

# FOUR PILLARS OF EFFECTIVE UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL DISTRICT PARTNERSHIPS: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

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## ABSTRACT

*Continued calls for greater accountability in the PK-12 U.S. schools have placed increased demands and accountability upon universities to help schools meet state and federal student achievement requirements. This is evidence of a trend that is here to stay and will have profound effects on postsecondary education (Kolb, 1995). This trend amplifies the need to better understand how to effectively plan for, create and maintain university-school district partnerships. These partnerships also offer significant promise for simultaneous educational renewal in both PK-12 and higher education (Goodlad, 1994). Based upon a number of partnership efforts with public schools dating back to 2004, we suggest four key pillars necessary for successful partnerships: 1) the need to take a developmental view and recognize that change, understanding of new structures, and deep engagement take time to develop and transfer to generalizable teaching and leadership practices; 2) the need to find balance between theory and practice; 3) the need to develop clear shared goals and maintain an effective communication system to keep these goals central; and 4) the need to develop and support the instructionally focused leadership practices required to shepherd in a new normative structure. We suggest that these four pillars are critical to effective planning of university-school district partnerships.*

## INTRODUCTION

Continued calls for greater accountability in the PK-12 schools placed increased demands upon universities to help schools meet state and federal student achievement requirements in the United States. While university-school district partnerships are not new, the intensifying accountability environment has created a stronger need, greater than ever before, to understand better how to plan effectively for and foster effective partnerships. Partnerships between universities and public schools offer significant promise for simultaneous educational renewal in both PK-12 and higher education (Goodlad, 1994).

A number of university-school partnership efforts, including the professional development school (PDS) movement, grew out of the concerns raised in the 1980's about educational quality and accountability, each with varying degrees of success (Essex, 2001). Intensifying demands from both state and federal policy requirements have fueled the interest and need in establishing and refining university-school partnerships. In the Commonwealth of Virginia, a number of current pressures have reemphasized the importance of partnerships between PK-12 and higher education. The Virginia Higher Education Restructuring Act requires institutions of higher education (IHEs) to work actively with public schools to improve student achievement. Similarly, the Virginia P-16 Council has called for K-16 coordination of its education system and approaches to improve transitions among levels of education. The result of these changes has been an unprecedented level of accountability placed onto the state's universities; evidence of a trend that is here to stay and will have profound effects on postsecondary education (Kolb, 1995). The movement to hold higher education more directly responsible for the success of PK-12 amplifies the need to better understand how to effectively plan for, create, and maintain these partnerships.

As educators venture into this ever changing climate, both university and school personnel should be cognizant of the potential benefits as well as the pitfalls of partnerships and work to develop and evolve collaborative efforts that will bear measureable improvements in student achievement. In our work in various university-school partnerships over the past 5 years, we have identified what we believe are four critical areas that should be considered in planning and implementing partnerships. Couturier (2006) emphasized that IHEs in the United States are carefully observing the results of the partnerships. Our hope is to contribute to the knowledge base on effective university-school partnerships and help the field make a successful transition to this new accountability environment.

## BACKGROUND

In 2004, a team from our university signed a memorandum of agreement with a small rural school division to assist them with school improvement, leadership development, and data-based decision making with the overall goals of improving school performance and closing achievement gaps among different student groups. An important aspect of this partnership was to create teams of educators from both the university and school system to work together on activities related to the division's needs. There are few programs where the connection between school and university is authentic (Blumenfeld, Fishman, Krajcik, & Marx, Soloway, 2000), and we hoped to find more genuine and effective ways of collaborating with the public schools.

Early efforts in this partnership ranged from test score data disaggregation training to professional development in mathematics instruction. These first-hand experiences within the schools, working shoulder to shoulder with school personnel, allowed us to gain a depth of understanding about the complexities and challenges school personnel currently face. This work revealed a number of critical issues within the school division in the areas of special education, staffing, and geographic isolation; and professional development needs in differentiated instruction, language development, mathematics, and assessment.

These early efforts with the growing partnership helped to form the basis for numerous external funding proposals. In an era of enhanced accountability and reduced funding for both local districts and IHEs, one of the benefits of the partnership was the ability to leverage these efforts to facilitate a clear rationale to fund both service and research projects. As a result, several state and federal grants have been awarded, in part to address not only the previously identified needs, but also to provide financial support for Instructional Support Team (IST) teachers and partially fund a distance learning lab that would help address the geographic isolation of the division.

