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Benefits of 25 Years of School District-University Partnerships to Improve Teacher Preparation and Advance School Renewal

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Generalizing about school district-teacher education program relationships across the long history and broad landscape of teacher preparation in America can prove challenging. With over 5,000 colleges, universities, school districts, and agencies engaged in the initial preparation of certified teachers and approximately 13,500 school districts as well as nearly 50,000 independent private, charter, and parochial schools throughout the country, it is likely that most forms of collaboration have occurred. However, if partnerships imply stable, long-term, mutually beneficial arrangements characterized by shared decision-making and resources, even a relatively cursory scan suggests that until about the past two decades few such relationships between schools and universities existed. Perhaps a notable exception is the special case of "university laboratory schools," credited initially to John Dewey and the University of Chicago (1896) and often associated with former normal schools (teachers colleges). These relationships, in which universities established schools, largely under their control, to provide preservice experience for their teacher education students and to serve as research and demonstration sites, represent at best a limited definition of a partnership.

Most typically, universities and school districts confined their formal relationships to agreements for providing and securing student teaching sites and sometimes to the specification of parameters for the use of school children as subjects in research conducted by university faculty members. While these agreements were usually signed contracts, they primarily spelled out provisions for the payment of minor stipends for the cooperating teacher/district and asserted the legal control of the school environment by the school district. Rarely did these documents speak to curriculum or professional development for either party or to improvement of the profession or other forms of interaction and joint opportunities and responsibilities. In reality, schools and universities remained separate in their own realms, willing to tolerate each other's existence primarily to fill each group's own needs but hardly true partners in any sense of the word.

Context

Prior to the initiation of what evolved into the nationally recognized Professional Development School Model (PDS) for school district-university partnerships,[1, 2] the relationships between the College of Education at Kansas State University (KSU) and local school districts were fraught with the many shortcomings evident in the clinical aspects of teacher preparation across the nation.

Again at some risk of stereotyping even the local situation, prior to the development of the KSU PDS model, school district-university relationships related to teacher preparation programming might reasonably be characterized as follows:

- Faculty members largely limited their involvement in schools to infrequent visits to supervise student teachers (usually announced well in advance) and occasionally to conduct research.
- Teachers rarely engaged with university faculty members; often both the cooperating teacher and supervising faculty member wrote separate evaluations of the student teacher's performance.
- District teachers had little, if any, role or input into the university's teacher education program; university programs were often fairly accused of being too theoretical and divorced from the realities of actual teaching and managing children in schools.
- University faculty considered most district teachers seriously deficient in knowledge of current research and theory on teaching techniques, curriculum design, and classroom management.
- District teachers considered most university faculty naïve about what really transpired in the modern school classroom and of the increasing challenges they faced.
- District teachers received minimal support for professional development; limited district resources mitigated against significant investment in teacher skill and knowledge enhancements.
- University teacher education faculty only occasionally were asked, or offered, to collaborate for local district school improvement.
- District teachers and university faculty rarely collaborated on research, program development, or other scholarship.
- District teachers received little incentive for mentoring a student teacher. In fact, many of the most highly regarded teachers expressed concern about the lack of preparation and brief duration of student teachers' experience and refused to accept them in their classrooms.
- Teacher education programs often struggled to identify student teaching opportunities for their students. To provide enough placements, student teachers were commonly spread among many schools in a number of districts, creating a variety of logistics problems for both the student teachers and their university supervisors.

> ***Through my experiences with the partnership, I learned that teaching was not about me imparting my wisdom, but helping guide students, teaching them how to learn.***
>
> – Ken Garwick
>
> Retired Classroom Teacher and Original PDS Planning Team Member, Manhattan-Ogden School District

- Teacher education students were seldom welcomed into schools prior to their actual student teaching assignment; as a consequence, they began their clinical experience (often for as little as eight weeks) at the very end of their university program, knowing little about school contexts and children. For some, they discovered at the last moments of a degree program that teaching was not, in fact, suitable for them, leading to a discouragement that strained relationships with their cooperating teacher.
- Boards of education were chiefly uninformed and unconcerned about the cooperation or lack of it occurring between the university and the district. The only time boards became involved is if parents complained about their children's education being impacted by too many student teachers or a poor student teacher.

While the elements and evolution of the KSU PDS partner districts' relationships are detailed elsewhere in this journal, in simplest terms a variety of stakeholders including local district (Manhattan-Ogden [KS] USD 383) and university administrators, the local teachers' association (Kansas National Education Association), and the local school board formally recognized the need for collaborative efforts in the interest of simultaneously improving both teacher education and schooling. Eventually these relationships extended to several surrounding area districts, most notably Geary County USD 475 and Riley County USD 378.

