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# Significant Elements in Collaborative Training Within A Cohort Structure

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## Introduction

After long difficult legal battles for equity in Texas School Finance, in January 1995, the Texas Supreme Court ruled state finance law constitutional. However, the Court noted that an "evidentiary void" remained to be addressed regarding inequities in school facilities. This position, in essence, directed the state legislature to correct the facilities inequities in property poor school districts, many which had booming student enrollments, overcrowded schools and no funding for additional facilities.

In response to the Texas Supreme Court, the 75th Legislature of the State of Texas (1997) passed Chapter 46 of House Bill 4 entitled "School Facilities Allotment, Equalization for School Facilities." The state committed \$200,000,000 a year as leverage for school facilities' bond debt for the life of the respective bond issues.

Embracing the new law during the 1997-98 school year, seventeen (17) schools in the Region I Education Service Center area (South Texas) passed bond elections and sold bonds to build instructional school facilities. All of these districts are growing, but some are increasing in student population at extremely fast rates. The Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District (ECISD) is one such entity.

The District grew an average of 3.22% per year from 1992 through 1999. This reflects an increase of 3895 students from 17,282 to 21,177. The projected student population growth for the next decade (through 2009) is an average of 4.3% per year. This, of course, will heighten the demand for teachers and school administrators respectively. With state support to pay indebtedness at 70%, in 1997, the ECISD sold \$50,000,000 in bonds to build a new high school, a new middle school, and four new elementary schools in a two-year

period. This accelerated effort to ease student overcrowding created imposing needs for new administrative teams to manage the new schools.

The South Texas Leadership Development Academy was born in response to the rapid facilities' construction in the ECISD. In February 1998, ECISD administrators met with the Dean of the College of Education of the University of Texas Pan American. They expressed the need for the University to create a fast-track training program that would offer students all required units within a fourteen-month period. This would provide for at least 12 teachers to assume entry-level administrator positions in September 1999. The Chair of the Department of Educational Administration and Supervision in conjunction with other faculty, Region I personnel and ECISD officials, created the structure and program to be implemented. Other school districts in the geographic area were invited to join, however, due to the short notice, and complex student selection process, only the ECISD chose to participate.

The district announced the program, accepted applications, screened the applicants and recommended twelve candidates to the University. All of the candidates were admitted on the condition that all admission requirements for the graduate school and the Department would be completed by the end of December 1998. All students complied. After one week of intense study, which began in early June 1998, one student dropped out. A second student lost a bout with cancer in December 1998. The ten who remained, completed their Master's Degrees in May 1999, and the remaining 15 semester credit hours for principal certification in August 1999. Nine of ten students passed the rigorous state certification test by the same time. The district then employed all of the students in entry level or mid-management positions for the 1999-2000 school year.

### **Review of the Literature**

The project described in this paper has two main objectives, 1) to create a "learning community" of future educational leaders for a given district and 2) to assure the district of an ample supply of newly minted educational leaders. This review focuses on those two goals.

As noted by Hart (1995) schools today are often complex, chaotic places that stretch the traditional, top-down model of leadership to the breaking point. Moreover, educational leaders in training are often not given a chance to exercise leadership before they are thrust into an administrative post. Senge (1990) emphasized that the efficacy of an organization is developed when individuals' capacities to lead are enhanced; that creating a learning community involves building a shared vision and team learning.

Katzenmeyer (1997) wrote that when teachers are prepared as leaders, "... these teachers along with their principals have a real chance at making change in their schools. Teacher leadership and learning communities in schools are the practices that hold promise for developing the capacity within schools for change that impacts student outcomes" (p. 1).

Learning communities are sometimes difficult to develop because of many barriers to change. Fullan (1993) notes that planning for successful change requires the system to change and that, in turn, requires individuals to change. Professional development centers/schools/programs tie together the teacher who is preparing to lead with the leaders that govern the organizational culture of schools. These activities, emerging from recent reform efforts, have made the development of teacher leadership a focus (Berry & Catoe,

1994; Darling-Hammond, et al., 1996; Dempsey, 1992; Lemleck et al., 1994; Smylie, 1996).

