

Innovative PDS Partnerships for Effective Teaching and Learning

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Would you like to breathe energy into your university-school district partnership? At Indiana State University (ISU), two clinical immersion imperatives and four partnership contexts provide an innovative focus that adds deeper meaning and intentionality to educator preparation.

Clinical Immersion

Our educator preparation programs had been migrating to more clinically intensive programming for several years, but the support of our K-12 partners was essential if we were to emphasize early and continuous clinical teaching experiences to enhance preparation efforts. As a first step, we developed the distinctive Teachers of Tomorrow Advancing Learning (TOTAL) internship for elementary and special education majors and an immersion program for secondary and all-grades majors.

Prior to student teaching, all elementary and special education teacher candidates spend a semester in the TOTAL program, becoming fully immersed and actively engaged in school-building activities including teaching, professional development, assessment, and administrative tasks. There is a structured, growth-oriented support model in place with TOTAL, with continuous feedback from cooperating teachers, administrators, and faculty. After two weeks of instruction, elementary and special education teacher candidates in the semester prior to student teaching go into schools four full days a week for an immersion experience. They are paired with a classroom teacher and are never alone with K-12 students. Cooperating teachers are prepared by ISU faculty in pre-service teacher supervision before being allowed to host a TOTAL intern. The TOTAL semester provides opportunities for remediation for those who are not meeting expectations before they enter the student teaching phase.

Our solid partnership with the College of Arts and Sciences as well as with our K-12 partners allowed us to focus on a tripartite approach to create the immersion program for secondary and all-grades programs. An immersion experience pairs teacher candidates with a classroom teacher for five weeks. The candidates are engaged for one instructional period a day for five days a week. The candidate acts as a classroom aide and then takes on the role of teacher for a unit of instruction lasting five to eight days. The candidate plans, delivers, assesses, reflects upon outcomes of, and provides remediation for the instructional unit. Moreover, the candidate produces a report of the unit and its effectiveness, basing conclusions on student academic achievement. The candidate learns the school improvement goals and incorporates these into the instructional practices as appropriate to the goals and the setting. Finally, the candidate is engaged in the larger school culture through a series of learning modules designed to help the candidate understand how schools work across units to support students' development and academic achievement.

As a second step towards greater clinical immersion, ISU committed to a Clinical Faculty Associate (CFA) position. The CFA model provides unique opportunities for K-12 educators to work as full-time temporary faculty in the Department of Elementary, Early, and Special Education or the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Media Technology with other university faculty responsible for the elementary or secondary teacher education programs. Because of an Indiana state statute, CFAs are allowed a one-year sabbatical and return to their teaching position with tenure intact. CFAs supervise interns and student teachers, work with veteran teachers, co-teach with regular university faculty, and provide professional development. In some cases, CFAs teach the introductory elementary or secondary education course, exposing ISU teacher candidates to current classroom practices early in their programs of study.

Partnership Contexts

In an effort to more fully understand our maturing partnership, ISU and our key K-12 partner, the Vigo County School Corporation, engaged in a process of dialogue that realized four critical contexts. These included building partnership capacity, supporting and sustaining change, fostering a collegial and collaborative partnership, and developing critical questions.

Since 1992, ISU has had a continuous professional development schools (PDS) partnership with the Vigo County School Corporation. The partnership includes nine schools, 6,921 K-12 students, 418 K-12 faculty, 130 higher education faculty, and 1,400 pre-service candidates. As Riggins (2001) noted, partnerships such as these require strong district support, appropriate administrative authority, and community buy-in.

Understanding the myriad of education reform challenges that K-12 and higher education must face, the partnership members decided to take advantage of the long-standing history of alliances and committed themselves to an innovative conceptual framework for change that was values-infused.

Building Partnership Capacity

Partnerships are the creation of networks (Edens & Gilsinan, 2005), often developed without any rules (Engeln, 2003). However, in an effort to strengthen the partnership framework, it was decided to build capacity immersed in shared values. Engeln (2003) suggested the following guiding principles:

- Begin with a discussion about values, goals, and needs;
- Respect and reflect the culture and goals of both partners;
- Support the core mission of the school district;
- Strengthen student well-being;
- Complement the social values and goals of the school district and university (p. 39).

