

# ED446179 2000-09-00 The Impact of Professional Development Schools on the Education of Urban Students. ERIC Digest Number 156.

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**Author:** Schwartz, Wendy

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## The Impact of Professional Development

# Schools on the Education of Urban Students. ERIC Digest Number 156.

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Professional development schools (PDSs) were originated a decade ago to provide a new model for teacher education that enables graduate students to have meaningful classroom experiences while they earn their degree. Over 1,000 PDSs exist in nearly every state, operating as partnerships between universities and public schools; most belong to one of many national or regional networks. PDSs have four overall goals: (1) teacher preparation, (2) professional development of inservice teachers, (3) research and inquiry on education practices and dissemination of innovations, and (4) the improvement of students' school experiences. An additional goal for some PDSs is to provide supports not available otherwise to underresourced urban schools and to facilitate change in restructuring schools (Clark, 1999; Levine, 1997).

Because of the several, and possibly competing, goals of PDSs, evaluations have been sketchy and inconclusive, although there is evidence that the achievement of some students in some PDSs has improved (Abdal-Haqq, 1998a). There have been many reviews of the concept itself, however, both strongly supportive and critical. All reviewers can cite evidence for their position, because experience varies so widely among the many PDSs and because outcomes at a particular school are affected by the interplay of each partner's strengths and weaknesses (including regulatory constraints); the skills and commitment of the university professors, student teachers, and school staff; and the characteristics of the students and the involvement of their families.

This digest describes some ways that PDSs can improve the school experiences of urban students; it also indicates their possible pitfalls. The information can help guide schools considering a PDS partnership with a teacher education institution.

## GENERAL SCHOOL SUPPORT

To "engage in an authentic collaboration" (Fountain, 1997, p. 2), the school partner in a PDS must be wholly and actively engaged in its PDS program. It must be willing to create different organizational structures, develop new roles, and secure additional resources, either through external sources or the reallocation of internal resources. PDS teachers need to be committed to making changes in their performance. (Indeed, these are the same changes required of all restructuring schools.)

## BENEFITS

One important benefit of involvement in a PDS for public schools is the presence of additional personnel who can perform many useful functions. Student teachers can relieve teachers in the classroom while they do planning, curriculum development, inservice training, and other group activities that are essential in restructuring schools. Another benefit of PDSs is the professional development that university professors offer inservice teachers. Development activities cover a wide range, such as ways to assess teachers' own effectiveness, the value of certain teaching techniques, and student needs; and training in new education strategies and multiculturalism. Computer training is often the most useful, particularly when it contains a distance learning component that expands teachers' ability to take courses and to provide children with new experiences (Abdal-Haqq, 1998b). The promise of a more satisfying professional experience has a positive impact on teacher retention in schools that otherwise would have high turnover.

The implementation of integrated service programs in PDSs benefits schools, particularly those suffering from a lack of social service resources: mental health and job counseling, dropout and gang prevention programs, etc. University partners can bring in counseling professors and graduate students both to work directly with students and families and to provide inservice staff with training (Clark, 1999). Unfortunately, though, not many PDSs have successfully incorporated such programs, although the University of Louisville has developed a Wellness Project that is now being replicated in some PDSs (Abdal-Haqq, 1998b).

## CHALLENGES

Improving education in the participating schools may not be the primary goal of the university partner, given its mandate to educate its own students. Therefore, schools must work to ensure that their students benefit educationally from the partnership. There may be a tension between the need to raise test scores, which is how a school's success is currently judged, and the desire of a university to develop curriculum and teaching strategies that increase student learning but not necessarily test scores (Pritchard & Aness, 1999). Of course, these goals need not be mutually exclusive, as demonstrated by a "reading buddy" program at a Houston PDS that paired student teachers with elementary school students for small group learning; the program, which also sparked the strong involvement of inservice teachers, raised test scores significantly (Abdal-Haqq, 1998b).

## INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

One important aspect of the PDS model is "inquiry": ongoing "action research" by all PDS participants to explore how they themselves and the students learn and interact, how they can apply this information to improve students' learning, and how effective the instructional innovations they develop are (Smith, 1999).

