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Partnership academy graduates focus on student perspectives in the academies through the use of surveys and through personal narratives of their own experiences.

# Inspiring Confidence and Professional Growth in Leadership: Student Perspectives on University-District Partnership Master's Academies

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*Change really isn't as hard as we thought if we capture people's interest and give them enjoyable, worthwhile experiences.*  
– Michael Fullan (2013, p. 77)

## Introduction

School leadership matters when discussing teacher effectiveness and student performance, and preparation programs need to graduate principals with the skills necessary to lead schools for tomorrow. The traditional approach to preparing educational leaders is no longer getting the job done. It is going to take everyone working together to better prepare those who will lead the schools we need (Miller, T., Devin, M., Shoop, 2005). Working together is exactly what Kansas State University (KSU) is doing by partnering with public school leaders to design a preparation program for leaders based on an effective blend of theory and practice. This collaborative relationship, in the form of university-district partnership master's degree academies, have prepared over 300 educators in the last 15 years for various leadership responsibilities at the building level, whether serving from the classroom or in an administrative position. As students who completed such a KSU-district partnership academy as part of our professional development, we can speak to the experience of being a student in the academy and we can comment on connections between our learning experiences and the leadership roles we have assumed in the years after the academy.

After reflecting on our own experiences and reaching out to other former academy students, we found that the partnership master's academies inspire high levels of confidence and professional growth in students, and at the same time helped the students think systemically as members of a larger organization.

## General Academy Benefits

Partnership academies give students hands-on learning experiences that engage them in the day-to-day realities of a school from a leadership perspective. Students in the

academy study current research, partner in a mentorship, engage in assignments and field experiences based on Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008), and reflect on their learning in order to grow as leaders. Through these experiences, students are given the opportunity to immediately make connections between theory and practice and to apply them in authentic situations. Students are empowered to own and make choices in their learning and truly receive a personalized learning experience. They connect theory to practice within their own work settings, design individualized projects, reflect on learning with their mentors, and share evidence of thinking and learning during class. These experiences not only strengthen the leadership skills of the students but also of the learning organizations.

The partnerships between KSU and public schools allow aspiring leaders to have realistic experiences. This preparation model prepares students by encouraging them to take knowledge gained and put it into practice, building the capacity needed to lead the schools Kansas students deserve to be successful.

### **Academy Model Outline**

When school districts partner with Kansas State University to create a master's leadership academy, they make a commitment to increase the leadership capacity of the staff members selected to participate as students in the academy. The model itself can look different based on individual districts' needs. However, there are characteristics common to most academy partnerships.

Structurally, the partnership academy model is designed as a master's cohort in which the same group of students move through the two-year program together. Cohort groups allow the selected participants to take courses together as a group in a pre-established sequence. The university provides one or two instructors and the district provides a district liaison who all support the cohort throughout the two years. Guest instructors may add expertise on selected topics. All of these instructors work together to facilitate learning, adjusting materials to meet the specific needs of the cohort and of the school district partner.

In each academy, partners collaboratively select course materials and design the assignments and requirements for student activities. In addition to a strong research focus within the six ISLLC standards, each academy member is tasked with completing multiple observations, projects, and a final portfolio, all of which demonstrate growth in each of the ISLLC standards and learning about how they are applied in district operations. This content prepares students for the Praxis School Level Leadership Licensure exam, should academy members decide to take it to acquire a principal's license, and aligns the academy learning experiences with national standards.

Ultimately, the master's partnership academy format gave us the opportunity to experience a learning environment that was rich in theory, but also allowed us to gain real-world local experience while progressing with a cohort of our peers.

### **Student Views on the Partnership Academy Model: Survey Findings**

As cocontributors to this themed issue of *Educational Considerations*, we would like to use this platform to highlight the student perspective of this model. However, before sharing our personal experiences as students, we wanted to present a broader view of the student perspective by collecting information from as many past academy participants as possible through the administration of a survey. We chose four districts that had partnered on three or more academies and located email contacts for former academy students still working in those districts. While some individuals had relocated and a few had retired, the majority of academy completers had remained in the same district.

