



9-1-2016

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Recommended Citation

Gustafson, Debra and Kiltz, Nancy (2016) "District Liaison Involvement in Partnership Academies," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 43: No. 4. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1007>

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District liaisons who have personally adjusted to their changing roles over several academies describe their experiences in this important position, which is a key role in the effort to successfully merge theory and practice.

District Liaison Involvement in Partnership Academies

Debra M. Gustafson and Nancy Kiltz

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Rationale for Partnership Academy Involvement

The greatest legacy a leader can leave is having developed other leaders...if you want to leave a legacy, invest in people, and encourage those you develop to pass on everything they learn from you to others who will do the same. People are what matter in this world – not money or fame or buildings or organizations or institutions. Only people. (Maxwell, 2015, para. 4)

Maxwell's words were the core of a philosophy shared with us early in our careers as educational building leaders. In talking to other leaders, we quickly learned we would only be as effective of a leader as the strength of those we surrounded ourselves with on a daily basis. While observing school leaders, we noted the most effective leaders shared their power and knowledge freely with others. In addition, we soon understood that taking the time to develop leadership potential in others would assist greatly in our efforts to shape and share the vision for the buildings we served. These beliefs propelled us to get involved in the very first master's level Professional Administrative Leadership Academy developed between Kansas State University (KSU) in collaboration with Geary County Schools, Salina Schools and Manhattan Schools in Kansas.¹ The opportunity to be directly involved in developing future building leaders was something we knew would help us grow in our own positions and also ensure that the work we had devoted our lives and careers to would continue on in our absence.

The ability to foster the type of thinking that promotes and creates positive learning environments in building educators and staff is imperative for student learning. The concept that schools must promote student growth and learning is the catalyst from which all efforts of school leaders should be based. However, not all potential school leaders understand the basis from which they should lead. The ability to influence this philosophy in future leaders was paramount in our decisions to take on leadership roles in developing future school administrators. Political

commentator Walter Lippmann said, “the final test of a leader is that he leaves behind in others the conviction and will to carry on. Ultimately, if your people can’t do it without you, you haven’t been successful in raising up other leaders” (Maxwell, 2015, para. 1). Through the leadership academy model, the dispositions and practices of effective leaders can be directly passed on to future leaders. The basic structure of the leadership academy model is developed to allow practicing leaders to have direct influence over educators interested in leadership. An elementary principal in one of the academy hosting districts commented:

Through working as a mentor with future potential school leaders, I can ensure the philosophies and attributes I have come to embrace through years of school experiences will be passed down through generational leadership. I take this ability to influence, model and impact very seriously (personal communication).

It should be noted that this school leader is also a graduate of the early leadership academy efforts and realized the advantage she enjoyed by being taught by practicing school leaders.

Initial Experience

The year was 1998 and all three Kansas school districts mentioned previously were experiencing both a lack of qualified applicants for their school leadership positions and a gap of skillsets in the applicants they were able to attract. In Salina, a voluntary workshop had been conducted to teach USD 305 teachers about team building, time management, how to run a meeting, and other building leadership expectations. Some of the participants in that group were also working on their master’s in administration through Kansas State University, and had inquired if their attendance at the workshops could potentially count toward some of their required coursework. Professors from KSU visited the workshop and thought a potential partnership between USD 305 Salina and Kansas State University could be established. By Spring of 1999, the planning sessions had begun, and USD 475 Geary County Schools with USD 383 Manhattan Schools joined the collaborative effort with USD 305 Salina Schools and Kansas State University to build a partnership academy that would fulfill the requirements of a master’s program in educational leadership, as well as potentially fulfill the leadership needs of the districts involved.

Through much discussion and collaboration, the initial partnership academy was created and titled Professional Administrative Leadership Academy. Because the curriculum was established to fulfill a master’s degree in educational leadership, it was also designed around the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Policy Standards. The program was intended to have a full link between the university and the participating school districts, and it was determined there would be a liaison in each of the districts to monitor and maintain the fidelity of that connection. This liaison position has been the critical link between the school districts and the university. The actual role of the district

liaison varies across the different academies and is dependent upon the involvement the liaison has had with previous academy efforts. The authors of this article have enjoyed extensive experience in the partnership academy model since its initial implementation in their respective districts. Therefore, their role as district liaison is more developed and inclusionary than may be the case in districts without as much academy experience. In addition, the liaisons’ involvement with the university also influences the extent to which the liaison is involved in decision making and delivery of content. We share our current experiences and roles as an example or model of what a fully invested and developed liaison role can be after involvement in the process over time. Modifications to meet individual district needs have been allowed and adjustments have been encouraged along the way to enhance the program. Our experiences give insight into what long-term partnership relationships can look like.

