



# What Has Been Learned from School-University Partnerships

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*Much of the promise of educational reform lies in the hands of partnerships.*

School-university partnerships are often epitomized as a one-way street, with university faculty providing K-12 teachers novel lessons or tricks for Monday's classes. Both parties generally leave dissatisfied. Teachers rarely receive the content or instructional knowledge they need (or would like), and university faculty are no closer to understanding the realities of educational reform than before. Little is learned; little changes. As revealed in this feature, however, much of the promise of educational reform resides in the positive partnerships or relationships between schools and universities. Such relationships serve to reduce the ivory tower image of universities working apart from K-12 practitioners and schools, thus creating the potential for a positive environment of continuing professional development for both partners. Like any relationship, cooperation is the key as people come together for a shared purpose, in the enlightenment or renewal of both school physical education programs and teacher education. Along the way, teachers, administrators, university faculty, and most importantly students profit from this relationship. As Lieberman (1992) stated:

The theory-practice connection is no better served than when it is lived. We can learn *from* as well as *about* practice. Our challenge is to create a community that educates all of us, those in the university and those in the schools, a community that expands our relationships with one another, and in doing so, our knowledge and effectiveness. (p. 11)

The four preceding articles in this feature illustrate the significance of partnerships where school and university personnel united in a collegial effort through shared commitment to professional development and program reform. This was accomplished through hard work, shared leadership and vision, and the support of administrators. As important were trust, equity, respect, open communication, and flexibility among school and university partners. Like any relationship, the presence of these qualities enhances the likelihood of success, while their absence spells doom for the promise of reform and change in teachers and university faculty alike.

It is clear that these partnerships were focused on success and that the relationships were forged in each instance through a sense of purpose and responsibility. As Stephens and Boldt (2004) stated,

...if all partners assume responsibility for success....each partner needs to try to understand as fully as possible, in the beginning and along the way, that behind the rhetoric of school-university partnerships, there is reality and that behind the reality, there is intimacy. (p. 703)

This intimacy has broad implications for how responsible teachers and university partners approach their roles, challenges, and the reality of practice as they address difficult questions. Such responsibility can also afford great rewards because the partnership has the potential to bring about a sense of professional and personal renewal in the parties involved, as well as to help the ultimate targets of reform—the students.

From the inner city of Detroit, the mountains of Colorado, and the flatlands of Indiana and Illinois, the relationships profiled in this feature clearly show some very important dimensions of school-university partnerships:

- The advantages gleaned are reciprocal.
- Making the relationship work requires overcoming inequalities and differential power.
- Accepting knowledge and practice differentials is important to designing effective programs.
- Shared leadership and leaders are essential elements in change and accountability.
- Change and sustainability equal renewal, reward, and beneficial outcomes for teachers and students alike.

This summary will briefly comment on each dimension, reinforcing that reform is about positive relationships between partners with a commitment to change.

### Advantages Gleaned

The success of school-university partnerships is often judged by the advantages gained by both parties. These stories almost uniformly show that both the universities and the schools benefited. On the one hand, for schools, the partnerships aided with school reform, improvement in pedagogical practices, curriculum development, and on-going professional development. On the other hand, universities gained from schools contributing to teacher candidate experiences provided through field-based teaching placements. Both the Indiana and Colorado partnerships acknowledged the benefits of these placements, indicating the reciprocal role of the relationship.

Many teacher education programs follow a pedagogical theory rooted in pragmatism, or that learning will have greater impact when preservice teachers directly learn in and through real-life experiences (Benson & Harkavy, 2002). The collaborations presented in this feature allowed those real-life experiences to support teacher candidate learning by depicting physical education content and practices in a congruent manner. Universities also took advantage of the partnerships by generating scholarly works disseminating the process and products of the partnerships with the hope of adding to the body of knowledge regarding successful collaboration.

