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Leadership During Change

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Leadership During Change

Mischel Miller

The national education system, similar to the Kansas education system, has seen little change since the 1800s (Throckmorton, 1967). In fact, over 50 years later, there have been few changes. Children come to school around the age of five to enter kindergarten and then move through the current system by age and grade level. These children sit in rows, are addressed by the expert teacher, are given information, and are expected to memorize and regurgitate the material in a standardized testing process. Schools in Kansas predominately open their doors in August and close in May (KSDE, 2018), perpetuating the long history of an educational system that spans almost 200 years. Moving a school system away from that dynamic is hard, and it is wrought with human challenges. What change needs to occur to meet the economic needs of the future? One major challenge to creating new learning environments is the lack of leadership at the individual school and district levels to help teachers feel safe and confident in making crucial classroom instructional changes (Bush, 2008).

Faced with enormous pressure, teachers are asked to advance students academically and to show growth in learning. Our current education system does not always allow leaders the time needed to make the necessary changes. According to the Kansas Board of Regents, in January of 2016, Kansas had only 52% of the workforce holding some form of post-secondary education, which did not fully meet and would not be able to meet the needs of business and industry (2016). Unfortunately, this means that having only a high school diploma is not enough to secure a middle-class lifestyle (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). Also, not surprisingly, this is paralleled at the national level.

Eighty percent of all jobs today are in the service sector. Jobs in industries like business services, **education**, health care, and office services require higher levels of interpersonal and problem-solving skills because the work entails higher levels of human interaction and personalized responses to people's wants and needs (Carnevale et al. 2013).

This information, as well as the Kansas post-secondary information included in *Figure 1*, reveals that Kansas students who graduated from 2013–2018 are not leaving high school with the skills they need for post-secondary success. Post-secondary success is defined, in Kansas, as students who continue in college beyond the first year. This definition includes consideration of an effective rate, which, according to the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) is a combination of a student's graduation success and the student's status two years after graduation (2016).

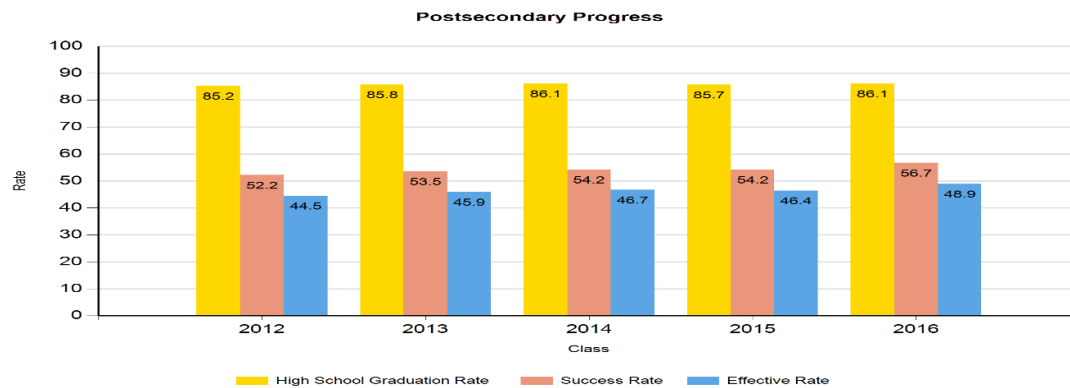


Figure 1: Kansas historical post-secondary data of high school graduates

In 2015, Kansas Commissioner Dr. Randy Watson and Deputy Commissioner Dr. Brad Neuenswander began a journey to discover what Kansans wanted from their schools. But the greatest leaders are indeed not alone in doing the greatest things, and this first step, promoted and supported by the Kansas State Board of Education, was an effort to challenge Kansas educators to have the maximum impact on students. By discovering what communities around the state were saying about the current education system and then discussing the needed change, the commissioners were poised to promote and create a new vision for education in Kansas. This research study seeks to more fully understand how to support leaders who desire change for their educational systems.

