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Strengthening Decision-Making Skills of New School Leaders through Mentoring and Service

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Abstract

The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute (KELI) addresses an identified need in providing mentoring and induction support to Kansas superintendents and principals stepping into the role for the first time. KELI coordinates statewide efforts through strong collaboration with partner organizations. The well-structured model provides a year long, on-site, individualized mentoring experience delivered by trained mentors along with monthly resources and regional and state networking in a safe and reflective environment. A major focus during the experience is gaining additional skills in ethical decision-making. In a 3-year trend of program completion data, 96%-100% of mentees enrolled in the program indicated that participation in KELI helped them grow professionally. Mentors agreed indicating positive results for new superintendent leadership development when completing KELI's program requirements. The KELI model maintains a focus on building leadership capacity and can serve as a state model.

Keywords: Mentoring, School Leaders, Kansas Educational Leadership Institute (KELI)

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Mentoring to Serve

School and district leaders direct and shape new initiatives and serve in complex political school and community systems. Research states that quality leadership makes a difference in student achievement and in schools and communities (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). In their first year as new superintendents, principals, or assistant-level leaders, virtually all face high demands and levels of accountability from stakeholders, and the skills they possess in making ethical decisions is critical. Local boards of education and communities hiring a new principal or superintendent must recognize that mentoring and induction for a new school or district leader is a priority investment, providing essential support in the first years of practice. As new school and district leaders eagerly take the helm and begin to guide targeted improvement initiatives that involve multi-faceted decisions at all levels of the organization, a well-designed mentoring and induction program can serve as a life-line to help propel the new leader past initial challenges to long-term positive impact. Skilled and servant-minded mentors can make a difference, providing calm and experienced voices as the new school leader forms new skills, strategies, and understanding of the local context (Autry, 2001).

State mentoring and induction programs for new school and district leaders vary greatly with respect to requirements and program design as these initiatives strive to meet the needs of new principals and superintendents (Beem, 2007). Mentoring programs are frequently not supported by funding or quality planning processes. Adequate funding and quality planning for mentoring programs are frequent problems, and training for mentors is also difficult to attain (Alsbury & Hackman, 2006). In addition, time for new school leaders to engage in mentoring is often limited, creating the need for programs that respect demanding schedules and designate meaningful activities that promote professional growth for these novice leaders.

Induction programs for new educational leaders offer orientation activities over several years that increase knowledge of the specific school system along with an emphasis on professional learning when the trajectory for growth is high. A continued focus on effectiveness and developing skills of the novice leader in induction programs can include mentoring as an essential component, however, some induction programs do not include mentoring by experienced veterans as a support. Mentoring programs can also exist exclusive of a larger induction initiative. Examples of induction practices include guidance with internal district leaders such as the superintendent, networking with other novice and experienced leaders, participation in state associations, attendance at seminars, shadowing and observation, professional reading, and district orientation events (Villani, 2006). Mentoring as a component of induction programs or as a stand-alone initiative is a powerful technique in providing critical developmental support to new school and district leaders.

Mentoring support for new school and district leaders can serve to bridge the gap between what new leaders know when they enter their position, what experiences they have had, and what they need to know in acquiring knowledge and skills while on the job

(Villani, 2006). School leadership can be lonely with few avenues to discuss fears, ask questions, and explore solutions before decisions are made. Furthermore, routine demands, administrative dilemmas, and emergency situations can overwhelm new leaders (Hatch & Roegman, 2012). New school and district administrators who have an opportunity to learn alongside seasoned veterans can acquire resources and strategies to establish priorities and use their time to focus on what matters most. In complex school environments, mentors can provide meaningful guidance and experience to new leaders who can be unfamiliar with the extent and influence to which every decision impacts the system. Mentors who surround new leaders with confidence and communicate with enthusiasm, strengthen the relationship and therefore, the work of the new leader (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, Warren, 2005).

An important foundation in the mentoring process is improving the ability to make consistently good decisions responding to daily events, crises that arise, accountability demands to improve, and the continual needs of the people the principal or superintendent leads. Superintendents not only make decisions responding to requests and inquiries from school board members, but also to their own leadership team, building leaders, and teachers. These groups seek strong leadership, and the decision-making skill of the superintendent is a major factor determining the success of the school district, as well as the personal tenure of the superintendent. Similarly, decisions made by principals are equally impactful. Problem solving and responding to daily situations often requires a new principal to consider tradition, stakeholder interest, and complex factors with not much time to reflect on probable outcomes. Decisions made by leaders may come in the form of taking an affirmative action, or by taking no action; but in either outcome, a decision-making process is needed to occur to lead to that action.

