

Developing Leadership Capacity in New Rural School District Leaders:

The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute

Donna Augustine-Shaw

Kansas State University

Understanding the context of rural school settings is critical to beginning school district leaders. Rural communities present multifaceted challenges that leaders must embrace as diverse community expectations unfold. The majority of Kansas school districts are in rural settings. Mentoring and induction shapes the experiences encountered during the first year of practice. The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute provides high quality mentoring and induction for new superintendents and principals in Kansas. Mentoring and induction provided by veteran superintendents familiar with leadership complexities in rural communities is offered through on-site visits. In addition, new superintendents participate in activities focused on building capacity through regional cohort networks, attendance at professional organization and state meetings, and in professional learning seminars. The rural superintendent wears many hats in serving their local district. Professional learning opportunities that provide leaders with strategies to focus on achievement, plan for change, and build leadership capacity in rural environments are critical for success.

Keywords: leadership, rural, mentoring and induction, professional learning

At the heart of leadership is a focus on student achievement. Research has validated the link between leadership and its impact on student learning (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Guiding the myriad of change initiatives in today's schools is a vital leadership skill. School leaders shape necessary curriculum, instruction, and assessment priorities for staff by establishing a clear focus on learning and high expectations. Building capacity and developing a culture centered on learning are key variables that support organizational change (Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher, 2005). A focus on raising student performance through skillful orchestration and expertise is paramount for every school executive leader.

Leithwood (2005) postulated that effective leaders must also respond to the local context of their school district and community. A strong emphasis on the educational context and responding to particular school improvement challenges within the local district setting is especially critical for the rural superintendent. Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) stated that superintendents in rural settings face unique contextual challenges ranging from poverty to wide-ranging responsibilities compounded by a highly visible public role. The local situation in each rural district and community is distinctive, resulting in leadership skills that must be tailored to the multifaceted needs of its community stakeholders (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005). Effective support and learning for district leaders can

bridge the important relationship between understanding the local district context and pathways to increase student achievement.

A continued focus on building capacity to support change in rural districts requires support at all levels of the organization. Lamkin (2006) noted that "the premise that the role of rural school superintendents has become increasingly difficult may be the direct result of increased demands and decreased assistance" (p. 22). Geographic isolation, the degree and intensity of community response to change, need for focused training, high visibility, and the broad application of scarce resources are uniquely challenging to the new rural superintendent (Lamkin, 2006). These complexities in building capacity at all levels for the new superintendent require an individualized approach to support.

Mentoring and induction for new rural superintendents is a critical investment in leadership and must be a priority for school district and university programs as well as educational professionals interested in developing and supporting the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for every new leader to be successful within the educational context they serve. Preston, Jakubiec, and Kooymans (2013) reinforced the elevated dependence on relationships for rural leaders, whereby rural leaders' skill and strong receptivity to the unique needs and perceptions of internal and external stakeholders within their school and community is vital to their success. Within this sensitive context, the need to support rural superintendents in their initial year of practice is

imperative. As a viable option to support new Kansas rural superintendents, as well as new superintendents throughout varied geographic locations in the state, the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute (KELI) is one model offering mentoring and induction services and professional learning for leaders.

The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute

The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute is a collaborative partnership among Kansas State University College of Education, Kansas State Department of Education, Kansas Association of School Boards, United School Administrators of Kansas, and Kansas School Superintendent's Association. KELI's mission is *to collaborate and share resources to support professional growth of educational leaders needed in Kansas schools for the 21st Century*. The mission is further divided into two strands: the mentoring and induction of new superintendents and principals, and ongoing professional learning opportunities for school district leaders and leadership teams. KELI's program design for leadership support developed from recommendations by partners and other planners is framed around best practice and research. The five-year plan places a high priority on each strand of the mission statement, which is evidenced through its vision, purpose, and goals. KELI partners support various aspects of the program mission as needs, resources, and expertise merit. KELI is governed by a partner-based steering committee and an advisory council comprised of field-based practitioners.