In a study of 24 Professional Development Schools, Czaja et al. (1998) have shown us the significant benefit of this approach to leadership development. They focused on "Mentoring" an activity which is part of this project and concluded that, "Mentoring is clearly associated with a more positive view of collegiality, recognition, developmental focus, and, in two cases, autonomy. With mentor training the dimensions of open communications and a positive environment were also viewed as significantly more positive."

Teachers are the usual, ready source of educational expertise and a logical source for new leadership, yet the process of making an educational administrator out of a teacher does not always work for the benefit of the schools in which they teach. The most qualified candidates for administrative posts may not be ready in time to meet district needs and often schools lose their most valuable personnel to other districts where the need for new principals occurs at the time the new administrator graduates and is able to serve (Schein, 1978).

### **Methods**

In this study, a single-case study approach (Denny, 1978) was used in which key constituents involved in the South Texas Leadership Development Academy were interviewed. Five different groups of constituents were given questionnaires that contained both structured response and open-ended questions (Bradburn, 1982). The five groups surveyed were: 1) employees selected for the Academy, and who also completed the 14-month degree and certification process; 2) employees who applied for the Academy but were not chosen to participate; 3) members of the district selection committee; 4) mentors (principals) of the Academy's interns; and 5) university professors, including adjunct faculty, who worked with members of the Academy's cohort.

A total of 47 applicants for the Academy were mailed a survey. Ten were Edinburg CISD employees who were accepted to the Academy in 1998, and 37 were employees who applied for the Academy but were not selected. Of the 10 selected for the Academy, eight returned the completed survey, or 80%. Of the remaining 37 applicants, only 11 returned their surveys, a percentage of about 30. Among all applicants for the Academy, the total survey return rate was 40%.

All applicants for the Academy, selected or not selected, were mailed the same survey. The survey solicited questions about demographic information such as age, ethnicity, gender, years with the district, grade level taught, and undergraduate grade point average. If selected for the Academy, applicants were asked to provide their level of satisfaction with the courses offered, scheduling of classes, professors, mentors, and internship experiences. They were also asked if they passed the certification exam (ExCET) given by the State of Texas to all graduates of university Mid-Management preparation programs the first time they took it. Applicants were asked to indicate whether or not they were hired for an administrative position in the district upon completion of the Academy. If not selected for the Academy, applicants were asked if they decided to pursue their certification on their own, and if they had changed jobs (specifically, if they had accepted an administrative position). Applicants were also asked about their relationships with the selection committee members. One concern of the departmental faculty at UTPA was that those selected for the cohort would be those who the sitting administrator wanted to favor, the old "who you know" versus "what you know" criteria for selection. (See figures 1 and 2.)

The South Texas Leadership Development Academy relied extensively upon the use of experienced administrators of the District who served as mentors to the cohort students. Of the eight mentors who were surveyed, five (63%) returned the survey. Mentors were asked how long they mentored their intern and if they were satisfied with their intern. They were also asked to provide information on the types of experiences provided to their interns, and which ones were perceived to be most valuable. Mentors were asked about changes that could or should be made in the program, and about any feedback (positive or negative) they may have received throughout the Academy's lifespan (from other administrators, people not selected for the program or any other person.) (See figure 4.)

All but one of the nine university faculty members responded to the survey (89%). Demographic information such as years teaching at the university, age, gender, education level, and faculty status was collected. Two questions were posed to faculty members about the Academy experiences. Faculty members were asked to compare their Academy teaching experiences with those of the traditional graduate setting courses. Those who were first-time teachers were asked to describe their experiences with the Academy. (See figure 5.)

