

## School and University Collaboration in Teacher Education Programs

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The power of the site experience is the power of learning in meaningful contexts, in real schools, with young adolescents. McEwin, et al. 1995, p.34

### **Public School and University Collaboration: The Reality**

Historically, public schools and universities have worked together in a relatively loosely organized relationship to prepare pre-service teachers for the classroom. In a common scenario, a professor contacts a school principal and begs for a field experience or student teaching placement, hoping all the while the teacher accepting the placement will be reasonably good (Goodlad, 2004; Walkington, 2007). In part due to frequent principal and teacher turnover, the professional relationship between school educators and professors is often minimal, which is a contributing negative factor in working out internship placements (Heath, 2005; Heath & Johnson-Taylor, 2006).

Additionally, understandings at the school level of university expectations regarding field experiences – which can come in many forms and from many different sources – and the needs of field experience pre-service teachers or student teachers are also often not as clear as they could be. As a result, experiences of preservice teachers are a mixed bag – some good, some bad, others not so good or bad. Universities normally have very specific expectations for what students will learn through each internship and student teaching, yet it is not surprising these expectations are often not fully met (Heath, 2005; Heath & Johnson-Taylor, 2006).

Nothing here is to suggest schools and teachers do not do everything they can to provide appropriate experiences for teacher candidates. In the absence of clear information, educators generally try hard to provide teacher candidates with what *they* believe to be important. Because the danger exists that a disparity between what universities expect to happen in internships or student teaching, and what may actually happen, it is critical that close relationships be developed between public schools receiving preservice teachers and their university programs.

### **Why is Collaboration Between Schools and Universities Important?**

Meaningfully and effectively training preservice teachers cannot happen at the college/university level only and must be a shared enterprise with public schools (McEwin, et al., 1995). Schools need high quality teachers, and universities strive to provide programs which will develop them. As relationships between schools and universities grow and become more and more symbiotic, preservice teachers engage in continuously improving levels of structured, well-defined, and implemented experiences (Bernshausen & McMahan, 2011; Goodlad, 1994; Heath, 2005; Heath & Johnson-Taylor, 2006).

Preservice teachers must have access to students in a classroom setting, and must be expected to, and have opportunities to, prepare high quality, standards-based lessons, and then teach them to diverse groups of students. Clearly, when preservice teachers have more highly structured opportunities working in a setting geared to support their preparation as teachers, they will have a much greater likelihood of becoming truly highly qualified to teach.

If school principals and teachers do not accept an obligation to do everything possible to train the next generations of professional educators., who will (Walkington, 2007)? In an

environment of high stakes testing pressures, teachers and principals can be skeptical and concerned about the ability of preservice teachers' capabilities to effectively teach content. As a result, they fear hosting preservice teachers may contribute to falling test scores (Heath, 2005; Heath & Johnson-Taylor, 2006; Walkington, 2007).

Collaborative partnerships between schools and universities should be developed on Goodlad's principles of "simultaneous renewal" (1991). School/university partnerships of this mindset will have a higher capacity toward developing collaborative relationships, improving teaching skills and strategies, and providing opportunities to update and improve preservice teacher education programs (Goodlad, 1994). Challenges will occur, such as universities' need for preservice teachers to have specific kinds of opportunities in school classrooms, while classroom teachers will feel the burdens of testing accountability. While these needs are not mutually exclusive, they may require serious collaboration and effort to make them work to everyone's satisfaction. Thoughtfully and methodically bringing together research-based efforts of universities and practical application-based experiences in schools will provide continuous opportunities in a laboratory setting for developing preservice teachers and the programs through which they emanate.

Close collaboration with public schools is an important piece toward the continuous improvement of teacher education programs in universities. When university faculties, classroom teachers and principals are actively involved in determining teacher education program improvements, public school educators gain a higher level of confidence in preservice teacher preparation, content knowledge and instructional skills. Additionally, program

improvements developed with both best practices research and practical application experiences of teachers add meaning and depth to preservice teacher training.

Collaborations such as those described allow schools and universities to develop a sense of common purpose, in that professors and school educators work together to provide the best possible circumstances. In turn, a common knowledge set is created, providing school educators with understandings of the university program and its goals, a common knowledge of the workings and needs of schools, their educational goals for students and professional development goals for teachers, as well as two-way input into the preparation needs of preservice teachers (Heath, 2005; Heath & Johnson-Taylor, 2006). Possibly one of the most helpful aspects of school–university collaboration is that of sharing resources, including such ideas as:

- sharing expertise,
- conducting action research,
- service on school and university program improvement committees,
- making joint presentations at conferences, and
- providing meaningful, rich preservice teaching opportunities in school classrooms.

