



A former school superintendent who is now a university professor uses her experience in these partnership roles to describe how Kansas State University's collaboratively designed master's academy leadership preparation models merging theory and practice came about over fifteen years ago, and how it has evolved since then.

# Transforming the Preparation of Leaders into a True Partnership Model

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## **The Context**

In the early 2000s, as public education moved into the accountability era spawned by passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, landmark research produced convincing evidence of the importance of leadership (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, K., 2004). These researchers found that among school-related factors, the influence of leadership on student success is second only to classroom instruction, and further, that leadership makes the most difference in schools with the greatest need. Even more attention-getting was that virtually no documented instances were found of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader. While other factors and positions were necessary in the process, leadership was found to be the catalyst.

Teachers were also recognizing the importance of leadership. In 2006, 36% of respondents to the Kansas Teachers Working Conditions Survey selected leadership as the single factor most influencing the decision about staying in their school and 97% ranked support from school leadership as important or extremely important in influencing personal decisions about future plans (Miller, Devin, and Shoop, 2007). Prior to these affirming statements from research, practitioners in school districts were experiencing the need for quality leadership firsthand. Expectations of school leader position holders were changing, and district leaders responsible for hiring principals were finding that current preparation programs were not producing candidates ready to be successful in this new leadership setting.

## **A Story of Change Begins**

Insightful chief district leaders in three neighboring Midwest school districts united with courageous faculty members from a nearby university to address leadership concerns in their area. They were superintendents from each of the three districts with their most immediate leadership teammates and the dean and senior faculty members from the department of educational administration at the nearby

state university. In true partnership spirit, the participants came together as an ad hoc planning committee to find a common commitment, to collect resources available across all sources, and to put together a more effective design for preparation of school leaders. They quickly found they shared a vision of a more effective merger between theory and practice and that they were ready to commit their respective organizations to planning and implementing a new program consistent with that shared vision. Everyone agreed a new approach to curriculum was needed, but it must be one anchored firmly in research and designed to reflect a growing body of knowledge behind best practice in schools of today and the future.

### **Finding a Research Base for a New Approach to Preparing Leaders**

This was just as the century changed and professional organizations and coalitions had gathered to produce guidelines related to successful leadership. After much deliberation over current professional activities and conversations, these planners chose two research-based components to form the structural framework for their new preparation program:

- *ISLLC Standards (1996)*. The Council of Chief State School Officials (CSSO) and the National Policy Board of Educational Administration (NPBEA) jointly sponsored a coalition of professional organizations and representatives from prominent leadership preparation programs known as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). In 1996 ISLLC published six research-based leadership standards endorsed by the profession. These six standards were the best match for the shared vision the district and university partners had identified.

Their choice proved to be a fortuitous one. State departments of education across the country soon adopted those same ISLLC standards as the basis for leadership licensure. The ISLLC standards continue to undergird the partnership model today, even as they were revised by ISLLC in 2008 and the Performance Indicators were added to bring clarity to the research base that same year.

- *NPBEA Leadership Competencies (1993)*. At the same time the academy initiators were planning their work, researchers were seeking answers to questions about what leadership looked like on the job – what leaders did to accomplish the work of these standards. The partnership planners adopted the current body of knowledge from work in this area by the NPBEA to support the six standards in the new academy curriculum. This was another wise choice; the NPBEA research led to what is now known as the 21 Leadership Responsibilities (Waters et al., 2003).

Planners for this new approach to preparing leaders made many significant decisions before any class members were selected or the date of a first class session was set. In significant departure from typical practice, members

of the new two-year closed cohort were selected by the home district through an open application process based on consideration of demonstrated leadership potential. Each of the three districts filled eight student spaces; the only university requirement of participants was successful admission to graduate school.

