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Professors share how the district/university partnership model thriving at Kansas State University was successfully replicated with four school districts in another state and was adapted to match their own department goals.

# North Dakota's Experience with the Academy Model: A Successful Replication

Tom Hall and Ann Clapper

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Leadership is a key factor in improving schools and ensuring academic success for all students. At the building level, the leadership role has traditionally been assigned to the principal, but principals cannot be expected to be the sole leaders in their buildings. Although teachers may not aspire to be principals, the complexities of today's schools demand that they lead as well. York-Barr and Duke (2004) defined teacher leadership as "the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of the school community to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement" (pp. 287-288). Other research on this concept of shared or collective leadership has also linked these practices to increased student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood & Mascall 2008).

A survey conducted by MetLife (2013) revealed that 84% of teachers said they were either "not very" or "not at all" interested in becoming a principal; however, nearly 25% were interested in a blended role that combined teaching with a leadership position of some sort. Therefore, given the importance of teacher leadership to student success, and sufficient interest by teachers to serve in blended leadership roles, preparation programs specifically designed for developing teacher leaders are needed.

In 2012, the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) released a position paper promoting the development of teacher leadership programs in collaboration with educational administration/leadership professors. The paper noted "[we] believe that leadership matters and thus we submit there is a sense of urgency for professors to collaboratively develop teacher leadership programs embedded within educational administration programs" (p. 1). The authors indicated that site-based internships might augment "simulated exercises in college classrooms" and observed that "university faculty could benefit from access to schools to limit the silo-effect between higher education and PK-12 education" (p. 5).

**The K-State Leadership Academy model was born in direct recognition that neither universities nor school districts could independently satisfy the need for highly trained leaders at all levels. Universities had the advantage of deep theory and reflection, while schools and other educational organizations held the advantage of real-world practice and faced the immediacy of high stakes outcomes and other pressures (College of Education, n.d., p. 3).**

While the premise of these blended university program options proposed by NCPEA is an admirable first step, it simply may not be enough in the long term to achieve the results needed.

Past studies have questioned the effectiveness of traditional principal training programs, noting that those programs did not adequately prepare aspiring principals for the world they faced upon entry into a leadership role in a school (Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, & Gundlach, 2003). Research gathered by the Southern Regional Education Board (2006) indicated that the majority of university principal preparation programs fall short of “implementing the conditions necessary to create high quality programs centered on preparing principals who can lead improvement in student achievement” (p. 8). Miller, Devin, and Shoop (2007) recommended that school district administrators and university faculty work together much more closely in preparing aspiring leaders. And, as suggested by the NCPEA paper cited earlier, school district administrators need a seat at the planning table if today’s university educational leadership programs are to be relevant and meaningful to a new generation of teacher leaders.

The research seems clear. Today’s teachers are interested in becoming leaders in their districts and they want programs that offer them practical skill development so that they can keep pace in the quickly changing world of the 21st century classroom. To do this, colleges and universities preparing future leaders must come down from the “ivory tower” and find ways to work much more closely with their administrator colleagues in the districts. Just as we ask teachers to change the way they teach to better match the learning styles of today’s student, so must we change the way we approach teacher and principal leadership preparation programs to better meet the needs of the field.

### Selecting a Model

When the decision was made to follow the current research and design a new master’s degree program specifically for preparing teacher leaders, the Educational Leadership faculty at North Dakota State University (NDSU) knew that borrowing a page from the old playbook on how to prepare principals wasn’t the answer.

Our search for a leadership preparation program that reflected the features we needed led us to Kansas State University. The K-State leadership academy partnership efforts first began in 1987 and have continued to grow in scope and impact since.<sup>1</sup> Central to the K-State academy is the importance of partnerships between universities and school districts and the unique strengths that each partner brings to the table.

Our initial discussions with the central academy faculty member in the K-State Department of Educational Leadership were by phone and email, but eventually we traveled to Kansas to observe two different leadership academies in action. These site visits were extremely beneficial, especially with regard to seeing what the concept of a coherent, spiraling curriculum looks like in practice and hearing about the benefits of a cohort model from the students.