### **Why School/College Partnerships Don't Happen Easily**

One of the great problems facing collaboration efforts is a lack of value recognition from school personnel of a need for their involvement in preservice teacher preparation. There are many reasons for this, including little familiarity with university personnel or their expectations for schools. In addition, teachers and principals feel a huge degree of constraint on their time to deal with preservice teachers or their programs. Time constraints are coupled with a

“something else to do” mentality for teachers who already have many demands on their plates (Sosin & Parham, 2001; Slater, 2001; Walkington, 2007).

Another problem for many schools is they have not developed systemic procedures to handle preservice traffic in schools. Who at the school is responsible for contacting teachers for internship placements? What information from the university is disseminated to supervising teachers regarding internship expectations, and who disseminates it? How do the names, classroom numbers, subject areas, and email addresses of supervising teachers get back to the university and the preservice teachers prior to the first day of internship (Sosin & Parham, 2001)?

#### *A Scenario*

The university professor contacts a middle school principal and asks for the placement of six students for forty-hour internships, to which she agrees. The professor forwards information regarding the internship, and each student’s content areas and times they are available to go to the school. The group of students shows up at the school on the first day of their internships, but have no information about supervising teachers, classroom numbers or subject areas; the principal is at a district meeting, and no one in the office knows what to do with the students.

#### *A Better Scenario*

Once the principal receives all information regarding the students, times, and internship expectations, she turns it over to a teacher leader who has volunteered to lead internship placements (Even better: the professor forwards all information to both the principal *and* the teacher leader, by pre-arrangement). The teacher leader sends out emails to selected teachers who match the preservice teachers’ content areas and time requirements as closely as possible, asking them to respond by a certain time. Once matches have been set, the teacher forwards a list to the professor, principal and school receptionist, including teachers’ names, grade, room

#### **Table I**

##### ***Additional Hurdles***

- Lack of release time for professors to work with schools,
- Little or no faculty involvement from professors in school programs, or from teachers and principals in university programs,
- Little or no support for collaboration at the school, district or university level.

numbers and subject areas. The professor forwards the information to preservice teachers. The principal, knowing she will be out of the office on the preservice teachers' first day, designates an assistant principal to greet them, show them procedures for checking in and escorts them to their classrooms.

To make this problem yet more complex, universities often have multiple individuals and departments contacting the same schools. Schools find this confusing and difficult to coordinate, as a variety of programs and internships each have their own set of expectations. For this to work efficiently for schools, universities can work toward centralizing placement procedures so that all placements are arranged through a single office or individual. (Heath, et al., 2004; Heath & Johnson-Taylor, 2006).

### **Finding Ways to Collaborate**

One of the first ways to begin collaboration efforts, of course, is to begin a school/university relationship. For example, many universities must periodically renew National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accreditation. NCATE Standard 3, states,

*“Field Experiences and Clinical Practice: The unit and its school partners design, implement, and evaluate field experiences and clinical practice so that teacher candidates and other school professionals develop and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions necessary to help all students learn.”*

Because this standard *requires* “school partner” involvement, it is a ready-made collaboration opportunity, and schools partnering with universities provide a natural pool of qualified

#### **Table 2**

##### ***Other Collaboration Possibilities***

- Professional development opportunities
- Development of curriculum for teacher education classes
- Grant writing
- Presentations at conferences
- Recruitment of students for college programs
- Recruitment for school faculty
- Action research

potential committee members. Through collaborative involvements such as this, school personnel gain understandings of the development of university program standards, and feel valued by the university.

Universities conduct extensive searches for new faculty members as the need presents, and typically establish search committees to screen and interview applications. Faculty members from collaborating partner schools can make great additions to these committees, and can provide candidates with tours of their schools. It is impressive for candidates to see firsthand a working collaboration between a school and university and can provide the tipping point in bringing in just the right new faculty member.

Teachers and principals from collaborating schools can serve as guest speakers for middle grades education classes to give preservice teachers an inside look at classroom practices and other topics of interest. Teachers can co-teach methods classes at the university, to bring in specific content for middle grades, and to collaborate with professors in presenting cutting-edge pedagogy (Walkington, 2007).

