

**A State of Educational Imbalance: An Autoethnographic Account of a Deputy  
Commissioner Facilitating Educational Reform**

by

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B.S., Baker University, 1987  
M.S., Kansas State University, 1994

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation presents autoethnographic narrative of my experience as the Deputy Commissioner of Education in Kansas while I was working to change how schools in Kansas are accredited to achieve better educational outcomes for students who were traditionally being left behind. Two types of data informed the study: tour data, and narrative data. Tour data refer to input that was gathered in 2015 during a 27-city tour across Kansas where the Commissioner of Education and myself asked three key questions to over 2,000 Kansans who attended these tour events. The responses were documented where attendants represented various stakeholder positions regarding educating Kansans. Upon completion of the first tour, the data were analyzed. To verify accuracy of the interpretation of the data, we organized a second tour to share results with stakeholders. Finalizing findings from stakeholder feedback, the State Board of Education set a new vision for educational reform in the state of Kansas.

The second type of data informing this study is narrative data that shape the autoethnography. The purpose of this autoethnography is to highlight and connect critical narratives from my positionality of a Deputy Commissioner of the Kansas Department of Education, juxtaposed against state and local culture of public education that contributed to a new Kansas accreditation model. The autoethnography is broadly informed by narrative inquiry and writing as a form of analysis and inquiry. The critical narratives offer a historical documentation of the processes that influenced an educational reform in Kansas when such reform had its own political and logistical challenges. Without a narrative telling of the events that led to a new educational vision and accreditation model

for Kansas, important conversations, thoughts and studies would be lost, and questions would go unanswered as to *how* Kansas developed its new vision and direction.

Two broad insights emerged as a result of engaging in this study. First, the tour data informed us that, as an educational system, the model that holds schools accountable to students and communities is out-of-balance with the desires of Kansans. Unless educational leaders and policy makers change the accountability model for schools and students, it is not likely that the educational system will see any significant change in the current educational results and outcomes equitably for those students who are traditionally left behind. Second, by writing the autoethnographic narrative, I was able to trace my upbringing, advantages that I enjoyed, and the responsibilities that come with such advantages. Being from a family of educational leaders and adhering to a belief system instilled by my father regarding equity-based learning for all, the autoethnographic narrative allowed me to stay open to information that I might not have known from my advantageous position as I toured through the state. Further, focusing on the various roles that I play within Kansas such as being a federal liaison and state department educational leader, I engaged in deep listening during the tours to facilitate a responsive educational reform that highlight voices that might have been traditionally unheard or silenced.

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## Preface

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” (Palmer, 1992)

- Margaret Mead

Is it possible for ten people to change the face of public education on a large scale? I'm not discussing mundane matters, as where someone recommends every high school select a mascot. Instead, I'm referring to true reform, including the structure, organization, curriculum, etc. Can ten people accomplish all of that? The answer is yes.

They were called the Committee of Ten, and the year was 1892 (National Education Association of the United States. Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies, 1894). This group produced a set of recommendations that would reform public education - recommendations we still follow more than a century later, including the design of the K-8 and high school organization and the Carnegie unit. These days, when I give presentations to high school staff, I frequently ask them to list the sequence of math courses they offer their students. Usually, their reply is, “Algebra I, then geometry, followed by Algebra II.” When I ask why, the typical answer is, “This is the way we have always done it.” Really? You would think over the past 130 years we could have found a different way.

Although the recommendations from the Committee of Ten, led by Charles W. Elliot, President of Harvard University, occurred over a century ago, I argue that such visionary thinking needs a revival. Today, where would we find another ten forward-thinking individuals to recreate this education reform effort? Answer: The 10-member Kansas State Board of Education.

This study is an autoethnographic narrative of my experience as Deputy Commissioner of Education on a journey to alter the ways we accredit schools in Kansas to achieve better outcomes for students. *Autoethnography* is a writing method that combines characteristics of *autobiography*, where the author narrates past experiences, and *ethnography*, where the writer enables the reader to understand a culture (C. Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Thus, autoethnography, borrowing from the methods of anthropology, allows researchers to become ethnographers of their own experiences, using ethnographic methods to juxtapose narratives against larger sociocultural, political, and historical discourses (Heider, 1975). It is a qualitative approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (-graphy) personal experiences (auto-) in order to better understand cultural experience (ethno-) (C. Ellis et al., 2011). In this study, I will use autoethnography to analyze and describe my experience as a Deputy Commissioner for the Kansas Department of Education. In that capacity, I toured the entire state of Kansas, seeking opinions from numerous stakeholders in public education, business, industry, and various communities through town hall meetings. Using the storied form of documenting these experiences, I also juxtapose them against the national discourse on public education and educational reform. Please note that this study is not constructed within the structures of a traditional study. Instead, for autoethnographies, there are no prescribed structures. Autoethnographers often use writing as a form of inquiry and analysis first, without any pre-determined structure. It is usually after the writing is complete that a structure is created – one that is congruent with the author’s intentions and the purpose of the study. This autoethnography also stands as a historical

narrative from the perspective of an educational leader for major policy reform in public education in Kansas.

Here is a brief overview of each of the study's chapters. In the first chapter, I discuss my subjectivities as an indicator of the researcher's positionality. Subjectivities are an essential part of qualitative research, interrogating and revealing values, assumptions, and beliefs that inform the study. The underlying premise of documenting and interrogating subjectivities is that no study can claim neutrality when it is conducted by human beings. It is the human ways of knowing and existing that inform the ways in which knowledge is constructed. Thus, revealing positionality is critical in all types of qualitative research since researchers themselves are not separate from the study (Bhattacharya, 2007). We are a part of the study, the story, the process, and therefore we are essential to it (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Specifically within autoethnography, researcher positionality is valuable and necessary because it does not hide from the reader the fact that, as the researcher, I bring with me a set of experiences in the area of study, instead of leaving the reader to make assumptions about my subjectivity (C. Ellis et al., 2011). Accordingly, I begin the first chapter with my upbringing, values, beliefs, and assumptions and how they played a role in the ways in which I support and advocate certain educational practices as Deputy Commissioner of Education. I use autoethnography as a research method to provide the reader with a perspective of this journey from my lens as the researcher, as well as reflections on my own role as a participant in the study.

In Chapter Two, I discuss the tours I took across Kansas and how they inform this narrative. Further, I explain how the tours were designed, how the events were structured,

and the research literature that prompted justification for travel. I also describe incidents where we engaged Kansans in important conversations about framing a new educational system, including details of the types of commentary and input we received. I share some individual stories and significant quotes while framing the ultimate vision for educational reform in Kansas. Any kind of educational reform is change, and such a change is perceived as dramatic because systems and people within those systems are not always able to make changes rapidly. Often, systems resist change, so educational reform for the entire state of Kansas could be considered quite dramatic. If changing the focus and vision of education to this degree could be done successfully, it would require the voices of Kansans. And due to extensive conversations and decisions that had to be made, these could be classified as scholarly-practitioner decisions involving consideration from key stakeholders.

In the third chapter I explain the process and methods used to analyze the data from the tours. Ensuring accuracy and legitimacy from the input of so many attendees was critical to a successful outcome of these tours, as they were designed to shape the direction of educational reform in Kansas. I share the findings of the community-conversation tours that led to a set of recommendations for the state board to consider. Moreover, I discuss what the tour data demonstrated, and of equal importance, what we considered as silence in the data. This is where the voice of Kansans come to life, and where value is given to the roles and responsibilities of students, parents, and communities.

Additionally, I discuss how we ensured the accuracy of our analysis and findings, after which we scheduled a second tour of the state, referred to as the *Reunion Tour*.

Here, we asked Kansans one simple question in relation to findings from the earlier tour data: “Did we hear you correctly?” At this time the state board of education was holding retreats to begin discussion on the direction that Kansans wanted to proceed in education, so it was important to share the findings with those who initially offered us their input. After sharing the results, they were asked for their comments and feedback, and then we shared that information with the state board of education for final recommendations.

In Chapter Four, I describe how we used the tour data to inform our plan for delivering a new vision for education in Kansas. I discuss how we pulled key elements from the tour data to drive the change Kansans wanted, and how they would be incorporated into a new accreditation model for accountability purposes. While we were framing that vision, the federal government was in the process of reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the federal accountability law known more commonly as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Behind, 2002), enacted in an era when federal accountability drove behaviors in state education policy. In a more current context, however, I explain how the voice of Kansans and the state board of education drove the educational decisions and actions in Kansas, while maintaining compliance with federal legislation. I reveal the decisions made with the use of tour data. I also share how a new vision of the state board of education was constructed, the process that we followed, and how this ultimately influenced the final version of a new accreditation model for Kansas school districts. Moreover, I provide evidence from national research that supports recommendations from the tour and shows alignment with the direction that Kansas is moving and explain how this will be significant to those who will be affected by these decisions.



In Chapter Five, I bring together the final reflections concerning the long journey of redefining educational success in Kansas. It includes thoughts on the process just completed, some retrospective ideas as to what might have been done differently, and additional considerations needed for the future. I also speak to the significance of this work by answering the question, “For whom is this work valuable?” I close this study with my final thoughts as a result of being a part of this educational reform process. This was my first, and possibly my last, opportunity to be involved in such a valuable, *game-changing* event. The odds of a young man growing up in a large family in rural America and having this chance to make an impact is something that cannot be taken for granted but valued highly.

Given the non-traditional format and content of the study, it is important to list some of the strategies I have used. First, as a visual learner, I have included several visual elements in the form of tables and figures. Some of these visuals are from the tour itself, a few depicting the results from the tour, and many that, I believe, shape the narrative of educational reform and how I have negotiated my experiences within that context. As a child, I always liked pictures in my readings, and as an educator, I like bulletin boards and banners; thus, the use of visuals is an important and intimate part of my writing.

This study is both personal and political. On the personal front, I write from the position of an educational leader at a state level while realizing the privilege of being in that position. I compose in an accessible voice because I imagine other educators and practitioners as my primary audience. This is intentional, because long after I am gone, I hope this document serves as a historical narrative that is highly readable – neither too dense nor lost in academic obscurity.

Throughout the document, there are times when I refer to “we,” which in most cases will include Dr. Randy Watson and me. Dr. Watson is the current Commissioner of Education for Kansas. Sometimes I refer to him as Randy to reflect the relational closeness I share with him. Other times, when I say, “We considered” or “We thought about,” I’m referring to ways in which Randy and I negotiated decision-making. This was a cooperative effort that was led by Randy, our new commissioner, while I provided the support and perhaps “carried the luggage.” I appreciate the opportunity to include myself in this “we.”

## Chapter One: In the Beginning

As the Deputy Commissioner of Education at the KSDE (Kansas State Department of Education), I experience unique events and opportunities that can only occur because of my position. Realizing that I am not the only person to have served in this role, I bring into this study my own character and personality with its idiosyncrasies and historicity.

I was born in the United States as a white man in a middle-class family living in the suburbs, to parents who never divorced. Searching the Internet, I found that the percentage of likelihood of this happening is 0.32% (specifically, less than 1% out of 7.2 billion people on earth). In addition, my father was a public-school district superintendent from the time I was two years old until well after I graduated high school.

Although I was raised in a supportive, middle-class environment, things did not always “come easy” while growing up with five older brothers. But in looking back, I find my youth was not so challenging. I began kindergarten at a young age, barely making the cutoff date with a late summer birthday, and I was probably a little immature for a 5-year-old boy. I do not know if being held back a year would have assisted my maturity level, but in hindsight, I think my dad would have done so if he knew then what he knows now. At best, I was a “C” student throughout my K-12 experience, and I have sardonically observed that it was my half of the graduating class that made the top half possible, academically speaking.

In my freshman year, the *light* came on for me, and I began to study seriously. But if it were not for sports, I am uncertain I would have stayed out of trouble. I have an ornery streak in me.

I have the gift of a vivid memory of my childhood, even as far back as three years old. In reflecting on elementary school, I can still visually pinpoint every locker assigned to me. In kindergarten, I made a clay mold of my handprint (which I still keep), and I remember the combination to our mailbox at the post office, (B 1/2, around once to F, back to I). That was 39 years ago. My brothers and I worked a local paper route and mowed 21 lawns until we were old enough to work on a farm. These events contributed to happy memories.

I never went hungry, never felt unsafe, never witnessed my parents fighting, and was never the victim of school bullies. We were not a wealthy family, but despite some difficulties, all of my needs were met. I was always the tallest kid in class, and although I was not known for academic prowess, I got along with everyone, never feeling the need to fit in with a clique. I was “just friends” with everybody. Maybe this was because I controlled my environment – or because I had five older brothers who created a safe environment for me, and I benefitted from that.

By no means was my behavior perfect. I spent time in detention while in school. I may have been the class clown and did not realize the appropriate times to use sarcasm around adults. Regrettably though, my greatest struggles occurred when I witnessed other kids being bullied. I hated bullying because I recognized the effects it had on one of my older brothers when I was very young. He was a little overweight, so he was often the subject of teasing and harassment. On one occasion he said, “Go ahead and hit me... it is only pain.” His spoken words could not hide that internal pain. I could see it in his eyes.

Since I was big for my age, and I was living in this “comfortable environment,” I decided to proactively deal with bullying problems. If I saw such an incident, I would

physically step in and protect the person being harassed. Some may ask why. Did I truly care about the victimized students? Or was I living in a “place of safety” within my own environment where I felt protected? I cannot say. But in my little world, I was the person to put an end to bullying. And as a result of such altercations, I was sentenced to multiple in-school detentions. One of my interventions led to a 3-day out-of-school suspension. This did not sit well with my dad, the superintendent of schools.

I am always a *glass-full* type of person, meaning neither half empty nor half full. I am full. Back then, I believed there was a light at the end of every tunnel, and I was going to be successful in life. This may have been due to the jobs I held while growing up. I knew I could always make a good living by working. I grew up in a rural community where, based on appearances, parents had good jobs, families lived in quality homes, and if there was poverty, I saw none of it.

Graduation rates were high in our community, and students inherited well-paying jobs right out of high school in the aircraft-manufacturing field. These were jobs where once a person acquired a skill on an assembly line, one could earn enough money to lead a quality life. For most people in our community, there was no need for formal education beyond a high school diploma, and some could get a well-paying job as a high school dropout. Almost anyone could work at the factory for 35-plus years and become a little more successful than their parents. During the 1970s and 1980s, this was how most students in our community envisioned their futures.

High school graduation was a celebratory event, and it was nice to finally wear the mortar board and stride across the stage, where my dad presented me with my diploma. However, shortly after graduation, he presented me with another piece of paper.

It contained words that have made the most impact in shaping who I am today as a person and educational leader. It read:

I fully realize that no wealth or position can long endure, unless built upon truth and justice, therefore, I will engage in no transaction which does not benefit all whom it affects. I will succeed by attracting to myself the forces I wish to use, and the cooperation of other people. I will induce others to serve me, because of my willingness to serve others. I will eliminate hatred, envy, jealousy, selfishness, and cynicism, by developing a love for all humanity, because I know that a negative attitude toward others can never bring me success. I will cause others to believe in me, because I will believe in them, and in myself.

My dad told me to read this quote to myself in the mirror every morning, commit it to memory, and say it every day with the expectation that it would begin to change my view of the world, how I would live my life in whatever profession I chose, and how it would positively affect those around me. I have committed this saying to memory and still carry it with me today. Most importantly, I believe those words are true.

While many of my friends worked in the factory, I went to college to earn a degree. At the time I had not yet decided to major in education. Instead, I was following several of my friends to college to play football. It was my dad's expectation that I enroll in college, so I am not sure if I was pleasing him or just going through the motions because I had nothing better to do.

After a few years of maturing in college and watching the enjoyment my dad had found in his career, I decided to follow his footsteps into the field of education and go into teaching. Later, I became the superintendent of schools in the same district I grew up

in, and where my dad had been superintendent years earlier. A few of my old teachers, those hired by my dad, were still there when I came back as their superintendent. A few teachers raised eyebrows at the thought of the kid who spent time in the school office while in detention now returning as their superintendent. I sometimes think, “Why not?” After all, if I was going to spend that much time in a school office, I might as well get paid for it.

I have gone through every step of the process, earning degrees that have enabled my climb up the educational ladder: teacher, coach, assistant principal/athletic director, high school principal, superintendent of schools, and now the Deputy Commissioner of Education at the KSDE. In that capacity, I oversee teacher licensure, accreditation of schools, early childhood, special education, title programs, standards, assessments, and career and technical education. Before this, I served as the Director of School Finance, overseeing the distribution of state and federal dollars to Kansas public-school districts. I also served as interim Commissioner of Education for 14 months while the state board of education conducted a search for someone permanent.

Having a variety of experiences in school districts before coming to the state’s department, working in both the fiscal and learning sides of the agency, I was allowed a unique perspective on the challenges and opportunities available within the field of public education. As a superintendent of schools, I was able to design long-term strategic plans to meet the expectations of the local school board and community with regard to the educating of their students. And as a commissioner and a deputy commissioner, I have worked with a 10-member board to lead education at a state level.

While serving as director of school finance, I annually reviewed the budgets of many school districts, small and large, urban and rural, and witnessed how they implemented strategic plans to meet the diverse needs of their students as well as those of the communities, many of which differed from what I had experienced while working in the field. It is important to balance fiscal, physical, and human resources to maximize educational outcomes based on the diversity and culture of our schools and communities in Kansas.

Being the director of school finance is another unique position where you are the only one in the state that holds this title. When school districts bring their budgets for review, you have the unique opportunity to see the operation of multiple districts through a distinct lens. And while I held this position, Kansas, along with the entire country, was going through a deep recession. It was sad to witness the dismantling of programs designed to meet the needs of at-risk students, coupled with a vast number of layoffs to balance declining budgets and services. It was a time in my career I wish I had never experienced.

But my experience and college degrees notwithstanding, I believe it was the other, *non-academic* skills I have gained along the way that have placed me in the current position I hold and has influenced my desire to work with others in introducing change to the system. Those non-academic characteristics include perseverance, assertiveness, teamwork, initiative, leadership, and self-discipline. I learned these skills while growing up with jobs and responsibilities, being raised with five older brothers, becoming involved in extra-curricular activities, and having parents with high expectations for us.



These skills helped me work my way through college, earning money on the side to finish school with no financial debt. They helped me to pursue education beyond a bachelor's degree and advance to higher positions in my field. Such skills also allowed me to consider the individual needs of my students, to build strong relationships with both students and peers, and to believe that even the person who endured the greatest challenges can still experience success. I learned early on that attitude is the most important ingredient of success, and having a strong relationship with colleagues can move mountains.

I did not climb the career ladder based on a desire for more pay. As a teacher, I often thought, "If I can have this much positive impact on a classroom of students, what if I was in charge of the building?" And, after serving as a high school principal, I remember thinking, "If I can have this much positive impact on a building, what if I was the superintendent and could impact the entire district?" And so it went, all the way to the state level.

There are a few observations that I have made while making my professional journey. I have discovered that the further I work up the administrative ladder, the more I realize I am joined by others of my gender and skin color. When I think about policy recommendations or decisions I make on behalf of education across the state, I picture my children as the *typical students* these recommendations will affect. Knowing this, I try to ensure I have representation from people in, and out of, the educational community who represent the vast population of students that we are serving.

Additionally, I have observed that I never feel second-guessed about my decisions or recommendations based on my predetermined background and credibility. Since I

represent the fairly stereotypical administrator in Kansas (where 84% of the superintendents are white men), I think I automatically *fit in*, which may or may not be disadvantageous, yet I realize I must continue to ensure there are checks and balances with different voices in the conversation.

Although I was raised in a small rural town of predominately white middle-class families, my current position as Deputy Commissioner has provided me the opportunity to view public education in Kansas from a different vantage point. I have the duty and benefit of visiting school districts and classrooms across the state. In doing so, I have experienced totally different environments from the one I was taught in, and I have witnessed what many policy makers would not recognize when they envision the characteristics of a traditional classroom. While having access to different educational cultures and environments is healthy, by no means would I become comfortable thinking I have a full grasp of the challenges that schools and students face. This is because I learn something new every week.

My job has led me through classrooms in urban Kansas City where the state's white majority population is the minority, where over 90% of the students live in poverty, and where over 50 languages are spoken. I have also toured classrooms in southwest Kansas where the fastest growing population are refugee students from other countries, and where one cannot place children of one Native-American tribe in the same classroom as those of another tribe because the elders of one tribe murdered the other tribe's elders.

We now have in some of our communities a situation where the minority population in the district is now the majority in numbers, but without the privileges that come from being in the majority. Yet sprinkled across this state are the small

communities that represent classic Americana, where 100% of students are white, prom is still held on the old gym floor, all students graduate high school, and the towns themselves are often referred to in country-music lyrics. One must wonder, then, whether most Kansans are aware of the subtle changes in demographics taking place in their state – and whether today’s policy makers are aware of the same. For most, I assume the answer is no.

I have fond memories of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), watching the story of a young Kansas girl becoming engulfed in a tornado that drops her into a strange land. The character, Dorothy, went from her comfortable lifestyle with close family and friends, living on a farm, to a very unfamiliar place with characters and environments and norms she was not accustomed to. I now see what she was living through in her dream when she says, “Toto, we’re not in Kansas anymore.” Not the Kansas that I believe many of our policy makers grew up in. I feel they are unaware of those subtle changes in student demographics, where minority populations are growing and becoming the majority. These diversified growth-patterns should compel educational leaders and policy makers to confront challenges that are invisible in traditional Americana school districts.

Before the tornado, Dorothy only knew the culture of a predominately white, middle-class rural environment where everyone shared the same values and expectations. When the tornado knocked her unconscious, she experienced a dream that led her on a journey to meet the wizard, and it was her first time exposed to different cultures, landscapes, and people of different backgrounds.

Many educational professionals in Kansas only know education as it was, several years or decades ago when they attended school in this state. People who graduated high

school in Kansas before the year 2000 may not recognize that classrooms in many locations across the state have changed dramatically. These changes range from the teaching styles to the varied backgrounds of the students sitting in those classrooms.

Over the past decade our state has seen a dramatic increase in the percentage of students who speak a language other than English at home, known as English Language Learners (ELL) (Kansas State Department of Education, 2017). In the late 1990's, less than two percent of the students in Kansas received English as a second language service, compared to 2015, when one-tenth of public education students qualified for these services. In addition, poverty rates in Kansas, as measured when factoring in students who qualify for free or reduced meals, have increased from 32.2% in the year 2000 to 50.3% in the year 2015 (2017).

Having one out of every two students living at the poverty level is not what most Kansans experienced when they went to school, yet we have a set of educational laws and regulations more aligned with 1939, the year *The Wizard of Oz* was released, than with 2018. And although there are many innovative approaches to teaching and learning across the state, infused with technology and individualized instruction, we still find ourselves held to restrictive schedules, seat-time minutes, and outdated rules that are hard to break. Maybe I am too close to my work. Perhaps what I have mentioned here is not as important as it seems, but I believe that the changing student demographics has altered the educational landscape dramatically in Kansas, while the system itself has remained the same.

With prior experiences, coupled with that “full-glass” outlook, I believe we can positively influence more individuals in our state by making changes to the current

system. Kansas ranks high in our nation with just about every educational indicator for success, but when I think about our dropout rates, I try to remember the face of a former student I lost when I was high school principal, and I wonder what I could have done differently. Or I remember the young kids who came to school hungry, dirty, and neglected, and hoped that years later, in their adulthood, they would be become skilled workers and successful individuals. They deserve the same chances I had, and for those not raised in a supportive environment, they need an adult advocate who can help lead them to success.

The lens I look through is simple, yet that lens is a gift. It is the lens of an educational leader tasked with overseeing learning services for Kansas. At any given point, there is only one person with this responsibility, and if I were not the Deputy Commissioner, I would not have the opportunity to engage at this level of work. I would not have the knowledge, experience, access to data (with the ability to collect more), and the authority to perform this study.

I also consider myself a humble individual, which is another trait I learned from my dad. However, this is the section of my introduction where I step out of that character and adopt a bolder stance. As the Deputy Commissioner of Education, I am in a position of authority. It is my job to lead these efforts. My responsibility is to make the educational experience successful for all students; and by all, I mean *each*...each and every child. I am fully confident in myself and the people I surround myself with to advance closer to this goal than has ever been reached in the history of Kansas education.

I have no problem standing in front of teachers, parents, school administrators, legislators, board members, education advocates or adversaries, or anyone discussing

educational policies, issues or initiatives, based on the prior experiences I bring to the conversation. School finance can be a complicated topic, but I understand and speak it well as the former Director of School Finance. I have been a teacher, coach, building administrator, and school superintendent. I am versed in the jargon and well aware of the issues that our schools and communities face. I have experience visiting with Chief Executive Officers of businesses, giving commencement addresses at universities, and having national conversations with commissioners and deputy commissioners across the nation about the direction we need to go.

I have had the opportunity to view education from a local, state, national, federal, and international lens. As the Chair of the Council of Chief State School Officers Deputy Commissioners Board of Directors, which is a national organization, I engaged in, and on occasion led, conversations and dialogue focusing on educational policies and initiatives that impact this nation, including the recently reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA), which addresses federal accountability of public education. I have participated in informal conversation with other state colleagues as well as the former President of the United States, Barack Obama. And I spent a week in China engaged in international conversations with secondary and postsecondary leaders of that country.

It is through this lens that I will be writing about this historic tour, and my goal is to make the best of this time and opportunity as Kansas Deputy Commissioner and spend a portion of my career gazing through this lens. Several people before me have gazed through it, but only one is allowed to do so at any given time, and that time is currently mine, so I will ensure that this lens is cleaned and clearer for the next person in line.