Face-to-face class session dates (compatible with district schedules rather than the university calendar) were scheduled with mentor interactions on field experiences supplementing them. Tuition was the responsibility of individual academy students, but books and published materials were provided for all by the districts. The university contributed towards costs in the form of compensation for district staff assisting with the academy. The details of district selection of students, material provision, and university cost sharing would vary over the coming years, but all continue to be distinguishing characteristics of the partnership model.

### **The New Program of Study**

Continuing the partnership framework, decisions related to curriculum and instructional delivery were made collaboratively. An integrated, spiraling curriculum replaced discrete course delivery, but was designed to remain continuously open to new research and to changes in context of practice. District leaders brought forward specific challenges facing their districts and university faculty aligned that context with research-based leadership standards (ISLLC and the 21 Responsibilities) and university preparation program standards (national and state accreditation). Delivery of instruction was also a partnership activity. As best practice and research-based knowledge was presented by university staff, district leaders reinforced the concepts by exposing students to real-world applications in the district, much like mastery in a magnet school within the context of the interest theme. Academy students practiced new skills through meaningful involvement in current school improvement work in their buildings, keeping strong connections between theory and practice foremost in implementation of the new model.

Systems thinking, networking, and greater understanding of the district operations were goals for student growth in the first academy. To facilitate learning and to bridge the distance between theory and current district practice and priorities, each student was assigned a mentor (a building leader in the district). Interactions among aspiring leaders and practitioners produced even more opportunities than expected as college of education staff, district leaders, mentors, and more experienced teachers learned from each other while working with the academy participants. A culture of learning for all emerged, exceeding all partners' expectations. These student goals and learning for all outcomes remain visibly important elements in current academies.

### **Impact of the Academy**

After months of planning, the first university/district partner master's academy got underway in February 2000.<sup>1</sup> Details of how this was accomplished are available in firsthand accounts of the story (Devin, 2004, Miller et al., 2007). Two years later,

twenty students across the three participating districts had acquired building leader licensure and were viable candidates for leadership openings in their respective districts as a result of completing the first master's degree district-university partnership academy. Planners rated the academy experience an overwhelming success. The superintendent of the district where all eight selected participants completed the academy summarized expected and unexpected benefits in a communication to her board of education shortly after the academy was completed:

**Benefits of the Academy Partnership Leadership Preparation Model**

- The district has a cadre of leaders with broader skills and commitment to call on for future school improvement efforts.
- District leaders participating on the planning committee grew professionally as they interacted with university staff and were stimulated by the responses of the academy participants.
- Many of the special projects completed by the participants were directly connected to school improvement efforts at the building level and produced positive results for students.
- Academy participants shared their experiences often with other district teachers and administrators, extending the professional growth beyond the eight directly involved.
- Mentors cited their own growth as they worked with the academy students in problem-solving situations.

- University staff introduced additional resources that are useful to the professional growth of practicing administrators in the district.
- The close working relations between the university and the district rose to yet another level. The direct involvement with our staff and programs has created even greater awareness of and respect for the quality present in the district.
- There are now even more opportunities for future collaboration with the university, for the benefit of staff and students.
- The district/university project was featured in the recent process of national accreditation for the teacher preparation program at the university, taking the positive exposure for the district even beyond Kansas. (Miller et al., 2007, p.99)

Later research on the first academy partnership design for preparing new leaders documented important findings in interviews with the participants themselves at the end of the academy. Quotes from academy completers in Figure 1 indicated the new preparation model more than accomplished the goals of those who partnered on its design. Reflective comments from completers in subsequent academies express similar opinions on the same themes.