In Rock Hill, SC, two sixth grade teacher leaders at W. C. Sullivan Middle School taught a Winthrop University section of Foundations in Education, a freshman course, during their planning time for several semesters. The course provided future teachers with a laboratory setting within which to frame topics discussed in class. This section of the course consistently received extremely high evaluations from students (Heath, et al., 2004).

Schools can provide service learning opportunities for preservice teachers who must perform required hours in schools. Middle schools can make use of these “free” volunteers through opportunities such as tutoring students, and teacher assistance in classrooms. Students

benefit by having available young, enthusiastic, future teachers working with them one-on-one. Schools benefit by having free help in advancing student learning, and preservice teachers benefit by having opportunities to work with students in schools (Handler & Ravid, 2001; Heath, et al., 2004, Walkington, 2007).

### **Making It Happen**

Occasionally a school will seek out a partnership with a university, but this appears to be relatively rare. Universities often find themselves begging schools and teachers for placements for preservice teachers, leading too often to poor placement circumstances. Because principals hold the power to permit a partnership to happen and all of the responsibility for the consequences of such a partnership, it is critical the principal be involved in everything related to a collaborative partnership with a university. Although principals will may assign responsibility to an assistant principal, curriculum coordinator, or teacher leader, it is no less important for universities to ensure principals are always in the information loop regarding internship placements, problems with preservice or supervising teachers, or other related issues.

Once a principal has agreed to explore a collaborative partnership, professors must begin nurturing a sense of mutual benefit with the principal and his/her faculty and staff. An often overlooked benefit for schools, and one which will get most principals' attention, is the ready recruitment of highly qualified new teachers coming out of university programs. When a school has a hand in both the development of the university program and in preparing preservice teachers through internships and student teaching, they know everything about

their training and performance. This gives the school a real leg up on recruiting the best and brightest new teachers – teachers they have seen working with students, collaborating with faculty, and presenting content knowledge utilizing effective pedagogy.

Working with preservice teachers and collaborating with university personnel provide numerous opportunities for teachers to grow professionally and develop teacher leadership skills. Teachers who actively teach the crafts of effective classroom instructional planning, teaching, and classroom management will become better teachers in their own right. Through collaboration with professors, teachers gain ready access to the latest research on best practices – and may even find themselves as part of action research about teaching and learning. This kind of collaboration offers teachers and principals access to a new level of professional collaboration, and creates an environment rich in creative, research-based practices for improving instruction and student learning (Heath, et al., 2004; Heath & Johnson-Taylor, 2006; Walkington, 2007).

As teachers engage in collaborative efforts with professors, they gain a greater understanding of teacher education programs, which in turn develops a sense of common purpose and common knowledge – not just between teacher and professors, but among school faculty as well. Through this, a desire to engage more deeply in the collaborative development and refinement of teacher education programs will take root.

### **What Can Schools Do?**

A first step in developing a collaborative partnership is to assess the current involvement of the school with a university teacher education program. A starting place is to ask questions such as the following:

1. Are teachers frequently asked to supervise preservice teachers?
2. Do teachers have a good understanding of their role as supervisors?
3. How do teachers and principals feel about hosting preservice teachers?
4. Do teachers and principals know university education program faculty?
5. Has the school engaged in any collaborative efforts with the university education program?
6. When preservice teachers come to the school, do they feel welcomed? Are efficient procedures in place to ensure they are provided with the information they need to function appropriately in the school?
7. Do faculty members share in a desire to improve the profession through engagement in the development of future teachers?
8. Do faculty members know what to do when things aren't going well with a preservice teacher?

Once a good sense of understanding of a school's belief systems is in place, reach out to the nearest teacher education program and offer to work with the university faculty.

### **What Can Universities Do?**

Universities can ask a similar set of questions regarding their roles in partnerships:

1. From which schools do we frequently request internships?
2. Which schools seem most favorable to working with preservice teachers?
3. Are our expectations and the needs of our preservice teachers understood by school personnel?
4. How frequently do we meet with supervising teachers and principals to talk about the expectations of our internships?
5. Has the university approached any schools to engage in collaborative efforts beyond internships?
6. Do teacher preparation faculty members share in a desire to improve the program through collaboration with school-based faculty?
7. Do we consider our relationship with schools to be mutually beneficial partnerships?

Certainly, there are many questions we can ask, yet the most significant question is: are we engaging in true, collaborative efforts with all stakeholders to engage in a continuously improving effort to provide preservice teachers with the best possible preparation? After all, the goal for both university teacher preparation programs and schools is to develop high quality future teachers to do the best possible job of educating children!

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