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Embracing New Realities: Professional Growth for New Principals and Mentors

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"Leadership is about creating new realities." – Senge

Abstract

This paper highlights one state model providing mentoring and induction for new school leaders in the U.S.A. The importance of mentoring and induction as a continuation of leadership preparation is highlighted in program components and participant perceptions in The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute's (KELI) mentoring and induction program and professional learning seminars. Experienced and trained mentors provide critical support for new principals serving schools and communities in their first year of practice. A program description, initial operational processes, program requirements, and mentor training are shared along with information about KELI's second year program, evaluation results, and next steps.

Introduction

When a new principal is appointed, school staff and community members share common feelings of anxiety, curiosity, and excitement (Villani 2006). Likewise, the new principal may be eager, yet uncertain, and in reality, often face complex demands very early in the job. New principals encounter particular challenges moving between and prioritizing the many tasks at hand. Staff resignations, unfinished construction, lack of essential classroom resources, and technology challenges can exacerbate the first few months of the position. "In the principalship there can be a ripple effect from almost any decision" (Sciarappa and Mason 2012, 65).

Regardless of prior experience and leadership preparation, new principals face situations for which they lack experience (Villani 2006). Mentoring and induction programs allow novice principals to learn new skills and increase understanding of multifaceted problems. Support from mentors grounded in knowledge of research, best practice, and current issues can make a decisive difference in the first year of practice where intense learning occurs. Having someone to share issues

and concerns in a confidential setting is paramount to the new principal. In addition, mentors encourage self-reflection and on-going professional growth through their dedication and time, moving beyond being simply a “buddy” (Villani 2006).

New leaders must gain the knowledge and skills necessary for survival during their first year on the job. The training for novice principal leaders often begins anew as a first leadership position is acquired. On-the-job training often supersedes these first year leadership experiences as new building leaders take the helm and undertake challenging circumstances. Principals need high quality mentoring and professional development in their first year of experience accompanied by contextually specific strategies in order to understand the values and serve the school community. As they encounter moving beyond their preparation program to the reality of actual practice, stress abounds from efforts to acquire new skills, stakeholder demands, long hours and fast-paced expectations, supervision of staff, and isolation (Holloway 2004).

Successful programs succinctly identify several variables important to the success of mentoring and induction programs for new school leaders. Crocker and Harris (2002) cited new principal mentees need time and ongoing opportunities to share with experienced mentors. A thoughtful selection process that matches the mentor and mentee according to school and staff characteristics is paramount to promoting trusting and confidential relationships. Other essentials include thoughtful guidelines for mentors to assist in shaping meaningful experiences during mentor/mentee interactions and training for mentors centered on building relationships and collaborative leadership behaviors. Dukess (2001) validated that quality mentor programs must include clear guidelines for both mentor and mentee and non-evaluative dialogue as key to a successful mentoring program. Mentor training aimed at enhancement of coach-like skills in listening and questioning helps mentors to facilitate clear and productive inquiries that better solicit critical thinking and reflection from their mentees (Mendels 2012).

Through incorporating continuous professional development targeted at understanding local contexts and embedded, responsive activities, mentoring programs strengthen leadership capacity and increase success during the first few years. Killion (2012, 26) stated, “Balancing multiple priorities is a typical challenge principals face, and in this era of so many significant changes, principals are feeling more overwhelmed than ever.” Furthermore, Killion shared that principals lack guidance on effective approaches to build coherence and implement multiple change initiatives simultaneously. An experienced principal mentor is a critical link for new school leaders as they bridge theory to practice and apply acquired knowledge and individual beliefs to daily performance and decision-making that positively impacts the school environment.

The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute

In an effort to address a clear need to support new principal leaders in Kansas, the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute (KELI) moved forward from a committed planning process in 2012 to implement mentoring and induction for principals new to the position in 2013. This process was led by a state-wide Building Leader Mentoring and Induction Task Force. The work of the task force resulted in a recommendation outlining research-based and best practice mentoring and induction requirements for new building leaders. This work built on and expanded from KELI’s initial mentoring and induction program to serve new superintendent leaders in Kansas in 2011.

