

Working together: what we've learned from building a school–university partnership

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Learning from
a school–
university
partnership

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Received 28 March 2023
Revised 29 June 2023
Accepted 27 July 2023

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this viewpoint article is to share the reflections of school and university leaders on the success of their emerging school–university partnership for the preparation of middle school teachers.

Design/methodology/approach – The article is a reflective paper in which the leaders of the school–university partnership discuss the benefits of establishing the initial school–university partnership and reflect on what has helped the partnership experience success in the partnership's first five years of existence.

Findings – While the authors describe their school–university partnership as emerging, both the school and the university have experienced successes. Upon reflection, the authors discuss four specific essential elements to their initial partnership success. Communication and collaboration among all stakeholders ensure all voices are heard and valued. Allowing the university to have a physical presence in the middle school encourages the building of trusting relationships. For partnerships to succeed, partners must allow time for the partnership to mature and grow. Finally, when the middle school hires graduates from the partnering university, this benefits both the school and university partners.

Originality/value – As teacher preparation moves further away from the university campus to engage more closely with schools, there are lessons to be learned. Reflection is an essential component of growth. The partners in this school–university partnership believe sharing the partners' experiences will enhance the effectiveness of the partners' own partnership and encourage others that choose to begin this journey.

Keywords School–university partnerships, Middle school teacher preparation, Professional development school

Paper type Practitioner paper

Emily adjusts her backpack and jokes with her small group of friends as she enters the sixth-grade hallway at Tichenor Middle School (TMS). She smiles and waves to the teachers as she walks by their classrooms. The poster next to the “maker space” has the date of the next school dance, and she mentally makes note of the date to see if she can go. Emily and her friends reach the stairwell and descend into the throng of middle school students going to their classes. They wave, say “hi” and “see you later” to the students they recognize. When Emily and her friends reach their classroom, they find their seats, fire up their computers and eagerly await the cheesy “joke of the day” told during morning announcements.

This is a typical day at TMS, but TMS is not your typical middle school. TMS does more than prepare 6th through 8th grade students for their eventual transition to high school and



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Submitted to PDS Partners: Bridging Research to Practice March 28th, 2023.

PDS Partners: Bridging Research
to Practice
Vol. 18 No. 3, 2023
pp. 171-176
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2833-2059
p-ISSN: 2833-2040
DOI 10.1108/PDSP-03-2023-0010

beyond. Emily and her friends are college students studying to become middle school teachers. TMS has partnered with Northern Kentucky University's College of Education (NKU) in an emerging professional development school. Together they work to better prepare middle school students and future middle school teachers alike. Five years have passed since the two schools began their partnership. While reflection is woven into the daily workings of the partnership and valued as an essential element of being an educator and building a PDS (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; NAPDS, 2021; Zeichner & Liu, 2009), until now leaders haven't stepped back to reflect on the partnership as a whole. This article is the result of that reflection. As principal of TMS and two NKU faculty members, we share what we have experienced that helped us be successful and grow, and we hope it can be helpful to others who are beginning this journey toward a school–university partnership.

Overview of our partnership

Partnerships between schools and universities have been promoted in middle school philosophy for some time (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NASSP, 2006) and trends in teacher preparation research also encourage the practice (Darling-Hammond, 2009, 2010; Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005; Zeichner, 2010). As leading educational researcher Lin da Darling-Hammond (2010) stated, teacher preparation needs to move “further from the university and engage ever more closely with schools” (p. 226). For many years, TMS and NKU have had a working relationship, placing the occasional college student at the middle school for a practicum placement or student teaching experience. TMS serves a diverse population of 564 students in a semi-urban area. There are 36 teachers on staff and six members on the leadership team. As a principal and teacher educators, we believed there was much more to be gained from working together to prepare teacher candidates for the realities of classroom teaching and to bridge the theory-practice divide that can plague teacher preparation programs. We met to discuss our vision of preparing teachers on site in a middle school.

TMS and NKU entered into a formal partnership in spring 2018 that has developed and matured over the past five years. As part of the formal agreement the school provided dedicated space in the form of a “NKU” classroom, provided field placements, offered access to classrooms for university activities and shared expertise on given topics. In turn, NKU teaches three classes on site, uses TMS for field experience placements, offers faculty expertise and require candidates to provide service through school engagement activities. Both institutions are experiencing benefits from working together. TMS has reaped the benefit of “extra eyes and hands” in classrooms working with students as well as a pipeline of future teachers from which to recruit. As a matter of fact, since the inception of this partnership, TMS has hired 14 candidates who participated in this redesigned program, an incredible accomplishment considering the challenge of attracting new teachers in a competitive job market. NKU has also fundamentally shifted its practices and adjusted courses to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the partnership with the goal of better preparing teacher candidates for their future careers.