Concurrent with the efforts with this rural division, we were also working with other school divisions on parallel programs in the area of formative assessment training and leadership development. These projects allowed us greater opportunity to work directly with students, teachers, school principals, staff developers, and central office subject area specialists to gain even greater experience working in a variety of collaborative environments. Most notable has been an ongoing partnership with a large urban school division that we have partnered with since 2006 training teachers and school leaders in formative assessment practices.

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

Over the course of our work with our school district partners we have collected a host of descriptive qualitative data. These have included copious field and debriefing notes; email communications between university and school staff; and various documents related to our efforts including, school improvement and division strategic plans, participant journals, focus group interviews, notes and documents from project and grant writing planning meetings, and individual communications with key stakeholders. These data were maintained in both physical and electronic files. Initially these data were evaluated in an ongoing and iterative manner. Through extensive memoing to capture insights gained throughout the process, an interim analysis was developed. This early stage of analysis helped to narrow our focus to two key areas we identified as central to the mission of university-school district partnerships: teacher quality and instructionally-focused leadership.

This interim analysis was followed by a period of more formal inductive coding and the development of categories that eventually lead to the identification of the four pillars described in this paper. The current model evolved from further iterations of our categories through feedback from various stakeholder groups. The first iteration of the model was presented at the 2006 International Conference on School Reform, in Vancouver British Columbia in a paper titled *Models for Effective and Scalable K12-Higher Education Partnerships in a Culture of Change*, (Blackburn, Myran, Robinson, & English, 2006). Further refinements to the model were presented in two related papers at the 2008 American Educational Research Association Annual Convention. With the feedback from reviewers, conference participants, as well as well as our school district partners, the authors conducted a final round of more comprehensive coding and significantly reorganized our codes into a hierarchical system with four main categories.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Based upon our interactions with administrators, teachers, and students; as well as our observations across numerous classrooms in several different school divisions, we grew concerned about the ability of schools to escape the gravitational pull of their own history and the increasing pressures of testing and accountability. We assert that schools as we know them have reached their functional and philosophic limitations. Currently schools appear to be unable to move beyond the dominant values and beliefs that assume the student is the product of schooling and as such is passive and compliant in their orientation and behavior in school.

The current iteration of the modern day school house has its foundations in the industrial revolution (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000). As such, many contemporary schools still reflect factories, “producing” their products in an assembly line fashion (Senge, et al.). Time and time again, we have seen teachers and administrators attempt good faith efforts to facilitate the often difficult transition to more “student centered” teaching practices and provide greater opportunities for engagement and self-directed learning. Yet, because of these historically rooted assumptions about the role of staff and students, the relationships between students, staff, and content are often unaltered and the student-centered practices not realized. An implied contract between the staff and students, rooted in the institutional norms of the school division, limit the degree to which students are able to take an active role in their own learning and intellectual development.

As we grappled with the challenges of working with schools and IHEs, we considered the differing cultures, norms, expectations, and rewards of these two institutions. As scholars interested in using our knowledge and experiences to help schools better meet students’ needs, we encountered many barriers that stemmed from deeply rooted institutional differences. While the differences are substantive and represent real challenges to effective partnerships, we felt focusing on these differences would take our effort in the wrong direction. Instead, we identified teacher quality and instructionally-focused leadership as central to the mission of university-school district partnerships.

Our focus in this project was on examining the central mission of quality instruction to improve student learning. Because there is clear consensus that teacher quality is the most significant school-based determinant of student achievement (Cochran-Smith, 2003), university-school partnership efforts must be well designed to bring about meaningful changes and improvements to teacher quality. Similarly, as the norms and standards for school leadership have shifted from largely management views to a more instructionally focused vision, university-school partnerships must also address how leadership preparation can help to foster and sustain improvements in teacher quality. Without these related foci, we risk what Blau and Scott (1962) have called “goal displacement” and losing sight of the purpose of partnerships by chasing accountability measures. Elmore (2002) notes educators often emphasize restructuring organizations, but they often do not change the practices within those organizations. In this way we narrowed our analysis to factors within the various partnership efforts that promoted teacher quality and instructionally-focused leadership, which are factors impacting the instructional core.

### *The Four Pillars*

As we critically analyzed our data, through the lens of teacher quality and instructionally-focused leadership, we identified four key themes that fall within a hierarchical model we assert are necessary for successful partnerships. We identified these four as being able to help build the internal professional capacity of schools to improve and sustain changes to create new and more productive normative structures. These four “Pillars” provide an instructionally and leadership-focused means to foster effective university-school district partnerships. The first two Pillars, *Take a Developmental View* and *Finding the Balance between Theory and Practice* are hierarchical and have several sub-themes, each which help to capture their relative complexity. The second two Pillars, *Maintaining an Effective Communication System* and *Instructionally Focused Leadership*, are more straight forward, but are critical for supporting the other two.