Defining the Need for Mentoring New Leaders

Accomplished school leaders possess clear goals, have unique needs, and note important learning occurs on the job (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005). New school leaders facing significant transition, reflect on both their past and future opportunities, and seek increased understanding of their own leadership style as they begin new challenges. Laughlin and Moore (2012) stated, “dedicated mentoring is a proven support structure needed for individual growth” (p. 38). Robinson, Horan, and Nanavati (2009) affirmed that mentoring “helps accelerate learning, reduce isolation, and increase the confidence and skill of newly appointed school leaders” (p. 35). Job-embedded and contextual specificity add to understanding of school and district priorities. Experienced mentors assist new leaders in defining their individual style, assist with managing their time, and work with adults as they encounter each leadership issue (Malone, 2000). Exemplary mentors, distinguished in their leadership skills, establish relationships void of fear and judgment and assist new leaders in developing strong networks. Mentors who listen first, hold positive expectations for growth, and focus on the needs of the new leader, uphold principles of servant-minded leadership (Greenleaf, 1977/1991). The formation of integrated knowledge and skill through effective mentoring

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practices engages new leaders on their most important task of developing a school climate focused on supporting student learning.

Turnbull, Riley, and MacFarlane (2015), in their study of principals, reported on the extent to which three support approaches led the principals to actual change in work practice and defined the need for mentoring new school leaders. In that study, individual support from a mentor/coach rated higher than did support received from supervisors or professional development. Mentoring relationships provided a critical base to learn in an individualized approach through observations, confidential reflection, and thinking deeply about leadership implications. A purposeful and necessary emphasis on problem-solving with practical and real-world application has dominated mentoring approaches in the field of education.

Context of the Mentoring and Service

In response to a defined need for professional learning for new district and school leaders in the state of Kansas, a consortium of leadership stakeholders recommended the establishment of the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute (KELI) to provide standardized and intense mentoring support for new superintendents and principals. The planning efforts of this consortium resulted in agreement on the need, design, and implementation of the Institute in May, 2011. A hallmark of KELI is collaboration with partner organizations. Partner representation included the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), United School Administrators of Kansas, Kansas Association of School Boards, Kansas School Superintendents Association, and the College of Education (Department of Educational Leadership) at Kansas State University. Initial mentoring and induction service began with new superintendents in 2011-2012, followed by mentoring and induction program support to new principals in 2013-2014.

An additional need was created by KSDE regulations enacted in 2014 requiring all initially licensed building and district leaders to complete a full year of mentoring and induction in an approved state model program to move to their full professional license. Compliance required every local school district to design and submit for approval or select an approved state program meeting detailed guidelines by 2015-2016. The following elements are required to adhere to state guidelines:

- Alignment to Interstate School Leadership License Consortium (ISLLC) (Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), 2008) as well as Kansas professional leadership standards
- One year of mentoring and induction to include a minimum of 40 contact hours and three face-to-face meetings
- Options for state-wide networking and collaboration

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- Opportunity for support beyond the first year
- Program evaluation, and
- Criteria for mentor selection and training (KSDE, 2015).

These new requirements passed by KSDE prompted KELI to respond to a field-based need to begin service to all state leadership groups including assistant superintendents, assistant principals, and special education directors, assistant directors, and coordinators. The core mission of preparing P-12 formal leaders to serve Kansas schools by continuing support in the initial years of practice through mentoring and induction enabled new leaders to develop successful paths to serving school and community stakeholders in every local district.

As new building and district leaders move from leadership preparation to their initial year on-the-job, support is essential. A resource guide (KSDE, 2015) provided districts with additional guidance and rationale outlining the need for support. KSDE included application of leadership preparation standards and connection to leadership position responsibilities in expectations for mentoring and induction program approval. Standards emphasize knowledge, skills, and dispositions critical to school and district leadership while application of these newly acquired skills materializes as leaders move into practice. The guidance provided by KSDE, via the resource guide, established a clear vision that makes a difference in this important transition through quality mentoring and induction support as new leaders serve their local school and district communities.

A State-Approved Program

As an approved mentoring and induction program in Kansas, KELI's vision provided mentoring and induction for new superintendents, new principals, and other leadership positions, as well as professional learning designed to address the needs of all school and district leaders and leadership teams. The structured mentoring and induction program established requirements whereby mentors foster a safe, confidential, and reflective environment for new leaders. The rural nature of Kansas positions many Kansas superintendents and principals living hours away from colleagues who work in similar roles, making face-to-face discussions with others difficult. In addition, superintendents located in these rural areas often wear many hats and serve as principals or hold director-level responsibilities and therefore, do not have other on-site administrators to share experiences. Through KELI's mentoring and induction strand, trained and experienced mentors support new executive leaders as they embrace exciting challenges in their school, district, and community. In their service, mentors share insight, focus on the individual needs of the new leader in their unique setting, and guide decision-making with their mentees on local district topics as well as state and national impact issues. New school and

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district leaders apply thoughtful decisions in their local district context and focus on priority goals established by the Board of Education and community.

