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A superintendent of schools shares perspectives from district leadership about the benefits of partnering with the university to prepare teacher and principal leaders.

Leadership Academies: A District Office Perspective

Rick Doll

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Introduction

In 2004, public schools across the country found themselves in the middle of an educational shift to standards-based accreditation. Expectations had changed. Schools were being held accountable for the success of all students. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 established the expectation that all schools must successfully educate all students. This federal legislation changed school accreditation to a model based on high-stakes testing.

At the same time, school budgets tightened. School districts dealt with budget cuts on an annual basis as the political environment changed. When revenues for professional development diminished, leaders had to focus funds on identified needs connected to the new accreditation model.

In this time of great change, research confirmed an important and positive relationship between the role of the administrator and student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004), and the need to build capacity in leaders as part of an effective school improvement process. Leading school improvement efforts became as important as the role of administrators as managers. Preparation programs for administrators needed to be designed to produce candidates who could succeed in this new environment. Those who prepared new administrators and those who supervised novice principals needed to work together to redesign preparation programs and develop support systems for practitioners.

As these significant changes in accreditation and expectations occurred, concerns grew that with a large number of administrators retiring in the near future, the pool of applicants for school-level administration would not meet these new leadership challenges. Superintendents in the state also questioned the manner of preparation of school principals. Specifically, superintendents began to question whether the traditional university program of students taking a series of isolated courses was the best way to prepare principals for this changing environment (Devin, 2004).

A group of Kansas superintendents initiated conversations with Kansas State University about a different way to educate the next generation of school administrators. These conversations resulted in the creation of a master's level partnership academy model to train and credential emerging educational leaders. Under the partnership academy model, the school districts and the university would develop jointly an integrated, spiraling curriculum to replace the isolated courses that made up a traditional master's program. Participants would be jointly recommended for the program and academy projects would be directly tied to initiatives in school districts. The curriculum would align with state and national standards, and school district and university personnel would jointly teach the academy curriculum. Portfolios, projects, feedback from mentors, and year-end interviews would be used to assess students. The overall success of the partnership academy model would be evaluated by determining: the number of qualified candidates for leadership positions, the professional growth of district administrators serving on the planning committee, the benefits of the academy projects for the school districts, and the overall benefits of school district and university partnerships (Miller, Devin, & Shoop, 2007).

Fast-forward to 2016, when multiple leadership academies have been conducted in various school districts across the state for the past 15 years. This article investigates district-level administrators' perceptions regarding the value of the partnership academies. Ultimately, this article used input from seven district administrators who provided feedback regarding the value of the district and university partnership, specific benefits to the district, the differences between participants who envision themselves as future school administrators or as future teacher leaders, retention of graduates, and suggestions for improvement.

Value of Partnership

District administrators reported that their partnership academies achieved one of their original goals: establishing a pipeline for in-house leadership positions. Districts have encouraged educators to participate in these academies and later hired them as administrators or promoted them to other teacher leader positions. Teachers advanced their leadership skills and stayed local; this has been particularly important in some of the geographically isolated areas of the state. Administrators reported a high comfort level with encouraging quality educators to enroll in the academy, which has translated into a pool of quality applicants. This "grow your own" model works. All superintendents interviewed expressed confidence that leadership candidates gained the skills needed to help their schools succeed.

Administrators viewed the partnership academies as a built-in, authentic, and comprehensive professional development opportunity. With projects tied directly to school district initiatives, collaborative planning and problem-solving has advanced those initiatives in direct and positive ways. The academies have tied curriculum to standards AND to school district needs, while also combining theory and practice with robust content and projects. One administrator shared that

the academies take quality educators and help them think differently – from a leadership perspective.

School budgets have continued to be tight in the state, so it is critical to get the most value from professional development opportunities. Administrators report that the academies help move teachers to develop leadership skills and learn content necessary to earn building-level licensure. Superintendents described the academies as places of communal problem-solving – a planning model whereby district challenges become part of the curriculum and projects for the academy participants. Participants learn content while they solve current problems.

One administrator described the academies as being built around people. When school district and university personnel jointly plan the curriculum and projects, they tie directly to identified needs. Tailored to district needs, the academies are relevant to current district operations. With topics routinely linked to theory and current happenings in the school district, the academies directly benefit educators by making them stronger leaders, which ultimately, increases student achievement.

Benefits of the Partnership Academies

In addition to creating a pipeline for leadership through a practical and relevant curriculum, the partnership academies also have benefited the district in several intangible ways. One original planner of the model expressed how they did not anticipate the development of current school administrators as mentors for academy participants. District administrators reported that mentors not only provided valuable coaching for mentees, but also grew their own leadership capacity and became ambassadors for the district when planning for future academies. One Kansas superintendent reported that as the district hired academy graduates, they became mentors for the next generation of academy students, thus perpetuating the learning and mentoring cycle.