Initially, each district recommends to the university one of its own administrators to serve as the liaison for the partnership academy. The liaison chosen is someone who shows an interest in building leadership capacity in the district, has knowledge of the district and its mission or vision, and has the ability to participate in the planning, development, and facilitation of the academy. The liaison is employed by the university as an adjunct faculty member and assigned to the two-year leadership academy. The philosophy of growing your own leaders and leaving a legacy of like-minded individuals interested in leading schools prompted some to step forward with interest in being a district liaison. It is this same belief and philosophy that has kept these three school districts and additional school districts across the state interested and participating in this effort.

Role and Purpose of District Liaison

The liaison works with the Kansas State University Department of Educational Leadership to build a marketing plan for the program. Once this is developed, a brochure is created and each liaison is then responsible for working with district leaders to roll out the proposal to other district and building leadership members and then certified staff groups. Liaisons then work with their superintendents to create an application process for those interested in applying for the academy. By design, the application process is intended to be rigorous enough to attract only those genuinely interested in leadership. Brochures and applications are then made available to applicants, and building principals are asked to write supporting letters of reference for the candidates they are promoting for the academy. At this point, it becomes part of the liaison’s responsibility to work directly with building principals to help them identify the type of individuals who have a propensity to take on this type of opportunity. Once the potential candidates are identified, building leaders are then asked to go to these individuals personally and communicate with them in regards to applying for the academy. While the opportunity is open to all certified staff, there is a specific effort to attract current quality teacher leaders into this opportunity. Completed applications and other required documents are then sent directly to the

superintendent's office and reviewed by the superintendent, the liaison, possibly a board of education member and other appointed district administrators. Finally, selections are made and invitations are submitted to applicants for participation in this leadership opportunity.

One of the strengths of the program is the ability to promote and recruit current teacher leaders into the process. In a traditional educational leadership program, schools are seldom involved in encouraging specific people to consider engaging in these higher learning opportunities. In the academy model, the selection of individuals who have already demonstrated leadership qualities by their ability to share and serve as role models regarding the vision and mission of the district allows these potential leaders to have an advantage over other candidates who may not have had the same experiences. Over the years as district liaisons directly connected to the academy model, we have had the opportunity to influence the enrollment of numerous individuals toward building leadership. The fact that liaisons are invested in their respective districts allows them to have direct knowledge of potential candidates and identify where the positive matches may exist. Additionally, the influence of supervisors has been identified as a major factor in the decision teachers make to pursue a career in administration (Zacharakis, Devin, & Miller, 2006). In working with these individuals on a daily basis, they can observe those who have developed a style of leadership that will be advantageous for school improvement efforts.

Liaisons ultimately can recruit and continue to support individuals interested in participating in the academy model in their respective districts. For example, over twelve teachers from one school alone have participated in the academy model throughout the years. This has given that school a tremendous leadership pool from which to pull when new instructional and curriculum initiatives are presented. In addition, in this same district, nine of the most current eleven building leadership position vacancies have been filled with academy graduates.

Designing Curriculum to Merge Theory and Practice

While the leadership academy district liaisons participate directly in the recruitment and selection of candidates, their primary role has always been to assure there is an authentic and true partnership between the individual districts and the university to work hand in hand to create a dynamic learning experience for all candidates. Therefore, the liaison is instrumental in the design of the curriculum and instructional content within the academy. The liaison, along with the superintendent and other district administrators, connects the curriculum of the master's program at KSU with the district initiatives and leadership needs to design a collaboratively developed and integrated spiraling two-year curriculum resulting in a high-quality degree, as well as benefiting the district with new teacher leaders. The spiraling curriculum is intended to foster habits of reflective practice combined with authentic experiences. The spiraling effect comes from the fact the content is not be taught in isolated coursework, rather, the identified content will be spread out and revisited

throughout the two-year experience. The liaison plays a vital role in matching the content of each class session with building and district initiatives or current practices so that hands-on, realistic learning can occur. This matching is also critical in the selection of authentic projects and mentor assignments. The goal is to provide a curriculum that is rich in knowledge and theory combined with guided practice, including both individual and guided reflections. The strength of the academy lies in the ability to effectively merge theory and practice.