KELI is a shared partnership between Kansas State University College of Education (KSU COE), Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), Kansas Association of School Boards (KASB), United School Administrators of Kansas (USA-Kansas), and Kansas School Superintendent’s Association (KSSA). KELI’s mission is to collaborate and share resources to support professional growth of educational leaders needed in Kansas schools for the 21st Century. Along with a priority focus on mentoring and induction new school and district leaders, KELI provides a second strand of support for all leaders in Kansas through deep learning opportunities designed to support Kansas leaders in the 21st century. High collaboration among KELI’s partners enables meaningful contributions and a continued focus on best practice, responsive planning to meet the needs in today’s schools and districts, and research-based program requirements. KELI’s dual emphasis on quality mentoring and induction and ongoing opportunities for professional learning for all Kansas leaders exemplifies a well-structured and well-received program of support for Kansas leaders.

KELI is recognized by KSDE as an area professional learning center. This status allows new superintendents and principals and other initially licensed leaders in Kansas to move to their professional license when mentoring and induction program requirements are completed. Trained and experienced field mentors set out to embrace exciting leadership work and service by providing individualized and on-site support in each local district. National leadership standards are applied in meaningful context by KELI mentors as they contribute to insightful discussions and reflective feedback at each mentor/mentee visit (CCSSO 2008). KELI’s second strand of leadership development for all Kansas leaders provides quality professional development focused on current topics. This strand of leadership development seminars are designed to target specific needs of the leader’s role in tackling many state and federal initiatives inherent in today’s school and district settings.

Moving the Principal Mentoring and Induction Program into Action

May 2013 marked the first steps in forming a pilot mentoring and induction program for first year principals in Kansas based on the work of the Building Leader Mentoring and Induction task force. KELI partner leaders collectively announced this new state opportunity for building level

leadership support. These partner leaders included the Commissioner of Education (KSDE), KSU COE Dean, Executive Directors of KASB and USA-Kansas, and President of KSSA. The work moved quickly into action. Preparation for requesting volunteer districts with first year principals and experienced Kansas principal mentors began in May 2013. Superintendents received email communication through KSDE listservs regarding the opportunity for voluntary participation for both new principal mentees as well as nomination requests for veteran principal mentors. Basic program descriptions provided superintendents with information about each opportunity and role as well as contact information to express interest in pilot program participation. During the summer months, extensive planning by KELI staff prepared for program implementation in August. Additional contact initiated by KELI staff with district superintendents and prospective mentors and mentees guided placement decisions during the summer months. Demographic information and other important characteristics of the mentor/mentee match prompted careful deliberation at every step.

