

The Topeka-KSU collaborative leadership academy addresses many of the major voids found in traditional administrator preparation programs.

# A Working Partnership: Training Administrators in a Cooperative Field-Based Model

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## Introduction

The training of educational administrators has long been the autocratic domain of universities and state departments of education. Universities have held an unrelenting grasp on academic and experience requirements for administrator certification and renewal since licensing procedures for administrators were instituted. Similarly, the aims of universities have generally gone unquestioned or at least patently respected by state legislatures. In recent years, however, the traditional preparation program found in universities has come under increasing criticism for a perceived lack of relevance and effectiveness. Charges have been leveled that university professors blatantly forsake the applied practice of administration in favor of theory-based instruction containing little practical applicability. The frustrations of critics have resulted in considerable depreciation of administrator certification requirements (Thomson, 1988), and a variety of proposals designed to improve administrative preparation has been suggested (Griffiths, 1987).

The diminished credibility of universities and strident attacks on the relevancy of preparation programs have not gone unnoticed. In many instances, universities have both reacted and proacted through alternative proposals seeking ways in which to respond to perceived needs for improving preservice and renewal programs and to increase benefits to new and practicing administrators. Proposals have varied widely and have included a continuum of severity, ranging from state mandated entry-level internships and administra-

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tor assessment to drastic reduction in university participation. A central theme of reform has been the intent to provide specific, identifiable skills tied to concrete field based experiences.

In many cases, it no longer seems arguable that a considerable degree of criticism is undeserved. Observation and common sense suggest that administrator preparation has necessarily been discrete from practice. While to some degree the schism is an unalterable natural phenomenon, the unfortunate consequence of deliberately fostering the chasm favoring abstraction has frequently placed preparation programs in the position of serving pedanticism more than it has served to bridge conceptual and experiential gaps.

Unlike the tepid reaction to many waves of reform, the response by institutions of higher learning to criticism of administrator preparation has been strong. While in some instances the reaction has admittedly been cloistered and unproductive, in other instances universities have responded in varied ways which have sought to grasp an opportunity to effect meaningful change. Some institutions have responded by strengthening academic requirements from within the organization, while other accrediting institutions have focused efforts on working cooperatively with state departments of education to standardize and refocus preservice preparation in order to ensure a greater degree of rigor and relevance. Still other universities, while encouraging cooperation within traditional strictures defined in legislative and bureaucratic codification, have sought through far-reaching and novel opportunities to explore uncharted ways in which to enhance preparation programs and to simultaneously address the credibility gap between practice and theory (Thompson et al., 1988).

One of the more promising structures addressing the theory-to-practice gap in training administrators is the university-public school partnership. This issue of *Educational Considerations* is devoted to exploring representative partnerships exemplifying myriad opportunities for enhancing cooperative relationships. While many variations on the partnership concept are represented in this volume and many more are readily conceived, one dimension of the partnerships concept is presently being used to address the experience and relevance gap in training administrators. Partnerships between public schools and universities offer tremendous potential for greatly improving administrative quality by providing the structure for public schools and universities to work jointly in determining meaningful administrator preparation. By joining producers and consumers in the preparation process, the multiple dimensions of collaborative partnerships serve a useful purpose by seeking to involve all interested parties in the design and implementation of accountable structures.

As Yount (1985) notes, the current emphasis on university-public school partnerships is timely and appropriate. Partnership is a concept with tremendous potential in an era when there is much concern about educating children for specified outcomes. As knowledge of effective schools and instructional leaders increases, emphasis on the critical role of administrators in effecting change also appears to be increasing through a substantial body of research indicating that administrators, particularly principals, can have a significant effect upon educational outcomes (Hallinger and Murphy, 1987). In at least one instance, the partnership concept is being seen as a vehicle to effectively address that need for effective administrative leaders in public schools.

