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The Kansas Commissioner of Education describes the leadership that education will need, based on what we have learned about leadership from research and in response to what he heard from the voices of stakeholders in his state.

# Introduction to the Special Issue: Leadership in Kansas for the 21st Century

Randy Watson

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*The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short, but in setting our aim too low and achieving our mark. – Michelangelo*

## **Introduction**

Kansas is currently experiencing a leadership challenge. This is evident both in the number of leaders new to their positions in K-12 school districts and in the methods our state must implement to effectively train those leaders for Kansas' education to prosper into the 21st century. This article describes the current leadership landscape in Kansas and provides a modest framework for training to move Kansas forward in the ongoing development of educational leadership.

## **Challenges of Leadership in Kansas**

In 2015-16, 52 superintendent positions in Kansas changed hands. Some of these changes were created by superintendents moving to different leadership positions within the state. Others ascended new to the superintendency. Fifteen of those new superintendents had been teachers only two years previously. Currently for 2016-17, 60 superintendent positions in Kansas will have different leadership than in the previous year, and that number could grow slightly higher. Future projections indicate that another 60 superintendent positions may change for the 2017-18 school year. If this occurs, it will result in a turnover of approximately 65% of the total superintendent positions in Kansas in just three years. This ratio holds true across all sizes of Kansas school districts. Of the state's top 25 largest school districts, 16 have replaced their superintendent during the past three years (Kansas State Department of Education, 2016; United School Administrators of Kansas, 2016).

This turnover also will have a deep effect on the principal positions in Kansas, as many of those superintendent positions will be filled from the principal ranks. This turnover in superintendent and principal leadership will have an immediate and profound impact on the leadership within our

state. It will challenge our training structures of leadership and will cause our current state and local leaders to consider new avenues for leadership development. Some of those avenues will have to be bold and innovative to meet the demands of what will be necessary to run our educational system over the next decade.

### **An Overview of Educational Change in Kansas**

*"We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too." – John F. Kennedy (1962)*

Leaders must always reflect on the political and social times in which they are immersed. Perhaps there never has been a greater situational leader than Winston Churchill. Serving as prime minister of the United Kingdom in the 1940s, he was greatly instrumental in helping Britain win World War II. During that critical period, Churchill led with courage and inspiration. During England's darkest hours of the war Churchill stated: "I have no fear of the future. Let us go forward into its mysteries, let us tear aside the veils which hide it from our eyes and let us move onward with confidence and courage" (as cited in Rohn, 2016, pp. 326-327).

Just as Churchill faced times that were different from those experienced by previous leaders, Kansas is experiencing change at a rapid rate, too. In 2016, Kansas finds itself embracing a new federal law that replaces the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The new law, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), gives a lot of authority back to the state and local leadership to develop plans to assist all students in becoming successful. This massive federal shift in policy not only places more burden back on state and local leadership, it gives the opportunity to lead in new and creative ways. The new law involves a completely different way of thinking and leading change in education. No longer will K-12 education progress be defined by a simple "Adequate Yearly Progress" chart on state assessments. The new accountability system will require states and local entities to develop and implement new courses of action geared to ensuring that all students are successful.

In November 2014, the Kansas State Board of Education hired a new Commissioner of Education whose role would be influenced by an anticipated change in federal education policies. Among the first tasks was for the new commissioner to directly engage Kansans in discovering what they wanted from their schools and to identify the type of educational system Kansas educators needed to focus on in the future. The ensuing "listening tours" gave Kansans a voice in creating the new system of education that will be implemented during the next decade. That tour initially consisted of 20 different Kansas communities spread geographically from Kansas City to Colby and from Coffeyville to Sublette. In order to gain a greater voice from business leaders, an additional seven-city tour from Lawrence to Pittsburg and Dodge City to Manhattan was completed.

During those 27 city tours, along with an online forum for those who could not attend a session, citizens provided input on what they believed was needed in an effective education system. Kansans stated that for students to be successful in postsecondary pursuits, schools must focus on helping students develop strong social-emotional skills, in addition to academic proficiency. Kansans also said that school structures must be changed, and in some cases, changed dramatically, to ensure they provide the flexibility needed for all students to be successful after high school.

The State Board of Education took this data and over the course of several retreats and board sessions, designed a new, bold vision for Kansas' education. The new vision, "Kansas will lead the world in the success of each student," represents the input of more than 2,000 Kansans.

The State Board of Education presented the challenge to all leaders in Kansas, and in doing so, created a new leadership training need. In moving toward this new vision, one that will require significant change in Kansas school systems, a number of questions surfaced. How does Kansas inspire, assist, and produce a new generation of leaders – teachers, principals and superintendents – to lead the next generation of schools and students? How will Kansas help change the existing veteran leadership – teachers, principals and superintendents – from one of compliance in the No Child Left Behind era, to a visionary style of leadership required by the board's new vision and the Every Student Succeeds Act? How will we accomplish this leadership challenge when the problems facing our state, from economic to educational, are becoming perhaps the greatest demands in our lifetime?