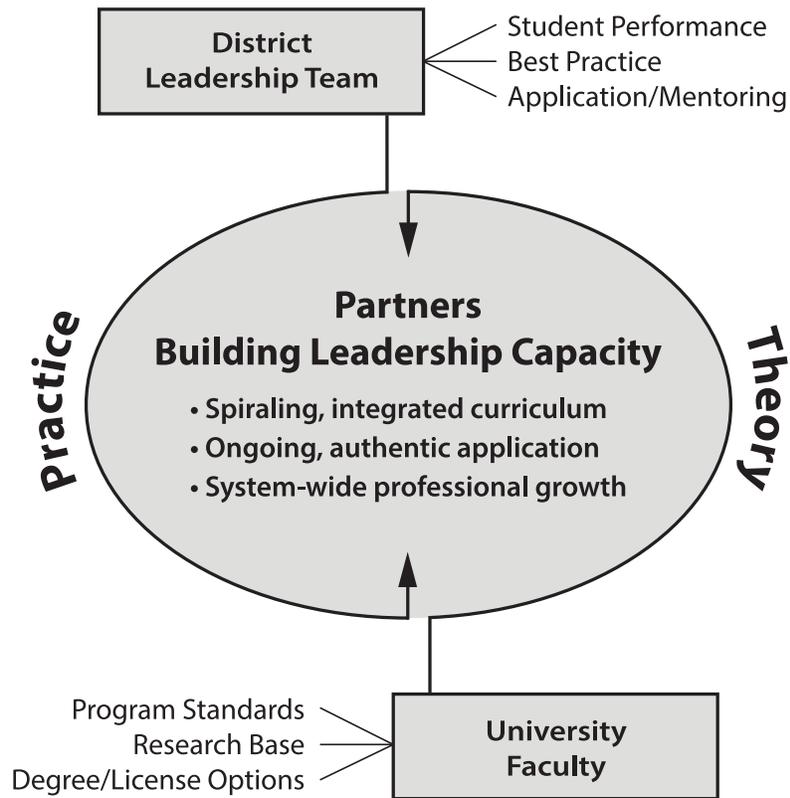
**Shift of Focus to Teacher Leadership Brings More Academy Partners**

Shortly after the conclusion of the first master's degree partnership academy, two of the three original district partners experienced changes in the top leadership position

Figure 1 | Program Graduates Reflection on Impact of Academy Experience

The Partnership Model...	Program Graduate Reflection	Source
<b>changed the way people think about themselves.</b>	"I had never given much consideration to becoming a building principal. Now I think I am glad to have an opportunity to get a principal license even if I never use it. I will be a much better teacher because of this experience."	(Gustafson, 2005, p. 108)
<b>changed classroom practices.</b>	"I clearly remember the very first reflective assignment – what a chore! Now, reflective thought is a daily part of my life, and a part I have included in the assignment of my students. The reflecting was something I will take with me into the future – asking my own students to reflect has impacted how I teach."	(Miller & Devin, 2005, pp. 2–3)
<b>provided authentic experiences.</b>	"In my first year of school administration, I do not think I have been exposed to anything that we didn't discuss at one time or another in (the academy). I can't imagine where I would be with our school improvement efforts and staff development planning had it not been for the knowledge we received in (the academy)."	(Miller, et.al., 2007, p. 85)
<b>developed systems thinking.</b>	"My participation in (the academy) was a genuine life-changing experience. I look at the entire educational field differently than I did before, because for two whole years, I got to view education from the lenses of some of the best administrators in education today. I was so fortunate."	(Gustafson, 2005, p. 131)

## PBLC: Partners Building Leadership Capacity



and attention to the academy partnership model was set aside for a time. In the third of the original partner districts, conversations turned to 1) student feedback indicating significant benefits from the academy even if the graduate remained in the classroom, and 2) the risks of preparing too many good teachers for more administrative openings than the district would need. This discussion led to a second university partnership academy with two changes. First, all participants came from a single district; second and more importantly, the focus shifted from principal preparation to expanding teacher leadership capacity. Academy content remained much the same with more emphasis on teachers as leaders working on school improvement from classroom positions or, as an individual option, as a foundation for the building level administrative license. This shift in focus is the foundation for the many university/district partnership academies that have followed to this date. Figure 2 is a visual demonstration of the partnership master's model for teacher leadership.