Participants were selected by a team of three ECISD administrators. All three selection committee members returned their surveys. Members of the selection committee were the district's curriculum directors and the assistant superintendent for personnel. Selection committee members were given the list of applicants and were asked to identify those they knew as close friends, as friends, as professional colleagues, relatives, through community activities, or just by their names. They were also asked if they thought the selection process resulted in the best candidates being picked and if the process could be improved and how. Finally, they were asked if they had received any feedback about the program. (See figure 6).

## Findings

Survey findings are illustrated in the following tables.

### Applicant (Non-selected) Response

Applicant	Grade Level Taught	Years in District	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	GPA	Pursued Degree	Changed Jobs (Admin.)
#1	Elementary	7-10	Male	28-33	Hispanic	3.1-3.5	Yes	No
#2	Middle	7-10	Male	45+	Hispanic	2.5-3.0	No	No
#3	Elementary	10+	Female	34-39	Hispanic	3.1-3.5	No	No
#4	Middle	4-7	Female	28-33	Hispanic	2.5-3.0	No	No
#5	Elementary	7-10	Female	28-33	Hispanic	2.5-3.0	No	No

#6	High	4-7	Female	22-27	Hispanic	3.1-3.5	No	No
#7	High	1-3	Male	39-44	Hispanic	2.5-3.0	No	No
#8	Elementary	10+	Female	45+	Hispanic	3.1-3.5	No	No
#9	High	7-10	Female	45+	Hispanic	3.1-3.5	Yes	No
#10	Elementary	4-7	Female	28-33	Hispanic	2.0-2.4	Yes	No
#11	High	10+	Male	45+	Hispanic	2.5-3.0	No	No

Figure 1

### *Applicants*

Of the eleven applicants not selected for the academy that responded to the questionnaire, five were elementary teachers, two taught middle school, and four taught at the high school level. Seven were women, and all applicants were Hispanic. Four had been teaching in the district for seven to ten years, three for over ten years, three for four to seven years, and one had only taught in the district for one to three years, but had 18 years of total teaching experience. Five applicants had undergraduate grade point averages between 3.1 and 3.4, five had grade point averages between 2.5 and 3.0, and only one had a 2.0 to a 2.4 grade point average. Only three of the eleven decided to pursue their mid-management certification on their own, and none of the applicants were promoted to an administrative position after the 1998–1999 school year.

Several of the applicants provided comments at the end of their surveys. Applicant number one wrote the following:

*I applied two years in a row and was rejected both times. I know most of the people that applied and my GPA, along with my GRE scores were higher than many selected. I also know that some applicants had less years of experience than me. If we are to have a solid administrative program in the future, I would expect to see the right people selected.*

Applicant number seven provided several comments at the end of his survey. They are as follows:

*I could not find anyone to write a reference because, at that time, I was new to the district. When I asked an SBDM member, she informed me she had already written a couple of these and did not want to write any more. I turned in my application without references for this reason. I feel that I would have been a good choice.*

Applicant number eleven, who felt slighted by not being chosen, commented as follows:

*It was obvious that they wanted young people. I felt I did a good job in the interview, but I think they already had their minds made up. I don't think they wanted to invest in me seeing how I could retire in the near future.*

All applicants were asked to identify which selection committee members they knew as close friends, relatives, professionally only, or through community activities. Three applicants knew all three selection committee members professionally, three applicants did not indicate that they knew any of the selection committee members, two applicants knew just one selection committee member professionally, and two knew two members professionally. One applicant was a relative of a selection committee member, a close friend of another, and knew the third member professionally.

