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ABSTRACT

This article describes an alternative master's degree program for inservice teachers which involves a collaboration between a large university and an urban school district. The program provides teachers with a rigorous and ongoing professional development experience that recognizes the context of their daily work and focuses on their specific needs, with the ultimate goal of improving the teaching and learning that occurs within the school district. Unique program features include the fact that it was delivered onsite to a group of beginning or newer teachers, content was designed around the expressed needs of the teachers, the school administrator and university faculty assumed new roles, content was provided in the context of ongoing professional experiences, outside consultants and local staff developers provided instruction along with university faculty, the school district paid all program costs, and the district and university were separated by 150 miles. This paper explains: how the partnership was established, its framework and goals, getting the program started, program structure and process, and successes and shortcomings. Overall, teachers valued the support they received from the cohort and became willing to try new things. University faculty felt the partnership enhanced their work. (Contains 20 references.) (SM)

BEYOND A RITE OF PASSAGE: INITIATING AN ALTERNATIVE MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAM FOR INSERVICE TEACHERS

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Most public school teachers in the United States are required to earn a master's degree at some point following their initial certification. For many teachers, this means attending classes on college campuses during evenings or in the summer, often while working full-time. Typically, the university programs in which they enroll are the result of a curriculum development process which establishes the content of the degree, the specific courses involved, and a pre-determined sequence for taking the courses.

While this kind of program may be appropriate in some disciplines—such as in the arts and sciences—it creates difficulties in the field of inservice teacher education. For example, because teachers typically have an imposed time frame in which the degree must be completed, and because course offerings are frequently limited due to finite university resources, the sequence in which courses are taken is often arbitrary. Working full-time and taking courses at night can also present a challenge for teachers in completing assignments and integrating new knowledge into their already overloaded classroom routines. At the same time, universities face the challenge of maintaining the integrity of their programs and assuring that teachers understand and can apply the concepts being taught. Furthermore, teachers generally proceed through a graduate program individually, with little or no support from their everyday school colleagues. As a result, it is no surprise that teachers often view the traditional master's degree program as more of a rite of passage than as a truly meaningful professional experience.

The alternative master's degree program described in this article addresses these problems through a collaborative effort between a large university and an urban school district. The program seeks to provide teachers with a rigorous and ongoing professional development experience that recognizes the context of their daily work and focuses on their specific needs, with the ultimate goal of improving the teaching and learning that occurs within the school district.

It is important to note that this article is not a systematic evaluation of the program. Instead, it focuses primarily on the contexts and conditions in which the program was initiated. The quotes from program participants that appear in this article were derived from reflective journal writing, audiorecorded interviews, responses to questionnaires, and various audiorecorded class sessions. These data are part of a comprehensive evaluation of the program that is currently underway and will be published in the future.

Unique Features of the Program

Several unique features distinguish the program from conventional inservice masters degree programs: 1) the program was delivered on-site to a group of beginning or newer teachers (median age: 32; median years of experience: four); 2) the content was designed around the expressed needs of the teachers; 3) a school administrator and university faculty assumed new roles; 4) the content was provided in the context of on-going professional development experiences instead of time-bound courses; 5) outside consultants and local staff development experts

were contracted to provide instruction in addition to university faculty; 6) the school district paid all the costs associated with the program (including tuition, fees, books, curriculum materials, and a laptop computer for each teacher); and 7) the school district and the university were separated by a considerable distance (150 miles).

Theoretical Framework

The usefulness of the traditional master's degree program for inservice teachers is generating discussion and analysis within the teacher education community. As Shen (1999) notes, in the last 25 years,

> ...there has been a profound shift in the balance of the various missions of the schools of education. Scholarly work has risen to preeminence at the expense of teaching and service. Concurrent with the rising importance of research, schools of education tend to retreat from the model of professional education and incline toward the model of academic education that prevails in the arts and sciences (p. 3).

Alan Tom concludes that "most teachers and some teacher educators have lost confidence in master's degree study for experienced teachers" (p. 245). He goes on to state that the impact of master's degree programs on experienced teachers "seems minimal" (p. 245). Miller and Stayton (1999) also emphatically maintain that if schools, colleges, and departments of education (SCDEs) are to continue to prepare teachers, "current program structures and faculty roles must change substantially" (p. 290). Imig (2000) recently addressed the issue of new faculty roles as a largely ignored but necessary needs in SCDEs. He calls for new roles to be developed for faculty who are "boundary spanners" or "bridge builders" who work jointly with the university and schools or school districts.