The Four Pillars of Effective University-School Distract Partnerships are as follows:

1. Take a Developmental View
  - a. An Iterative and Additive view of Growth
  - b. Transformative Growth
2. Finding the Balance between Theory and Practice
  - a. An Alternative Approach to Professional Development
  - b. Integrating Partnership Activities into Division Initiatives
  - c. Authentic Research
3. The Need to Develop and Maintain an Effective Communication System
4. The Need for Instructionally Focused Leadership Practices

### *Take a Developmental View*

A review of existing data from various university-school partnerships revealed an overwhelming number of initiatives our partnering school divisions had underway at any given time. Often the initiatives appeared to be operating independently of one another, and occasionally counter-productive to one another. Focus group interviews and teacher work sessions revealed conversations among staff members revolving around the myriad of division mandates, internal and external professional development, and test preparation focused requirements. It is important to note that most of the teachers we have worked with have not been able to articulate how these different initiatives fit together and what the long term goals were beyond raising test scores.

In our earlier work with the rural division, we asked teachers to list the different initiatives they felt responsible for and thought might be reflected in their evaluations. After compiling the results, we developed a common list of 32 initiatives that were identified by at least 80% of the participants. When we asked the division leadership to make their own list, they identified only nine. Not only was the teachers' list significantly longer than their administrative peers, but they discussed how each year the focus was different. Many teachers expressed frustration with putting effort and time into training, developing materials, and lesson planning only to have the initiative quietly removed from the agenda. They had become accustomed to a revolving door of new foci and as a result had developed a degree of skepticism about the usefulness and longevity of these ever changing initiatives. This revolving door of initiatives and the commonly shared skepticism about them helped to create a form of institutional immunity to the short-lived initiatives. Just as an incomplete dose of antibiotics can result in a strain of bacteria more resistant to treatment, the incomplete or short lived school improvement efforts created an environment where teachers and the larger school culture itself were resistant to future improvement efforts.

What seemed to be lacking was a strategic and developmental view of division initiatives. We know both intuitively and from related literature that real school improvement takes time (Copland, 2003; Streshly & Bernd, 1992). Most of the partnership initiatives involved significant shifts in the culture of leadership, teaching, and learning, and as such involved more than simply acquiring a new set of discrete skills. Instead, success would depend on acquiring a new set of skills and background knowledge, in addition to also establishing new institutional norms and beliefs to support the long term intended use of these updated skills. A developmental view of school improvement recognizes that new understanding takes time and deep engagement to develop into well understood and generalizable teaching practices. This kind of change requires a developmental view that understands an organization's improvement efforts will need to go through a number of developmental phases and each phase will require different types of support and encouragement.

### *An Iterative and Additive View of Growth*

An important aspect of a developmental view is that it needs to be iterative. That is, improvement efforts require a consistent, ongoing focus strategically linked to teachers' daily work, professional development, and formative assessment efforts that capitalize on ongoing teacher discourse and inquiry. An iterative approach fosters teachers' active involvement in improvement efforts to continually refine

and give shape to subsequent iterations and allows teachers to be active agents in their own intellectual and personal development and be central to building new educative normative structures within their schools.

Similarly we have recognized that an *additive approach* to school improvement efforts can capitalize on various investments that personnel have already made. In many cases, sound programs were dropped and teachers felt disenfranchised as their efforts appeared to be wasted. Examining what existing knowledge, skill, and material resources already exist as a result of previous efforts can help teachers recognize a common focus and direction. As we have worked with teachers on formative assessment strategies, for example, we have discovered that many teachers already effectively utilize aspects of these practices. Through these experiences we recognized that much of the processes, strategies, and innovations that are the focus of professional development and school reform are already embedded in teachers' daily practice.

Teachers may not have used the same language or utilized variations of the concepts, but with guided discussion, we were able to easily identify common knowledge and skills. In this way, university-based reformers need to create opportunities for teachers to share, expand, and refine these strengths to further develop/strengthen local capacity. We have referred to this as "mining reform". That is, facilitating building better internal capacity by identifying teacher and leader strengths and assisting in building school and/or division goals on this foundation. Mining reform is similar to asset-based community development, common in successful community-building initiatives (McKnight, 1993). We explored how we might work towards creating better partnership mechanisms for matching expectations among partners and drawing out the internal and human resources to best facilitate the reform or improvement effort. In our view, university faculty and school administrators cannot impose or manage change – teachers need to have active responsibility for reform and change efforts.