#### **Survey**

A 13-question survey was designed consisting of both Likert-type questions and open-response questions. The survey was created using Google and was emailed to all participants along with a brief explanation; participants had 10 days to respond to the survey. Thirty-eight participants from the four district partners responded. Although the response rate was lower than we had hoped, we will share what we discovered.

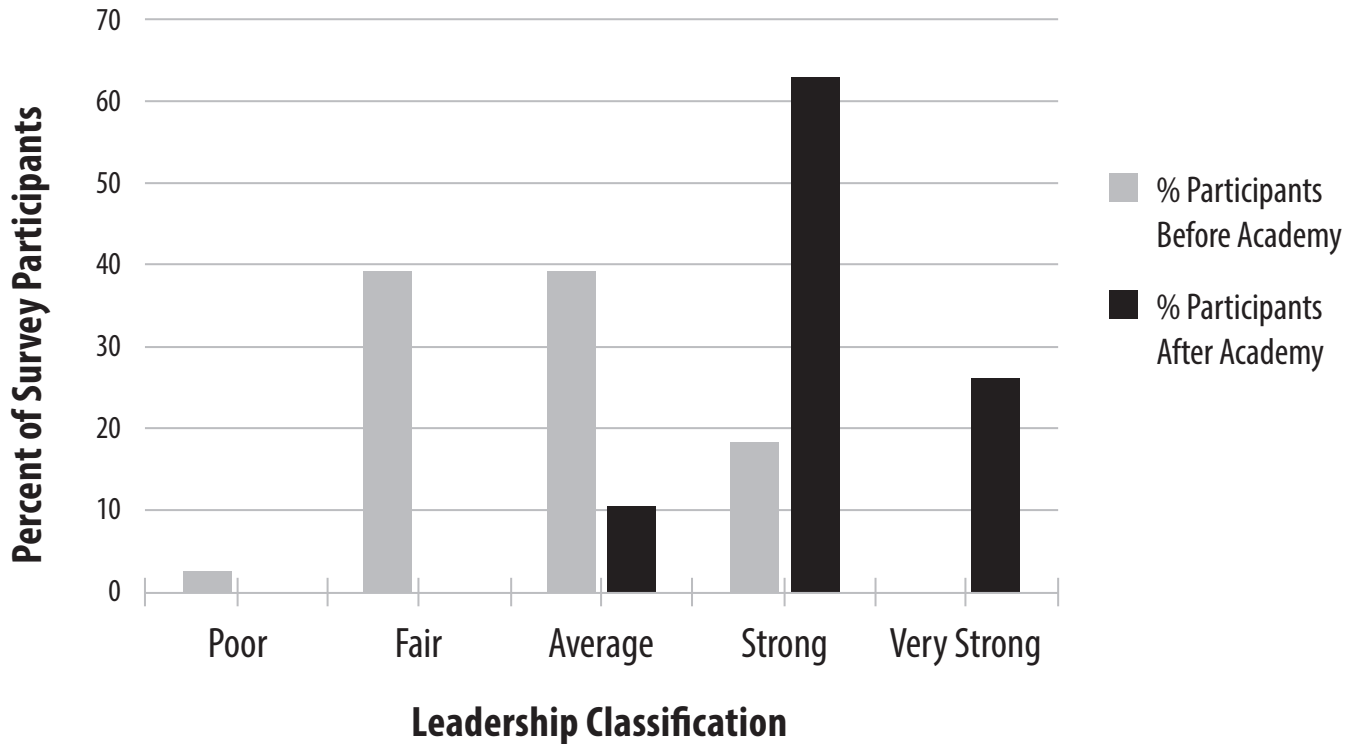
#### **Processing the response data**

To analyze the data, we used a version of in vivo coding. Saldaña (2013) states that in vivo is one of several first-cycle coding methods "that prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (p. 91). In vivo coding fractures the data into segments that represent individual codes and then each one is "taken directly from what the participant himself says and is placed in quotation marks" (Brenner, 2006, p. 363). The reason for using this coding method is to keep the data rooted in the participants' own language as well as using their own words (Creswell, 2007; Saldaña, 2013), in an attempt to keep the language authentic. Once we received the results of the survey, we coded in search of commonalities across the answers and identified several categories within the responses. We graphed those categories to illustrate how the majority of the participants had responded. Responses that did not require open response analysis were graphed separately.

