

Impact Story: Executive Leadership Forum in Kansas and Missouri – Guiding Leaders Guiding Change

In response to the rapidly changing context of delivering education during COVID-19, Region 12 Comprehensive Center (R12CC) launched a monthly forum to engage school superintendents in conversations about leading change during times of uncertainty. Drawing on research and experience from multiple fields, sessions are designed to help leaders broaden their understanding of better practices, promote trust and collaboration, and identify and replicate bright spots—pockets of success—to achieve better results.

Key to its design is the opportunity for superintendents to network with fellow executives who are experiencing similar challenges. The forum provides a safe space for sharing insights on how to engage in continuous school improvement processes while navigating significant changes in education.

Over three years, R12CC has facilitated more than 40 executive leadership forum sessions for over 100 Kansas and Missouri superintendents.

Collaborative Format

Designed as both professional and peer learning, each hour-long session begins with a plenary discussion centered on research-based practices. In small, facilitated breakout group discussions, guiding questions are posed that allow participants to reflect on their leadership practice while thinking forward toward innovation, such as considering “safe experiments” to take to prepare for teacher shortages and using educational, organizational, and political levers for change to create conditions that lead to great student learning experiences.

During these small group conversations, each participant can share what is or is not working in their district and learn how others are applying evidence-based practices in their own school and community contexts. Finally, a closing plenary session asks superintendents to think about how they will take what they have learned back to their district to affect positive change.



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**Participating Superintendent
R12CC Executive Leadership Forum**

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During its initial design, R12CC collaborated with representatives from the Kansas Education Leadership Institute, Kansas Association of Education Service Agencies, and Kansas Association of School Boards to promote information sharing and conduct needs sensing to inform forum content. This collaboration represents the first time these organizations have worked together to support Kansas school leaders. This resulted in consistent professional learning across the state which was critical as systems learned together how to adapt during the pandemic.

In Missouri, representatives from the Missouri Association of School Administrators join forum sessions to gauge needs in the field and inform their professional learning for other superintendents they support.

Evolving for Different Audiences

Initially created to support Kansas superintendents in the variable and complex context of COVID-19, the forums have evolved to support various audiences. For example, the executive leadership forum was so well-received by Kansas superintendents that R12CC launched a forum to support Missouri superintendents to strengthen instructional practice and student learning.

Staff members in the area of curriculum and instruction or professional development were invited to join superintendents for a four-part series focused on developing teacher talent. Further, customized sessions are designed for new participant cohorts to provide the context necessary to seamlessly acclimate to the group.

Feedback-Driven Content

From examining the use of ESSER resources to advance higher student performance to addressing the social and emotional needs of students and school staff in the wake of trauma (an example topic is displayed in Figure 1), the sessions are driven by emerging needs and common concerns identified by participants.

The forums have disseminated key best practices such as identifying bright spots as catalysts for positive change, fostering social and emotional learning through asset-based thinking, and using unlearning and reflective thinking to recalibrate and innovate in schools.

Avoiding “solutionitis”

“Solutionitis is the propensity to jump quickly on a solution before fully understanding the exact problem to be solved. It is a form of groupthink in which a set of shared beliefs results in an incomplete analysis of the problem to be addressed and fuller consideration of potential problem-solving alternatives.”

(Bryk et al., 2015, p. 24)

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Figure 1. Executive Leadership Forum sample topic

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes focus on superintendents’ increased knowledge of effective leadership practices to support school and district leaders as they navigate change. In Missouri, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has responded to identified needs by refining their approach to supporting principals in the state through improvements to the Missouri Leadership Development System. In Kansas, identified goals center on deepening stakeholders’ understanding of the technical and adaptive challenges related to navigating education policy changes and building capacity for continuous improvement at the state and local levels.

To examine the effectiveness and impact of the executive leadership forum sessions, participants were surveyed about their experience. Nearly all respondents reported that the sessions were high quality (97%), useful (97%), relevant (94%), and met expectations (97%). As one superintendent commented, “[I appreciate] matching research with application while being able to have dialogue and discussion with colleagues from my region with districts of varying sizes.”

Ninety-four percent of respondents agreed that they had increased their understanding or knowledge of the issues discussed. The majority of respondents reported applying what was discussed to challenges in their school district (90%) and sharing information from the forum with others (87%). Another participant stated, “The balance of new learning and opportunities to reflect and connect with others is invaluable. In many cases, I am able to immediately apply what I am learning and share it with our leadership team.”

Results and Impact

Participating superintendents and state education agencies are encouraged to further disseminate and utilize forum materials to reach more school and district leaders across the state and build their capacity to innovate and accelerate student learning. Superintendents can use the materials as a conversational guide to build the collective thinking of their principals and support district leadership teams to make strategic decisions and apply research to practice within the district's context.

The forums also enable R12CC and state education agency members to identify needs emerging in the field as well as supports superintendents might provide to school leaders.

The executive leadership forums are responsive to changing situations. By adapting content based on real-time needs and engaging other district leaders, such as talent managers and human resources professionals, in focused conversations, participants are better positioned to use the professional learning to evolve as leaders and address challenges in their district. Providing superintendents the opportunity to share and reflect on their lessons learned and promising practices creates the conditions for success for leaders, teachers, and students.



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