### *Transformative Growth*

Another important observation along these lines is that a developmental view of school improvement efforts can be transformative. In our various efforts working with teams of teachers we have seen numerous examples of how teachers cycled through resistance to adoption to commitment. As we have facilitated opportunities for teachers to try out, evaluate, and share their experiences utilizing innovative instructional practices, they developed clearer understandings of the strategies themselves, as well as the underlying principles. Not only has the self-assessment and teacher dialogue influenced this transition, but more importantly, as they have collected evidence of the impacts on student learning and seen changes for themselves in students' learning behaviors, teachers' commitments to continuing to push deeper into these instructional strategies intensified. In focus group interviews, we heard numerous examples of how the students themselves began pushing their teachers to use certain strategies. What we found was when teachers had opportunities to iteratively develop new skills and strategies, using current strengths as a starting point; they increasingly integrated these practices into the fabric of their classrooms. As students recognized these changes and saw for themselves the benefits to their learning, they advocated for their continued use and further influenced the teachers' professional development. In this way the developmental view recognizes school improvement through a systems lens, understanding the complex dynamics of the school organization including students' contributions.

These observations about the need for a developmental view are consistent with the literature on teacher professional development and school reform. The Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), has pointed out a need for substantial and long-term resource commitments as well as working beyond the usual channels and broadening the roles stakeholders might play in professional development and curricular reform (Corcoran 1995). Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) suggested teachers need opportunities to collaborate with one another with trust, candor, openness, risk-taking, and commitment to continuous improvement in order to bring about a culture of educational change. In this way developing stronger collaborative working relationships between teachers and administrators, among teachers themselves, and with university faculty and other educators is critical in reculturing schools to become places that stimulate and support teachers to make important changes.

### *Finding the Balance between Theory and Practice*

Perhaps one of the more important insights gained from our early partnerships was the strength of teachers' desire for training in immediately useable instructional strategies. Teachers often argued that the university's approach was too academic with limited directly useful information. This is consistent with Hargreaves (1999) comment that in the current climate of high-stakes testing and accountability, there is an urgent need for better professional knowledge about effective teaching and learning. In one training session in the first year of our partnership with our rural division, one teacher interrupted the professor and said, "Just give me three strategies that work!" This "toolkit" mindset, where participants were primarily focused on acquiring specific and immediately actionable strategies was very prevalent. Teachers, assistant principals, and principals articulated that spending a lot of time on theoretical concepts was not a good use of their valuable time. They certainly acknowledged the value of theory; however, the need to survive the daily expectations involved in teaching and the pressures to increase student performance far outweighed what they often viewed as an intellectual exercise of developing in-depth understandings' of theoretical constructs. "Just give us strategies that work," was the frame of mind that many of our public school partners had.

From the university perspective we struggled with how providing this more directive, user-friendly training, actually risked undermining the very teaching practices we were encouraging. In our view, in order to assure the high impact use of these training areas, teachers needed professional development that facilitated discretionary authority and clinical professional judgment. We were concerned that an overly pragmatic approach could promote a type of mechanized teaching where the focus was on procedural certitude over ability to apply practices in flexible, non-rote ways. The development of clinical professional judgment, flexibly applied, we feel is a critical building block of sound pedagogy.

In the early phases of our partnerships, we spent significant time observing classrooms and talking to teachers and logging examples of surface or mechanical uses of progressive teaching strategies. For example, we saw many instances of teachers asking students to cut out notes from handouts and paste them in their interactive notebooks. We reviewed dozens of these notebooks and found little to no evidence of any "interactive" behaviors; in nearly all of the classrooms using the notebooks, each students' notebook looked exactly like the next. It appeared the teachers had received very pragmatic training on using interactive notebooks and the school's administration had added them to their teacher supervision and evaluation plans, but no one really seemed to understand the underlying purpose. As a result, teachers and administrators alike approached the use and supervision of the notebooks in rote, mechanical ways. This behavior suggested an overall lack of clinical judgment and discretionary authority with respect to instruction and supervision.

While our interpretations of these observations are unfavorable, we also came to understand that this rote tendency is tied into a lack of strategically aligned professional development efforts that take a long view of school improvement. As with taking a developmental view of school improvement, we came to understand that acquiring new or updated skills was dependent, in large measure, on establishing new institutional norms and beliefs that supported the use of updated skills. In this way, finding the balance between theory and practice involved leadership that supported a developmental view of school improvement; one that recognized effective teaching is not routine, students are not passive, and teaching is not simple, predictable or standardized (Darling Hammond, 1997). To acquire professional clinical judgment about how, when, and why to utilize various instructional practices required teachers develop sound understandings of both theory and practice.