Content delivery in the leadership academy classroom is also a shared experience between KSU professors and the liaisons. While most of the initial content is delivered by KSU professors, liaisons are taking on more of an instructional role and are a critical component in the application and connection of the content to what is happening in the buildings. Ongoing discussions between the university professors and the district liaisons are vital in establishing an authentic curriculum based on merging theory, best researched practices, and current required expectations. Through the frequent use of guest speakers and current school administrative panels from varying positions in the district, as well as direct work with assigned mentors on assignments, candidates are able to work on authentic projects that will benefit their current schools and positions. In many cases, the liaisons deliver the content as well as the application, depending on expertise in the content area and comfort level in presenting.

The division of work between the district and the university has worked very well throughout the academy models. The university continues to provide the necessary transcript and certification responsibilities such as enrollment, online systems, grades, development of curriculum, required legal paperwork, direct professor instruction and other management issues. The school districts provide work directly through the liaison by scheduling classes, ordering materials, grouping students, facility management, inviting speakers and presenters, and scheduling required activities and field-based experiences. The liaison also makes the connections between the academy and other individuals within the district.

The partnership academy model curriculum includes both required activities and field-based experiences, and district liaisons are a vital facilitator of both of these authentic learning strategies. The liaison makes the connections between leadership academy members and others in the district, which is essential for a successful academy experience. Principals of schools are directly involved because they will have assignments such as mentors, having academy members interview them, observe in their buildings, attend meetings in their buildings, and assist in designing authentic projects. Principals will also serve on panels to discuss issues and questions the academy candidates will propose to them. Administrative department heads must also understand the leadership academy model because they are called upon to serve as guest presenters and participants on learning panels where they are questioned about their

duties and involvement in new projects. Additionally, district administrators are involved in the academies through class presentations, helping academy participants refine their ideas for projects, and being available for student interviews and questions. Academy liaisons are instrumental in assisting students in scheduling required activities such as State Board of Education meeting attendance, observing negotiations, attending other district and building level meetings, and more. Upon academy completion, district administrators often join local school boards in celebrating the graduation of the leadership academy candidates.

Field-based experience for academy participants is the component that makes the academy stand above all other avenues of gaining a Master's in Educational Leadership. Woven throughout the two-year academy are a multitude of ways the participants get hands-on, real-life experiences in school leadership. These field experiences provide the candidate the opportunity to apply the theory learned in class to practice in authentic settings. The district supports these activities through securing substitutes, providing guidance, and clearing the way for participants to sit in on activities that are typically done in a more "closed" setting. In these field experiences, the participants have opportunities to work in cooperation with other leaders. These field experiences will ultimately include the opportunity to shadow other building leaders on the job and reflect upon their experience much, as one would do in an internship.

During the planning sessions prior to the start of the academy, the district liaison connects activities and initiatives throughout the district within the curriculum content. Suggestions are also made as to possible presenters, panel members, etc., that might speak at an academy session to give meaning to some of the topics students are learning about in their readings or in class sessions. The liaisons are constantly thinking and considering what the academy participants may need to make their learning experience as rich as possible. As new initiatives are rolled out in districts, the liaisons do what they can to gain academy member participation in the effort. The overall goal is to create as authentic of an experience as possible for the candidates. Once again, readers may question why busy individuals would take on this role when they already have a full-time position in the district. These choices are made because of the belief that school districts will be well served to have an active role in preparing their own leadership candidates, and furthermore, the belief that district leaders have a moral responsibility to ensure the quality leadership currently enjoyed in a district is maintained for future students.

While the district academy liaison may or may not be one of the professors of the academy, they serve an important role in bridging the master's program with what happening in their district. This requires that the liaison communicates effectively and frequently with district leadership to ensure that the vision of the district is being passed on to academy participants. The liaison helps build the agenda for each academy session and assists in providing supporting class materials. This is another authentic experience, as the liaison

is able to provide very timely material to the candidates that may have been provided recently to district building leadership.