Background and Setting

The community conversations across Kansas addressed both the academic and the non-academic skills necessary for after high school graduation, or post-secondary success. Commissioner Watson and Deputy Commissioner Neuenswander set out across Kansas to gather information across 84,000 square miles. (Kansas State Department of Education, 2017). Neuenswander (2018) noted the purpose of the tour was to find out what Kansans wanted from their education system. The commissioners spent time touring Kansas to gather community data to support the upcoming work with an intent to use this information for strategic planning with the State Board of Education (Neuenswander, 2018).

Information was solicited from community members representing not only the school personnel and parents, but also economic, business and industry interests, with a focus on preparing children for the future of Kansas. In total, 20 community conversations and seven Chamber of Commerce focus groups were held throughout Kansas including well over 2,000 individual participants involved in the discussions. Specifically, over 100 people participated in the business and industry focus groups. An electronic survey gathered another 100 responses, which accounted for 287 focus groups, with members of many backgrounds, positions, and political parties, as well as business and community leaders (Neuenswander, 2018). Events were held both during the day and in the evening, and responses were gathered and analyzed from each of the community conversations, and all data sets were compared for consistency (Neuenswander, 2018). Neuenswander (2018) stated that in each of these focused conversations, the same three questions were asked to elicit information:

- (a) “What are the skills, attributes, and abilities of a successful 24-year-old Kansan?
- (b) What is K–12’s role in developing this successful Kansan, and how would we measure success?
- (c) What is higher education’s role in developing this successful Kansan, and how would we measure success?” (p. 44).

According to Neuenswander (2018), an analysis of the data occurred in the fall of 2015 and “helped inform the State Board of Education in creating a new vision” (p. 14). According to the participants, to be successful after high school, graduates require critical thinking, openness (i.e., adaptability, independence, and creativity), communication skills, interpersonal skills like teamwork, and a sense of citizenship and moral duty (KSDE, 2015). This article examines the specific leadership skills Kansas school leaders need during this period of school redesign and aims to fuel redesign success by aligning strategies with these skill sets.

Finally, the 2015 Kansas community conversation and future strategic planning by the Kansas State Board of Education led to a new project effort: *Kansans Can, Redesign* (KSDE, 2017). This new vision for education in Kansas was built from the tour data and continually referenced the information gathered from the participants. The new strategic plan intended to encourage stakeholders to think differently about Kansas education and lead to the vision for Kansas to *lead the world in the success of each student* (KSDE, 2015). The State Board measurable outcomes focused on five key areas: academic preparation, content preparation, technical skills, employability skills, and civic engagement (KSDE, 2017).

Interesting data were collected during the Kansas community conversations, specifically relative to the school leadership skills and dispositions necessary to enable dramatic change. The essential student skills shared during the Kansas community conversations currently may not be included in most school leadership conversations and training. This study will build on the community conversation data by collecting additional data from school leaders currently involved in Kansas’ Redesign efforts to pinpoint specific skills, attributes, and dispositions needed by school leadership during times of dramatic change.

Research Background

Extensive research is documented in the literature focusing on the skills and dispositions needed by school leaders. These skills and dispositions, can be defined as “a pattern of behavior exhibited frequently in the absence of coercion constituting a habit of mind under some conscious and voluntary control intentional to broad goals” (Katz, 1993, p.16). These are the very attributes which may be necessary for school superintendents and principals to acquire or learn in order to support large scale change.

Nohria and Beer (2000) noted that 70% or more of most change initiatives fail due to challenging environments. The key to success lies in prepared leaders (Kowal, Hassel, & Hassel, 2009) who realize that a strong commitment to change will need to happen, and transformed leadership is key to that commitment. Knudson, Shambaugh, & O’Day (2011), reported that turnaround strategies include an influential culture of change, implementation of a strong leader, active

teaching, data analysis, community involvement, and piloting those ideas that show promise as factors that improved struggling schools in California.