In discussing the broader challenges facing the teacher education enterprise, Imig (2000) concludes that there is a "disconnect" between the perceptions of teacher education faculty and its critics including "our graduates and their school communities" (p. 2). Two of the reasons he gives are the emergence of school-embedded professional development and increasing competition from a host of providers. He states that such developments "demand a different response from teacher education faculties" (p. 4). That this is a significant problem is illustrated by a recent article by Dennis Sparks and Stephanie Hirsch, two leaders of the National Staff Development Council. Sparks and Hirsch (2000) are critical of the current teacher reward system connected to graduate education. They state,

> ...The current system that rewards teachers with higher pay according to higher education credits—regardless of their quality or topic—simply encourages teachers to take a hodgepodge of courses that may not be linked to the school's needs. As a result, many current programs of professional development do not help teachers and schools make lasting improvements (p. 45).

Such thinking is confirmed by Wolk (quoted in Tom, 1999) who believes that professional development is mistakenly viewed as being disconnected from teaching.

> Unfortunately, the system as it now exists does not encourage real professional development. We have this odd notion in education that one's intellectual growth is separate from one's daily work, that it happens through osmosis by sitting in some boring inservice session or in some irrelevant evening course at a nearby college (p. 251).

One response often called for by schools, colleges, and departments of education (SCDEs) is the formation of school/university partnerships which, hopefully, will address some of the problems and challenges confronting SCDEs. Some of these partnerships, however, are merely universities' relationships with schools designed to support student teachers and to provide faculty members easy access for research. Others are more organic and long-lasting such as Professional Development schools (*Changing course: Teacher education reform at state colleges and universities*, 1995; Levine & Trachtman, 1997). Of a more unique nature, the partnership described in this article was initiated by a request from the school district for a master's degree program which could serve as an induction program for their young teachers, which would focus on instruction and student learning and achievement, and which could be experienced as on-going, job embedded professional development. The university responded and engaged in the collaborative development of a unique program based on the expressed needs of teachers and the district, which was not constrained by traditional course structure and sequence, and which framed new boundary-spanning roles for faculty and personnel in both institutions.

The Partners

Located on the northern boundary of Detroit, the Oak Park School District has four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school, which serve a diverse population of approximately 4100 students. Eighty-four percent of the students are African-American, 13% are Caucasian, and 3% are Hispanic or Asian. Of the Caucasian students, 70% are from Chaldean or Arabic-speaking households. A wide range of socio-economic levels are represented in the district, but nearly half of the students are at or below the poverty level. Ten percent of the students currently receive special education services and 11% are enrolled in a bilingual program. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Oak Park was widely known as one of the worst performing school districts in the state, as measured by the Michigan Educational Achievement Program (MEAP).

Western Michigan University is a large public university, consisting of nine colleges with a total enrollment of approximately 28,600 students. The main campus is located in Kalamazoo, with seven regional centers spread throughout the state. The Carnegie Foundation places WMU in the category of "Doctoral/Research Universities-Extensive." The College of Education at WMU is among the largest in the United States; it serves 13,000 undergraduate students, with 4800 being enrolled in the teacher education program. The College's graduate population includes approximately 2600 students, with almost 800 enrolled in a variety of master's degree programs for inservice teachers.

Oak Park's History of Reform Efforts

When the current superintendent came to Oak Park in 1992, only 15% of the District's 4th-grade students performed satisfactorily on the MEAP tests in reading and mathematics. Twelve percent of 7th-graders had satisfactory MEAP reading scores and only 5% of 10th graders had satisfactory mathematics scores. In response, the Board of Education and the superintendent developed a formal partnership with Consumers Energy, a major Michigan utility, to help with improvement efforts. Together they implemented a system-wide reform initiative, The Sixteen-Step Strategic Planning Process (see Porter, 1995; Marx, Hunter & Johnson, 1997). In accordance with the model, the district established performance standards for a set of success indicators identified by a group of education stakeholders from the community and then developed a long-range Improvement Plan that responded to those areas where the baseline status was less than satisfactory. The plan set forth performance goals for students and teachers as well as for administrators. District and school building organizational structures were aligned with the performance goals and profiles of achievement data were used to track performance at regular intervals. Implementation of the Process was funded by a grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and included intensive training programs for administrators and teachers in data-driven decision making.