Since the Institute's inaugural event in May 2011, KELI has provided increasing opportunities for supporting the growth of Kansas' leaders. KELI is recognized by the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) as an area professional learning center. New executive leaders are able to move to their professional Kansas license or earn credits towards license renewal through completion of KELI's program requirements, which include mentoring and induction support along with deep learning opportunities. In KELI's first strand, new

superintendents are supported by trained mentors as they tackle the exciting challenges inherent in executive leadership. As mentors share insight and prompt new superintendents to reflect on their decisions related to national leadership standards, these district leaders apply meaningful discussions within their local context to these important benchmarks (CCSSO, 2008). The professional growth benefits and support for decision-making and understanding a new level of responsibilities for the beginning executive leader also occurs through networking opportunities with other superintendents at regional cohort sessions and professional organization and state meetings. In the first four years of operation, KELI has served 77 new superintendents and with 21 first-year superintendents enrolled in 2015-2016, a total of 98 first-year superintendents will have completed the mentoring and induction program requirements.

KELI's second strand of leadership development in Kansas provides high quality, deep professional learning opportunities that address current topics and spotlight the unique leadership role of school district administrators. In these seminars, Kansas leaders learn new content, hear from similar position leaders on implementation strategies, and network in a collaborative setting. Through the planning process, KELI partners identify and respond to the needs of all leaders and provide professional growth opportunities necessary to guide Kansas schools in the 21st century.

Identifying the Need: Rural Kansas and New Superintendents

The rural nature of Kansas often results in new superintendents working many miles from colleagues who lead in similar settings and face common challenges. With large distances between districts in rural Kansas, networking and face-to-face interactions are limited. An example of this landscape during the first two years of program operation is depicted in Figures 1 and 2.

Rural districts often face small enrollments, with the reality that many new superintendents also bear principal-level duties such as working first-hand with elementary, middle, or high school students, staff, and parents. KELI is designed to bridge this critical need in rural settings through strong mentoring relationships and networking opportunities offered regionally and state-wide. Mentee demographics (see Tables 1 and 2) outline initial and professional licensure accomplishments in the first four years of operation. Tables 2 and 3 highlight the ratio of practicing and retired superintendents serving KELI in the critical role of mentor. The Institute of Educational Leadership (2005) noted the critical role that an experienced mentor can play in developing a trusting, constructive relationship that encourages honest reflection and feedback. A clear picture of the rural nature of KELI's service to new superintendents is highlighted in district enrollment. In cohort one, 69% of new superintendents led districts with an

enrollment of 1,000 students or less. In cohort two, 82% of new KELI superintendents served districts with 1,000 students or less in enrollment. In cohort three, serving 11 new superintendents, 45% work in districts with 1,000 students or less in enrollment. In cohort four, 63% of new superintendent leaders served districts with 1,000 students or less enrolled.

The support offered by KELI mentors who have marked experience in the specific skills and acculturation needs of rural Kansas districts has significant value to new superintendents. In response to these specific needs, KELI's program structure provides new superintendents with an opportunity to participate in on-site mentoring and induction and expand professional networks with other leaders who share common insights and challenges. One new superintendent noted the value of this experience, saying "The KELI program has been extremely beneficial to me as a first year superintendent. My mentor was absolutely wonderful."

Table 1

<i>Mentee Demographics</i>		
<u>Licensure Status</u>	<u>2011-2012 Cohort (n)</u>	<u>2012-2013 Cohort (n)</u>
Initial	13	9
Professional	13	13
Completed Requirements	26	22
Total	26	22

Table 2

<i>Mentee Demographics</i>		
<u>Licensure Status</u>	<u>2013-2014 Cohort (n)</u>	<u>2014-15 Cohort (n)</u>
Initial	4	11
Professional	7	5
Completed Requirements	11	16
Total	11	16

Table 3

<i>Mentor Demographics</i>		
<u>Career Status</u>	<u>2011-2012 Cohort (n)</u>	<u>2012-2013 Cohort (n)</u>
Practicing Superintendents	2	0
Retired Superintendents	7	7
Total	9	7

Table 4

Mentor Demographics

<u>Career Status</u>	<u>2013-2014 Cohort (n)</u>	<u>2014-15 Cohort (n)</u>
Practicing Superintendents	1	2
Retired Superintendents	4	5
Total	5	7

Supporting New Leaders through Mentoring and Induction

KELI’s mentoring and induction strand emphasizes mentoring experiences as a key component of support to new Kansas superintendents. Along with similar background experiences and district demographic characteristics, mentees and mentors are also matched according to geographic location. The mentors, veteran superintendents, provide support for the transition to the role of the executive school leader and overall professional growth by sharing skills pertinent to the local setting and context of smaller, rural districts. Through these experiences, veteran superintendents share critical knowledge with novice leaders and provide significant assistance to address limited resources for support in rural Kansas. KELI superintendent mentors provide support through monthly on-site visits as well as attending two performance demonstrations, typically at least one local board of education meeting during the year. Mentors then share observation feedback with mentees. The quality process and research outlined in KELI’s program occurs primarily through on-site face-to-face mentoring sessions between novice and experienced superintendent leaders. These sessions are the capstone support for mentees. One mentee shared, “Face-to-face visits were excellent!”