This new landscape of Kansas education requires a new approach to the leadership development of not only aspiring leaders, but of veteran leaders. One that departs from previous methods of discussing leadership theory in isolation to combining theory with actual practice. One that departs from thinking of leadership development as an event or even a degree, to one that spans a degree development program and follows the individual into the position of a teacher, principal, or superintendent. As John Maxwell stated, "Leadership deals with people and their dynamics, which are continually changing. They are never static. The challenge of leadership is to create change and facilitate growth" (2010, p. 4).

### **The Synergy of Working Together**

The challenges of this new era in education will stretch all existing formats of learning and training. Universities, service centers, professional and leadership organizations, and the Kansas State Department of Education will need to collaborate on a much deeper level.

These new structures of learning should provide a seamless coordination of learning opportunities from the initial teaching degree options, to a master's, doctorate, and postdoctoral study. This new leadership development will range from formal to informal settings of learning and should involve coordination across the state to address the various stages of leadership development. It will become imperative for all teachers, principals, and superintendents

to have multiple avenues and opportunities to participate in such leadership development and that those opportunities continue over the course of many years.

### **Core Principles of New Leadership Development**

As current leaders ponder the changes necessary for leadership development in Kansas now and in the future, there are certain principles of leadership that are a necessity for development.

Too often leaders fail to understand the difference between core principles and managing leadership change. Core principles are timeless. They guide leaders like a true north star. They do not change. Perhaps Jim Collins, in his book, *Good to Great*, captured this essence when he said:

Yes, the world is changing and will continue to do so. But that does not mean we should stop the search for timeless principles. Think of it in this way: The practices of engineering continually evolve and change; the laws of physics remain relatively fixed. I like to think of our work for the search for timeless principles – the enduring physics of great organizations – that will remain true and relevant no matter how the world changes around us. Yes, the specific application (engineering) will change, but certain immutable laws (physics) of organized human performance will endure (2011, p. 15).

Stephen Covey also wrote:

By centering our leadership on correct principles, we create a solid foundation for development. Unlike ideas based on people or things which are subject to frequent and immediate change, correct principles do not change. They don't depend on the behavior of others or the current fad for their validity. They are not here one day and gone the next. Even in the midst of people or circumstances that seem to ignore the principles, we can be secure in the knowledge that principles are bigger than people or circumstances, and that thousands of years of history have seen them triumph, time and time again (2013, p. 15).

The following five core principles of leadership development are not intended to be exhaustive. They are meant to begin a discussion on the core tenants of a new leadership model. However, by keeping core principles to a limited set, they create a powerful driving force that will lead to complex behavior. This in turn enables change and movement forward for Kansas' leadership development.

#### **Core Principle 1: Leadership development should be grounded in understanding culture, timing, and environments.**

In Kansas, we are currently living in an era of strongly opinionated political discourse on state revenues allocated to education combined with the public's increased pressure for more accountability. Any leadership development in Kansas will need to be centered on understanding the state

and local social, political and education landscapes. Too often, leaders apply theories of leadership and change in a vacuum of understanding the political realities of a given situation. Contrast two of America's greatest leaders, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. They were at their peak of leadership approximately 100 years from each other. Consider that Lincoln was attempting to keep a country together during a massive civil war. During that time, Lincoln, despite much opposition to his position, issued the Emancipation Proclamation, establishing the abolition of slavery. One hundred years later, King stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial delivering a call to the nation to adopt new civil rights legislation.

During Lincoln's time, he understood that the war and slavery were intertwined and could not be separated. His bold stance moved the country forward, and in many ways, also held it together. King understood that by peaceful protest, he could move the nation forward to equality for all. Both men deeply understood the times of which they lived and then applied leadership principles that were effective in changing our nation dramatically.

Today in Kansas, leaders will have to understand the economics, politics, and the era they have been asked to lead Kansas' school districts and schools. In developing leadership in Kansas, leaders will have to understand state and local culture. For example, in any community, leaders want to know, what are the values important in this community? What are the traditions? Who makes up the workforce? What has been accomplished in the past? All of these aspects of leadership are important before leaders can apply change at the state or local level. With so many changes in principal and superintendent positions, this core principle will be very important to understand for all Kansas leaders.

#### **Core Principle 2: Leadership development should be grounded in understanding how to develop vision, inspiration, and purpose.**

A great vision can propel any organization forward with purpose and clarity. Much has been written about the importance of vision to the leadership of any organization. Hans Finzel stated, "Great leaders challenge people to attempt things they would never try on their own" (2016, p. 17). A leader begins by having a "compelling 'dream' or destination – and determin[es] how we'll get there from an unwanted or underestimated departure point. This destination also resonates with or revives people's sense of their own best identity" (Hargreaves, Boyle, & Harris, 2014, p. 10).