Given our observations about the tendency to use newer instructional strategies in rote or mechanical ways, we worked with our partners to address these concerns. First, we evolved our approaches to inservice training to offer an alternative to the often ineffective or minimally effective approach to supporting professional development in public schools (Borko, 2004). Namely, we designed professional development that was job embedded, built on, or supported by building expertise and resources, long-term, and strategically linked to other on-going improvement efforts. Second, we carefully coordinated these efforts with the broader scope of the school(s) and division initiatives and helped school personnel understand what the overarching goals of reform were.

## *An Alternative Approach to Professional Development*

We have found there is a large gap between what can be referred to as “Utopian” theories of how schools should operate and the day-to-day realities of school practice. Educators are often locked in the daily rigors of teaching and have a difficult time transitioning to new structures and practices, while academics look at the ideal, often without addressing in pragmatic terms how one bridges vision and reality. The space in between these two divergent states is often left unexplored by professional development processes, leaving no structure or support for an educator which undermines the purpose of the professional development. There is a need to break down theories into useable knowledge, without losing the deeper meaning and fidelity to the practice.

Throughout our various partnership activities, we have not found teachers receptive to topically or academically abstracted or thematic approaches to professional development. Instead they have been more receptive to incorporating aspects of the professional development topic as part of their ongoing, day-to-day subject matter teaching responsibilities. Based on teacher feedback, observations, and our ongoing dialogue, we determined that professional development activities should (1) have immediately actionable strategies that exemplify some key aspect of the training, that is, “pragmatic anchors”; (2) provide iterative opportunities for teachers to test and refine strategies in the classroom, based on their lived experiences with the pragmatic anchors; (3) provide timely feedback to teachers about their experiences using the new strategy; and (4) provide opportunities for teachers to share their own expertise and experience with each other to enhance knowledge sharing and professional networking. In part, we worked to create opportunities for teachers and administrators to “see” how theory translates into their classroom experiences. We believed that in the absence of these pragmatic anchors and ongoing interactions to address professional learning questions, professional development efforts had little hope of being effectively utilized or sustained.

Conventional professional development can often approach teaching as a set of discrete tools that can be collected in a “toolkit”. While this conception of professional development has appeal, it lacks the underlying conceptual understanding of what makes such tools effective. Thus, the approach does not promote the development of professional clinical judgment that will allow teachers better to select the appropriate tools, given particular contexts. Most professional development (PD) programs do not create any lasting scaffolding for teachers to explore, try out, and refine. Langer (2000) points out the need for teacher training to “fit” in the context of the classroom in order for teachers to reasonably try-on new teaching strategies and orientations. The inability of most PD programs to allow this exploration means the various instructional and assessment strategies teachers were exposed to do not bridge the gap between generalized theory and daily pragmatic classroom practices. Without the time and other critical resources, the transition from ideas to application in the classroom simply does not happen. Therefore, organizing teacher professional development around a “toolkit” model invites failure.

In our approach, pragmatic anchors serve as conceptual building blocks to developing deep substantive understandings from one’s own contextualized, firsthand experiences. Our approach moves much closer to addressing the theory-to-practice divide by reshaping the fundamental question to articulating theory *from* practice, capitalizing on educators’ lived experience working with students and using this contextual knowledge to build usable knowledge (Glaser, 1998), or what some have called, “action knowledge” (Goldkuhl, 1999). In addition, this approach capitalizes on what Lave and Wenger (1991) call “*situated learning*,” that is engagement in a collaborative and contextual community of practice.

We have to work towards developing better classroom materials that teachers can readily utilize and that will sustain teachers through the difficult process of adopting new practices into their daily work. These materials need to be carefully thought out, bridging the difficult area between being unstructured and overly prescriptive. Yet, carefully designed materials alone will not help teachers make these important transitions. The partnership efforts must also provide a structure for teachers’ active collaboration with colleagues, opportunities to share their experiences utilizing new practices, and a means of directly linking these experiences with student academic achievement.

### *Integrating Partnership Activities into Division Initiatives*

There is a significant need to integrate carefully all partnership activities into ongoing division initiatives. We found our school partners had numerous, and sometimes competing and/or overlapping initiatives. The lack of integration was a significant source of frustration for many teachers as they grappled with managing time and resource limitations and determining where to spend their professional energies. Those initiatives that are not clearly aligned with and supportive of their primary teaching responsibilities were put on the back burner. Over the course of our various partnership efforts, we have encountered many teachers who shared examples of professional development efforts, university partnerships, and school and division mandates that lacked clearly focused goals and expectations. Several teachers showed us binders full of training materials that they received during professional development or staff meetings they had never had time or purpose to review, let alone utilize. These teachers expressed concerns about the burden of constantly having to assess which training, initiative, or mandate required their attention and which would be forgotten and not fully implemented.