#### **Findings**

After collecting the surveys and analyzing the responses, we found that the participants reported significant increases in their leadership self-efficacy in multiple ways, along with common recognition of key academy learning experiences reported as influential to their leadership development. Additionally, there were multiple data pieces that indicated enhanced student ability to think at an organization level, and other findings that indicated a close balance between the number of academy graduates choosing building level licensure and those staying in the classroom. Most significantly, participants reported feeling mostly confident in taking on leadership responsibilities after they graduated from their academies, and they strongly believe that the academy improved their professional performance.

Figure 1 | Self-Reported Change in Leadership Self-Efficacy Before and After Academy



**Improved Self-Efficacy:** Regarding self-efficacy, former academy students indicated that they believe their leadership capacities significantly improved from the beginning of their experience in an academy compared to when it ended (See Figure 1). At the beginning of the academy 18.4% of the participants reported having strong or very strong leadership skills, compared to 89.5% by the time the academy ended. This overall change (71.1%) indicates students who completed the academy felt a strong sense of growth in their leadership capacities, and that they left with a strong foundation of leadership self-efficacy.

**Big-Impact Learning Experiences:** Additionally, in vivo coding analysis of survey responses indicated that participants were significantly impacted by key academy learning experiences in a variety of common ways, as illustrated in Figure 2. The category cited most frequently across responses was in reference to how the academy was successful in developing leaders who are more adept in understanding, applying, and following the learning/transformational process in their organization (27%). Also commonly referenced were the advantages of professional networking opportunities within the academy (23%), shared statements about improving systemic thinking (11%), the effectiveness of instructors (11%), the quality of instructional materials (12%), and the overall value of gaining authentic experience (10%) throughout the learning process. Collectively, former students felt these to be clear areas of strength in the academy model.

**Organizational and Systemic Thinking:** From an organizational standpoint, the participants were definitely concerned about their professional growth, but they also demonstrated care for the growth of their organizations. The design of the university-district partnership master's academy is fluid and cohesive, allowing students to see tangible connections between topics, structures, organizations, and other elements that function as joint entities. As such, it imparts an understanding that "reduces the isolation often mentioned by new educational leaders as a reason to leave the profession entirely ...and the networking that results from the class sessions, the field experiences, and the mentoring provides participants with a rich support system from which to work" (Miller, Devin, & Shoop, 2007, p. 70). Participants begin to understand the big picture and to know the importance of networking and collaborating with others to meet organizational goals.

When asked about how the academy prepared them for subsequent leadership roles, many participants indicated that the academy experience helped prepare them to think systemically (42%) as well as better understand and value collaborating with other professionals (27%), as shown in Figure 3. Also of note is that 11% of survey respondents indicated the academy prepared them to become reflective practitioners in their subsequent leadership roles.

Additionally, the following statements from survey participants show that participants learned to think on a systems level, and move the organization forward:

Figure 2 | Academy Learning Experiences Perceived to be Significant in Developing Leadership