The KSDE recognizes KELI as a regional professional learning center. Upon the completion of KELI program requirements, new leaders can move to their professional Kansas license or earn credits towards license renewal. The mission of KELI is to collaborate and share resources to support professional growth of educational leaders needed in Kansas schools for the 21st Century. KELI's program, recommended by Kansas superintendents and principals, provided an individualized approach to mentoring and induction for new leaders as they embrace dynamic responsibilities and make decisions that influence student learning and guide overall improvement.

KELI receives guidance from the partner-based steering committee and a field-based advisory council comprised of practitioners. KELI's partners and advisors provide ongoing support through expertise and collaborative planning. KELI has been providing mentoring to new superintendents in Kansas since 2011 and has served 94 first-year superintendents during the first five years of operation. In the first three years of operation, KELI has served 56 new principals since 2013.

Program Design

The program design for KELI resulted from investigation, research, and best practice strategies discussed by initial consortium and agency members. Selected key works in this study of effective mentoring practices included Lipton, Wellman, and Humbard (2003); Gray, Fry, Bottoms, and O'Neill (2007); and The Wallace Foundation (2007). In developing the building and district level mentoring programs, practitioners and state-affiliated professional leadership organizations in Kansas were closely involved in recommending program requirements for building and district leader mentoring and induction requirements.

KELI program requirements include currently practicing principals recommended by their superintendents and retired superintendents delivering individualized, on-site support to new leaders in their local context. A deliberate process considers essential variables that match the mentor and mentee to geographic location, school level and size, and situational experience. Mentors and mentees utilize various forms of additional communication throughout the year (phone, email, etc.) to enhance on-going communication. Mentors also conduct on-site performance observations agreed upon with their mentee, with the goal of providing confidential feedback to the mentee for professional growth. The structure of KELI's program is focused on building capacity in new leaders through professional learning, monthly checklists, cohort networking, involvement in professional organizations, and an end-of-year reflective activity. Through these professional learning activities, new leaders exposed to regional and state resources gain knowledge and insight into operational and professional connections for future collaboration.

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Experienced and carefully selected mentors serve new leaders in Kansas through the KELI model. One-on-one, site based mentoring sessions allow experienced superintendents and principals to share knowledge and perspectives with novice leaders. On-site visits occur monthly for new district leaders and five times during the year for new school leaders. Mentors establish a year-long relationship with each mentee and focus on building capacity in the new leader. Reiss (2007) noted that new leaders need “just-in-time opportunities for ongoing, confidential dialogue with a thinking partner to dialogue, brainstorm and develop strategies that benefit the system” (p. 16). One new superintendent commented,

I found that the time just to talk with my mentor was the most valuable part of the program. We spoke about the most current legislation or issues that came up that week. I knew that my mentor had been there and they could give me the ideas, resources, and reassurance I needed.

Another mentee shared, “[My mentor] helped me think about issues from multiple perspectives.” Another new principal commented, “My mentor administrator has been outstanding and has talked me through a few tough situations and that has really eased some of my decisions throughout the year.”

In addition to the one-on-one individualized visits, KELI’s service-minded program provides feedback to new leaders on two performance demonstrations selected by the mentee and mentor. Typically, a board of education meeting is selected by new superintendents as one of the performance observations in the local district and a staff meeting or parent meeting is often selected at the principal level. Mentors provide insightful and confidential feedback to the mentee after attending the agreed upon observation. This highly customized approach to visiting mentees on-site enables mentors to better understand important contextual and demographic needs in the school and district setting. Another valued resource used by both new superintendents and principals to plan is the monthly checklist of activities and research-based articles. The monthly checklist, developed by mentors and KELI staff, assists new leaders in planning for upcoming tasks and reports as well as providing an opportunity to clarify responsibilities with mentors at on-site visits.

As part of KELI’s focus on building capacity in new leaders, strong networking opportunities are included in program components through fall and spring cohort meetings and attendance at professional organization meetings. Mentees attend fall regional cohort sessions hosted by mentors and a statewide cohort meeting. During these cohort sessions, mentees share first year challenges and collaborate with other leaders in their geographic region as well as discuss statewide topics of interest. These cohort sessions provide a venue for informed perspective and sharing. One mentee commented, “One of the most valuable parts of the program for me was the networking with peers that is basically a requirement

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of the program.” The mentee continued, “The chance to meet with this cohort group and listen to each other’s problems and solutions was invaluable as a first-year superintendent.”