### Making the Relationship Work

Another successful indicator of genuine partnerships includes how the stakeholders effectively deal with complex interorganizational relationships. Potential challenges can result from the fact that university-school partnerships bring together organizational entities characterized by structural differences,

inequalities, and differential power (Knapp, Barnard, & Bell, 1998). The arguments regarding the universities' community engagement focused on reinventing the social roles of higher education institutions. Historically, professors have been labeled as residing in an ivory tower or criticized for academic elitism and being disconnected from the real world (Maurrasse, 2002). The partnerships represented within these articles clearly succeeded at reducing those labels.

While most educators lack formal training in interprofessional collaboration, the individuals in these articles demonstrate a wealth of collaborative skills. For example, Tia's story of how the Colorado partnership was formed (from a small group to a larger one; from chit chat to more serious discussion; from a 10-minute meeting to a three-day retreat) underlines the collaboration skills. Another example is the metaphoric description of the change agents (Wizard, Warrior, and Wagoner) in the *Active + Healthy = Forever Fit* project. This in-depth role internalization illustrates how partners can play different and significant roles in bringing about reform to the benefit of students. While the articles are replete with examples of collaboration in these projects, it would be interesting to know whether any of the universities have increased their efforts to help preservice teachers learn to seek out collaborative opportunities in their future as teachers.

### Filling the Knowledge Gaps

The partners in these projects each brought different knowledge, skills, and dispositions—none better than the other, just different. University faculty brought theoretical understanding of curriculum and instruction, while teachers brought the reality of working in K-12 schools. In each of the four cases, as the two groups sat down together, it was the fusion of both sets of knowledge and skills that allowed them to be on the same page in completing projects designed to improve the quality of physical education (e.g., curriculum development, teaching improvement). Sitting at the same table also required them to truly listen to one another to remove the persistent criticism about the gap between knowledge and practice. The results of the Indiana project clearly indicate how recent pedagogical knowledge, such as instructional models in physical education (e.g., sport education, teaching personal and social responsibility, and fitness for life) could be integrated into daily teaching practices. In Detroit, this type of listening and learning resulted in broadening the scope of physical education to include health education, nutrition education, and the formation of after-school physical activity clubs.

### Shared Leadership

It is clear throughout this feature that without shared leadership the teacher and program renewal process will go nowhere, and the school-university relationship is doomed to failure. From the initiation of the relationship to the many decision points along the way, leadership from various stakeholders is essential. As in most activities, people

need and want someone to lead the way. This was no less true in the cases presented here. For example, Castelli et al. identified three different, yet essential, leadership roles: the Wizard, Warrior, and Wagoner. These roles, which spread beyond the borders of the school and across school faculty and university mentors, showed how shared leadership helped to facilitate and advocate for curricular change and innovation, while at the same time helping teachers to move beyond a “traditional” curricular approach. As in the other articles, this case demonstrated the importance of all participants taking responsibility in the change process—to serve as a community of “all-leaders.” Each article supports Goodlad’s (1993) notion that if leadership is distributed, the partnership will be better off as people grow in accountability to and empowerment of the mission of a project.

One other point on leadership in these articles is worth noting. Change is virtually impossible without the support of central and school administrators. To varying degrees, school and central administrators were supportive of the initiatives and played the additional role in serving as “Wizards” in their own right. Hemphill and his colleagues showed that Superintendent Layton’s steadfast interest, support, and insistence in improving physical education in his district was instrumental in the change process. Similarly, the importance of building principal support within the Detroit Healthy Youth Initiative depicts how one individual can make a difference. The literature is clear on this point, administrative support is critical to school reform and teacher change (Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington, & Gu, 2007; Doutis & Ward, 1989; Fullan, 2007; Parker, Patton, Madden, & Sinclair, 2010).

