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The Kansas State University Chair of the Department of Educational Leadership reviews the strong history of his department's university and public school partnerships and the impact he has seen those partnerships have on leadership preparation programs.

# Revisiting Public School/University Partnerships for Formal Leadership Development: A Brief 30-Year Retrospective

David C. Thompson

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## Introduction

Almost exactly 30 years ago, Kansas State University foresaw the power of partnerships with public schools in preparing new generations of formal school leaders. A themed issue of *Educational Considerations* (Fall 1988)<sup>1</sup> celebrated that recognition, showcasing how the university had partnered with selected large Kansas school districts for development of leadership capacity. It was not only the university that recognized such power – then Commissioner Lee Droegemuller noted in the inside front cover of the special issue of *Educational Considerations* that real change in schools through partnerships requires “specific, mutually agreed-upon goals and objectives [wherein] each partner knows what the other has to offer and has a realistic view of what might be accomplished; ...employability, curriculum and skill development, and management and leadership; [and] leverage of both financial and human resources.”

These insights proved exactly on target for Kansas State University and partner school districts over the next three decades. Partnerships for leadership development – known as leadership academies,<sup>2</sup> in this case – took root, prospered, evolved, and multiplied to the point at which today K-State is simultaneously partnering with no fewer than seven school districts statewide in mid-2016, all having the purpose of developing formal school leadership capacity and leadership succession plans. These academies have also broadened to include other leadership recognition, most notably distributed leadership for systemic strength and optimization of human capital resources. This outcome was possible only because all partners were committed to unusual risk and were insightful in rearranging tradition to accommodate new models of inquiry, new models of institutional support, and new models of thinking about authority, power, and hierarchies in the educational world. The story of this success is retraced here in brief.

## Transitions from Traditions

The centuries-old model of higher education, wherein students come to the ivory tower to learn at the feet of the masters, went out the window in K-State's case nearly 30 years ago. The context of the original birth and subsequent rebirth and expansion of new models of leadership academies (circa 2000) was grounded in dissatisfaction on the part of the university because it came to realize that its faculty held deep knowledge but often lacked either currency of field experience, or in some cases, no experience at all. At the same time the university was struggling with its disconnect from dynamic practice, Kansas school districts in general were forging their own alternatives to that same disconnect by championing and relying on noncredit in-service models of professional development, with the full support of the state department of education. While anyone wanting a professional license in order to serve as a school leader still needed to pursue a traditional university course of tightly prescribed study, practicing school leaders had no compelling reason to return to a university setting except to earn additional degrees. Simultaneously, schools and their leadership ranks were losing the benefit of deep theory-based knowledge of university faculty. While it might appear that schools actually created and desired this rift by promoting alternatives to credit-based learning, it was actually the case that each group – university faculty at K-State and top leadership in Kansas school districts – were each lamenting the divide and were actively seeking a bridge to rejoin these critical forces.

## First Wave

The joining happened in two distinct phases, with evolution, growth, and maturation over the following decades. Initially in 1987, K-State and one large nearby school system agreed to provide selected in-service building-level administrative leaders (assistant and head principals) with additional professional development for academic credit. Agreement was reached that the university would work with appointed senior school district leaders to coplan and coteach a series of courses for credit that would be counted toward terminal degrees if participants desired. The university's gain was obvious: it gained entry into a real live school district, gained recognition and credibility in the field of practice, added new degree aspirants, and gained teaching resources in the form of school district personnel who were appointed to adjunct faculty rank at the university. The school district's gain was equally obvious: it gained targeted internal staff development at the highest academic level and provided an opportunity for the district to handpick participants for a two-year extended observation period wherein the district's initial motivation had been to create a senior leadership backfill and succession plan in light of ever-increasing retirements in that district. It also effectually provided the district with the opportunity to tailor elements of coursework in ways that addressed the district's unique urbanized needs. The partnership was so well received that it continued for three more two-year cohorts, ending only because the district succeeded in creating an internal candidate pool that risked growing too large if it continued at its historic rate.

## Second Wave

In 1998, the second and most impactful and enduring stage began. In similar fashion to how the first cohort formed, superintendents from other large school districts in the area also were lamenting in their regular monthly meetings with each other about lack of depth in applicant pools as entry-level principalship vacancies occurred. Already having good relationships with K-State, these superintendents agreed to approach the university to open conversations about a preservice model of shared principal license preparation. The invitation was welcomed with open arms, and collaborative talks between three school districts and the university began. Of deep but unsurprising importance was that the four partner organizations were so committed to the concept of joint planning and delivery that it was agreed from the outset that the districts and the university would coplan every element and codeliver every part of a leadership academy aimed at creating a leadership candidate pool by identifying, recruiting, and selecting participants from among current classroom teachers in their respective districts. The districts proposed that the university be responsible primarily for providing a theory-into-practice knowledge base and being responsible for coleading and coteaching all license courses; at the same time the three districts would be responsible primarily for coleading and coteaching *and* adequately resourcing the academy through financial commitments to release time for participants, resource experts from the districts' own staffs who would provide strategic instruction based on their own employment specialties, and valuable perquisites such as refreshments and travel to selected learning opportunities in the state capital and beyond.

The result was a new style of partnership that would last and expand for decades. The first new-style leadership academy of this second wave began in 2000 and was named the Professional Administrative Leadership Academy (PALA). Enrolling eight students from each of three partner districts, PALA was built around the intellectual and collegial partnership just described and was based on national leadership standards promulgated at that time by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) and on the Kansas State Department of Education's own parallel leadership licensure standards. Participants were carefully chosen by each district, all of which were certain to select participants based on their potential for eventual appointment to a formal administrative position within their school district. All planning and all instruction took place at various central locations, with the university campus used only when gathering academy participants for events like national speakers and library instruction. Participants were paired with mentors, who themselves were exemplary sitting leaders within the three districts.