While the partnership academy model reflected the same research based elements that we planned to use to guide our new pilot program, their model has a different focus. Although teacher leadership has become a theme among K-State academies, their model was created out of principal preparation efforts and as such continues to be guided by the ISLLC, or Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). But the focus of the NDSU pilot project put a greater focus on teacher leadership from the beginning, so a different set of standards was needed to guide our new program.

### Adopting New Standards

The Teacher Leader Model Standards (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011) were selected to guide NDSU’s Teacher Leader Academy pilot project. Work on these standards began in 2008 when a group of key leaders from around the country came together to discuss the importance of teacher leadership in assuring student and school success, and the end result of that initiative was the set of model standards.

The format of the Teacher Leader Model Standards is similar to the ISLLC Standards, which was of benefit to us given our familiarity with the use of the ISLLC standards in our principal preparation program. The teacher leader standards have seven broad “domains” that describe the scope of a particular element of teacher leadership with “functions” under each domain that provide more specificity of what that domain looks like in practice.

**The teacher leader model standards can be used to guide the preparation of experienced teachers to assume leadership roles such as resource providers, instructional specialists, curriculum specialists, classroom supporters, learning facilitators, mentors, school team leaders, and data coaches (Harrison & Killion, 2007).**

## Piloting the Model

We didn't have to look far to find a partner to pilot the academy with us. The West Fargo Public School District, located just a few miles from the NDSU campus, is well-known for its willingness to take the lead on implementing innovative practices. The district is led by a visionary superintendent with ties to Kansas State University and a deep understanding of the K-State partnership model which facilitated our initial conversations with the district about serving as a pilot site for our initiative.

Once the West Fargo school district committed to the pilot project, a series of meetings with the superintendent and assistant superintendents were held. The results of those meetings included finalizing a set of "nonnegotiables," expectations, and responsibilities that were agreed to by both parties. Those agreements included commitments such as:

- Applicants for the academy must meet North Dakota State University Graduate School admission criteria as well as the admission criteria established by the Educational Leadership Program.
- The district would provide a district liaison who would be associated with the academy through the duration of the pilot project and work collaboratively with the university liaison.
- The design and delivery of courses would be a shared responsibility between the university and the district.
- The academy would provide opportunities for candidates to acquire teacher leader skills using authentic activities relevant to district initiatives.
- Candidates would be involved in multiple field based experiences.

Once these broad agreements were in place, we moved to a planning process that was more specific to the actual work of the academy. The planning team consisted of the two assistant superintendents (serving as codistrict liaisons) and two NDSU Educational Leadership faculty members (serving as co-university liaisons).

We started by aligning the Domains and Functions of the Teacher Leader Model Standards with the school district's initiatives and priorities and the university courses that the candidates would be required to take in the program. Then we identified potential assignments or field-based activities that were relevant to the work of the district that would help the students acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities described in the Teacher Leader Model Standards.

In addition to increasing students' knowledge, skills, and abilities relative to the Teacher Leader Model Standards, the planning team also identified ancillary goals that we wanted our students in the academy to acquire. These goals included having students demonstrate the ability to work effectively with their colleagues in the academy, contribute to a healthy school culture, support district goals and initiatives, willingly assume leadership roles in their building or the district, and to speak and write effectively.

At the same time, the planning team designed an informational brochure and held district-wide meetings with interested teachers to provide general information

**The spiral curriculum approach is better than taking one class at a time and then moving on.**

(West Fargo Academy Student Comment)

about North Dakota State University's new 30-credit Teacher Leader Master's degree (a cohort model, six graduate credits each semester for five consecutive semesters) and the unique features of the degree (delivered at the district site in partnership with district leaders, authentic learning activities linked to district initiatives, and a spiraling curriculum with an emphasis on action research). District leaders designed the application materials using the K-State application materials as a guide and the planning team reviewed the applicants. Fourteen teachers from all levels (elementary, middle, and high school) applied and all 14 were admitted to the pilot program.