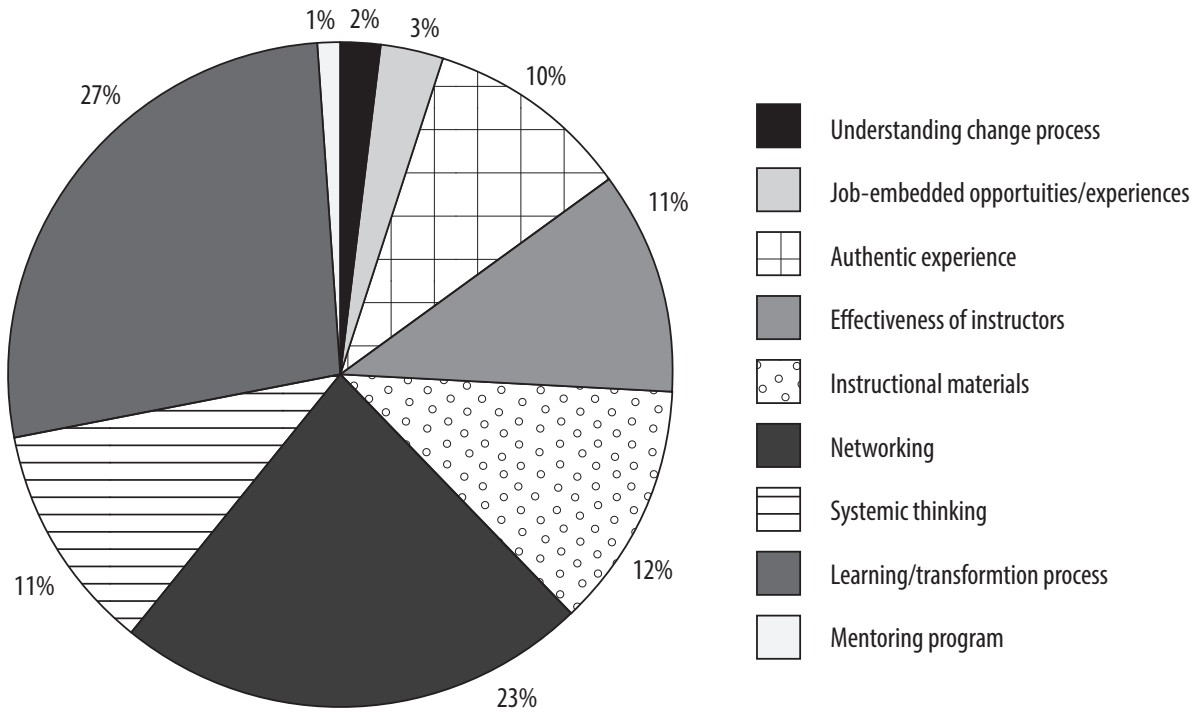
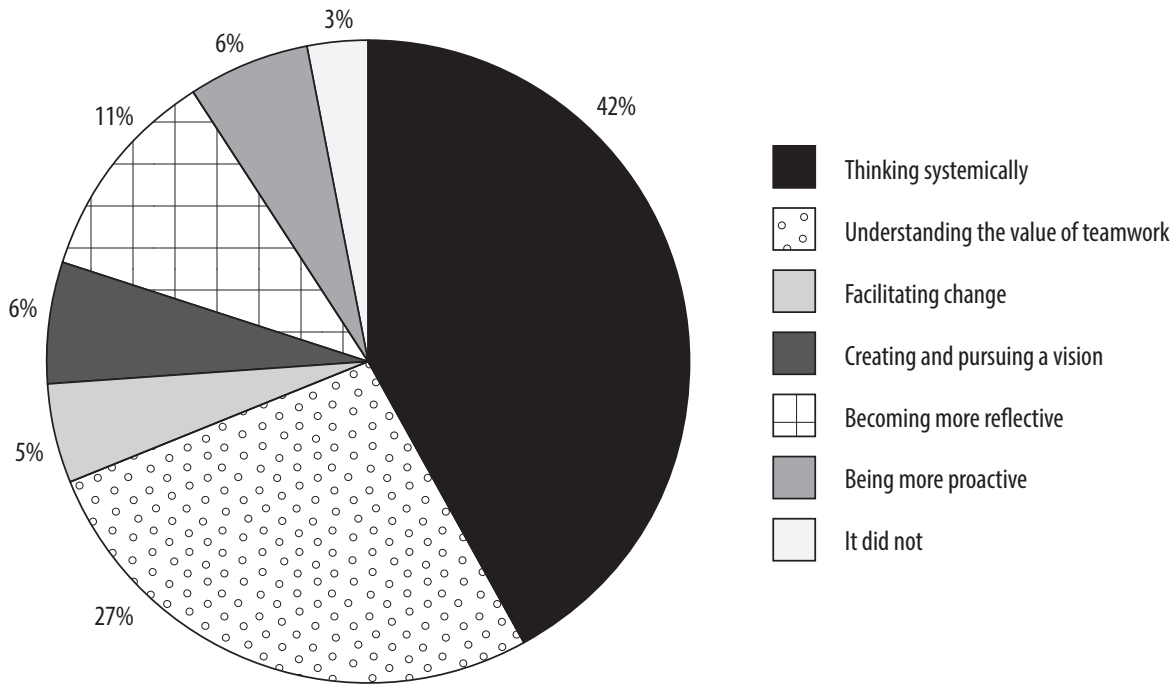