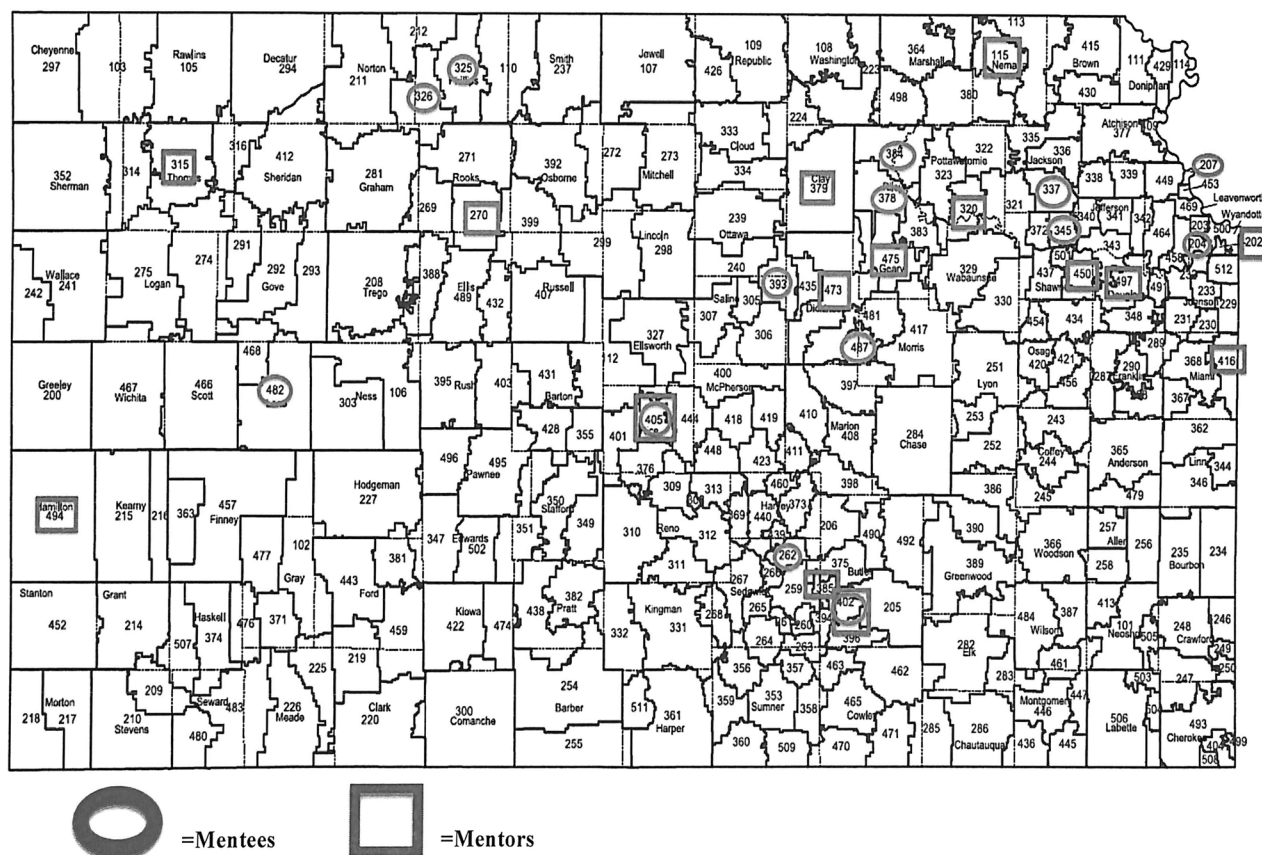
Pilot program. In July 2013, 17 principal mentors, with the support of their district superintendent, agreed to serve 19 first year principals for the 2013-2014 pilot mentoring and induction program. Figure 1 highlights the geographic location of mentees and mentors participating in the pilot

principal mentoring and induction program. Twenty-seven districts in Kansas hosted either a new principal mentee or experienced principal mentor. Following the receipt of district and mentor contracts, service to new principals began in August through orientation activities and scheduling of on-site visits.

In KELI's framework, mentors deliver individualized, on-site support to meet the needs of each school leader in their respective settings. As recommended by the planning task force, mentors selected for serving new principals are currently practicing or recently retired. Particularly critical to the success of the mentoring experience is a thoughtful process to consider variables enabling the mentor and mentee to form a trusting relationship. These variables become the foundation for matching mentors and mentees, namely, geographic location, school level and size, and unique experiences such as leading rural schools. Special attention is also given to place principal mentors from outside districts with each mentee. This allows a confidential environment for open discussion and dialogue on local issues.

All principal mentors from across the state meet in September. In 2014-2015, mentees joined mentors in this September meeting as a result of feedback from the previous year participants. Groups share goals and reflections on their upcoming experiences. The KELI coordinator reviews program completion requirements along with important procedures,

Figure 1 | Geographic locations of mentees and mentors in 2013-2014 pilot principal mentoring/induction program



logs, and documentation of activities. Clear expectations establish necessary parameters for both mentees and mentors during the year. The coordinator asks mentors to share Words of Wisdom with their mentees. Some examples are as follows.