## **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this autoethnography is to highlight and connect critical narratives from my positionality as Deputy Commissioner of Kansas Department of Education, juxtaposed against the state and local culture of public education that contributed to a new accreditation model.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions guide this autoethnography:

1. In what ways did my position as a Deputy Commissioner contribute to conducting tours across Kansas to hear key stakeholder perspectives?
2. How do my own experiences, educational background, and positionality inform the ways in which a new accreditation model was created for Kansas public education?
3. In what ways can I inform my role as an educational leader to conceptualize educational change and its current and projected implications on policy and practice?

## **Data Sources**

This study contains two types of data: *narrative data* and *tour data*. The narrative data consist of salient and critical narratives that I selected as a researcher after thoughtful analysis of the narratives that emerged from my experiences while on a statewide tour, listening to Kansans, my personal and educational background, and my role as a Deputy Commissioner of Education. The selection process of these narratives involved reflecting through theory, methodological framework, empirical literature, and practitioner

experiences. Tour data refers to data collected while on tour, listening to various stakeholders throughout the journey.

For tour data, we collected information from statewide tours and online surveys. We gave presentations in local communities where we divided all participants into focus groups, consisting of five or six individuals with different backgrounds. This tour also consisted of meetings with local Chambers of Commerce in addition to a conference where we met with a large group of teachers. We also had an online presence for those who could not attend any location of the original listening tours where we asked the same set of questions and had over 100 responses submitted. Details of this tour are covered in Chapter 2.

### **Timeline**

The Community Conversation Tours and the Business and Industry Tours occurred during the spring and early summer of 2015. Tour data was coded and analyzed during the summer and fall of 2015 in preparation for the Reunion Tour, where we shared the results with key stakeholders. Input from the reunion meetings were analyzed in late summer and early fall of 2015 and helped inform the state board of education in creating a new vision. The state board's final vision was presented to over 1,000 Kansans at the KSDE Annual Conference, held in November of 2015. The narrative data began at the time of the tours and spanned across several years during my work on this study. Throughout the different stages of developing the new accreditation model, including the tour data's influence on the model, I reflect on my writings to analyze the effect that this work would have on the new accreditation model.



## Why Autoethnography?

The purpose of this autoethnography is to share critical, personal experiences, and reflect through my writing the stories of the events that took place during a statewide listening tour and subsequent events in Kansas that led to the development of the state board of education's vision, and ultimately, the implementation of a new accreditation model. I am using autoethnography to convey this narrative report of my experiences, which have taken place over the past four years while working as the Deputy Commissioner of Education at the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE).

As defined by Allen-Collison, (2013), autoethnography is a way for the author to draw upon his/her own lived experiences in relation to the culture within which they are a member. According to Ellis et al. (2011), autoethnography is also a method of writing that combines characteristics of *autobiography*, where the author writes about past experiences, and *ethnography*, where the writer enables the reader to understand a culture. Through this approach I analyze my critical narratives in relation to a broader social discourse of public education, becoming an ethnographer of my own Self within the specific cultural context of the Kansas Board of Education. Autoethnography allows me to share a narrative understanding of events that unfolded from my perspective within the culture of Kansas's public education. As mentioned in an earlier section of this chapter, this is a culture I have known since my childhood, having lived and worked in it throughout my adult life. Through self-reflection and multiple writing attempts, I discovered that autoethnography is not just about a person telling a story, but about that person describing the social-cultural phenomena they are engaged in by using a diverse array of tools (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). According to Chang (2013), a significant

goal of autoethnography is to “expand the understanding of social realities through the lens of the researcher’s personal experiences” (p. 108). As someone who grew up in a family with a professional educational background and as one who has spent his entire adult career in education, my cultural experiences have given me a set of beliefs that helps form my thinking about this study.

Autoethnography is also a form of research where the *writer* actually writes himself or herself into the story, sometimes as the *key* figure (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2008), allowing the researcher to reflect on the culture and experiences they have been associated with while collecting data. Using a researcher’s personal experiences to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008), the researcher is able to share with others something that transpired during an event or time. A critical piece of this study is to produce a historical narrative of the journey in which I participated. The collection of tour data/input from over 2,000 Kansans, the context of the culture of public education at the time of this study, and my engagement and reflections from this work make up a narrative that, if untold, would be lost. Therefore, a key piece of historical change in Kansas public education would miss its rich, detailed, narrative context.

Autoethnographies are often told by people who occupy several categories of identity through which certain types of storytelling become valuable. It is unlikely for a busy educational administrator to write a 200-page narrative, let alone expect anyone to read it. Yet if anyone were to understand the decision-making process in conceptualizing the historic tours, in making sense of the tour data, and in changing policy for accreditation, there is no one comprehensive document that contains the information,

unless someone actually writes about it. Events do not occur in a vacuum, and as a writer, I cannot claim value-neutrality, so I write these historical events as I understand them through my multiple personal and professional identity categories. By combining my lived experiences in the field of education, along with my participation in these tour events, I can bring a perspective to this narrative unlike someone who has neither a long historical background in education nor holds a position that allows them to experience and help facilitate these events. Admittedly, I was uncomfortable early on in the writing, using myself as a key speaking and reflective figure. However, writing while using this research method has allowed me to think more deeply and critically about the experience, to reflect on the role I played in modifying an accreditation system in Kansas, and to document the unfolding of social history.

Using this research method, I bring readers into the scene (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Telling the story and showing graphics of these events will enable readers to see the story by experiencing the conversation through *telling* and *showing*. (Ellis et al., 2011). It is also suggested by Ellis (1999) that in autoethnography, the writer tells a story that allows readers to enter and feel as though they are a part of the story that provides emotional, intimate details and thus allows the reader to be a part of human experience.

As mentioned earlier, there are two types of data used in this autoethnography. First, the data and input that was collected from community conversation tours, which I refer to as *tour data*. Second, there are the *narrative data*, a result of my writing during my doctoral program, including field notes and reflections from my journal entries. During the months following the community conversation tours, intense thought and reflection went into the understanding of the voices I heard from Kansans, and how that

would be transferred and understood by the general public, juxtaposed with substantive, theoretical, empirical, and methodological literature.

In addition, I address the ethical issues of using other people's perspectives and narratives within autoethnography. While this *is* an autoethnography, implying a central focus on my understanding, analysis, and interpretation of tour and narrative data, it implicates other stakeholders, especially those who shared their thoughts during the tour data collection phase of the project, those who helped analyze the data, and those who helped make key decisions to change the accreditation policy. Thus, even though primarily the researcher is understood to be the research instrument (Punch, 1994), I must remain conscious of what information I will and will not share. As an educational professional by trade, and having close ties to those who were part of this study, I clarify my subjectivities and relationship to the tour data and how the narrative data were developed in relation to the tour data. Yet despite my due diligence, this would not prevent a reader (or readers) from questioning the findings, interpretations, or even the integrity of the study. Thus, when using autoethnography as a research approach, the autoethnographer has a responsibility to shape the data with his or her moral and ethical considerations and accept that critical reception to the work could be mixed (Goodwin, Pope, Mort, & Smith, 2003).

Although autoethnography is a type of narrative inquiry (Bhattacharya, 2007), I have used writing as a method of inquiry as described by Richardson and St. Pierre (2008) – specifically, that writing is not about stating whether one's work is fiction or non-fiction, but that one would have knowledge of an event, or would know something about a subject, and through writing would create deep, critical analytic narrative

accounts that would be worth telling. Being able to write about my experiences while giving full disclosure about my subjectivity allows me, the researcher, to tell the story behind the data, charts, and graphs that brought forward a system-wide change in public education in Kansas. As Richardson and St. Pierre (2008) observe, the researcher has the knowledge of the experience, “rather than the survey, the questionnaire, or the census tape” (p. 967) to tell the story.

Narrative writing as a method of inquiry spans across many forms of human sciences including psychology and sociology as well as professional research in law, medicine, education, and social work (Kohler-Riessman, 2000). Autoethnography, as a form of narrative writing, can be used in multiple contexts for research. While Boylorn and Orbe (2016) worked with critical autoethnography to prioritize marginalized voices and experiences playing well into the understanding of multicultural education, Chang (2013) emphasizes how autoethnography has the potential to better translate stories across multiple disciplines, allowing access by various groups of people. As Chang further notes, “[t]his unique voice of the autoethnographer is what readers respond to” (p. 112). The unique voice of the researcher becomes the storyteller, and only through his or her voice can the reader have a better understanding of a culture, regardless of the reader’s prior experience or background.

As a methodology, autoethnography has been used in the field of education in various ways since it is a method that engages the researcher in cultural analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2008). Schools and classrooms are rich with a diversity of student and adult populations, along with a variety of community cultures and demographics. As a result, autoethnography is accepted as a research method that can be used to examine

the relationships between Self and Other from the perspective of the Self (Starr, 2010). The examination of the Self/Other can translate to the relationships between teacher/student, privileged/disadvantaged, individual/collective, as well as navigating self-awareness through assumptions concerning such issues as race, ethnicity, gender, and age (Spry, 2001). Autoethnography has been used to understand (and perhaps enhance) teaching and learning experiences in schools where the teacher's cultural background is different from that of the students (Reta, 2010) or while looking at whiteness and critical race theory as a lens for evaluating experiences with students of color (Pennington, 2007). Within these examples the autoethnographer identifies the relationship between Self and Other, and discusses the implications of that relationship. The goal is to bring attention to the differences of experiences between Self and Other so that critical conversations about these differences can take place.

For me, it was a challenge and an opportunity to use autoethnography as a methodological approach to analyze my Self/Other relationships. The challenge emanated from the realization that I have been a part of this educational culture for the majority of my life, and the opportunity to juxtapose myself against this culture provided me an opportunity to think critically about this study. In Kansas, there is a diversity of population from school district to school district. Therefore, when engaging with stakeholders to design a way to accredit school districts, I had to continuously remind myself of the heterogeneity of the population, and how that related to who we were as educational leaders and how we understood what might be the salient issues in each district. Questions that arose for me as I interrogated my perspective were, "Is that a perspective that I see from my own Self, or is that a perspective shared by Others,

meaning other Kansans?” When reflecting on the work from Starr (2010) and looking at my Self-and-Other relationship, I have to take into consideration that I am myself, and I am also part of the Other, having grown up in this educational environment when I did not inhabit the role of an educational leader. Therefore, I am constantly in movement between my multiple subject positions while writing this dissertation, which contains its own tensions. As Tedlock (1991) asserts:

During participant observation ethnographers attempt to be both emotionally engaged participants and coolly dispassionate observers of the lives of others. In the observation of participation, ethnographers both experience and observe their own and others’ coparticipation within the ethnographic encounter. The shift from one methodology to the other entails a representational transformation in which, instead of a choice between writing an ethnographic memoir centering on the Self or a standard monograph centering on the other, both Self and Other are presented together within a single narrative ethnography, focused on the character and process of the ethnographic dialogue. (p. 69)

During the community conversation tours and throughout the work on this study, I was living the experience of designing a new accreditation model. This is my job, and the people of Kansas are embedded in my culture. I am also in a unique position as Deputy Commissioner, unlike any other position in Kansas education. So when I am writing and reflecting on my writing, I see an opportunity through autoethnography to develop a single narrative that considers both Self and Other. While writing, I am closely related to the Other while focusing on the self-awareness of the critical narrative lens of performative writing.

My position as Deputy Commissioner of Education affords me to speak to, and visit with, a variety of audiences, ranging from educators and business leaders to legislators, policy makers, and parents. During my presentations, I try to customize my language to their knowledge level of the topic. Sometimes as educators, we speak our own jargon, not the language of those who are not part of our culture. With this being said, the message I try to convey does not change, but the use of autoethnography can better translate this story across a broader audience, because of the critically selected narratives that can resonate with various stakeholders.

In her presentation at a conference held recently in Kansas, Dr. Ruby Payne (March 2017) maintained that the smallest percentage of our population – the wealthiest – are making policy decisions that affect the middle-class population, who are educating the lowest class population, who have children in schools. This is an example of what I believe Chang (2013) was referring to as a diverse audience to whom autoethnography is appealing and transferrable. Educational reform decisions impact the largest underprivileged groups and without some backstory of how an educational reform came to be, so much of the decision-making narrative remains invisible. This is why historical narrative writing through autoethnography becomes critical for documentation purposes.

Richardson and St. Pierre (2008) have observed that “quantitative research can give its message in the tables, but qualitative work needs to deliver its message in the text of the reading” (p. 960). According to Nash (2004), “scholarly personal narratives” liberate researchers from abstract, impersonal writings and “touch readers’ lives by informing their experiences” (p. 28). This study does not look at a diversity of populations or marginalized voices, but my goal is to engage a variety of readers that



expands across a multitude of audiences. Also, the impetus for conducting this work has always been to create more equity in teaching and learning environments in public education. The field appears foreign to those not working in it, so an autoethnography can help reach across diverse populations, including that of policy makers. Additionally, educational leaders in my position often do not have the time or the desire to write long narratives about their experiences even if they are acting as change agents and educational policy reformers. Therefore, such professional demands put me in a unique position where I play the role of an educational reformer and a doctoral student. As an educational reformer, I can influence policy changes, and as a doctoral student, I can document the narratives that culminate in policy changes by authoring an autoethnographic study.

Throughout the tour, we collected input from attendees that, through a coding process, I could divide into main *categories* that would tell us what was important to Kansans. However, what was of equal importance were the messages that were not necessarily spoken. Writing about these experiences and telling the stories that were unspoken allow me to describe in detail what took place. My position is always that of an unreliable narrator intersecting with my subjectivities and worldviews. Here, the word “unreliable” does not mean “inaccurate.” Instead it means I am situated in my worldviews, beliefs, assumptions, and sociocultural locations. This position is not innocent and is always vulnerable for further interrogation. However, even with such invested positioning, it is critical that educational history is documented and told in ways that are intellectually honest and situated.

Autoethnography allows a person in my position to describe events in writing with the hope that it will engage those in education as well as those who are not. Similar to Chang's (2013) reference to reaching across diverse audiences, Ellis (2011) suggests that we can reach audiences made up of *insiders* and *outsiders* of a culture. I cannot imagine a school principal, a parent, or a policy maker wanting to read a technical manual about our journey to define a new vision for education in Kansas, nor would they come away having a similar understanding of the events.

With this being said, I envision myself as a storyteller. I offer verbal presentations to a wide variety of audiences, from classroom teachers and local board members to business executives and state legislators. Most recently, I have written stories about our journey – narratives about the voice of Kansans, what they shared with us, and why these conversations are important. During presentations, diverse populations are engaged in conversations with an understanding of our vision. Putting these stories in print is important for all of us to have a historical narrative of our work.

In this study, I could simply provide the reader with pages of data gleaned from the input of tour attendees, but this would not tell the stories behind the conversations we heard on tour. Again, as Richardson and St. Pierre (2008) have asserted, the researcher has the knowledge of experience and this allows me to write about the main themes that came from this lived experience. Yet the tour data itself may not explain *how* Kansans said:

- Our accountability system is “out of balance.”
- All of this “makes common sense.”
- There is “a sense of belief,” that we can do this, and

- This is going to require a “great deal of leadership.”

I have been told on many occasions that among the strengths of Kansas educators are the positive relationships they cultivate across the many associations that support a variety of educational professions. I am a member of this culture, passed down from one generation to the next. Those of us currently in education did not create this culture of positive relationships, but we feel that it is our responsibility to maintain and strengthen it. Growing up in the family of an educational leader allowed me to see a former generation of school district leaders build strong working relationships across the state. My dad, Bill, and my uncle, Dan, were strong leaders in Kansas working with the state department of education and the legislature to help build a strong foundation. By having the same last name, which is only common to education, I am frequently asked, “Are you Bill or Dan’s son?” For me, there is pride because they automatically assume I have to be the son of one or the other, and I am asked to identify which.

In Kansas we respond less to our title and more to our first name. Although my last name is familiar due to my tenure at the state level and my experience in the field, along with immediate family members who have worked in education, I am better known and referred to as Brad. There are people forget what my title is, introducing me as the secretary to the commissioner, assistant commissioner, and even the second-in-command (as in the military). The other deputy commissioner is known as Dale, and our commissioner is known as Randy.

We are comfortable working on a first-name basis because we know the building of comfortable relationships enables us to work together for the benefit of schoolchildren. This relationship allows us to feel an easy, relaxed closeness with our colleagues.

Autoethnographers often view their relationships with the participants as colleagues and friends, and do not regard them as *subjects* to be mined for data (C. Ellis et al., 2011).

Therefore, a narrative telling of our journey is appropriate for this report because we have stories that describe the passion, challenges, and hope for our state's public education system. It is a story about our journey and the voice of Kansans, echoing the rich culture and diversity of our state.

A few years from now there will be those that question (or forget) the reasons decisions were made regarding the direction taken by Kansas public education. For those who participated in community conversations, this report will be a historical reminder of their input. For those new to the profession in Kansas, I hope they will see themselves in this journey, and the story will engage them comfortably enough to position themselves in the conversation even though they were not there at the time.

Having a historical narrative of our journey will be valuable to the planning process for leaders in this state. As we will base our new vision on input from these tours, we are *hedging bets* that our decisions are accurate, yet we know there must be adjustments to our plan as we actually live through the experience. As Martin (2014), explains, "If the logic is recorded and then compared to real events, managers will be able to see quickly when and how the strategy is not producing the desired outcome and will be able to make necessary adjustments" (p. 8). Martin justifies the need for a written narrative of the account because the human mind will naturally rewrite history to deceive us into believing we got it right the first time, when we were actually *betting* on the ideas and concepts. In reality, we will need to make adjustments to the original plan. By having

a written document and referring to what works and does not work, it will also make us better planners (Martin, 2014).

Autoethnography is important to this study as a way to share the experiences of the past few years while developing a new vision and a new accreditation model for Kansas education. The fieldwork involved a rich process of dialogue with a wide variety of stakeholder groups across a vast area. Telling the stories of this experience and documenting various types of evidence and data that were shared and collected to inform our decisions, this narrative will be an important piece of history for future generations. They will need a record of our journey in order to craft a bold new vision and design a new accreditation model for Kansas schools.

One will see throughout this story the use of multiple figures and tables, providing visual representations to better understand the story. Mayer (2002) believes the use of pictures in writing provides a deep cognitive level of learning for the reader. He refers to this cognitive theory as multimedia learning and states, “People learn more deeply from words and pictures than from words alone” (p. 31). By using visuals, my hope is that they enable Kansans to feel a sense of belonging and participation, even if they are just now learning of the events. Additionally, as a visual learner, various visual representations of information allow me to elaborate and connect with my embodied experiences.

For the state of Kansas, it may have been easier to adopt an accountability model that had already been developed by others. Instead, we developed our own, based on the uniqueness of our state and from the voices of various Kansas stakeholders. Those who participated in the journey to educational reform will discover their voices in this narrative account. These voices, including my own, can be maintained as a historical

narrative for future generations. There are only two people who can tell this story as insiders to policy change – our commissioner, Randy, and myself.

Without the use of autoethnography, I am certain this study would result in a dry compilation of facts, figures, and words. This methodology introduced me to languages in research and writing that were unfamiliar to me, such as describing and analyzing, the use of personal experience, understanding culture, being critically reflexive, engaging in narrative storytelling, showing instead of telling, consideration of diverse audiences and perspectives, and truths that emerge from situated lived experiences. While I am familiar with these concepts at a broad, generic level, mixing them into my research and writing allowed me to uncover new meanings and understandings and to ask myself tough questions throughout my story. Which audiences am I trying to reach? What does my written voice sound like? Will people understand the culture I live in? Will they feel as if they were a part of this journey? Can they visualize and picture this? Will they walk through a journey with me as they read the narratives presented in this document? Without the use of autoethnography, perhaps the questions above would have gone unasked.

Telling this story from my perspective - actually writing myself into this story - made it personal. I own this. I cannot hide behind this work or shift the responsibility of the policy change to other people. I own the successes of this policy change as well as the challenges that require further interrogation and reflection. I have read studies before and later remembered a little about the research, but not the person that conducted that research. Here, the reader will know me personally and know my passion for this work.

This is a piece of me and hopefully it will contain resonant elements for the reader over the years.

### **Chapter Summary**

Through my work as Deputy Commissioner of Education, I have had experiences where I listened to other individuals present information to various groups, and I found myself disagreeing with some of their findings. I asked myself why they came to those conclusions with their data. As I started my doctoral studies in preparation for writing this study, I learned why it is important for the researchers to discuss their positionality – because it tells the reader what informs the author’s writing. Knowing this information provides the reader, or listener, with a better understanding of findings and how they are presented. The reader may or may not agree with the findings in this study, but they will have an understanding of how my prior experiences inform my writing.

I have never felt comfortable admitting my biases regarding certain topics. But when it comes to education, I do feel a passion and bias for this work. I admit to shortcomings in our public education system, but there is also much to celebrate. Throughout the study, I will question not only my thinking and views, but at times I will even question the educational system itself as I look at how it can be changed to provide better outcomes for our students and communities. As a result of my involvement in the educational reform process, I have spoken to a variety of groups and individuals about my journey. It is through my storytelling that I share the best of my research and narrative of the events. Autoethnography is a method that conveys my experiences and allows me to share the events that unfolded through my perspective within the culture of Kansas’s public education system.

## Chapter Two: A Tour of Kansas

### Design of the Tours

When a reporter discovered we were going to conducting a 20-city tour across the state to acquire input from Kansans about “what they want from their educational system,” his first questions was, “Wouldn’t it be easier to just do an electronic survey? It would save you a lot of time and travel.”

My response was, “So you must be new to Kansas?” I cannot think of a time over the past 10 years when we were preparing to make a big decision that we did not solicit input from our stakeholder groups, and this was *not* going to be the first time.

Kansas has a 10-member state board of education (See Figure 1), and traditionally the board holds a strategic planning retreat every two years in February following the election of new members. With the hiring of a new Commissioner of Education, Dr. Randy Watson, in November 2014, the decision was made to postpone the February retreat so Randy and I, along with state board members, could conduct a tour of Kansas communities, seeking input regarding what Kansans want and value in their public education system. It was important to the new commissioner and the state board to base their long-term strategic plan and vision on input from Kansans, so the spring of 2015 would be the best opportunity to conduct tours across the state.



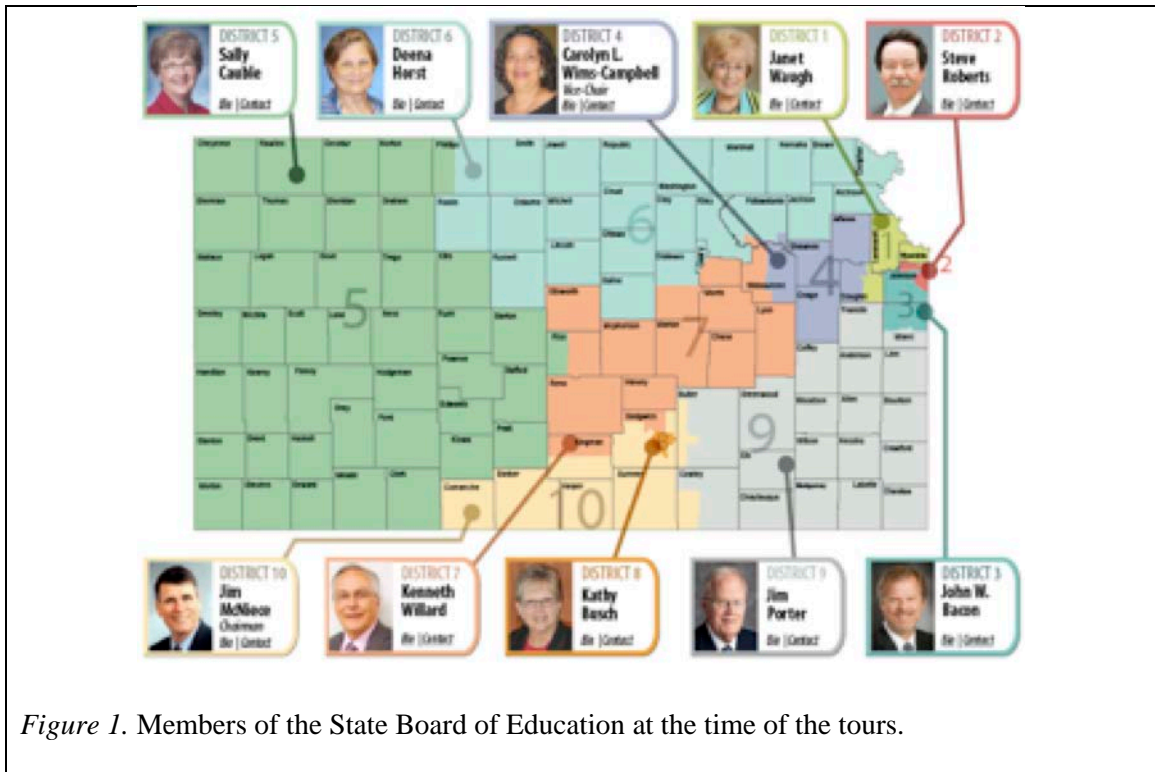


Figure 1. Members of the State Board of Education at the time of the tours.

Kansas is a rural agriculture state that includes 286 school districts spread out over 84,000 square miles, stretching 400 miles east to west and 210 miles north to south (Kansas State Department of Education, 2017). We have 10 elected board members that represent regions of the state, based on the population of residents, so it was important that we received input from each region, as well as provide enough meeting locations to prevent participants from driving too great a distance. Known for its early frontier trails of the Oregon, Chisholm, California, and Santa Fe Trails, Kansas was about to have a new trail established, and I was calling it the *Education Input Trail* – not very catchy, but with all the traveling to do, this is how I felt.

In order to encourage attendance and participation from a larger population than just the school employees, Randy and I decided to call these events *Kansas Children, Kansas' Future: Community Conversations* (See Figure 2). It was important for us to

hear the voice of all stakeholders who wanted to be engaged in conversation about redefining success for students in education, so we wanted to focus on the ideas of community and conversation. *Community* referred to parents, business, students, and the general public, while *conversation* signified dialogue between us, as presenters, and the participants, as audience. We wanted them to know they would be involved in a discussion, rather than merely hearing a presentation where communication is a one-way process.