The West Fargo Teacher Leader Academy started in the summer of 2014 and the students completed their degrees in December 2015. During that time, the planning team continued to meet and discuss what was working and what needed to be changed, but by the end of the pilot we all agreed that the spiraling curriculum concept and the action research process that we had foreshadowed for teachers when we promoted the model should be standard practice in every academy moving forward. The specifics on how the research "course" was taught in the academy follows.

### Spiraling Curriculum and Action Research

We introduced research practices in general, and action research in particular, during the first semester of the academy. We spent time in class discussing the challenges the students were facing in their classrooms and reminded them that these kinds of challenges are the genesis of an action research project. We also analyzed and critiqued various research studies so that the academy students had an understanding of how research methodologies differ.

We then explained that unlike a typical university course (which might run for a 16-week semester), their "research course" would continue on through the duration of the academy (five semesters). After creating the foundation of knowledge and understanding of action research in the summer, the students were instructed that they would spend fall semester writing up their action research proposal in the form of a three-chapter research proposal paper. Then, during spring semester they would gather their data, write up their results in the summer, and complete their final activity (academic paper as well as a poster presentation to the West Fargo Board of Education) in the fall before graduating in December of 2015.

Students were told that the culminating activity for their action research project would be a poster presentation prior to the district's school board meeting in December 2015 and that the poster presentation would be modeled after the actual process that university faculty go through when they prepare for and present a poster at an academic conference.

To help the students visualize and practice the poster presentation process, we had the students create a poster based on their action research proposal, and in December 2014 we held a mock academic conference in the hallway of the district’s central office building where our academy class sessions were held. After the practice session, the students worked together to finalize the checklist they wanted to use to guide the development and assessment of their formal poster presentation to the school board.

This assignment also included learning about and practicing informative speaking skills. To help guide the students in developing their talking points for their practice poster presentation session, a faculty member in NDSU’s Communication Department worked with the academy students on creating and refining their poster presentation skills.

**Replicating the Model Across North Dakota**

Given North Dakota’s small population base (739,482), word about NDSU’s Teacher Leader Academy pilot project with the West Fargo district spread quickly to the rest of the state. We also promoted the model by copresenting at statewide conferences with the West Fargo district liaisons and a West Fargo academy student. At those presentations, we limited our presentation time in order to allow our district partners to share their stories, as it was their observations and insights that the audiences really wanted to hear.

As a result of the successful pilot, interest in the model is high. Currently, we have Teacher Leader Academies operating in one urban and two rural North Dakota school districts. We are in discussions with several other large districts in our state and the West Fargo District will be starting their second academy in the Fall of 2017.

In the case of the Oakes academy (a small rural school district in southeast North Dakota), the district is using the academy for teacher recruitment and retention by paying a portion of their teachers’ NDSU Graduate School tuition in return for their commitment to continuing to teach in the district for a specified number of years after they have completed their master’s degree. Teacher recruitment and retention is a growing challenge in North Dakota’s small, rural schools so we hope that other small, rural school districts will use the Oakes approach so that the academy model is not limited to just the large schools in our state.

While the demand for the model is a good problem to have, we are limited by our faculty capacity, therefore, we are working closely with our Department Chair and the Dean of our College to determine how to staff each academy with a university liaison. One plan is to hire retired school leaders as adjuncts and train them in the model. To ensure that core elements of the model are preserved, we are in the process of writing a series of university and district liaison handbooks that will provide guidance and standardize certain elements of the model, while still leaving room in the model for incorporating the specific initiatives and responding to the needs of each district.

We are also in discussions with another university in our state that is interested in partnering with us on delivering the academy model. A Memorandum of Understanding has been drafted and we are anticipating that it will be finalized in the near future. Having a university partner will extend the reach of the academy and our hope is that the handbooks that we are creating, and the training of our university partner on the model, will ensure that the core concepts and practices of the academy model are preserved no matter where the university liaison comes from.