## A Remarkable Commitment

The transition from university-driven traditions was remarkable because time-honored ways of doing things stopped in dramatic fashion. From the very outset, under the leadership academy vision the university gave up its absolute control of preservice leadership license preparation programs, which notably included no longer claiming to hold all knowledge and all program control. The new way moved school leadership preparation off campus to a vibrant field setting, with full embrace of the unique view that high levels of expertise were housed within both the districts and the university – with both elements needed for a superior preparation program. The new way involved financial commitments likely never before seen, as the university provided faculty for planning and for instruction and also provided direct substantial payment to districts to help defray mentor costs – importantly, these costs were entirely new because the university continued to operate its traditional campus program for students not chosen for an academy, while the academy itself was a closed audience. The new way involved fundamental change within districts as well, as they committed to providing release time for participants, instructional contributions by senior leadership, and many expenses such as travel, conference registrations, refreshments, and more.

Movement to the new model at the university level could have been difficult, but it was not. Kansas State University's College of Education has long been known for modeling promising ventures, and aligning human and fiscal resources with the new model required only that the case be laid with proper care. The model's investment was significant. It required enlisting the enthusiastic support of an entire academic department's faculty whose teaching load changed as a result of the new vision. It required salaries and travel in support of off-campus programming. It required refocusing the vision of leadership preparation to include theory-into-practice in ways that went far beyond lip service to the concept. It required understanding of complex university structures involving academic credit processes, graduate school regulations, and the support of college and university administrators. The college's reputation for innovation made these elements doable within a traditional university macrostructure, along with faculty understanding and support.

## The Outcome

Success of the leadership academy model is evidenced in extensive data on academy reiterations, program completers and employment placements.<sup>3</sup> The original three districts that launched the second wave have so benefited for their own reasons from the academy model that each has had multiple iterations across the past 15 years. One school district has partnered on seven academies for a total of 108 participants. Another has been a district partner on four academies for a total of 43 teacher participants. The third original partner is currently in its third academy for a total of 36 participants. As news spread, additional districts asked for tailored academies to address their leadership needs. As a result, and despite

the reality that Kansas has very few large school districts where deep needs for leadership succession may be thought most prevalent, three additional districts have committed to multiple iterations of academies, totaling eight iterations involving another 115 prospective leaders. In total, 318 teacher leaders chosen by their school districts have been or are in the process of being prepared for service at some level since 2000. Accounting for multidistrict partnerships, another way to perceive the impact is to realize that these data were generated across 19 distinct and unique academy cohorts.

A remarkable aspect of these data, however, rests in one additional concept that has greatly altered the nature of the leadership academy partnership. That concept is that K-State's partner school districts have wisely understood that leadership occurs at all levels and that neglecting the development of leadership capacity at the classroom level is inefficient and unwise. Throughout the history of the K-State leadership academy concept have been the understanding and desire to develop selected faculty and staff who may – or may not – aspire to taking on a traditional administrative leadership role. Consequently, a large number of recent academies have been based in a title more accurately described as *teacher leadership academies*. In this case, participants receive all the learning typically reserved for administrative leadership aspirants, but the program of studies may be modified or shortened to allow for selected topics to be pursued in greater depth depending on district interests. Experience has shown, however, that the eyes-wide-open learning that transpires generally leads participants to complete a full course of studies leading to formal leadership licensure, so much so that to date across 23 academies a large majority of participants ultimately have become employed at a higher level of responsibility within their respective districts than was true when they began their studies. In sum, the academy model works because districts have succeeded in developing deeper leadership candidate pools as proved by their repeated requests for continued academy partnerships.

## The Future

The academy model shows no signs of abating. Several districts are awaiting a start date, and the model has been replicated in other states. K-State is even launching a leadership academy partnership in a bordering state. The challenge is no longer the model or evidence of its success. The challenge is in meeting demand for service, and in sustaining the high cost given severe state pressures to reduce university and school district budgets. There is no doubt the model is expensive. Kansas State University today invests nearly \$200,000 annually in its currently operating seven leadership academies – these dollars are in addition to normal faculty salaries and benefits and are in addition to the costs of operating other traditional programs including campus-based master's and doctoral programs. K-State smartly manages recurring external dollars to support this additional cost – if that source of funding were to cease, it would gravely jeopardize the viability of the academy model because it would place these extended costs back onto base resources that are being slashed by the state in order to pay

for tax cut policies. The defense against such risk is obvious: would either the partner school districts or the university be willing to regress to the old ivory tower model? In a word, a resounding NO. Alternatives would have to be found – there is simply no going back, as the academy model has been established as a top priority for the College of Education at Kansas State University and is part of the university’s long-range vision entitled *K-State 2025*.



## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> See generally *Educational Considerations*, 15(3), Fall 1988.

<sup>2</sup> An important distinction is made here: the earliest versions (1987–1998) of leadership academies, as they were called, were post-master’s degree professional development for practicing school leaders. Subsequent leadership academies have been partnerships for preservice prospective school leaders, providing master’s degrees to the selected participants.

<sup>3</sup> For more data on past leadership academies, see later in this issue, Figures 3, 4, and 5 in Mary Devin’s, “Transforming the Preparation of Leaders into a True Partnership Model.”