To make Kansans aware of these conversations, we leveraged social media, contacted state and local media outlets, and encouraged school administrators to communicate with their patrons. We did not want a random sample of Kansans, as in an episode of *Family Feud* where a moderator announces, “We asked 100 people at a mall this question and the top 7 answers were...” Instead, we wanted participants with a vested interest in their public schools, both positive and negative, to provide their voices.

The procedure of these conversations was to place participants in focus groups of 5-6 participants per group with each member from a background different from the rest. These rules were simple but intentional.

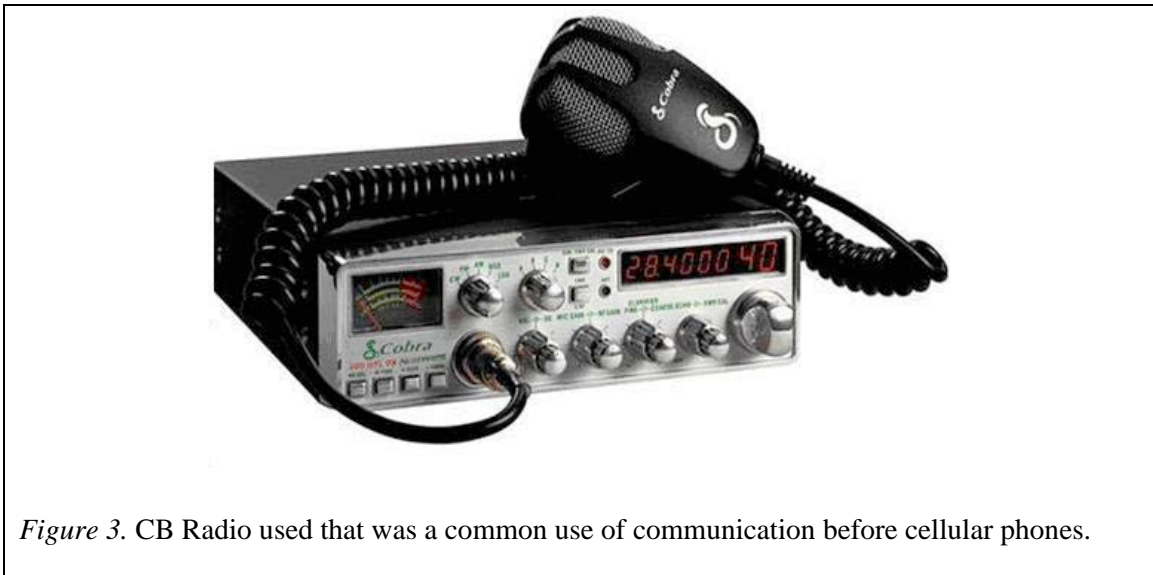
*You cannot sit at a table with someone who shares the same title as you or who rode to this event with you.* If we had 18 students at the event, for example, they all had to sit at a different table. This way, everyone could hear the thoughts of someone different from them as they formed answers and offered recommendations.

The tour consisted of 20 locations across the state and included approximately 1,700 attendees broken into 287 focus groups, representing educators, parents, students, higher education officials, business leaders, community members, and public officials, including legislators. Some of these events were held during the day, while others took place in the evenings. We also formulated the questions, referenced later in this chapter, available through an electronic survey on our agency web page, where we received over 100 responses. These were kept separate from the *in-person* gatherings because online respondents missed the face-to-face dialogue and we wanted to see if there was a difference in their input.

Having been involved with events similar to this, we knew that if we kept people for more than two and a half hours we would probably lose their attention, so we wanted the session to be rich, meaningful, and engaging. Moreover, we wanted to ensure we received the quality and amount of data that would allow us to come to informed decisions about the future of public education in Kansas.

The community conversation events were broken into two sections, with the first section setting the stage, followed by a second section where we would ask a series of

questions. During the initial section, we told the audience how things have changed over the past several decades, yet we seem to move through those changes and adjust policy without a great deal of thought. We have moved from pay phones, CB radios, pocket cameras, and home phones to smart phones that now do everything – all the while ignoring changes that these devices have exerted on our daily lives (See *Figure 3*). Judging the ages of the participants, I observed maybe a third of the audience were of my generation, having grown up in a period of history where communication devices have changed rapidly. Yet we do not seem to mind making the adjustments because communicating is important to us. These changes, based on my own experience, moved us away from being attached to a wall by a cord, where our phones were mounted, to walking around our house with a wireless device, free to communicate from any location we desire. Technology has also eliminated the need to have a CB radio in our vehicle because our cellular phones go with us anywhere at all times.



*Figure 3.* CB Radio used that was a common use of communication before cellular phones.

As a child growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, I can remember driving to a video store, like Blockbuster, walking through aisles, searching for movies to rent for 48 hours,

and then returning them fully rewound. Today, my children sit with us in front of the TV and rent movies through Netflix simply by entering a password and never leaving our seats. Having conversations about these changes, and how they affected our daily lives and routines, shows us how easy we are to adjust to technological innovations. Yet there is much in education that has not changed for several decades. We are still beholden to the Carnegie unit, counting seat-time minutes instead of demonstrated competencies, and graduation requirements that are required of all students regardless of their career interest or pathway.

There were interesting conversations among groups about the concept of business and industry making changes quickly based on market needs, and the speed with which consumers adjust. This led to some good discussion on the *stagnation* of education. “Why are we so slow to change?” On several occasions, participants predicted students would adjust more quickly to change than the adults (rather than the other way around), and the idea of change would therefore become more of an adult issue than a student issue. Is there a resistance to change because we are a nonprofit organization and our funding is a steady stream from government sources and thus we need not worry about going out-of-business? Or is it because we don’t have enough competition to force us to make those needed changes? These were all good thoughts and questions that will challenge us to make major adjustments to our current educational system.

In Kansas, as well as the nation, there was a public perception of *education* during a time that was not as positive as we would have liked it to have been (Shanahan, 2013). To those of us in public education, this was criticism we did not deserve. As states’ educational leaders came together to develop a more rigorous set of academic standards

in Math and English Language Arts (ELA) that would better prepare students for college and careers – known as the Common Core State Standards (Rothman, 2011) – there was a national grass roots effort to rally around the message that these standards were not in our students’ best interests. A billboard along a highway in Wisconsin, for example, expresses a negative message from an organization against the Common Core Standards initiative (see *Figure 4*).



*Figure 4.* Billboard against the Common Core

While educators were excited in the beginning to get behind the Common Core Standards, those in education who attended the tours were almost hesitant to mention the words “common core,” fearing someone would attack them. People I had personal dealings with (but who were not educators) were mostly against the Common Core initiative. They also protested the authority of the federal government and saw this as a way to connect education to something national which met their objections. As educators, we were ill at ease in experiencing such acrimony from “outsiders” who were questioning the purpose of our business.

In addition, there was growing dissatisfaction, both externally and internally, by the education community with state-standardized tests (Kelleghan, Madaus, & Airasian, 2012; Linn, 2001). This frustration could be sensed by the language written on a marquee outside a public middle school (See *Figure 5*). Questions surfaced about the purpose, value, and result of lost instructional time caused by the tests. These concerns were not only shared by the educators who administered those tests, but by the parents of those taking the tests. During the NCLB era, from 2002-2014, the state assessment results were the major focus for determining the quality of a school system (U. S. Department of Education, 2017).



Included in the first section of the community conversation tour was the idea that Kansas educators are a dedicated, hard-working group of professionals. We work every day to make a positive influence on children, and we focus on the goal given to us

through an accountability system, whether that goal is set at the local, state, or national level. Over the past decade that goal has been achievement on a standardized test score, known as making “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP), mandated by the federal NCLB law (U. S. Department of Education, 2017). Yet while Kansas schools did well in making academic achievement gains under NCLB (Kansas State Department of Education, 2017), we could see no measurable gains in the percentage of students who went on to achieve success in postsecondary institutions.

Randy and I challenged the thinking of the participants by posing the question that “although we have been chopping down a lot of trees, have we been chopping them down in the right forest?” (See *Figure 6*) In other words, although we are working hard, are we taking the right measurement (performance on standardized tests)? Or should we focus our attention on other initiatives we believe will gain us the success we strive for? While I walked around, listening to discussions at various tables, participants were commonly agreeing that, yes, educators are working hard. However, the focus of success has been on test performance and not any other measure.





*Figure 6.* Picture used to visualize the hard work of cutting down a tree.

Aside from the internal focus on standardized testing, there was also an external shift, although subtle to the public, in the changes that are occurring in our adult labor market and workforce, both nationally and in Kansas. According to a study published by the Georgetown Policy Institute (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013a), businesses and industries are looking for a more skilled workforce than the decade before and the decade before that. According to this study, nationally, by the year 2020, 64% of jobs available will require some form of postsecondary education – either a 4-year bachelor’s degree or a two-year associate’s degree or industry-recognized certification. Furthermore, Kansas ranks 6<sup>th</sup> nationally with the percentage of jobs requiring postsecondary completion at 71%.

While this is a positive reflection on the quality of jobs available, Kansas currently has only 52% of its adult workforce holding some form of postsecondary

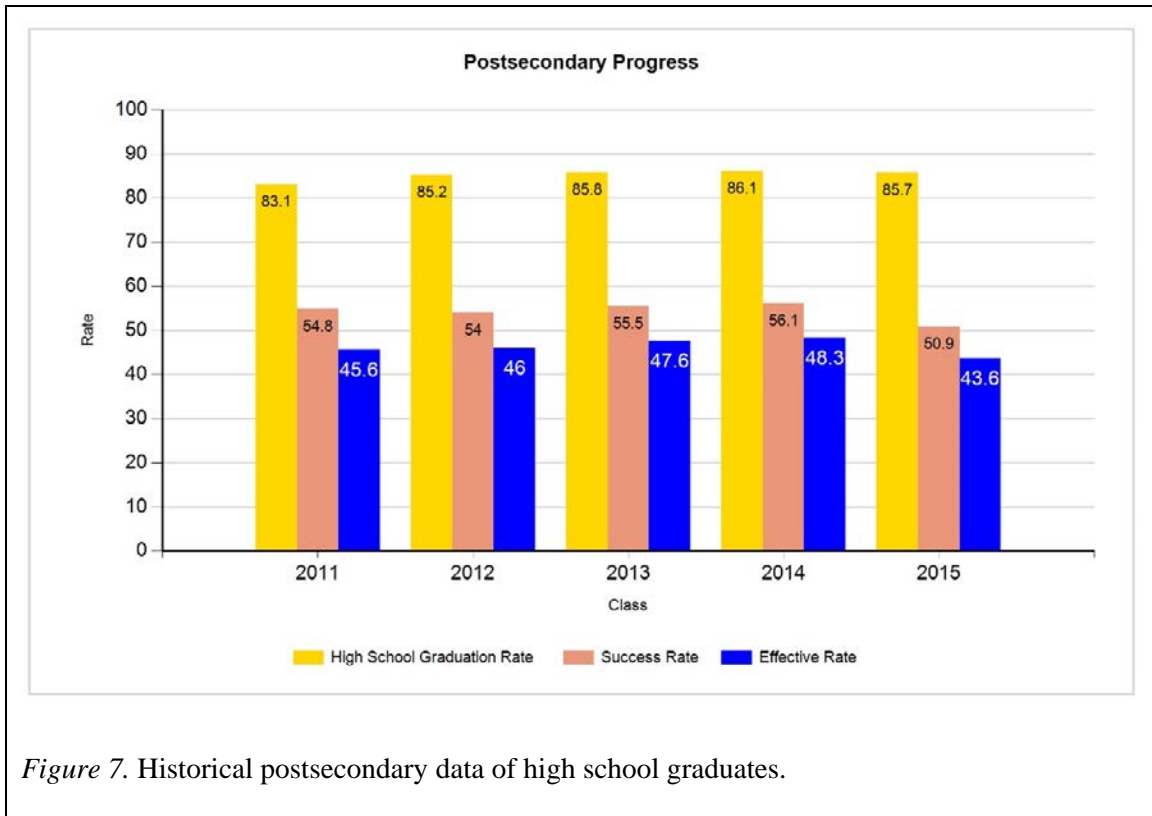
completion, a gap of some concern for the state's businesses and industries as they cannot find enough skilled workers to fill their well-paying jobs (Kansas Board of Regents, January 2016). The inverse of this report is that only 29% of the jobs available can be acquired with a high school diploma alone. Unfortunately, for high school dropouts, there is only an 8% likelihood that they will ever enter the middle class (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013b). During the tours, I asked participants about the possibility for a dropout to acquire a job that would bring in a middle-class income. With today's workforce requirements, it is possible, but just not probable. This new information requires us to think differently about the value of a *high school diploma* in today's job market. While it may have led to a well-paying job a few decades ago, those jobs are now requiring education beyond high school.

For most participants, I could tell from their surprised reactions at the workforce data that this was new information; they were accustomed to looking only at data that was directly related to *school* results: assessment scores, graduation and attendance rates, etc. I could almost hear them thinking, "Why are we talking about workforce data? Aren't you guys from the Department of Education?" This was all part of *setting the stage* for future conversations. In the meantime, I could also see some significant interest in the topic.

We also asked participants if their schools still celebrated 8<sup>th</sup> grade promotion, and a majority said they did. When asked why, the answer usually focused on the idea of tradition. But in reality, graduation from eighth grade signaled the end of formal education for most Americans during the early 1900s, as at that stage of their lives students then went on to work on farms and in factories. So now, the tradition has little

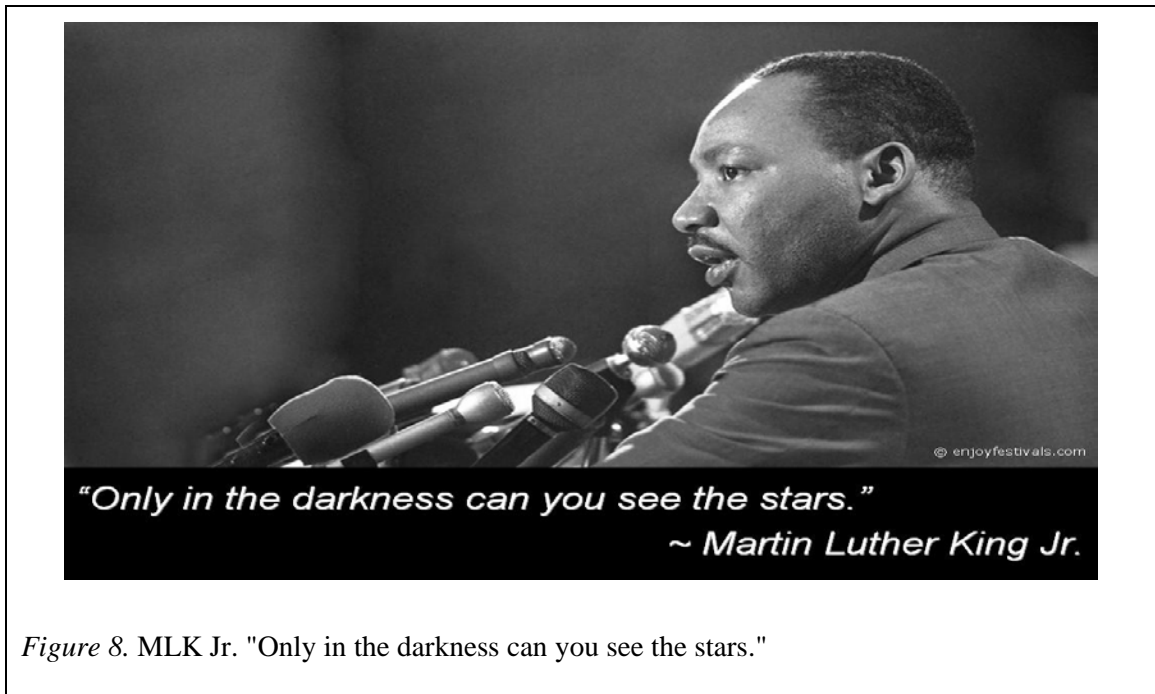
meaning. For contemporary 8<sup>th</sup> graders, they expect to start the next year as freshmen in high school. Today, and in the future, we need to view high school graduation the same as 8<sup>th</sup> grade promotion – as a time for celebration. But for the vast majority of our graduates there is the expectation that they will continue their education at a postsecondary institution.

It was at this time that I shared our current Kansas postsecondary data with the participants. *Figure 7* depicts the data for the years 2011-2015. It shows that 55% of Kansas graduates who continued their education in a postsecondary institution and successfully completed their first year and returned for a second year. Again, this is *only* our Kansas students who graduate. During the same time, only 85% of our 9<sup>th</sup> graders graduate on time from high school, so if we look at the percentage of our 9<sup>th</sup> graders who complete their first year of postsecondary education and enroll their second year, we drop from 55 to 44%. These findings take us back to an earlier question: “Have we been measuring and focusing on the right thing?”



For four participants, this information was also new. It was akin to being issued a challenge to rethink the value of a high school diploma. In the past, it was a ticket to the middle class; now, it seems like just another celebration on the way to a postsecondary institution. As I walked from table to table listening to conversations between our participants, I witnessed discussions about how to repair the bridge gaps between the K-12 system and institutes of higher education (including technical and community colleges). Participants also believed that if we were accustomed to a single measure and a simple AYP target, then making the move to unfamiliar measures of success would take time in order for people to understand and adjust. I was pleased with my interpretation of their acceptance to new data, even though the data itself was not what I would call a positive sign of how well we are preparing our students for success after high school.

Towards the end of the first section of the tour, I could sense that participants were a little rattled about seeing new data and somewhat worried about a change in focus. This country had just experienced a Great Recession and was in the process of recovery. Kansas, however, was still facing a financial crisis and school districts were still responding to declining budgets that led to the end of programs and the reduction of staff. Times still appeared to be *dark*. Since Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was approaching, we shared one of that great leader's quotes to help instill a sense of faith and hope that although we may believe that times are dark and challenging, there is always a light if we look for it (See *Figure 8*). It was important to us that, as we moved into the second section of community conversations, participants were encouraged to help us do something significant for education in Kansas.



*Figure 8.* MLK Jr. "Only in the darkness can you see the stars."

Now that the stage had been set, it was time to move into the second section of the tour, one that was dedicated to gathering feedback from participants on a set of specific

questions. At the outset, we decided to include input on the future of our public education system, but we had to be intentional in how we framed the questions so we did not gather data that was too open or too broad to analyze. If we were going to dedicate this much time and effort, we needed quality data that could be analyzed and transformed into specific recommendations.

Instead of simply asking participants, “What do you want with your school systems?” we decided to focus the first question on our most important objective, and that is our students. By asking questions about the desired skills, attributes, and abilities of our students, we could then think about the design of our new system in order to deliver the desired outcomes for our students.

There were three questions asked at every community conversation, with recorded responses from each group, followed by an open dialogue at the end of each. Those questions were:

1. What are the skills, attributes, and abilities of a successful 24-year-old Kansan?
2. What is K-12’s role in developing this successful Kansan, and how would we measure success?
3. What is higher education’s role in developing this successful Kansan, and how would we measure success?

The participants were given time to dialogue in their groups and write their responses on cards we provided. These “focus groups” were given about 30 minutes to consider each question, dialogue with each other, and then reach conclusions. After

recording their responses on the cards, individual groups reported out to all other participants their thinking, ideas, and recommendations.

Randy and I continued walking around and listening in on their discussions. I was proud to see how engaged each participant was, especially considering we arranged the groups so they could not sit with someone with whom they rode to the event or with whom they shared the same job title. I was especially proud of how engaged the students were, and how the adults accepted their voices in the conversations. Although Randy and I were on our feet for three full hours, dialoguing and moving about the room, I would glance at my watch and realize how fast the time was flying along. Toward the end, I felt pressed to give the participants more time for interchange; they could have gone on and on with their conversations. The room was a constant buzz of voices, and when I would concentrate on a particular table, I could hear the high voice of a female teacher, the young voice of a high school student, the sage voice of a college professor, or the excited voice of a parent. As I returned my attention to the room as a whole, I smiled at the pride I felt for collective engagement shown by participants in the room.

By the end of the event, I wanted to honor the time they gave us and at the same time stick as close as we could to the agenda. So Randy and I announced, “You have three minutes left to finalize your thoughts.” As they reached our deadline, I felt like some of them would stay and talk forever, yet I knew that others had commitments and obligations. As Randy and I packed up and left, it was not uncommon for some participants to follow us out to the car and continue the conversation, not wanting to go unnoticed or unheard. Once we finally eased our way into the car and shut the doors, we engaged in our own buzz of reflection before pulling out of the parking lot.

The following is an excerpt from that conversation:

RANDY: Did you hear that principal say how different this would be?

BRAD: Yes, most of our educators know nothing other than NCLB. And did you notice how that one table was so loud and excited?

RANDY: What did you think about the comment from that college student about having no plan for the future?

BRAD: That was so sad. While she was talking, I was imagining what if that was my daughter. I felt like going over and giving her a big hug.

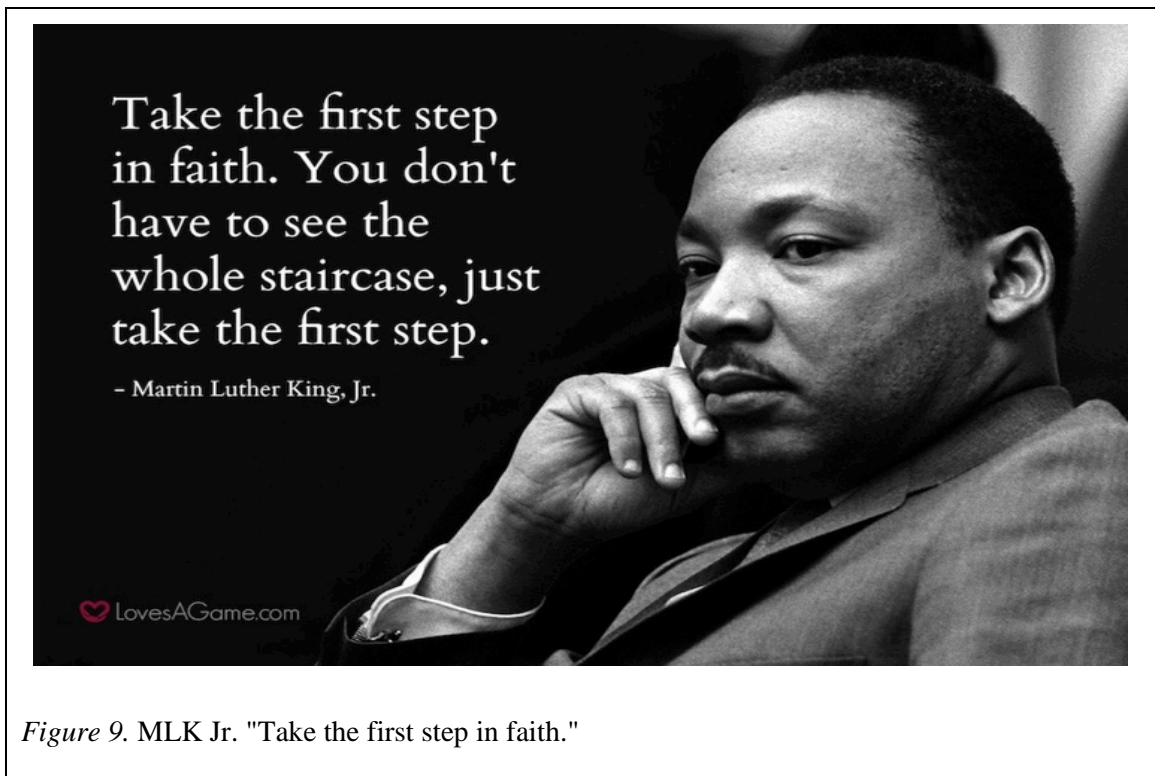
The buzz in the car would continue for miles as we drove to Topeka for another event. This was our pattern of engagement in these town hall meetings and the drive afterwards for the next several months at 27 different locations in Kansas, with over 2,000 participants attending. The setting and milieu would be different in each location. Sometimes, it was a community center. Or another meeting might be held in a school cafeteria or a local library. However, the structure and stipulations of each event were the same, as Randy and I led them through both phases.

At the end of each meeting, we assured participants that not only had we appreciated their participation and willingness to be open and share their thoughts, but that we were committed to the process of analyzing their input and reporting back to Kansans the data collected for verification. In fact, we announced a follow-up tour to be held a few months later, the purpose of when to do just that – to report back data and ensure our accuracy in capturing their voices.

Changing the focus and direction for education at a state level was not something any of us has experience with, but collectively, we believed that it could be



accomplished. We may not design the perfect system at the start, but it was, and is, our belief that it will be a better, more effective system for our students, staff, and communities than the current one. This replacement design must be flexible enough to make adjustments, but firm enough to make gains in areas of value and importance. Our final message at the end of each event was, again, from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s quotation on "taking that first step" (See *Figure 9*).



*Figure 9.* MLK Jr. "Take the first step in faith."

### **Your Voice is Heard**

I was excited to begin our journey across the state and spend some windshield time with our new commissioner of education. We joked about finding an old church bus, slapping a new coat of paint on it, and driving it across the state. We cancelled that idea since neither one of us was skilled at engine repair or troubleshooting mechanical issues.

In the planning phase of this tour, we considered the question of how best to involve audiences. We had dismissed the idea of setting up a booth in a shopping mall and asking random passers-by a set of questions. Instead, we wanted to target individuals who had an interest in education and were willing to donate a portion of their day to engage in conversation. And in reflecting on what we had just accomplished during the previous tour, we were satisfied.

Our first destination was Arkansas City (population 12,400) located in the south-central portion of the state, a few miles north of the Oklahoma border. We were pleased with the attendance, which included educators, students, board members, faculty from higher education, as well as some parents.

