New Leadership Program Aimed at School District Executives

Mary Devin, associate professor of educational leadership in the College of Education and KELI executive director, wished a similar comprehensive program had been available to her as Geary County school superintendent. “While I was superintendent, we talked about the need for professional support,” she said. “In Kansas, we do a great job of developing teachers and principals, but there is so much more we can do to foster our superintendents’ professional growth. The vision for KELI was to create a program that went beyond theory or sharing war stories, but provided true ongoing professional support.”

Pamela Coleman, director of teacher education and licensure at the Kansas State Department of Education, explained much planning was devoted to KELI’s creation and structure. “We sent a group of five superintendents and two KSDE employees to Harvard to assess a leadership program designed for teams at the district level. It was a high-quality program, but not one that completely represented our goals, regulations and laws in Kansas. So we selected the components that worked for us and built the rest,” Coleman said.

Mike Mathes, president of the Kansas School Superintendents Association and superintendent of Seaman USD 345, said there are many reasons KELI was needed. “In these times of economic and politically charged times, new more than ever before, public education needs strong leadership at all levels,” Mathes said. “Superintendents are expected to know everything about the districts they lead, yet nowhere do they receive that type of training. KELI offers an opportunity to provide superintendents with a professionally trained mentor as well as professional development opportunities specifically designed for each person’s district’s needs.”

KELI has contracted with nine superintendents and principals who have initiated relationships with the state’s 26 newest superintendents. “Since July, these new district leaders have had face- to-face visits each month and the expertise of these very successful superintendents on call as needed throughout the year,” Devin explained. “What is so powerful about this program is our mentors will be out in the field and teaching the mentors how to survive in the real world while being a conduit for deep learning,” Devin said.

A subtle advantage of this program comes from the power of the partnership. “There were many well-intended programs designed to assist superintendents, but they were fragmented and disjointed,” Devin said. “We believe this (KELI) will be a more efficient and effective approach, and will result in higher performing superintendents and hopefully, increase retention.”

Coleman said there is a high turnover rate for superintendents between three and five years on the job. “Qualitative research indicates the need for ongoing professional support,” she said. “For authentic development, all employees need to grow professionally both to enhance employment related skills and desired personal professional growth. We hope by pairing them with a trusted and respected colleague within the framework of KELI, they will have the resources available to keep strengthening their leadership skills.”

Why devote a program solely to superintendents? Practical need and research proves the need for KELI. “We have lots of research and common sense about the importance of the teacher in the classroom, but there is less appreciation for the impact of leadership,” Devin said. “What the research shows time and time again is high performing schools had high performing principals. The superintendent creates the environment where people believe that what they do can make a difference. It is this collective efficacy that ultimately moves the district forward. The superintendent champions this growth and allocates resources to make it happen.”

Coleman maintains, while there are several factors at play in a school district’s success, there is a direct link between quality leadership and results. “In order for Kansas to create meaningful post-secondary career prepared students—the workforce—school is where that happens. Executive leaders have every opportunity to truly influence that work,” she said.

Mathes described being a superintendent in the current environment challenging. “The economic downturn, he asserted, has resulted in a ‘bottom line’ mindset, not one necessarily focused on what is best for students. Often, the good news gets lost. ‘The media continues to portray the 5% of poorly performing schools across the nation as representatives of the entire system when 95% of schools are doing better than ever before,’” Mathes said.

Mathes believes KELI is “off to a solid start, which he attributes to Devin, who was named 1999 Kansas Superintendent of the Year. ‘With Dr. Mary Devin as KELI executive director, we have a proven leader who will guide this collaboration into immediate and future success.’

Dean Fink, a former superintendent and international education consultant, believes this program will bring national exposure. “The vision of the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute provides the roadmap for Kansas to lead the nation in leadership training both in developing new school leaders and in supporting experienced executive leaders,” he said at the May 12th grand opening ceremony.

Coleman and Mathes agree that KELI has entered uncharted waters. “I know of no other program that is a collaboration with as many educational associations as well as private involvement as KELI,” Mathes said. Coleman agreed. “Currently, there are no large-scale collaborative efforts being made that will result in a high-quality, research-based program such as KELI.”

For more information about KELI or to watch video clips from the grand opening celebration, please visit www.coe.k-state.edu/keli or scan the QR code below.