You have moved into a new world. Your role as a principal is so much different than it was as a teacher. Sometimes you may feel like you don't know where you fit in, or if you are doing anything right. Stay strong, believe in yourself, listen to your staff, listen to parents, and when all comes back to you stick to your values and beliefs and you will make the right decisions and choices. (Mentor 1)

Don't be frustrated by all the interruptions that happen during a day, realize that the interruptions ARE the job. Enjoy every one of them. (Mentor 2)

Build strong long lasting relationships with members of the district and community. Find your building leaders and allow them to lead the ship. Always be willing to ask for help and find a buddy that you can ask anything. (Mentor 3)

Program requirements. Mentoring and induction program guidelines outline requirements for successful completion of the KELI program. These requirements denote interactions between mentors and their respective first year principals. Mentors, who have been recommended by their superintendent as being successful Kansas principals, meet on-site with their mentees at least five times face-to-face during the year from August through May. One of the visits includes a visit by the mentee to the school site of the mentor. Mentees and mentors visit as needed throughout the year utilizing communication channels of their choice. Mentors also conduct two on-site performance demonstration observations (i.e., staff/parent session, assembly, presentation) and provide confidential and timely feedback to the mentee for the purpose of professional growth. One KELI mentee shared, "As a new principal, you don't always know what questions to ask and when. My KELI mentor guided me through the year so that the information I received was pertinent and in a timely manner."

Program requirements present structured activities and professional resources to build capacity in the new building leader. A beneficial resource provided to mentees is a monthly checklist developed by principal mentors and the KELI coordinator. These checklists outline important duties, reports, and requirements for first year principals and give new leaders a heads up as they plan their time to meet necessary requirements in addition to their daily work and school site priorities. In addition, research articles accompany monthly checklists and address topics of timely concern important to school level leaders.

A defined purpose in the KELI mentoring and induction program is forming valuable professional networking to assist growth and leadership capacity building. Throughout the year, mentees must attend four sessions to move towards accomplishing this goal. The four sessions must include two professional organization meetings (i.e., principal association,

education summit, leadership conference, or other professional organization meeting), one cohort session (fall regional hosted by mentors or spring regional hosted state-wide), and one professional leadership session to increase leadership skills and knowledge. Various opportunities throughout the school year afford mentees opportunities to complete these activities. To encourage best practice in reflection, mentees are requested to share brief reports for two of these out-of-district experiences with others in their district. Mentees are also asked to provide a year-end reflection capturing major personal and professional growth experiences during their first year as principal as a culminating activity in the month of May.

A mentee's successful completion of the KELI new principal mentoring and induction program enables mentees with an initial leadership license to move to their professional school leader license with authorization from the KELI executive director. New principals holding a professional license can earn professional growth credits through KELI's recognition as a regional learning center.

Mentor training. KELI principal mentors participate in coaching training during their first two years serving as a mentor. All KELI mentors continue to take refresher training as needs dictate. Intentionally designed as asynchronously deliverables, the training modules are hosted on-line allowing busy principals to participate actively in the training distantly from their own local school offices. Master class coaching training is provided by a nationally certified trainer and utilizes various technology platforms to deliver instruction and practice. The purpose of coaching training is to learn the basic tools of being a coach-like mentor and acquire new knowledge in the tenets of developing a coaching mindset, becoming a committed listener, asking powerful questions, and giving reflective feedback (Cheolites and Reilly 2010). An equally important purpose of coaching training is to strengthen the theory-to-practice conversion through a series of practice labs conducted in a safe and risk-free environment. Practice labs involve simulations through small group discussion, role-playing, and coaching practice around real-life topics. Villani (2006, 19) affirmed that "ongoing support of mentors often yield significant results." Through this carefully guided training, principal mentors gain professional skills and satisfaction in acquisition of new knowledge and skills that, in turn, assist mentees in developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Mentors receive a copy of *Coaching Conversations: Transforming Your School One Conversation at a Time* (Cheolites and Reilly 2010). Mentors provide feedback on the quality of technology used for training as well as strengths and areas for improvement related to training contents and structure. Mentors also share their experience in serving as a mentor, often related to self-assessment and professional outcomes. Additional professional development for mentors occurs from opportunities to reflect and network with other building leaders in Kansas state-wide and regionally. One KELI principal mentor commented, "You will grow as an educator too!"

