



Wisconsin  
Evaluation  
Collaborative

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# First Year Superintendents Academy Case Study

*for the* Wisconsin Foundation for Educational Administration



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## About the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative

The Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC) is housed at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. WEC's team of evaluators supports youth-serving organizations and initiatives through culturally responsive and rigorous program evaluation. Learn more at <http://www.wec.wceruw.org>.



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## Section I

# Introduction

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# Introduction

The Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC) at UW-Madison partners with the Wisconsin Foundation for Educational Administration (WFEA) to evaluate their professional learning series supported by federal Title II funding. The WFEA oversees the series that is developed and facilitated by the Association of Wisconsin School Administrators (AWSA) and the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators (WASDA). A variety of professional learning opportunities are offered to support school and district leadership development. As part of the evaluation, WEC conducted a case study on the First Year Superintendents (FYS) academy.

According to WASDA, 61 school districts had new superintendents in the 2021-22 school year. Within these 61 districts, 44 superintendents were classified as either new to the role or new to the state of Wisconsin. WEC was asked to highlight the First Year Superintendents academy because it serves as an induction program for the large number of new superintendents in Wisconsin.

This case study builds on four years of observations, interviews, survey data, and a previous analytic memo about the FYS academy drafted in 2020. The current case study is guided by two evaluation questions:

1. How do academies support new district leaders?
2. What are the perceived impacts on leadership practices from attending a WASDA professional learning academy?

In order to address the two evaluation questions, WEC interviewed six randomly selected participants of the FYS academy, observed an FYS academy session, reviewed documents that included meeting agendas and related resources, and administered a survey to the forty 2021-22 FYS participants. Of the 40 participants, 29 completed the survey, for a 73% response rate.

This report first presents an overview of the FYS academy, then findings from current participant experiences and the ways in which participants utilize the learning. The report concludes with reflection questions for academy planners and facilitators.

## Overview of First Year Superintendents Academy

The First Year Superintendents academy provides “just in time” learning for new superintendents. The “just in time” nature of the academy has significantly grown over the last few years. In 2019-20, the FYS academy included six in-person workshop sessions; the previous year it was five in-person sessions. In 2020-21, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the academy shifted to a virtual format. In addition, in order to provide support to the new superintendents as they navigated the impacts of the pandemic on their schools, the academy hosted more frequent sessions starting in July 2020 and continuing throughout the entire academic year, for a total of 26 sessions.

Prior to the start of the 2021-22 FYS academy series, facilitators reflected on what worked during the 2020-21 year and the feedback they had received, restructuring the sessions and the content based on those reflections. In the 2021-22 school year, 22 FYS workshops were offered; five were in-person, and the remaining sessions were virtual. The year kicked off with two, back-to-back, full-day in-person sessions. Over the course of the year, there were three additional in-person, all-day sessions aligned with the WASDA fall conference, the winter state education convention, and the spring WASDA educational conference, respectively. The virtual sessions were 90 minutes. All sessions were recorded and made available for participants to reference. For each session, knowledge and practice objectives were identified and shared with participants. Topics covered in both the in-person and virtual sessions included:

- School board
  - o Board relationships, roles and responsibilities, the annual meeting, and school board elections
  - o Open meeting laws
- Policy and legislative updates
- School finance
  - o Fund balance, financial management, and budget development
  - o ESSER funding
  - o Setting the levy and property tax bills
  - o How student counts impact school funding
- Communications and social media
  - o Community engagement
  - o Crisis communications
- Student achievement
  - o 100-day plans
  - o Equity and achievement for all
  - o Five levers to improve learning
- Leadership
  - o Change theory and creating an engaged workforce
  - o Shifting mindsets
  - o Executive presence
  - o Dealing with conflict
  - o Superintendent evaluations
- Human resources
  - o Contracts and contract renewals
  - o Staffing needs and salary
  - o Employee handbooks
- Legal counsel and guidance
  - o Public records law
  - o Student discipline and expulsion
- Referendum 101

The academy is facilitated by Kathleen Cooke and Michael Gallagher (KCMG Consulting). Dr. Cooke is a former superintendent, and Mr. Gallagher brings a business background with him to the academies. Several additional speakers present content regularly. Those include the Baird school finance team, Joe Donovan (Donovan Group), Kirk Strang, (Strang Law), Drew Howick (Howick Associates), Mike Julka (Boardman Clark), Jon Bales (WASDA), and Jim Rickabaugh (consultant). Other guest speakers included John Forester (School Administrators Alliance), Doug Witte (Boardman Clark), Laura Adams (DPI), Bob Butler (Wisconsin Association of School Boards), and over ten current superintendents.

All new superintendents in the state of Wisconsin are offered coaching support through WASDA. Of the 40 FYS participants in 2021-22, 38 engaged in coaching. Coaches are veteran or retired superintendents who regularly meet with the new superintendents to reinforce FYS content and provide individualized coaching support.