Four Domains

The *Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A System Framework* (2017) resulted from a meta-analysis of the research on school leadership and its effect during rapid school change. The *Domains* originated at WestEd, a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency, that works with education and other communities. This organization has roots in a bipartisan initiative from 1966, that allowed Congress to create regional laboratories across the country to improve education and learning for students. The intention was to create a starting point for the vast amount of available research in school leadership and to supplement as well to build a broad understanding of the impact on school leaders during times of rapid change.

As a research-based center, WestEd scholars provide strong evidence that these four areas are the most impactful within the context of school improvement efforts. This model was developed as a framework to assist states, districts, and schools working to change education. Turnaround Leadership (Baroody 2011; Hitt 2015), Talent Development (Anderson, Steffen, Wiese, & King 2014; Darling-Hammond, 1999 & 2007; Hallinger 2003, Steiner & Hassel 2011), Instructional Transformation (Anderson, Leithwood & Strauss, 2010; Hamilton et al., 2009), and Culture Shift (Lambert 2002, Masumoto & Brown-Welty 2009; Redding 2014), were identified as the keys to school turnaround and improvement as the focus education systems should address to successfully change schools as well as fundamental practices for school improvement. Further, they clearly articulated a systems framework to include each level of education: the state agency, the local district, and the school.

Turnaround leadership is defined as the prioritization of improved communication, the monitoring of short- and long-term goals, and customizing and targeting support to meet the needs of the improvement process (Jackson, Fixsen, & Ward, 2018). In-depth school redesign lies in the vision and goals of school improvement implemented by the district leadership teams. Harris (2005), when looking at the field of school improvement, noted that it would appear the most recent studies point toward the importance of capacity-building as a means of generating and sustaining school improvement. Therefore, Hassel, Hassel, Arkin, Kowal, & Steiner, (2006) noted the leadership strength to depart from the way things have always been done is imperative for the turnaround leader.

Talent development can be defined as recruiting, developing, retaining, and sustaining talent, targeted professional learning, and the stating of clear performance goals (Jackson, Fixsen, & Ward, 2018). While studying the competent principal, Clark (2017) found “each principal built teacher capacity, recognized change, and responded by motivating teachers and self, supporting continued collaboration, recognizing and encouraging teacher leadership, and adapting to new circumstances” (p. 6). Furthermore, Clark (2017) noted that as principals are faced with difficult decisions, successful leaders kept all stakeholders at the forefront of their decision-making. The productive and successful building leader may focus on sustainability as a primary focus that supports the success of school change.

Instructional transformation involves diagnosing and responding to student learning needs, the provision of rigorous evidence-based instruction, and the ability to remove barriers and to provide opportunities (Jackson, Fixsen, & Ward, 2018). A research project funded by the Carnegie Corporation (2017) found systems that provided coherence and consistency in the curriculum were the most successful. Marzano's (2007) study found that goals and consistent curriculum had an impact on student achievement, and once agreed upon and adherence to these instructional goals was maintained at the district level, any known discrepancies could be addressed by school leadership, and corrective action could be implemented. Marzano (2017) goes on to detail how goals related to curriculum and instruction must be adopted, based on relevant research and maintain clear and focused implementation. Both Marzano's (2007, 2017) studies propose a strong focus on solid curricular practices that lead to higher student achievement.

Culture shift is defined as the ability to build an atmosphere focused on student learning and effort, the solicitation of action on stakeholder input, and the ability to engage students and families in pursuing education goals (Jackson, Fixsen, & Ward, 2018). Peter Drucker is credited with saying culture eats strategy for breakfast. That being the case, Hoy (1997) defined culture as "a system of shared orientations that holds a unit together and gives it a distinctive identity" (p. 24). Hawkins (2009) noted leaders are being called to build trust, learn the art of delegation, build teams, and possess the ability to create a sustainable vision. The environment of any workplace in today's society demands that leaders to invite all staff to participate in conversations with open and honest discussions about the direction of a school building staff. Clark (2017), recognized the school principals that "cultivated a spirit of collaboration as structures," (p. 7) were more successful at creating change and had more sustainability than those who did not have this innate skill.