Figure 3 | How Academy Prepared Participants for Subsequent Leadership Roles



- "I am able to see the system from the balcony and how changes impact all stakeholders. I am able to reach out to others who have strengths where I may have weaknesses. I am able to see the value of planning, reflection, and evaluation of our system and change."
- "[I] learn[ed] how to shape the culture of my school to improve student learning."
- "I am able to look at the 'big picture' more clearly when involved in developing curriculum, training professionals and working with colleagues."
- "[I learned] the importance of developing meaningful and honest relationships to work through hard situations and tough changes with unity and optimism."
- "I also learned that I shouldn't try and go at it alone."
- "[I was] provided the opportunity/reason/excuse/requirement to step out of comfort zones and tackle projects and issues out of our four classroom walls."
- "[I was] provided opportunities to collaborate with those who were already in leadership roles and learn from their experiences."

These comments speak to the professional capital and systemic thinking attained during the partnership academy that allows students to catapult not only themselves, but also the organizations to which they belong.

**Building-Level Licensure vs. Returning to the Classroom:** Regarding building-level licensure and the development of leaders who stay in the classroom, the respondents indicated that a significant number moved on to pursue building-level licensure and left the classroom for other assignments, but many academy graduates elected to stay in the classroom. Specifically, of the 38 survey respondents, 58% subsequently enrolled in two more university classes (the option offered as an extension to the academy requirements) and successfully passed the Praxis to obtain building licensure. The other 42% did not complete licensure requirements (at the time of the survey), choosing instead to lead in meaningful and important ways from classroom positions.

For teachers committed to working directly with students in the classroom, school administration does not always sound appealing, and this can result in hesitation to join a leadership academy. However, the academies offer students a pathway to administration, and also offer emerging leaders the opportunity to enhance their skills while staying in the classroom. This is an important finding, considering it illustrates how the academies build leadership capacity across the organization, and not just at one level of the hierarchy.

**Comfortable Leaders:** Survey responses showed that participants felt significantly more comfortable taking on new leadership roles when the academy ended. As indicated earlier, the academy experience made them think like leaders outside of their classrooms and even outside of their schools, giving them a broader understanding of how a

Figure 4 | Participants' Comfort Level Taking On New Leadership Roles Post-Academy

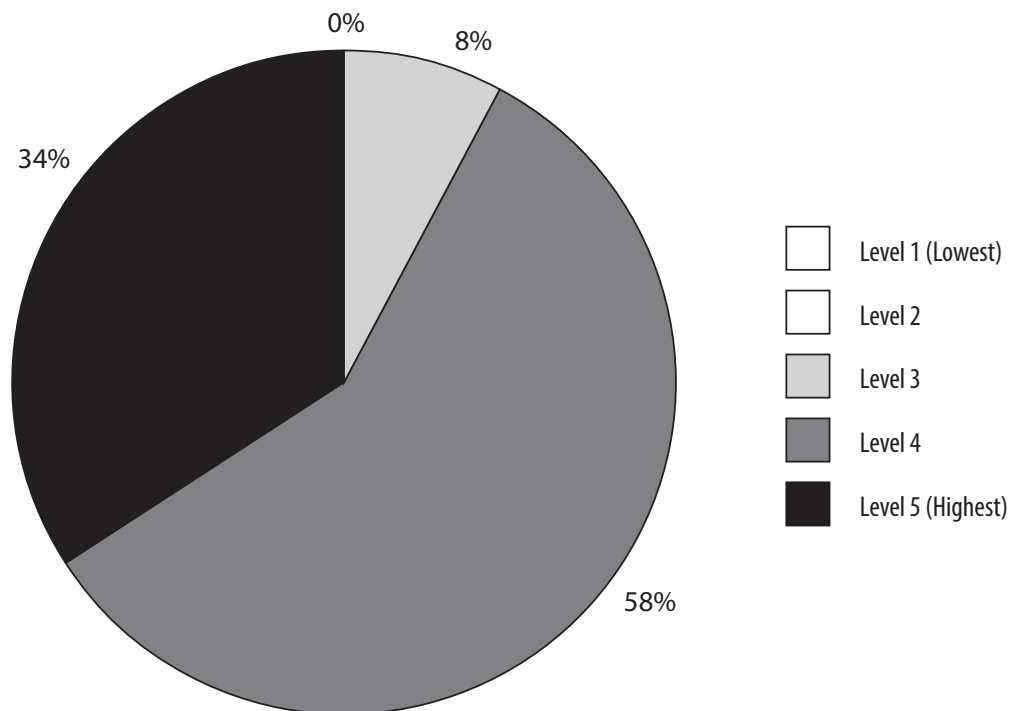


Figure 5 | Participants' Comfort Level Taking On New Leadership Roles Outside of School Post-Academy