As we listened to teachers describe their experiences navigating this unclear territory, we were often struck by how potentially interrelated and mutually supportive many of the initiatives and mandates were. A number of the teachers we worked with recognized this as well, but felt these links were rarely articulated or supported administratively and never became part of the normative structure of their school. Without a way to focus and prioritize one's teaching efforts, many teachers seemed to default to a compliance mindset where they did what they were told to do even if they did not see an educative value.

As Hatch (2001) pointed out, managing and coordinating numerous initiatives are not part of teachers' formal job descriptions and incentives are often not clear for the effective management and coordination of school improvement efforts. In addition both pre-service and in-service training may not adequately foster teachers' ability to assess multiple initiatives and make sound clinical judgments about them. In our experience because of a lack of administrative structure, strategic visioning and incentives for coordinating multiple initiatives, many teachers looked to their superiors or to the university to provide direction. This created a decision making vacuum and left the various stakeholders feeling powerless to act in coordinated and proactive ways. This feeling of powerlessness helped to create an environment where the myriad of initiatives felt like a set of requirements that have to be complied with as opposed to a coherent set of efforts that we were collaboratively working on that would lead to school improvement.

Given the lack of integration and associated professional authority to help bring focus and clarity to these various initiatives, we speculate that the collective efficacy (Goddard, Hoy, Wolfolk-Hoy, 2004) for these initiatives may have been negatively affected. Throughout our partnership experiences, we heard teachers and administrators express skepticism about the ability of the many initiatives to have a positive impact on student learning. This apparent lack of collective efficacy for various efforts has the potential of influencing the group's behaviors and course of action, potentially undermining an initiative's real potential (Goddard, 2001; Goddard, Logerfo, & Hoy, 2004; Ross, Hogaboam-Gray, & Gray, 2004).

### *Related Consideration: Authentic Research*

A notable barrier to partnerships that promote a balance between theory and practice is the pressure most higher education faculty feel to publish research articles in "high impact" journals. University faculty promotion and tenure has historically been assessed in large measure by their research productivity. Action research, teacher research, and other more authentic or practitioner-oriented forms of research have typically not been viewed as being rigorous enough to fully meet the standards of tenure and promotion committees. As such, faculty often experience institutional pressure to work in areas of research that practitioners often complain is not well designed to make a practical difference.

As Rakow and Robinson (1997) asserted, "for many years the dichotomy between the ivory tower of the university and the trenches of public school have been both an ideological perception and a reality." As a result, practitioners often argue that too much research addresses esoteric topics with limited directly useful information. In fact, in one study (Kezar, 1998) researchers and practitioners differed in what forms and formats of research they found useful, in their criteria for quality, in their definition of what



makes a study significant, and in their opinion of future directions for research. Clearly researchers and practitioners work in different environments with different cultures and institutional norms, however, because of the pressures to publish forms of research practitioners generally do not find useful, faculty who work in university-school partnerships can find themselves serving two masters. For many higher education faculty members, this presents a conflict that makes working in collaboration with public schools too time consuming and at odds with the norms and expectations of their own institutions.

One potential form of educational research that may help to bridge the conflict between the researchers and practitioner views is design-based research. Design-based research communicates findings to practitioners as well as other researchers (Brophy, 2002); takes place through continuous cycles of design, enactment, analysis, and redesign (Cobb, 2001; Collins, 1992); seeks to understand how educational issues play themselves out in authentic settings; and uses research methodologies that can document and connect outcomes to program implementation. This approach can produce findings that can aid practitioners in creating learning conditions that theory suggests are productive, but that are not commonly practiced or well understood as well as formatively feeding back into program improvement.

In design-based research, the primary goal is not global propositions or theories, but the creation of products, artifacts, and processes that leverage findings by making insights usable, actionable, and adoptable. The question becomes not simply one of abstract effectiveness, but one of deep contextual understanding of the transference of research to real school settings. Design-based research seeks to understand how educational issues play themselves out in authentic settings and uses research methodologies that can document and connect outcomes to program implementation. This approach goes beyond simply testing theoretical constructs, theories, or interventions, but seeks to understanding the complex relationships among theory, designed artifacts, and practice (Zaritsky, Kelly, Flowers, Rogers, O'Neil 2003).