### Intern Response

Interns	Grade Level Taught	Years in District	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	GPA	Courses	Schedule	Professors	Mentors	Experiences
#1	Middle	4-7	Female	34-39	Hispanic	3.1-3.5	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied
#2	Middle	4-7	Female	28-33	White	3.1-3.5	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied
#3	Elem.	10+	Female	45+	Hispanic	3.1-3.5	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Not Satisfied	Satisfied
#4	Middle	7-10	Female	28-33	Hispanic	2.5-3.0	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied
#5	High	10+	Male	39-44	Hispanic	2.0-2.4	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied
#6	High	4-7	Male	39-44	Hispanic	3.1-3.5	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied
#7	Elem.	1-3	Female	34-39	Hispanic	3.6+	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied
#8	Elem.	10+	Female	45+	Hispanic	2.5-3.0	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied

Interns	ExCET	Subsequent ExCET?	Changed Jobs?
#1	Yes	N/A	Yes
#2	Yes	N/A	Yes
#3	No	Yes	No
#4	Yes	N/A	Yes
#5	Yes	N/A	Yes

#6	Yes	N/A	Yes
#7	Yes	N/A	No
#8	No	No	Yes

Figure 2

### *Intern Profile*

Eight of ten interns replied to the survey. Three were elementary teachers, three were middle school teachers, and two were high school teachers. Only two respondents were male and all were Hispanic with the exception of one White respondent. The ages of the interns varied, with two interns being between the ages of 28 and 33. Two were between 34 and 39 years of age, two were between 39 and 44 years of age, and two were over 45 years old. Three of the interns had 4-7 years of service in the district, three had over ten years of service, one had 7-10 years, and one had 1-3 years. Half of the respondents had grade point averages between 3.1 and 3.5. One intern had a grade point average of 3.6 or better, two fell between 2.5 and 3.0, and one was between 2.0 and 2.4. All respondents were satisfied with the courses that were offered, the scheduling of courses, the professors, mentors and experiences, with the exception of one intern who expressed dissatisfaction with the mentor(s). Six out of the eight respondents passed the ExCET (certification exam) on the first try, while one passed the second time it was taken. One intern has not passed the test. Also, six of the eight respondents changed their professions from teaching to administration after the program. The other two were already in supervisory positions.

### **Comparison of Applicants Not Selected and Selected**

Survey Group	Grade Level Taught	Average Years in District	Gender	Average Age	Ethnicity	Average GPA	Relationship To Selection Committee
Applicants Not Selected	Elem. – 45%	7.5 years	63.6% – Female	36.8 Years	100% Hispanic	2.95	Close Friend – 1
	Middle – 18%		36.4% – Male				Professionally – 13
	High – 36%						By name only – 15
							Relative – 1
Interns	Elem. – 37.5%	7.1 years	60% – Female	37.75 Years	87.5% Hispanic	3.06	Close Friend – 1
	Middle – 37.5%		40% – Male		12.5% White		Professionally – 20
	High – 25%						By name – 3

Figure 3



### Comparison Chart

Interns that were selected for the Academy represented a good cross-section of grade levels. Applicants not selected for the Academy were mostly elementary level teachers. Few were middle school teachers. The average years of teaching in the district, gender, age and ethnicity did not vary much between the two groups. Applicants had spent about seven years in the district, were mostly female (over 60%), were in their mid- to late-thirties, and were mostly all Hispanic (one White applicant). The mean grade point average of the interns was slightly higher (.11) than the mean GPA of the applicants not selected.

All applicants were asked to indicate which selection committee members they knew. Applicants were asked if the selection committee members were friends, close friends, relatives, if they knew them only professionally, or by name only. The non-selected applicants knew two more committee members as close friends or relatives. Most applicants identified the committee members as professional relations only.