## The Leadership Academy Concept

To effect major change in administrator preparation programs, divergent thinking must be encouraged which strips away tradition and fosters innovation. If a major criticism of preparation programs has been their inapplicability to 'real life,' then life itself must be sought out and experiences delivered which approximate reality as closely as possible. For the training of administrators, the *leadership academy* concept offers a pioneering application of partnerships between producers and consumers. Leadership academies incorporate the willing equal participation of the public school into the design and implementation of performance-based administrator preparation programs. The leadership academy provides for development of administrative leadership skills by focusing on clinical and internship experiences in order to directly address the conceptual gap on which criticism of existing programs is founded. Although clinical experiences have long held a dormant potential for significant contribution to administrative training, only recently have efforts been focused on implementing cooperative ventures to improve preservice experiences.

The leadership academy concept offers unusual opportunities for alternatives in delivering preservice programs. Universities are thus able to provide significant benefits to school systems, and administrative interns and the public schools in turn provide countless benefits to colleges and universities. A leadership academy offers multiple benefits by providing universities the opportunity to field test administrative candidates while simultaneously offering school systems the opportunity to provide system-based training to prospective administrators. The public school simultaneously receives an extraordinary benefit through extended clinical observation of interns prior to contractual agreement for employment. Finally, the leadership academy allows the university to achieve the appropriate integration of theory into field based practice, and university-school district collaborative supervision also addresses the criticism that university programs devote inordinate time to theoretical abstraction.

Clearly, the leadership academy concept has gained impetus from growing concerns regarding the effectiveness and efficiency of both public school administrators and university preparation programs which sponsor them (Livingston et al., 1988). The leadership academy concept deliberately addresses theory-to-practice concerns by preparing administrators in experiential field settings utilizing a living laboratory approach to capitalize on creative and integral input from the public schools. Intensive clinical experiences prepare interns to approach the first leadership assignment with greater confidence and proven skills. The far-reaching benefits to school districts, universities, and the interns are sufficient cause to lend merit to the leadership academy concept.

## A Model Program

Kansas State University and the Topeka Public Schools are firm believers in the partnership concept. These dynamic organizations are presently operating a model leadership academy for the identification and advanced preparation of educational administrators for building-level positions. For both the university and the public schools, the leadership academy's onsite preparation program appears to be a creative answer to criticisms of both preparation program content and to administrative shortages anticipated by the school system. Development and implementation of the Leadership Academy in the Topeka

Public Schools has addressed concerns on both issues with considerable success.

A critical conceptual element of the program's operation is the equal cooperative partnership between Kansas State University and the Topeka Public Schools. Following a series of jointly initiated discussions and creative efforts, an agreement was reached in early 1987 between the faculty of educational administration at KSU and officials of the Topeka schools for the creation of an experimental leadership academy. The academy was designed to provide an intellectual and clinical atmosphere to foster innovative experiences for the university-based administrator preparation program and to serve the unique needs of the Topeka school system which is facing potentially significant administrative vacancies due largely to natural attrition.

The KSU/Topeka Leadership Academy was developed for specific reasons benefiting both the university and the public schools. Initial recognition suggested a need to provide advanced skills to a new generation of administrators from the perspective of improving university preparation and from the school district's need to identify outstanding individuals for administrative career opportunities.

The design of the KSU/Topeka Leadership Academy is uncluttered and direct. The structure of the academy called for full and equal approval of the program at each level of involvement. Plans were formulated which sought the collaborative endorsement of the university and the school district. The board of education of the Topeka Public Schools was asked to approve a plan to internally solicit applicants for the academy and to provide funding and structure for the training of eight potential administrators during the 1987-88 academic term. Upon board approval, the superintendent was empowered to create the academy and to provide joint administrative structure in coordination with the university. The resulting organization was the district's administrative team which oversees the entire academy process, and the appointment of one representative from each institution to direct the academy's daily operation.

