



Kansas State University co-facilitates teacher leadership academies with seven local school districts. From left, Abigail Lynch, Nathan Downs, Kristi Timm, and Austyn McNew from Manhattan-Ogden Public Schools participate in a teacher leadership academy in 2017.

# TEACHERS FIND THEIR VOICE

ACADEMY BOOSTS TEACHERS' CONFIDENCE, CAPACITY, AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS

BY DONNA AUGUSTINE-SHAW AND JESSICA LANE

**T**eacher retention is a continuing concern. One of the reasons teachers leave the profession is that they don't feel valued or working to their potential. Developing teacher leadership is a positive way to improve job satisfaction, career development, and retention (Wixom,

2016). In addition, teacher leadership and influence in decision-making are positively associated with student achievement (Ingersoll et al., 2018).

One promising approach to strengthen teacher leadership capacity is through leadership academies. At Kansas State University, we co-facilitate teacher leadership academies with

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seven local school districts. Educators identified by their districts engage in a two-year process designed to build teachers’ confidence and skills and help them explore the career continuum as they work toward a master’s in educational leadership.

This model helps districts invest in keeping good teachers in their pipeline, either within the school or by advancing to other career opportunities within the district. It also helps teachers find their voice as they grow professionally, establish strong networks, and develop their leadership skills to impact student learning and contribute to the success of their schools. Some become teacher leaders in the classroom or in positions at the building level, and some pursue formal administrative credentialing.

As one academy graduate explained, “During the academy, I realized that one way to put my knowledge into action was by pursuing a building license, after which I became an assistant principal. . . . My thinking was reshaped, my mind was more open and more clear about education, and my goals grew with my learning.”

Another said, “I can’t think of another education experience that has been more meaningful, thought-provoking, or useful to me.”

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF THE UNIVERSITY-DISTRICT PARTNERSHIP**

University leadership preparation programs and school district educators have a responsibility to work together to prepare school leaders. Through strategic and collaborative planning between our university and local school districts, the academies emphasize preparing teacher leaders to better understand their own school and district systems and structures, as well

as their current and potential roles in them.

Each partnership academy is customized to local district needs through a planning team that meets to consider district goals in leadership preparation. One district established priorities around understanding the organizational system, leading in a collaborative and professional learning environment, and harnessing the power of collective efficacy in leadership. A new academy has set the district’s focus on issues related to equity and inclusiveness, using data to inform decisions, social and emotional learning, and an emphasis on personalized learning.

District liaisons and a university facilitator jointly plan instructional content and design. In addition, each participant is paired with a district mentor for the two-year cohort academy, which allows participants to further explore and develop their knowledge and skills and provides opportunities to practice and apply what they are learning about leadership in real-time experiences and projects.

In the collaborative partnership, district contributions include responsibilities to:

- Establish a planning team to identify local needs and select the focus for the academy along with providing input throughout the two-year cohort experience;
- Partner with the university to plan and implement curriculum, learning activities, and assess overall progress of students and the cohort;
- Determine the criteria for selecting academy participants, the application process, and selection of teacher participants;
- Provide support to students

such as books, supplies, location for classes, determining an appointed district liaison to co-instruct with the university facilitator, and assign field-based mentors from the district to work with teacher leader candidates during the academy; and

- Appoint mentors to guide field experiences and assist teachers in better understanding their strengths and interests.

The university collaborates in the academy model by:

- Ensuring that academy content is aligned with national leadership standards;
- Co-planning with the district liaison to facilitate curriculum, design learning activities, and assess student learning and cohort progress;
- Determining candidates meet university requirements for admission;
- Providing faculty to assist students in university processes and facilitate the two-year cohort and degree program; and
- Supporting the district in all aspects of the cohort process, including mentoring.

Teacher leaders in the academies range from entry level to more experienced and include teachers from general education, special education, and special topic areas, as well as educators with other positions like school psychologists or instructional coaches. Often, academy participants are seeking a second master’s degree as their curiosity has grown about decision-making or leadership (e.g. instructional coaching, building leadership, or curriculum and assessment support).

## INSTRUCTIONAL CONTENT

A hallmark of the academy model is a coherent instructional framework to which all learning experiences connect, including coursework co-facilitated by university faculty and district staff both online and in person (pre-COVID), as well as field work. As one participant explained, “One of the big academy practices that best facilitates my learning is that everything is intertwined and related to each other. The spiraling of the information keeps everything relevant.”

Leadership standards are the foundation of this instructional framework. We focus on the Kansas standards for building leaders, which are based on the National Educational Leadership Preparation Program Recognition Standards.

We use a set of core resources for all the academies that focus on the contributions of leadership to student learning. They include Goodwin & Cameron’s (2015) 21 responsibilities for effective school leadership, which are categorized in the three areas of having a clear focus, managing change, and developing a purposeful community.

Beyond these core resources, we collaborate with the district to determine instructional materials, based on district needs and priorities. In response to current world and national issues, one academy is using two books that deal with competency-based education and social justice to promote knowledge and important conversations about student learning during the pandemic and equity issues.

Using grounded and emerging research in professional books outlines a sequence for content and instruction important to achieve the goals of the university and district.