In our view, university faculty working in this area need to understand the value of more authentic research methodologies such as design-based research and help point the way to research that can more directly impact quality leadership and teacher preparation. We call for colleges and universities to carefully assess their own meanings of academic quality and how these views impact faculty work with their school constituents.

### *The Need to Develop and Maintain an Effective Communication System*

Among the most important lessons learned in our partnerships over the past five years has been in the area of communication. At the center of this issue has been an overall feeling among participants that goals and expectations were unclear. While grants and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) may specify goals and expectations at an administrative and structural level, the various lines of communication needed to make this clear and actionable to all of the stakeholders, particularly teachers were often missing or inadequate. Peel, Peel & Baker (2002) stress the importance of partnerships where schools and universities work collaboratively with shared leadership, common vision, support of top leaders, flexibility, respect and trust, and open communication.

University-school partnerships have great promise for helping to improve schools (Essex, 2001), but must be supported and advanced by top leadership at both types of institutions. In order for this to happen, more effective lines of communication are needed. Public schools and universities are very different places. Roles, expectations, standards, schedules, rewards and the like are very different for schools and universities. Communication is no exception and can be a significant issue in university school partnerships (Teitel, 2003).

Our experience is consistent with the literature in the presumption from some PK-12 educators that the university is going to “fix” their school (LePage, Bordreau, Maier, Robinson, & Cox, 2001; Clarcken, 1999; Day, 1998; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Simpson, Payne, Munro & Hughes, 1999). This top-down mentality creates obstacles for authentically meeting shared goals (Yamagata-Lynch, & Smaldino 2007).

### *The Need for Instructionally Focused Leadership Practices*

Throughout our work, it became increasingly evident that without an instructionally focused and

strategically aligned mission, our efforts were at serious risk of withering on the vine. While individual efforts may have been valuable, they often lacked clearly articulated links to the strategic goals of the school division and how these goals could be met at the central office, principal, assistant principal, and teacher levels. Because of the communication issues outlined earlier, the various stakeholders did not always understand their roles and the goals of participating. We did not have any problems showing teachers the value of using formative assessment strategies, for example, but how specific strategies fit into the school's and division's various agendas was not often fully thought through and/or articulated.

As DeVita (2007) points out, efforts to bring about meaningful change have rarely been effectively organized and result in what she called “a crazy quilt of reform strategies – a try something, anything attitude that has left successful reforms isolated, uncoordinated, uninstitutionalized and unexamined” (para 6). Similarly, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) noted, “Pilot projects show promise but are rarely converted into successful system-wide change” (p. 1). Despite 25 years of reform efforts after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) most reform efforts have failed (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006) and students, particularly poor children, still do not receive an adequate education (DeVita, 2007). While there are individual exceptions, education as we know it has remained largely unchanged.

In the current educational climate, dominated by frequent testing and decontextualized pacing guides, we tend to focus on teaching the canon itself and miss opportunities to engage students and teachers in using the canon to develop strong self-efficacy known to impact student learning (Pajares, Johnson, 1994; Urdan, Pajares, Lapin, 1997) Working harder within these confines, we argue, will not meet our long term goals. There is a possibility of becoming what is measured (Wergin, 2003), and focusing solely on the standards runs the risk of underestimating the need to teach higher-order cognitive skills and promoting self-efficacy. These are widely recognized as being necessary for advancement to upper level courses and as fundamental life skills in today's complex society (Bandura, 1986; National Science Foundation, 1992; Pintrich, 1989; Pintrich, De Groot 1990; Schunk, 1989) A primary focus on teaching to the test can take the life out of school programs and deflect teaching from its deeper purposes.

A central issue is the dominant training-and-coaching model which focuses on expanding teachers skills is not adequate to the current climate of school improvement and reform; this knowledge dissemination model does not embody most of the basic assumptions about teaching and learning found within school improvement efforts (Little, 1993). In this way, school improvement and reform initiatives project a vision of teaching and learning that the teachers themselves have not experienced (Little, 1993). Structural changes without clear understanding about how these changes support instructional goals (Elmore, 2002) do not impact student performance. What is often missing is instructionally focused leadership that can help move beyond simple structural change and facilitate changes in the instructional core and foster a more dynamic learning environment for students.

