critical first step. One mentor indicated, "It was a safe and professional consultant relationship, as the superintendent position can be very isolating and lonely." Mentees shared that the reassurance and encouragement from the mentoring experience was critical to their initial year in the position. One mentee commented, "I was the lone administrator in our district serving as K-12 principal/superintendent. It was nice to have someone to call, knowing that there was someone on my side."

The support and positive reinforcement from mentors echoed by both respondent groups validated the work of the new superintendent. One mentor expressed that the KELI program presented a confidential setting in which new superintendents had an "outside set of eyes and ears to serve as a sounding board" for local district issues and the responsibilities of the new position. Overall experiences were noted as being valuable and rewarding by both mentees and mentors. One mentor concluded, "I would have liked to have had such support in my first year as a superintendent."

Face-to-Face Mentoring

A second equally strong theme identified from mentee and mentor responses surrounded the value of face-to-face mentoring. Both mentees and mentors reiterated the irreplaceable benefit of face-to-face mentoring. This interaction provided an intensive and individualized approach to address the needs of each district's unique setting. One mentee noted, "My experience was wonderful. I didn't use the phone-a-friend option much but really enjoyed the face-to-face meetings. This greatly influenced my practice." Mentees described their mentors as effective and active listeners. One mentee reflected that the mentoring experience "served as therapy for me to be able to tell my stories to someone not affiliated with the district." One superintendent new to the position shared:

"I believe it helped me get a clearer picture of the expectations for the superintendent. There is so much to learn, even for someone in education for many years. Having a successful mentor on-site to listen and advise was very helpful."

The majority of face-to-face sessions occurred on-site at the local district. This allowed a mentor to serve as a tremendous resource on common issues for new superintendents. Mentors cited understanding and monitoring the district budget, local board relations, and stakeholder communications as topics in

which mentors worked alongside their mentees during these sessions. "Honestly, they were all very helpful," one new superintendent shared:

"Moreover, I have been an administrator for 20 years so the responsibilities of the position were not necessarily new to me but the specific district questions and scenarios that occurred were what I really needed the advice on how to handle. The budget was the toughest part for me."

The on-site presence allowed the experienced superintendent to better understand the culture, needs, and goals of the district. "The face-to-face time also provided opportunities for planning and problem-solving with a trusted resource who had valuable experience" confirmed one mentee. One new superintendent contended:

"The KELI experience has been a lifesaver so far during my first year as superintendent. It has given me peace of mind that any problems or issues that come up, I have a contact that can guide me through them. It has been great to be able to sit down one-on-one and discuss school issues and have someone to bounce ideas off of."

Mentee after mentee reinforced the value of face-to-face mentoring and the relationship developed with their mentor as having the greatest influence and impact on their practice. One mentee noted, "By far, the face-to-face meetings with my mentor have been most valuable. They are individualized, topic specific and solution-oriented." Another mentee shared, "Easily the biggest help was being able to sit down with my mentor and get actual advice pertaining to real problems on the job. There is no way to replicate this type of help other than face-to-face."

Reflective Practice

Mentees and mentors in the KELI program indicated that opportunities for reflection influenced their professional practice. Mentors explained how asking questions encouraged the mentees to think and reflect deeply. In reflective dialogue, mentees gained confidence by developing an increased awareness of the impact of their decisions and actions.

KELI professional learning requirements provided the opportunity for mentees and mentors to reflect in cohort settings twice during the year. The benefit of these encounters was best described by one mentee. "It was nice to meet with other first year superintendents and hear about what they were experiencing. Sometimes it was 'ignorance-loves-company' feelings and other times we learned from each other and were often able to offer suggestions."

Mentee and mentor groups confirmed the value of monthly checklists in reflecting on and pacing the work of the new superintendent. "The monthly checklist has been invaluable! It is a great way to give us reminders of what typically would be done during that month. I will save these for years to come." remarked one mentee. One mentor joined the chorus, "The monthly checklists are great reminders of things the mentees need to be addressing."

Networking

Mentees voiced the importance of networking with other professional leaders and with new superintendents that had similar concerns and goals. Building these relationships affirmed that other first year executives were “going through some of the same struggles.” The professional learning sessions (e.g., state board meeting, superintendents’ organization, regional summits, and conferences) allowed new superintendents, sometimes accompanied by their mentors, to see the importance of professional associations and getting to know other leaders in the state. Another mentee stated, “Opportunities of this kind have led to networking and provided a pathway for becoming better informed. Finding local opportunities for effective professional development for this role can otherwise be difficult and expensive.” Yet another mentee shared, “Having these [KELI activities] didn’t make the first year experience seem quite so daunting or lonely.” A final mentee stated:

“These activities showed me the breadth of this position and helped me see the value of networking. The superintendent is a connector from their school district to the outside world both locally, state-wide, and nationally. Without these requirements, I would not have understood this as soon as I did.”

