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Theory into Practice: A Cry From the Field for Innovative Leadership Development

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Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. The ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results. – Andrew Carnegie

Leaders make the difference. This is uniquely evidenced in school districts where a single superintendent impacts the lives of so many children, teachers, staff, and community members every day. With so much responsibility, the need to mentor the ongoing professional learning and development of this key leader is critical.

We are well aware that our world, and thus our schools, is changing. Technology, economics, curriculum demands, federal and state policy, and changing student demographics are all impacting schools. We understand the importance of a 21st century leader to positively impact students and teachers.

This philosophy is grounded by Wagner, et al., in describing a new kind of administrative team that “needs to learn to take on two jobs at once—running the school or district they have, and leading an improvement process to create the school or district they must become” (2006, p. 214). Our view of leadership as a learned process is based on Rost’s definition of leadership as “an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes” (1991, p.102). This perspective lays this foundation for a learning and leading model of professional development for school leaders.

Kansas has a well-articulated process for school leader preparation programs. State standards are currently being updated and are based on the foundational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 1996 and more currently, 2008 (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). Accredited institutions of higher education must document, through a rigorous program review process, that candidates meet these standards. This process, guided by state regulations, ensures that “the focus is on assessment evidence that demonstrates teacher

candidate proficiencies, accompanied by appropriate contextual information that will assist trained program reviewers” (KSDE, 2007). Further, each potential superintendent must successfully complete a content test developed and administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS) prior to recommendation for licensure. This effective program preparation process is strong and has ensured Kansas’ school leaders have the knowledge and skills needed to be effective leaders.

However, these preparation programs only lay the foundation for the soon-to-be practicing school leader. While standing on a foundation of an effective preparation program, he/she begins the work of managing the district and creating a vision for the district. Induction into the executive leadership role is often a stressful time. While much more attention has been placed on mentoring new teachers (Scherer, 1999; Villani, 2002; and Portner, 2008) far less research has examined the value of a mentor for beginning school leaders. Further, many states even have mandatory mentoring requirements for beginning teachers (Portner, 2008). Again, a smaller but growing number require mentoring for new superintendents. The field itself often takes on this work, responding from within to provide support to new executive leaders.

Kansas provides one such example of a field-based response for executive leadership support. The professional organization, Kansas School Superintendent Association (KSSA), developed a one-to-one mentoring program for new superintendents where a new superintendent was paired with a more experienced practicing superintendent. However, initially the parameters of this mentoring program were overly broad and lacked definition. There was an expectation the practicing superintendents serving as mentors would make contact with the mentee superintendent early in the academic year and then on a monthly basis, but the content of those meetings was left entirely up to the mentor and mentee. Over time, it became obvious that a more focused approach to the operation of the mentor program was necessary. To meet this need, leadership from KSSA generated an itemized list of tasks/concerns for the mentor superintendent and the new superintendent to address on a monthly basis. This list then became the roadmap for the mentor and the mentee to follow throughout the year. While this adjustment to the program provided more structure to these monthly conversations, it did little to help the new superintendent build the leadership capacities needed to successfully lead a school district. The topics themselves dealt more with managerial tasks such as convening the calendar committee or being sure to inform the patrons of the district about inclement weather procedures. Also important to note, none of these conversation topics were research-based or tied to any validated list of non-negotiable tasks superintendents need to address in order to ensure quality educational experiences for the students of the district.

Albeit well intentioned, as could be expected with such a loosely designed program, the results of the efforts of this program varied widely. Some new superintendents felt they had great support, others not so much. This was due to the particular strengths and weaknesses of the mentor superintendents, compatibility issues within certain mentor/mentee

pairings, the physical proximity of the mentor to the mentee, and the availability of the mentor to spend the necessary time with the new superintendent in light of the fact they had other professional and personal responsibilities to address in their own districts.

Along with the pragmatic issues previously discussed, another roadblock put before this fledgling program was the lack of regulation to make the participation mandatory for all new superintendents. So, unless a new superintendent had the vision to see that s/he would benefit from being involved in a “formal” mentor/mentee program, s/he had little provocation to take on yet one more thing to address in an already busy schedule. And, unfortunately, the new superintendent simply didn’t know what s/he didn’t know at this point, as this was the first time to serve as a superintendent. So, all too often the new superintendent put his/her head down and bulled ahead in his/her new position, rarely taking the time to step back away from the issues to ensure the efforts taking place were being effective. These concerns, and others, led to a statewide examination of induction and mentoring for all new superintendents.

The State had initial conversations as part of the Kansas Educational Leadership Commission (KELC), a large initiative to take an in-depth look at leadership needs. Membership on this commission consisted of representation from schools, higher education, business, professional organizations, State Board of Education, State Board of Regents, and the Governor’s Office. This group expanded beyond the original 18 members to further flush out the recommendations. Their final report was issued in May 2008.