Figure 1 | **Crosswalk Between North Dakota State University’s Strategic Vision and Teacher Leader Academy Model**

Focus Area	Objective	Strategy: Teacher Leader Academy
<b>Student Success and Learning</b>	Increase Graduate School Enrollment Reduce time to degree and attrition rates for graduate programs  Provide adequate access to the space, technology, library resources, and other infrastructure that supports graduate student work	70 students have enrolled in academies since the start of the pilot (Summer 2014)  Candidates in the academy complete their Master’s degree in five semesters as a cohort; little or no attrition given that candidates are recommended by their district and the academy is relevant to the work of the district  Candidates in an academy do <b>not</b> need space, technology, and other infrastructure on campus to support their work, as the coursework is delivered at the district site.
<b>Outreach and Engagement</b>	Increase the educational reach of North Dakota Improve communication with the citizens of North Dakota	The academy is a new program that serves the citizens of North Dakota by providing educational opportunities to place-bound citizens through distance education.  The academy model has increased interaction with underserved, small school communities

### Aligning the Academy Model with NDSU's Strategic Vision

The publication of NDSU's Strategic Vision in 2015 provided us with the opportunity to move the academy model from an innovative pilot project to an integral part of helping the university achieve its objectives. Figure 1 was created to illustrate how the work of the academy supports the specific objectives in the university's Strategic Vision.

### Planning for the Future

The implementation of NDSU's Teacher Leader Academy model also initiated statewide conversations about the preparation and ongoing professional growth of educational leaders. From this several meetings have been held to consider how we might create a more coherent statewide system. The centerpiece of those discussions focused on a document created by the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) that recommended that states establish a leadership career continuum that starts with teacher leadership. While North Dakota does not have a state board of education, an ad hoc group of state leaders and university faculty have been studying this guide and paying close attention to the following graphic (Figure 2) as they consider how they might work together in order to create a more coherent system of leadership preparation and growth with teacher leadership as the foundation for that system.

### Reflecting on the Past

Reflecting on the pilot of the academy model with the West Fargo district allowed us to identify key takeaways that have helped us improve our practice and guide the writing of our university and district liaison handbooks. Here are some of the

lessons that we have learned and insights that we have gained since starting down the Teacher Leader Academy model path:

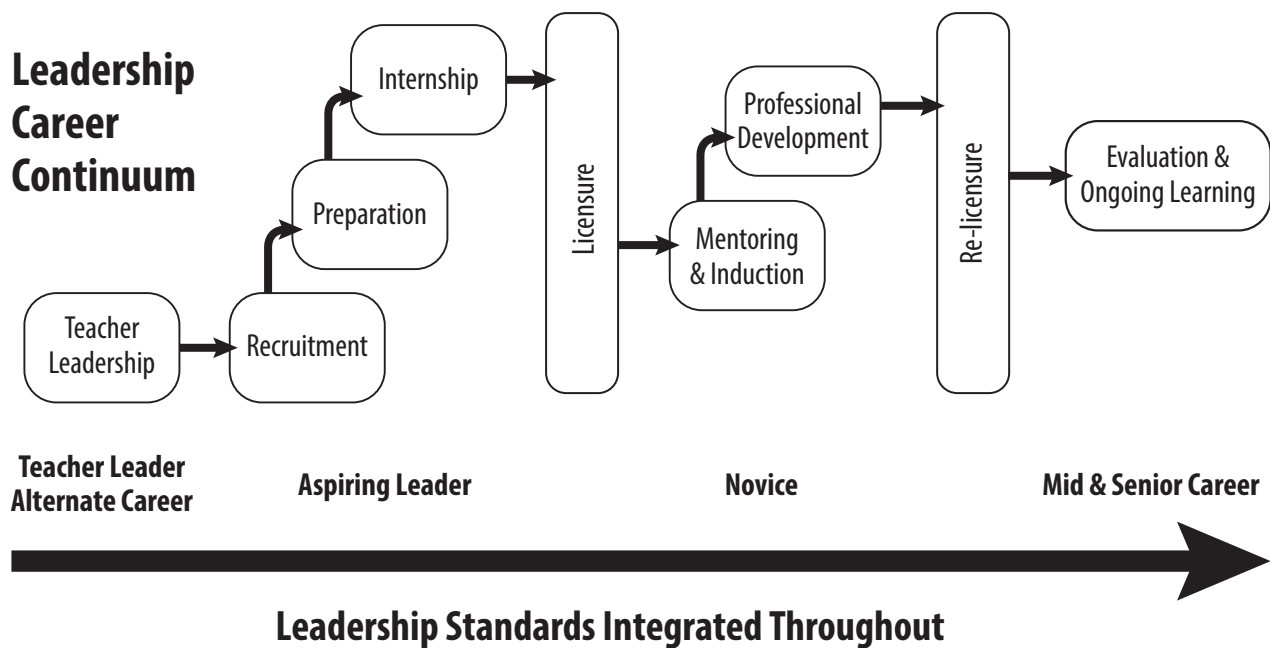
- Every district is different and so every academy is different.
- District liaisons are critical to the success of an academy.
- The district must commit to planning time prior to and during the academy.
- District recognition and support of the academy is key.
- The academy has created an enormous amount of goodwill for NDSU across the state.