A valued information source and dialogue starter is the monthly checklist of activities that assists new superintendents in planning for expected tasks and reports. These checklists provide a venue for discussion at site visits and are reviewed by KELI mentors to provide rich contextual background for rural superintendents as well as superintendents in larger districts. Many rural superintendents are placed in positions encompassing additional principal or director duties. These checklists provide an important benchmark in the long list of duties for these district leaders.

In rural districts, new superintendents wear many hats and respond to a multitude of responsibilities, often encountering difficult decisions resulting from dual positions and a wide-range of expectations. Canales, Tejada-Delgado, and Slate (2008) concluded that “The dual position of

superintendent/principal is a multi-faceted role which requires a variety of leadership skills and behaviors” (p. 6) and further recommended that a network of mentors with similar experience be created to offer support. Doug Conwell, a KELI mentor for four years and current rural superintendent stated:

Many of the new superintendents that get their first superintendency in smaller rural schools tend to be former principals with little knowledge of the responsibilities of the central office. Two areas of support that seem to be of most interest to these new superintendents are relations with a Board of Education and understanding the operational budget for a school district. The understanding of a school budget is critical because for most of these districts, they are experiencing declining enrollment and little to no funding help from the state. An experienced superintendent from the KELI program can help these superintendents to not only understand how budgets work but also to project future budgets. This is critical for these smaller school districts.

As part of KELI’s goal to build capacity through strong networks, mentees participate in fall regional cohort meetings arranged by mentors and in a state-wide spring cohort meeting developed to address current needs. In these cohort sessions, mentees share first year challenges and relevant experiences, and collaborate with other leaders around various topics of importance to the first-year superintendent. One mentor shared, “The cohort meeting in December was a good time for them [mentees] to reflect on the first half year of work. Listening to each other gave them support, understanding, and knowing that they are not alone.”

Another program component of mentoring and induction is attendance at professional association meetings (i.e., school board association, leadership conference, new superintendent’s session, or educational summit). Further knowledge is gained by mentees attending state organizational meetings such as a state board of education meeting and state

superintendent meeting. Mentors often accompany their mentees to these meetings to further networking and relationship building opportunities.

As part of the best practice model, mentees reflect on their professional and personal growth following attendance at out-of-district leadership events as well as in an end-of-year reflection. In addition, reflective tools are developed by KELI staff to address current areas of accountability important to new leaders. These tools are framed around research and state department requirements and are designed to promote meaningful discussion, professional reflection, and growth, and address key responsibilities of the organization and its leadership. These reflective tools are used by mentors to understand the perceptions of their mentees around essential tenets for success and goal-setting and are especially meaningful to rural superintendents where one or two individuals often carry the load for all leadership responsibilities within the local district and community.

Mentor Coaching Training

KELI mentors participate in professional coaching training during their first year to enhance onsite mentoring sessions focused on building leadership capacity in others. Follow-up training is custom-designed to reinforce the practice and further refinement of coach-like behaviors. A qualified coaching model (Cheliotis & Reilly, 2010) provides the foundation for certified trainers to develop understanding and effective skills around coaching practices. One mentor noted, “I am always working to improve on my coaching skills. Coaching is the real key to developing leaders who can move their districts forward.”

Coaching tools focus on the coaching practices of committed listening, paraphrasing, positive intent, questioning, reflective feedback, and goal setting. These tools developed by KELI staff, along with additional resources such as *Leadership Coaching for Educators: Bringing Out the Best in School Administrators* by Reiss (2007) and *Opening the Door to Coaching Conversations* by Cheliotis and Reilly (2012) provide mentors with examples of coaching practices within the school setting and additional contexts for learning. In a mid-year coaching mindset self-assessment (2013-2014) mentors rated themselves as high in their knowledge of core coaching competencies around active listening and exhibiting trustworthiness (Reiss,

2007). A mentor commented, “As we coach mentees to ask the right questions, listen, reflect, and communicate, the more effective and successful they will be and the more they will use those same coaching techniques with their various publics.”