Specific university faculty members were assigned to a PDS school, master teachers were paid through university resources to represent the university within each PDS school, district teachers participated and led in professional development activities throughout the year, master teachers were hired by the university as clinical instructors, and eventually many clinical instructors transitioned to teaching within the university teacher preparation program. District teachers and university faculty collaborated on research and curriculum development projects, and participated together in professional development. Preservice teachers were offered a variety of supervised early experiences in PDS schools and were expected to interpret their experiences in relationship to their formal coursework.

Authentic partnerships are easy to claim and difficult to sustain. It seems nearly axiomatic that long term, successful, and productive partnerships depend heavily on the reality of

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mutual benefit. The KSU Professional Development School partnerships evolved to ensure that all relevant players realized enduring and important professional gains, many of them detailed below.

Partner Benefits

District teachers

Our partnership with the university opened incredible opportunities for district teachers and their students. Many of us found career ladders we never imagined would exist. Everyone became better learners: teachers, university faculty, preservice teachers, researchers, and, most importantly, our students.

– Melisa Hancock – PDS teacher, clinical instructor; KSU faculty member; Milken Educator Award recipient

- District teachers are provided significant assistance in their classrooms with the placement of relatively highly prepared student teachers that bring extended experience working with school children in school settings.
- Teachers are provided greatly expanded opportunities for professional development. As colleagues with the university faculty members, they are invited to participate in a wide variety of workshops, lectures, seminars, and summer institutes throughout the year; many of these opportunities are funded through university grants or are part of the university's normal professional development activities.
- Since student teachers begin their semester with extended and progressively demanding experience working in school settings, teachers receive real assistance in teaching and managing their classroom when they accept responsibilities as a cooperating teacher.
- The combination of student teachers, clinical instructors, university faculty, and shared professional development activities greatly reduces teacher isolation and increases morale as they have regular opportunities for planning, brainstorming, and sharing with other professionals.
- The many facets and roles in the PDS relationship provide the opportunity for variety in teachers' professional lives; this variety is motivating and ego boosting. Teachers see themselves as real contributors to the improvement of their profession.
- Working with university colleagues, teachers experience enhanced opportunities to engage in research, publish professional articles, present at conferences, and lead workshops. The concept of teacher leaders blossoms and flourishes.
- Involvement in the partnership provides many teachers an avenue for additional career options, including as clinical instructors, project leaders, and university teacher and supervisors, both during their employment with the district or after retirement. Since these teachers have been closely involved in the development and implementation of the PDS programs, they became obvious choices to bring their expertise and field experience to the campus program.
- The broad participation involved in the PDS partnership stimulates increased acceptance by teachers of accountability in the interest of continuous improvement; the classroom door is now generally open to "outsiders."

University teacher education faculty members

As I worked toward earning tenure, the relationships with district teachers and administrators I established through my PDS assignments proved invaluable. My connections to the schools led to opportunities for conducting research, securing grant awards and consulting that greatly enhanced my professional credentials. I became a better instructor, plus I was really energized by seeing my contributions lead to significant gains in student achievement.

– David Allen – KSU Director of Field Experiences; Associate Professor; former PDS clinical faculty member

- Partnership provides insights into new areas for research and development for university faculty. While nearly all university teacher education faculty members taught in P-12 schools, for a significant proportion their experience was either an extended time in the past or in a different school context. Assigning them to specific school site responsibilities and engaging them closely in work and professional development activities with district teachers markedly increases their current knowledge and experience in school settings.
- Involvement in the PDS partnership provides insights into new areas for research and development for university faculty members and access to cooperative field-based sites for their work.
- The formal PDS partnership significantly enhances the competitiveness of many faculty members' grants and contracts proposals.
- For more experienced university teacher education faculty, the opportunity to become more engaged in individual school sites with district teachers they grew to better understand and respect re-energized their careers and bolstered their commitment to their key responsibilities.

Teacher education students

The initiation of our new model led to a pretty amazing turn around in our teacher education students' abilities to impact student learning. Their varied and scaffolded experiences made them so much better able to manage and orchestrate learning environments. Their confidence and capabilities soared.