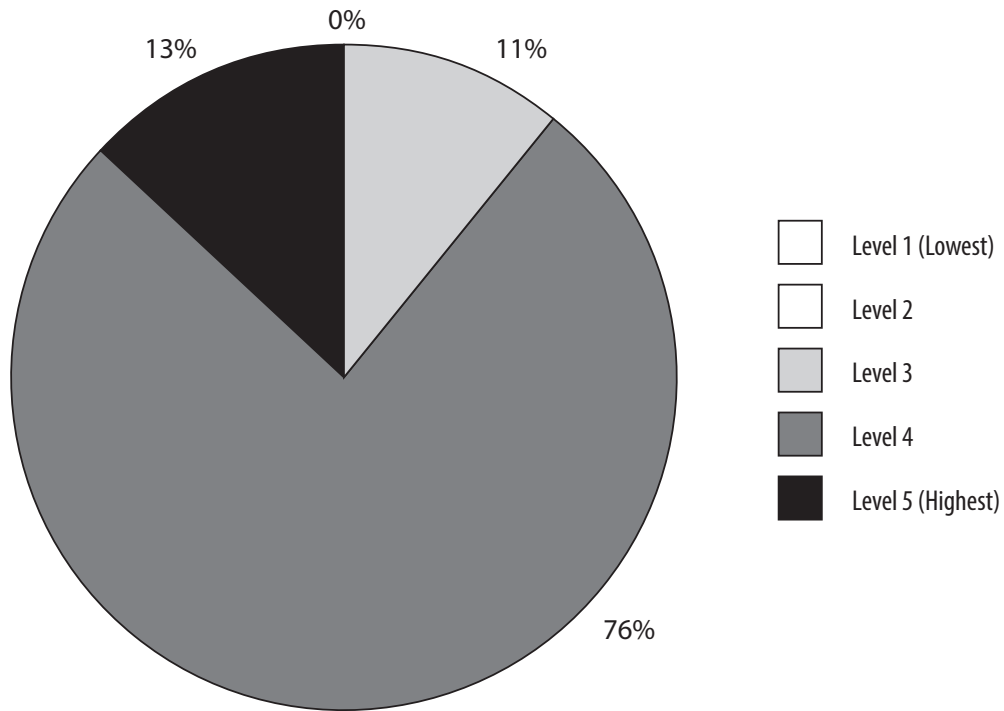
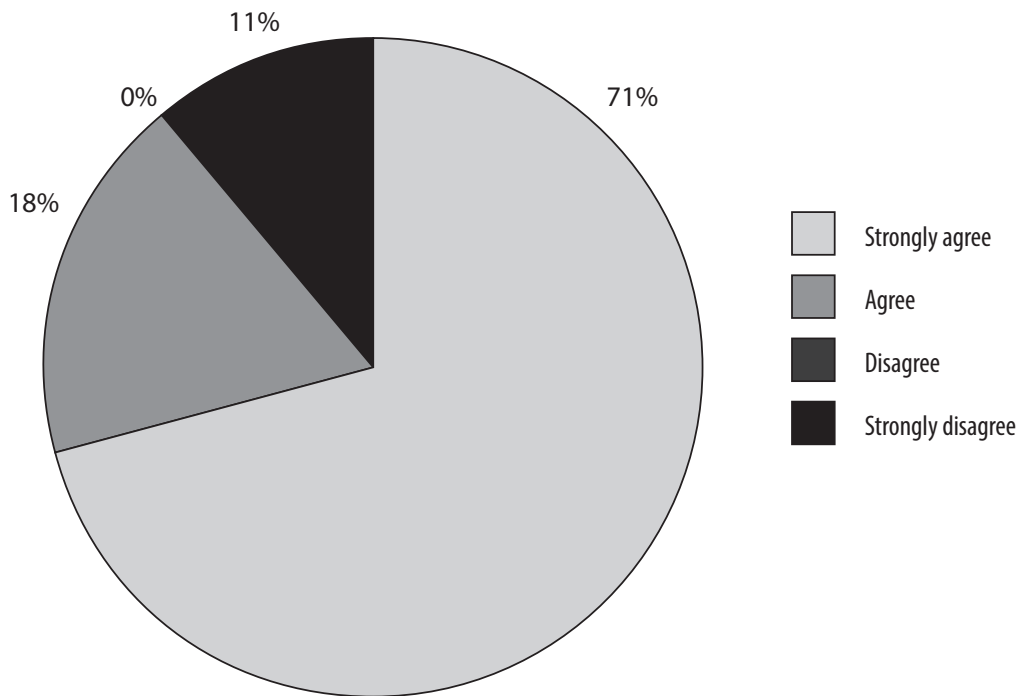