Moving Forward, Year Two Program

The mentoring and induction program for new principals has experienced steady growth and success. As depicted in Figure 2, in 2014-2015, 17 first year principals participated in KELI's mentoring and induction program served by 14 veteran principals. During that year, three principals continued to receive support as a second year principal. Ten districts participated in the program. Twenty-four districts participated in KELI's program for principals in 2015-2016, with 21 new principals and 18 mentors involved in and providing services. During 2015-2016, 11 principals continued to receive support as a second year principal. A closer look at services available for principals moving into their second year is detailed in the next section.

Research reveals that effective mentoring programs entail continuing support past the first year of practice for leaders. The purpose of KELI's second year support program for Kansas principals is to offer principals a continuing, but less intense connection to mentors to continue building capacity in the new principal leader. When possible, the mentor remains the same during year two. The mentee and mentor work collaboratively to consider opportunities to move beyond survival skills to deeper reflection and application of leadership behaviors that make a difference for student achievement and school progress. Activities are customized to address identified targets and include one face-to-face visit between the mentor and mentee each semester, one performance observation at the request of the principal

mentee, access to monthly checklists and professional resources, and participation in regional and state cohort discussions.

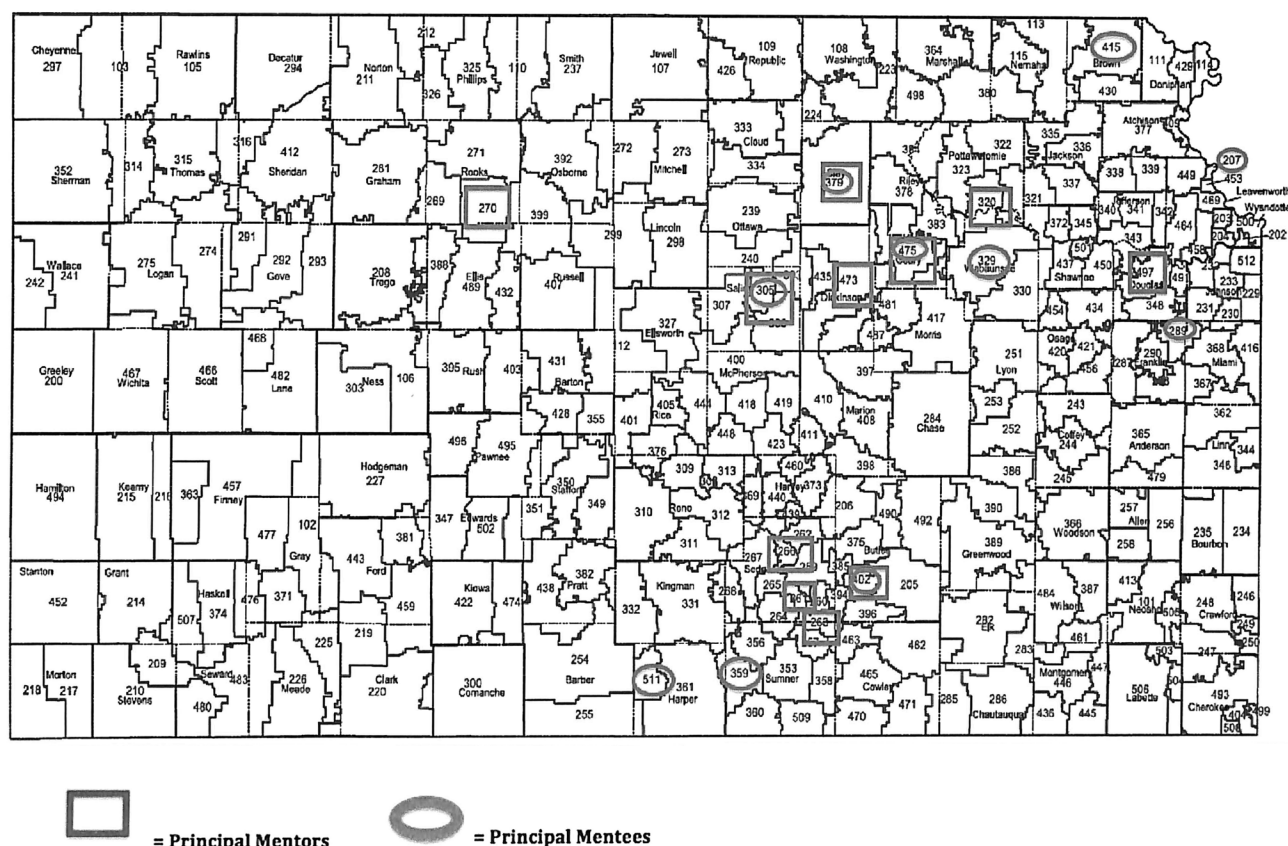
Major goals for second year support focus on individualized support to meet specific professional growth needs of the mentee, increased opportunities to build networks and contribute to leadership and service in professional organizations, and enhanced overall capacity to build knowledge and address issues in the local context.