### Conclusion

As discussed earlier in this article, research over the past several years has indicated that the way colleges and universities have been preparing future educational leaders needs to be reconsidered. To be relevant in today's ever-changing education environment we, college and university Educational Leadership program faculty, need to work much more collaboratively with local school district principals and superintendents. Doing this will better ensure that the knowledge and skills gained by our aspiring school leaders will be useful, meaningful, and relevant to the districts and ultimately the students they serve.

Approximately four years ago, North Dakota State University's Educational Leadership Program was tasked by the institution's president to reflect on its past and consider its future direction. During this gap analysis process of considering who we were and who we aspired to be, the K-State partnership academy model came to our attention and the proverbial light went on. The academy model was a

Figure 2 | Leadership Career Continuum



Source: National Association of State Boards of Education, 2011

process we needed to learn more about, and eventually it was decided that it was the right direction for our program.

As no two school district leadership academies are exactly alike, neither are our two (K-State & NDSU) academy models. After all, we are two different states with different challenges, needs, and stakeholders. The primary focus of the North Dakota State University Teacher Leader Academy model is developing teacher leaders rather than principal preparation. As such, we use the Teacher Leader Model Standards to guide the academy process. Our primary signature assignment is an action research project and paper that each student completes prior to graduation. In addition, every student takes part in a poster session where they present their action research to the local board of education.

These differences aside, generally speaking the two academy models are very similar in terms of process and structure. To illustrate, students enter the academy as a cohort from one specific school district, they move through the academy at the same pace and graduate (earned master's degree) together after successfully completing a predetermined number of semesters and courses (delivered at a district site vs. on campus), academic coursework is closely aligned to school district goals and initiatives, class sessions are jointly planned and cotaught by university faculty and local school district administrators. It is this final point that is at the heart of developing a successful Teacher Leader Academy, as it is the contention of the authors that without the support, cooperation, and most importantly, collaboration of the local school district's top administrative team, a successful academy experience would be difficult to achieve.

We would like to end our discussion here by stating how indebted we are to Dr. Mary Devin and her colleagues at Kansas State University for taking us under their collective wing and showing us the value of the master's partnership academy model, and teaching us how we could use this innovative educational approach to enhance the delivery and practice of the Educational Leadership Program at North Dakota State University.



## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the history of the KSU partnership academies, see previously in this issue David Thompson's "Revisiting Public School/University Partnerships for Formal Leadership Development: A Brief 30-Year Retrospective", and Figures 3 and 4 in Mary Devin's "Transforming the Preparation of Leaders into a True Partnership Model."

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