Oak Park Schools demonstrated impressive gains in achievement after the initial implementation of its Improvement Plan. At all levels, MEAP scores more than doubled, fiscal integrity was restored, high school graduation rates increased and the most recent community survey showed a majority of respondents were satisfied with the district's performance. Although programs implemented early in the process resulted in dramatic gains, recent progress has slowed and in some cases results have declined. Current MEAP scores for the district remain below the state average for most grades and content areas.

Establishing a School/University Partnership

Analyses of student performance and program effectiveness data hinted that much of the early successes in Oak Park resulted from sharpening up existing practices and procedures that had a positive impact on students who were borderline satisfactory performers. Most building and district interventions were focused on student remediation and little had been done to initiate changes in administrative or teaching practices that might be required to meet the needs of students who were struggling. District administrators concluded that providing meaningful professional development opportunities for teachers designed to increase their content knowledge and instructional skills should be included as a key component of future initiatives intended to raise student achievement to higher levels. The possibility of utilizing a master's degree program as a means to support teacher learning emerged from discussions about available alternatives. From the district perspective, the main problem with traditional graduate programs was the inconsistency in the ability of participants to transfer new knowledge and skills to the school and classroom. It was their belief that if a university would collaborate with district staff to ground educational experiences required for a

master's degree in the district curriculum and the daily work of the teachers, student achievement would increase.

Oak Park administrators recognized this would require major changes in the way graduate school instruction was implemented, but saw this arrangement as a cost effective way to engage teachers in an intensive professional development experience that would directly benefit the district. Oak Park established two conditions as the basis for negotiating with universities to deliver the program. First, the university and school district would need to agree that the success of the program depended on our joint ability to ultimately demonstrate increases in student achievement. The second condition was that course content must be presented in a way that was perceived as relevant to teachers. In the words of the superintendent, "What is discussed in class one night should be something teachers can use in their classroom within a week." The first condition was intended to keep the focus of activity on improving student learning, while the second reinforced the job-imbedded nature of the envisioned program.

After conducting discussions with several universities, Oak Park Schools eventually decided to enter into a partnership with the College of Education at Western Michigan University to offer a field-based graduate degree program to a cohort of 32 employees of the district. Twenty four of these teachers were relatively new in the system. The remaining eight were more experienced teachers and administrators who were interested in completing the degree program. The school district provided the participants with required textbooks and paid all tuition and fees. The expenses incurred were slightly higher, but still comparable to the hourly stipends that would have been paid to engage these people in workshops for the amount of class time required of a 36-hour degree program.

Framework and Goals

The conceptual framework for the program as it was initially envisioned met the "programmatic markers" described by Tom (1999). These markers are the following: 1) program delivery is on-site and the content is framed around teacher needs so that teaching is viewed as a continuing process of self-improvement; 2) the cohort includes teachers from all four elementary schools, so that an effort has been made to develop a community of learners where teaching is being viewed as collegial work; and 3) the focus of the content is always on student learning. As it has evolved, the program also meets the four research based elements of effective professional development posited by Sparks and Hirsch (2000). These elements show that "effective teacher development is: 1) focused on helping teachers become deeply immersed in subject matter and teaching methods; 2) curriculum-centered and standards-based; 3) sustained, rigorous, and cumulative; and 4) directly linked to what teachers do in their classrooms" (p.45).

The primary and overarching goal of the partnership was to integrate teacher professional development needs and district organizational needs with the content of a graduate degree program which could be delivered in a flexible manner. The program was designed to serve as a bridge between teacher needs and course content—combining what busy teachers need to know and be able to do with the

world of research and best practice. An important sub-goal of the district was to help teachers use diagnostic data to inform teaching practice.

A New Role for the District Assistant Superintendent

In 1993, when Oak Park was collaborating with its business partner, Consumers Energy, the district superintendent created a unique new role for one of its school administrators. At the suggestion of Consumers Energy, the superintendent released the high school principal from his duties and assigned him to work with Consumers to help implement the reform plan. For the next five years, he worked from an office in the regional headquarters of Consumers Energy while assisting the superintendent on this project. Then, in 1998, he returned to an office in the district to continue facilitating the change process—and his title was subsequently changed from Director of Student Performance Analysis to Assistant Superintendent.

The duties of this new assistant superintendent were unique. He reported directly to the superintendent and had no supervisory program responsibilities for day-to-day operations within the system. Instead, his primary role was to ensure that school and district improvement efforts resulted in continuous growth in student achievement. Due to the access to the superintendent that the position afforded, the assistant superintendent gained a high degree of referent authority over the years even though he operated outside the normal chain of command. Over time, he became the one man in the district who thoroughly understood the superintendent's vision and expectations, and it became common for other administrators to ask him for clarification on directives or to support their proposals. In addition to process facilitation, he also managed major district initiatives implemented as part of the District Improvement Plan, and he sometimes intervened in other areas on a short-term basis when disconnects that might impede progress were noted.

