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Commentary

The guest editor of this issue of *Educational Considerations* shares observations about the leadership qualities of the contributors to this themed issue.

Walking the Walk: The Presence of Core Educational Leadership Standards in the Development and Implementation of Partnership Academies

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As repeatedly mentioned throughout this themed issue of *Educational Considerations*, the Kansas State University partnership academy model was built on the foundational principle of improving educational leadership training by creating a learning environment that better merges theory and practice (Miller, Devin, and Shoop, 2007). After reading through the insights and commentaries of the various stakeholder perspectives contained in this special issue, I have chosen to use this guest editorial platform to highlight something that became highly apparent as I read through each article – these leaders not only are talking the talk, they also are walking the walk. Specifically, in the development and implementation of leadership academies, the authors are heavily employing the very educational leadership qualities and standards that they are teaching in the academies.

Many of the authors mentioned that the curricula of these academies rest on national leadership standards and research such as the six leadership standards created by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (CCSSO, 2008, as adopted by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration)¹, McREL's 21 leadership responsibilities (Waters, Marzano, and McNulty, 2003), and in the case of the North Dakota State University versions, the Teacher Leader Model Standards (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011). My observations, which I describe below, are that there are clear correlations between the leadership values found in these resources, and the actions and dispositions of the educational leaders who are engaging in this partnership academy model.

To be clear, my commentary here is not intended to be an exhaustive review of every leadership quality in the above standards and research; I simply chose to highlight a few that are strongly represented throughout this issue:

Student and District Partner Needs Drive Decision

Making: First and foremost, student needs should always be a priority when making decisions across the field of education, and the educational leadership standards and

research mentioned above are no exception. Clearly, leaders contributing to this special issue have set aside their personal and institutional conveniences for the sake of students and their needs, and the results have been positive.

In the case of leadership academies, university professors commit to inconvenient travel and scheduling that caters first to the needs of students and partnering institutions. This simple shift has opened up not only access to practicing educators in isolated areas, but throughout this special issue of *Educational Considerations* it has also been observed that positive results in student achievement are accruing. Specifically, faculty have seen improvements in leadership self-efficacy (Augustine-Shaw and Devin, 2014), along with high retention and graduation rates. The ease of access of the leadership academy program combined with the personal encouragement of supervisors has prompted many qualified students to choose an educational leadership degree, many of whom likely would not have done so without the academy opportunity – these are obvious positives for the university, and it occurs almost entirely because of increased attention and adjustment according to student and partner needs.

On the district and/or tribal partner side, these academies require strong commitments from practicing administrators, such as volunteering for additional evening work hours, taking on additional mentorship duties, and engaging in a program that adds significantly to their work load. But in the end, they know that improved leadership in their institutions can improve student performance. Ultimately, all of these stakeholders are signing up for inconvenience, but they are agreeing to do so to better meet their respective student and partner needs.

Being a Change Agent and an Optimizer: As discussed throughout this issue, the leadership academy model requires a substantial shift from traditional educational leadership programming. In order to accomplish this, these authors had to demonstrate the ability to be a *change agent* and an *optimizer*, both proven leadership qualities taught in these academies from the McREL 21 leadership responsibilities. This model would be impossible to construct and deliver if leaders were not in place who are *willing to and actively challenge the status quo*, while also *inspir[ing] and lead[ing] new and challenging innovations*. Individuals who develop and execute these partnership academies must have these leadership qualities. Additionally, they also must have the dispositions and skill sets necessary to create a *vision for change, collaborate with stakeholders*, and navigate certain *political, social, economic, legal, and cultural structures* in order to make it happen.²

Stakeholder Communication and Collaboration:

Creating a Healthy Ecosystem: The educational leadership policy standards clearly suggest that strong collaboration and communication with stakeholders improves institutional culture, and the authors in this special issue of *Educational Considerations* have demonstrated a keen interest in this message. Both ISLLC Standard Four and Domain VI of the Teacher Leader Model Standards heavily stress the need to collaborate and communicate with internal and

external stakeholders, along with related leadership responsibilities among the McREL 21 such as *culture, resources, communication, relationships, visibility, and intellectual stimulation* (Waters, Marzano, and Mcnulty, 2003). In building these partnership academies, however, these authors not only have embraced these concepts and built several stakeholder partnerships, but rather *they also have successfully combined these elements to create cross-institutional leadership ecosystems that thrive on collaboration, communication, learning, and ongoing leadership development*. This, I posit, is much more important than viewing these academies as simply individual partnership programs that are meant to train and credential cohorts of individuals.

To better see this in action, it is important to do what the academy leaders ask of their students, and to engage in systems thinking and take a look at the partnerships from the “balcony view.”

From a university standpoint in this ecosystem, universities are immediately given avenues to improve their communication lines with their patron institutions and administrators, while simultaneously maintaining access to real-world administrative practice that keeps them grounded. This, in turn, informs their continued instruction and research with all endeavors in an ongoing and cyclical manner. At the same time, the partnering institutions and the local liaisons gain expanded access to the most up-to-date theory and research, which they can then transmit to leadership offices across their institutions. This theory-practice marriage has been well stated as an explicit goal of these academies, but it possesses a symbiotic relational quality that is important to recognize.

What is also important is that this symbiotic relationship acts as a catalyst for the creation of something even bigger – a leadership ecosystem infused with theory and practice, and further enhanced by strong personal relationships and communication lines. From an organizational standpoint, communication opens up both vertically and horizontally across institutions. From the top down, central office administrators not only get a structured and in depth avenue to transmit information throughout the school system, they are also given opportunities to become more visible and to develop system-wide relationships over an extended period of time. Then, as emerging leaders graduate and take on new leadership responsibilities at the building or classroom levels, vastly improved communication lines are able to take fuller advantage of already established personal relationships, lines that do not necessarily disappear once the academy is over. As a result, the final product of the academy is not simply a cohort of credentialed and capable leaders, it is a complex network of leadership knowledge, practice, and communication that includes university leaders, central office administrators, building level administrators, classroom teachers, and other leaders distributed across this ecosystem. This is a powerful network and highly beneficial for all.

Not to be overlooked, and as discussed by many of these authors, this thriving network also has a very positive effect on the culture and climate of each unique institution, many times in unforeseen ways. Ultimately, the academies take

on the quality of being a leadership Professional Learning Community (PLC) for the partnering institutions.

With these institutional networks in mind, it is important to recognize that these ultimately rest on a foundation of stakeholder collaboration and communication, a common theme in national leadership standards. The authors featured here not only teach these standards, they have demonstrated a commitment to them as core values. As a result, they have built something much more than just a strong professional development mechanism – they have created a thriving ecosystem of collaboration and communication among the partners. Even further, as more universities implement this model, as robustly demonstrated by North Dakota State University, the stronger the larger leadership ecosystem becomes.

Conclusion

The evidence across many years indicates that these educational leaders are doing more than simply teaching the leadership values found in national standards and research – they are truly embodying and modeling them to their students in these academies. These leaders have prioritized student needs in the context of the challenges facing schools today and have adjusted the traditional system to fit those needs. They have acted as change agents, not only thinking outside the box but creating new boxes, and in doing so have mobilized the prerequisite resources to fit their vision of merging theory and practice. They are seeing positive results and, quite simply, they are walking the walk with their partners.



Endnotes

¹ It is acknowledged that these are now in transition to the 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, but since this is commentary on what has occurred mostly prior to the present transition, the 2008 version will serve as the primary reference point for this piece.

² Italicized terms are references to Standards 1, 4, and 6 as found in the (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium 2008).

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