The stated educational philosophy of PDSs is learner-centered, constructivist practice, which will increase learning by being responsive to the various needs of a diverse

student population, instead of demanding that all students fit into the "traditional, largely Eurocentric [teaching] mold" (Abdal-Haqq, 1998b, p. 35). Specific strategies include cooperative learning, use of hands-on manipulatives, story reading and writing, and students' use of the discovery method to learn independently (Davis, 1999). While assistance in implementing such a philosophy can be an important benefit for the school partner, "only a few studies" indicate that these strategies are actually being used (Abdal-Haqq, 1998b, p. 35).

The value to students of small group learning and personal attention by teachers is well demonstrated by the PDS experience. Because of the large number of educators on site, PDSs can develop one-on-one and group tutoring activities whose pace is determined by the students' progress. Moreover, student teachers in a classroom can work privately with a child to reinforce learning while the teacher moves through the curriculum more quickly with the remainder of the class (Pritchard & Aness, 1999).

## DEVELOPMENT OF EFFECTIVE MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION STRATEGIES

An important PDS focus is infusion of a multicultural perspective into learning. Ideally, PDSs implement multilingual, multiethnic, and culturally diverse learning experiences, and adapt them to meet the particular needs and learning styles of urban students. They sensitize teachers to student differences, explain the importance of drawing upon community and family resources, and provide opportunities for teacher education students to develop long-term relationships with children different from themselves (Fountain, 1997).

Several problems have been identified with this PDS effort, however. First, the public desire to train more teachers whose ethnicity and socioeconomic status match their students' is somewhat subverted by the PDS model itself. Teacher education training through a PDS largely prevents students from working simultaneously; thus, it is most likely that white students with better access to financial resources will enroll in the program. Second, research has shown that presenting information about the learning and behavioral characteristics of different ethnic groups can increase teacher stereotyping and even lead to the belief that some students cannot learn (Proctor, Wagstaff, & Ochoa, 1998). Third, according to Murrell & Borunda (1998), many PDSs consider equity to be "equality of opportunity and access," as opposed to equality of outcomes, which is the true way disadvantaged students can become equal with "mainstream" students. Finally, they assert, most PDSs accept the traditional structure of schools, including their relationships with students' families and communities, thus possibly leaving in place inequitable access to education and distributions of power (p. 69).

## PARENT AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Efforts to involve parents depend on the commitment of the public school and university staffs involved in the PDS, and some PDSs have model programs. An El Paso PDS has developed a "democratic community" enabling parents to initiate their own action plans and collaborate with educators on school restructuring. At a rural Nebraska PDS students engage in ongoing activities to connect them to the community (Smith, 1999). A Houston PDS operates a Saturday School, a ten-week program for parents and students that complements other parent support services, including English language classes (LeCompte, Irby, & Lara-Alecio, 1995).

These models notwithstanding, "explicit programming to involve parents and communities...is not widespread" (Abdal-Haqq, 1998b, p. 54). Some school and university staffs do not consider working collaboratively with parents important; thus, their student teachers do not have an opportunity to see how it can be done effectively (Proctor et al., 1998) nor to work productively with individuals whose socioeconomic status and race differs from theirs (Murrell & Borunda, 1998).

## CONCLUSION

Urban schools can benefit from becoming a partner in a PDS in many ways. Often, the positive effects, such as staff development and the acquisition of technology resources, will be felt even after the partnership is ended. But because the original promises of PDSs are frequently only partially fulfilled, schools should seek assurances from potential university partners that their institutional needs and the needs of their students will be considered just as seriously as the effort to educate student teachers. Schools entering into a PDS partnership must also commit themselves to the hard work of institutional change, which involves the way they operate and educate, and the way their staff members work and relate to each other (Davis, 1999). Finally, schools and communities need to partner in the planning and operation of a PDS to ensure that the goal of equity translates into student achievement, school accountability, and community involvement (Murrell & Borunda, 1998).

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