

# SCHOOL LEADERSHIP DURING TIMES OF MAJOR CHANGE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Leading staff toward the goal of school redesign and school change can result in a tremendous amount of pressure on school leaders. As the need for scholastic change increases in Kansas, research is needed to guide school administrators on the skills and dispositions necessary to lead with purpose and achieve success. Although much research has been conducted on change management, Kansas school communities find themselves in a unique position to lead an initiative that is being promoted by the Kansas State Board of Education, which has coincided with the emergency changes provoked by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the skills and dispositions necessary for school administrators to lead during times of change by examining the current leaders of the Kansans Can School Redesign Project and interpreting their experiences. The results of this study may help others who wish to drive dramatic scholastic change in Kansas and perhaps outside of the state by providing details regarding the types of competencies leaders will need to effect such change in Kansas.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Kansas Education Commissioner Dr. Randy Watson and Deputy Education Commissioner Dr. Brad Neuenswander set out on a mission to discover what Kansans wanted from their schools. By discovering what communities around the state were saying about the current education system and then discussing the changes needed, the commissioners were

poised to create and promote a new vision for education in Kansas.

Community conversations across Kansas addressed both the academic and the non-academic skills needed after high school graduation for postsecondary success. The purpose of the tour was to find out what Kansans wanted from their education system (Neuenswander, 2018), and to use that data for strategic planning with the State Board of Education. The commissioners solicited information from community members representing economic interests, businesses and industries, and school personnel, with a focus on children as the future of Kansas. In total, 20 community conversations and seven Chamber of Commerce groups were held throughout Kansas and involved approximately 2,000 individual participants in the discussions. Additionally, more than 100 people participated in business and industry focus groups. Neuenswander (2018) noted that in each of these focused conversations, the same three questions were asked: (a) What are the skills, attributes, and abilities of a successful 24-year-old Kansan?; (b) What is K-12's role in developing this successful Kansan and how would success be measured?; (c) What is higher education's role in developing this successful Kansan, and how would success be measured? (p. 44). According to the participants, successful high school graduates require critical thinking skills; openness (i.e., adaptability, independence, and creativity); communication skills; interpersonal skills such as teamwork;

and a sense of citizenship and moral duty (KSDE, 2017).

The original intent of this study was to explore leadership qualities during the implementation of a new KSBoE initiative, the Kansans Can School Redesign Project. However, the nationwide pandemic began in March of 2020. This unprecedented event changed the context of the research and provided the opportunity to consider these leaders as they navigated both a volunteer change process and a forced change caused by the pandemic. Still, the research questions, grounded in a methodological framework of interpretivism, remained the same:

1. How do school leaders navigate challenges during change processes?
2. How do leaders determine the skills and dispositions most beneficial during rapid change, including during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. Why do school leaders perceive certain skills and dispositions as valuable during change processes?

## METHODS

During this study these leaders were dealing with concerns related to health and safety because of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Each of these leaders was passionate about leading student achievement and supporting their staff during this time of uncertainty. However, the realities of the pandemic dramatically impacted schools and forced them to change their practices to meet immediate and short-term educational goals, while at the same time dealing with possible life and death situations. This qualitative case study and the data collected intended to describe the insights of school leaders involved in the Kansans Can School Redesign Project while they also navigated pedagogical shifts during COVID-19.

The data for this qualitative study come from survey data and interviews with Kansas building and district leaders. First, survey questions were developed with broad input from principals and superintendents, and these helped to inform the semi-structured interview questions. Several themes were identified based on the results of the survey, and these themes were used to guide the semi-structured interview process. These recorded interviews were analyzed to understand the skills and dispositions Kansas superintendents and principals must possess to lead a school change initiative. The qualitative survey was sent to 254 district and school leaders who were involved in the Kansans Can School Redesign Project. A total of 113 responses were collected, completed and considered fully answered, resulting a 44.4% return and response rate. The survey's demographic information indicated that of the 113 survey respondents, 68% were principals and 32% were superintendents; the respondents are geographically representative of Kansas. Each participant entered the state-wide redesign initiative at various times during the past four years.