From the onset, the university partners agreed that team leadership is an essential component of the shared vision and they were pleased to enter into a second partnership with the district. Instead of a 36-hour master's encompassing all requirements for a building principal license, the academy program of study was reduced to a 30-hour master's in

educational leadership with the individual option of adding six additional hours outside the academy to complete building license requirements. The new format created district interest in a series of academy cohorts in order to give greater numbers of teachers the opportunity to be involved. It was also a way of showing value placed on teachers as learners and a way of supporting those interested in pursuing advanced degree work. The focus on building leadership skills was especially useful as nonadministrative positions such as coaches, coordinators, team leaders, etc., became more common across districts. At the university, the University/District Teacher Leadership Master's Degree academy would become the primary delivery model for the master's program and the building leader preparation program of study over the next fifteen years. See Figure 3 for the history of university/district partnership academies since the model's introduction in 2000.

The redirection to a focus on teacher leadership did not diminish the importance of thoughtful planning for each academy on how to embed theory in the context of local practice, but the shift did alter the conversation between the university and district partners as new academies formed, either with first-time partners, or when beginning a new group as part of a series with a familiar partner. Projecting leadership needs became even more holistic in nature,

Figure 3 | **University/District Partnership Master's Degree Model – History (May 2016)**

Academy Name	District Partner(s)	Dates of Academy	# Enrolled
Professional Administrative Leadership Academy (PALA)	Geary County (8) Manhattan-Ogden (8) Salina (8)	March 2000 – February 2002	24
Leadership Academy	Geary County	September 2003 – May 2005	20
Garden City/Manhattan-Ogden Teacher Leadership Academy (GC/MO TLA)	Garden City (12) Manhattan-Ogden (12)	Spring 2005 – Fall 2006	24
Professional Education Leadership Academy (PELA)	Geary County	January 2006 – December 2007	17
Dodge City Education Leadership Academy (DCELA)	Dodge City	January 2007 – December 2008	21
Professional Education Leadership Academy 2 (PELA 2)	Geary County	June 2008 – May 2010	15
Salina Teacher Leadership Academy (STLA)	Salina	Fall 2008 – Summer 2010	8
Professional Education Leadership Academy 3 (PELA 3)	Geary County	September 2010 – June 2012	15
Dodge City Education Leadership Academy 2 (DCELA 2)	Dodge City	January 2011 – December 2012	22
Salina Teacher Leadership Academy 2 (STLA 2)	Salina	Fall 2011 – Summer 2013	6
Topeka Public Schools Teacher Leadership Academy (TPSTLA)	Topeka	January 2013 – December 2014	10
Professional Education Leadership Academy 4 (PELA 4)	Geary County	January 2012 – December 2013	14
Topeka Public Schools Teacher Leadership Academy 2 (TPSTLA 2)	Topeka	January 2014 – December 2015	9
Professional Education Leadership Academy 5 (PELA 5)*	Geary County	Fall 2015 – Summer 2017	19
Salina Teacher Leadership Academy 3 (STLA 3)*	Salina	Fall 2015 – Summer 2017	21
USD 383 Teacher Leadership Academy 3 (TLA 3)*	Manhattan-Ogden	Fall 2015 – Summer 2017	16
Dodge City/Garden City Teacher Leadership Academy (DC/GC TLA) **	Dodge City (12) Garden City (12)	Fall 2016 – Summer 2018	24
Topeka/Wamego Teacher Leadership Academy **	Topeka (17) Wamego (4)	Fall 2016 – Summer 2018	21
Osage Nation Educational Leadership Academy (ONELA)**	Osage Nation (Oklahoma)	Fall 2016 – Summer 2018	12
Teacher Leadership LEAD 512***	Shawnee Mission	Spring 2017 – Fall 2018	TBD

\* In progress. (Fall 2015 – Summer 2017)