Our successes

While we still have work to do to meet all nine essentials of a fully established professional development school (National Association of Professional Development Schools [NAPDS], 2021), we feel our partnership has experienced some success. First and foremost, the partnership has been beneficial for TMS's middle school students. With university faculty and teacher candidates in the building, there are more eyes and hands to assist and work with the middle school students. Middle school students are getting more individualized attention, teachers are able to have more help in the classroom and middle school students are exposed to college

students and college life. University students not only help out in the classroom, they are engaged in duties around the school including volunteering for dances, literacy nights and sporting events. The university students and faculty have become part of the school community.

We have also experienced success enhancing the university teacher preparation program, with input from the principal, teachers and teacher candidates. University faculty are constantly changing and evolving to better prepare new teachers for today's schools. Working together, we have reimagined our work and redesigned courses, activities and assignments to take advantage of being on site at the school. School leaders and staff are now guest speakers and panelists in the college classes and college students make visits to middle school classrooms to see examples of the concepts they are learning in their college classes. Assignments are designed to directly connect to the partnering school.

With the experiences and changes to the program, we are seeing benefits for the teacher candidates first hand. Over the last five years the middle school has hired 14 graduates from the university program. Graduates are able to fit into the school community immediately upon graduation because they are already familiar with the teachers, students, school culture and the partnership. We are finding the graduates are struggling less during their first years of teaching. They are collaborating with veteran teachers, implementing effective instructional practices and having fewer challenges with classroom management. These successes have been exciting and only possible for the reasons we outline below. While we understand every school-university partnership will be structured differently and may have different goals to achieve, we have found the following to be essential to our partnership's initial success.

Communication and collaboration

Partnerships require collaboration and effective collaboration requires communication. We work hard to make sure all voices are heard and valued. As [Bosma et al. \(2010\)](#) found, communication, shared decision making and recognition of the other partners' priorities are among the keys for successful, mutually beneficial partnerships. We found this to be true of our partnership as well. Formally, we, the principal and university faculty, meet before and after every semester to discuss field placements, activities or experiences for teacher candidates, middle school activities that could use university support, as well as any successes or challenges that need to be highlighted. The middle school leadership team which includes assistant principals, school counselors, the instructional coach and the youth services center director meets with university faculty often to discuss activities for teacher candidates and school-based activities for middle school students that could use teacher candidate support. For example, the youth services center director works with university faculty to engage teacher candidates in creating activities and presentations for STEM and Literacy Nights at the school. With teacher candidates being an integral part of the school culture, the leadership team is able to provide additional feedback on teacher candidates' teaching and dispositions.

As [Rychly, Pettit, and Buning \(2020\)](#) found, classroom teachers value their relationships with teacher candidates and take their mentoring roles seriously. At TMS, classroom teachers work closely with university faculty providing feedback on placements, evaluating teacher candidate teaching and providing feedback on the university program. For example, during a formal focus group on the status of the partnership, teachers suggested changes to the field experience schedule to help improve the experience for teacher candidates and to help teachers provide more meaningful feedback. As [Rychly et al. \(2020\)](#) suggested, though teachers valued their work with teacher candidates, they had uncertainties about their mentoring roles and how to align school and university structures. Through open communication, the teachers were able to offer a viable solution that has since been implemented.

Every year the university middle grades program invites the principal, leadership team, teachers, alumni and current students to an advisory session to provide feedback on the

program and the partnership. This provides another avenue for stakeholders to contribute additional feedback. As key members of the partnership, teacher candidates also provide input and feedback in the process. In addition to the advisory sessions, candidates supply feedback on their field experiences and cooperating teachers at the end of each semester. They provide feedback in a number of ways as well. In addition to formal meetings with all members of the school, they contribute feedback and recommendations on hiring new teachers. University faculty have also organized formal feedback sessions, such as individual and focus group interviews with teachers, the leadership team and the principal researching the benefits and challenges they may be experiencing as a result of the partnership and asking for ways to improve our collaboration. These formal opportunities to evaluate and provide feedback are essential to the development of our partnership.