As mentees challenged their mentors with questions, district administrators noticed that these mentors had to "up their game." The mentors engaged in individual professional development around coaching topics, and as they examined their own practice, their reflection made them better leaders. Acting as a mentor validated the job that they are doing in their role as principal. Mentors also learned from the ideas that were generated in the academies and were challenged to respond to new ideas around leadership.

The district administrators interviewed also reported positive feelings around watching newer educators grow in their leadership capacity. With the district directly involved in the promotion, selection, planning, and delivery of academy content, district administrators observed the growth of their future leaders. Additionally, they could be assured that the leadership candidates were gaining the skills needed to meet the changing challenges of their school districts. When administrative openings have occurred or when districts have needed teacher leaders, superintendents take comfort in knowing people who could fill these positions. Several superintendents acknowledged that this model is radically different from the traditional manner of educating principals,

and they stated that prior to these partnership academies they may not have known who among their teachers was pursuing licensure to become a principal.

Administrators also mentioned that the academies allowed them the benefit of breaking down barriers between administrators and teachers. In this model, district leaders interact with teachers through the academies, clarifying issues and developing a rapport with them. The academies have served as an informal method for administrators to talk with teachers about school district issues and keep participants informed about national and state issues. District administrators have welcomed the opportunity to engage these future leaders in a more informal class setting. They also report that the school-based projects gave the teacher leaders opportunities to report their findings to the district administration and to the board of education. Also, in many instances the school district has provided meals for the academy participants, and superintendents reported that these meals served as excellent opportunities to interact with the future leaders in a relaxed atmosphere.

One superintendent who works in a more isolated part of the state reported that the need for an academy grew out of their geographic isolation, and there were concerns that “windshield time” for teachers had negatively affected decisions to pursue master’s programs. By delivering academy classes on site, the instructors travel so the students do not have to. Also, as the model has evolved, the introduction of more online learning opportunities has greatly mitigated the challenge of geographic isolation.

District leaders also cited development of a common language for administrators as another academy benefit. One Kansas superintendent reported finding the academy helpful in developing a common language to use throughout the district, since the participants would most likely be future administrators in the district. He stated that simply getting everyone in the organization to use common terms helped to focus the work of the district.

Flexibility of the program was also noted as a significant characteristic of the academy. There was flexibility in the planning process, and as important topics materialized at the district, state, or federal levels, the academy adapted. The district leaders interviewed contrasted this with the course content of a traditional licensure program in which professors have established curriculum regardless of current events. They cited this flexibility as a benefit of the academy, along with the ability to maintain some control of the content through collaborative, ongoing planning.

District administrators also expressed comfort with the good mix of online instruction and face-to-face interaction. Since original academies were designed prior to the advent of online instruction, the professors traveled to the school districts. This practice continues, but some online instruction has replaced a portion of the face-to-face meetings. District administrators have valued keeping this face-to-face instruction and reported satisfaction with the current mix. This shift mirrors what is happening in public education as schools implement blended learning models.

Teacher Leaders versus Administrative Preparation

The original mission of the partnership academies was to develop pipelines for administrative positions, and this mission has been accomplished. However, the creators of the partnership academy model may not have envisioned a secondary benefit – the development of teacher leaders outside of the administrative track.

As the expectations have changed from individual teachers taking responsibility for their individual students to a system in which all teachers take responsibility for all students, districts needed more teacher leaders. District administrators reported that the academies have helped develop these teacher leadership skills, whether teachers have become administrators or have continued teaching and taken on other leadership roles. For example, several superintendents reported that Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have become the norm in their schools, and there has been a need for teacher leaders to facilitate this effort. The leadership of PLCs can be challenging because peers must work together to solve problems and make decisions. Administrators reported that the academy has prepared leaders for this model of school improvement, as academy graduates understand not only the theory behind school improvement, they also understand the practical issues in their school, making them better able to lead.

School districts have also been moving to include more teacher input into the goal-setting and goal-implementation process. The increased number of initiatives has created a need in the districts for more teacher leaders who have been trained in the leadership process. Superintendents reported that graduates of the academies have been more ready to lead these efforts and principals have had a leadership pool ready to take on new responsibilities. They have learned not only effective leadership skills but have gained a better understanding of “big picture” issues, such as accreditation and the change process. For some teachers, this new leadership capacity has helped fill a personal need, and superintendents reported that some teachers want to advance their careers, but also want to stay in the classroom. Ultimately, becoming a teacher leader is a valued choice.

The development of teacher leaders has also helped to break down barriers between administrators and teachers. One superintendent stated that academy participants are people that he knows, respects, and encourages to become leaders. Another superintendent reported that the academy takes quality educators and helps them think differently—from a leadership perspective, whether they desire to be future administrators or not.

In regards to the commitment levels of these teacher leaders, it is important to note that those interviewed did not distinguish any difference between those participants who envisioned themselves as future administrators and those who saw themselves as teacher leaders. One district office administrator observed that once teachers feel that teacher leadership is valued, they own their decision to remain teachers and commit to providing leadership for their school. Additionally, some teachers have started to see themselves as

administrators while participating in the academy, even if they had not planned that outcome.