Another valued component in KELI’s program is attendance at professional organization meetings. Knowledge of the impact on local issues is gained by attending designated district or building statewide meetings. Often, mentors attend these meetings with their mentees to enhance understanding, networking, and relationship building. In line with best practice, mentees are encouraged to reflect on their first-year experiences and provide an end-of-year reflection to capture personal and professional growth. Mentors focus on coaching skills, outlined responsibilities, evaluation criteria, and goal setting.

New superintendents and principals completing the KELI program have an opportunity to receive continued, but less intensive, support in year two of their practice. Mentors typically serve new leaders they have previously worked with during year two. On-site visits by skilled mentors is provided quarterly and focuses on gaining additional resources and solving challenges by thinking through and reflecting on decisions best suited for the local district and community. Second year participants continue to receive monthly checklists and other resources and attendance is encouraged at cohort sessions.

Professional Learning for Leaders

In a continuum of services for leadership development, KELI’s program includes professional leadership seminars aligned to specific needs of all school leaders in Kansas. In this second strand, professional development seminars are designed to address current topics and highlight the role of the leader. The vision for professional learning purposefully connects relevant topics with a clear focus on the role and decision-making responsibilities of the leader and is jointly developed with KSDE and other state administrative professional organizations. The professional development seminars present new knowledge by content experts, panel practitioners’ application in local Kansas districts, and opportunities for leadership discussion and networking. The meaningful context of KELI’s leadership seminars showcases collaborative planning among building and district leader participants. These seminars also provide a vital link to state and national issues that impact local school district implementation. This effective model for professional learning has proven to fill a defined need for leadership development in Kansas.

A Closer Look at Mentors

By recommendation of KELI planners, all mentors have experience as Kansas superintendents and principals. Most superintendent mentors are retired to better work within restrictive time demands and hectic schedules while most principal mentors are currently practicing to ensure relevancy on current position tasks and issues. Mentors are selected based on consideration of their professional qualifications, experience as a successful Kansas practitioner, mentoring experience and coaching skills, and overall

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desire and commitment to serve a designated number of mentees. Mentors continue their professional learning by attending statewide meetings and professional reading on current topics. Mentors serve in geographic proximity to current year mentees and are placed with new leaders of common experiences in small and large schools/districts, districts with multiple leadership roles, and similar backgrounds in level of school (i.e., elementary, middle, high school). Mentors share that giving back to the profession, along with highly rewarding experiences, fuels their desire to provide continued service to the field as mentors and enables them to grow and learn alongside their mentees.

Villani (2006) stated that supporting mentors in the development of mentoring skills leads to substantial results. KELI mentors participate in professional coaching training to increase their skills and provide coach-like support to mentees. Building and district mentors participate in coaching training during the first two years as a mentor and have continued opportunity to participate throughout their service. Training modules delivered in an on-line format allow busy principals and district-level leaders to actively engage in training via distance in their local setting and at a convenient time. Coaching training sessions are provided by a nationally certified trainer and incorporate knowledge and tools focused on being a coach-like mentor and developing a coaching mindset through active listening, paraphrasing, positive intent, probing questions, and reflective feedback (Cheliotis & Reilly, 2010). Mentors practice new skills in a confidential and safe environment in practice labs incorporating real-life situations and application of coaching tenets in discussion and role-playing. Guided training allows mentors to develop professional skills they can use in their current school setting as leaders and as they work with mentees. Professional development for mentors also occurs from reflection and networking with other building and district leaders.

The selected coaching model for KELI mentors (Cheliotis & Reilly, 2010) provides a framework to nurture coach-like behaviors and develop understanding of effective skills in coaching for mentors. One mentor noted, “I have grown as a leader and provide appropriate support for my staff through coaching. I no longer feel I need to have all the answers. Instead, I listen, ask appropriate questions and work as a team to find solutions.” Another mentor noted, “I am a much better listener and have increased my awareness of the value of my role in the conversation.” A mentee shared,

My mentor is a very good listener and is willing to spend the time to help me become a successful principal. He helped me think through different solutions to situations that I may not have come up with on my own, without his coaching.

KELI mentors form a leadership team for the program, meeting regularly during the year to discuss issues important to new school and district leaders and provide feedback on program improvement. Mentors are a critical link and source of information in meeting the needs of new state leaders in an ever-changing local, state, and national education landscape.

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KELI's needs-focused mentoring approach hones in on the development of greater decision-making skills. A meaningful relationship between the mentor and mentee is one of the most critical elements in mentoring programs (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006). Daresh (2001) also identified additional characteristics of effective mentors for school administrators. Mentors for school superintendents and principals must possess relevant administrative experience and an earned regard for effectiveness in their knowledge and practice. Important to successful mentoring is the ability of the mentor to articulate a vision, embrace multiple solutions to complex issues, ask probing questions to guide decision-making, and understand how to get things done in political systems.