### Mentor Response

Mentors	Time spent with intern	Satisfied with intern	Types of experience provided intern	Most valuable experience provided	Program changes recommended	Feedback
#1	Less than 3 weeks	Yes	A,b,e,h,i,k,l	i	None	None
#2	10-18 weeks	Yes	a,b,c,f,g,h,j,l	h,j	Comment	None
#3	6-9 weeks	Yes	A,d,f,h,j	a	Comment	Positive
#4	More than 18 weeks	Yes	a,b,c,d,e,f,g,h,i,j,k	a,c,e,g,j	Comment	Positive
#5	More than 18 weeks	Yes	a,b,c,e,f,g,h,j,l	a,l	None	Positive

Figure 4

### Mentors

Five of eight principals responded to the six-question questionnaire. All respondents were satisfied with their interns, and three stated that they had received positive feedback on the program. Respondent number four reported that the fast-paced program was facilitated by the support of the cohort. Two respondents did not indicate whether or not they had received any feedback on the program. The time spent with interns varied from 6 weeks to

over 18 weeks. Several interns spent time at more than one campus with more than one mentor.

Principals were given a list of intern experiences and were asked to indicate which ones they provided for their interns. These included:

- a. Curriculum and instruction
- b. Student disciplinary procedures
- c. Budget development
- d. Duties at extracurricular activities
- e. Attendance/PEIMS/other accountability procedures
- f. Student testing
- g. ARD's and 504 meetings
- h. Parent conferences
- i. Board meetings/committee meetings/SBDM meetings
- j. Classroom observations
- k. Expulsion hearings
- l. Other

All respondents indicated that their interns were provided experience with "curriculum and instruction and parent conferences." Four respondents stated that "student disciplinary procedures" were part of the intern's duties. Three provided "accountability system experiences" for the interns. Three included their interns on "budget development." Only two indicated that their interns were required to be at extracurricular activities. Four included interns on "student testing." Three of the mentors said interns attended Admission, Review and Dismissal and Section 504 meetings. Four included interns in various other administrative meetings. Two allowed interns to experience "expulsion hearings." Other experiences for mentor number one's intern included "growth plans for staff" and "dealing with staff discipline." Mentor number two and mentor number five allowed their interns to be involved in the Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS) evaluations of teachers.

Three mentors indicated that the most valuable experience for the interns was the curriculum and instruction experience. Two indicated that classroom observations were important. One believed meetings were most valuable. One cited parent meetings as being important. One thought the PDAS was most important, and one indicated that budget development, accountability, and ARD meetings were most valuable.

When asked what, if any, program changes should be made, respondents number one and number five had no comments. The other comments are as follows:

*Respondent number two indicated that the program's demands were excessive, and recommended a slower-paced program.*

*Respondent number three stated that more discipline and Site-based Decision Making committee experiences would have helped the intern more.*

*Respondent number four stated that the program was excellent, but that the intern experience should only be conducted in the final semester of the program.*

### Faculty Response

Faculty	Years Teaching at UTPA	Faculty Status	Highest Degree	Age	Gender	Cohort Experiences (All Positive)	Experiences of the Inexperienced
#1	1 year	Adjunct	Doctoral	31-40	Female	Comment	Positive
#2	1 year	Adjunct	Doctoral	41-50	Male	Comment	Positive
#3	6 years	Associate	Doctoral	51-60	Male	Comment	N/A
#4	2 years	Assistant	Doctoral	31-40	Male	Comment	N/A
#5	4 years	Assistant	Doctoral	51-60	Male	Comment	N/A
#6	2 years	Adjunct	Masters	41-50	Male	Comment	N/A
#7	28 years	Full	Doctoral	51-60	Male	Comment	N/A
#8	0	Adjunct	Masters	51-60	Male	Comment	N/A

Figure 5

#### *Faculty Response*

Eight of nine faculty members who instructed the interns responded to the survey. Of the eight, only one had not previously taught graduate students at the university and only one was a full professor. Four respondents were adjunct faculty, two were assistant professors, and one was an associate professor. All but two respondents had doctorates and only one was female. The faculty members were also varied in their ages. Half of the respondents were in their fifties, two respondents were in their forties, and two respondents were in their thirties.