Opportunity for Support in Year Two

KELI provides superintendents moving from their initial year of practice and completion of the program an opportunity to be involved in a second year of less intensive mentoring and induction support. KELI mentors maintain quarterly contact with mentees and are available as needed during the year. The focus of support is designed to assist the mentee with additional resources and building capacity to solve unique issues encountered in the local district. Whenever possible, the original mentor is assigned to continue their support with the mentee during this second year. Monthly checklists and other research-based articles are provided to participating second-year superintendents. These superintendents are encouraged to participate in KELI cohort meetings and receive reduced rates for attendance at KELI-sponsored professional learning events. KELI mentees and mentors regularly provide feedback on suggestions for improving services as these additional program supports are offered to meet the needs of rural and state-wide district leaders.

Supporting New and Veteran Leaders through Deep Learning Seminars

The second strand of KELI’s support to leadership development in Kansas provides state-wide partnerships focused and aligned to the professional learning needs of new and veteran school district leaders in Kansas. The vision outlined for KELI by its governance bodies and state partners has embraced a responsive and professional learning community approach to seminars in an effort to purposefully connect and impact deep learning and student achievement, specific to rural leaders and other state/district initiatives. KELI’s deep learning seminars for Kansas leaders provide opportunities for knowledge and application of current topics. These topics are defined through collective discussion and feedback, field mentors, new and experienced practitioners at both school and district levels, and state agencies. The seminars are offered in a meaningful context that allows for presentation of new knowledge, examples of applied use by school

district leaders, and time for learning and networking in collaborative leadership teams. The possibilities for impact from linking state/national change initiatives to actual school/district implementation steps through focused and rich dialogue around local context has proven to be an effective model for professional learning in these seminars.

In 2011-12, “Let’s Talk” seminars provided the context for the professional learning strand for Kansas leaders. In 2012-13, “What’s New” seminars framed the next set of deep learning opportunities for Kansas leaders. In continuing with a professional learning approach for leaders grounded in best practice, the 2013-14 seminars, “Professional Learning for Principals,” are framed in three responsive seminars that focus on the needs of school principals. The “Professional Learning for Principals” theme continued as an emphasis with partnering agency KSDE during 2014-15 in three seminars targeted on emerging state-wide initiatives for building leaders. These topics included performance evaluation, assessment and student evaluation, and accreditation. The target audience for each seminar is leaders and leadership teams, and the approach is carefully crafted to build the knowledge and skills of leaders who are faced with understanding, supporting, and communicating major change initiatives in their school or district setting. In order to effectively embrace meaningful collaboration, KELI’s deep learning seminars are designed to help leaders first understand the change themselves, to witness application of these programs from other school and district leaders in various sized school districts, and to openly discuss next steps in their own local settings. As a result, participants consider how to facilitate change for sustained impact and willingly share valuable resources in accomplishing this end for increased student achievement in their local settings.

The design of the professional learning seminars is particularly relevant and beneficial for Kansas rural superintendents and principals, as the seminars promote opportunities for exposure to content experts, application in similar settings, and networking among peers. In each of the professional learning series offered by KELI, the current needs of school district leaders are identified and a clear direction for real-life application determined. This is accomplished through input from KELI staff experienced in leadership and knowledgeable about current trends, state partners, program mentors, and practitioners themselves. Content experts determine

key components for presentation of new knowledge. Field presenters are thoughtfully selected to focus on the *leader’s role* in the application of the topic and to provide unique perspective for small rural districts, mid-sized districts, and large districts in Kansas.

The first KELI “Let’s Talk” seminar in 2011-2012 pinpointed the critical topic of legal issues in schools. Experts in school law provided guidance on current operational and policy issues as identified by current superintendents in the field. A panel of field superintendents then shared implications for local decision and policy-making impact. KELI’s second 2012 “Let’s Talk” seminar responded to the needs of local school districts in the area of technology. University content experts and several tech-savvy superintendents from rural and other various sized districts in Kansas shared innovations, implications, and effective technology use in their schools. Local policy, technology funding, staff training, and virtual learning environments provided specific discussion for leaders attending the seminar.