Program Evaluation and Success

As a yearly culminating experience, KELI principal mentors and mentees attend a face-to-face meeting in the spring to provide feedback and input for program improvement and share insights to raise public awareness of the program's benefits and its state-wide participation. Break-out discussions provide an opportunity for district superintendents, principal mentors, and mentees to network and discuss program highlights and ideas.

In addition, all program participants receive an on-line survey including key questions pertinent to their participation in the KELI mentoring and induction program in the spring. The survey is comprised of a Likert-scale and open-ended questions. Table 1 provides highlights of the survey responses for each group. Feedback is also solicited from superintendents whose districts have principal mentees in the program and superintendents whose districts have supplied principal mentors. In both years of operation, 100%

Figure 2 | Geographic locations of mentees and mentors in 2014-2015 principal mentoring/induction program



of mentees agreed that the KELI mentoring and induction program was helpful to their first year of practice. All mentee respondents indicated they would recommend other first year leaders to participate in the KELI mentoring and induction program.

Principal mentors expressed benefit to their own professional learning in serving as a mentor. For both years, 100% of KELI mentors agreed that serving as a mentor is a personal and professional learning experience. The mentors who are practicing principals shared that the coaching training, reflection, and experience increased their skills in “how [they] think and work at what [they] do with [their] own staff.” One mentor noted, “This has been a wonderful thing for me.” Mentors consistently noted that mentees had grown tremendously as a result of participation in the KELI pilot program, growing “leaps and bounds.”

Professional Learning

KELI’s deep learning seminars for Kansas leaders are offered in a meaningful context that allows for presentation of new knowledge, demonstration of applications in practice by school and district leaders, and time for learning and networking in collaborative leadership team settings. In July 2013, staff from KSDE and KELI began to discuss the need to provide timely information to principals in Kansas on current state and national change initiatives. A state-wide survey administered to school principals in September 2013 framed the needs and content of these sessions. KSDE directors and KELI staff reviewed 540 responses from elementary, middle, and high school principals. The survey provided opportunities for respondents to identify important demographic information, preferences on seminar format, and ranking of professional learning needs in nine main topic areas. From the review of responses, six top areas of concern emerged along with multiple key preferences on delivery.

This collaborative effort resulted in a series of seminars for 2013-2014 focused on school level leaders as they work to understand, facilitate, and communicate change to and with staff and parents. These seminars specifically targeted principals and school leadership teams. KELI partnered with KSDE in the development of these seminars to identify needs around changes that impact principal leadership. The three topics selected for the 2013-2014 school year, entitled “Professional Learning for Principals”, represented the highest relevancy and impact identified by principals. Seminars were hosted in two separate locations in Kansas. Accreditation was the first topic, focusing on assessing needs, setting goals, and gathering evidence. One seminar attendee shared the following comment, “I appreciate you bringing principals together to give us information about what is going on.” The second session focused on inter-rater reliability, walk-through evaluations, and feedback. Some examples of attendees’ comments included: “This was a topic as a first year principal I need to learn more about – thanks,” “Excellent workshops/seminar, this will really help me become a better principal,” and “Presenters are invested and willing to go the extra mile to help all administrators across the state.” The third session addressed strategies and issues/opportunities related to

capacity building. Dr. Kelly Gillespie, the Kansas Service Center Director and KELI Professional Learning for Principals Seminar presenter, noted, “This opportunity allowed building level administrators across the state to meet, share, and collaborate on mutually concerning educational issues. Based on attendance and participation, these events obviously fulfilled a need in the field.”