Faculty members were asked if their experiences with teaching the cohort were different from teaching the traditional graduate classes. They were asked to explain the differences, if any. All respondents had positive comments, which ranged from the faculty members truly enjoying the group to descriptions of the cohort being cohesive, committed, and dedicated to each other. Other comments about the cohort were reported such as students taking the initiative and being exceptional and eager. Classes were also reported to be fast-paced and more interactive. The two first-year cohort instructors responded positively to their experiences.

### Selection Committee Response

Committee Member	Relationship to Applicants	Best Candidates Picked?	Improve Process?	District Goals Met?	Any Complaints?
#1	None	Yes	No	Yes — comment	No — comment
#2	27 professional colleagues	Yes	Yes — comment	Yes	No
#3	2 friends and 15 professional colleagues	Yes	No	Yes — comment	No

Figure 6

#### *Selection Committee Response*

Three individuals made up the selection committee and all three responded to the survey. One was an assistant superintendent (respondent number one), and the other two were district curriculum directors (respondents two and three).

Respondents were given the list of applicants and were asked to circle those they knew personally. Of those they circled, they were asked to indicate which of them were 1) close friends; 2) friends; 3) professional colleagues; 4) community activity acquaintances; 5) relatives; or 6) just by names. Respondent number one indicated that she did not know any of them. Respondent number two indicated she knew 27 of them as professional colleagues only, though she did not circle the names. Respondent number three circled 17 names and indicated that two were friends and 15 were professional colleagues only. All stated that the best applicants were picked for the Academy. When asked about improving the selection process, only respondent number indicated that professional experience should weigh more heavily in the selection process. All three respondents agreed that district goals were met through the process. Respondent number one commented that “good, qualified administrators were available for our district’s growing needs.” Respondent number three indicated that the best possible potential candidates were trained for administrative positions. None of the respondents indicated that they had received complaints about the process. Respondent number one stated that compliments were received for the proactive approach in meeting the needs of the district.

### Discussion

The South Texas Leadership Development Academy has been judged a success in that the goals were met; that is, the ECISD had a ready cadre of new administrators just in time for new school openings. The process of selection appears to have not been biased by individual applicant’s personal knowledge of the selection committee members, or vice versa, and the University’s standards were all met. Evidence of the success of the program can also be found in that 80% of all Academy members passed the ExCET examination in their first try.

The UTPA Educational Leadership Department has a perfect record of overall passing rate (100%) but only (80%) pass it in the first try. This cohort group was thus average in this regard. The faculty who taught the cohort (skeptical at first of the fast track program) found the students to be superior to those in the regular program with regard to their ability to work as a group and their focus on the goal. This is to be expected since all students took all classes as a separate group and they had the additional "carrot" of knowing that if they finished the program on time and passed the ExCET, they would be employed as administrators. That promise was also realized.

It should not be overlooked that the students of the STLDA cohort were working full-time and taking fifteen to eighteen semester hours per semester over a period of fourteen months. Typically an intern would spend half a day in the classroom at their home campus, and half a day performing administrative intern duties at another campus. The students spent every evening, and many Saturdays, in classes at the university. The intensity of the program did not discourage any of the students, with the exception of one who left the program in the first week.

Additional questions have been raised by this program. The question of equity to other employees of the District who are pursuing the regular preparation program without the benefits given the cohorts, has been raised by some faculty, members of the cohort group selected as well as by those not selected. It is true that the accelerated training, intern pre-selection by the employer, the benefit of a smaller class size, and the extra advantage of the mentoring experience, has created a group which has been favored by the university and by the district. This has created a perception of inequity to those students who were not selected.

The second STLDA cohort was selected in the summer of 1999. This cohort consists of five employees of the Edinburg CISD, and six employees of the La Joya Independent School District. La Joya ISD is growing even more rapidly than Edinburg; therefore, La Joya's need for administrators is also considerable. To meet the fast paced student population growth, La Joya is currently building a new high school, middle school, and several elementary schools. A follow-up study of the eleven interns participating in the second cohort will be conducted in the Fall of 2000.

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