\*\* Begins Fall 2016

\*\*\* Begins Spring 2017

Figure 4 | **District Partners by Academy Date/Enrollment (May 2016)**

District	Academy Start Date	Enrollment
<b>District Partner 1: Geary County</b>	March 2000	8*
	September 2003	20
	January 2006	17
	June 2008	15
	September 2010	15
	January 2013	14
	September 15	19
		<b>Total = 108</b>
<b>District Partner 2: Salina</b>	March 2000	8*
	September 2008	8
	September 2011	6
	August 2015	21
		<b>Total = 43</b>
<b>District Partner 3: Manhattan-Ogden</b>	March 2000	8*
	Spring 2005	12*
	September 2015	16
		<b>Total = 36</b>
<b>District Partner 4: Dodge City</b>	January 2007	21
	January 2011	22
	September 2016	12*
		<b>Total = 55</b>
<b>District Partner 5: Topeka</b>	January 2012	10
	January 2014	9
	September 2016	17*
		<b>Total = 36</b>
<b>District Partner 6: Garden City</b>	January 2005	12*
	September 2016	12*
		<b>Total = 24</b>
<b>District Partner 7: Wamego</b>	September 2016	4*
		<b>Total = 4</b>
<b>Partner 8 (Tribal Government): Osage Nation</b>	September 2016	12
		<b>Total = 12</b>
<b>Total academy participants to date = 318</b>		
<b>Total academy groups to date = 19</b>		
<b>(District Partner 9)</b>	(In planning for January 2017 Start)	(TBD)

\* Joint partnership with another district

especially as emerging research reinforced the importance of building leadership teams and districts broadened the manner in which they relied on teacher leadership as an essential component of successful school improvement. The planning group morphed into the Planning Committee and was acknowledged to be an ongoing part of the process throughout the full two years of the academy.

Interest in partnerships grew quickly as word spread among education leaders regarding the positive outcomes of early academies. Figure 4 illustrates this growth, as they list academies by district partners, showing how the number of individual district partners participating with the university in leadership master's academies will have tripled in the first 16 years of its implementation.

Within academies, field experiences became more diverse in order to meet the needs of the teachers coming into the program from various assignments across the districts. While face-to-face time continues to be an important element in the academy model, the challenge of geographic distance is often an item on each planning committee's agenda. A typical academy meets face-to-face on the district site eight times each semester with technology facilitating communications in-between. However, the partners have found various creative ways to package face-to-face time over the years. Longer weekend sessions reduce travel time and developing technology resources such as PolyCom and Zoom can create a degree of physical togetherness without so much travel.

#### **Academy Materials**

Materials selected today are very different from those used in the first academy, but choosing them collaboratively remains a major part of the planning process. The first academy relied on a series of titles from the mid-90s based on the 21 competencies identified by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) to describe what principals should know and be able to do. The 21 themes were grouped into Functional, Interpersonal, Programmatic, and Contextual domains. When McREL research introduced the 21 Leadership Responsibilities of building leaders, materials shifted to those related to the newer research (Waters et al., 2003, 2007). Another influence on materials has been the growing body of knowledge from many sources on what works in schools and how to build leadership capacity at all levels. Approximately twenty titles are selected by the respective planning committees for each academy currently, looking at the most recent materials available that best match issues, interests, and professional development in the partner district.

While authors and titles vary across academies (even in the same district), they remain contemporary research-based publications on topics related to building leadership capacity at all levels; such topics include using data to inform decisions, understanding and leading the change process, and leadership in special education, technology, curriculum, and team building. Other consistent elements in the integrated, spiraling curriculum are influencing a culture supporting school improvement, safety and equity issues, and ethics that underlie educational decisions. Authors

frequently appearing on materials lists include Lambert on teacher leadership, Fullan and Wagner on change, Kidder on ethics, and others such as Douglas Reeves, Victoria Bernhardt, Charlotte Danielson, Kent Peterson, Terry Deal, Ken O'Connor, and Shirley Hord. Additionally, emerging emphasis on the formation of professional learning communities, which reinforces the need for teacher leadership, also has become an integral part of the several academy's professional growth plan. Primary resources used for developing and sustaining a professional learning community culture include the National Association of Elementary Principals and the works of Robert DuFour and others.