Retention of Graduates

Administrators unanimously agreed that the partnership academies help retain employees. Even in one district where the administrator described high turnover, it was clear that the academy greatly increased retention. They noticed that most graduates of the academy stayed in their current district, and many became administrators. Another district reported that their institution has retained many academy graduates as teacher leaders, and has promoted some to administrative positions.

Regardless, both teacher leaders and new administrators have been more likely to stay in their home districts. Those interviewed reported that teacher leaders stay because they feel valued and have become more connected to district projects completed or initiated through the academy. One superintendent reported that teachers feel good when they contribute to the overall health of a school, as they own their challenges and commit to problem-solving. Overall, becoming part of a team increases a teacher's commitment to the school and ultimately aids retention.

Areas of Improvement

All administrators interviewed expressed strong support for the partnership academy model and they pointed to a strong, collaborative relationship with the university. The academies have enabled districts to overcome barriers identified when working with other universities, and administrators reported the university's flexibility in the design of the program as critical to its success. All of those interviewed cited the leadership of KSU faculty as a strength of the program, and many specifically credited Mary Devin, Ph.D., for providing flexibility in the design of the program and continuity, particularly in the early years of the master's level partnership academies.

Administrators suggested improving the program by providing more training for the mentors. The role of the mentors has evolved and become a key component in the partnership academy model. The relationship between the mentor and mentee is very important as academy leaders strive towards the mission of tying theory to practice and in some cases, the mentors have not received training. The increased effectiveness of the mentors will be key to the continued success of the academies. Administrators also suggested that mentors be given time to meet and experience professional development around the mentoring role. One superintendent pointed out that another program at Kansas State University – the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute, whose mission is to provide mentoring for new administrators – could be utilized for this needed professional development.

One superintendent suggested that more connections with college professors could be helpful, as this would enable the academies to better balance the theory and practice of leadership. There was another suggestion that the university and school district communicate the accomplishments of the

academies to other universities and school districts. With its success, the partnership academy model should replace other traditional university programs.¹

Conclusion

The need to provide a pipeline of qualified applicants for building-level principal positions led to the creation of Kansas State University's master's partnership academy model. School districts wanted to be more involved in the education of these future administrators, partially because of the changes resulting from the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and university professionals had an interest in developing a program that would meet the needs of this new high-accountability environment and remain relevant in the education of the next generation of school administrators. According to administrators interviewed, the collaborative efforts of school districts and Kansas State University paid off with a system of highly functioning partnership academies.

In addition to solving the practical need to establish a pool of local candidates for future administrative positions, the mission of the partnership academy model expanded to provide professional and collaborative training that blended theory with practice. University professors have planned the program with district leaders and they have collaboratively taught standards through project-based learning built around authentic challenges in the schools. In the era before online education, districts cited a need to reduce "windshield time" for participants and it became highly beneficial to create a site-based, off-campus academy.

According to the district administrators, the academy model has accomplished its original mission to establish a pool of applicants. Districts and university personnel have jointly planned a program that ties to standards and relevant school issues. The continuation of academies in the original partner districts also speaks to the quality of the partnership model.

District administrators also pointed to the emergence of other positive results, perhaps as important as the accomplishment of the original intent of the academies. These results revolve around the emergence of teacher leaders, the development of mentors, and breaking down barriers between administrators and teachers.

The emergence of the teacher leader, educators who do not want to become administrators but do want to lead, may be the most positive unintended result of the academies. Administrators clearly stated that these teacher leaders have filled a void created as school districts shift to a system in which all educators must take responsibility for all students. Professional Learning Communities drive school change and the committee structure of the PLC model requires skilled educators to lead and continue to teach. Ultimately, the academies provide a pool of teacher leaders to help lead their respective school improvement processes.

While unplanned, the contribution to professional growth of administrative mentors in the academies became another important development. Administrators noticed that the mentoring part of the program greatly benefitted the not only students, but also the mentors. Students gained knowledge of how theory fits into the practical, day-to-day running of

a school and mentors gained valuable insight into the latest leadership theory. Although it was an unplanned outcome, administrators are reporting that the mentors gained as much as the mentees.

Finally, administrators reported that the academies break down barriers between administrators and teachers. With this partnership model, local administrators plan the curriculum, select participants, teach content, plan projects, and evaluate the students and the program. As administrators interact with the participants in the academy, they build leadership capacity, dispel rumors, communicate district goals, and generally explain district issues. District administrators who are directly involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the academies enthusiastically support the model.



Endnote

¹ Later in this issue, two articles discuss replicability of the partnership academy: Tom Hall and Ann Clapper's "North Dakota's experience with the academy model: A successful replication," and Alex RedCorn's "Stitching a new pattern in educational leadership: Reinterpreting a university partnership academy model for native nations."

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