Figure 6 | Student's Perception of Academy Influence on Improved Professional Performance



system works. One participant reported feeling confident in making decisions because of a broader knowledge of how the entire school system is effected by events and decisions. Throughout the survey responses, and as illustrated in Figure 4, this newfound confidence was confirmed. On a scale of 1-5, 92% of respondents indicated they were comfortable taking on new leadership responsibilities at a level 4 or 5, with 5 being the highest. Additionally, 89% indicated that they were comfortable taking on new leadership responsibilities outside of their school at a 4 or 5 level, as illustrated in Figure 5. Overall, it is clear that the emerging leaders who graduate from these academies are comfortable with the notion that they can take on new leadership responsibilities upon graduation.

**Improved Professional Performance:** One of the more significant findings was that 89% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the partnership master's academy had improved their professional performance, as seen in Figure 6. Components of the academy that were frequently mentioned for contributing to the participants' professional performance included system networking, quality and continuity of the professors, instructional materials, collegiality of classmates, personalized and applicable projects, and deep understanding of the ISLLC standards.

In conjunction with all data compiled from this survey, it appears that academy graduates clearly believe that their professional leadership capacities had been enhanced by the academy, as they indicate a strong self-efficacy, a strong organizational vision, and a newfound confidence and professionalism as they embark on new tasks.

Now with the greater picture for reference, we share our personal stories.

### **Student Views on the Partnership Academy Model: Personal Stories**

As former students in the partnership academy model, we have experienced what it feels like to be an emerging leader in this nontraditional learning environment. To help illustrate what the academy looks and feels like from this very important vantage point, we will now share our personal reflections based on our firsthand experiences in the academies.

#### ***Personal Academy Reflection One***

It was the Fall of 2011 when I had started contemplating what I might do next to further my education and my job opportunities. Three years prior, I had graduated with a Master's degree from the University of Kansas, which had opened doors for me, but I knew that was not the end. My love for learning and growing would not allow me to stall. My heart was telling me that I needed to start considering what my next steps would be. Thinking with a certain "end" in mind, I had a pretty clear vision of where I wanted to get, but I was unclear on what steps to take to make it there.

It was a regular morning at work when a clear path started materializing in my mind after the Deputy Superintendent of my school district paid me an unexpected and unannounced visit. "Have you heard of the Leadership Academy?" he asked. I was not familiar with it and was intrigued. Leadership. That word resounded with me. "Tell me more," I asserted skeptically. He shared all the information he had about it and led me to the place where I could become fully informed. "Just apply," were some of his last words and, after thanking him for taking the time out of his day to come to my office, he was on his way. And my wheels were turning!

Not long after that very special visit I found myself filling up application forms, gathering transcripts, and asking for letters of recommendation to start what could become a second master's degree for me. I, along with another nine Topeka Public Schools educators, got in and a new journey began in the Spring of 2012. For two years, I embarked in what turned out to be the richest, most authentic, important and relevant educational experience I had ever had. While in the Topeka Public Schools Leadership Academy (TPSLA), I gained true understanding of what leadership means. I held a common misconception about leadership prior, which was linked to title or power. Soon after starting the program, that changed and I learned about distributed leadership and how anyone can lead, in a multitude of capacities, when given the opportunity. This became the basis of my transformation during the TPSLA. I was growing in ways that I yearned for during my time in the classroom and as an instructional coach. By the time the experience ended, I had morphed into a change agent and a transformational leader who clearly believed that the best results in any undertaking are always best when conceived and achieved as a team. But this did not happen overnight nor by accident. All of it was possible due to the design of the TPSLA and to the quality of the instructors.