### **Mentored Field Experiences**

From the first academy through the present ones, each academy participant is assigned a one-on-one district mentor to work with over the two-year program. The mentor assists the student in finding suitable applications, increasing responsibility over time. As topics are explored in class, students are expected to find opportunities to put what they have learned into practice at an appropriate level. When topics reappear in the integrated, spiraling curriculum, the level of involvement in practice increases for the student. The purpose of the mentor relationship remains the same, but planners have learned that good mentor programs require a program of support and skill building. District partners are responsible for assigning mentors, but the university partner can provide assistance with developing mentoring skills. Mentor support includes establishing a network of mentors where they can learn mentoring skills and share ideas, successes, and challenges with each other.

### **Staffing and Linking the Partners**

An important staffing element separating the partnership model from previous preparation approaches was the blending of both university and district personnel as first-line staff during the two years the cohort works together. The first partnership academy was staffed by the three experienced district leaders (each of whom had served as a university adjunct instructor), who were individually teamed with a designated university faculty member with expertise on content. These three superintendents were the connecting links between the university and the staff. As planners, each accepted an active role in designing and delivering topics in the proposed curriculum. In addition, practitioners and outside experts were called on to enhance topics as they were studied in class settings.

Staffing changes among and within the partners themselves played a significant part in the evolution of the partnership academy model. The last remaining superintendent from the three original partners transitioned to a full-time university faculty position and joined forces with another faculty member who had recently made a similar transition from the principalship to the university. This educator was also well-versed in the new model, having served as a mentor in the first master's academy prior to moving to the university. These two, now university colleagues, assumed leadership for expanding the partnership model to more districts. Successor

leaders in the first three districts became familiar with the model and its past successes and interest grew in working together again. Roles or faces of all leaders had changed since initiation of the partnership model, but its reputation for accomplishing the goal of merging theory and practice was growing rapidly. In a very short time the number of academies increased dramatically, taking shape as a series of academies with original district partners and new first-time partnerships with others.

Staffing needs continued to be affected as the model matured. Thorough planning before the first class session reduced the need for impactful decisions to be made during the academy. With this preplanning in place, the direct participation of chief decision makers (superintendents) was no longer essential after commitment was made to enter the partnership. A new district liaison role took shape replacing the one held by the original superintendents. With the strong team from the university, a district liaison was needed to coordinate between the academy activities and the district, to facilitate communication, and to assist in making whatever connections were important between the academy staff, students, mentors, and others. The liaison position holder shifted to an Assistant Superintendent or a central office director. The selection of the liaison remained collaborative and the university assumed responsibility for compensating these positions as adjunct instructors.

Over time the increasing number of partner districts and the challenges of geographic distance led to other staffing alterations. At the university, the two faculty members leading academy expansion recognized the need to work separately and build leadership capacity in others in order to accommodate twice the number of district partnerships. The district liaison became a coteacher with equal responsibility for planning and delivering the curriculum within the guidelines established by the district/university planning committee. Position holders began to include principals and in some cases districts chose to split the assignment between two district leaders. Selection remains collaborative and the university continues to provide compensation for the position in whatever format best serves the partnership at that time.

### **Academy Planning Committee**

The presence of an academy planning committee composed of both district and university members is another unique feature of the university/district partnership. The purpose of the committee is to provide guidance throughout the two academy years; it does not shut down after initial planning and the first class session. As the model matured, transitions influenced the Planning Committee makeup, not its importance. Today in addition to the university representative(s), the district members typically include the superintendent or a top assistant, central office directors involved with staff development and school improvement, representative principals, and sometimes representatives from past academies.