Building Leadership Capacity

A major goal of the KELI program for first year superintendents centers on resources and support networks that build leadership capacity. Through participation in KELI’s mentoring and induction program, mentors shared perceptions and observations about mentees related to increased leadership capacity (e.g., future thinking, confidence, and preparation). Messages shared by mentors included statements such as, “helps with confidence,” “more assured,” and “definite impact on future decision-making.” A KELI mentee stated, “It is nice to learn from others and examples instead of by making mistakes and learning things the hard way. It has definitely helped me be a stronger leader.” A mentor agreed, stating the KELI program provided mentees “direction when they need it, it helps them work through some tough issues, it provides an outside source to confide in, and it helps them develop confidence in the job they are doing.”

Furthermore, mentees confided that structured conversations and collaboration embedded in the KELI program aided them in decision-making and in gaining confidence. “Knowing at least one person supports my decision is powerful” indicated one mentee. Several mentees added reflections on the confidence they had gained to make decisions on tough issues as a result of their participation in the KELI program and through the support of the mentor. “The dynamics of each district are different and having a one-on-one mentor allows pin-pointing specifics that help.” A mentor commented:

“It allows them [the mentees] the opportunity to bounce ideas off an experienced support person who has the inclination to help them learn as the issues come at them at breakneck speed. This should build their capacity to fly on their own.”

Mentors specifically commented on the value of coaching training in assisting them to guide deeper thinking around problem solving strategies and strengthening capacity of the new district leader. The coaching training helped support the individual professional growth of mentors by helping them gain skills in questioning, active listening, and probing rather than “just solving their problems for them [the mentees].” One mentor exclaimed that in a recent phone conversation with a second year superintendent, the mentee commented that the mentor “was using that coaching stuff now” when the question was rephrased for the mentee to consider and think more about.

Mentors suggested that building leadership capacity through the use of coaching techniques was a hallmark of the KELI program. The theme of building leadership capacity in the new superintendent through coaching techniques was highlighted by mentors. “The coaching training has been excellent and has helped us all to be better and more effective listeners and given us skills in asking reflective questions” remarked one experienced mentor. Another mentor reiterated the value of the coaching training by stating, “The active listening and questioning techniques stressed in coaching training enabled mentors to help mentees “come up with an answer to their problem” and thus, increase their growth and capacity.

Mentee Affirmation of KELI Support

KELI mentees shared and affirmed the value of participating in KELI’s first year support program. Sixteen of the 22 mentees specifically stated they would elect to participate in the KELI mentoring and induction program again and the six remaining respondents expressed high regard for the program and the support they received. “As a new superintendent, I didn’t know what I didn’t know. That is where the KELI program provided invaluable information and guidance. I would absolutely participate again.” Another mentee reported, “The KELI program was just what I needed to make it through my first year.” All 22 responses of mentees affirmed the value of their experiences.

At least two mentee reflections resulted in a change of attitude during and after participation in the KELI program. One mentee stated, “I was reluctant to be a part of this program from the beginning... Now that I am in the program, I think it is a great program for beginning superintendents.” Another mentee noted similar feelings, “I am not a new superintendent, and at first I was not real excited about this scenario. I am glad that I participated and would certainly recommend it, as well as do it again.” One mentor confirmed, “I believe the program design is excellent. I also believe that the KELI program is only as good as the mentor and mentee working together allow it to be.” One added mentor recognized, “how much the mentee wants to invest makes a significant difference.” Thus, individual commitment impacted the quality of the experience in some cases.

Reflections From Year Two Participants

Perceptions offered by mentees and mentors in their second year as superintendent or mentor demonstrated positive feelings in KELI’s ability to address the needs of the first year

superintendent. One mentee stated, "I realize so much more about what is coming and when." Mentees shared that the transition of support to Year 2 seemed logical dictating a need for less intensive support. Mentees and mentors agreed that location, district size, and demographics are critical variables to consider in assigning mentors to mentees. The closer the geographic location, the less distance plays a part in availability. Similarly, needs of large and small districts, rural and urban, dictated different conceptual understanding of district issues and solutions. A mentee stated:

"My initial feeling was that I didn't see the mentor as 'necessary.' That feeling changed rather quickly. I believe the mentor as a KEY to my success in my current position. The only problem I see with it was the distance between my mentor and me."