Being present

Just as important are the informal conversations that organically arise from all members being together in one building. We have found proximity has many benefits when building a relationship, a notion supported by [Bosma et al. \(2010\)](#) in his study of successful partnerships. TMS supported this school–university partnership by providing a dedicated classroom to the university program at the middle school. Having a place to call “home” was the first step in building trust and helping the two organizations establish an on-site working relationship. Field experiences and university classes are held on the middle school campus. As such, university faculty and teacher candidates are a normal part of the school day at TMS. We have found this helps support communication and the common goals of the partnership. With everyone in one location, it creates a team environment. Organic, informal conversations arise when the university faculty is on site. Classroom teachers stop and ask questions, check in on university students, or ask for advice or resources regarding mentoring or instructional issues. The principal and leadership team chat and interact with teacher candidates in the dedicated university classroom. For example, the principal and leadership team are invited to participate in university class discussions, so teacher candidates can ask questions about the school, profession and the interviewing process. As [Darling-Hammond \(2010\)](#) suggested, moving teacher preparation, “further from the university” allows us to “engage more closely with schools” (pg. 226) and provide activities and experiences that candidates otherwise would not experience on the university campus.

An additional benefit to having teacher candidates on site is having more “eyes and hands” in the building with students. The middle school gets volunteers for non-instructional tasks such as lunch, bus and hallway duties as well as help in Professional Learning Community (PLC), department and school meetings. The middle school also benefits when teacher candidates volunteer for sporting events, literacy and STEM nights and community events such as the community block party. Teacher candidates are part of the school while they are there and, as such, get to experience firsthand the school community and culture. They benefit from learning and experiencing other roles teachers play as well as seeing the importance of community engagement. It’s a win-win for all involved.

While we would like to think our partnership could be successful without it, having space for the university program creates a number of unique and beneficial opportunities for both the school and the university to develop and further the partnership.

Allow time

Some things just cannot be rushed. It takes time to get to know each other and to build trust. Of course, whenever there is the merger of two entities, there is the potential for conflicting goals, personalities and schedules, among other things. The university has to learn the middle school procedures, initiatives, teachers and culture and the middle school has to learn about

the university program, course content and schedule. We entered into our partnership for the long haul knowing it would take time to develop and mature. However, it took longer than we thought. While many of the TMS teachers have worked with the university faculty before for practicum placements, having a formal school–university partnership with university faculty and teacher candidates embedded in the building was different. Teachers needed time to develop trust and to view the university faculty as a resource and not as an outsider or an evaluator. Over time, university faculty became familiar with the teachers as well, identifying strengths and leveraging those strengths for preparing teacher candidates. Building trusting relationships is not easy and does not come quickly, yet, as [Bosma *et al.* \(2010\)](#) found, allowing time to develop and maintain relationships is essential if a partnership is to be successful.

Hiring graduates of the program

A major benefit of the school–university partnership for the middle school has been hiring qualified applicants for open teaching positions. Graduates of the university program are familiar with TMS students, culture and community. As such, more and more applicants are applying with the strong desire to work at TMS. They apply because they want to work at TMS, not just because it is an open teaching position. Graduates also have an advantage over outside applicants because they are already familiar with the school, procedures, customs and culture. We strongly suspect hiring graduates of the program will result in better retention of these teachers, but the partnership is still too young to know for sure. Likewise, hiring graduates from the program helps support the university programs and the long-term sustainability of the school–university partnership as well. Since the graduates are familiar with the university faculty, courses, assignments and program, they are able to support the goals of the school and the university teacher preparation program. In turn, these newly hired teachers who are graduates of the program have access to university faculty for support and advice as they are inducted into their professional teaching roles.

Conclusion

Our partnership is still evolving. We feel to some extent parts of each of the Nine Essentials ([NAPDS, 2021](#)) have been addressed, with some areas more fully developed than others. As we reflect on the work we have done, the primary focus has been on Essential 2 (Clinical Preparation) and while this focus yielded positive results, we see opportunities to enhance our work in Essential 3 (Professional Learning and Leading). To this point, the professional learning was focused on teacher candidate learning. In the future our hope is to expand the learning experiences for all participants in the partnership including teachers, university faculty and school leadership.

We are working every day to make the partnership better, so we can develop and prepare the best teachers. Working together makes sense because we all have the same goal: to provide the best education to students, both in middle school and at the university. It has been our experience bridging the gap between these two worlds not only strengthens both organizations' academic programs but has potential for long-term positive impact on student learning.

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