Moving Mentoring to a Deeper Level: A Focus on Decision-Making

A critical support to new leaders is the guidance provided by experienced mentors in decision-making. Without effective decision-making on the job, new leaders will face criticism in the beginning stages of their leadership. Daily problem-solving along with long-term impact of significant decisions, makes the role of the mentor an essential support to new school leaders. Ethical decision-making serves as one example where mentors collaborate with their mentees. School building and district licensure programs teach decision-making models in required courses and the same concepts continue to be developed through mentoring support during the first years of practice. New leaders are often encouraged to reflect on what they feel are the characteristics of people they know who consistently make good decisions, and characteristics of those who consistently do not make good decisions. Most new leaders believe that good decision makers are those who take the time to gather information, weigh their options, and then have the courage to decide. Most also feel that consistently poor decision makers are too quick to act, neglecting to take time to gather information, which in turn limits their options. They also feel that poor decision makers very often lack the courage to decide in the first place, which forms a very negative impression on the perception of leadership.

These characteristics only tell part of the story, for they do not say how the decision makers ultimately decided what to do after they contemplated the facts and circumstances that confronted them. Leaders frequently face situations where their decision-making skills are tested, and in some cases, they are presented with problems---where they must choose between a set of known solutions. This can be a very complex process for any new leader necessitating support from experienced mentors who can share perspectives and ask questions that force the new leader to consider implications, better informing their decisions. Mentees can also be faced with arguably a more difficult scenario---a dilemma that Kidder (1995) has described as being forced to choose between different choices where every potential answer could be the right choice. New superintendents and principals are faced with consistent, multi-faceted and complex issues that include opposing ideas, frameworks, perspectives, and goals related to the problem where their decision is required.

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The prospect of how to respond to daily events, continual change, and managing school reform and improvement presents a responsibility for a superintendent or principal that never ends. Decision making in education can range from mundane daily tasks to decisions that have potentially life-altering consequences for children and adults. Foster (1986) stated “Each administrative decision carries with it a restructuring of human life: that is why administration at its heart is the resolution of moral dilemmas” (p. 33). When faced with continual change, superintendents and principals know how they respond to change not only impacts the adults they lead and the students they are responsible for, but also their professional tenure.

Therefore, it is imperative to have a foundation, framework, and mentoring support to enable the new leader to make consistently good decisions that produce positive and desirable results. Kidder (1995) provided a framework for resolving dilemmas surrounding choices that must be made when the options present themselves as right versus right. The application for the school leader is that there are many decisions that must be made where all options may be the right choice, but there are distinct differences between the choices, and only one option may be chosen. To illustrate, school superintendents and principals often face the challenge of balancing the rights of students and the responsibility to ensure the safety of all students (Hachiya, Shoop, & Dunklee, 2014). When faced with the choice of having to suspend or expel a student, it is right to consider the long-term effect the expulsion has on the student but also right to consider the safety implications for all students. It should be noted that the choices presented are not necessarily desirable choices; instead they are oftentimes the only choices available. A new leader, faced with these realistic dilemmas, can think through the ramifications of these choices with experienced and confidential mentors who have experience and knowledge, and understand the nature and complexity of the issue.

School leaders are required to make decisions affecting their schools or districts that are not exclusively bad or good. In other words, there may be change that is welcomed and exciting: the addition of a new program; the opening of a new school; or the addition of new leadership team members. At the opposite end the change might be very unwelcomed, such as the change presented due to deep budget cuts, new regulatory requirements, or sudden shifts in enrollment. In any circumstance, the decisions made while responding to changes and demands impact the potential result of the change, creating long-term consequences.

In a mentoring relationship, the blending of personal and professional codes helps both the mentor and mentee to gain additional perspective from each other. Mentoring relationships rooted in trust and confidence, provide a safe place for new leaders to increase their problem-solving and decision-making skills, keep them engaged in collaborative exchanges, and increase the likelihood they will remain in the profession (Lipton, Wellman, & Humbard, 2003).

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As mentors explore effective resolution principles with mentees, they often consider solutions involving the greatest good for the greatest number, explore the purpose of the action, or pose a scenario whereby the decision-maker places him or herself into the situation the other person is facing (Kidder, 1995). Mentors further press new leaders to assess the consequences of the action or decision as policies are reviewed or developed that affect the system. As leaders reflect deeply on the magnitude of their decisions, they often discover that some decisions are more beneficial to some than others. The consequence of a decision can impede innovation. For example, if one person is allowed to do it their way, everyone will want to do it their own way. Good decision-making can also involve thinking about doing to others what you would want to have done to you. School leaders assess their own personal feelings of the results and gain a sense that their work makes a positive difference in the lives of others. Complex decision-making can also push leaders to make decisions that have an undesirable impact on others yet still must occur. Effective decision-making skills guided by experienced leaders through mentoring conversations, help frame the thinking for mentees as they face both daily events and longer-term dilemmas or problems. With greater practice and experience, more consistent and positively impactful decisions can be made.