The liaison also serves as the district spokesperson on any committees or task forces related to the academies. This consistency is extremely important for each academy's success. The heart of the academy lies in the partnership between the college and the individual school districts. The partnership is most visible in the required activities and field experiences. The goal is to stretch the comfort zone of the participants and give them new experiences in education that they might not otherwise have had. In the first year of the academies, participants are required to write their philosophy of education, reflections of their initial authentic required activities, and a reflection of their growth. These are then rewritten and compared at the end of the second year and become part of the final member's portfolio. Liaisons are available to candidates throughout their writing process to provide ideas and feedback.

Current building principals or district leaders serve as role models and formal mentors for the leadership academy participants. In addition to the mentorship, these individuals are asked to share their experiences with the entire group. This is often done through panel discussions so that different perspectives can be shared. The participants are always amazed at how different each building is, especially the differences between elementary and secondary schools.

The assignments and projects throughout the two-year academy program give authenticity to the program itself. Participants learn content, study the research, and then see their new learning in action. This structure is a benefit to both the district and to the teachers of the program. The participants gain a deeper knowledge of the content, thus allowing higher-level questions and deeper discussions in class. The district benefits in that this group of teachers has gained a better understanding of how things work and why leaders do the things they do, as well as being able to give the district new perspectives.

Ultimately, participants capture their personal journeys through the completion of a final academy portfolio, structured primarily with the ISLLC Standards. Although students decide individually how to present their growth in this portfolio, every portfolio must include artifacts and reflections documenting their growth and competencies related to each ISLLC leadership standard.

Mentorship

As mentioned previously, each participant is provided a mentor for the entirety of the program. The academy model district liaison is responsible for overseeing that mentors are trained properly and assigned to participants. The role of the mentor is to guide, instruct, support, and nurture the academy participants. In some districts, the liaison provides regular mentor meetings to keep them abreast of the activities and assignments in the academy classes. Districts with the strongest mentor-to-mentee relationships can be found where there is specific structure and accountability provided to the relationship by the district liaisons. It is critical

that mentors are not selected for convenience, but rather that they be individuals who are currently practicing some of the best leadership in the district. It should be an honor to be asked to mentor a leadership academy participant, not an expectation. Mentors should not only be quality leaders themselves, but also individuals who know and understand how to develop leadership capacity in others and who are skilled in collaboration.

The mentors who are administrative leaders within the district provide an important bridge between the participants' learning and real life in the school setting. In some situations, mentors are provided with the same books and reading materials as the candidates so they are able to discuss content with the students. They provide opportunities for the academy participants to experience leadership through various activities. They help guide the academy participants as they design projects or complete assignments. They also attend some of the academy sessions as presenters or panel members to share the principals' perspective of various avenues of leadership.

Benefits

From the perspective of the building principal, the ability to have graduates of the professional leadership academies in their building provides tremendous quality in teacher leadership efforts. These individuals have learned how to effectively work in groups to review data, ask the right questions, make decisions ethically and a variety of other leadership traits. They come out of the leadership academies considering themselves as leaders among teachers and ready to fulfill a need in the buildings they serve. As one current elementary principal stated,

I came out of the professional educational leadership experience ready to take on additional leadership duties in addition to my teaching assignments. I learned how to effectively help others in their decision making and the ability to coach others to be more efficient (personal communication).

Building principals know their best teacher leaders have a knowledge mixture of both theory and practice that they are able to combine for the benefit of teachers and students. Having leadership academy graduates in the buildings helps ensure the staff benefits from that knowledge. Regardless of what role an academy graduate takes in the future, they will be better at that role than they would be without their participation in the academy. Those who remain classroom teachers will be stronger teachers and those who continue in teacher leadership roles will be stronger leaders. It is a win-win situation for all involved.