Although most mentees reiterated the need for less support in transitioning to Year 2, two mentees poignantly reflected the need to build on their mentee/mentor relationship even more. "While last year was a blur, I think the need for peer relationships is even greater the second year" remarked one mentee. Likewise, the second mentee shared:

"Obviously, I need less support and guidance in many areas of day-to-day operations. However, I'm now taking some risks and tackling bigger issues. Thus, I've actually asked advice of my mentor and fellow superintendents more this year than last year."

One mentor agreed, "New superintendents need work on developing vision and planning to move their districts forward" and in establishing high expectations for performance-based accountability. In keeping with the spirit of professional learning activities included in the KELI program framework, one mentee also reiterated how important involvement in professional organizations was through their KELI program participation.

Powerfully stated by one mentee, "The bottom line for me is that I know my mentor is always available...and that type of safety net provides tremendous peace of mind." A mentor concurred, "The mentor is the most trusted person in their [mentee's] life...the relationship established in the first year is one that will carry on for years following."

Implications and Conclusion

The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute's vision to develop support for Kansas leaders showcased marked success in its initial year of operation. The five-year plan painted a clear picture of the comprehensive commitment of partners and professionals to make this vision a continued reality. Through dedicated efforts and responsive planning, KELI's mentoring and induction program for new superintendents provided a solid foundation to equip new district leaders with the skills and strategies to tackle the challenging environments in which they lead. The value of the KELI mentoring program, as evidenced in the perceptions of new superintendents and veteran mentors, alike, will warrant a strong focus on sustainability. Leadership for the 21st century calls for deep learning opportunities in content knowledge and processes to facilitate change. KELI's mission aligned with these goals provided

a critical link to support first year superintendents and energize successful leadership efforts in Kansas.

An implication for practice is an impetus for KELI's mentoring and induction program for first year superintendents in Kansas to maintain a focus on responsiveness to changing needs. The educational landscape is changing like never before, encompassing massive shifts in national educational trends, state initiatives, and local district challenges. Kansas leaders must have access to the most current research, highly experienced and trained mentors, and a mentoring/induction program that is flexible in design. KELI program developers and partners must listen carefully, plan strategically, and adapt successfully to provide the critical link that offers support for the challenges inherent in the political and dynamic role of the superintendent. This must be accomplished while maintaining program strengths that participants have identified.

A second implication for practice is sustaining the commitment of partners and collaborative resources in a complex climate of financial competition and survival. The renewed relationship of partners forming the original mission must receive concentrated attention. As professional entities and organizations seek creative strands to attract revenue and services in a time of declining budgets, competition will increase. Ongoing attention must be fostered to validate strong rationale for coexistence and planning efforts in support of the KELI mission.

Maintaining a powerful cadre of mentors in a dramatically changing world is a third practical implication. Defining and embracing the role of technology in the mentor's role and work is essential. Not only must mentors maintain competency in order to communicate effectively with mentees where geographic boundaries exist, they must also understand the vitality of diverse issues presented by technology's impact in the educational setting. Moreover, general knowledge of current field practitioner on-the-job requirements must be maintained by mentors who work from their experience and understanding of the superintendency. Lastly, maintaining quality and formal coaching training must be a program priority to develop and hone mentor skills as the mentor cadre's membership changes over time.

Expansion to first year principal leadership, mentoring, and induction is a natural step in KELI's mission to support leadership in Kansas. This effort is consistent with KELI's five-year plan along with continued development and inclusion of deep learning opportunities for veteran leaders in Kansas. In conclusion, coordination of these efforts aimed at leadership development for the 21st century provides KELI with a strong purpose, viable mission, and sustainable resources. A KELI mentee acclaimed, "Knowing I have a friend and colleague only a call, email, or text away deserves a huge thank you to KELI for fostering this relationship!" 📖

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Table 1 | **Mentee Demographics**

| Licensure Status | 2011-2012 Cohort n | 2012-2013 Cohort n |
|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Initial | 13 | 9 |
| Professional | 13 | 13 |
| Completed Requirements | 26 | Data available June 2013 |
| Total | 26 | 22 |

Table 2 | **Mentor Demographics**

| Career Status | 2011-2012 Cohort n | 2012-2013 Cohort n |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Practicing Superintendents | 2 | 0 |
| Retired Superintendents | 7 | 7 |
| Total | 9 | 7 |

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