Other paradigms aimed at understanding how to approach ethical decision-making and resolving situational dilemmas exist. These include the ethics of justice, care, critique, and the profession (Stefkovich, 2006). Superintendents and principals who understand the frameworks that philosophers and educators have developed over the years give themselves a foundation to make consistently sound decisions. Leaders understand that answers are not always in front of them in obvious ways, making it necessary for them to make decisions when implications are unclear.

While there are many approaches to decision-making, a practice for new leaders would be to think in terms of fairness, equity, and justice. Mentors can pose situational dilemmas to place leaders in real-life circumstances that require decisions involving individual liberties such as freedom of speech and social and economic inequalities. When new leaders take these concepts into consideration, they often provide the greatest benefit to the least advantaged and provide the greatest opportunity for everyone (Rawls, 1999). When new leaders make decisions through an ethic of justice, those in the least advantaged position are given fair treatment.

The ethic of care is vital and shifts thinking towards empathy and compassion. In 1998, Sernak combined the paradigms of justice and care and called for school leaders to balance their power with care, in relation to building a positive school climate. In the ethic of critique, the new leader might consider the issues of power and privilege, as well as culture and language. This paradigm would be related to the concepts of social justice, where decision-making would consider those who are marginalized within their school culture.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) argued for a fourth paradigm that includes the ethic of the profession. The ethic of the profession integrates both personal and professional codes. Model codes of ethics for educators can be found at both the national and state levels, such as those from the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC). The Model Code of Ethics for Educators national standards help guide decision-making in practice, and come from standards set forth by various educational groups and organizations (NASDTEC, 2016). When mentors utilize standards to guide their conversations with new leaders, a clear application between theory and practice emerges and real-life problems provide the context for discussion.

While such professional standards can serve to guide new leaders as they deal with the challenges they face, without question they are blended with the personal codes and values the principal also possesses. The blending of professional and personal codes both play a critical role in educational decision making, and account for different decisions by principals faced with similar circumstances and facts. Mentors must allow mentees to “think through their own issue, rather than telling them what to do,” focusing them on the solution and engaging them in positive conversations that stretch their thinking (Rock, 2006, pp. 35-36).

When faced with educational issues, using the paradigm of considering the best interest of the student often leads towards more consistent, and better decisions (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2005). If individual students are treated with fairness, respect, and care, the message is sent to others that they too, will be treated similarly. Stefkovich (2006) stated that decisions related to the students’ best interest are those incorporating individual rights, teaching students to accept responsibility for their actions, and respecting students. This foundation helps principals make decisions that help fulfill their obligations as school leaders. The application of acting in the best interest of the student can be made for most situational dilemmas faced by new leaders.

Relevance to Mentors and Mentees

Throughout the mentoring year, the development of effective decision-making skills is a consistent and major focus. Every action a leader takes involves a decision of some order. Ciulla (2003) referred to the “Hitler” problem, which is the conflict between ethics and effectiveness. Answering the question whether Hitler was a good leader would depend on if the definition of a good leader was someone who gets people to perform tasks or functions. Such a conversation may be relevant in an ethical leadership discussion today between KELI participants when examining various state and national educational issues. While perhaps the example using such historical figures or events is extreme, the important message is that mentoring relationships such as those fostered by KELI mentors allow for open discussion and a learning experience different from any other a new leader will have. The greater the number of problems, dilemmas, and quandaries that can be discussed during the mentoring process, the greater the likelihood there will be growth during the first year. The focus on ethical decision-making is just one of many potential growth

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possibilities for new leaders supported by experienced mentors in contextualized situations.

The responsibilities school leaders face is at times daunting, and it is difficult enough to make life-impacting decisions on their own; but they become even more difficult when you must make decisions related to backed up sewer systems, bus schedules that become impacted by road closures, school lunches that were spoiled by a broken freezer, or a controversy brought to school through social media. Beckner (2004) noted that there was a time when ethical decisions were easier to discern---in earlier times people tended to have greater acceptance of rules and expectations. Today where information is immediate and change necessary, leaders must understand facets of decision-making and conclusions that combine a variety of systems of thought. The conclusion is that it is imperative to learn how to become a better, more consistently good decision maker; and that mentoring relationships can help nurture and grow those skills.