As building principals, one of the greatest benefits we have noticed with staff members who are academy graduates is their ability to problem-solve. They arrive at challenges with the "balcony view" of the whole district rather than the narrow view of just their classroom and are able to see themselves in solutions that benefit all instead of only their position. They are more reflective in their thinking and are able to view all angles of a situation. Additionally, in a district with significant

teacher turnover, the academy graduates are more prepared to train the next generation of teachers through their new skills of inquiry, situational awareness, and ethical decision making. One building principal elaborated:

... having an individual in your building be part of the [academy] allows them to work with a school and staff they are already familiar with. Since they have built relationships with the staff they are more comfortable in sharing the information for a task they have been given. It helps the student build their confidence in their skills so they will be able to move forward when they have their own building. Those relationships in their home building have helped them experience how some staff will not buy into changes at the beginning of a change. This is good practice for how they can deal with helping that staff member understand how beneficial change is for the students (personal communication).

It is the safety net of the academy experience that allows participants to branch out and experience these growing pains. They have been able to observe practitioners with a focus on student achievement and have learned from the failures and successes from their mentors.

The overall implementation of numerous partnership academies has benefited the participating districts tremendously. In their book, *Closing the Leadership Gap*, Miller, Devin, and Shoop (2007) have outlined the district benefits of academies as the selection of the participants, influence over curriculum, increase in number of qualified candidates for leadership positions, and professional growth of the participants. From our observations, we would add and emphasize that the further development of relationships between the districts and the university often expands itself into other viable partnership programs and opportunities, the enhanced ability of professors and practitioners to frequently communicate on best practices and initiatives, and the critical connection to research and practice. The opportunity to collaborate with the local university is beneficial to all. The interview process itself allowed district personnel to get to know each person who applied to the academy, and particularly the ones who were accepted.

Watching the transformation of teachers into leaders is truly like watching a butterfly evolve from its cocoon. Knowing that we, and the districts as a whole, have played such a huge part in growing leaders continues to be an exhilarating experience. New leaders who understand the district's philosophy and share in the vision of the future can help others in the district understand it. Their newfound knowledge will assist them in Professional Learning Communities and other committees across the district because they will have the "balcony view" of the district. Given the demands and accountability measures put on school districts, it renders them nearly defenseless to effectively find the time and resources to grow their own pool of qualified, quality leaders. The opportunity to partner with the university to remedy this gap has been of tremendous assistance to both entities. Both the school districts and universities can carry on their legacy of providing quality

leadership for students while enhancing their programming and enrollment respectfully.

The benefits to individual school districts from the collaboration nature of the leadership academies has been so significant that many have opted to continue them in a variety of schedules. This collaborative relationship allows school districts access to the most current research on best practices. The opportunity to impact the future is the measure of a true legacy, and is very exciting. In their book, Miller, Devin, and Shoop also stated that “principals should be judged as successful not on the basis of programs put in place, but on the basis of how many new leaders are emerging” (2007, p. 20). An Associate Superintendent shared,

... [the academy] has been a real asset to [our district] over the past years. Having a leadership training program for teachers within our own district has provided us with a quality program where our teachers can learn about leadership in a contextual setting. We have had many occasions in which we drew from that trained pool of teacher leaders for everything from curriculum work groups to the principalship of a building. [Academy] participants are quick to make adjustments to their new role because of their background in [the academy]. We are enormously fortunate to be able to benefit from this program (personal communication).

The benefits of having a pool of qualified and effective leaders from which to choose when positions are vacated significantly outweighs the time and effort it takes for this partnership. Everyone wants to leave a legacy in their chosen field. The opportunity to directly impact the future is a true legacy. The legacy that involves the development of individuals to lead the future is significantly powerful. While doing something positive for their respective districts, academy liaisons are able to create their own legacies in the districts they serve. The entire experience is reflected by Ralph Nader, who said, “The function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers” (Leadership, 1976, para. 41). While this philosophy is generally attributed to business, for the future of effective schooling, it is imperative for educators to consider the same opportunities.



Endnote

¹ An important distinction is made here: This refers to the most current model at KSU, which is the primary model discussed throughout this themed issue. 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 of this “second wave” have been partnerships for preservice prospective school leaders, providing master’s degrees to the selected participants. For more on this distinction, see previous commentary in this issue, David Thompson’s, “Revisiting Public School/

University Partnerships for Formal Leadership Development: A Brief 30-Year Retrospective.” To see a complete list of subsequent academies, see Figures 3 and 4 in Mary Devin’s, “Transforming the Preparation of Leaders into a True Partnership Model,” also in this issue.”

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