The assistant superintendent was directly involved in the analyses and discussions that led to the superintendent's idea of offering a master's degree program to elementary teachers in Oak Park, and he conducted most of the negotiations with universities that were pursued as potential partners for the project. Once the partnership was formed with WMU, the assistant superintendent helped to recruit participants, facilitated the mechanics of implementation for the school district, and collaborated with university staff in developing the instructional program. After the program was underway, the job of planning, organizing, and overseeing the program from within the district was the assistant superintendent's sole responsibility in the district.

Getting the Program Started

The master's degree program began with a one-week session during the summer of 1999, which was led by the assistant superintendent. He and the teachers spent time reflecting on the state of their professional careers with an emphasis on their ability as educators to effect positive changes in the performance of their students. They began with case studies of students they were able to help and those whom they wished they could have helped more. As a group, the teachers

examined patterns of performance from the classes they most recently taught to identify their strengths and their weaknesses in content expertise and considered how factors like student behavior and attendance affected their work. Finally, they looked at standardized test scores for their students and compared these results with the letter grades they had given students for performance in the content areas tested.

These early class sessions were structured in a way that systematically engaged teachers in conversations about their reflections on prior experience with an eye toward building a sense of community within the group and establishing individual learning goals for the master's program they were just beginning. At the end of the week, the Dean of the College of Education and the university faculty assigned to work with the Cohort joined the discussions. Together, they conducted an interactive needs assessment and reached a consensus decision that the area of reading and language arts would be the cohort's first area of study.

Initially, it was thought that the master's degree would be in Elementary Education, with an emphasis on other subject areas (e.g., math, science, social studies, etc.) to follow an initial focus on reading. Over the next several weeks, however, as the nature and shortcomings of the district's existing reading and language arts curriculum became apparent, the program gradually evolved into a master's degree in Reading. The cohort adopted a balanced literacy approach (e.g., Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 1999, 2001), which was a sharp contrast to the existing basal and skills-driven reading curriculum in the district. Thus, for the next two years, class sessions revolved around the overarching goal of re-conceptualizing the district's reading curriculum, and developing the knowledge base necessary to implement a balanced literacy approach.

Structure and Process

The cohort generally met at least once a week for three hours. Two days were set aside for this purpose—Tuesday and Thursday—with Thursday being the primary meeting day and Tuesday occasionally being used in addition. Individual class sessions were structured more like a series of ongoing, connected teacher workshops than like traditional college courses. From week to week, the content was planned and organized by the assistant superintendent and a university co-coordinator—always in direct response to the teacher's expressed and implicit needs as they sought to implement a balanced literacy approach to reading and language arts in their classrooms.

Individual sessions were conducted by a variety of personnel, including university faculty members, outside consultants, and district personnel. Because of the 150-mile distance between WMU and Oak Park, which resulted in a 5-hour round trip drive for faculty members who traveled to Oak Park, only two university faculty members were assigned to Oak Park as part of their regular course load. Other faculty members were enlisted, as needed, to lead particular class sessions, and thus were not required to travel to and from Oak Park on a weekly basis.

In many respects, the Oak Park/WMU program functioned as a needs-based professional development program featuring job-embedded learning. Teachers were asked to reflect on the progress of the program and on their own progress on a regular basis throughout each semester. As a result of this feedback, regular

adjustments and modifications were made in both the content and the sequence of the course work. For example, as noted earlier, the program was originally conceived as a general elementary education degree, which is what emerged from the initial summer needs assessment. However, the cohort group was asked to discuss their needs and perceptions at the first fall session and in the fifth session worked in small groups to examine their reading curriculum. The planning group, consisting of a smaller group of school and university personnel, also had an all-day planning session in September. The developing consensus from these sessions suggested that the program goals had moved to a different level of specificity. A general agreement among the cohort and the district administrators emerged suggesting that the primary goal of the program should be to develop a framework for a balanced literacy program and to work to develop a shared understanding of the framework among all teachers. This adjustment in the perceived needs of the teachers resulted in a modified plan for the remainder of the fall session. Throughout the program, similar adjustments were made at nearly every juncture while continuing to maintain the overall program direction and assuring the integrity of content.