Our first question, having to do with the skills, characteristics, and attributes of a successful young 24-year-old Kansan, elicited significant responses. But when we asked about our role in K-12 education, there was one memorable comment from a college student. This is what she said:

I am a second semester sophomore in college with over \$35,000 in debt. I have yet to declare a major, and the one field that I am considering, I don't even know if there is a job market or demand for it. I don't want to graduate with a ton of debt and not have a job, or have to accept a job in an area that I'm not passionate about because no one has helped me plan for my future. I sure wish that someone would have helped me explore my options well before I even went to college.

Driving home later that day I wondered how many other college students felt the same way – lost in debt, lost in direction. Hours later, I could still see the frustration on

her face and hear the anxiety in her voice. She should be excited about the future lying ahead of her. But instead, she is scared about her prospects of ever finding a career and providing for herself and, eventually, a family.

From Arkansas City, we journeyed our way up the middle of the state, hosting meetings in Wichita, Hutchinson, and Salina before concluding our work for the week. We had several parents attending our sessions during this trip, and many of their responses were unexpectedly heartfelt, almost like pleas for help:

“What I want from my school is to partner with me in helping my children become successful young adults.”

“I want my child to find a career that they enjoy, that they can support a family on, and they learn to give back to their community.”

“My child is worth much more than a test score. Just because her strength is not in math, she is talented in the arts, has strong leadership skills, and has a colorful personality. Why are those skills not valued? I believe that those are the skills that will help her be successful in life.”

It was as if the parents were telling us that we are measuring and valuing the wrong things. Throughout my career I heard the phrase “teaching the whole child,” and these parents were saying that this is exactly what they want. They want to *partner* with us, and maybe we should not be afraid to build stronger relationships between the school and the home. As a parent myself, I even have the same thoughts; yet I am caught up in the *thought traps* as all other educators, shooting for GPAs and test scores.

The next week of the tour was a long one. It led us to all four corners of the state. Starting with a full tank of gas, we headed northwest to Hays, followed by a stop in

Oakley. From there we drove south for an evening event in Garden City. The next day, we picked up the tour in the southwest community of Sublette, then drove 333 miles to southeast Kansas for an evening event in Parsons. On the third day, we started in Girard, moved on south to Coffeyville, and then headed back to Topeka. In all, it was a 1,012-mile journey.

As focus groups discussed the questions at their tables (See *Figure 10*), Randy and I would begin our customary walk around the room, listening in on conversations. I thought how fortunate I was to be involved in such an endeavor as this. Watching a superintendent listen closely to the voice of a student, or a university dean speaking with the parent of an English Language Learner family – these were occurrences that I may never witness again in this type of setting.



*Figure 10.* Picture of participants at a Community Conversation event.

As with the first week of tours, we had better-than-expected attendance at both events during the day, as well as those held in the evenings. Attendees shared meaningful ideas for moving education forward in this state. At one of the events, a group member asserted:

Many of the skills that we want our young adults to possess are learned both outside and in school, including elective courses and extra-curricular activities. For example, young boys and girls learn many life skills by being involved in groups like Boy Scouts and 4-H, but the education system does not recognize this, nor do we give them any credit for this. We need to think differently about how these kids can earn skills in and out of the K-12 system and be recognized for it.

Teaching and recognizing non-academic skills was a message we heard consistently, where participants used a variety of examples. The parents of one student revealed to Randy that their daughter had traveled to Nashville, Tennessee, to “cut a record” for an album, and she had to miss a few days of school in order to make the trip. Upon returning to school, her vocal music teacher required her to do “extra” work for the time that she missed. The child and the parents thought that producing a record album should have some recognition and value in the area of vocal music, but the teacher disagreed because her performance was not a part of the school program. According to the parents, the teacher reasoned that “If I do this for one student, I will have to do it for others.”

Really? How many students are cutting records in Nashville? Moreover, why *not* do this for others?

The final leg of our tour covered the northeast corner of the state beginning in Emporia, followed by afternoon and evening events in Topeka. We then traveled to Kansas City and Olathe before ending in Hiawatha. By the time the tour was completed, we had logged over 2,500 miles over a 3-week period and facilitated discussion among 2,000 participants. Randy and I got to know each other well and had some stories to share. Such discussions between us could only have happened during an event such as this.

Randy's hometown is Coffeyville, located in southeast Kansas. It was one of our stops on the tour. While there, I met his best friend from high school and learned a few things about Randy. Since we used a picture of an old CB Radio in our slides, I tried to find out Randy's old *handle* (a nickname that one answers to on the CB Radio). Finally, Randy's friend shared the secret that Randy was withholding – his handle had been *Captain Fantastic*, the title of an old Elton John album he used to spin when he was a DJ (disc jockey) in younger days. So I now hold a piece of Randy's past – not that I would ever use it against him. Still, such trivia is interesting to know.

Throughout the three-week tour, we assigned a staff member the task of inputting all participant responses into an Excel spreadsheet. It was to be used once all responses had been gathered. Comments on three questions, coming from 287 focus groups, took several days to enter. In the meantime, Randy and I, exhausted from the hours of travel and presentations, were looking forward to the process of *learning what Kansans said*.

While on tour, we had kept track of our participants' occupations, having them indicate *educator, parent, student, higher education, business*, etc. Toward the end of our tour, we noticed that we had less than 1% participation from business and industry. This

was a significant discovery. We believe their voices are important to the direction of education in the state. So it was decided that we would conduct a similar tour across various regions of Kansas, targeting local Chambers of Commerce.

### **Back on the Road to Hear More**

This was the first time I had an opportunity to carry on a collective dialogue with so many business leaders across the state about education (See *Figure 11*). They were receptive to having us meet with them, and I felt as though they were welcoming us as new residents to their community. In the Wichita area, for example, known as the air capital of the world, businessmen discussed cultural challenges in the aviation industry. From the 1950s to the 1980s, individuals could have well-paying jobs in the aircraft industry with only a high school diploma or less (Carnevale et al., 2013a). However, when the industry re-tooled their factories, entry-level positions required an industry-recognized certification. These workers now found themselves “unemployable” by an industry they built their livelihoods around. As a result, they steered their own children and relatives from pursuing a career in the building and maintaining of aircraft. This, in turn, created a culture of “mistrust” in an area where aviation can provide a great lifetime career pathway.



*Figure 11.* Picture of a group of Business and Industry leaders during the tour.

These businesses discussed their struggles in finding qualified applicants for open positions, and they suggested ways to improve the situation. Textron Aviation, Spirit Aerosystems, and Wichita Technical College suggested a partnership with the Wichita school district to create an Aviation Academy for high school students to explore the aviation industry as a career pathway.

While these business participants came from a variety of cultural backgrounds, they were surprisingly consistent in their responses to our questions. It was interesting for



us to hear from the perspective of those who are on the “hiring” end of the equation as we spent the majority of our time with those involved in the education of our youth.

In using the same questions as on our previous journeys throughout the state, we learned that representatives from business and industry varied in size, as measured by the number of employees in the organization (see Appendix C). There were two businesses that were self-employed, having no employees working for them, and 19 business participants who staffed more than 500 employees. Out of all attendees, 50.4% were representatives from firms that ranged in size from 1-50 employees, which would be described as the typical small business in Kansas. A major policy goal for Kansas, as with other states, involves the creating of new businesses for economic development.

Just as in the first tour, participants sat at tables and discussed each question, reported out to the larger group, and recorded their responses on cards to be analyzed later. Having the voice of business and industry in our Kansas communities is important to this study in order to compare the similarities between responses from our first community conversation tour and that of the people who are hiring our young adults.

In response to our question about the skills, attributes, and abilities of a successful young adult in Kansas, an influential company president, who was well in his years of experience, looked at me and said;

Company President: Son?

Brad: Yes, Dad. (That got a smile from him.)

Company President: When you are interviewing a candidate for a job, how many questions do you ask where you are trying to find out if they are academically prepared for the job? You probably have that taken

care of by the end of the second question. During the rest of your interview you are trying to find out if they have the skills to perform their task at a high level. You are asking questions like, “Tell me a time when you had difficulties working with another colleague on an assigned task, and how did you work your way through the problem with that colleague?” Furthermore, “What do you do when you don’t have the answer to an important question that is preventing you from completing a task?” The majority of your interview is trying to find out if the applicant has all of those non-academic skills that will make them a great employee.

This gentleman nailed it on the head, yet he explained it in a way that was common sense. I immediately reflected on the interview questions that we use in our agency, and they are designed exactly as he had described. Approximately 10% of the questions are academically focused and the remaining questions are looking for those non-academic skills.

Other comments that stood out during the business and industry tour included:

We want to be engaged with our local schools, but we want our involvement to be meaningful. It seems like the only time we are invited, we show up and have cookies and punch, and they tell us how good they are. I can eat cookies at home. - Business leader

It seems like most of our new hires have never worked an honest day in their lives. They take way too many breaks and want advancements too early. - Business leader

A lot of our young employees are not willing to take risks. They are too nervous about trying new methods and exploring innovative approaches to solutions. - Business leader

We have great paying jobs that require specific skills, and most of them do not include a college degree. We cannot find qualified applicants that hold the right certifications to fill our open positions, and we don't know where to go to find these candidates. - Business leader

From this tour, we forged some positive relationships with individuals who were serious about staying engaged in our new journey. Several of them have agreed to serve on future advisory councils and committees to help the state board of education move their vision forward. They were willing to help us “look under the hood” and find solutions to our current problems. They cared deeply about their communities, had concerns about the quality of applicants that they were receiving, and agreed that the best way to grow Kansas was to have an educated community and workforce. After visiting 27 locations across the state (See *Figure 12*), we felt that the voice of Kansans was heard. Not only were we happy with the participation, but we were also pleased with the variety of participants who attended (See *Figure 13*). Having a clear voice meant that we heard from people inside and outside of education, in our schools and in our communities, from institutions of higher education that receive our graduates, and from businesses and industries that eventually hire our students.

# KANSAS REPRESENTATION

● GENERAL COMMUNITY MEETINGS ● BUSINESS COMMUNITY MEETINGS



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Figure 12. Location of the communities that we visited on our tours.

## PARTICIPANT BREAKDOWN

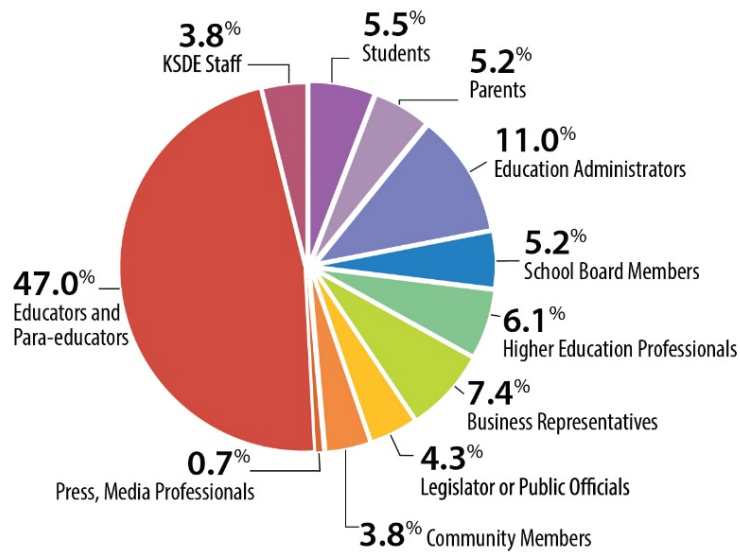


Figure 13. Chart showing the representation of participants during the tours.

This tour of Kansas was personally gratifying as, for the first time, I was able to meet with such a diverse group of Kansans that cared deeply about the educational future in our state. I am not sure that there will be another time when I will be able to hear the collective thoughts from a college student, business owner, college professor, school board member and teacher sharing ideas about the future of education in our state. The time spent on these tours were well worth the efforts Randy and I, and I hope for those that attended.

### **Chapter Summary**

In the second chapter of this dissertation, I discuss the tours that inform this autoethnographic historical narrative. Within this chapter I describe how the tours were designed, how the events were structured, and the research literature that was used for justification of the tours. I also describe the typical tour format where we engaged Kansans in the important conversations about framing a new educational system for this state. I include details of the types of comments and input and share some individual stories and quotes from those participants who helped frame the ultimate vision that was ultimately developed. It was our opinion that to dramatically change the focus and vision of education in Kansas to this degree, to be done successfully, requires the voice of Kansans. Additionally, due to the extensive conversations and decisions made, these could be classified as *scholarly practitioner decisions* that involve taking into consideration the perspectives of stakeholders.

This chapter described the tour events that informed this autoethnographic historical narrative. I have described the design of the tours, how the events were structured, and provided research literature that supports the use of tour data in the

framing of our new accreditation model. Much of the data informs not only this historical narrative, but the design of the new KESA accreditation model. Besides the data, I include research literature, personal observations, and discussions that were carried on between Randy and me on this journey. I will continue reflecting on these and other items and events throughout the succeeding chapters.

As Deputy Commissioner of Education, currently playing the role of researcher in this study, I offer the possibility that the variety of facts and information reported in this chapter may dramatically change the focus and vision of education in Kansas.

### **Chapter Three: Your Silence is Deafening**

As noted before, Randy and I spent a lot of time reflecting on the rich conversations as we travelled between these tour events, and there were times when we would ask ourselves, “What are they really trying to tell us?” I thought about a statement from the well-known writer, educator, and business consultant Peter Drucker (2006), who suggested the most important thing about communication is to hear what is not being said. This concept is supported by Tracey (2010) when she says that “researchers can access tacit knowledge not only by taking note of who is talking and what they are talking about, but also who is not talking and what is not said” (p. 843). Were there hidden messages? What was in between the lines? What was their posture? What was their body language saying? What was their attitude toward us when asking these questions? There were times I enjoyed not only getting to know Randy as my new boss, but also to think deeply about the discussions we were having with so many Kansans. Were we hearing the things that were not being said?

I also remember telling Randy that although I was excited to have this valuable input from Kansans, I was a little nervous as well. Most of us have had the experience of driving down a road, and out of nowhere a dog runs into the street and chases your car. Why do they do that? Do they really think that they are going to catch us? Moreover, if they did, what would they do with us? This is how I felt having all of this data from the tours. I wanted it. I now have it. So what do I do with it?

I have also heard the saying, “Your actions are speaking so loudly that I cannot hear what you are saying.” I do not remember who said this, or who the author was, but I have used this quote many times when I speak with people regarding the messages their

body language is sending. Are their actions aligned with what they are saying? During the tours, I also believe there were messages from attendees who were not clearly spoken but we were hearing nonetheless. When the topic of federal accountability came up, attendees would appear tense and cross their arms; and when the subject of local control was mentioned, they would smile and almost sit up straight, beaming with confidence.

With all of this taken into consideration, we were now in possession of some valuable data and input from a large, diverse population of Kansans. This was the first time in our careers that we had participated in an event providing us with this much meaningful information. I felt like I was holding the winning ticket to the lottery, but could not tell anyone yet. There was too much work ahead, and I was nervous about processing it correctly.

Even though I hold multiple degrees and have years of experience in education and can *talk shop* about education with just about anyone, I do not have much experience in analyzing the amount of data we have collected. However, I am fortunate to have, on our staff at KSDE, a researcher named Tony Moss. He has the experience but not the tools to code and analyze this vast amount of input. I am also fortunate to have been contacted by the Dean of the College of Education at Kansas State University, Dr. Debbie Mercer, who expressed interest in the university's becoming involved in our study. So I reached out for support from someone on the KSU faculty who had experience in working with qualitative data for input, guidance, and to help ensure a degree of validity in my study.

Dr. Kakali Bhattacharya, a professor at KSU, has a vast amount of knowledge and experience in working with qualitative data and educational research. Tony and I met



with her several times early in our analysis phase to set up the framework by which we would code, chunk, categorize, look for patterns, and *make sense* of the tour data. She guided us through important questions that we should be asking ourselves as we looked at the data and cautioned us to let the data speak for itself and not speak the way we wanted it to. I believe that the aforementioned comment from Drucker (2006) complements the recommendation from Dr. Bhattacharya: 1) let the data speak for itself, and 2) listen to what is not being said.

The type of responses we were working with came from participant groups that recorded their thoughts and recommendations on cards that we provided. Not every participant's penmanship was as neat and easy to read as that of the individual provided in the next artifact (See *Figure 14*), but it was clear that their group gave some significant thought to the questions.

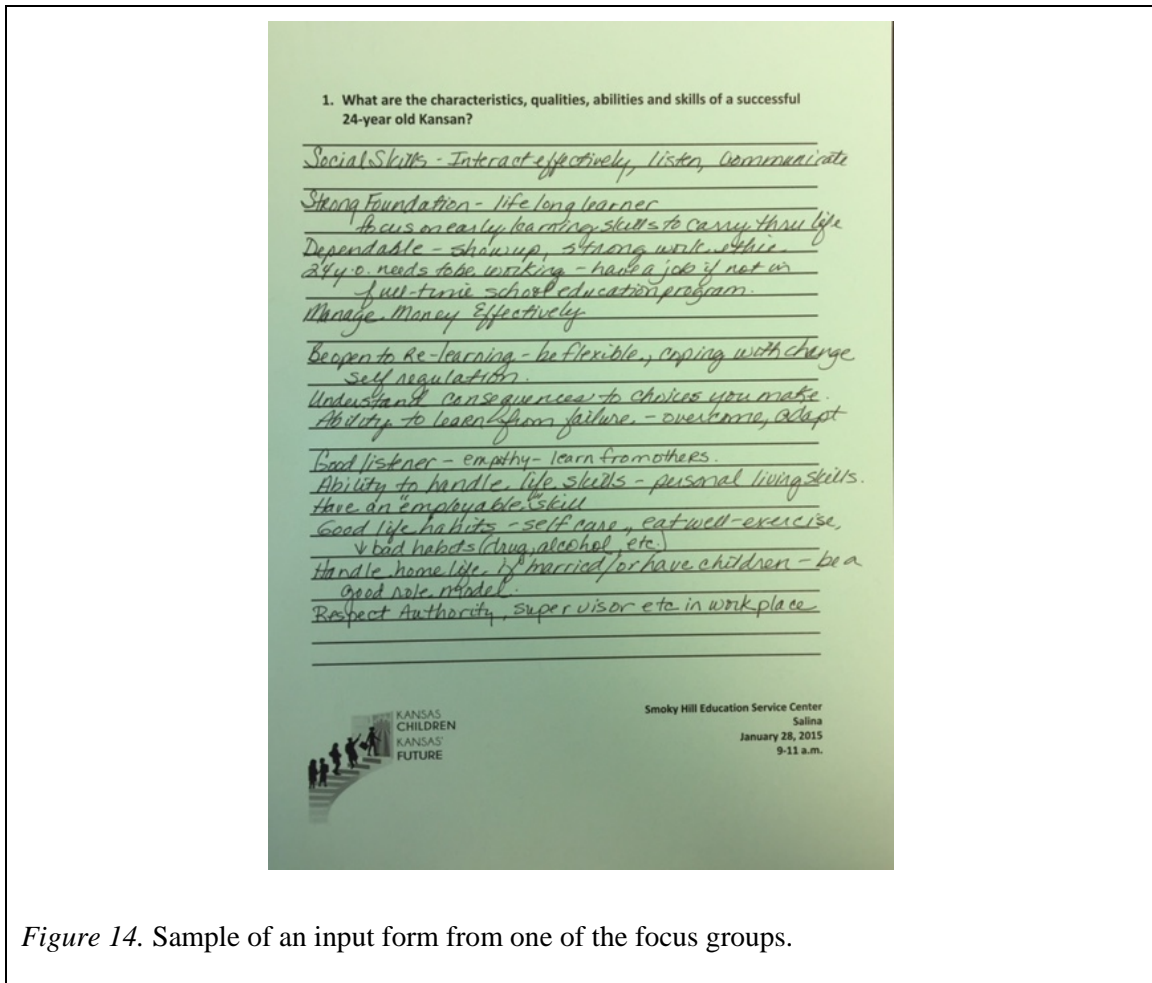


Figure 14. Sample of an input form from one of the focus groups.

After each tour event, we recorded all participant responses onto an Excel document so that they could be managed more easily (See Appendix D). These responses were then entered into the coding software program NVIVO, where we were able to sort and group the data by the frequency of key words and phrases (See Figure 15). For example, we looked at how many times participants mentioned the terms “problem solving skills,” or “teamwork” when asked about important skills needed for success. While we aggregated the responses to determine the voice of Kansas, we also looked at the responses by regions to see if there were similarities or uniqueness in responses by

location. We were also able to compare community responses with those of business and industry by looking for similarities and discrepancies.

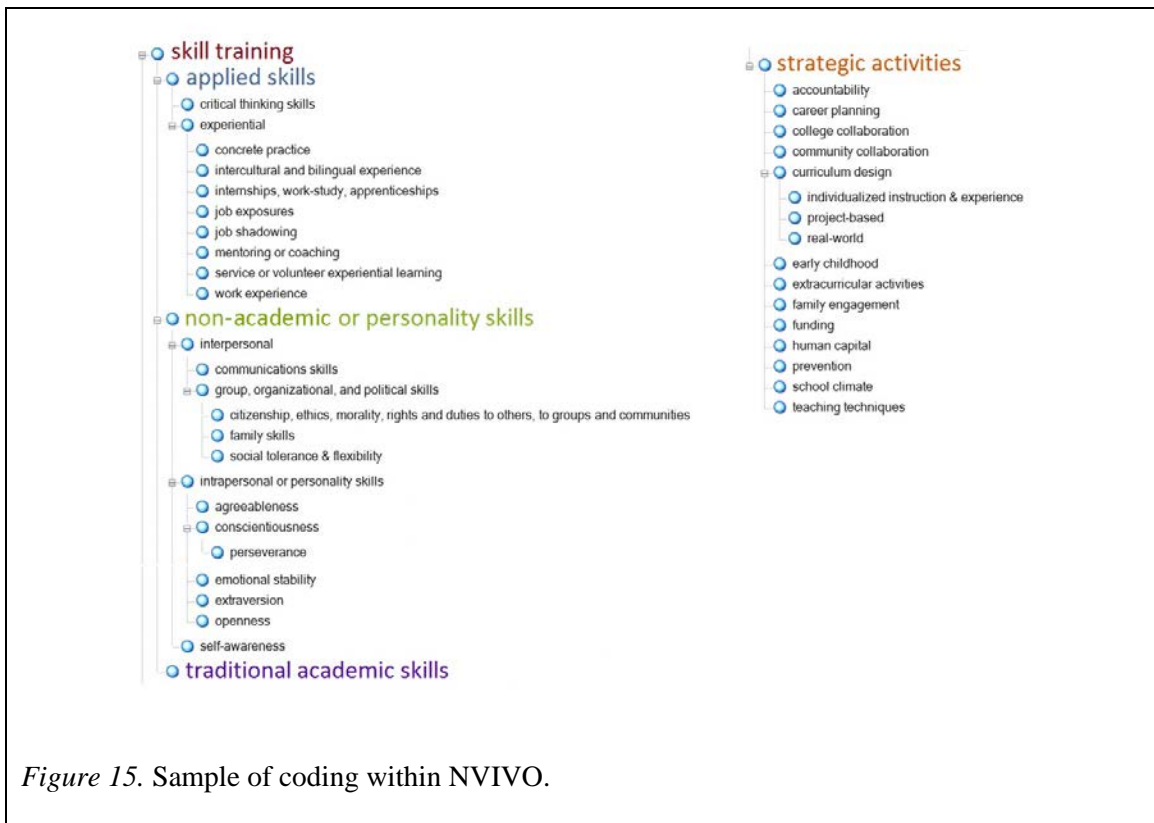


Figure 15. Sample of coding within NVIVO.

The vast majority of responses were similar in nature by region, except that southwest Kansas and the Kansas City area spoke for a greater need in bilingual and multi-cultural skills. These two areas of the state are comprised of higher percentages of populations who speak a second language other than English in their homes, and where the minority populations are sometimes greater in number than the majority.

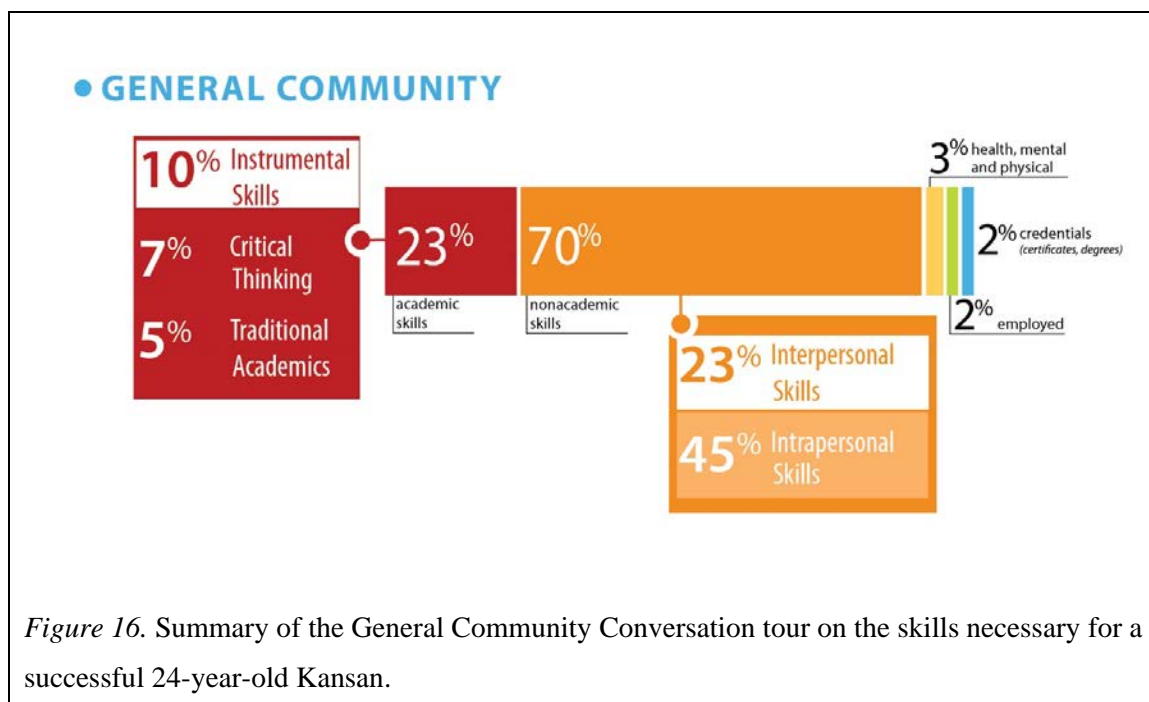
When looking at the volume of responses to the questions, it was evident that participants found it easier to provide feedback to the first question, but they struggled with the second and third. More specifically, they had little problem answering “what we want,” but when it came to answering “How do we do it?” participants found it difficult

to formulate replies. But after some deep conversations, they were able to provide some valuable responses to help guide us in framing our new accreditation model.