The Jackson, Fixsen, & Ward (2018) definition of culture could be combined to include relationship building and the eliciting of input from others as one characteristic. As Fullan (2002) stated, the principal "must look to the future and strive to create a culture that has the capacity not to settle for the solution of the day" (p. 19). Redding (2014) further defined culture as "the school's values, collective beliefs, norms, and its expectations of personnel and students; its practices, routines, and rituals" (p. 34). Particular skills and dispositions are necessary for school leaders seeking to change the instructional environment relative to relationship and climate building.

These four domains highlight the most impactful skills and dispositions needed by school leaders as they navigate significant change. School leaders must provide strong guidance and provide opportunities for dialogue as they build the culture to support systematic change.

Survey Participants

This Kansas leadership study examining the current leaders of the Kansans Can Redesign project (*Figure 2*) and interpreting their experiences may help others who wish to drive dramatic school change in Kansas and beyond. During the 2017-2018 school year, seven Kansas school districts were chosen to participate in a redesign project to create model schools that would help inform other Kansas school districts, as all schools are expected to move through this process by 2026.

These seven districts were part of Kansas’ Mercury project and spent the school year building a plan for implementation that would guide the full launch the next school year. In addition to the Mercury School districts, subsequent redesign efforts were added including 20 Gemini I districts, 20 Gemini II districts, and 19 Apollo I districts. During the 2020-2021 school year, another nine Apollo II districts were added. Ultimately, all 286 districts in Kansas will be participating in the redesign process. Leaders within these public-school systems and those in each round of the school redesign projects can provide insight into the dispositions necessary to lead during times of change. Since inception, 75 school districts have volunteered to engage in this project.

These schools range in size from a total district student population of 137 to a much larger district with approximately 30,000 students (KSDE, 2019). This survey gathered information from many building and district leaders gaining their perception of the knowledge and skills needed to lead change. The survey was electronically sent out to all 229 building and district leaders in the *Kansans Can Redesign* project. Eighty surveys were submitted for a 35% response rate.