With the mentoring relationship, core values of professional responsibility are discussed, analyzed, developed, and shared between not only the paired mentors and mentees, but with everyone involved with KELI in a broader sense. The decision-making concepts and codes of ethics bring together the understanding for the common good in education for every school district involved in the program. The KELI experience helps to identify common problems and dilemmas of the profession through networking experiences and helps participants gain further understanding of their professional responsibilities. One of the greatest of those responsibilities is the ethical use of the power they possess. Leadership is more than an ability to merely get things done, and depends not just on the outcomes, but the quality of the means and ends of leaders' actions.

METHOD

Program evaluation of KELI is conducted in multiple ways. KELI staff meets four times annually with district program mentors and twice annually with building program mentors to obtain informal feedback on program effectiveness, field-based needs of mentees, and overall suggestions for improvement. Relevant programming topics are also shared with the organization's governance structure. Mentors are encouraged to self-reflect annually on their practice. KELI administers a perception survey to capture essential feedback from all program mentees and mentors at the end-of-year. Careful review of this feedback is conducted and adjustments are made in program requirements and structure because of this on-going and critical input.

In the spring, an electronic survey is administered to all mentees and mentors participating in the KELI program to gain insight into perceptions of program participants on the effectiveness of the mentoring and induction program. Principal mentors and mentees completed the KELI mentor/mentee survey in 2013-2014 (mentor $n = 16/17$; mentee $n = 16/18$) and 2014-2015 (mentor $n = 14/14$; mentee $n = 17/17$) on their program experience. In 2015-2016, the mentor/mentee survey was revised and included principals,

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assistant principal mentees and special education coordinators (mentor n = 21/21; mentee n = 29/32). The survey contained questions developed by KELI staff, rated by a five-point Likert scale and open-ended questions. Selected survey Table 1. In a three-year trend, 90% of mentors and mentees agreed that KELI mentoring/induction support is helpful to a first-year building leader. Results also highlighted that 100% of mentors agreed that serving as a KELI mentor is a personal professional learning experience during the same three-year period.

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Table 1
KELI Building Program Mentoring and Induction Perception Survey Results

Question	2013-2014		2014-2015		2015-2016	
	Mentor n=16/17	Mentee n=16/18	Mentor n=14	Mentee n=17	Mentor n=21	Mentee n=29/32
KELI mentoring/induction is helpful to a first-year building leader	93.75%	100%	100%	100%	100%	90%
Multiple face-to-face interactions with a mentor are essential to effective mentoring/induction support	93.75%	100%	100%	94.44%	100%	72%
Small group cohort meetings with area mentors and mentees are helpful to new principals	80%	81.25%	71.43%	83.33%	81%	76%
Meaningful feedback should be provided by the mentor to the new leader after observing actual leadership performance	100%	93.75%	100%	94.44%	100%	79%
Receiving the monthly checklist is helpful to new leaders	81.25%	100%	93.33%	94.44%	95%	86%
Attending professional meetings is helpful to a new leader	75%	75%	100%	94.44%	100%	90%
The coaching training sessions strengthen my skills as a mentor	93.75%	NA	93.33%	NA	95%	NA
I apply the skills I learn in coaching training as a leader in my own district	100%	NA	93.33%	NA	95%	NA
Serving as a KELI mentor is a personal professional learning experience	100%	NA	100%	NA	100%	NA
I recommend other first year leaders participate in KELI	NA	100%	NA	100%	100%	86%

Note. Numbers represent percentage responding “agree to somewhat agree”

Superintendent mentors and mentees completed the KELI mentor/mentee survey in 2013-2014 (mentor n = 5/5; mentee n = 10/11), and 2014-2015 (mentor n = 6/7; mentee n = 16/16) as well as for the first two years of program operation. The electronic survey is administered annually and was completed end-of-year by participants on their program experience. The survey for mentors and mentees, developed by KELI staff, contained questions rated by a five-point Likert scale and open-ended questions. In 2015-2016

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(mentor n = 14/14; mentee n = 27/29), the mentor/mentee survey was revised and included superintendents, assistant superintendents, special education directors, and special education assistant directors. Table 2 highlights selected survey results from the last 3 years of data obtained from the perception surveys.

