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The Dean of the Kansas State University College of Education recognizes the challenges that school principals and teacher leaders face and accepts responsibility for providing a different kind of preparation program to ensure graduates are ready for those roles.

# Who is the Building Leader?: Commentary on Educational Leadership Preparation Programs for the Future

Debbie K. Mercer

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It is critical that educator preparation programs reflect the current and future needs of schools. The job of a school leader is more complex and more demanding than ever before. As institutions of higher education contemplate the question in the title, defining the roles and responsibilities of the school building leader is critical. Understanding these issues in the context of current classrooms adds value to the discussion.

Kansas public schools have changed drastically in the last 25 years. The *Kansas Report Card 2014-2015*, published annually by the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), details the demographics of Kansas public school students. Currently, 65.4% of the students in Kansas public schools are white; this is on the decline. Concurrently, the state has experienced an increase in Hispanic students (18.9%), and English Language Learners have grown to 8.7% in Kansas. Additionally, unique challenges face schools and communities related to steady increases in poverty rates to the current rate of 50%. Indications are that these areas will continue to see increased numbers of students.

In Kansas, 286 school districts employ approximately 1,300 principals. These individuals work directly with educators to positively impact the learning of the most diverse group of student learners in our history. What is the current role of a school building leader and how can higher education preparation programs best prepare them for those responsibilities? Those questions guide this discussion.

First, we must recognize that the role of a principal varies greatly. Large and small schools both produce unique strengths and challenges. Likewise, rural and urban, majority English Language Learners, Title classification, and mobility rates due to military connectedness or migrant work all impact the role of the building leader. Even within buildings, we see diverse leadership structures. For example, some buildings have assistant principals who handle certain activities or issues, while other buildings require the principal to take on a district-wide responsibility such as transportation director, special education director, or athletic director. These

duties all compete with the daily leadership responsibilities within a school building.

### **Kansas Licensure Requirements**

Possession of a building leadership school specialist license is required to hold a building leadership position. In Kansas, an accredited four-year institution of higher education (IHE) must submit a program review for each area in which they would like to recommend a candidate for licensure to KSDE. These program reviews include, among other requirements, key assessments and data from required assignments that document attainment of the standards adopted by KSDE, which are adapted from the 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). In sum, there are thirteen institutions of higher education that have approved building leadership programs in Kansas.

Traditionally, IHE preparation programs of study have included distinct courses in areas such as leadership, school finance, school law, special education, and technology. These courses are aligned with the Kansas professional school leadership content standards, and all programs require some type of clinical field experience in schools. While a

combination of classroom learning and application in the field is required, I believe there is a better way to prepare leaders for their complex set of responsibilities than the isolated course approach.

Once the initial school leadership license has been attained, a new school leader is required to participate in a mentoring program before moving to the professional level license. Mentoring guidelines are established by KSDE to provide a more uniform experience throughout the state.

### **The Building Principal: A Complex and Demanding Job**

Figure 1 shows a sample job description for an elementary principal. You can see that the generalities of the position show the intense responsibilities of the individual charged with administering the building and ensuring student learning.

While a position description provides a broad overview of the responsibilities projected for an individual, the reality comes when dealing with the challenges of each day. The following scenario (found in Figure 2) is the reflection of a P-12 principal in a rural 1A school. These activities are what he considers in a typical day.

Figure 1 | **Sample Job Description**

#### **Position Title: Elementary School Principal**

**Basic Function:** Administers the school under the supervision of the assistant superintendent. Provides leadership to faculty and students; manages and directs all activities.

#### **Performance Responsibilities:**

1. Demonstrates leadership through beliefs, skills, and personal characteristics
2. Ensures that teachers plan and provide effective instruction
3. Monitors, assesses, and supervises the approved district curriculum
4. Develops an effective staff development program
5. Promotes a positive school climate by encouraging capabilities of all individuals
6. Uses a variety of data to improve the school's instructional program
7. Coordinates development of a written statement of the school's beliefs and goals
8. Determines whether the individual educational needs of pupils are being met
9. Evaluates the performance of the certified and classified staff members
10. Interprets, implements, and maintains school board policies and state school laws
11. Develops a program of public relations to further community support
12. Administers the school's budgeted allocations
13. Directs activities involving pupil and parent contacts concerning registrations, credits and transfers, suspensions, expulsions, pupil progress, placement, guidance and counseling matters, and other matters of a personal nature
14. Possesses a thorough understanding of child growth and development
15. Engages in a program of continuing professional development
16. Orients newly assigned staff members and ensures their familiarization with school policies and procedures, teaching materials, and school facilities
17. Creates a strong sense of togetherness through human relations technique
18. Possesses skill in conflict resolution, decision making, and consensus building
19. Performs other related duties as requested

**Requirements:** Valid certificate and five years of teaching experience.  
Salary commensurate with experience.

Source: Thompson, D. C., Crampton, F. E., & Wood, R. C., 2012, p. 199.