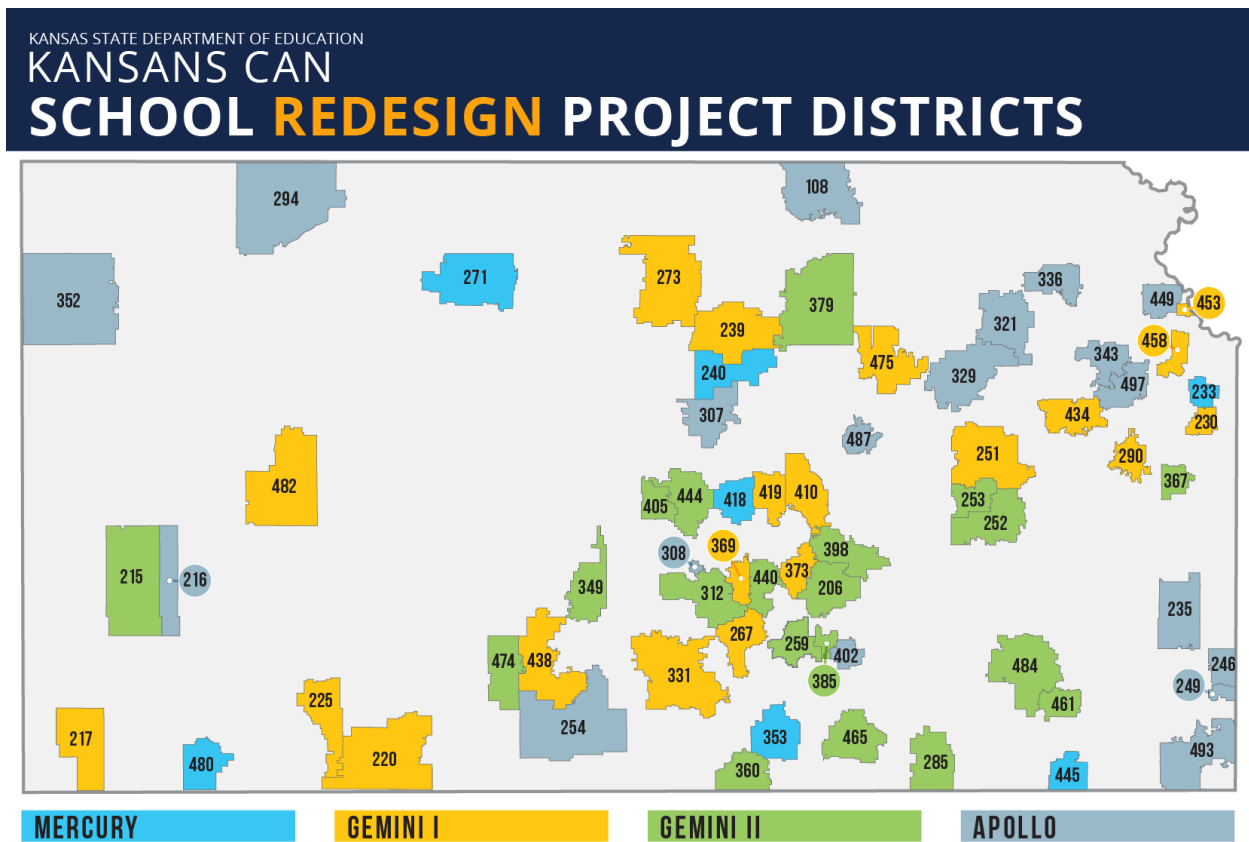


Figure 2: Kansans Can School Redesign project districts

Survey

The survey was developed to gather input from these school leaders to provide details on the types of skills and dispositions needed to lead during this stage of rapid school improvement. Kelley, Clark, Brown, and Sitzia (2003) developed guidance for developing and conducting

surveys. This criterion was used as the survey was constructed, implemented and analyzed. The survey was designed to aid in understanding the leadership skills and dispositions of current school leaders serving in Kansas schools participating in the *Kansas Redesign* process. The theoretical framework lends itself to the notion of interpretivism as a means of informing the research to be conducted. The primary characteristics of interpretivism allow the researcher to create a way to understand the social world (Bhattacharya, 2017), which, in this context, would be that of the public-school culture in Kansas.

Survey respondents were representative of varying levels of student populations, from 175 students, to school systems of student populations well over 2,500. Each of the *Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement* (Jackson, Fixsen, & Ward, 2018) were used to build the framework of the survey. The survey was built in conjunction with the Central Comprehensive Center, a National network of centers, funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The partnership with this Center was a natural outgrowth of work at the Kansas State Department of Education. During the 2017 State Department of Education, Kansans Can Redesign process it became clear that leadership was indeed a major factor in the success or failure of the Redesign projects (KSDE, 2019). To that end, work with the Comprehensive Center to determine the skills and dispositions necessary for school leaders during times of change.

The survey contained 16 questions. First, three demographic questions were asked so that data could be disaggregated by school/district leader perceptions, level of engagement in the *Kansans Can Redesign* project, and the number of buildings and students at particular levels (elementary, middle, and high school). The remaining questions included a range scale (*large, some, or little* to indicate their level of activity) or yes/no, and provided opportunities for open-ended responses. Data was collected electronically and quantitative data was organized by response percentages. Qualitative, open-ended responses were analyzed through NVivo software. Themes emerged in this data analysis process. As the survey data was analyzed to determine the skills and dispositions used by school leaders during a time of school redesign, valuable insights were gleaned. First, demographic questions provided context into the participants (see Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic survey responses

Survey Responses	Percentage of responses
Principals	74.3%
Superintendents	25.6%
We are interested, but not yet engaged	0.0%
Mercury 7	5.0%
Gemini I	22.5%
Gemini II	41.2%
Apollo	27.5%
Other engagement	3.7%
Elementary	34.3%
Middle/Junior High	30.6%
High School	33.8%

The following questions and corresponding data tables help to understand the level to which school systems communicated to stakeholders, used a self-assessment process to determine priority focuses, provided aligned professional learning experiences, oriented student focused strategies, addressed student social-emotional needs, and promoted a shared school culture and vision.