Supporting and Sustaining Change

Institutional partnerships include a recognition and understanding of change as it relates to teaching and learning. Change, then, is strongly correlated to improvement. Effective university-school district partnerships can support and sustain change initiatives in meaningful and systemic ways that result in teaching and learning improvements. Wholesale adoption of other partnerships' successes rarely yields positive results. Barth (1990) referred to this as "list logic" (p. 37). Effective institutional partners understand change theory in relation to the unique needs of their district and university. Tomlinson and Allan (2000) described change principles. The partnership focused on seven, which included the following:

1. Change is imperative;
2. For schools to become what they ought to be, systemic change is needed;
3. Change is difficult, slow, and uncertain;
4. To change schools, the culture of schools must change;
5. What leaders do speaks with greater force than what is said;
6. Change efforts need to link with a wider world; and
7. Leaders for change have a results-based orientation.

Change is often “riddled with dilemmas, ambivalences, and paradoxes” (Fullan, 1991, p. 350). Effective partners recognize this, practicing patience and persistence. Most importantly, the partnership must model change and how to deal with the challenges of change initiatives. Modeling change can render the partnership vulnerable since a roadmap for change does not exist and uncertainty looms over every change initiative. However, university-school district partners who remain focused on the vision and mission of the partnership can model focused and aligned change.

Fostering a Collegial and Collaborative Partnership

Strong partners value a collegial and collaborative environment. Glatthorn (1997) noted that more effective schools have a climate characterized by collegiality. Collegiality (i.e., the equal empowerment of partners sharing a common purpose) is enhanced when collaboration (i.e., working together effectively) is practiced. A collegial and collaborative partnership should not be confused with a congenial (i.e., agreeable) partnership. A congenial partnership is nice and usually indicative of stakeholders who enjoy gathering together to talk and discuss; however, congenial conversations are often not about the complex and difficult work of the partnership. It is easy to mistake a congenial conversation for collaborative and collegial conversations. Effective partners move beyond congenial relationships, striving for collaborative and collegial efforts focused on the vision and mission of the partnership. These efforts are embedded in data-driven decisions, effective use of resources, diverse perspectives, alignment, and an *all-students* orientation.

Developing Critical Questions

Effective partnerships share a common attribute: they ask critical questions. Questioning is a powerful tool for seeking clarity about stakeholder roles. Further, thoughtful questions seek deeper meaning and understanding. The single most important question partnership stakeholders can ask is, “What is working and what is not?” Be advised! Do not ask this question unless you are willing to listen and respond to the answer. If the question is asked, be prepared to respond.: it is the imperative of the partnership and an opportunity to support challenging improvement efforts laden in change.

Asking and listening to “why” and “how” questions will yield answers that are deeply rooted in motivation. It is generally accepted that motivation is an internal state or condition that activates and energizes behavior and gives it direction (Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981). Understanding the motivators that result in effective actions and behaviors regarding teaching and learning assists the partnership in reaching its full potential. “Why are we collecting data?” “Why do we need assessment?” “How can we accomplish this for all students?” “Why did you decide to implement this change?” “Why must I attend this meeting?” These questions and their answers are deeply rooted in motivation.

Conclusion

Amid the innovative efforts to strengthen our clinical immersion programming and deepen our partnership with the Vigo County School Corporation, challenges remain. Supervision and evaluation of student teaching is not as comprehensive as the TOTAL and

immersion programs. In fact, many classroom teachers have expressed a preference for having a TOTAL intern or immersion candidate over hosting a student teacher. Additionally, scheduling challenges, the absence of quality and uninterrupted reflection time for the candidate and host teacher, and resistance from some faculty have prevented the immersion experience for secondary candidates from reaching its full potential. Finally, clinically based programs are resource intensive; building these strategic efforts into the base budget to ensure sustainable commitments takes time and support at the level of executive leadership.

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