Table 2
KELI District Program Mentoring and Induction Perception Survey Results

Question	2013-2014		2014-2015		2015-2016	
	Mentor n=5	Mentee n=10/11	Mentor n=6/7	Mentee n=16	Mentor n=14	Mentee n=27/29
The KELI program gives mentees appropriate access to the mentor	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
The frequency of face-to-face mentor interactions met the mentees' needs	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Interaction with a mentor helped the mentee solve problems	100%	90%	100%	100%	85.71%	100%
The KELI mentoring program helped mentees grow professionally	100%	100%	100%	100%	92.86%	96%
Mentees used the KELI program to address current matters in their districts	100%	90%	100%	100%	100%	96%
Cohort meetings were helpful	100%	100%	83.33%	93.75%	85.71%	93%
The training provided by KELI helped me be a more effective mentor/coach	100%	NA	100%	NA	100%	NA
% rating the KELI program as an effective support program for a first-year district leader ranging 8 to 10 (10=highest)	100%	90%	94%	100%	100%	100%

Note. Numbers represent percentage responding “agree to somewhat agree”

It is noteworthy that 100% of mentees and mentors felt the frequency of face-to-face mentor interactions met the needs of mentees for the entire three years of program operation. During 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 of operation, 100% of mentors and mentees agreed the KELI mentoring program helped mentees grow professionally. In 2015-2016, 93% of mentors and 96% of mentees agreed. In addition, 100% of mentors agreed that

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training provided by KELI helped them be a more effective mentor/coach during the three years of survey administration. One mentee commented,

The KELI mentoring program was a tremendous asset to me over the last year as I have begun to navigate the district leadership role. I appreciate the purposeful interaction between my mentor and I. If this would have been a mentoring situation structured by ‘call me if you need anything’, I wouldn’t have taken the time to stop and even think about what I needed, let alone take the time to initiate the conversation.

Another first-year superintendent noted,

I feel that the KELI mentoring program has been well worth the investment. The experience that the mentors bring to the field and the match between mentor/mentee was exceptional. Just having a mentor to call, text, or email to ask questions and run thoughts by helped time and time again. Without this relationship, it would have been complete survival mode.

The KELI program is experiencing rapid program growth in response to an increased awareness of mentoring and induction and new guidelines requiring a year of mentoring by the KSDE. KELI is continuing to serve new superintendent and principal leaders in Kansas schools while embracing service to assistant-level leadership positions, including leaders in special education. Through involvement and collaboration of expert field practitioners and state representatives, KELI’s design for new programs continues to tailor to the specific needs of these leadership positions.

DISCUSSION

KELI’s service to support new school and district leaders in Kansas through quality mentoring and induction and highly experienced and trained mentors enables new leaders to transition more smoothly into their first years on-the-job. Mentors and program requirements build essential understanding of the impact of decision-making in varied local district contexts. Considering the individualized needs of leaders (i.e., rural, suburban, urban) in varied settings will strengthen KELI’s ability to more fully meet the distinct needs and challenges in unique settings. KELI’s continued analysis of program feedback is critical to responding to the changing needs of leaders as they embrace state and federal initiatives and use of technology to enhance the mentoring experience. The opportunity to conduct both qualitative and quantitative research in the future will lead to additional recommendations in determining the effect of mentoring relationships on program outcomes. Engaging in this inquiry would strengthen KELI’s continued work in the field and its formal evaluation program.

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Leading in school districts today is complex, thus requiring an adaptive approach to serving new leaders in the second and third year of practice. In addition, embracing ideas shared by mentors and mentees provides KELI with an innovative lens to program improvement. These targeted areas for future recommendations to improve and sustain KELI's work in the field and positively impact decision-making for new leaders embraces new possibilities to lead successfully in twenty-first century schools.

CONCLUSION

New school and district leaders face a myriad of challenges as they move into their first year of practice, facing interconnected systems and unfamiliar demands. The promise of support offered by trained and experienced KELI mentors who form a trusting bond and confidential relationship focused on service to new leaders provides a foundation on which new school and district leaders can grow and learn. It is common for any first-time administrator to lack understanding of what they do not know as they move into a new set of broader system-level responsibilities. Through KELI, new principals and superintendents begin to form strong ties, embrace initial expectations, and build relationships with their district and community stakeholders. Through individualized and trusted mentoring and professional development, new school leaders develop capacity to address school and district goals and community needs. Honest dialogue among mentees and mentors informs daily practice and collaborative conversations begin to address organizational goals, inform decision-making, and create an impactful focus on quality teaching and learning. Relationships formed between mentors and mentees enable new leaders, uncertain of the right direction, to assume their new roles and responsibilities with increased perspective, information, and confidence.

High quality mentoring and induction provides critical support during professional transitions. Keenly aware of their need to serve new leaders and support their efforts to make sustained system improvements, experienced and trained principal and superintendent mentors, provide new state leaders with a deep understanding of how decisions impact local stakeholders and strategically plan for change to develop organizational and leadership capacity. The needs and influence of the school principal and district superintendent identifies a clear responsibility for every district and state to develop and maintain meaningful and focused mentoring. Mentoring relationships and mentoring to serve makes a difference in the professional development and strengthening of decision-making skills that impact students and staff for every new leader serving local school and district communities.

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