Table 2. Stakeholder Communication

Survey Responses	Percentage of responses
Large	77.5%
Some	18.75%
Little	3.75%

The survey question asked: To what extent do you feel you have communicated to your (school staff/district personnel/school community) the importance of school redesign and its benefits? The vast majority felt they spent substantial time on communicating to both parents and community members. Many narrative comments on this question indicated that communicating with parents was the key to the successful implementation of the redesign process. The use of parent camps, parent nights on and off school grounds, and the use of parent newsletters were just a few of the examples given as communication strategies. Specifically, one respondent noted that multiple ways of communicating to parents seemed to be the most successful strategy.

Table 3. Use of Self-assessment

Survey Responses	Percentage of responses
Yes	64.1%
No	35.9%

The survey asked participants: To what extent has your (district/school) promoted/implemented use of the Redesign self-assessment for schools to identify prioritized needs and monitor progress? The majority of respondents indicated that developing a redesign self-assessment tool, as a means of measuring growth in each of the priority goals, as a beneficial resource. The development process itself was noted to build school-wide ownership of the redesign vision. Although a time-consuming process, approximately two-thirds of the participants used an internally developed self-assessment tool.

Table 4. Aligned Professional Learning Experiences

Survey Responses	Percentage of responses
Large	82.2%
Some	13.92%
Little	3.8%

When asked: To what extent have you and the Redesign team ensured that professional learning experiences in your (school/district) are clearly connected to redesign principles? Over 80% of the survey respondents indicated aligning the professional learning experiences for teachers and

staff as a helpful strategy. It is important to note, survey comments also indicated there was an increase in the intensity and focus of professional learning. Many of the survey comments showed an indication that professional learning was constantly revisited and reprioritized based on the learning needs of teachers. These professional learning needs also has implications for teacher and leader preparation programs. As current needs are identified for in-service teachers, a process to incorporate those needs into pre-service programs is needed.

Table 5. Student Focused Strategies

Survey Responses	Percentage of responses
Large	69.23%
Some	24.36%
Little	6.41%

The survey asked: To what extent does your (district/school) emphasize the use of student-focused strategies to respond to student learning needs? Survey participants indicated that a large amount, almost 70% of learning strategies were in direct correlation to the needs of students. Notably, the use of project based learning and personalized learning strategies were mentioned throughout the comments. Making learning activities relevant to student learning needs is a goal of the redesign initiative. This data supports schools intensive efforts to be student focused.

Table 6. Addressed Student Social-Emotional Needs

Survey Responses	Percentage of responses
Large	77.22%
Some	20.25%
Little	2.54%

Participants responded to the following question: To what extent have you been successful at building a culture that prioritizes social, emotional, and character development in your district/school? Currently much emphasis is being placed on student's non-academic or social emotional needs. Over 70% of the survey respondents indicated they were successful in implementing strategies to address the social-emotional needs of students. Both programs and personnel were addressed. Many comments identified specific trademarked programs that were in use, while many other comments indicated the use of additional school counselor and social work positions to address these student social-emotional needs.

Table 7. Shared School Culture and Vision

Survey Responses	Percentage of responses
Large	73.42%
Some	24.05%
Little	2.43%

The survey asked: To what extent do you feel you have been successful in building a (district or school) shared culture of cooperation and collaboration among staff? Survey respondents noted they were successful in promoting a shared school culture and vision among staff. Over 97% felt

confident that they were building a shared school culture and vision. Comments from survey respondents indicated that more time and training had taken place in these areas, that allowed for the creation of a shared culture and vision. Other comments included collaboration and collective thinking were contributing factors regarding a shared culture and vision.

Summary

In conclusion, the changes taking place in schools across our country to meet the needs of our students, indicate strong building and district leadership is a rising factor of success. The pressures of our current COVID-19 pandemic and fear of the unknowns drive teachers and families to questions that our school leaders should be prepared to address. The intention of this survey was to begin a discussion on how we might collectively work to develop certain skills and dispositions among our school leaders to prepare them to be successful leaders of students and teachers in the years to come.

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