### **A State of Imbalance**

As Randy and I continued our travels across Kansas, we heard loud and clear that the state accountability system used for accrediting schools is out-of-balance with our priorities. Kansans can say they value all of the things that help a young individual become successful later in life, but if we only measure the success of a child or institution based on a standardized test score, then we will most likely ignore examining the rest of the important components of a successful educational system. Not only was the system's main focus on NCLB test scores, but it was also the driving factor behind Quality Performance Accreditation (QPA). These were features that met with disapproval from many Kansans. We needed a more balanced approach to accountability – one that places value on other measures of success.

Of the responses from the first 20 community conversations, Kansans stated that the skills and abilities of a successful young adult should fall into five major categories (See *Figure 16*). This graphic, which is a visual aggregation of the community responses, reveals that non-academic skills carry considerable value in what Kansans want for our youth, and that valuing only academic skills in an accountability system does not match our desires.



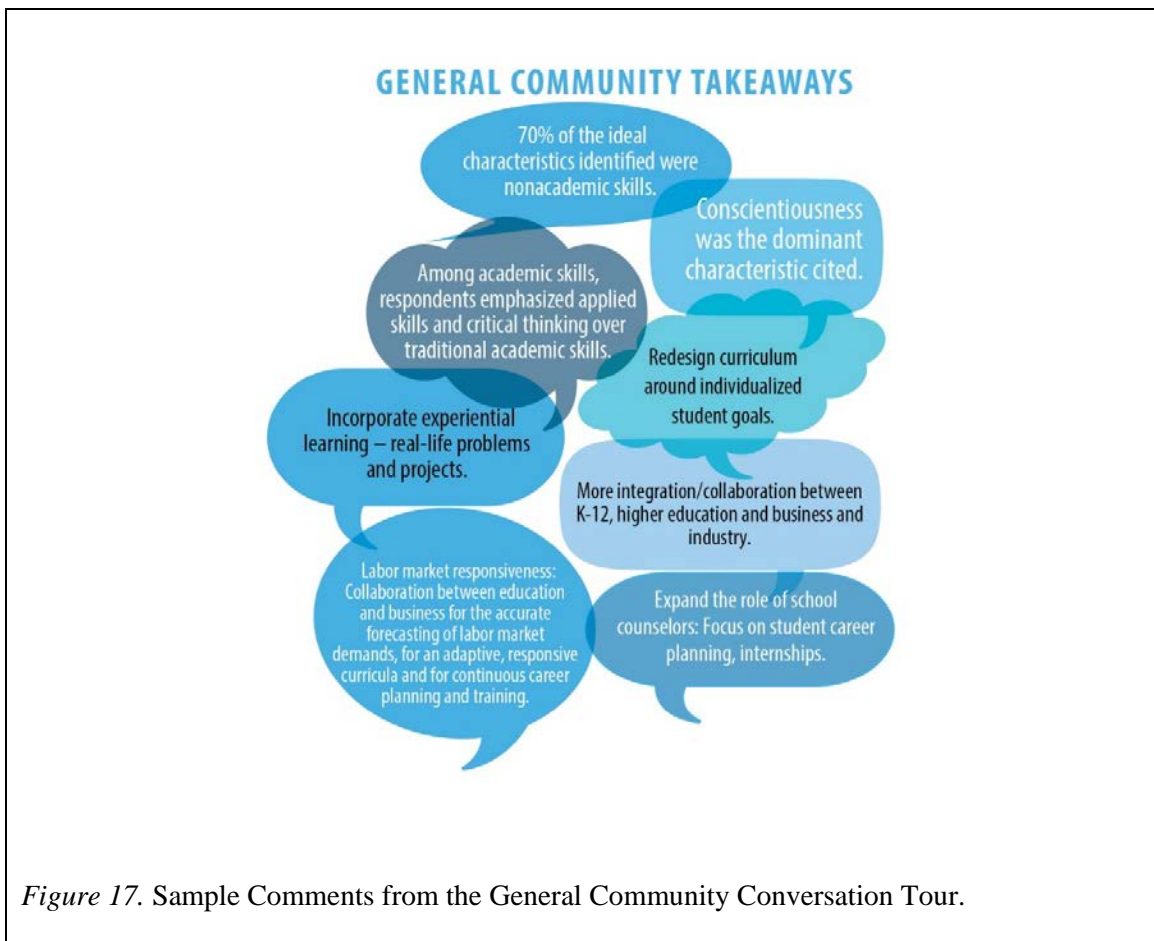
Of the skills mentioned by participants, 23% were in the category of academic skills, with the majority of those being instrumental skills that can be used in real-world, on-the-job situations. People felt we put too much emphasis on many traditional academic skills where students memorize information in order to pass a test, but they cannot transfer that knowledge to an actual job performance task.

We anticipated hearing the types of skills labeled as non-academic, but we were somewhat surprised it would make up 70% of responses. We categorized the non-academic skills into two categories of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Interpersonal skills include areas like communication, citizenship, social tolerance, as well as cultural and group skills. Items that were placed under intrapersonal skills included agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, emotional stability, and openness.

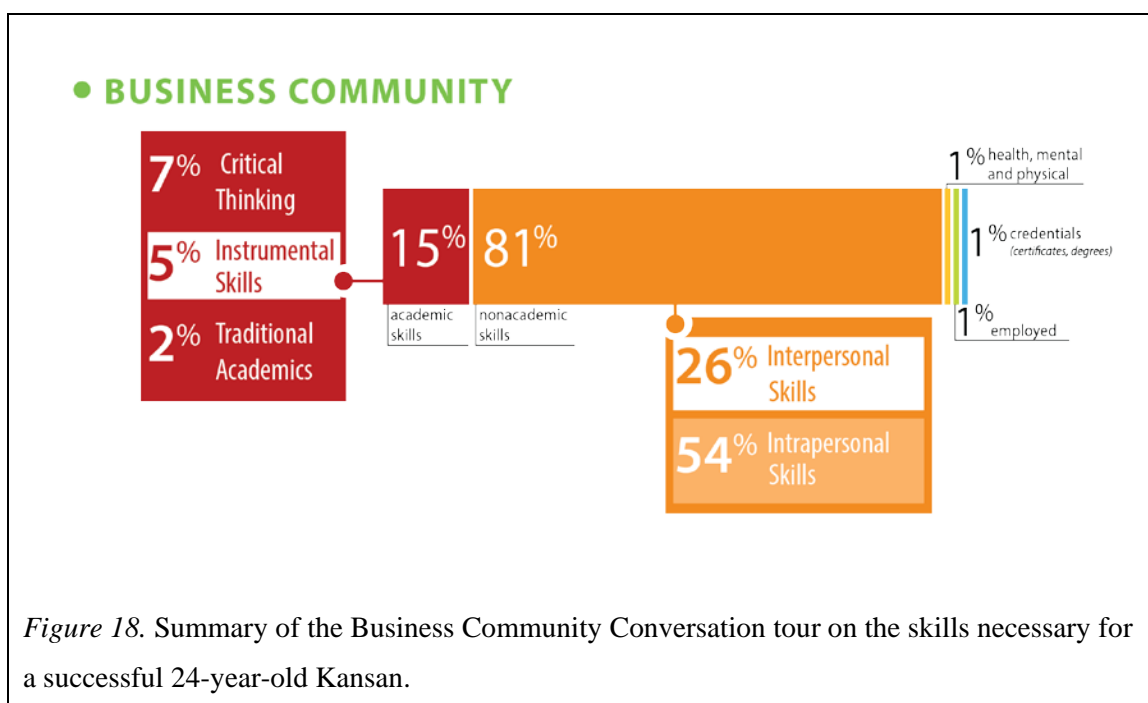
Additional findings showed concern for students' mental and physical health stability at 3%, the holding of industry-recognized certifications or credentials at 2%, and

finally there was the desire for wanting graduating students to become employable and “not living in our basements.” This sentiment came in at 2%. I am not sure the phrase “not living in the basement” can be classified as a skill, but it was clear participants wanted their children successfully employed, out on their own.

A variety of the comments (See *Figure 17*) paints a picture of the types of responses recorded by each table group. While often they would write a single word like “teamwork” many times, they would write a phrase that better described the skills they felt were important. Thus, it was suggested that we redesign the curriculum around the concept of individualized student goals.



Of responses from the seven business/industry tours, where 110 businesses across the state of Kansas were represented, the skills and abilities they desired were similar to those suggested by the community groups (See *Figure 18*). We assigned the same categories as we used with the set of community conversation responses, and we found it interesting that the business group listed academic skills to a smaller degree than the community group. Business participants spoke more often about the importance of non-academic skills for gaining and securing employment. In other words, many of their employee-candidates are academically prepared for the positions for which they apply, but they lack the types of non-academic skills that make them an effective employee.



One of the most surprising and interesting findings from both the community and business tours was the need for our young adults to become civically engaged. It was not surprising that community groups would mention this, but we did not expect it to be mentioned to this large a degree. The magnitude of their responses was almost identical

to those of the business and industry leaders. Businesses spoke clearly of their desire for employees who engaged with their communities.

A final key observation from these tours was the need for our students to not only be academically prepared, but to have applied academic skills that can be used in real-world situations. They emphasized the importance of students exploring career possibilities, followed by job-shadowing, internships, and work experience early on in their schooling, well before graduation. The business group also offered similar advice as well as valuable suggestions about areas where we could provide a greater focus and ways to better engage students in the learning process. (See *Figure 19*).



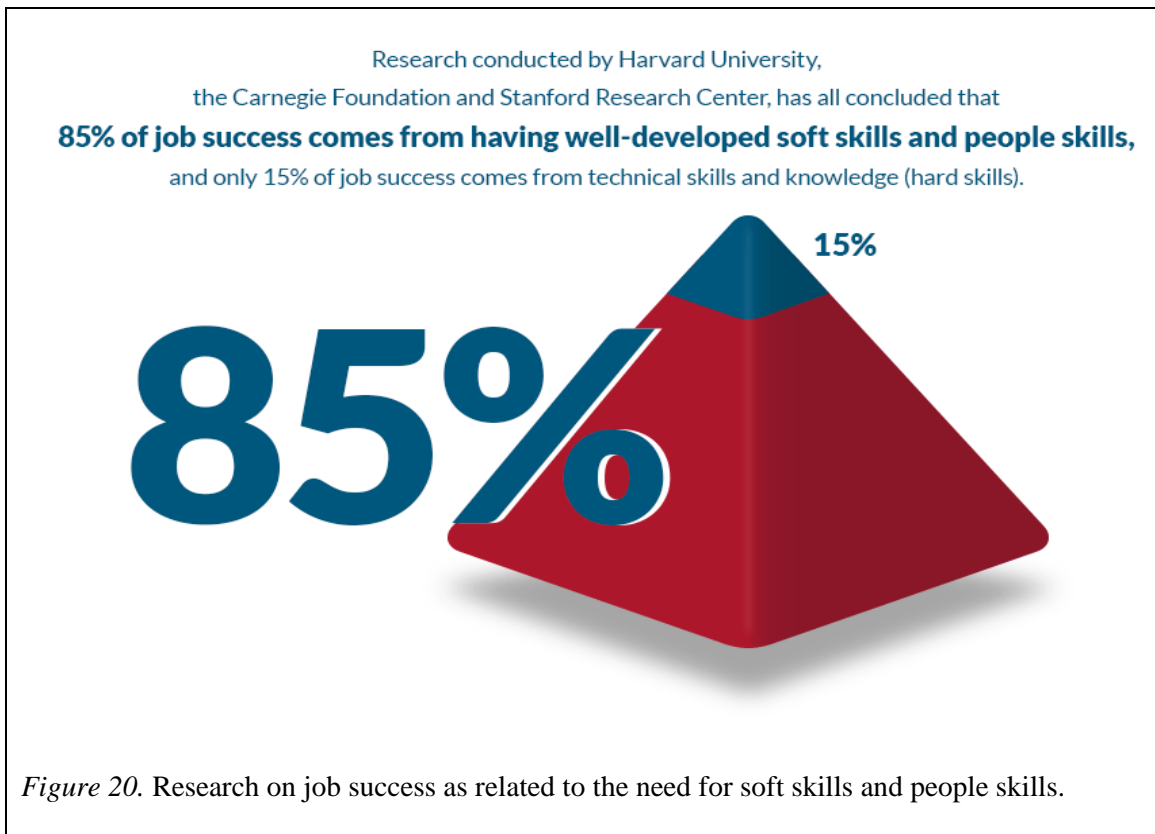


When examining the results from both the community and the business/industry tours, we found that by a ratio of 2:1, *non-academic skills* were listed at a greater frequency than *academic skills*, with *conscientiousness* accounting for 22% of all items as the largest set of skills, followed by *openness*, *agreeableness*, and *extraversion*. In a study that compared international research on college and career readiness, the authors found that there was a correlation across five categories: *openness to experience*, *conscientiousness*, *extraversion*, *agreeableness*, and *emotional stability* (Lipnevich & Roberts, 2012). In the area of academics, two-thirds of the skills fell into the category of critical thinking and applied academic skills, with the latter set gaining the most commonly cited set of academic skill importance.

I also believe that Kansans align themselves with respondents in other studies, such as when the Hart Research Association (2010) interviewed employers to find out the most important skills and abilities necessary for employee success. The highest responses included both academic and non-academic skills like communicating effectively, orally and in writing, using critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills, applying knowledge and skills to real-world settings, connecting choices and actions to ethical decisions, and analyzing and solving complex problems. Further support comes from a report (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006) suggesting that despite their foundational importance, skills like reading and mathematics are not of primary concern to today's employers.

Additionally, the requirement of these non-academic skills are supported by a study from Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation, and the Stanford Research Center (Crosbie, 2005) where it was found that 85% of job success was dependent on the employee having well-developed soft skills and people skills (See *Figure 20*). Of

interesting note, this study referred to subject-matter knowledge as “hard skills,” as opposed to “soft skills.”



While academic skills were cited as important for a successful young Kansan, it was clear from both groups that the current Kansas accountability system, QPA, has become outmoded in the way it measures success. Predominantly this was caused by a response to NCLB and proficiency targets included on state exams. Placing too much focus on a standardized test is not gaining us the desired outcomes we want as a state. Four participants advocated a more balanced focus to include other, non-academic skills on an accountability model to deliver the success that Kansans desire.

## Stating the Obvious

As we moved from town to town along this tour, it felt like we were meeting with the same people, where only the faces, venues, and cookies for snacks changed – even though many of the cookies looked the same. We heard virtually the same themes and comments from the participants, as if they were telling us to “wake up” and recognize the obvious. Still, we asked them what they thought, and they had little trouble telling us how they felt and what they desired.

When we asked them education’s role in developing the successful young Kansan, participants cited several key sets of skill training and strategic activities that need greater focus within our school systems and inclusion in the new accountability model. The participants seemed to know in advance that we would ask this question as they quickly began to list ways that education could better prepare our students for success after high school. Of the responses, 37% were categorized as skill training for students and 63% as strategic activities for schools (See *Figure 21*).

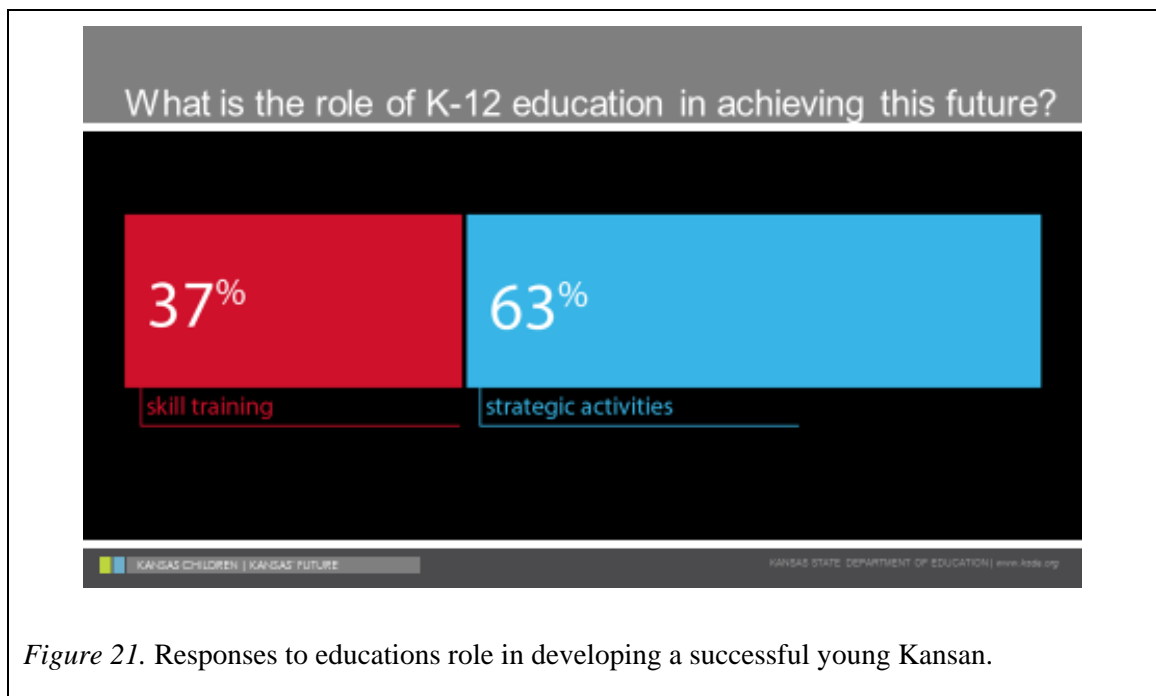


Figure 21. Responses to education's role in developing a successful young Kansan.

I was not surprised at their responses. As a father myself, seldom do I describe my children as good test takers. (They did not get their brilliance from me). Rather, I think about how hard they work, how polite they are, and how they willingly help others in need. I place greater attention on their social skills and who each is as a person rather than their academic prowess. I would admit that I check their grades frequently on my smart phone app to see if they are working hard on their studies. As a parent, I care about their grades, but my pride is intensified when I see them work hard and show kindness to others.

When listening to the participants, *skill-training* referred mainly to instrumental or applied skills that allow students to use their knowledge in the workplace. In our daily lives, we need such skills as financial and technological literacy, and they are best learned through internships, mentoring, job shadowing, service learning and volunteering. Other skills included in this section were those aimed at cultivating personality, social emotional skills, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century employability skills. Also, a need was highlighted for a rigorous core academic curriculum that teaches critical thinking skills using innovative problem-solving that incorporates solutions from divergent subjects, experiences, and other sources.

The majority of K-12 educational responsibilities were categorized as Strategic Activities that would help schools reach their goals for student success. Most frequently cited were the needs to create a stronger school climate that centered on high expectations for individual student success, to build a supportive culture based on the involvement of

parents and community, and to develop positive relationships with students through the PreK-12 system.

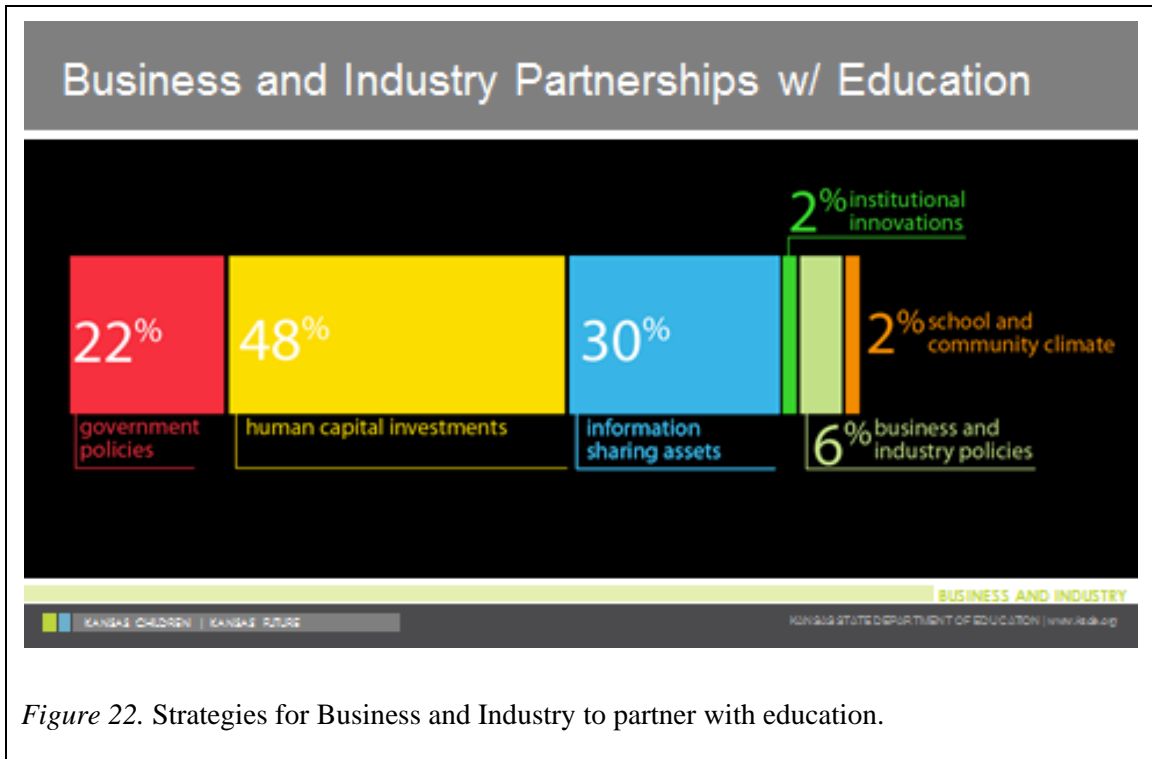
Other strategic activities mentioned were:

- **Career Planning:** calling for individual goals, and planning of classes, pathways, further education, transitions and careers, beginning as early as the middle grades.
- **Family Engagement:** These items complemented the career planning items, but the partnership between schools and families started early, from birth through Pre-K and throughout the child's educational career. Also, there was included the need for joint planning for the child's future, along with other family participation activities, including family education.
- **Community Collaboration:** These items emphasized mutual obligations between students and the community and other social networking. Many advocated for student community service, possibly as a graduation requirement. Community partnerships between the school and community were also emphasized.
- **Individualized Instruction and Experience:** This varied in intensity from career interest diagnostics to universally required individualized plans of study, even those that the student must personally defend upon graduation.
- **Real-World Instruction:** These advocate for concrete, real-life, relevant problems to solve, suggesting the integration of academics with instrumental/applied skills.

- **Project-Based Learning:** This emphasized the learning and demonstration of applied skills, sometimes in contrast to standardized curricula and assessments. Suggestions were to include projects in community service, or as a way to teach or measure personality skills.

Preparing students with the skills necessary for postsecondary success cannot be placed on high schools themselves. Many states and school districts now realize that, at a minimum, skill development has to begin in the middle grades, if not earlier (Schaefer & Rivera, 2012). Having students embark on an Individualized Plan of Study in the middle grades, based on skill and interest inventory tools, helps guide their future planning and career exploration.

Similar to the first 20-community conversation tours, it wasn't just about telling us what the issues were. Our business and industry groups provided valuable input on ways they can collaborate with PreK-12 and higher education to deliver the successful young adult who is needed for our communities and workforce (See *Figure 22*).



Human capital investments, our largest theme, included ways for businesses to cultivate students early with experiential training, like internships and job shadowing. Another human capital investment was employer-provided mentors for teachers and school administrators. There was also a set of government policies that would need to be addressed that centered on the protection of employers, schools, and students. There is a fear, and rightfully so, that we cannot have high school-aged students working alongside adults. What if someone gets hurt, and a lawsuit results? We need to find a way to work through such issues, or else the struggle to enable students to receive career and work-based experiences will become even more complicated.

Other frequently mentioned items were the possibilities of coordinated curriculum planning and feedback loops between PreK-12, higher education, and employers. There were also suggestions focusing on promotion of business and industry within schools and

the introduction of new services aimed at expanding company counseling to cover career planning and employee mentors for students.

Input from the 27 Community Conversation tours resulted in valuable information from Kansans regarding desired outcomes needed for success and the direction that the state should move in order to reach our goals. While at times we found ourselves tangled deeply in the data and trying to make sense of “what Kansans are really telling us,” we knew that it was still important to keep our students at the center of our attention (See *Figure 23*).



*Figure 23.* Keeping students at the center of our attention while deciphering the tangled web of data.

### **A Sense of Belief**

After spending the majority of the summer of 2015 combing through the data from the community conversation tours and completing the analysis, several retreat days



were scheduled with the state board of education to review the responses and begin the development of a plan and vision to move education forward in Kansas. Board members paid close attention to the “voice” of Kansans during their visioning process and debated measures that would demonstrate that we were being successful with our ultimate goals.