– Kathy Holen – KSU Assistant Professor Emerita, PDS clinical faculty member

- Prior to the initiation of the PDS partnership, student teachers routinely complained university faculty supervisors observed them infrequently and under artificially planned conditions. One goal of the PDS approach was to render moot the question "how often were you visited by your supervisor during student teaching?" With the collaboration of cooperating teachers, clinical instructors, and university faculty members assigned to the school, student teachers are observed, evaluated, and provided feedback during virtually all of their classroom experience.
- District schools provide preservice teachers a range of early placement opportunities not previously available. This access allows students to become gradually immersed in school culture and incorporate their experiences as they interpret the content of their university coursework. These graduated experiences provide far richer induction experiences than were available to them previously.
- Early field experiences and collaborative feedback from both district and university professionals allow preservice teachers to self-identify the possibility that teaching might not be an appropriate career choice, giving them a chance to change majors much earlier in their college experience.
- Student teachers become well known to principals and teachers, markedly enhancing the possibility of their employment in the district upon graduation.
- Within the PDS environment, student teachers enjoy a far more realistic induction experience. In the past, the relatively brief student teaching assignment was all too often characterized by brief lessons in the midst of "make work" (mostly elementary education) or "sink or swim" or "turn-teaching" (mostly secondary education). The PDS commitment is to a full, rich, closely supervised induction experience with consistent, regular feedback.

Teacher education program

As the individual most responsible for our state and national accreditation reports for many years, I was impressed and gratified to see how far ahead of the curve of evolving and strengthened standards our PDS programs placed us. In the end, it's not really about reputation, but about moving our students and the profession forward with increased expectations and performance to become the teachers our nation's students deserve.

– Janice Wissman – KSU Associate Dean Emerita of Education

- The PDS partnership forms the basis for significant awards (well in excess of $30 million to date) for competitive federally funded development grants.
- The joint district-university partnership and its related programs and activities greatly enhance the national reputation of the College of Education, leading to its recognition by numerous national and regional associations.
- Joint planning and program implementation by school and university partners, consistent with national, regional, and state standards, lead to successful accreditation outcomes for all partner institutions.
- Collaboration with school partners informs decisions in the continual improvement of teacher education curriculum and requirements.
- Improvement of teacher education curricula and preservice experiences combining research, theory, and practice benefits from full and equal participation stimulated by the PDS partners.

District and College of Education administrators

For decades, teacher education programs largely ignored the immense talent pool represented by practicing teachers and administrators. The PDS brought fresh insights to our preparation programs, re-engaged university faculty members with the challenges and opportunities of modern schooling, and provided dependable, high quality sites for extended and sequenced preservice experiences, research, grant funding, and curriculum development.

– Michael C. Holen – KSU Dean Emeritus of Education

While I am convinced the success of the PDS model extends well beyond initial teacher preparation, clearly on-site clinical supervision plays a key role, assisting preservice teachers to become part of the overall culture of the particular school and schooling in general. Individually they experience the modeling of quality pedagogy; working together they contribute significantly to mission-driven initiatives supporting all students in the building as preservice students discover the value of school-wide collaboration among teacher leaders. The PDS approach blends field practice with experience and research in an intentional, structured context of capacity building.

– Mary Devin – Retired Superintendent, USD 475 PDS partner district; KSU faculty member; past Executive Director, Kansas Educational Leadership Institute

- Formal agreements between the district and university, coupled with collaboration among school administrators, college administrators and clinical instructors ensure stable access to student teaching and other teacher education school placements.
- The close collaboration between district and university personnel allows the early identification of individuals in the teacher preparation program who are showing signs that their skills, dispositions, and attitudes might be inconsistent with teaching as a profession. This identification process stimulates counseling and assistance of preservice candidates to best assure appropriate career decisions.
- Relationships between school and university leaders established through the partnership allow them

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to identify and mitigate potential problems and to jointly support promising new opportunities.

School District/Board of Education

The new partnership greatly increased the district's ability to provide quality professional development for our teachers at reduced costs to the school system. Coupling teaching improvement with curriculum revision activities, student performance clearly increased. The board's relationship with district teachers became far more collaborative and supportive. Plus, for little recruitment costs, we gained a big advantage in hiring the best of the best new teachers.

– Joleen Hill – Member and former President, USD 383 Board of Education; Signatory to founding PDS partnership agreement

- The PDS partnership provides a significant increase in district teacher professional development at reduced cost to the school district itself.
- The formal nature of the district-university partnership provides the basis for substantially increased external funding for grant-based activities within the district.
- Prior to the development of the partnership, local districts only occasionally hired newly graduating teacher education candidates, preferring to employ experienced teachers from other districts. As the PDS graduated new teachers with expanded experience in the partner districts, districts were able to hire individuals familiar with their schools and policies and whose skills the principals and teachers had observed. The resultant move to hire these individuals markedly reduces district recruiting costs and enables them to employ high quality, relatively experienced new teachers at beginning teacher salaries.
- The formal approval of the PDS agreement leads to a strengthened relationship between the Board and the university leadership; the board members are provided an opportunity to see value for the district and its students by collaborating with the university.