When a district expresses interest in forming an original partnership or another in a series in the same district, university and district leaders form a Planning Committee to

collaboratively plan and implement a preparation program for future leaders. All decisions are made collaboratively. The Planning Committee remains in place throughout the two years of the academy and periodic meetings are scheduled to share information on student progress and to make sure support systems are working satisfactorily. The involvement of the Planning Committee is what has made it possible to effectively merge theory and practice. Its goal is to extend academy benefits across the district, beyond personal growth of students in the program. The Planning Committee is where relationships are built between the university and the district.

### Impact on District and University Cultures

In the sixteen-plus years since the first university/district partnership began, some generalizations about this approach to preparing leaders have become evident. The number of district partners choosing to have a series of academies indicate the model has become an ongoing component of professional development opportunities offered to staff; teachers anticipate the beginning of the next academy cycle. The nature of the academy structure itself benefits districts beyond the professional growth of the participants in the class. As teachers learn in the academy classroom, they become actively involved in real school improvement efforts

in their building or district. Participants across all academies consistently speak to the benefit of being able to apply immediately what they are learning, and to seeing the positive impact of what they have learned on their performance, whether they remain in the classroom or move to another assignment in the future. School improvement efforts benefit from the skills academy students bring to their assignments. For those academy completers who have gone on to building leader positions, feedback indicates support for the strength of preparation for leadership responsibilities provided by the academy model.

The opportunity to select academy students through an application process gives the district significant influence on who will pursue personal leadership development, an especially important factor when increasing diversity of staff is a district goal. The influence of supervisors has been identified as a major factor in the decision teachers make to pursue a career in administration (Zacharakis, Devin, & Miller, 2006), and in making decisions for future leadership positions, district leaders can consider their extended observations of student growth in leadership over their time in the academy. Beyond professional growth for academy students, mentors report their service to be an especially valuable professional growth for them, as well.

Figure 5 | One District's Report of the Effectiveness of Academies by Providing Leadership for Future Positions

Description of Academy Graduate's Current Position In or Out of the District	Number of Graduates in Current Position (Across all six academies completed in the district between 2002–2014)	Percent of Academy Graduates
Number of academy graduates serving as principal or assistant principal in the district	21	24
Number of academy graduates serving in a central office position in the district	6	7
Number of academy graduates serving in a building level nonclassroom assignment in the district (coach, coordinator, etc.)	16	18
Number of academy graduates remaining in a classroom teaching assignment in the district (with teacher leader responsibilities on building and district committees as needed) *10 of these individuals graduated from the most recently finished cohort and have had only one academic year to pursue administrative positions	23	26
Number of academy graduates departed from the district	23	26
<b>Total graduates during time period</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>*</b>

Note: This district partner was one of the three original university partners and since beginning the first academy, and has partnered on a total of six completed academy cohorts. In Fall 2016, 18 more teachers enrolled in a seventh partnership academy scheduled to be complete in Summer 2017.

\*due to rounding, figure does not equal 100%

District satisfaction is evidenced by the fact that in every district where a partnership academy has been completed, two or more additional academies have now been completed. Several districts have sponsored three or four academy cohorts. One large district has completed six master's academies and is presently midway through a seventh cohort group since the model was first used in 2000. Focusing on this one longtime district partner, one way to assess the impact of this investment in professional growth is to follow teachers who have completed an academy, and Figure 5 charts graduates from these six academies in this one district. For this district with high mobility due to its location, it is important to note that only 26% of academy completers left the district, meaning that 74% of completers stayed. This speaks to the value of the academies as a retention tool for good teachers.

Academies affect the culture of both the district and the university partner. In the district, academy participants change the conversations in faculty lounges, in team discussions, and in leadership team planning. Across the district, there is a growing appreciation for and understanding of the complexity of decisions and actions, even when those decisions are not viewed favorably. A greater sense of system is blended with personal interests as issues emerge and problems are solved.