Upon completion of the final analysis of the survey and the semi-structured interviews, 'communication,' which included targeted and timely support, and 'culture' were shown to be the most effective tools leaders use during times of rapid change. Leaders who saw the importance of communication and used that as a tool for improving the processes of change appeared to be more successful, according to respondents. Successful communication required intentionality and repetitive opportunity. Regarding targeted and timely support, each of the school leaders noted their development of supportive environments for teachers during this time of rapid change. By engaging staff members and all stakeholders, leaders were able to provide a powerful opportunity to support and target exactly what steps needed to be taken to attain change efforts.

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Another critical area of note is the creation of a culture of change and the knowledge to lead relative to the culture of the school building or district. In this research, culture became narrowly focused on the emotional and physical care of each individual in the school setting. At times, the political ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic were evident and forced changes and opportunities that may or may not have been considered under normal circumstances. 'Culture,' defined as the ability to build an atmosphere focused on student learning and effort, soliciting action on stakeholder input, and being able to engage students and families in the pursuit of educational goals (Jackson et al., 2018), was paramount to success during both the forced change process brought on by COVID-19 and the volunteer change process of the redesign effort.

## CONCLUSIONS

Fullan (2002) in his early work with chaos theory questioned how the education system might change if it was unknown what it looked like and what it was doing. The COVID-19 Pandemic created conditions of chaos for many school districts that prompted instructional shifts grounded in the unknown, and it may have forever changed perceptions of what the educational system should look like and what it should be doing. This moment in history relative to the work of education is unique. School leaders must develop communication with staff members that allows for the comfortable and collegial exchange of ideas centered around a common targeted goal, they must provide timely support to staff, students, and their communities, and they must nurture a school culture focused on student success.

The significance of this study lies in the willingness of school leaders to be open-minded about how their role as a leader impacts the achievement of students. The findings articulated the need for strong communication skills, and were powerfully evident as the leaders were working to share information with others. Communication is a powerful tool for leaders that creates transparency and trust, facilitating positive relationships among all staff. It is significant that during times of change and challenge, communication is the key to success. This major finding should be considered when reflecting on what was learned during the pandemic. For school leaders, knowing that communication, culture, and targeted and timely support are the key leadership skills during times of major change may move their work forward in positive and important ways that ultimately improve student learning and achievement.

## RESEARCHER RECOMMENDATIONS

During this research, a global pandemic forced school leaders to make rapid changes. These deep adaptive changes asked people to question their personal beliefs and values and required people to alter their practices; it is when these deeper changes take place that lasting change can occur. As Fullan (2011) states, leaders must have the needed knowledge to guide through any change process. The common thread found in this research is that district and school leaders must be effective communicators and must attend to the culture of their districts when bringing about change. Communication can be generally defined as the imparting and exchanging of ideas and beliefs. Deep layers of communication are necessary and should continue to occur at all levels and by all stakeholders, including teachers and school leaders, parents, local school board, and community leaders when bringing about change. This means that district and school leaders must consciously focus to develop common talking points and communication tools that can be used in a variety of ways.

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Although teachers are the single most important factor in affecting student achievement, deeper analysis in the domain of turnaround leadership (Jackson et al., 2018) drives home the need for school leaders to be bold in communicating the priority of school improvement. Turnarounds do not happen without bold leadership. School leaders need to engage in concise and meaningful communication efforts to routinely communicate the focus and goals of the school system. Furthermore, the need to create school board mechanisms and policies related to focused, succinct, and clear communication about school districts' goals for student achievement is imperative for school change to happen. However, communication alone will not create success concerning student achievement. Common goals related to responding to student learning needs must drive these common communication tactics.

Creating positive relationships and strengthening a given district or school's culture seem to be the most positive findings and may have the greatest significance for future leaders. As skill development shifts to center on how to create school cultures of learning and growth for students and teachers, the outcome may result in a net positive for student growth and academic achievement.

During this research opportunity, school leaders found themselves focused on survival. In the end, the simplicity of using good communication, targeting short and long-term goals, and focusing on a positive culture were the most important skills and dispositions leaders use during times of dramatic change.

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## CONTACT INFORMATION

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