District P-12 students

The PDS partnership engages our teachers in new levels of learning and performance; teachers often learn as much from the KSU students as those students learn from them. Our district's students clearly benefit from the extra hands in the classroom, allowing teachers to implement instructional strategies that enhance student learning– differentiated lessons, small group learning, learning centers, technology-enhanced lessons, genuine class discussions, and much more. We have become actively involved in the evolution of teaching, serving our students far better than before.

– Carol Adams – Executive Director of Teaching and Learning, USD 383 PDS partner district; long-time district leader in PDS evolution

- The regular presence of student teachers, early field experience students, and clinical instructors provides significantly increased opportunities to manage the classroom environment in ways that allow more individualized attention to respond to learner needs. More adult attention focused on their success greatly benefits students.
- The focus of the PDS on assessment, accountability, and improvement in teaching practice and curriculum leads to increases in student performance.

Teachers Association

The school district, university, and teachers association used the PDS partnership agreements to expand professional horizons for our teachers, enabling major new opportunities–lots of professional development, support for teacher national certification, enhanced career laddering, and new insights into teaching and learning. Perhaps as importantly, we teachers gained new levels of respect and the satisfaction of impacting our profession at its very beginning–contributing greatly to the preparation of high quality entry-level colleagues.

– Lisa Bietau – PDS teacher; state and local National Education Association leader; PDS clinicalinstructor; KSU faculty member

- By its formal support of the PDS partnership, the association demonstrates to its constituency and others their promotion of teacher professional development, teacher input to curriculum and instructional improvement, and teacher participation in the improvement of the profession.
- Involvement of the association leadership in the creation, implementation, and improvement of the PDS partnership agreements leads to improved relationships and understandings with the district administration and Board of Education.

Again, however tempting it may be, extrapolating much beyond the experience of the KSU College of Education and its PDS school district partners to other sites is problematic and perhaps even presumptuous. Universities and school districts across the nation vary widely in their political, social, economic, and cultural environments and assumptions. At heart, however, these experiences strongly suggest that when professional education stakeholders commit to honest efforts to work together to establish, improve, and promote genuine relationships, the potential is substantial that all of them will reap significant and long-term benefits.

Clearly, the joint commitments and interactions required in an effort such as the KSU PDS partnership markedly increase communication, collaboration, and resource sharing not typical in most school district/university dealings. There are many potential problems and points of contention in the day-to-day interplay of district teachers, teacher education faculty, teacher interns, early experience students, district students (and their parents), board of education members, and administrators at the school, district, and university levels. The building of trust and lines of communication through

relationships nurtured within the PDS significantly decreases the intensity of these issues, lowering both the rhetoric and the "heat." The goal becomes finding solutions, not winning.

Perhaps most importantly for the development of the profession and the enhancement of the teaching/learning community, district teachers and university teacher education faculty members gain a new and greatly enhanced sense of mutual admiration and respect. Old ideas and tensions about "ownership" of the profession evolve into a sense of shared responsibility for improving both student learning and the preparation of new teachers.

And finally, diverse perspectives brought together by the partnership lead to the generation and testing of new ideas, the identification of unmet or marginally met student needs, and the creation of innovative programs to extend the impact of all entities. As examples:

- collaborations and relationships established within the PDS model led to the establishment of school district based leadership training academies, preparing the next generation of school building leaders;
- the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute was formed to provide and support induction experiences for new superintendents;
- KSU College of Education responded to school-identified needs of the children of military families, an effort recognized for excellence by the Military Child Education Coalition in 2014 [3]; and
- the college and PDS partner districts cooperated in wide-ranging efforts to address the opportunities and challenges posed by growing numbers of culturally diverse students and to focus on promoting success for students with special needs.

The many positive outcomes accruing to all stakeholders in these efforts to improve both teacher preparation and the education of school children strongly suggest the likelihood that when teacher preparation institutions and school districts commit to forging genuine partnerships students and the education profession benefit.

> *National Football League Hall of Fame coach Vince Lombardi once said that while perfection is not attainable, chasing perfection sometimes allows us to reach excellence. Frankly, school district-university partnerships rarely flourish, but dedication to sustained and aggressive continuous development by many talented individuals led the KSU-USD 383 PDS partnership to become an acknowledged national model for excellence in the simultaneous improvement of teacher preparation and schooling.*
>
> – Dan C. Yunk – Executive Director, Kansas Educational Leadership Institute; Retired Superintendent, Manhattan-Ogden School District

Footnotes

1. Exemplary Professional Development School Achievement Award: National Association for Professional Development Schools, 2011

2. Best Practice Award for Professional Ethics and Moral Disposition in Teacher Education Award: American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, 2012

3. LTG (Ret) H.G. "Pete" Taylor Partnership of Excellence Award for Higher Education, Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), 2014

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