## Change and Sustainability

“What are most partnerships about? They are about change” (Silka, 1999, p. 351). A focus on change and sustainability provides for overcoming challenges and the status quo to bring about a new reality. Sparkes (1990) indicates three types of change in our field. The first is change at the surface level. These surface-level changes are more practical, and in the case of these programs they reflect revised curricular materials and technologies or an effort to secure the STARS exemplary program award. Second, there can be changes involving the use of new teaching approaches (i.e., new curricular or instructional models). Finally, there are changes at a deep level, reflecting the alteration of beliefs and values. This type of change is difficult to notice and harder to measure. The four university-school partnerships represent changes at various levels; some were surface level only, while others may have gone beyond that. There are, however, some project characteristics that could possibly lead to change at a deeper level. Some examples of these characteristics include long periods of funding (three years) and project ownership by teachers. A longer duration with ongoing efforts has the best chance of sustainability. The projects described in this series had their own unique strategies to guarantee more permanent changes. The curriculum development project in Colorado, for example, used varying strategies commonly

found in continuing professional development—such as the provision of ongoing support, work sessions built into the school day, active hands-on learning activities, and facilitation with care—to increase the likelihood of sustainability. The co-teaching that occurred in many projects also provides a platform for permanent change.

Gusky (2002) found that when teachers observe the fruits of their labor manifested as student success, they are reinforced, and their inclination to sustain a particular approach to teaching becomes evident. Although we do not know whether the teachers featured here will sustain the reforms adopted, the likelihood of continuing the curricular and instructional innovations are probably enhanced. In the short term, the majority of the teachers in each setting felt good about their involvement in the change process. For example, the reflections across six areas from Karla, Lizzy, and Tia from the Colorado project provide testimony to the power of effective school-university partnerships. Clearly, these teachers gained a sense of renewal, as did the majority of teachers in this feature. They felt empowered and inspired to plan and teach at a level much higher than before.

This was no less true for the teachers from Lafayette Sunnyside Middle School, who felt so good about their efforts to improve their program that they applied for and received STAR status from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. This award was presented at a recent annual conference, and the pride each teacher felt most assuredly will translate into great teaching and meaningful student learning. Many contend that for true and real change to occur, teachers must view themselves as learners (Armour, 2010; Makopoulou & Armour, 2011), and empowerment is foundational for teacher learning (Putnam & Borko, 1997). The empowerment experienced by the teachers in these projects appears to have paved the way for long-term, sustained reform.

## Summary

The four stories presented in this feature have provided us with insight into the often messy realities of successful school-university partnerships. Each partnership had individual dynamics and different players, yet common results were influenced by the types of relationships that developed. Just as in any relationship, the complexities and nuances cannot all be described and the intangibles might not be fully understood (nor should they be). Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) reminded us that systemic reform will be accomplished only if partnerships between schools and universities work to transform schooling and teaching. These partnerships seem to be two-way roads, and the teachers and professors will have more than “something to do on Monday.” So we should celebrate the extraordinary commitment and diligent efforts toward renewal and reform demonstrated by the stakeholders of these projects, applaud their openness toward professional development through ongoing partnerships, and learn from what they have willingly shared.

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Major educational reform, focused on the achievement of physical education standards, can be undertaken in schools when existing personnel embrace key roles and responsibilities. This school-university partnership would not have been possible without the Wizard taking the initiative to foster the relationship. In this case, the Wizard came from within the school context and was an individual who had administrative responsibilities, which clearly facilitated educational reform (see Castelli & Rink, 2003). However, the Wizard could be anyone who champions a specific cause, fosters relationships, and builds the capacity of others. The Warrior carried out important tasks that facilitated change through inquiry and that resulted in mastery teaching. The Wagoner helped individuals bring their own visions to life through an effective collaboration. Because these individuals adopted the role of change agents, students increased their daily physical activity engagement, physical fitness, and self-efficacy toward being physically active (Castelli, 2009; Centeio & Castelli, 2011). It is imperative that teacher education programs educate teacher candidates to carry out roles such as the Wizard and Warrior. Simultaneously, physical education teacher educators must have a willingness and commitment to roles such as the one described in the story about the Wagoner. The provision and direct supervision of authentic field experiences is a natural starting point for fostering such partnerships and may contribute to the professional growth of the faculty member.

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