In the final “Let’s Talk” professional leadership learning seminar, KELI hosted a strategic seminar emphasizing the national Common Core standards (CCSSO, 2012). The leader’s role in implementation of these new standards provided program participants with an opportunity to hear from content experts and Kansas districts of various enrollment categories leading the reform. Leaders and leadership teams shared resources and implementation of the curricular standards at their local district level in break-out sessions. Seminar participants appreciated presentations from small rural and larger-sized districts in Kansas as well as sharing ideas in team discussions. During the first year of KELI’s professional learning seminars, over 100 Kansas school district leaders rated the “Let’s Talk” seminars above average to excellent on the quality of content and presentations in their evaluations (Thompson, 2012).

In the second year of KELI’s professional leadership seminars, “What’s New” highlighted the theme identified as relevant to Kansas leaders. The first seminar in 2012-2013 reinforced leader preparation in College and Career Readiness standards along with important changes in student learning goals. KSDE directors presented the latest information, and three Kansas districts shared components of their local programs. This provided strong implementation strategies important to rural Kansas superintendents as they considered next steps

in aligning new standards and professional development for teachers.

The next KELI professional leadership seminar in the “What’s New” series shared vital information for leaders in the area of accreditation and changes in national waiver measures. In this seminar, education consultants from KSDE provided school district leaders with new terms in the state accreditation structure, the 5 R’s (i.e., Rigor, Relevance, Relationships, Results, and Responsive Culture), and critical understanding of shifts from Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) to Kansas’ newly defined Annual Measureable Objectives (AMOs). In addition to this fundamental knowledge, three Kansas districts of various sizes shared their local strategies for embarking on this new accreditation adventure. In considering the distinct needs of rural school district settings, the presentation of local district challenges and successes as well as the opportunity to network provided valuable insight for these leaders in their implementation planning.

The series of seminars crafted for 2013-2014 focused on building capacity in school leaders as they work to understand, facilitate, and communicate change. These seminars were open to leaders at any level but were specifically targeted for principals and school leadership teams. Superintendents of rural districts who carry principal-level responsibilities are also drawn to attend these sessions. KELI partnered with KSDE in this project to clearly identify principal needs regarding changes that impact their leadership. 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 several key preferences on delivery. The topics and format of the three “Professional Learning for Principals” seminars depicted the highest relevancy and impact identified by principals. Two regional locations in Kansas hosted the seminars.

Accreditation, the first 2013-2014 session topic, emphasized needs assessments, setting goals, and providing evidence. Leaders attending this seminar shared the following comments: “Great panel of experts,” “The breakout time for our team was beneficial” and “Thank you for reaching out to principals – rare opportunity for me.” The second session focused on inter-rater reliability, walk-through evaluations, and feedback. One attendee shared, “It was good to have a workshop focused on topics for principals. The information was timely and informative. I was able to ask questions and get answers to questions that will help me in my position.” The topic of the third spring 2014 session was building leadership capacity. Kansas leaders from rural settings engaged in critical conversations about current challenges and collaborated with others from across the state in networking opportunities. One leader shared, “This is one of the best and most relevant and applicable workshops I’ve attended.” In 2014-15, identified themes critical to building leaders continued through partnership planning with KSDE and centered on evaluation, assessment, and accreditation. Neale & Cone (2013) cited that “collaborative principal networks have an impact on student achievement” by allowing them to practice and build learning communities among teachers in their schools (p. 5). Table 5 highlights overall evaluation results by approximately 600 KELI program participants across the four year series of professional learning seminars.

Table 5

Participant Evaluation of KELI Professional Learning Seminars

<u>Question</u>	<u>Legal Advisors</u>	2011-2012		2012-2013	
		<u>Social Media</u>	<u>Common Core</u>	<u>Preparing for CCR</u>	<u>Accreditation</u>
This seminar provided opportunities for me to deepen my understanding of the program topic.	4.6	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.0
The presenters appropriately addressed the seminar topics.	4.8	3.7	4.5	4.4	4.0
The format for the seminar	4.5	4.05	4.5	3.9	4.1

enhanced the learning experience for me and created opportunities to share my ideas and experiences with others.

The overall quality and content of this seminar met my expectations.	4.5	4.4	4.4	4.2	3.9
The topic of today's session was important to me and my leadership team.	NA	NA	NA	4.6	4.6

Scale: 5-Excellent, 3-Average, 1-Poor

Fullan, Cuttress, and Kilcher (2005) assert that “One of the most powerful drivers of change involves learning from peers, especially those who are further along in implementing new ideas” (p. 55). During KELI deep learning seminars, time is committed to collaborative planning within and among local district teams. This provides the opportunity for strategic discussion of content and helps rural leaders plan and think differently about their ideas, next steps, and achievable goals within their local context. This is a “game-changing” experience for principals and superintendents serving rural Kansas districts.