In 2014-2015, a follow-up sequence of professional learning seminars for principals continued in partnership with KSDE. These deep learning sessions focused on performance evaluation, assessment and student evaluation, and accreditation. Seminars were hosted in three locations in Kansas including a session with the Southwest Plains Regional Service Center in Sublette, Kansas. The format of the professional learning seminars included presentation of content experts on the selected topic, field practitioners (of various sizes and levels of Kansas schools recognized for leadership) serving as panelists on the selected content and/or issue, and opportunities for networking with other building leaders across the state. For all four professional learning seminars in 2014-2015, program attendees rated the topics of the sessions as important to both their own leadership and their leadership team with ratings above 4.5 on a 5.0 scale. Table 2 highlights the overall evaluation results by program participants across the two years of professional learning seminars for principals.

Next Steps and Implications for Practice

In 2015, the KSDE enacted regulatory guidance to require that each school district in Kansas provide a year-long mentoring and induction program in an approved program to all new position school leaders with an initial license. To qualify for approval, programs must include opportunities for hands-on application of national leadership preparation standards and state building and district leadership standards, structured contact with a minimum of 40 contact hours and three face-to-face meetings, networking with colleagues, options for support beyond the first year of practice, program evaluation, and stated selection and training criteria for mentors (KSDE 2015). As a result of these guidelines, KELI responded to requests by the field to serve assistant principals, assistant superintendents, and special education building and district leadership positions. In 2015-2016, five first year assistant principals received support from four veteran mentor principals.

The KELI program model on serving assistant principals and principals will continue to adapt and change to best meet the needs of building leaders in Kansas. The scope of service across a highly rural state with noticeable turnovers in the principalship (be it resulted from high in retirement or other factors) makes the provision of continued quality service for school leaders increasingly challenging and yet promisingly rewarding if done right. KELI program planners will need to continue efforts to communicate the value of its structured program, providing clear expectations for new principals and their mentors as well as increasing collaboration to best align resources and strengths among state organizations.

Table 1 | **KELI principals mentoring & induction program perception survey results: 2013-2014, 2014-2015**

Questions:	2013-2014		2014-2015	
	Agree/Somewhat Agree		Agree/Somewhat Agree	
	Mentor (n=16)	Mentee (n=16)	Mentor (n=14)	Mentee (n=17)
1. KELI mentoring/induction support is helpful to a first year building leader.	93.75%	100%	100%	100%
2. Mentoring and induction support from the mentor should continue August through June during the leader's first year.	93.33%	93.75%	93.33%	88.89%
3. Multiple face-to-face interactions with a mentor are an essential component of effective mentoring/induction support.	93.75%	100%	100%	94.44%
4. Mentor visits to the new leader's building site are an essential component of mentoring and induction support.	100%	100%	100%	94.12%
5. Four is an adequate number of mentor visits to the new principal's school.	93.75%	100%	93.33%	83.33%
6. Visiting the mentor's school at least one time is a helpful additional benefit to face-to-face interactions.	100%	93.75%	100%	88.89%
7. Small group cohort meetings with area mentors and mentees in the area are helpful to new principals.	80%	81.25%	71.43%	83.33%
8. Additional communication between mentors and new leaders via technology is important.	100%	93.75%	100%	100%
9. A mentor should provide the new leader with meaningful feedback after observing actual leadership performance. (Meaningful feedback from a mentor after observing an actual leadership performance is helpful to a new leader).	100%	93.75%	100%	94.44%
10. Receiving the monthly checklist from KELI is helpful to a mentor. (The monthly checklist from KELI is helpful to new leaders).	81.25%	100%	93.33%	94.44%
11. Attending one or more professional meetings with a mentor is helpful to a new leader.	75%	75%	100%	94.44%
12. A meeting of all KELI mentors at the beginning of the year is helpful to mentors. (You would be interested in attending a joint meeting of all mentors and new principals at the beginning of the school year).	100%	80%	100%	94.44%
13. You would be interested in attending a joint meeting of all KELI mentors and KELI new principals at the close of the school year.	93.75%	75%	86.67%	94.44%
14. KELI should consider offering a level of mentoring support for a second year for new leaders.	75%	62.50%	86.67%	77.78%
Additional Mentor Questions:	2013-2014		2014-2015	
	Agree/Somewhat Agree		Agree/Somewhat Agree	
	Mentor	Mentee	Mentor	Mentee
15. Participating in coach masters training classes adds to your professional skills.	93.75%		93.33%	
16. The coach master training sessions are useful in your role as mentor.	93.75%		93.33%	
17. Follow up group calls after coach masters classes assist you in improving your coaching skills.	87.50%		86.67%	
18. You are applying what you are learning in KELI coach training as a leader in your own district.	100%		93.33%	
19. Serving as a KELI mentor is a personal professional learning experience.	100%		100%	
Additional Mentee Questions:				
20. You find yourself using with others coaching behaviors your KELI mentor models.		87.50%		64.71%
21. The coaching you receive from your mentor strengthens your problem solving skills.		93.75%		88.89%
22. You would recommend other first year leaders participate in the KELI mentoring/induction program.		100%		100%
The effectiveness of communication between the mentee/mentor (5=highest)				
	Mentor	Mentee	Mentor	Mentee
In-person			5.00	4.94
Phone	2.25	2.44	4.00	4.38
Email	1.19	1.19	3.33	4.27
FaceTime/Skype	4.69	5.57	2.00	3.14
Other	4.90	5.33	2.00	3.00