One concern arising from this process was the need for professional development for school leaders. Three key recommendations arising from the Commission’s work (2008) are worthy of revisit as we examine the needs in Kansas:

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

“The Commission believes that the continuing education of school leaders can be dramatically improved through the targeted use of state policy. In this regard, the Commission recommends that a Kansas Education Leadership Initiative be created to provide high quality continuing education programs to school leaders, under the direction of the Kansas State Department of Education.

The Initiative should have sufficient resources to provide quality services, including a director and sufficient staff to operate the entity effectively on behalf of school leaders throughout the state. Operations and programs should be shaped by an advisory board of practicing school leaders and university faculty members appointed by the Kansas State Department of Education in consultation with the appropriate professional organizations.

The Initiative should be built with and operate based upon the following key elements:

- *focus on the ISLLC standards that are at the heart of learning-centered leadership in Kansas;*
- *adhere to the principles of professional development promulgated by the National Staff Development Council;*

- focus on sustained learning experiences that promote deep organizational change;
- mesh with the pre-service education provided by universities and colleges;
- extend and enhance partnership among the KSDE, universities, school districts, and professional associations;
- foster extensive networking among school leaders throughout the state; and
- promote opportunities for coaching.

The Commission envisions an initiative that develops comprehensive continuing education programs for school leaders. Initially, the focus should be on creating core programs that appeal to a wide variety of school leaders. As operations ramp up, these core programs should be supplemented with specialized offerings for educators in specific leadership roles (e.g., assistant principals, director of human resources).

The Commission recommends that policy be developed to require each licensed school leader to participate in at least one of the comprehensive programs provided by the initiative every five years; that is, as a requirement for license renewal." (KELC, 2008, p. 8-9).

Additionally, two recommendations focused on Administrator Induction:

ADMINISTRATOR INDUCTION

"The Commission concludes that currently insufficient attention is being devoted to helping new school administrators acclimate to their roles and responsibilities. We, therefore, recommend the development of policy to strengthen the school leader internship process already in play in the state.

First, we recommend a required two-year induction program for all new school leaders in Kansas.

Second we recommend the drafting of policy language to support the development of programs for the required induction experience. To begin with, we recommend that the KSDE be charged to (1) review induction-related activity from around the U.S. and capture benchmark models and (2) delineate the essential elements of high quality programs. KSDE should distribute this information widely so that districts can create highly effective induction programs for their school administrators.

In addition, we suggest that policy language be crafted to require the KSDE, in conjunction with universities, districts, and professional associations, to (1) build four model induction programs and (2) have those models piloted in districts throughout the state. The models should be designed so as to capture the diversity of administrative arrangements in operation throughout Kansas. For example, one model might be designed to support superintendents who also assume principalship responsibilities.

We recommend that resources sufficient to undertake the development, piloting, and distribution of work be provided. We also recommend that an evaluation of pilot programs and a sample of district-developed programs

be conducted, and that resources necessary to undertake this assignment be provided. Part of the evaluation should address cost benefit questions (KELC, 2008, p. 9).

The Commission believes that coaching for leadership should be a central element of the overall design for strengthening school leadership throughout the state. Leaders, whether emerging or experienced, become more effective as a result of strategic leadership coaching. Therefore, we have woven this important strategy into recommendations 4, 8, and 9 as follows:

We also recommend the development of various centers throughout the state where educators can acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to become teacher leaders and effective coaches or to support the development of teacher leadership in schools and districts. (4);

Establish a system of training for all school leaders in both the use of the evaluation system and the core ideas on which the system is built (e.g., learning focused leadership, effective coaching) (8); and

The Kansas Education Leadership Initiative should be built with and operate based upon the following key element: to promote opportunities for leadership coaching (9)." (KELC, 2008, p. 9-10).

Other recommendations discussed preparation program improvements and modifications and leader evaluation. These issues are critical pieces of the entire leadership development process in Kansas.

The idea of a more formalized statewide approach to mentoring school leaders incubated in the minds of many for the next couple of years. Informal conversation between key education organizations began taking place two years later. Key leadership at KSDE provided the spark, which was quickly combined with leadership from the original Commission. Casual conversations led to "what if" excitement and the internal demand for action was strong. Uniting in the mission of providing mentoring support and professional development for school executive leaders remained the focus as many possibilities were discussed. It became quickly evident that the conversation needed to be broader if an initiative this big were to come to fruition.

The Kansas State Department of Education's Teacher Education and Licensure Division, Kansas State University's College of Education, United School Administrators of Kansas, the Kansas School Superintendents' Association, Kansas Association of School Boards, and the Kansas Leadership Center all pledged interest and support for this initiative. The first formal gathering took place at the Kansas Association of School Boards in Topeka, Kansas. Partners from the organizations began the dialogue about what existed to support new school superintendents, what was needed, and how we might move ahead with strengthening a state-wide approach to supporting and mentoring new school leaders. The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute (KELI), as it was immediately named, was taking shape.

Vince Lombardi is credited with saying, "Individual commitment to a group effort – that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work." That is also what is making KELI work...individual commitment, organizational commitment, and a state commitment "to support professional growth of educational leaders needed in Kansas schools for the 21st Century." 

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