It was important for the board to know from our constituents whether we were on track and if we heard them correctly during the initial tour. Often, when telling the story of large groups of attendees, as in the community conversation tours, it is necessary to return the data to the participants and allow them to respond to the results. This allows them to *talk back* to how they are being represented (C. Ellis et al., 2011). This would also be a time for us to measure the *willingness* of Kansans to embark on this new journey.

Thus, during the mid-point of the state board’s visioning retreats, Randy and I went on a *Reunion Tour* to share with our constituents the data results in order to confirm whether “we heard them correctly.” I was excited about this opportunity because during the initial tour, I could feel a sense of belief from the attendees that we were onto something special. We were now going to see if that enthusiasm still existed across our state.

In the fall of 2015, seven regional meetings were conducted across the state, where we presented the results of the community conversation tour. We asked our attendees to record their responses and reflections on cards so that we could analyze any final suggestions and recommendations they wanted to share. These were suggestions we would take back to the state board of education as *things to consider* when finalizing their

vision for Kansas. Again, someone with good penmanship gave us some valuable information to consider as we moved forward (See *Figure 24*).

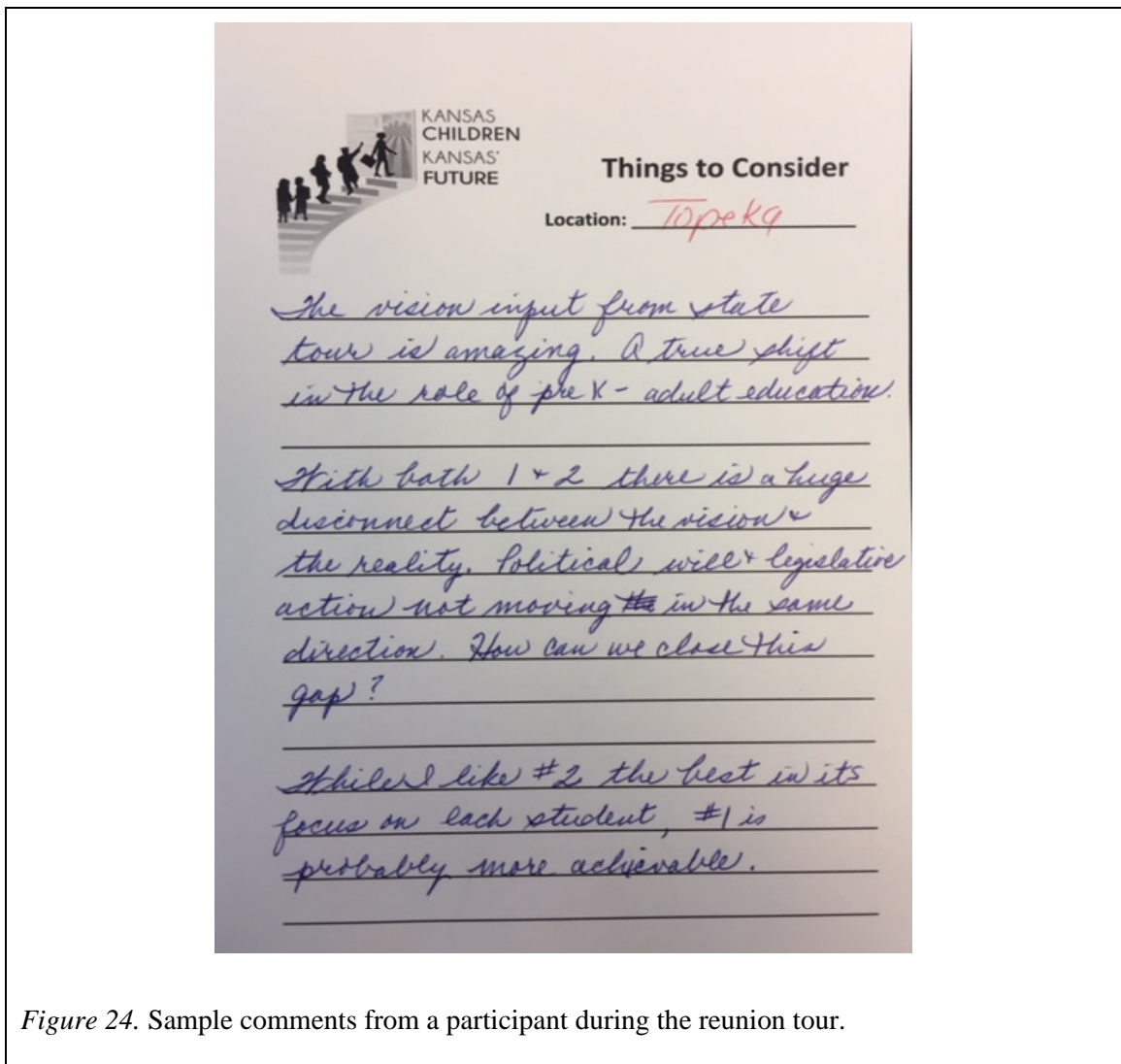


Figure 24. Sample comments from a participant during the reunion tour.

As I was setting up the room and equipment for the first reunion tour event, I remember being nervous about the attendance as we had just recently completed the first set of tours, and I know how valuable time is for the participants. In addition, school was only in session for a few months and this was one of the busiest times of the year. I asked Randy, “Do you really think they are going to come back to hear what we learned from the original tours?” We both smiled and crossed our fingers.

Just before commencing the event, those with familiar faces walked in and greeted us with smiles and enthusiasm. We recognized many who had participated in the original Community Conversation Tour. They seemed as familiar as those we work with on a regular basis, now coming back to engage in more conversation. This occurred regularly throughout the reunion tour, and my anxiety level lessened each time the participants made us feel welcome and valued. We were pleased to witness over 1,000 people returning, excited again to collaborate with us in an attempt to transform Kansas education for the better.

What was most pleasing was the sense of belief we found across the state – the belief that we could do this. Whether they were happy to see us or relieved that someone was actually listening to them, the participants gave us some valuable ideas to consider as we moved forward.

We again used the NVIVO software program to code and analyze responses from the reunion tour, and glean the main components to share with the state board. These main points summarize the reunion tour responses:

- Overwhelmingly, Kansans appreciated the board seeking their input and following up with results and final considerations.
- Individual Plans of Study was an idea that was mentioned frequently; it was believed that such plans were needed for every child, beginning in the middle grades.
- Quality pre-school was needed for Kansas Children, including All-Day Kindergarten.
- School Culture and Climate needed a greater focus.

- Non-academic soft skills were equally important to academic skills, but should be measured locally.
- School counseling and career exploration needed greater focus in order to meet the needs of students.
- Funding and resources were needed to make this happen.
- Be careful that we do not “swing the pendulum” too far in the other direction and de-emphasize the need for academic preparedness.
- Other important considerations;
  - Parent, community and business engagement.
  - Job shadowing, internships, work-experience, etc. are valuable for students.
  - Community service should play a larger role in education.

There was positive feedback and appreciation from the field about the fact we not only asked their opinion in the beginning, but we took seriously the process of analyzing their input and returning to make sure we heard them accurately.

The final board retreat day was scheduled in October 2015 to review responses from the reunion tour. At that time the board finalized their vision and set their outcomes to measure the success of Kansas education. The unveiling of the new vision would occur at the KSDE Annual Conference, to be held the next month. Over 1,100 educators from across the state, including teachers, principals, curriculum leaders, and superintendents, would hear for the first time the bold new vision for Kansas education.

Also invited to the conference were key leaders in our state and communities outside of the normal educational arena. These “dignitaries” included legislators who

held leadership positions, the governor's office, deans and presidents of postsecondary institutions, and business leaders from across the state. It is our belief that if we want to reach a bold new vision in Kansas education, it will take greater community support than the traditional K-12 audience.

At the conference, we encouraged participants to provide us their thoughts about what this new vision meant to them, especially as educators. We had prepared cards with the words "Kansans can..." and participants were asked to complete the sentence. We were hoping to avoid responses like, "Here we go again, just another change," or "I was just getting use to NCLB and now the rules are changing again." Instead, we were pleased with the written comments from the field, some of which I have included below:

#### **Comments from the Field**

Kansans can take a role in making our nation and world a better place for everyone to live, learn and grow in. - Keil Hileman, De Soto USD 232

Kansans can find, encourage, grow and celebrate the uniqueness of each child because each one is worth it now and tomorrow. - Lucinda Crenshaw, West Middle School, Lawrence Public Schools USD 497

Kansans can promise to empower students as individuals and not let them be defined by their personal circumstances. - Laura Brogdon, Shawnee Mission USD 512, Overland Park

Kansans can prepare its children to lead the world into a future full of challenges and opportunities. - Eric Magette, Eudora High School, Eudora USD 491

Kansas kids are our greatest resource. We must invest in bringing this resource – these valuable people – to the world! Invest in Children! Invest in our future! - Julie Doyen, Bergman Elementary School, Manhattan USD 383

Kansans can believe in the power of education. - Deidre Hoff, Salina Public Schools USD 305

Kansans can provide every student with meaningful educational opportunities. - Chrissy Lacy, teacher Hugoton USD 210

Kansans can provide safe, nurturing schools where our students can be successful, motivated learners. - Anne Sobba, teacher Nieman Elementary School, Shawnee Mission USD 512

Kansans can make a huge difference – even if it is one child at a time. - Janet Van North, teacher, Tecumseh South Elementary School, Shawnee Heights USD 450

Kansans can achieve greatness through libraries. - Aurelia Jackson, Northwest Kansas Library System

Kansans can mold the lives of the future with public education provided for all students. - Kimberlee Osenga, teacher, Fort Riley Middle School, Geary County USD 475

Kansans can change the country! - Carrie Thrash, teacher, Rex Elementary School, Haysville USD 261

Kansans can lead the way, make the difference and inspire others. - Ashley Bonson, teacher, Ogden Elementary School, Manhattan-Ogden USD 383

Kansans Can be a leader in educating all students. - Deb Rawlings, teacher, Santa Fe Trail High School, Santa Fe Trail USD 434

Kansans can inspire a future of innovators. - Dan Dinkel, teacher, Geary County USD  
475

Kansans can make the impossible possible by working together to help all kids achieve their dreams. - Brandi Leggett, teacher, Rose Hill Elementary, Shawnee Mission USD  
512

### **Follow the Leader**

One of the great advantages of being involved at a leadership level for so long in Kansas education is to know many other educational leaders in the state. From superintendents to teachers, from local board members to principals, I knew many of the faces in our audience during the tours, and their faces told a story. Owing to the advice of Drucker (2006), I could read excitement, along with a sense of anxiety, about what this type of educational reform would require. A level of change will challenge any organization's ability to lead and sustain (Evans, 1996). We could hear repeated mention of the idea of "Leadership." Most of the educational attendees I knew here were in some form of leadership role, and recognizing that a change in vision was going to challenge our own work is sometimes hard to admit publicly.

While we were in the process of analyzing the data, Randy and I agreed that our success would depend largely on the way we implement and lead our state through this new vision and model. We could have used an online survey of Kansans and had a few people summarize the data and tell the state what we wanted to do. But that is not leadership. According to Schwahn and Spady (1998), empowering qualified people around your purpose is a key to success. Although the authors were referring to employees of a company, I believe the same holds true for a state agency to empower our

customers, meaning the educational public, and especially school teachers, principals, and superintendents.

In just about every sector of business and government, changes have occurred. But not in education. In their follow-up book to *Total Leaders*, Schwahn and Spady (2010) suggest that, for the most part, education is still stuck in the assembly-line industrial age, and flexibility occurs only when we re-work the system. For Kansas, we have decided that we need to change the system. For too long, we have tried to change students to fit into our system instead of changing the system around the needs of our students.

I believe this new approach to education can be categorized as being innovative. This is neither a new model based on a system from another state, nor one that we purchased from a vendor. We are designing it with our own needs in mind. We base it on the voice of Kansans, supported by research. Will it pass the “innovative smell test?” According to Drucker (1998), when discussing disciplines of innovation, it should be so simple that it should have been thought of earlier.

When we share data from our tour constituents, we hear responses like, “That makes so much sense” or “Why have we not been doing this all along?” Those are intuitive reactions, and I believe Peter Drucker was correct when discussing innovation. He also suggests that, to be innovative, examine not only the figures, but the people as well. Study their expectations, their values, and their needs (Drucker, 1998). Touring Kansas gave us this valuable information about our “people.”

We also felt time was ripe for a change – a time when there was unrest in our state. We were transitioning from an old state accreditation model to a new one, while we



were waiting for the federal government to change ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act). We were also transitioning from one set of state assessments to another, and schools were losing hope for the future, thanks to several years of budget cuts. As Gertner (2012) explains, innovation springs from a need – a problem to solve. Innovation relies on access to “new knowledge in real time” (p. 152). Randy and I had the access to gather this “new knowledge” quickly, but it would take sustained effort and coordination with our public.

I realize that change, especially to this large a degree, comes with risk. Fullan (2014) maintains that change can cause anxiety and lead to panic. However, it can also lead to excitement, risk-taking, and improvement. Leading through this level of change will take time, but it is not something we can do occasionally. We need to keep our leadership voice and efforts clear and consistent. Fullan (2014) describes leadership as *confronting* problems we have not yet successfully addressed, instead of mobilizing others to solve problems we already know how to solve,

If those in education are empowered, engaged in purpose, and asserting voice in our vision, Kansas will be successful. Confronting the challenges to change is where our leadership will be challenged. It was easy for Kansans to say *what they want*, but when it comes to *how do we do it*, our leadership will be needed the most. Fullan (2007) also refers to overemphasis on standards and assessments. Accordingly, we need to find a balance with other important factors to a quality educational system. This is what Kansans told us on our tour, so we need to accomplish this simple but challenging task.

Making dramatic changes to a state’s educational system brings about some cautions and concerns. According to the Balanced Leadership Framework (Waters &

Cameron, 2007), the importance of leading schools and communities through change can exert a negative effect if leaders fail to understand the implications for stakeholders. This is true at both the state and local level, so we need to be cautious and intentional about moving at a manageable pace that is clear to our constituents. We do not want to move faster than our stakeholders expect. The implications of change for school communities also varies by the degree of change. As others have noted, “Leaders must tailor their own leadership practices based on the order, or magnitude of the change that they are leading” (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003, p. 9).

Such changes will include the necessities of breaking with the past, moving outside of our existing paradigms, requiring new knowledge and skills to implement, and being emergent – all characteristics of a “second order changer,” or of a large magnitude (Waters et al., 2003). As a state, we will have to recognize early that our educational leaders and stakeholders will need support to lead and navigate through this change process over the next several years.

Moreover, working through a new process that includes second order change is transforming, meaning that it often requires setting a new vision and a revised mission (Redding, 2012). This effort would require the re-defining of a successful high school graduate, along with new outcomes to be measured. Navigating through this change will require strategy and purpose. Success will depend upon the engagement of people, the communication of our purpose, and the articulation of our short-term wins (Kotter, 1995).

Purposeful change emanates from leadership decisions and is best accomplished within an established process – one that facilitates agile and informed decisions, followed by efficient execution (Redding, 2012). As the superintendent of schools for two districts,

I was experienced in leading a district through a strategic development process. However, I was new at leading a state through this magnitude of change, and we had to get it right.

A generation of students would be affected by our decisions. As Redding (2013) states:

The public and its governments must assure that children are not disadvantaged by ill-conceived experimentation. But there is always a need to find better ways to educate children, and better ways are discovered when smart and passionate people are encouraged to break the mold. (p. 7)

Are *we* trying to break the mold? Yes. And it makes sense. When we visit with people and ask them their reactions, they appear to pause and think, “Can we do this?” And then they ask, “Well, what about...?” or “How will we...?” Those are good questions, but we must push ourselves through, especially if there is no transcript to follow. People here are motivated. There is excitement in creating a fresh vision. As Christensen, Horn and Johnson (2008) observe, “Motivation is the catalyzing ingredient for every successful innovation” (p. 4). Regardless of our people’s skill levels, our success will depend on our motivation. There is no guide for this model, no instructional manual aside from the literature on leading through change.

This level of change will challenge the State Education Agency (SEA) to examine itself. Are we aligned to lead and provide support for reforming education in our state? SEAs were originally designed to administer a handful of federal programs and distribute state and federal funds to Local Education Agencies (LEAs), or local school districts, and were not initially designed to lead reform efforts (Smarick & Squire, 2014). Those types of efforts were to be led at the local level.

At KSDE, over half of our staff are funded by federal dollars to implement, support, and monitor federal programs. Much of this work falls under a “compliance” role where we ensure funds are spent at the LEA level according to federal requirements. These roles would not be classified as a “reform” initiative or responsibility. According to Gene Wilhoit, former Executive Director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, and former education commissioner in Kentucky, “Often SEA staff on the federal dime are more loyal to their federal program than the agenda of the state chief” (Smarick & Squire, 2014, p. 9).

With this understanding, KSDE will need to ensure that we are bringing SEA staff on board to help lead and support both SEA and LEA leaders in reform. All of our work, coming from both a federal initiative and a state initiative, need to impact each and every child and program in the state. We will need to make the connections in order to have a purposeful SEA effort.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter Three outlines a critical time during my journey of creating a new accreditation model for Kansas. I sometimes refer to this period as when there was the composing of a recipe and a collection of the ingredients needed for cooking up a new model for educational reform. This recipe included data from tour responses, observations of non-verbal and non-written cues, and national research on educational reform, including the challenges and opportunities of leading through this degree and level of change.

This was also a time of personal anxiety as I have never led this type of initiative. Although I believe that the field was confident in my abilities as Deputy Commissioner

of Education, I felt responsible in delivering on the wishes of over 2,000 Kansans who provided their time and thoughts during the process. Kansas State University agreed to look over my shoulder throughout the analysis phase of the data to ensure a high level of reliability and validity to the tour data. Those at the university also assisted in instilling the study's rigor in analyzing the development of Kansas's new accreditation model.

While completing the analysis of the Community Conversation Tour data and the Business Community Tour data, I compared the commonalities and differences in how two different groups responded to the tour questions. This was accomplished by examining national studies that either did or did not support what Kansans wanted. To my delight, I discovered that what Kansans say they wanted actually *aligned* with several national studies around community and business desires on educational outcomes. When Randy and I went on our reunion tour, I was excited to share these results with the participants. However, I had a sense that although the touring and data analysis phase was challenging our schedules, the real work would be just beginning. Randy and I agreed that it was now time to shift gears.

## **Chapter Four: A Bold New Vision**

While growing up, I was told by my dad that acquiring the results of a complete physical exam from a doctor is not an end but a beginning of improvement to your health. To extend an analogy, we have a state board of education that is serious about improving the health of education. They dedicated seven months to gathering input from Kansans, and now they are ready to diagnose a new vision for our state. The three most important questions are: 1) What is it that we want? 2) How will we go about doing this? and 3) How will we know when we get there? KSBE has the results from their physical (the tour), so from here on, the real work starts.

It was clear from tour feedback that Kansans believed our current educational system was out-of-balance, with too much focus placed on a standardized test score. In addition, this misaligned focus was placed on schools from the state and federal levels through accountability measures, such as QPA and ESEA. Living under these two pieces of legislation made it difficult for school districts to explore the freedoms that would allow for significant reform while performance was judged by measures, like test scores, that do not reflect other important reforms desired by Kansans.

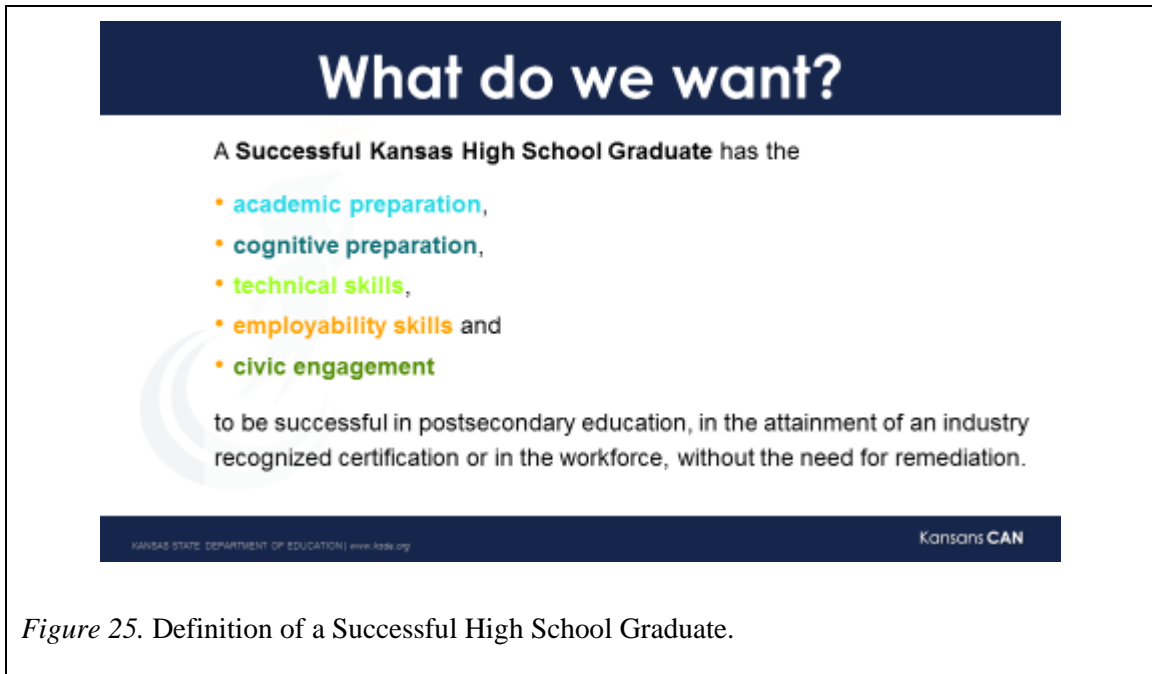
### **What is it that we want?**

The state board of education now had an opportunity to reform education in Kansas. During conversations with state board members, Randy told them the story of President Kennedy's vision of America's sending a man to the moon by the end of the 1960s – a lofty goal when considering that rocket launches had been unsuccessful and no astronauts were orbiting the earth yet. Thus, Randy encouraged the board to, in his words, take a moon shot. Set a goal that would inspire us to think differently about educational

reform. He continued: “The first time you hear our goal, you should almost gasp for air. The feeling when you think it is so inspiring, yet so bold.”

When reviewing the tour results, board members focused on key elements that were common throughout the state, across all audiences. Yes, students need to be academically prepared, but they also need to have deeper cognitive skills to apply learning and think critically about their knowledge. For many of our students, technical skills will be important for future success; every student needs to have those employability skills that help them complete a postsecondary degree and enter the workforce. Finally, Kansans told the state board of education that it is important for young adults to be engaged in community activity. Not only should students have civic skills, but also the opportunities to engage in their communities with these skills.

So what was it that the board wanted? Their primary role is to provide oversight for K-12 education. Since working at the KSDE, this was my first time witnessing the state board, as well as Kansans, develop a desire to expand the definition of a successful high school graduate to include a variety of skills and preparation for life after graduation (See *Figure 25*). With this in mind, they answered their question by developing a definition of a successful Kansas high school graduate.



By re-defining the successful graduate, the state can place an equal emphasis on important skills to be attained upon completion of high school. No longer are educators, or our system, focusing solely on academic skills. It is important to remember, however, that Kansans still regard academic skills as important. Nor does the state board wish to diminish the value of academics. Instead, they will place other skills on a more equal playing field.

Furthermore, these skills are necessary to prepare our students for success in postsecondary institutions, in industry-recognized certification, or on a path that leads directly into the workforce without the need for remediation. Kansans felt strongly that students prepare for success upon graduation without having to take additional courses or have additional training to achieve that success.

At the 2015 Annual KSDE Conference in Wichita, Kansas, the new vision was announced. Kansas would lead “the world in the success of each student,” and our motto



was KansansCan (See *Figure 26*), meaning that together we can do this. The board could have said that they wanted to improve our current results, or even lead the United States in student success, but they chose to go after the world -- not only to be the best in the country, but to beat Singapore, Finland, Portugal, China, and all other countries. Who better to do it than the state of Kansas? This was our moon shot.



### **How Will We Go About Doing This?**

Since 1966, the accreditation of Kansas schools has been a function of the KSBE; and in 1968, the state’s legislature enacted laws to implement the 1966 constitutional amendment in which the KSBE was given the authority to “accredit schools including elementary and secondary...public and private...” (K.S.A. 72-7513).

Accreditation is a recognition by the KSBE that schools and districts are compliant with regulations and laws, both state and federal. This accreditation process allows the state board to move important initiatives forward, including this new vision that Kansas will lead the world in the success of each student. In order to reach this new vision, the state board must change the accreditation system. It is a system that, in the board's opinion, is to blame for most of the problems Kansas faces. There was a time when the system was believed to be in the best interest of Kansas's students. Now, we see it is a system dominated by an old accreditation model aligning it to the realities of more than 100 years ago, developed by the original Committee of Ten in the late 1800s.

Renkoski (2017), a consultant with the group Education Reimagined, suggests that the goal of the old system was to provide students universal access to core content knowledge in order to prepare them for work in the industrial age. Moreover, the way to make the system efficient was through standardization. Robinson (2010) compares the old system to that of a conveyor belt in a factory line during the industrial revolution where students are taught in *batches* based on their age and not on their knowledge. Kansans told us that today teaching youngsters in groups, based on age, fitting them in the same box, and moving them down the conveyor belt at the same speed was an obsolete method.

It is believed by leadership at the KSDE, along with the state board of education, that the way to reform education in our state is to change the way we accredit schools. Through this model we can enable districts to focus on the board's vision and outcomes, while giving them tools and resources to guide them through research-based practices that enable improve student success. This new school reform model should move away

from designing controls at the state level. Instead, the system should be more localized in order to direct behavior to a model that builds local teacher and administrative capacity to assume responsibility for learning that is responsive to their communities and students (Darling-Hammond, 1993).