Program Highlights

Through the two strands of support, KELI provides new rural Kansas educational leaders worthwhile

learning experiences from on-site veteran superintendents and the most current information on critical topics important to today's school district leaders. In 2012 through 2015, a perception survey administered during the spring semester to all mentees and mentors participating in the KELI program captured program experiences (Ruder, 2012). This end-of-year electronic survey provides insight into the perceptions of program participants on the effectiveness of the mentoring and induction program. The survey is comprised of a Likert-scale and open-ended questions. The survey for mentees contained 11 questions and the mentor survey had 16 questions. A summary of the survey results for the first four years of program operation depicted in Table 6.

Table 6

KELI Superintendent Mentoring and Induction Program Perception Survey Results

	2011-12		2012-13		2013-14		2014-15	
	Agree/ Somewhat Agree		Agree/ Somewhat Agree		Agree/ Somewhat Agree		Agree/ Somewhat Agree	
	Mentor	Mentee	Mentor	Mentee	Mentor	Mentee	Mentor	Mentee
Questions:	(n=9)	(n=26)	(n=7)	(n=18/22= 82%)	(n=5)	(n=10/11= 91%)	(n=6/7 = 86%)	(n=16)
1. The KELI program gives mentees appropriate access to the mentor.	100%	96.10%	100%	94.40%	100%	100%	100%	100%
2. The frequency of face-to-face mentor interactions meets the needs of	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

mentees.								
3. Interaction with a mentor helped the mentee solve their own problems.	100%	100%	100%	94.50%	100%	90%	100%	100%
4. The KELI mentoring program helped mentees grow professionally.	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
5. Mentees used the KELI program to address current matters in their districts.	100%	96.20%	100%	94.40%	100%	90%	100%	100%
6. Meetings between KELI mentors and mentees were purposeful and accomplished specific goals.	100%	100%	85.7%	100%	100%	90%	100%	100%
7. Mentees found mentee cohort meetings helpful.	77.80%	80%	100%	94.40%	100%	100%	83.33%	93.75%
8. The training provided by KELI for mentors helped me be a more effective mentor/coach. (Mentors)	100%		100%		100%		100%	
9. Indicate the effectiveness of communication between the mentee/mentor. Note: Rating averages listed below for each communication type; 5=high.	Mentor	Mentee	Mentor	Mentee	Mentor	Mentee	Mentor	Mentee
In person	5.0	4.6	5.0	4.0	4.8	4.8	4.94	5.00
Phone	4.1	3.8	4.9	3.8	3.8	4.3	4.38	4.00
Email	3.9	3.9	3.7	3.3	3.0	4.1	4.27	3.33
Skype	2.5	3.4	1.0	N/A	1.3	1.0	3.14	2.00
10. Rate the KELI mentoring/induction program as an effective support								

program for a first year district leader.

Range of 5-7	0%	15%	0%	17%	0%	10%	6%	0%
Range of 8-10 - (10= High)	100%	85%	100%	83%	100%	90%	94%	100%

For all four years, 100% of mentees and mentors agreed that the frequency of face-to-face mentor interactions met the needs of mentees. In addition, 100% of both groups confirmed that the KELI mentoring program helped mentees grow professionally. One mentor shared, “It is helpful to provide insight from an experienced perspective. This allows the mentee to think through issues benefitting from the concepts of looking at the issue from a variety of angles.” A mentee substantiated, “I really enjoyed having an experienced superintendent to assist me with issues and questions. I strongly recommend the KELI mentoring program to all first year administrators.” Doug Conwell, an experienced KELI mentor and Kansas rural superintendent for 20 years, commented:

New superintendents operating in smaller, rural districts are exceptionally different from those serving in larger districts. Small, rural superintendents at many times are the transportation director, public relations director, human resources director, curriculum and instruction director, etc. They get to learn about maintenance issues such as boiler systems, HVAC systems, roofing, and a host of other large project facility issues. There is a multitude of issues that ALL schools experience for which the small school superintendent has no on-site help. KELI mentors can help these superintendents think through issues involving any of these areas because they have experienced most of these same issues.