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## Section 2

# Findings



# Findings

## Participation and Attendance

As noted above, 40 new superintendents enrolled in the FYS academy. When survey respondents were asked how they learned about the academy, the majority indicated they learned about it through a WASDA communication (76%), followed by a colleague recommendation (17%) and supervisor recommendation (7%). In follow-up, respondents were asked to identify from a list of options what motivated them to attend the academy; they were allowed to select all that applied. As shown in Table I, to support their professional learning was the top motivation for participating.

Several survey respondents made additional comments about their motivation to participate in the academy, including:

- “To be prepared to best serve my school district and community.”
- “To build a supportive network.”
- “I have a great deal of respect for Jon Bales and WASDA and wanted to learn from this group.”
- “Opportunity to have a mentor.”

**Table I: Participant Motivation**

MOTIVATION	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS
To support my professional learning	86%
To support district priorities	62%
The academy was recommended by a colleague	59%

**Table 2: Participation in Virtual Sessions**

PERCENT OF VIRTUAL SESSIONS ATTENDED	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS
75% - 100%	62%
50% - 74%	24%
25% - 49%	3%
Less than 24%	10%

In our follow-up interviews, we also asked about motivation to attend. Responses were similar to those from the survey. Many shared that it was “strongly suggested” by peer superintendents and/or their predecessor. In addition, a couple interviewees noted specifically wanting to learn from Jon Bales and Kathy Cooke because they are “well known” as being resources in the field. Lastly, several indicated they knew it was a “good opportunity to learn and grow.”

The survey included items about attendance at the in-person sessions and participation in the virtual sessions. Of the survey respondents, 59% said they were able to attend all of the in-person events. Scheduling conflicts was the most frequently cited reason for not being able to attend an event, and participants specifically noted the April session as the most challenging to attend. When asked how many of the virtual sessions they were able to join, 62% said they were able to attend at least three-quarters of the sessions. Table 2 displays the breakdown of the remaining respondents.

Of the participants indicating they were unable to attend an in-person session, 80% responded that they did view the recorded session and that it was a “good resource.”

**Table 3: Participant Experience with the Academy**

SURVEY STATEMENT	STRONGLY AGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
The academy supported my district’s priorities.	85%	15%	0	0
The academy met my professional learning goals.	85%	11%	0	4%
The academy goals were clear to me.	92%	4%	4%	0
The academy was engaging.	89%	7%	4%	0
There was an appropriate balance between facilitation and practical application for me to reach expected learning outcomes.	92%	4%	4%	0

**Table 4: Participant Perceptions of Strategies to Address Key Issues**

SURVEY STATEMENT	STRONGLY AGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
The academy provided useful leadership strategies for me to implement in my context.	89%	7%	4%	0
The academy helped me develop strategies to address educational equity in my context.	52%	37%	11%	0
The academy helped me to address mental health issues in my context.	55%	37%	4%	4%

**Table 5: Participant Perceptions of the Applicability of Skills and Knowledge Earned**

SURVEY STATEMENT	STRONGLY AGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
I feel confident that I can apply learning from the academy within my context.	89%	7%	0	4%
Skills I learned in the academy will help with our local continuous improvement efforts.	74%	22%	4%	0

The survey included a series of questions about participant experience with the academy. Specifically, participants were asked whether the academy met their motivation for attending; if the goals of the academy were clear; if it was engaging; and if there was a good balance between facilitation and practical application. Table 3 displays that the respondents overwhelmingly had positive feedback on the facilitation and instruction of the academy. It is worth noting that the “somewhat disagree” and “strongly disagree” response was the same individual, who also reported that they did not attend all the sessions and in the comments shared that they wished more of the sessions were in-person.

Survey items also asked participants to reflect on whether the academy provided them with strategies to address a number of issues identified by the Department of Public Instruction as key for district and school leaders. Those issues include leadership, mental health, and equity. Table 4 presents the responses related to each strategy. Even though some of these strategies were not specifically or fully addressed in the FYS academy, as shown in the table, participants agreed that they developed strategies to address these areas.

Finally, survey respondents were asked if they felt confident in applying what they learned in their local context and if the skills they learned would help them with local continuous improvement efforts. Responses are presented in Table 5.

All survey respondents reported that they would recommend the academy to others. The reasons respondents would recommend the academy can be grouped into three themes: networking, facilitation, and generally positive feedback. Examples include:

- Networking
  - “This is a great opportunity to get to know other first year administrators, networking and collaboration is always valuable!”
  - “The networking is HUGE. I made great connections and developed a support system.”
  - “The connections I made to other superintendents was incredibly valuable.”
  - “The opportunity to network with other first year superintendents and experienced ones was invaluable.”
- Facilitators
  - “The facilitators are empathetic and approach their work with professionalism and optimism.”
  - “Kathy Cooke is amazing! She is a wealth of knowledge and consistently reminds us that ALL means ALL.”
  - “The depth of knowledge and expertise provided by each and every presenter was beneficial in my new role as superintendent.”
  - “Excellent leadership from Kathy and John. Wonderful presentations throughout.”
- General feedback
  - “It is 101 for any new district administrator. It’s been some of the best professional development I’ve had in education.”
  - “The academy was exactly what I needed to help ground me and guide me through my first year in the superintendent chair.”
  - “This has been a great group of leaders assembled to support new superintendents. I cannot imagine my year without this resource.”
  - “I firmly believe that every first year superintendent should participate in this academy. I cannot fathom navigating my first year without the support and guidance I’ve received from the academy.”