Having one professor to lead the bulk experience with the assistance of other quality ones, allowed for the two years to be cohesive and interconnected throughout. This also allowed me to gradually evolve into a systemic thinker who was ready to take on much more responsibility and help all students now that I had the tools I needed to do so.

During the TPSLA, I realized that one way to put my knowledge into action was by pursuing my building license, after which I became an Assistant Principal. But that was not all the TPSLA had to offer me, directly and indirectly. My thinking was reshaped, my mind was more open and more clear about education, and my goals grew with my learning.

With the encouragement of my professors, the TPSLA put me in the path that I am on today, finishing my doctoral program at Kansas State University. Getting a doctorate had been an evasive goal of mine for quite a while and the TPSLA definitely gave me the confidence, mindset, courage, and tools to pursue it.



## Personal Academy Reflection Two

I wasn't sure I ever wanted to be anywhere but the classroom. I believed the classroom was definitely the most important place to be. Although I was considered to be an effective teacher and I had earned a Master's in Curriculum and Instruction, I had so much more to learn to develop my craft in the classroom. I was fortunate to be teaching in a district that valued continuous development for teachers and to be a part of a staff that placed a high regard on collaboration and learning from each other. My principal was supportive and created a culture where everyone was committed to the success of all of our students. I was definitely in a good place.

It all started to change for me the day my principal shared with the staff about a leadership academy that was forming to develop teachers as leaders. The academy would be a partnership with KSU and district administration, and the participants would earn a degree in administration. The academy intrigued me and strengthened my desire to continue to grow professionally. After visiting with my principal I decided to apply and was accepted into the very first master's level partnership academy in 2001.

My academy experience was 15 years ago. Since the academy, I have been a principal in three elementary schools in one district, and one in another district. I am currently beginning a leadership position at the district level. If it wasn't for the academy I don't know if I would have had the opportunities afforded to me today. The academy exposed me to leading educators like Michael Fullan, Thomas Sergiovanni, Linda Lambert, and Richard DuFour, just to name a few. To this day I still continue to read and reflect and put into action the theory and research of these educators along with others. The academy taught me how to take a collection of ideas and understandings illustrating different leadership styles and personally reflect and assess on how a school can be transformed by one's leadership.

As a principal, I have also been a mentor for several teachers who were participants in an academy over the past 15 years. It was exciting to see how the academy continually evolved and adjusted to meet the rapid changes in today's educational world. The education world is always being presented with new challenges that put new demands on our education system. The academies were always cognizant of this and provided the latest research and addressed the current issues that were needed to make a system change. Not only did the mentees learn and grow, but I also continued to do so in the mentor role by being exposed to the current research and effective practices taught through the academy.

I still believe the classroom is the most important place to be. Even though I am no longer in the classroom, the academy definitely showed me how my decisions as a building leader and now as a district leader can have a broader direct positive impact on students in the classroom.

## Conclusion

The leadership academy connects theory with authentic experiences to prepare future leaders for the enormous job of leading schools in the 21st century. Fullan and Hargreaves (2012) stated that "people are motivated by good ideas tied to action; they are energized even more by pursuing action with others; they are spurred on still further by learning from their mistakes; and they are ultimately propelled by actions that make an impact" (p. 7). In other words, students who participate in this experience feel empowered to put theory into action in meaningful, authentic, and immediate ways in a collaborative setting to bring about the change that the individual school setting needs.

The goal of the partnership master's academy, according to its creators, is "to offer a program based on an effective blend of theory and practice; a program designed by collaborative partnerships; and a program that produces an integrated, spiraling curriculum" (Miller, Devin, Shoop, 2007, p. xiii). According to the results of our survey and from our own experiences, we can attest that this goal has been met throughout the years. From our student perspective, it is without a doubt advisable that the partnership model be replicated in other settings to provide schools with the kind of leaders they need to better serve every student in every school today and tomorrow.



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