In March 1968, Robert Kennedy spoke at the University of Kansas while campaigning for the presidency. In that speech, Kennedy reminded us to believe in a better future when he said:

George Bernard Shaw once wrote, 'Some people see things as they are and say why? I dream things that never were and say, why not?' So I come here to Kansas to ask for your help. In the difficult five months ahead, before the convention in Chicago, I ask for your help and for your assistance. If you believe that the United States can do better. If you believe that

we should change our course of action. If you believe that the United States stands for something here internally as well as elsewhere around the globe, I ask for your help and your assistance and your hand over the period of the next five months.

The State Board of Education, in both developing and implementing its vision for Kansas' education, has applied the leadership principles of creating that vision based on the desires and aspirations of Kansans. The "needs assessment" conducted during eight months of gathering information gave the State Board of Education the information needed to provide Kansas a bold and compelling vision for the future. This vision will require us to rethink our leadership at every level – from what teachers should do with instruction in classrooms to the restructuring of the learning environment for students. The new vision challenges all Kansans to think differently about how best to assist all Kansas students to become successful after completing formal schooling.

Leadership training in Kansas will need to focus on assisting leaders at all levels – teachers, principals, and superintendents – to understand how to use the State Board of Education's vision, and then develop strong visions in their own schools and communities to meet this challenge.

### **Core Principle 3: Leadership development should be grounded in theory and research with practical application of theory in the field.**

Too often, master's and doctoral programs discuss theories of leadership and change without the practical application to see it in action. Programs of the future will have to incorporate much more practical application to leadership theories, thus deepening the understanding of research and its practical application to leadership in communities, districts, and schools.

Jim Collins spoke to the concept of learning from others, taking research and watching it applied, then learning from it. Collins stated:

Entrenched myth: Successful leaders in a turbulent world are bold, risk-seeking visionaries. Contrary finding: The best leaders we studied did not have a visionary ability to predict the future. They observed what worked, figured out why it worked, and built upon proven foundations. They were not more risk taking, more bold, more visionary and more creative than the comparisons. They were more disciplined, more empirical, and more paranoid (2011, p. 9).

In formal programming, such as degree-based programs, theory will be studied in the classroom and then applied in both a classroom and clinical setting – immersing the student in a practical based environment of learning. Ongoing training will be needed after any degree program. All too often, ongoing leadership training after degree completion is limited to learning activities or programs without the deep scholarly research needed to evaluate such programs or activities. Postdegree leadership development programs in Kansas will need to focus on both the knowledge of current

research and theory, along with the program application of that research.

### **Core Principle 4: Leadership development should be grounded in ongoing coaching and reflective practice.**

A well-trained coach is essential for the ongoing development of leaders in Kansas. All successful leaders have mentors and coaches who help motivate, inspire, and challenge their thinking. In order to provide lasting change and deepen learning, ongoing coaching, training, and personalized support is necessary. Effective leadership development must include a strong mentoring component that provides ongoing training and an opportunity for personal reflection to foster the mentee's continued growth.

### **Core Principle 5: Leadership development should be grounded in the belief that leadership is not positional.**

In February of this year, the United States Department of Education, in conjunction with the Council of Chief School State Officers, the National Education Association, and American Federation of Teachers, convened a national summit of all 50 states on teacher leadership and teacher voice. Kansas was fortunate to have a strong delegation at the summit. A common theme to come from the conference was that from a leadership role, the voice of the teacher has largely been ignored.

Leadership should come from teachers, principals, and superintendents in a collaborative, trustworthy, and engaging environment. This principle was derived in part from the Kansas Leadership Center (KLC). Unfortunately in most schools and school districts, this type of shared leadership is not found. Given the complex challenges all educational leaders in Kansas will face over the next decade, it is imperative that we invest in leadership development at all levels of the education system.

### **The Complete Cycle of Leadership Development**

Leadership is about learning theories of leadership, practicing that theory of leadership in real-world environments, and then receiving coaching and reflecting on the application of that theory. This three-stage process in leadership development is critical to the ongoing development of the leader.

The fact is, most people never ascend to the leadership levels they are capable of obtaining because of the absence of a leadership development process. This process can be embedded in formal programs, such as master's or doctoral programs, and can be deepened and further developed through leadership institutes like the Kansas Leadership Center (KLC) and the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute (KELI). While it may be possible to grow as a leader without any assistance from others, that is more likely the exception than the rule.

A great leader never stops learning and leaders must repeat this cycle of development over and over throughout the span of their careers.



## Conclusion

To achieve the level of change that the State Board of Education's new vision for Kansas education calls for will require the development of strong, visionary leaders at all levels of the education system. To that end, it will be imperative to implement a leadership development process for current and future education leaders. Change can be difficult, but with strong leadership, it is obtainable. The authors of Uplifting Leadership stated it well:

Individuals who have led others through profound change do not do so without fear of failure, danger or what the future might hold in store. Every leader experiences a moment of self-doubt where he or she faces the real prospect of defeat. What defines uplifting leadership is how these individuals deal with their own and their followers' fear - and do so in a way that creates uplift (Hargreaves et al., 2014, pp. 25-26).

When we foster leadership development, Kansans can and will lead the world in the success of each student.



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