The courses were, to some extent, modularized and focused on specific, long term objectives, something that is often not possible in a traditional program. The content was experienced conceptually so that teachers viewed it as on-going professional development instead of time-bound course work. However, the framework of the program was consistent with the traditional graduate program in reading offered by the university—that is, the content of all the courses in the existing 36-hour program was spread across the two-and a-half-year program, although the content of individual courses was not bound within the normal 15-week semester time frame. For example, the planning committee, in line with the district goals, decided that the first topic should be to help teachers develop a more systematic process for classroom reading assessment and to implement a common approach for data collection and analysis across the four elementary schools. A university faculty member led several sessions focusing on this topic, as teachers worked to implement these procedures in their classrooms. This topic is an objective of a course which was to be offered during the second semester but was more meaningfully addressed in this early phase of the program.

Another example of extended course content can be found in the research course, which is foundational part of all the College's master's degree programs. This research course focuses on the reading and understanding of educational research. The content includes the investigation of quantitative and qualitative approaches, and students are required to develop a research proposal as a final project. In the Oak Park program, the decision was made to introduce the concept of action research (Mills, 2000) early in the second year. Several sessions were devoted to introducing the content of the regular research course, but it focused directly on the needs and contexts of the Oak Park teachers. Instead of the action research proposal serving as a culminating experience, the proposal became a first step in actually conducting the research in classrooms. Some teachers chose to work alone while others worked as a research team in their school building. The action research

culminated with the writing of papers, and the presentation of findings to the entire cohort.

The effect of this extended investigation was dramatic. Instead of seeing the research course simply as a necessary step to a degree, the cohort teachers reported that by answering questions that were important to them, they saw research as an integral part of their teaching. This result is generally not observed in the regular one-semester research course, since developing a research proposal is seen by most students more as an academic exercise, or as a rite of passage, than as tool for their professional development. However, by extending the emphasis on research through a longer time-span, by letting them choose topics of interest, and by fostering conversations about their questions and their action research, the teachers clearly benefited, as did the district.

A final example of extended course content involves work with the upper elementary teachers by a regular university faculty member. Beginning in the second semester, the teachers expressed a desire to sometimes split the cohort into two subgroups based on their grade levels, in order to better address their specific needs. When the cohort was split, one group contained the K-3 teachers, while the other consisted of the teachers in grades 4-5. The content of much of the work being done by the upper elementary teachers was consistent with the objective of one course, which lasts for a single semester in the traditional program. However, in order to provide ongoing support and technical assistance, a university faculty member came to the cohort and worked with the upper elementary group once a month for more than a full year. As the teachers progressed in their understanding of the concepts involved, this faculty member continued to work in a supportive and problem solving role and was able to spend two full days in the teachers' classrooms providing real-time help.

Successes and Shortcomings

To date, the partnership between Oak Park and WMU has been successful in a variety of ways. For instance, it has enabled the Oak Park teachers to grow professionally, and improve the instruction in their classrooms. After the first year of the program, one teacher wrote:

> The biggest change in my classroom this year is that I am willing to try new things. When something is brought up and discussed, I try to think how I can implement it with my kids. It used to be that I would think that this won't work with them or they would never be able to pull it off. I now feel that I have the confidence and the support of the other members of the cohort to try just about anything in the room.

In addition, many of the teachers have mentioned the value of the support and encouragement that they have received from the cohort. As one teacher explained, "When faced with those who live with the 'status quo,' doing things at a level of static sameness, I know that besides me, my fellow cohort members are acting as agents of change as well."

The partnership has also positively influenced the professional lives of university faculty members. One professor involved with the cohort stated,

> When I teach on campus, I never know what kind of impact I am having on my students. Will they be able to put the things that they are learning in my class into practice in their classrooms? I hope so, but I realize it is a hit-or-miss proposition. The ongoing support that they need, especially when my class has ended, is just not there. Going to Oak Park, however, has been an exhilarating experience. To actually work with the same group of teachers for two-and-a-half years, watching them try new things, succeed, fail, and grow—and helping them along the way—is a tremendously rewarding privilege.

Fortunately, at WMU, the personal rewards gained through this kind of labor-intensive work are not achieved at the expense of promotion and tenure. The university has adopted a promotion and tenure policy consistent with the work of Boyer (1990), which recognizes that working with schools is a valuable form of scholarship. Another benefit to the university involves the generation of monetary funds. The partnership with Oak Park has brought a modest amount of money to the university that has helped to supplement faculty travel funds, and provide other resources to university faculty.