## Applying the Learning

In both the survey and the follow-up interviews, participants were asked to discuss how they are applying the learning from the academy, how their practices may have grown or changed as a result of attending the academy, and what skills or strategies they learned that supported their first year as superintendent. Across the survey and interview responses, four topics were identified as key takeaways that participants have applied: legal guidance, school finance, referendum planning, and relationships with school boards. Related to school finance, one of the interviewees shared:

My practice has grown. I don't know where to start. I'll try to pick the best example I have. It's an area that I continue to try to grow in because it's an area that's not one of what I would consider strengths. To understand the importance and the urgency of working through the finances of the district. A solid understanding of what those are, and how they work, who to go to when you have questions... So just knowing and working through, talking through WASDA and in my superintendent cohort about finances, is probably an area that I did grow in. And so that was probably my best example of where I needed it, and it really was impactful. Now, one of the first things that I asked is, how does it impact the budget?

Another participant described increased confidence around legal requirements:

The takeaway was just kind of an empowering, yep, you've got your legal basis covered...it was a confidence builder, maybe more than anything, to know that I had the right legal framework. I don't know how many times in board meetings this year or in closed session I was able to pull out policies, state statutes, or court standings. Those are things that we discussed during the academy.

A final example highlights those individuals who discussed relationships and communicating with their school boards. One interviewee said, "I think the biggest thing I learned was how to communicate with my board and my board president."

Interviewees were also asked what resources have been most helpful back in their local context. Many stated that they reference the PowerPoint slides and handouts that they received over the course of the year. One superintendent said, "I'm constantly going to the academy resource page and pulling up previous presentation and making sure that I'm following the letter of the law and a number of things." Several also stated that they re-watched particular sessions related to topics that they were currently addressing.

## Additional Supports

When interviewees were asked about resources and support, without being prompted, each mentioned that the coach they were paired with was the most valuable resource. One interviewee stated that their coach was "extremely helpful." Another stated that coaching was a "great opportunity." Participants also reported that they appreciated "having another person to be able to bounce some things off of," and that having that as a resource was "powerful." Most stated that they met with their coaches monthly and that the coaches came with an agenda aligned with the academy sessions but were also responsive to whatever needs or questions they had. Participants also appreciated the "feedback" they received from the coaches and mentioned that "it was a good professional push, but encouragement and support at the same time." In 2022-23, all second year superintendents will be offered a second year of coaching support through WASDA. During 2021-22, a few superintendents requested coaching during their second year, which was approved on individual case basis. The superintendents whom we interviewed indicated that they would like to continue working with their coach, although possibly less frequently (e.g., quarterly versus monthly).

Although interviewees and survey respondents indicated that networking was one of the elements that they found most valuable about the academy, when asked how they utilized their network of peers from the academy, it was typically limited to in-person sessions and conference sessions. Outside of those events, the superintendents we interviewed reported that when they reached out for help, they typically reached out to superintendents in their athletic conference. For example, one superintendent articulated:

I had great relationships built this year with surrounding superintendents. And I have [a] network from...previous to starting this job that I could go to. I felt like I created a really good network, and I've got a whole group that...I will I'm sure, for years to come connect with at conferences...and touch base with. I would say again, I was really fortunate with my area network here. And I didn't have any of those new folks in my area. But I connected well with those, and connected with a second year superintendent in my area. We had regular conversations as well. So good connections built through that, but not necessarily those go-to connections.

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## Section 3

# Key Findings and Questions to Consider

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# Key Findings and Questions to Consider

The First Year Superintendents academy provides timely support to new superintendents with content that is relevant to their role and responsibilities, networking with peers and experts in the field, and individual coaching. The supports and resources offered through the academy are well received by participants, and all the participants that we surveyed and interviewed stated that they would recommend the academy to future superintendents.

Participants reported that the learning was relevant to their local context and impacted their leadership, specifically around school finance, knowledge of legal requirements, planning and implementing referendums, and relationships with their school boards.

In order to strengthen the participant experience and alignment between FYS and other professional learning academies, how can facilitators, where appropriate, align content and resources with those that DPI and AWSA teach and reference? Examples may include the WISE suite of tools including the Data Inquiry Journal, root cause analysis, equity, and social emotional learning. Doing so could help new district leaders sort through the multiple signals that come from different levels of the education system and support coherence.

In addition, other research that WEC has conducted on principal support and evaluation has identified the need and want by principals for feedback from their supervisors. If time in the academy allows, how could feedback training support new district administrators as they begin supporting their principals?