Next Steps in Supporting New Rural Leaders in Kansas

As a part of KELI’s five year plan, preparing for mentoring and induction of first-year principals in Kansas began in 2012-2013. There are currently 286 districts in Kansas. A state-wide survey administered to superintendents and principals showcased the far-reaching need to support new principal leaders in their initial year of service in rural districts. Of the superintendents with enrollments of less than 1,000 students, 144 responded to the survey. Of those

districts reporting, 84 or 58% indicated no availability for mentoring and induction program for new principals. Twenty-nine of the districts with enrollments of less than 1,000 students that did offer some form of mentoring and induction for new principals reported their program as not effective or somewhat effective. As a result of this defined need, a pilot mentoring and induction program for new principals in Kansas began in 2013-2014 and state-wide implementation of the mentoring and induction program continues for new building leaders.

As KELI continues to expand and grow, several goals and priorities remain for supporting beginning principals and superintendents in rural areas of Kansas. These goals include efforts to retain rural leaders through strong mentoring and induction support and focus on professional learning opportunities designed to develop knowledge and skills and assist rural leaders in successfully responding to the unique role and needs of their school district and community. In addition, KELI must strive to maintain a strong and widely-versed cadre of mentors to address the unique needs of rural Kansas districts. Experienced mentors with a firm understanding of “walking in the shoes” of these new principals and superintendents will continue to build understanding and capacity at the local district level. Expanding utilization of technology to assist in effectively delivering services in geographically remote areas in Kansas is an additional goal.

Conclusion

Timely and reflective opportunities to engage in meaningful mentoring and induction and purposeful professional learning for new Kansas leaders is an important priority. A clear focus on student learning must be center-stage and modeled by all school district leaders (Learning Forward, 2013). KELI activities provide guided opportunities for mentees to increase their knowledge base and networking and assist new rural school district leaders in placing high expectations on a culture of learning. Likewise, mentees operating in rural contexts can better understand their role in advocating essential

resources and facilitating meaningful collaboration to improve schools in their local district. A focus on student learning, aligned to the school and district vision, is a top priority for all educators and leaders. The focus on improving student achievement in rural settings is promulgated by the individualized mentoring and induction support and vital link offered through KELI's programming focus on leadership.

As new principals and superintendents form strong ties and expectations between student achievement and professional learning, KELI's program of support for new rural Kansas leaders plays a crucial role in reflection, action, and support that can "change what educators know, are able to do, and believe" within the complexity of their unique leadership setting (Learning Forward, 2013, p. 3). Providing opportunities for reflection and honest dialogue among mentees and mentors can change daily practice, promote collaboration, and strengthen a continuous cycle of school improvement. New rural Kansas leaders, working in concert with leadership teams, model these collaborative practices and discuss local strategies to inform next steps in implementing state and national reform efforts as a part of their local school improvement process.

As new rural school district leaders continue their journey in becoming the experienced leaders of tomorrow, it is essential that their first year of practice form a trail of successful steps upon which a flourishing future will be built. School and district leaders in newly acquired rural positions must keep a pulse on results and stakeholder responses and think deeply about implementing necessary reform.

Because the rural leader often operates in isolation as a result of geographic location, multiple networking experiences with other school district leaders is vital to accomplishing goals. Through encouragement and exposure to professional networking resources, new rural principals and superintendents are able to develop collaborative processes and form valued learning communities enabling them to find and utilize resources to effectively address their local district needs.

The KELI model provides one example of how new school and district leaders strategically embrace a focus on student achievement, plan for the intricacies of necessary change, and build organizational capacity through effective mentoring and induction and deep learning opportunities. Building leadership capacity to enable new rural principals and superintendents to focus on student achievement, allocate essential resources aligned to goals, and address the varied expectations defined by their local school and community stakeholders are necessary leadership responsibilities. The KELI mentoring and induction program is a viable option to assist rural leaders in their professional transition to the leadership role and to develop knowledge, apply skills, and promote meaningful discussion towards sustainable change in their local context. These supportive efforts, embedded in rich context, promote conversation around local district and community goals and inform the highly visible role of the rural leader in achieving positive progress for stakeholders in each rural Kansas school district and community.

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About the Author:

Donna Augustine-Shaw is Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Kansas State University. Dr. Augustine-Shaw has 16 years of experience in school administration including building principal and superintendent of schools.