Figure 2 | **Daily Responsibilities of a Building Leader**

1. Confirm transportation for morning, mid-day, and afternoon. Deal with any conflicts regarding regular routes and/or activity trips (I am also the "Transportation Director").
2. Deal with any potential teacher evaluation-related items. It seems this is happening all year long between observations, pre/post-conferences, PD plans, etc.
3. Prepare for any upcoming BOE or Committee meetings. Distribute information to the public via email, Twitter, website, etc.
4. Deal with any student behavior. Fill out necessary paperwork, inform parents, inform staff, make placements.
5. Deal with any staff problems or behavior. At least one staff member per day needs something. It may be action on my part, advice, support, or simply just listening, but there is never a day that at least one person doesn't need something.
6. Attend to any business-related transactions. I approve all Purchase Requisitions and work directly with the BOE clerk. This also includes working with the HS secretary on activity account transactions.
7. Help resolve any conflicts or planning for specific events, staff absences, activities, or otherwise. There is always some form of "scheduling/planning" that has to be attended to every day.
8. Attend any required meetings for KSDE, KELI, I-Can, WKLL, KASB, USA, or otherwise. I have to make it to the required meetings, but then still need to keep my own personal professional learning a priority.
9. Attend any JH/HS activities if I can when I don't have conflicts. We are on a rotation for away activities and I take my share. However, I provide support for set-up and hosting for as many home events as possible throughout the year. Provide support/supervision to all coaches and ADs as well.
10. Possibly get into some classrooms and/or hallways to maintain a physical presence. As the year wears on each Spring, this becomes less and less unfortunately, due to the aforementioned.
11. Supervise Maintenance Department. Advise and/or approve any purchases, projects, planning, or otherwise. This includes working with the various contractors that we have to as a result of our limited staff.
12. This time of year is IEP season; I have at least 3 per week.
13. Answer a varying and diverse amount of phone calls, emails, and text messages ranging in topic, variety, and from whom.

Source: P-12 principal from a rural, 1A school, personal communication.

You can see the variety of typical duties. Yet, regardless of the specific district assignment, all building-level positions require the same KSDE license. The building leadership preparation program must provide breadth and depth of both knowledge and skills.

### ***Building Leader as Key Instructional Leader***

The knowledge and skills to be an effective school leader require depth and breadth. Issues related to curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment are critical components of an instructional leader. Also important are the skills of managing the school building, including communication, use of social media, working with parents, and community engagement. We know these interaction and communication skills are critical to be an effective school leader.

Much has been written about the principal as the instructional leader in the building (Lunenburg, 2010; Marzano, 2005; Mendels, 2013; Stronge, Richard, & Catano, 2008). There is no doubt that this is a crucial role for a building leader, regardless of district demographics. Programs must address instructional leadership roles and responsibilities for all learners. A critical part of this role involves evaluating teacher effectiveness as defined by student learning gains. As part of the continuous improvement cycle, timely feedback and opportunities to enhance teaching skills is the responsibility of the leadership team in the building.

### ***Building Leader as Key Culture Establisher***

The principal sets the tone in the building. But how is tone defined? The climate, the culture, the happiness in the hallways? Perhaps, yes. School climate includes the culture of learning, and building the context for this to occur is critical (DeWitt & Slade, 2014). I think it is safe to say that we all want such an environment, yet it takes focused effort to create such a learning context.

As schools in Kansas become increasingly diverse, the roles related to nurturing the building culture become more important. Schools with strong character education and anti-bullying programming focus on treating all students and staff with respect. Further, focusing on building leadership capacity throughout the school building enhances a culture not only of acceptance, but also of ownership toward learning.

### ***Building Leader as Key Change Agent***

School leaders are responsible for leading change within their educational system. Moving from what worked in the past, to what is needed in the future can be daunting. Fullan notes, "effective school leaders are key to large-scale, sustainable education reform" (2002, 16). What a responsibility!

The building leader must be part of a team of professionals, each bringing their own strengths. The principal is responsible for empowering educator teams to research new curriculum, implement new programming, and seek professional development that promotes the vision of the district leadership. Strong and impactful teams create strong and impactful schools.

### ***Educational Preparation Programs for the Future***

While no one enters an IHE preparation program strong in all areas, the program must build skills in all areas. Graduate school must prepare the building leader for practice. In our discussion about defining a school building leader, it is evident that the roles and responsibilities vary greatly. With the job emphasizing instruction and learning, culture building, and leading change as common themes, the question then becomes: what do educational leadership preparation programs need to consider for the future?

With the understanding that no one person can address all building needs, a focus on teams is needed. Teams of professionals focusing on different needs can accomplish more than any one individual. So ideally, groups of emerging leaders from a particular school or district coming together as a cohort to work through a program together, provides opportunities to reflect deeply on their particular needs, challenges, and strengths. This is exactly what Kansas State University's partnership academy model represents.

Strong collaboration between the institution of higher education and the district wanting to build capacity is critical. The students entering these cohort-based programs may have aspirations to become building leaders or may choose to lead from their classrooms. It is the leadership capacity of the entire building – professional staff and students – that leads to a culture focused on respect and learning. Strong district and university partnerships prepare effective school

leaders. K-State's academy partnerships require belief in the importance of leadership and commitment to the collaborative process.

With district and university partners working together to develop the curriculum, we ensure that connections are made between theory and practice. Further, the curriculum is relevant to the learning context within that particular partnership area. District partners have the opportunity to present real challenges for academy students to address. University faculty see real-world scenarios first hand. Learning is a benefit to all involved– university faculty, aspiring leaders, and practicing school leaders.

Not all districts in Kansas have the capacity to send teams as a district cohort. There are simply not the numbers of educators available to fill a district cohort model. However, an academy model of delivery can still exist. With dedicated faculty building on key concepts, while putting responsibility on students to connect their learning to their particular context and connecting to the school partner, the weaving of theory to practice occurs. Building networks through discussion and reflection are important components to any model preparing school leaders for the future. At the same time, students should be challenged as their critical thinking skills are enhanced to consider common issues in their coursework, based on real data.

There is no doubt that school leadership preparation programs must reflect the learning environments in which children learn. Further, we know that the student demographics are changing in every school in America. Educator leader preparation programs must reflect student needs, while preparing leaders to accept the challenging and complex responsibilities of the future. Students are relying on this as they focus on learning.



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