

Serendipitous Findings of A School-University Collaboration: A Case Study with National Implications for Supporting Novice Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Schools and universities have a connectedness that has existed for over a century. Once the axiom “preparation for college is preparation for life” became popular, the role of the high school as preparer of university students and the role of the university as preparer of future educators came together to form a perpetual cycle that continues to drive the missions of both public schools and universities. While the cycle remains, the quality of the relationship between schools and universities has been strained. School-university collaborations have been reformulated so that the relationships between them can be revitalized to effect school reform and improved learning outcomes. Insights from an attempt to create school-university collaboration have led to insights the authors present in this article.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to focus on lessons learned from a collaboration among two faculty members from the College of Education at a rural university, the principal of a ninth grade center at a suburban high school, and novice teachers. The collaboration represented an effort to mentor novice teachers to ensure their success in the classroom and retention in the profession. Each principal-teacher dyad was to be the unit of analysis for the intervention. To facilitate the intervention, the principal provided lunch in her conference room. This set a very positive tone for all parties.

Reflection Revealed Several Insights

The collaboration was an informal pilot initiative. The authors hoped it would lead to an expanded effort with a wider network of principals and teachers but many obstacles faced by the authors led to the termination before it could be pursued further. Reflection revealed several insights:

1. The busy schedule of the principal and the emergent demands on her time during the day are a normal part of running a school. In this case, some of the delayed meetings or cancellations were due to efforts to coordinate with her schedule. The lunch and conference schedules of the teachers also had to be coordinated with university faculty schedules. The commitment of the authors was to avoid disrupting the teachers' day or unnecessarily taking up their time. The intent was to schedule campus visits at a time when university faculty could observe classes and make recommendations.
2. The professors had different time frames for teaching. Undergraduate curriculum and instruction classes were taught on weekday mornings; educational leadership graduate classes were taught in the evenings and weekends. The university requirement for structuring office hours, combined with the mutually exclusive class times, rendered joint visits by collaborating professors difficult.
3. Unexpected university meetings frequently were called at times with last minute reports that needed to be written. Cancellations of high school campus visits occurred at such times. Rescheduling was not easy. The constant interruption of work flow made it difficult to continue the intervention.
4. Geography also presented a challenge. The collaborating high school, located 30 miles west of a downtown urban center, was 40 miles south of the university. The road of choice had a posted speed limit of 45 miles per hour and was well traveled. The round trip between university and high school campuses required a

minimum of 2 hours. The rural university setting made travel more difficult. One author lived 45 miles north of the university and 85 miles from the collaborating high school; the other author lived 30 miles east of campus and 40 miles from the collaborating high school. The respective “triangles” these distances formed, from home to university to collaborating campus and back home again, were extremely large and individual triangles did not overlap. The need for very tight planning and schedule coordination combined with the vast distances left very little room for flexibility if there were to be multiple weekly interventions.

5. Different agendas between university professors and collaborating high school teachers prevented a more productive collaboration from developing. The professors envisioned sharing ideal teaching and learning content with the teachers, including some prescriptive strategies upon learning of their teaching challenges. The collaborating teachers’ responses varied. Some did not feel a need for guidance; though, the challenges they faced revealed that perhaps they could use some help. They did not want a long term relationship that would last beyond the first meeting. The teachers felt there was too much to do and meetings would be a complete waste of their time. Some simply wanted solutions to immediate pedagogical concerns – quick fixes or a grab bag of pedagogical tricks.
6. Long-term collaborations are not always necessary in order to conduct a school-university intervention. During the initial meeting, a novice science teacher revealed unhappiness with his teaching situation. His frustration was clear, but he communicated the problem for the first time to his principal. The principal made immediate adjustments based on that information.

Lessons Learned

The desirability of collaboration between university professors and public school teachers and administrators remains high. The success of collaborations is vital to the improvement of school performance and student learning. The following recommendations are made to improve the university side of the school-university collaboration:

1. University policies and practices should be examined and reformulated regarding faculty work load, scheduling, and release time for public service and building relationships to support university-school collaborations. Barriers to collaboration with schools should be identified and eliminated.
2. Selection of collaborators should be preceded by a series of conversations about what is needed and what each partner can offer the other. In this case, the initial meetings with potential collaborators achieved this. It was disappointing and

- surprising the collaboration could not proceed. However, it was good all parties were able to cut their losses early rather than proceed without adequate resources.
3. Collaborators should be willing to use technology to a greater extent to reduce the cost and expense of commuting. For example, E-Mentoring can replace face-to-face mentoring when working with novice teachers.
 4. It is important to have better organization of anticipated departmental and university tasks so departmental emergencies do not occur daily or weekly absorbing faculty time and resources. Reports and studies that require faculty involvement should be addressed early so faculty work schedules will not be affected.
 5. The ability to work professionally with schools, maintaining scheduled meetings for example, is vital to maintaining school motivation and willingness to view universities as a reliable resource. Frequent rescheduling made it difficult to establish momentum.
 6. Respect for teacher time is also vital to forming relationships that are productive. In this case, the principal provided lunch and met with teachers during their lunch time. If needed, an assistant principal was available to cover a class. In each case, the intervention was completed during the lunch period.
 7. Another distance-related issue is that of smaller triangles. It is important to select collaborators as close as possible to the university. School districts that are close to the university and not prohibitively distant from professors' homes make a far more sensible collaboration.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, all parties to the collaboration in this case study demonstrated good will and a desire to work together. Time constraints, distance, and emergent demands on faculty resources kept this collaboration from moving forward. University flexibility and facilitation of activities that it espouses are vital to fulfilling the university side of school-university collaborations.