Note: The surveys are administered online annually at the end-of-year to program participants. The surveys contain Likert scale questions and open-ended questions. Only the results from the Likert scale questions are presented here.

Table 2 | Participant evaluations of KELI professional learning seminars for 2013-2014 and 2014-2015

Survey Question	2013-2014 Seminar Topics				
	Accreditation		Observation/Feedback		Building Capacity
	Olathe November 13	Wichita November 20	Wichita February 12	Olathe February 19	Wichita April 23
The topic of today's session was important to me and my leadership team.	4.52	4.44	4.91	4.63	4.56
The seminar provided opportunities for me to deepen my understanding of the program topic.	3.92	4.33	4.82	4.48	4.32
The presenters appropriately addressed the seminar topics.	3.70	4.43	4.82	4.63	4.48
The format for the seminar enhanced the learning experience for me and created opportunities to share my ideas and experiences with others.	3.78	3.95	4.59	4.52	4.52
The overall quality and content of this seminar met my expectations.	3.29	4.23	4.68	4.52	4.32
Survey Question	2014-2015 Seminar Topics				
	Performance Evaluation	Assessment Student Eval.	Accreditation	Assessment and Accreditation	
	Wichita October 1	Manhattan November 19	Manhattan January 21	Sublette February 12	
The topic of today's session was important to me and my leadership team.	4.56	4.51	4.50	4.68	
The seminar provided opportunities for me to deepen my understanding of the program topic.	4.28	4.32	4.21	4.51	
The presenters appropriately addressed the seminar topics.	4.26	4.19	4.21	4.51	
The format for the seminar enhanced the learning experience for me and created opportunities to share my ideas and experiences with others.	4.19	4.11	4.08	4.35	
The overall quality and content of this seminar met my expectations.	4.19	4.16	4.00	4.49	

Note: 5=Excellent, 3=Average, and 1=Poor.

Conclusion

Novice principals can embrace new realities through the calm and experienced voice of skillful mentors. Mentors provide a life-line for new leaders to move past situational challenges, refine skills and strategies for long-term results, and understand the impact of decisions in the local context. Through experiential learning and reflection guided by trained mentors/veteran leaders, new principals learn how to prioritize time to build meaningful relationships with all stakeholder groups. Within a trusting relationship, new leaders can seek advisement on aligning goals and building confidence to meet complex needs in school settings. New and experienced leaders, working in partnership, shape a journey during the first year of practice that leads to higher levels of accomplishment for the beginning building leader and the school communities they serve.



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