## REAL-WORLD CLASSROOM APPLICATION

The academy seeks to blend theory with real-world application. The program’s instructional emphasis is a simultaneous integration of theory and

## ACADEMY REACH

The academy model operates in seven school districts statewide and one tribal nation in another state. Since 2000, 464 teacher leaders have participated in 28 partnership academies. Individual academy cohort enrollment varies between 12 and 24 students. Districts vary in their cycle of repeating academies as they consider local resources and recruitment of candidates (i.e. back-to-back, or one or two semesters between academies).

## PARTNER DISTRICTS

Partnership districts include: Geary County Public Schools, Manhattan-Ogden Public Schools, Salina Public Schools, Dodge City Public Schools, Topeka Public Schools, Garden City Public Schools, Shawnee Mission Public Schools, and Osage Nation (Oklahoma). Teacher leaders from several districts have participated as a part of the ongoing partnership districts, including: Marysville, Rock Creek, and Wamego.

practice, exploring best practice, with a continual focus on learning outcomes for selected teacher leaders (Miller et al., 2007).

This purposeful connection between theory and practice helps teacher leaders apply their learning and think differently about their work. One academy teacher said, “I loved that the content matched what I was trying to accomplish in my classroom as well as seeing how administration handles things like behaviors, staff, budgeting, and running a building.”

This is enhanced by mentors moving the discussion to real-world experience. “One practice that facilitates my learning in the academy

is tying our learning directly to our schools,” one academy participant said. “I enjoy learning different topics in class and being able to apply it in my own school shortly after class. There are many strategies that I have read about in class and discussed with my mentor shortly afterwards.”

Mentors also help facilitate a special project that each participant completes over the academy. These projects demonstrate leadership contributions to school and district improvement initiatives. Special projects provide teacher leaders the opportunity to demonstrate performance skills across the leadership standards and apply what they have learned about leadership in real time.

Participants select these projects, in coordination with their mentor and district liaison, and showcase their leadership in defining the purpose of the project, working with others to accomplish agreed-upon goals, and assessing the success and next steps for the project.

Projects are a way for teacher leaders to assume a leadership role outside of their normal responsibilities and produce a measurable outcome important to the school, district, or community.

In addition, guest speakers from the larger district community share their broader perspective with students, providing teachers with the “balcony view” that builds an understanding and appreciation of the system. Examples of guest speakers include the school superintendent and directors from various district positions like curriculum, staff development, and finance.

Academies often host presentations about special topics such as the role of the counselor, focusing on real-life examples of how counselors and principals work together to support students and families. These connections have an intentional focus on strengthening the pipeline of support for students while exposing teachers to new ways of thinking about

the importance of relationships in the school community.

**MONITORING GROWTH**

Academy participants complete a self-assessment of their growth on a continuum over the two-year cohort experience. This is based on the work of Linda Lambert (2003), who identified components of emerging teacher leadership, considering four categories for teachers moving from reflective practitioner to thinking more critically as a leader.

She defined these categories as adult development, dialogue, collaboration, and organizational change, with a developmental continuum of dependent to independent to interdependent and, finally, leadership. We monitor the individual growth of each teacher leader through these self-assessments and ongoing progress toward increased leadership roles over the two years.

Academy participants get continual feedback on their growth in the areas of content knowledge, demonstrated skills, and reflection on their beliefs and values. These opportunities for individual and group reflection promote powerful learning and professional growth. “The academy has caused me to reflect deeper. ... The reflecting was something I will take with me into the future. ... Asking my own students to reflect has impacted how I teach,” noted one academy participant.

As educators in the academy reflect on opportunities to exhibit their leadership and explore the career continuum, they define their own growth by considering the leadership standards. An example of this continuum of leadership development specific to the standard focusing on vision and mission is made clear in the following stages (CCSSO, 2008):

- **Aspiring education leader:** Develop or revise the current vision/mission in department/grade-level teams;
- **Entry-level education leader:** Analyze the current vision/mission with others;

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- **Early career education leader:** Work with others to identify and disaggregate data to improve the focus of the vision/mission;
- **Advanced career education leader:** Guide teachers and parents in discussions around data to ensure students and staff have necessary resources to reach goals in the vision/mission; and
- **Mentor/coach/specialist:** Teach and model ways to evaluate data points to implement a student-focused vision/mission with measurable goals.

As one academy participant said, “When starting the leadership academy, I knew I would learn more about how to be a leader, but during this process, I have ended up not only learning about how to be an effective leader, but also about myself. ... Over and over, I realized the fact that I am capable of so much more than I ever saw before. ... I am forever changed and forever moved to strive to be more each and every day.”

**LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

Each leadership cohort is a cohesive and committed learning community. Cohort members and instructors are invested in and respect the continual improvement of each person. A sense of collective responsibility is evident in the dedication and strong relationships

that develop through the academy experience.

This investment in one another is essential so that each participant develops along his or her own path. Leadership matters at all levels of schools, and the academies help prepare teachers for whatever responsibilities they pursue as leaders in their schools and districts.

Teachers who are prepared this way are more apt to thrive in today’s complex school environments. As one participant said, “It is my mission as a teacher leader to empower others in our organization to not only lead, but to continue to commit to professional growth in teaching and learning practices that ignite outcomes leading to student success, the ultimate end goal.”

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