Although our agency had been working with Kansas stakeholders on a framework for a new accreditation model for 2 to 3 years, it was not until the state board set their vision for our direction in education that we could begin to bring them some recommendations for a new accreditation model. It was now time to finalize that model – one that would hold Kansas’s districts accountable to the state board’s vision. In addition, the board would need to provide the support that would help us attain this vision. Gone were the days of QPA, and in its place would be a new acronym – an accreditation model called the Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA).

The KSBE receives recommendations concerning accreditation from an Accreditation Advisory Council, a group of representative stakeholders from all facets and levels of education and from all regions of Kansas. This council had been meeting regularly throughout the past few years, discussing a new accrediting model, and in June 2016, they brought the first set of recommendations to the state board of education, which became the foundational structure of the new set-up. These recommendations included:

1. The accreditation of districts, or systems, as opposed to accrediting individual buildings.
2. A framework within which to evaluate school improvement efforts by focusing on the areas of Rigor, Relevance, Relationships, Responsive Culture, and Results.

3. The “Results” R would be aligned to the state board’s vision and outcomes, while the other four R’s would help guide districts to improved Results.
4. The use of rubrics in school and system-needs assessments to set baseline improvement plans.
5. An outside visitation team to provide mentoring and coaching to educational systems.
6. An accreditation cycle length of 5 years, instead of a single-year cycle that was used under QPA.
7. Full public transparency (process and progress) through a KSDE Report Card or Dashboard.
8. Foundational requirements such as compliance with licensure, fiscal, statutes, and IDEA.

These recommendations were not easily approved by the state board of education. There were lengthy discussions over a few years prior to the board’s approval, and the most challenging change in this new accreditation model was the shift to accredit school districts, or systems, instead of individual buildings. Several board members were concerned that an underperforming building would get lost in the “system” and have no accountability to a community’s students and parents. We assured those members that there would still be performance reports at the building level, similar to the QPA days, but even in the old accreditation model, we still had buildings that were underperforming. We believed positive change for those buildings would be better aligned with the system of which they were members.

It was also important for the state board to understand that “while individual schools are indeed the center of change, the improvement of low-performing schools cannot be implemented or sustained without redesigning the larger system in which they reside – the school district” (Zavadsky, 2012). Supporting this model is the rich research base of systems theory, which resoundingly shows that sustained improvement of a system requires viewing it as a whole and analyzing the impact of each part. Any change to one part of the system affects (positively or negatively) other parts of the system and, therefore, the system as a whole.

The benefits of a systems approach is that it addresses the underlying factors of systemic issues and symptoms and aligns efforts across the district, increasing accountability and collaboration within and among schools. “Everybody doing their best is not sufficient. Functional areas of a system must be aware of how their actions impact other groups and the entire system. Each group must investigate to understand how their actions will benefit the whole, and identify the dangers of how their actions introduce risks to the whole” (Nave, 2007). In education, students move through a series of buildings as they grow older, typically from elementary schools, middle schools, and then high schools. Without these buildings communicating and working as a system, students must deal with changes and transitions from one isolated system to the next.

Providing the state board of education with research that supported the change to accredit systems rather than buildings helped somewhat in the decision-making. But when several school districts, both large and small, demonstrated to the board how they had already aligned their school district to a systems approach, only then did the board

actually see evidence of a systems approach in place. Thus, they could now fully support the recommendation.

### **Selection of the 5 R's**

The KESA model uses the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century themes recognized by national studies and organizations (Bell, 2010; Bellanca, 2010; Dede, 2010; Jerald, 2009; Rotherham & Willingham, 2010; Trilling & Fadel, 2012). They include the categories of Relationships, Relevance, Responsive Culture, Rigor and Results (the 5 R's) as a framework within which to focus on the quality characteristics of an educational system. An emphasis on what students can do with knowledge, rather than what units of knowledge they have, is the essence of 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills (Silva, 2009), as well as detail systems that focus on embedding those skills in a school's culture, rather than trusting that a student is fortunate enough to attend a school that focuses on the teaching of these skills – or is assigned a teacher who incorporates those skills into her or his instruction (Rotherham & Willingham, 2010).

When selecting the 5 R's for the KESA model, much of the framework design was based on varied studies discussing the importance of rigor, relevance and relationships in creating successful learning environments (Daggett, 2011), as well as the concept of relational suasion, or “the teacher's ability to influence a student's learning, motivation to learn, metacognitive competencies, and social emotional competencies by virtue of the teacher's personal knowledge of, and interaction with, the student and the student's family,” which are believed to have a huge impact on student success (Redding, 2013, p. 8). Although I could not locate a study that included all 5 R's together, the

KESA framework is a combination of multiple *best practices* for school districts to tailor their system's design to the uniqueness of their community.

Included in the model is the importance of a rigorous academic program that focuses on strong instructional practices while placing a greater emphasis on the non-academic skills (as requested during our tour of the communities) that are necessary for a quality school environment influencing student success. These concepts are not new to education, as evidenced in the research of Lezotte (1993) in his work with the *Correlates of Effective Schools*, or Covey (1992) with his research and studies on leadership and organizational culture. I would also refer to evidence of the need for non-academic skills development from Maslow's (1943) *hierarchy of needs*, where he suggests that humans must satisfy a set of basic needs before they can learn and grow. Many of these needs were discussed during the tour, such as a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. These can only be gained if the child feels safe, nourished, loved, respected, recognized – and then the child can pursue an inner talent (Maslow, 1943). In the following few sections, I will describe the importance each of these R's plays in the KESA framework, including the categories within each R that allow for these important skills to develop as part of the school's daily culture.

### **Relationships**

In reviewing the research, and in response to our Kansas communities, KSDE determined it is important for educational systems to have quality relationships with their staff, students, families, and communities. Strong characteristics of schools that model such relationships include: a) frequent input from internal and external stakeholders through surveys or in-person events, b) mentoring programs and quality training

opportunities, c) social emotional and character development initiatives, and d) community, staff, and parent involvement with long-term strategic planning (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2004; Conley, 2007). Strong relationships also include frequent positive and meaningful two-way communication about programs, meetings, and other events promoting partnerships with various stakeholder groups. Home-School Relations, one of the 7 correlates of effective schools (Lezotte, 1993), is significant as both parents and teachers share goals to ensure success for each student.

Extremely important to that success are the positive relationships established between students and the adults in the school who are engaged in their personal learning process (Daggett, 2011). Students will perform at higher levels and achieve more success when they know adults in their school and community care about their individual needs, talents, and aspirations. Schools across the country realize increasingly that rigor and relevance develop most naturally when they are cultivated on firm grounding in relationships (McNulty & Quaglia, 2007). As a result, it is important that these R's be a key component of the new accreditation model and incorporated into the daily rituals of the school environment.

### **Relevance**

Included within the relevance domain are curriculum, instruction, student engagement, and technology. These factors ground learning in a student-centered environment (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). Having a meaningful and systemic curriculum review process includes an alignment and adoption process that is both rigorous and innovative (Wasley, Hampel, & Clark, 1997) and aligned with appropriate and effective instructional strategies that meet all students' learning needs. However, we



cannot just organize curriculum around content and skills. Rather, there should be a greater focus on what students should do with the content in the real world (Froehle, 2017). This is why it is essential in student engagement for an individualized plan of study that incorporates class selection, pathways, transitions, and career exploration and planning with real-world experiences. Students need applied academic programs that include internships, work studies, apprenticeships, and exposure to job settings (Gaal, 2005).

Along with better student engagement, the use of technology in learning is growing exponentially (Fabry & Higgs, 1997), but just placing students in front of computers is not the answer. For effective use of technology in education, there needs to be a focus on leadership, infrastructure and support, teaching and learning, professional learning and practice, strategic planning, and student needs and progress assessment (R. Christensen, 2002; Fabry & Higgs, 1997).

### **Responsive Culture**

Responsive culture encompasses the areas of leadership, early childhood, district climate, and nutrition and wellness. This “R” targets the support that needs to be in place throughout the system in order for the educational environment to be successful and responsive to internal and external shifts and changes (Elmore, 1996; Leavy, 2005). Of schools that have shown success, most of these have created learning environments that are not only rigorous and relevant, but also safe, secure, engaging, and caring for staff and students (Daggett, 2011). While visiting with school leaders during our tour, many of them believed that this type of learning system will require a change in focus and direction, moving away from a testing focus and more toward a cultural focus.

If a system is to build sustainability, leadership at every level will serve as keys to success (Fullan, 2004). Leadership will set clear visions, have high expectations for results, prepare the culture for teaching and learning, measure indicators for success, and build strategic plans while developing learning communities (Kanter, 2003; Owens & Owens, 1995). This will require the collaboration of many stakeholders, and at the heart of culture are the people involved within the organization because an organization's culture is the collective behavior of its people (Covey, 1992). Leaders will also helm advocacy efforts, allocate resources, communicate with stakeholders, and mentor other leaders within their community (Fullan, 2004). To do this, Kansas needs a system packed with leaders who are trained to think in bigger terms and to act in ways that affect larger parts of the system as a whole.

In addition to school culture, quality early childhood programs are critical to ensuring our students begin their educational experiences on a more level playing field, eliminating much of the need for remediating children throughout their educational experience (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Children living in poverty have on average 30 million fewer words spoken to them by their fourth birthday than their high-income peers (Hart & Risley, 2003). This "word gap" translates into lower vocabulary, language development, and reading comprehension – all before children have even started kindergarten. Over half of low-income children are entering kindergarten unprepared, lacking the skills necessary for a strong introduction to schooling, and a quarter of their more affluent peers face the same challenges (Isaacs, 2012).

Complementing early childhood programs, there needs to be a positive district climate that addresses academic, behavioral, social emotional, and character-development skills (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). The more teachers provide instructional activities in a positive learning environment, the more students will learn how their academic, social, and emotional skills support one another (Yoder, 2013). In addition, states like Kansas are incorporating and integrating more programs and initiatives to address the social and emotional learning (SEL) needs of students – programs geared to teach many of these 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Skills. SEL involves the processes through which students and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to 1) understand and manage emotions, 2) set and achieve positive goals, 3) feel and show empathy for others, 4) establish and maintain positive relationships, and 5) make responsible decisions (Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013).

Many school improvement agendas focus on a new instructional strategy or curriculum, but bringing all students to high achievement levels is more complex (McNulty & Quaglia, 2007). It involves establishing the right culture to cultivate the minds of students and to enrich the involvement and innovation of school leaders and staff.

### **Rigor**

The components of rigor include career and technical education, professional learning, resources, and data. Although there are additional components within the other R's that could arguably be placed under rigor (as in having a rigorous curriculum), these four were chosen by Kansans as key components critical to ensuring our educational systems can meet the needs of all students.

Built into this model is the need for having quality career and technical education pathways available to support the variety of student and community needs. In the past, schools traditionally offered two paths: college preparation and vocational education (Castellano, Stringfield, & Stone III, 2003). In today's climate, it can no longer be an either/or component, but a combination of both – where students receive an applied academics program and where vocational skills become the platform in which academic skills are delivered (Daggett, 2011).

The key to any organization's ability to improve effective professional learning standards and practices must be in place (DuFour, 2004), including the allocation of physical, human, and financial resources, and decision-making based on accurate, timely data ensuring all initiatives within the system are supported (Darling-Hammond, 2004). For these reasons alone, providing quality professional development to school staff must be a part of the new accreditation model. But as Kansas moves to a new school funding formula, I anticipate that school districts will be required to show some form of accountability for any new funding or resource. This is where I believe professional development will provide the supports and practices to attain the results that Kansans deem important to student success.

## **Results**

The new accreditation model in Kansas will shift the conversation from student achievement to student success. It was clear from our community conversations that the former QPA accreditation model was *out-of-balance*, placing too great an emphasis on one measure – specifically, a standardized test that measured only academic performance.

The SBOE has set a new vision for Kansas as world leader in the success of each student. Measuring success at the state level will include data such as graduation rates, percentage of students going on to post-secondary institutions, persistency rates of our post-secondary students, and kindergarten readiness. The state boards' outcomes also include the implementation of Individual Plans of Study (IPS) beginning in the middle grades, along with a focus on Social Emotional and Character Development; but this outcome will be measured locally by each school district.

They will examine multiple indicators to see if students are on track for post-secondary success, including such academic measures as state assessments, attendance, participation in activities, community service, civic engagement activities, certificate completions, and college credit-hours earned. By allowing districts the authority to focus on multiple indicators of student success, Kansas brings a new accountability model into balance, aligned with the desires of those we listened to on our tour.

I admit that this new KESA model can be, on the surface, fairly complicated to understand. I further admit I have known this concept from its inception. I have been living and breathing it for several years. While presenting this model to those in education, including the state board, I believed I was making a little headway each time, but there were other instances when two steps forward would result in one step backward. I realized then that many people, like me, are visual learners. I needed to develop a logic model showing how KESA would help school systems move toward the state board's vision and ultimately improve student success (See *Figure 27*).

# KANSAS VISION FOR EDUCATION

*Kansas leads the world in the success of each student.*

## Successful High School Graduate



A successful Kansas high school graduate has the

- Academic preparation,
- Cognitive preparation,
- Technical skills,
- Employability skills and
- Civic engagement

to be successful in postsecondary education, in the attainment of an industry recognized certification, or in the workforce, without the need for remediation.

## RESULTS



## Evidence-Based Practices

| RELATIONSHIPS | RELEVANCE          | RESPONSIVE CULTURE     | RIGOR                          |
|---------------|--------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Staff         | Curriculum         | Leadership             | Career and Technical Education |
| Students      | Instruction        | Early Childhood        | Professional Learning          |
| Families      | Student Engagement | District Climate       | Resources                      |
| Community     | Technology         | Nutrition and Wellness | Data                           |

## Foundational Structures



## Compliance

Teacher Licensure and Accreditation | Kansas State Department of Education | Landon State Office Building | 100 S.W. Jackson Street, Suite 116 | Topeka, Kansas 66612-1212 | (785) 296-2299 | [www.ksde.org](http://www.ksde.org)  
 The Kansas State Department of Education does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, disability, or age in its programs and activities and provides equal access to the Boy Scouts and other designated groups. The following person has been designated to handle inquiries regarding the non-discrimination policies: Michelle Conner, Director of Compliance, KSDE, Landon State Office Building, 100 S.W. Jackson, Suite 116, Topeka, KS 66612. (785) 296-2299

Figure 27. Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA) framework.

With the new KESA framework, we begin at the top with the definition of a successful high school graduate, defining the skills and preparation they will need for future success. Next will be the state level focus on results. Here, we will monitor social

emotional factors, kindergarten readiness, individual plans of study, as well as graduation and postsecondary success. The remaining four R's fall under the heading of evidence-based practices. These are areas that schools and districts will target in order to improve results for greater student success.

Educational systems are required to have certain foundational structures in place to support student success. They also must comply with state and federal statutes and regulations. The foundational structures align closely with the Kansas Supreme Court's ruling in 2015 that school districts must provide all students with instruction in the arts and cultural education, physical and mental health, diversity and equity, communication and basic skills, and tiered frameworks of support.

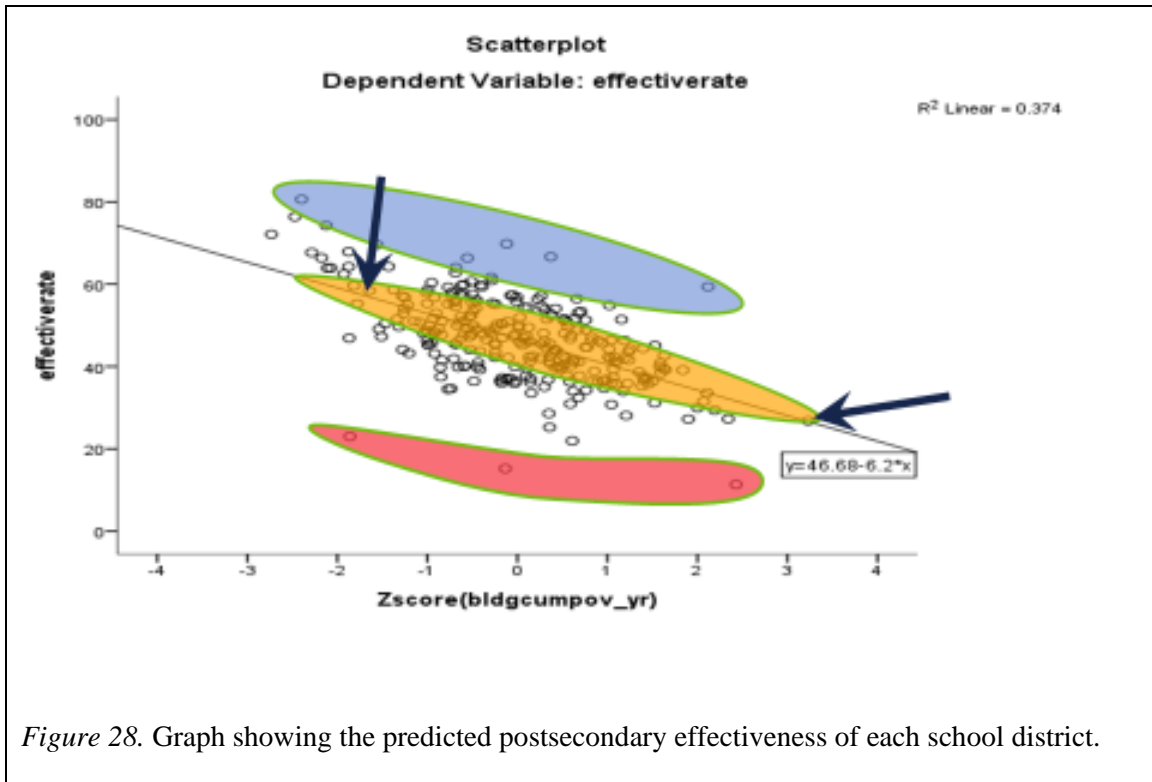
The easiest way for me to explain this model is to compare it to losing weight. First, you have to step on the scale to see what your current weight is, which signifies the "Results" R of the KESA model. But in dieting, you don't lose weight by standing on the scale. You actually have to step off the scale and exercise, change your eating habits, acquire plenty of rest, monitor your stress, and so on. Similarly, with the KESA model, you can monitor your graduation and postsecondary rates; but if you want to improve them, you have to look into, for example, your relationships with parents and community, the quality of your instructional practices, your engagement with students in the learning practices, or the culture and climate of your buildings.

We also know that results matter, especially when they are made public. Even though districts will be held accountable to a multiple set of measures instead of their performance on just one assessment, we still hear complaints from school leaders that it is unfair to compare their results to districts less affected by poverty and student mobility

than theirs. Accordingly, unless their complaint is used as an excuse to underperform, we agree with their argument.

Thus, the research staff at KSDE examined data to create a profile for each district that, based on research, contained factors that would negatively impact on performance measures such as graduation rates and academic achievement. These factors include schools with high levels of student poverty (Ng & Rury, 2006; R. K. Payne, 1998; Zigler & Valentine, 1979), buildings with chronic absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Romero & Lee, 2007), and challenges with a mobile student population (Rumberger & Larson, 1998; South, Haynie, & Bose, 2007). As an agency, we took these risk factors and applied them to every school district in the state. We were then able to create a predicted level of the performance they should achieve, based on the type of students in their schools. Interestingly, when using their postsecondary results, our staff had a 95% confidence level of their predictive performance, based on the performance of other districts with similar risk factors among them (See *Figure 28*).





In this graph, the vertical axis represents the percentage of the 9<sup>th</sup>-grade cohort of students (*cohort*, meaning those who finish school in 4 years) who graduated on time and enrolled in a postsecondary institution and returned their sophomore year. The horizontal axis is the level of risk factors that the district experiences, with greater risks being further to the right on this axis. Based on the seven risk factors, we can predict their performance somewhere along the line, as indicated by the yellow-shaded oval. Whereas most of our school districts perform within a comfortable range of where we would predict them to perform, the question we then ask ourselves is, “What about those districts in the blue-shaded area?” They are districts that are performing well above where we would predict, based on their risk factors. Similarly, what about those in the red-shaded area? Why are they underperforming as much as they are, based on their risk factors? These are questions for which we have no answer, but in our new accreditation

model, we want to find out why districts are outperforming our predictions. That way, we can assist other districts in areas we believe would lead them to higher levels of student success.

One way to help schools and districts focus on other measures is to provide them with data to inform their decisions. For our postsecondary outcome measures, we are able to report to our districts their average graduation rates, postsecondary success rates, and their postsecondary effective rates. An example of this report (See *Figure 29*), is the postsecondary progress report for USD 109, Republic County Schools. You will see on this report that their 5-year average effective rate is 54%, while we would predict their rate, based on their risk factors, to be in the range of 43-48%, indicating that they are exceeding our expectations.

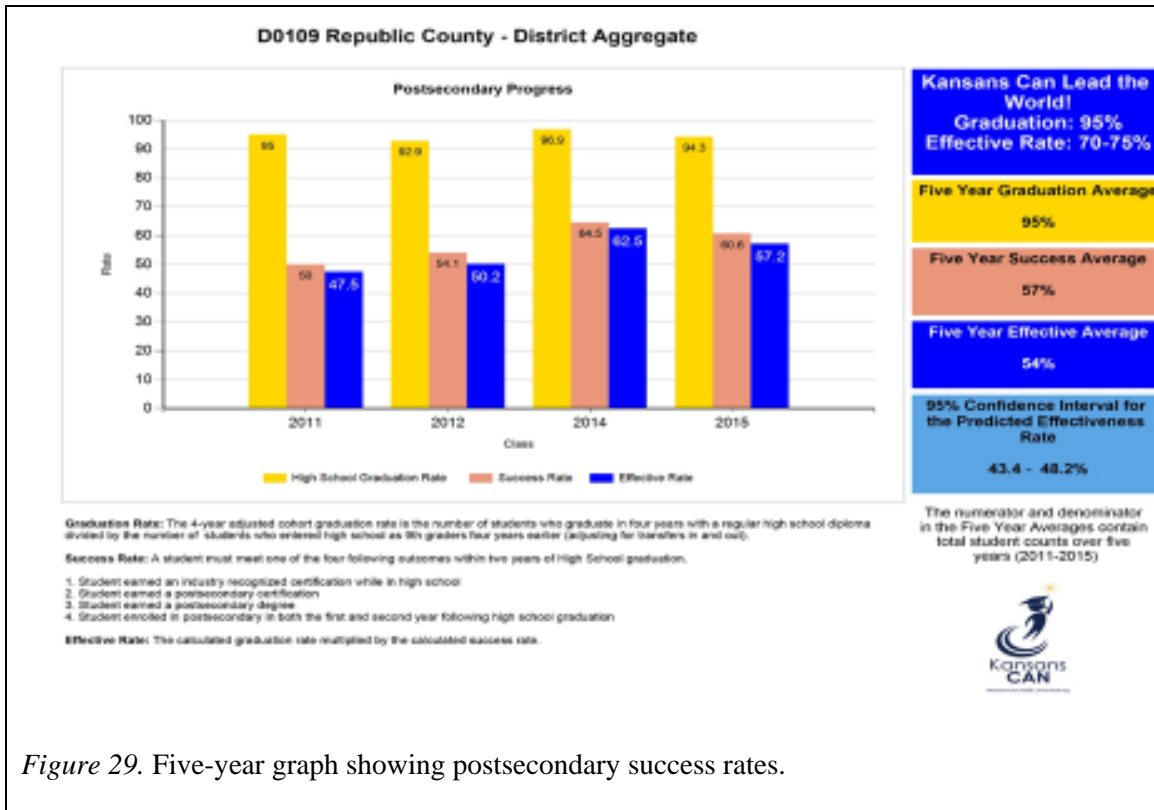


Figure 29. Five-year graph showing postsecondary success rates.

Our goal with the new accreditation model is to enable school districts to focus on what Kansans said was important and put programs in place to align with their local needs to improve success rates for all students. Kansas will never lead the world in the success of each student if we continue to live under an accountability model and an educational system that were created centuries ago. We have to change the focus.

### **How Will We Know When We Get There?**

The purpose of this journey is to develop and implement a plan that will lead education to a better place for the students we serve. Knowing when we get there will always be a topic of discussion, as the world of measures seems to be always changing. We do know that if we redefine the word *success* while using the same yardstick to measure progress, we will most likely experience no change (Natto, 2017). With that being said, there are a few measures on which we can focus.

The state average graduation rate for Kansas in 2015-16 was 86%, and we could lead the United States with a 92% graduation rate (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017), moving ahead of Iowa, currently at 91%. And we believe that a graduation rate of 96% would allow us to lead the world. Thus, we are always chasing a moving target as other states and countries improve their numbers each year, so we must continuously monitor our data.

The other challenge Kansas will face in measuring our success against the world is that not all states measure the same items that Kansans value; and if they do, they may use a different method of calculation. For example, our postsecondary-success measures were created uniquely for Kansas and cannot be compared to another state. The same is true for how Kansas will measure kindergarten-readiness. What we can do though is

measure our progress toward the goals we have set for ourselves, and allow other states to model and measure what they learn from Kansas and incorporate those into their accountability systems for the future.

### **Chapter Summary**

In my experience, the more you involve others, especially the people you serve in the decision-making process, the more likely you will succeed in not only the implementation of a project, but in the quality of the product itself. A company or organization will only go as far as its employees and constituents will allow it to go (Collins, 2001), and stakeholder engagement will improve the success of the initiative, especially when that initiative involves significant change (Evans, 1996). Input from the field to define what Kansans wanted was foundational to the development of our new state vision and accreditation model. The community conversation tour data, supported by research, helped the KSBE define the success of a young Kansan and develop the educational system that was needed to achieve desired outcomes.