## Participant Selection

An internal notice was sent to all district certificated employees announcing the creation of the Leadership Academy. Several prerequisites were necessary for applicants to be eligible for participation. A primary requirement for entry into the program was that the candidate must already possess a valid building administrator's professional certificate. By incorporating certification as a requirement for candidacy, the university and the school district were assured that candidates selected for participation would not be totally inexperienced recruits without exposure to administrative skills. Additionally, in the event that vacancies were to occur propitiously, the requirement served to provide advanced training to pre-identified candidates rather than to entirely risk employment decisions on external applicants. Additional requirements of applicants included intensive screening by a committee of top administrators and university representatives. Although a decided advantage regarding potential vacancies accrued to participants, a competitive atmosphere was maintained to improve the overall quality of the candidate field because academy applicants were notified in advance that successful completion of the academy experience did not guarantee an administrative post within the district.

Forty applications were received in the first year of the program's operation. All applicants were given full consideration as potential candidates upon receipt of appropriate materials. Applicants submitted a resume, transcripts, letters of reference, and underwent intensive screening using

a thirty minute personal interview before university faculty and central office administrators. The interview process provided the university and school district the opportunity to further evaluate prospective interns and to contribute equally in the spirit of cooperatively identifying promising candidates. The process, although time-consuming, provided rigorous selection and identification, with the result being eight persons who were chosen to enter as the first cohort group beginning in the fall term 1987.

### Participant Training and Development

The spirit of collegiality and cooperation was embraced as endemic to success. Both governing organizations brought unique and common needs to the academy which included specific competencies and processes to be field tested. The first year of operation of the leadership academy centered on four intensive experiences serving the unique needs of both organizations. Academic and preparation needs were served as candidates received advanced classroom training using a seminar format in advanced topics on public school administration. To maintain the structural and philosophical integrity of field-based cooperative learning, university personnel traveled to the Topeka Public Schools to join central office administrators in team-teaching experiences. Careful attention was given to preserving philosophic congruency of the partnership concept, as all central office administrators were granted adjunct faculty status at Kansas State University.

The academic component focused on intense examination of current topics in educational administration. The prime thrust of the course work was to provide unique and specific training to candidates to equip them for entry into administration with a defined set of skills. Academy participants were provided the opportunity to earn twelve academic and internships credits delivered in the two semesters of the year-long experience. Instruction focused upon selected indepth topics in personnel, curriculum and staff development, finance, and law. Personnel topics included selection and evaluation of staff, collective bargaining and contract administration, and other related personnel issues. Curriculum and staff development was a heavy emphasis consistent with the attitude that administrators should be educational program leaders. Finance sessions provided an indepth review of principles of school finance, construction and operation of funding mechanisms, and a thorough review of Kansas statutes governing finance. Sessions on school law for principals focused on topics of current concern in public schools by providing indepth analysis of tort liability, due process and student/employee rights, and other current problems confronting school districts. The joint venture of co-teaching instructional segments provided not only the perspective of equality of professional university/school district administrative staff, but also provided seminar participants with the opportunity to gain a close view of the school system and to establish a productive working relationship with district administrators.

While advanced academic preparation provided new skills to interns, experience in administrative roles occupied a major portion of the academy. The agreement provided daily release time for interns for one-half day during an entire semester to participate in intensive clinical experiences with mentor administrators in the district. Interns were scheduled in three-week blocks at all administrative levels in the district. The interns rotated through elementary, middle school, high school, special education, and central office administration levels for the purpose of obser-

vation, instruction, and actual performance of assigned administrative leadership tasks.

While course work provided valuable concepts, internship experiences assumed a critical proportion in the leadership academy. Interns were placed with experienced administrators termed *clinical associates*, who were identified by the school system for their ability to serve as mentors. Clinical associates were assisted by the academy's co-directors. The associates and co-directors met each semester to outline a program of intern experiences and to evaluate their work. Interns were further required to meet monthly with the university supervisor to discuss internship activities in a group setting.