The challenges and shortcomings of the partnership are consistent with issues that arise in any partnership between two organizations. For example, Dolan (1994) notes that "there is a fundamental, relational, and intellectual consistency in every system that translates into a powerful drive to retain its equilibrium" (p. 5). In other words, organizations resist change, and this has been true at both Oak Park and WMU. In Oak Park, it was difficult to change the reading curriculum because of the institutional momentum behind the existing program, which was philosophically inconsistent with a balanced literacy approach. Thus, as the 34 cohort teachers moved ahead in implementing a balanced literacy approach in their classrooms, a knowledge gap emerged between the cohort teachers and other teachers (and administrators) who were vested in the existing program. In some ways, the efforts to oppose the new program were not even conscious, and might better be described as well-intentioned interference. For example, systemic issues such as scheduling, materials, and the allocation of resources—all of which were designed to support the old program—served as barriers for curriculum change.

The College of Education also had a "system in place" that was perhaps even more resistant to change than Oak Park's. Because the Oak Park master's program challenged the structure, format, and very essence of the existing master's degree programs, some faculty and administrators raised important concerns about issues such as rigor, coherence, and capacity. For example, with a distance of 150 miles separating the university and the school district, and with personnel outside the university playing a significant role in program design and implementation, how could the quality of the program be ensured? In addition, without specific content being covered in the context of time-bound courses, how could the program be coherent? Also, in spite of benefits to individual faculty, and a modest financial benefit to the college, such a program has the potential to strain college resources and diminish its capacity to engage in other work.

Because of these and other ongoing concerns—as well as the tremendous size and momentum of the existing master's programs—the Oak Park Program has not yet had a significant impact on WMU's College of Education.

Schlechty and Whitford (1988) identify at least three distinct types of collaborations between schools and universities which can be termed partnerships. The simplest and most common is a "cooperative" collaboration where one party helps the other. These arrangements are often characterized by a personal relationship between parties in both institutions. Another type is a symbiotic collaboration whereby both parties provide help to each other. The third type is an organic collaboration, in which parties work together jointly for the common good. The collaborative partnership between Oak Park and WMU can best be characterized as a symbiotic partnership moving toward an organic collaboration. Currently, a second cohort of teachers in Oak Park have entered the master's degree program, while some of the graduates of the first cohort (and other teachers in the district) have entered into a new field-based doctoral program sponsored by WMU.

Conclusion

As we move further into a new century, new pressures and new challenges continue to confront SCDEs. Public education is under a great deal of scrutiny from critics ranging from members of the United States Congress, to citizens on talk radio, to the popular press. To many critics, the perceived problems of public education can be placed squarely on the shoulders of teacher education programs. SCDEs cannot help but ask, "What is our future? What direction do we take?" Some people feel that the future of teacher education (as a university function) rests on the development of collaborative partnerships with public schools, including a clear commitment to field-based work.

Consequently, many colleges and universities are beginning to rethink the ways in which their graduate programs for teachers are structured and delivered. For example, Johns Hopkins University has collaborated with the Montgomery County Public Schools to create a unique master's degree program in special education with a concentration in inclusion (King-Sears, 1995). Similarly, South Dakota's Augustana College has collaborated with a local school district to offer a special master's degree in technology and teaching to a cohort of inservice teachers (Clementson & Hanson, 1998). In addition, National-Louis University is offering an innovative cohort-based master's degree program for practicing teachers from a variety of school districts (Burnaford & Hobson, 1995) . The Western Michigan University/ Oak Park partnership is different from these other programs in that it combines a cohort approach with a flexible curriculum and incorporates staff development resources from outside the university. We believe that much can be learned from our innovative master's degree program, just as we have learned from the efforts of others.

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This article describes an alternative master's degree program for inservice teachers which involves a collaboration between a large university and an urban school district. The program provides teachers with a rigorous and ongoing professional development experience that recognizes the context of their daily work and focuses on their specific needs, with the ultimate goal of improving the teaching and learning that occurs within the school district. Unique program features include the fact that it was delivered onsite to a group of beginning or newer teachers, content was designed around the expressed needs of the teachers, the school administrator and university faculty assumed new roles, content was provided in the context of ongoing professional experiences, outside consultants and local staff developers provided instruction along with university faculty, the school district paid all program costs, and the district and university were separated by 150 miles. This paper explains: how the partnership was established, its framework and goals, getting the program started, program structure and process, and successes and shortcomings. Overall, teachers valued the support they received from the cohort and became willing to try new things. University faculty felt the partnership enhanced their work. (Contains 20 references.) (SM)

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