Leadership for learning has increasingly become the default way of conceptualizing educational leadership. We can see this in the foci of professional conferences, leadership and instructional supervision textbooks, journal articles, professional development workshops and the mission statements and program descriptions of colleges of education across the country. While few would argue that the real value to this emerging perspective on school leadership, just what is meant by the term *learning* is not well defined and the “folk” understanding of learning within our educational institutions from preschools to doctoral programs tends to be dominated by a “banking” concept of learning (Freire, 1970), that is an approach to teaching that views the student as the passive recipient of knowledge handed down by the teacher who is viewed as the knowledge authority. If we examine the attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, practices and habits of both teachers and learners, we observe that they tend to be dominated by epistemological perspectives that lean towards omniscient knowledge authority, certain and simple knowledge, and innate ability (Schommer, 1993). These are the beliefs that dominate the educational landscape.

We argue that most, if not all, “high yield” (Marzano, 2007) instructional and assessment practices require an active agency orientation on the part of both the teacher and the student in order to meet their educative potential. In order to meet this potential, school leaders need to understand better how to structure and facilitate this orientation in their buildings and school divisions. There is a need to more carefully and purposefully embed these fundamental concepts into pre-service and in-service teacher

and leadership training. In order to avoid the “crazy quilt of reform strategies” (DeVita, 2007) we need a better overarching framework that will help to align strategically our efforts around a sound conceptual center that promotes the effective use of these research-based, high-yield instructional and assessment practices.

## CONCLUSION

The need to better understand how to effectively create and maintain university-school district partnerships is clear. Because teacher quality is the most significant in-school determinant of student achievement (Cochran-Smith, 2003), and the norms and standards for school leadership have shifted, university-school district partnership efforts must be well designed to bring about meaningful changes and improvements to both teacher quality and leadership preparation that fosters and sustains improvements in teacher quality. Educators venturing into this ever-changing climate, both university and school personnel, should be cognizant of the potential benefits and burdens of partnership efforts. Our suggested pillars provide a possible model to help to navigate these challenging waters, and to design, plan for, and assess future efforts.

Our model is based in a teacher quality and an instructionally-focused leadership framework that is designed to facilitate building the internal professional capacity of schools to improve and sustain changes and create new and productive normative structures. The components of this framework are: 1) the need to take a developmental view and recognize that change, understanding of new structures, and deep engagement take time to develop and transfer to generalizable teaching and leadership practices; 2) the need to find balance between theory and practice; 3) the need to develop clear shared goals and maintain an effective communication system to keep these goals central; and 4) the need to develop and support instructionally focused leadership practices required to shepherd in a new normative structure.

Many of the initiatives we worked together on in our various partnerships involved significant shifts in the culture of leadership, teaching, and learning. This involved much more than simply acquiring a new set of discrete skills; rather, success was dependent on establishing new institutional norms and beliefs that would support the long term intended use of these updated skills. A developmental view of school improvement recognizes that new understanding takes time and deep engagement to develop into well understood and generalizable teaching practices.

Throughout our partnership efforts we noted teachers’ desire for training in immediately useable instructional strategies; teachers often argued the university’s approach was too academic. Based on teacher feedback, observations, and our ongoing dialogue, we developed an approach we believe provides potential guidance to overcome this barrier. When teachers had opportunities to utilize actionable strategies that exemplified some key aspect of the training, had iterative opportunities to test and refine strategies, received timely formative feedback and had opportunities to share their own expertise and experience with each other, we found training to be far more effective. In the absence of these pragmatic anchors and ongoing interactions to address professional learning questions, professional development efforts have little hope of being effectively utilized or sustained.

Another important partnership consideration is the need to carefully integrate all partnership activities into ongoing division initiatives. Our school partners had numerous, and sometimes competing and/or overlapping, initiatives. This lack of integration was a significant source of frustration for many teachers. Without a way to focus and prioritize one’s teaching efforts, many seemed to default to a compliance mindset where they did what they were told to do and suspended their professional judgment.

University-school partnerships have great promise, but public schools and universities are very different places and communication problems can undermine this potential. Roles, expectations, standards, schedules, and rewards in these two settings are all very different and as such more effective lines of communication are needed.

Lastly, without an instructionally-focused and strategically-aligned mission, partnership efforts are at serious risk of failing. Individual efforts may have merit, but if there are not clearly articulated links to the strategic goals of the school division and how these goals could be met at the central office, principal, assistant principal, and teacher levels, this potential is not met. In the current educational climate, dominated by frequent testing and decontextualized pacing guides, we tend to focus on teaching

the canon itself, which is teaching to the test. This can take the “life” out of school programs and deflect teaching from its deeper purposes. Instructionally-focused leadership can help move beyond simple structural change and facilitate changes in the instructional core and foster a more dynamic learning environment for students.

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