Once a vision was set, finalizing the model for Kansas educators to achieve the success of this new vision took a coordinated effort from many teams and educational organizations. Since the KSBE is the ultimate accrediting authority in Kansas, it was agreed by the Kansas accreditation advisory council that the new accreditation model should focus more on process and less on outcome. Both are important, but as Kansans told us, we need to strike a balance between the two. By framing a model that took into consideration multiple types of input, the Five-R accreditation model incorporated all that was valued by Kansans and supported by research.

As mentioned earlier in this study, the current accreditation model had not seen significant change for almost three decades, and few educators, both from the field and internally at KSDE, were involved in its development going back to 1992. The language of educational reform is used when a public-education system goes through change (C. M. Payne, 2008). I believe Kansas is deep into the systems-change process, and I ask myself whether we can propel the change we want to see through an accreditation model, as there are those who maintain that what gets measured gets changed (Giovannini, 2004). Fullan (2012) argues that educational reform cannot be forced or mandated onto the system. It is my hope that Kansas educators will see, in the new system, a model that aligns with what they value, as revealed during the tours. Based on their data and unique local needs along with a process to guide their own reform efforts, allowing school districts a choice in their own goals will increase the probability that all Kansas school systems are working towards the state board's vision.

Measuring the success of this new accreditation model will have to be flexible and adjusted over several years. Kansans said we need a greater focus on kindergarten readiness, social emotional learning, students navigating their educational careers through individual plans of study, increased graduation rates, and improved postsecondary effectiveness rates. A few of these outcomes already have quantitative measures to monitor progress, but the rest will have to be developed or measured locally. This is new territory for Kansas and, I would argue, across the nation as well.

## **Chapter Five: Reflections and the Future**

### **Looking in the Rear-View Mirror**

By 2016, we had already conducted 27 community and business tours and seven reunion tours to verify our findings. Overall, I was pleased with the work accomplished on this tour, but more importantly, I was honored to be a part of the journey. To be an agent of tremendous change in a state's entire educational system is like nothing from my past with which I can relate. The odds of my choosing the right profession, being in the right position, in the right state, and at the right time are probably more unlikely than winning a lottery. Unlike many people who win the lottery and then squander their riches, I plan to relish this experience and make the most of it for the rest of my career.

Among the greatest benefits of this journey were the relationships and acquaintances I made and developed along the way. I was introduced to people in business and industry, and I learned of their stories, accomplishments, and struggles. There were educators whom I had never met, as well as those I had not seen for a long time. While this experience was valuable for me, it seemed the participants reciprocated that sentiment; they appeared delighted to be able to develop a relationship with the state's leadership team. Perhaps it is not surprising that many educators across the state do not even know that there *is* a commissioner or deputy commissioner of education. It is true that, as a news reporter once suggested, we could have conducted an online survey of Kansans in order to receive our input for this study, but the lack of relationship-building would not have provided us the quality of information we desired.

Since this was my first time at conducting a statewide listening tour, I was pleased with the participation and outcomes of the events. In retrospect, I might have challenged

some strategies, such as the format of the agenda, locations, and questions asked of the participants. Had I taken a few doctoral courses while Randy and I were planning our tour of Kansas, I would have given more thought to the structure of these events – specifically, the questioning techniques and the data-collection methods. However, I did not embark upon my studies until I was already involved with the community conversation tours. Since then, I received valuable coaching from my professors, and I was able to implement some of their advice.

I know now that there is an art to the process of conducting listening tours, analyzing data, reporting the findings, and putting a plan in place for implementing the findings into a vision. The professional guidance I received while in the doctoral program served as a mentoring influence, and I believe my findings would not be of quality and value without this support. I strongly recommend that any scholar working on a project of this magnitude find a good qualitative or quantitative mentor to help guide one through the journey. It will result in a study that is more valuable and worthwhile in the end.

Using autoethnography as the methodology for this narrative inquiry allowed me to draw upon my personal experience in describing the educational culture of Kansas. The process of developing this historical narrative forced me to question myself, my thinking, and decision making. This process has enabled me to better understand the people I serve while providing a better direction for our educational future. Even though I am relating the story of *our* journey, the vision for the state of Kansas is a reflection of the voice of *Kansans*. I just happen to be the narrator of their collective voice.

As I reflect on the research questions that helped guide this autoethnography, my first thought is of my unique position as Deputy Commissioner during a time of

significant change in Kansas education. There were times during the development of our new accreditation model when debates had to end because some key decisions had to be made. There were times when people would look at me and say, “Well Brad, what do you want?” I would always try to answer with, “Well, let me tell you what over 2,000 Kansans said,” or, “Let me tell you what Lezotte, Marzano, Dagget, Fullen, DuFour, Redding, etc., have said.” Then I would make a decision and we would move forward. It was not that I was uncomfortable serving in this role because prior experiences had provided me a certain comfort level. Rather, I treated the experience as an opportunity to participate at a time when important decisions were being finalized, and my tour experiences, along with sound supporting research, provided me a firm foundation on which to make informed recommendations.

In addition, as I tried to balance the voice of Kansans with the writings of national experts, I wondered what influenced the need for including, for example, *relationships* or *responsive culture* in our new accreditation model. Was it something that happened to me at an earlier time? Could the fact that I grew up seeing the effects of bullying on people I care deeply about have an influence on my being so passionate about including a strong focus on social emotional and character education development in our new model? As I looked at what Kansans said, and what I see in national research, did the call for students to be taught the skills of *empathy* towards others trigger a response in me? There *is* a high probability that prior experiences have influenced my passion for certain components to be included in our new state vision and accreditation model. According to Ellis (2011) as well as Richardson and St. Pierre (2008), personal subjectivity will naturally influence a researcher’s study, so I believe there is a degree of my subjectivity woven into this new



accreditation framework, which is unavoidable. What is important here is to ensure that the voice of Kansans are not subdued or compromised in favor of my personal inclinations.

### **For Whom is This of Value?**

During the 18-24 month timeline after the tours, our findings became popular with a variety of audiences. Randy and I have presented these findings to the legislature, educators, board members, business and industry leaders, the general public, and we have had requests for this information from a variety of groups, including the press, both within and outside of Kansas. While I was writing this study, I was interviewed for a national documentary on school reform, as there is interest in what Kansans want in a new educational system.

As we summarized the findings in presentable formats, we worked with a graphic designer to give them a professional appearance. That way, we believed it would appear credible to an audience of professionals. Moreover, as I was giving presentations across the state, I noticed it was taking two to four times for people to hear the message before they really internalized what was being said. There were times when I thought, “Haven’t I shared these findings with this group before?” and the audience would either want the information repeated, or there would be new participants hearing that same information for the first time. Still today, three years after the community conversation tour, we encounter individuals in Kansas who have not heard the message. As a result, we consciously keep this information “front and center” when we are speaking across Kansas, as well as having it visible on our web site and on our social media to ensure that people can return to our goals or inform themselves by seeing it for the first time.

Hopefully, the impact of this initiative will exert lasting effects on an educational model that will support and enhance student learning and success in Kansas. For the first time in three decades, we are having deep and lasting conversations about true educational reform in our state. A large part of that is due to this study. Randy and I are just the microphone for over 2,000 Kansans to express their desires, and we are in a position to influence policy makers who can make this vision a reality. It is important to remind people, however, that our new accreditation model is grounded in the tour data – what Kansans said they wanted in their educational system.

There was extensive time and effort that went into this initiative and having a written narrative of the journey with the decisions that resulted from our work will be valuable as a historical record that can be referenced in the future. People might forget the *why* and the *how* of our journey in Kansas, and this is my only chance to capture the events in document form. As humans, we tend to rewrite history in our own minds unless there is something that can ground us in the actual events.

This work is stirring up conversations locally as well as nationally. We see articles in local newspapers (See *Figure 30*) that speak of the results from our tours, but our work is also recognized (See *Figure 31*) by the National Association of School Boards as an innovative way to engage stakeholders in helping to re-define educational policy.

**College not sole path to career success**

Important non-academic skills and characteristics that matter most include character, persistence, the ever-important critical thinking skills and teamwork, as well as dependability, according to a large qualitative study in 20 Kansas communities completed by Kansas State University on behalf of the Kansas State Department of Education.

*-Jeanny Sharp is the marketing solutions director for The Hutchinson News.*

Figure 30. Article from the Hutchinson News.

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National Association of State Boards of Education

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**+** Kansas Loops Stakeholders In  
on Conversation about K-12 Policy

Figure 31. Article from the National Association of School Boards.

As Randy and I continue to travel the state, we see the state board’s vision logo on walls in schools, service centers, and educational associations. This work is leaving a visual *footprint* across Kansas. We receive requests from business and industry groups to share our findings, along with those in higher education who are curious about how this

new vision will affect their teacher-preparation programs. Currently, it is too early to tell exactly *for whom* this study will influence, but here are my hopes.

I envision this study to continue informing our state's lawmakers as they debate policy and legislation to support public education. I wish for local school boards to use this work as a means of generating conversations about their local community, and how they can better provide support for their students. It would be my desire for these findings to help guide a national conversation around using stakeholder input to drive a statewide vision. Moreover, it is my ultimate hope to see this study change the landscape of the educational delivery system in Kansas.

### **How Might the Tour Data Help Change Education?**

As stated earlier, this autoethnography is grounded in the educational tours conducted during 2015. The findings from that tour informed the current accreditation model of educational reform in Kansas. In this section, I reflect on how such data can help change education in Kansas and perhaps even beyond.

Kansans told us clearly that our accountability system was placing too large a focus on an assessment that measures only academic preparation. This method is so engrained in our culture that it is difficult for educators to value other skills and activities that lead to a more successful educational system. I am unsure about how long change will take, but this study helps to center our conversations on the need for that change, and it begins with a new accountability model.

Although KSDE staff and colleagues from across the state have been working on a new accreditation model for a few years now, I do not believe that the state board would have fully supported that model without the final input from these tours. As an

agency, we were now able to align the KESA framework with the desires of Kansans in order to move the system in a new direction. That, in and of itself, will be the vehicle that drives change over the next several years.

The new KESA model does what Kansans want. It balances the values desired of a successful high school graduate – academic preparation, cognitive preparation, technical skills, employability skills, and civic engagement – in order to increase the likelihood of being a successful Kansan. In addition, it places an emphasis on the social emotional needs of students, kindergarten readiness, individualized plans of study, high school graduation, and postsecondary success. These outcomes were missing in the old accountability model, but they are now measured results of the new KESA model.

Transitioning our schools and districts to this new accreditation model has already begun to change the conversations around the possibilities of educational reform. To reach our new outcomes, schools are having better discussions about the engagement of parents and communities, the appropriate use of technology, the culture and climate of our schools, the quality of instructional practices, as well as changes in their allocation of resources. Gone now from the conversation is the need to test/prepare students to excel on the state assessment. And with that missing talking-point, I can tell that change has begun to occur.

In addition, the state's new vision has affected policy makers, particularly the Kansas legislature. During the spring 2017 legislative session, a new school funding bill was passed and implemented for the 2017-18 school term. Their new formula includes the addition of approximately \$75 million in new funds for early childhood and full-day kindergarten. Although I cannot conclude that our vision led to this new funding, I do

know the state board has advocated for this without success for the past decade. With focus on kindergarten readiness as one of the vision's new outcomes, I believe this had had a critical effect on the additional funding in the new school finance formula.

### **What Might a New Educational System Look Like?**

While visiting with Kansans on the tour, some of the more challenging questions and discussions centered on visualizing a new system that allowed for various types of programs, initiatives and outcomes that were desired as this required a new way of thinking about school design. As a beginning to the conversations, it was sometimes easier to describe what the new educational system will *not* look like than to describe what it *might* look like. What we do not want is the traditional system where students move through education based on age, time and, content; this would be akin to replicating an assembly line. There are many changes occurring in our schools, but Kansans are telling us that the *system* is getting in the way of true change. When I visit school districts (or listen to the experiences of my own children in school), there are classrooms where I see effective teaching and learning. However, this experience is not system-wide. That is where I believe our problem lies. How do we create a system where every student is authentically engaged regardless of the classroom or teacher they are assigned?

Within the new system, schools will incorporate several main themes from the community conversation tour. How the schools incorporate these themes in the context of a new framework has yet to be seen, but I envision that they will have high quality preschool programs, including full-day kindergarten, that allow children to enter their educational journey on an equal playing field with one another. This will require new

partnerships with the school and community to engage stakeholders in a coordinated effort that is unique to the needs of their families and students.

A new system must also address school culture, recognizing each student for her or his individual gifts and talents. This will require the reorganization of the school around the student, rather than attempting to fit the student into a system. This will also mandate a new role for school counselors and social workers to better identify the uniqueness of each child and tailor services individually instead of groups. Included in this model will be the need to have students more closely consider life and career exploration with connections to a broader community of experiences, including community service projects.

In addition, I envision a system where students spend more personalized time with a teacher, whether that means more time in school during the day or even spending more years with the same teacher. I also envision more project-based learning, specifically with those that occur over an extended time so that students can experience a deeper engagement in their learning. Just as children involved in organizations like the Girl Scouts and the Boy Scouts engage in projects in order to receive recognition, or badges, students will have similar experiences in school. We may even consider innovative new partnerships with those two organizations, as well as 4-H Clubs, where their programs are introduced into our schools for all to experience.

I am excited for the future of education in Kansas and honored to have been a part of this incredible journey. It is difficult to describe exactly what the future will look like for education, but I commit to ensuring we continue to push forward. The recommendations from the Committee of Ten were revolutionary more than a century

ago, but they no longer align with the needs of our schools, our communities, and the life experiences of our students as they enter adulthood.

### **Conclusion**

As mentioned earlier, this study's purpose is to highlight and connect critical narratives from the positionality of a Deputy Commissioner of Kansas Department of Education, juxtaposed against the state and local culture of a public education system dedicated to redesigning a new accreditation model.

Serving in that role of Deputy Commissioner, I had the experience of both a participant and researcher. There were times when I was a facilitator of events. At other times, I was analyzing and reflecting on a variety of resources that were used to inform the study. Part of my role was to look for key perspectives from all resources and find a balance that allowed for all voices to be heard. There were occasions when I was hearing voices from a national level as a result of ESSA. On a statewide level, I heard the voices of those who attended our community conversation tours. And there were the voices of Randy and me during our windshield conversations between events. It was important that I ensure that one voice did not overshadow another, causing one to be lost, or another to take control of this study.

Besides the uniqueness that my role of Deputy Commissioner played in influencing this study, my educational background, experiences, and positionality have also left a mark on the new accreditation model for Kansas. It has always been my opinion that there is more to the success of an organization, or an individual, than just one indicator. If every individual is unique in her or his own way, with different gifts, talents, hopes, and dreams, then there should be a multiple set of measures that define success in

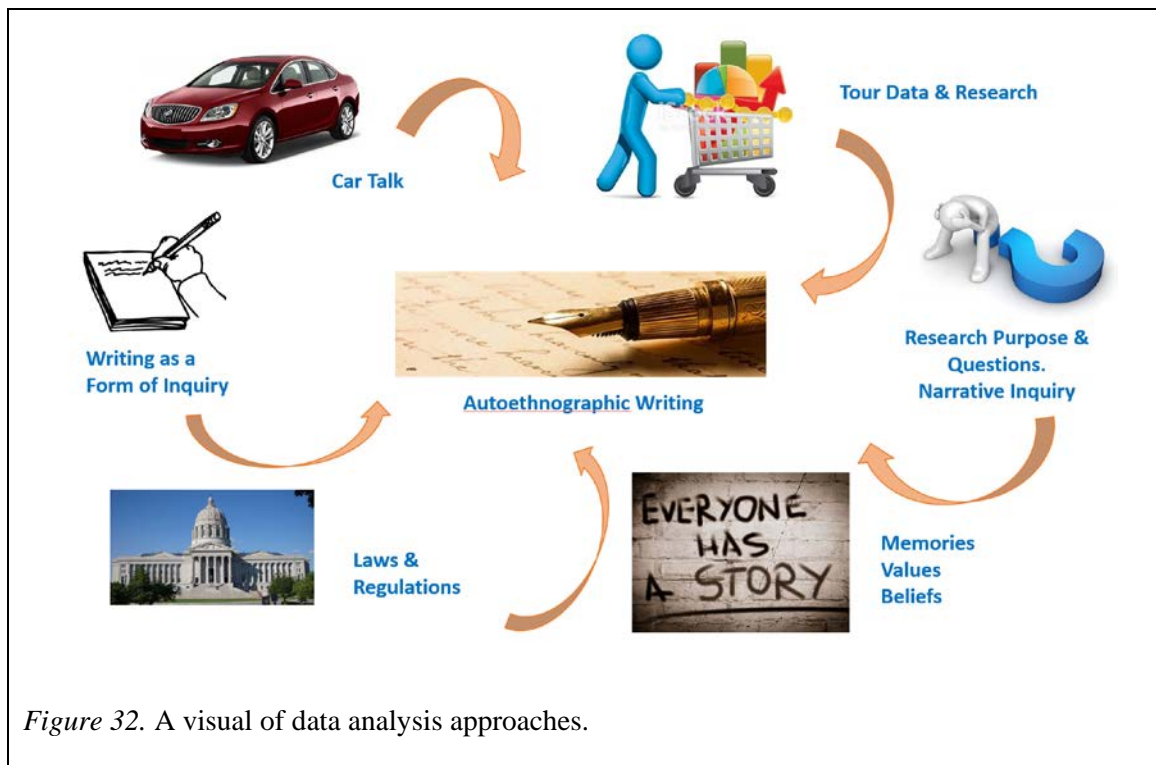


a unique way. The new accreditation model is designed to reflect and adapt to each district's uniqueness.

In the future, I will be able to use this study as a way to inform and remind Kansans that changing the educational system in order to improve desired student outcomes is what we collectively proclaimed we wanted. Changing a decades-old system will have its challenges, but this is what Kansans want – for ourselves as well as our students. This study will be a historical narrative of the events that will lead us to a new accreditation model. It is a reflective response to *why* Kansas is heading in this direction of educational reform. Our decisions moving forward, relative to the design of a new system, are grounded in this study.

## Epilogue

This dissertation was informed and sculptured with a variety of resources and methods that culminated into an autoethnographic narrative that allowed me to share personal, critically reflexive experiences juxtaposed against local and national discourses involving educational reform. Throughout the past few years, I navigated and negotiated my way through an analytic understanding of the varied pieces of information that informed this study (See *Figure 32*). This autoethnographic writing is influenced by multiple analytic processes. In this epilogue, I offer a narrative about my approaches.



*Figure 32.* A visual of data analysis approaches.

Prior to discussing the analytic moves I made, it is important to list what I have used as data sources for analysis. The data sources are both tangible and intangible. The intangible data sources are those I have “picked up” information from, without really systematically trying to collect information. Examples of intangible data sources would

be witnessing my family in various educational leadership roles. Below, I offer a list of data sources with which I engaged systematically:

- Field notes that included conversations with Randy while we were driving to and from events.
- Legislation that was occurring at the state and national levels.
- Data from the listening tours.
- Research and studies on educational reform.
- My personal experiences, beliefs and, values as I journaled through the study.
- My reflexive narrative inquiry through my writing.

The value of such data sources is based on how I understood them in relation to my research purpose and questions and the lens of narrative inquiry. Broadly speaking, the process of data analysis that informed this autoethnography was mostly through reflexive writing. The research purpose and questions offered me focus when I was working with large volumes of data. I used the research purpose and questions to understand whether the data actually responded in a meaningful way to either the purpose or questions that governed this study, or if it was simply *interesting* trivia. If I decided it was the former, I journaled about it. If it was the latter, I kept the journal put away. I used narrative theory to structure my thoughts and representation in each chapter. Where possible, I created narratives and adhered to several tenets of narrative theory to write descriptively, episodically, and with rich, thick details.

Car talks refer to my experiences of traveling and chatting with Randy after the community conversation tours. These tours were loaded with insight, and we would discuss our *takeaways* and impressions of events that were still fresh in our memories.

We would collectively analyze the events and discuss possibilities for educational reform. Of singular impact was a college student who shared her disappointment and anxiety over having no plan of study when she enrolled in college. For her, this led to college debt, wasted time, and a sense of loss.

I kept a journal during our tours, where I would write down points of emphasis before they were lost in memory. Throughout this study, I have returned to those journal notes, and repeatedly reflected on them, using writing as a process of inquiry and analysis as I integrated them where needed in this document.

For information gathered during the tour, we kept documentation of the participants' responses and worked with Dr. Bhattacharya to help analyze the information using NVivo and state-level and national-level discourses in educational reform. I identified the most powerful markers that influenced the move toward educational reform in Kansas and reflected on my role in bearing witness and facilitating such change.

As I was managing the information, I would hold onto pieces that began to be mentioned frequently in conversations (or mentioned with strong emphasis) and connected those to other sources of information within and outside the tour data. As an example, when I would hear repeatedly or with emphasis from Kansans during our tours that we needed to place more importance on early childhood education, I would look into educational-reform literature to locate national studies that supported this same desire.

As I worked my way through the study, there were times when I would sit down and write for 30 minutes, and at other times, for several hours. I did not have a pre-set outline or table of contents; instead, I would write about what was on my mind that day, relative to this study. That day's writing may have been informed by legislation with

regard to the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) and how that may influence our new accreditation model. Or I may have written about a recent experience, such as a conversation with an author who had just published an article on school reform. It was from these writings that I eventually identified patterns coming into alignment with the voice of Kansans, and the new vision that was being set by the state board of education. It was also through these writings that I identified the salient narratives that I shared in this dissertation.

In the early stages of my work, I was excited by the data and resources I was gathering to inform this study, but I eventually became overwhelmed with the sheer volume of information. This is where I wrote the narrative as a form of inquiry, and it helped me to glean more salient pieces out of each data source to be included in the new vision, and ultimately in my writing. For instance, I chronicled my reactions to the passage of new ESSA legislation and its considerable influence on our new accreditation model. Ultimately the ESSA law had a negligible effect on KESA and is thus mentioned less frequently in this study.

Of more significance is the fact that I am willing to admit to the significance of my own experiences, beliefs, and values. As no autoethnography is void of the author's own positionality, this dissertation, and the final Kansas vision and accreditation model, have several of my fingerprints visible throughout. In qualitative research, it is common practice to let the data speak for itself. However, the data received its voice through my own writing, so I believe that my *telling* of the data-stories was not shaped in some way by who I am. Navigating my way through the data with my writings and reflections

allowed me to craft a story that explores how I perceived the changes that eventually led to a new way of accrediting schools to achieve higher levels of student success.

Therefore, data analysis for this dissertation was non-linear, iterative, and without any concrete, pre-determined structure. Instead the practice of writing about information, insights, and ideas, and the ability to think creatively guided this example of analytic writing. In addition to the sources presented above, I read various autoethnographic publications to inform this dissertation. There are only a few autoethnographies in educational leadership and even less from the perspectives of an insider during an educational reform process. Therefore, I had no model in advance that set up the ways in which analysis and writing can occur within the context of this study. To whatever extent possible, I used writing as a space for questions that arose, the connections I made, the ways in which I understood narrative theory, and how I was motivated to do this work to bring some much-needed change in the educational culture of Kansas.

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## Appendix A: Operational Definitions

*Kansas State Board of Education (KSBE)* – refers to the 10 elected board members that serve to oversee K12 education in the state of Kansas.

<http://www.ksde.org/Default.aspx?tabid=92>

*Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE)* – means the state educational agency that works on behalf of the KSBE to ensure federal and state compliancy, and to move forward and implement the goals of the KSBE. <http://www.ksde.org/Home>

*Accredited* – means the status assigned to a school that meets the minimum performance and quality criteria established by the KSBE.

<http://www.ksde.org/Default.aspx?tabid=394>

*Quality Performance Accreditation (QPA)* – means the accreditation model adopted by the KSBE in 1992 to hold public and some private schools accountable to both quality and performance criteria. <http://www.ksde.org/Default.aspx?tabid=394>

*U.S. Department of Education (USDE)* – refers to the federal educational agency that provides oversight to states with regards to federal educational laws. <http://www.ed.gov/>

*Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* – the federal law that was passed in 1965 to govern federal educational laws. From the years 2000-2015, ESEA was given the name No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and is referred to as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). <http://www.ed.gov/ESSA>

*College and Career Ready (CCR)* – as defined by the KSBE, a successful Kansas graduate has the academic preparation, cognitive preparation, technical skills, employability skills, and civic engagement to be successful in postsecondary institutions,

or directly into the workforce, without the need for remediation.

<http://www.ksde.org/Default.aspx?tabid=1007>

*21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills* – commonly referred to as “soft skills, or employability skills,” that includes skill like grit, conscientiousness, work ethic, team work, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, agreeableness, etc. <https://k12.thoughtfullearning.com/FAQ/what-are-21st-century-skills>

## Appendix B: Description of Events

Description of Events, the number of occurrences, the number of participants, and the number of responses received.

| <b>Event</b>                | <b># of Occurrence</b> | <b># of Participants</b> | <b>Responses</b> |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| Community Conversation Tour | 20                     | 1,800 +                  | 861              |
| Business/Industry Tour      | 7                      | 130 +                    | 38               |
| KEEN Conference             | 1                      | 300 +                    | 28               |
| Online Survey               | 1                      | 109                      | 109              |
| Reunion Tour                | 10                     | 900 +                    | 627              |

### Appendix C: Business Participation

*Participation of Businesses by the number of employees and the percent of total attending.*

| # of Employees | # of Businesses | % of Business at this level |
|----------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| 0              | 2               | 1.8                         |
| 1 – 10         | 28              | 25.2                        |
| 11 – 50        | 28              | 25.2                        |
| 51 – 100       | 8               | 7.2                         |
| 101 – 150      | 6               | 5.4                         |
| 151 – 200      | 6               | 5.4                         |
| 201 - 500      | 14              | 12.6                        |
| > 500          | 19              | 17.1                        |