The advanced course work and clinical experiences were supported by a third component which focused on completion of a major applied research project by each intern. At the beginning of the year, central office administrators and university representatives identified research topics of current interest to the school district and the applied practice of educational administration. Under the direction of the university supervisor, interns pursued a research project in which they were expected to develop a thorough and scholarly problem analysis and to propose an exemplary program suitable for implementation in the schools. The applied research project was expected to be scholarly, to identify strengths and weaknesses within the school district associated with the issue, and to propose a model strategy based on research evidence, local needs, and original critical analysis.

The final academy activity provided external validation of district and university observations of the interns. As a culminating activity, interns were evaluated in an National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) Assessment Center. By requiring interns to successfully complete assessment center activities, the university and the district were provided with external observations against which district and university evaluations could be compared, contrasted, and strengthened.

### Program Evaluation

The outcomes of the Academy were of vital interest to both the university and the school district, and a major portion of the overall process focused on program evaluation in order to determine the academy's continuance. Clearly, perceived success on the part of the school district was vital to program survival and long-term effectiveness. Evaluation by the school board and district administrative staff was deemed critical to the project as the school district had invested heavily in the project with expected costs in excess of \$50,000 for the first year of operation. In sum, the district's credibility was balanced on the academy's success. Additionally, evaluation of the academy by the university was seen as critical in responding to national criticisms of administrator preparation generally found in the various national reports. Because of strong beliefs by the district and university in efficiency, effectiveness, and relevance in administrator training programs, evaluation was given an important and integral role in the academy's operation. It was clearly recognized that effective evaluation would allow for program improvement and vitality in subsequent years.

Three essential factors comprised evaluation of the academy. The first phase obviously examined the perceptions of university and school district personnel. Given positive attitudes and indications of willingness to continue the program, relative success was measured in part by the merit assigned to the academy after a full year of operation. Secondly, consistency of observations through comparing inhouse evaluations of interns to the assessment center

data was an indicator of validity. Where individual candidate's strengths and weaknesses were uniformly validated by both assessment center data and internal agents, some degree of confidence was assumed regarding the academy's value to future employment decisions. Finally, assumptions were built into program evaluation regarding the increasing value of longitudinal observations extending beyond the first year.

The first year of the leadership academy produced a high degree of satisfaction within both sponsoring organizations. Plans have been formalized to continue the academy into 1988-89 and subsequent years. Content of the program for the second year nearly parallels the first year with minor adjustments to accommodate changes in anticipated vacancies and rearticulation of school district goals. The central components focusing on academic course work, clinical internship experiences, and applied research projects have been retained intact. Both the university and the school district agree that the external NASSP assessment appears to lend strength to the validity of the internal observation process. While the final longitudinal benefit remains to be seen, there is a clear indication that the university and school district perceive real gains resulting from collaboration and equal partnership in preparing administrators.

### Summary

The concept of partnerships in education has resulted in many efforts of collaboration in school districts around the nation. Partnerships are as unique as the organizations that engender them. That uniqueness is a major strength, as organizational interests are fused into productive relationships leading to mutual benefits.

The KSU/Topeka Leadership Academy operating in Topeka, Kansas provides one more instance of a growing, thriving plethora of exciting alternatives for the preparation of tomorrow's administrators. It has offered the Topeka Public Schools and Kansas State University an exciting and unique experience which should serve as a model of a working partnership for medium to large districts which support the effective schools research (Kyle, 1985) and which can afford to invest extensively in the educational program improvement by recognizing the contribution of administra-

tive leadership to educational program excellence. The leadership academy offers universities an exciting opportunity to field test preparation programs and to test the appropriate intermingling of research, theory, and practice in a clinical setting, and it also offers school districts an unequalled opportunity to observe candidates for an extended period of time, while providing them with unique experiences related to their roles if they are offered positions within the host district. The sum total of the academy concept appears to address many of the recent concerns expressed regarding sterile preparation programs and the failure to allow for cooperative design of academic and field based administrator experiences.

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