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Collaboration at Its Best: Supporting the Professional Growth of Educational Leaders

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We understand that collaboration and teamwork are essential to getting extraordinary things done in today's world. – Kouzes & Posner

Strong leadership has a tremendous impact on organizations. This special edition of *Educational Considerations* highlighted the journey of the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute (KELI), from inception to implementation. Sergio-vanni stated, "Those who lead - indeed those who have a responsibility to lead - are those who have the will, expertness, temperament, and the skills to help us achieve our goals in a particular area at a particular time" (2007, p. 112). KELI collaborators recognized the value of developing and implementing an action plan in support of educational leaders throughout Kansas. According to KELI executive director, Dr. Mary Devin, the organization's team members shared a spirit of collaboration unmatched by many other groups.

Jim Collins explained that when organizations establish a new vision and strategy for improvement, it is critical to get "the right people on the bus" and insure they are in the right seats (2001, p. 13). KELI partners were the right people, in the right place, at the right time. They were key decision makers within their own organizations, and they had the ability to formulate a plan and bring it to fruition. Authors Kouzes and Posner (2006) maintained: "Leaders are expected to look into the future, to gaze across the time horizon and communicate to us what they see. It's not about being prescient or clairvoyant. It's about being discerning and perceptive. It's about noticing what's around the corner" (p. 90). KELI partners saw what was around the corner and took action. They knew that strong leadership skills are cultivated through ongoing and structured professional learning opportunities. While they could not predict the future, they agreed that a course of action designed to support educational leaders in Kansas was not only important, but also urgent. The need was identified, and a plan would unfurl.

All the authors in this special themed edition of *Educational Considerations* described the various phases of KELI's collaborative effort to develop a systematic, statewide approach to

mentoring new school leaders. Dr. DeBacker's opening message emphasized the impact of KELI's contributions by stating, "The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute is one that will benefit countless teachers, leaders, and students for many generations." While future program evaluations will be used to confirm and validate the long-term success of KELI, preliminary reviews acknowledge areas where the budding organization has already been successful.

Pre-service preparation programs provide new leaders a foundation on which to stand. However, the most successful leaders will only continue to grow and develop, once they are on the job, if they have ongoing opportunity for professional growth through meaningful interaction with experienced mentors. Mercer and Myers' synopsis of the sequence of events leading up to the birth of KELI unveiled keen insight into the process of uniting key players in a common vision. The authors took readers back several years to when state leaders first recognized the need for a targeted approach to support new district-level leaders across the state. In a timely response to the state's call, concerned partners joined together to formulate a plan to increase leadership capacity in the state of Kansas.

In the second article, "Case study in the power of collaboration: Planning process for the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute," Dr. Devin, along with other key contributors, described the process of bringing the KELI organization to life. From steering committees to subcommittees, the KELI organization began to take shape. As stated by Devin, "The right voices had been invited to this conversation." Six partners successfully collaborated on a project that would eventually spark a statewide shift in the way new district leaders receive support.

In her next article, "From vision to implementation: KELI's first year" Dr. Devin outlined and reiterated the challenges associated with getting an organization of this magnitude and importance on its feet. Despite challenges with initial funding and roadblocks related to time and personnel constraints, the KELI organization continued to blossom because of dedicated individuals loyal to a common vision and a united goal. Michael Fullan said, "People stimulate, inspire, and motivate each other to contribute and implement best ideas, and best ideas mean greater overall coherence" (2001, p. 118). Simply put, partners wanted KELI to succeed. They agreed there was a need and they believed in the value and goals of their organization. Most importantly, team members were committed to creating forward momentum and persevering through the twists and turns of challenges they met along the way.

The fourth article, "The influence of mentoring on developing leaders: Participants share their perspectives" Dr. Augustine-Shaw and Dr. Funk introduced readers to the talented mentors and mentees involved in KELI over the past two years. Authors Kouzes and Posner explained, "Leaders who see their role as serving others leave the most lasting legacies" (2006, p. 10). Just as KELI planners shared a common vision for the organization, the KELI mentors and mentees shared a common commitment to leaving a legacy. Collectively, the planners, mentors, and mentees alike were committed to building district leadership capacity by positively impacting

the professional practice of over two dozen Kansas leaders. Throughout the article, the authors highlighted the experiences and perceptions of first and second year mentor and mentee participants. The themes identified within the qualitative data provided meaningful insight into the impact of KELI activities. This information will prove valuable as the steering and advisory committees continue to improve the program for future participants.

In the last article, "Illuminating the path: Evidence of initial success and implications for the future" Dr. Donna Augustine-Shaw reviewed the initial success of KELI's first year and described the organization's next steps forward. The author explained that, in addition to KELI's successful support initiative in place for novice superintendents, the organization is further responding to current practitioner needs by creating a framework of support, mentoring, and induction for new Kansas principals. Newly appointed task force members, including elementary, middle, and high school principals and administrators, convened in 2012-2013 to review current practices, needs, and priorities for supporting new principals in the state.

The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute may best be described as a successful *learning organization*. Peter Senge (1990) described learning organizations as organizations that allow and encourage members to think creatively and expansively. Furthermore, Senge maintained that a learning organization continually transforms itself and is committed to facilitating the growth of the members within the organization. As a learning organization, KELI must continue to increase its capacity to develop strong Kansas leaders by responding to the needs of the professionals in the field and adapting the organization to fit those identified needs. The reflective articles in this journal will serve as a helpful tool in planning the Institute's next steps forward. KELI's success can only be determined by the success of the leaders it supports. Therefore, continuous feedback from program planners, advisors, and participants will be crucial to the organization's success.

Public schools are in need of strong, effective leadership. Tony Wagner (2008) expressed concern about America's schools becoming "obsolete" (p. xxi) because they are failing to meet the needs of 21st century learners. Strong, effective district leaders will help schools remain relevant in the lives of the country's greatest resource; its children. Programs such as KELI, will help support superintendents as they lead the organizations designed to prepare students to thrive in a global, multi-cultural society.

While many school districts recognize the value of mentoring programs for educators new to their roles, very few superintendent mentoring programs exist across the country. KELI's model, which was designed to support the professional growth of educational leadership in Kansas schools, can be used as a practical model for other states across the nation. The KELI framework is designed to help leaders continue to learn new skills and develop all aspects of their leadership. Fullan (2001) stated:

"Each and every leader, whether the CEO of a multi-national corporation or a school principal, can

become more effective –much more effective—by focusing on a small number of core aspects of leadership and by developing a new mind set about the leader’s responsibility to himself or herself and to those with whom he or she works" (p. 2).

The collective efforts of all of the professionals involved in the KELI organization should be commended for their commitment to making a substantial investment in new school leaders. ▣

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