University staff benefit equally from this connection between theory and practice. The opportunity to be involved at a closer proximity to practice provides important insight for university staff. Networking with district personnel and district programs has led to additional unexpected opportunities for collaboration beyond academies between the university and districts. The reputation as a partner/collaborator is a growing asset to the college and to the larger university. The university has frequently recognized district partners by acknowledging their leadership by presenting them with formal recognition such as the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) Excellence in Educational Leadership Awards.

### **Future of the Academy Partnership Model**

Efforts continue to make an academy partnership as effective as possible. Keeping curriculum topics current, attracting potential leaders in the application process, selecting the most up-to-date materials to support the topics, making sure field experiences are authentic, and listening to feedback from district leaders and students themselves continue to be routine parts of academy operations.

Keeping the academy connected to the district is important to the success of the mission of this leadership preparation program. Seated principals must see the academy as an important capacity-building opportunity for teachers. Identifying the best academy students depends on district leaders and principals encouraging potential leaders to apply for the academy. This influence is the most significant factor in building leadership capacity for the future. Teacher leaders often lack self-confidence and fail to see their own strengths or potential. Principals who have had faculty members in academies report a positive influence on building culture

itself as new skills and conversations are introduced in building team and school improvement activities.

One area tagged for improvement in academy operations is skill development and support for mentors of academy students. District partners with the most successful outcomes have an organizational plan for mentors during the academy period. University staff assist with skill-building materials and activities and the district liaison acts as a facilitator for mentor networking.

Even absent efforts to recruit new partners, requests for expanding the number of partnerships continues to grow. The capacity of the department to match the level of interest will challenge leaders in the coming years. Prospects for finding coalitions of smaller districts not large enough to support an academy within their own district are untapped, but certainly feasible. Capacity in current academy staff must continue to grow and may need to be applied in changing fashion. New ways to organize in district support systems are likely to emerge. Technology improvements will open new options that preserve the face-to-face benefits while reducing barriers. Blocks of time will be reshaped to better fit needs of new partners. Extended blocks (several days) during summer, for example, can replace current shorter, more frequent schedules now typical.

Interest in the academy model has spread beyond the parent university. Another state university requested assistance from academy leaders to establish university/district partnerships out of their own leadership preparation program. The two-person university team that had taken the teacher leadership model to scale in their department provided direct consulting services to support this effort by a university colleague. Unfortunately, the effort produced only a single academy partnership experience, perhaps at least partly because of unrelated leadership changes in both the university and the district involved.

As a result of professional information shared through university networks, a similar request was received from a university peer outside the state. The former superintendent turned university academy liaison worked with interested staff from North Dakota State University. Based on this support and their own good ideas and hard work, the academy partnership model in that area has been successful in its first application and is presently expanding for additional partnerships.<sup>2</sup>

### **Concluding Comments**

Some things have changed since the first university/district academy model was initiated. Perhaps the most significant event: the focus moved from principal preparation to teacher leadership. Research and best practice continue to support the absolute necessity of team leadership in education and in other settings. In schools, this means leadership skills are as important for teachers as they are for formal position holders. Today's academy model gives participants the option of completing the required state license for building leader positions, while also filling leadership needs at the classroom level.

Details of the roles of those working within the academy system have been altered slightly, but the emphasis on a collaborative merger of theory and practice remains as strong as in the original experience. In order for this to happen, both the university and the district must be committed to a partnership relationship, building together what neither could accomplish on its own.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> An important distinction is made here: This “second wave” is the current model at KSU and is the primary model discussed throughout this themed issue. The earliest versions (1987 - 1998) of leadership academies, as they were called, were post-master’s degree professional development for practicing school leaders. Subsequent leadership academies of this “second wave” have been partnerships for preservice prospective school leaders, providing master’s degrees to the selected participants. For more on this distinction, see previous commentary in this issue, David Thompson’s “Revisiting Public School/University Partnerships for Formal Leadership Development: A Brief 30-Year Retrospective.”

<sup>2</sup> See later in this issue Tom Hall and Ann Clapper’s “North Dakota’s Experience with the Academy Model: A Successful Replication.”

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