A Common Vision: Teacher Quality Enhancement in the Middle Grades in Illinois

Collaborating for Success:
Lessons Learned from Illinois'
TQE Grant Implementation

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Cross-Site Evaluation Report

I.   INTRODUCTION

In 2000, the U.S. Department of Education awarded a state-level Teacher Quality Enhancement Grant to Illinois for "A Common Vision: Teacher Quality Enhancement in the Middle Grades in Illinois." Four sites were selected to implement the grant: Chicago State University, Northeastern Illinois University, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

The goals of the grant, as set forth in the revised TQE grant proposal dated January 2002 are as follows:

- Develop a middle grade certificate and rigorous middle school curricular-appropriate teacher preparation standards.

- Improve the knowledge and skills of middle-grade teachers, with an initial priority on teachers serving high-poverty urban and rural areas.

- Develop and implement recruitment activities to increase the supply of effective middle-grade teachers, with initial priority on poverty urban and rural areas.

Each site conducted additional activities specific to their needs using supplemental funding during the last year of the grant. Activities included continued development of modules, additional technology training and professional development to higher education faculty, development of a Master of Arts in Teaching degree, development of a Higher Education Professional Development Certificate program (targeted to community college faculty), creation of an electronic portfolio system, and additional training to pre-service and cooperating teachers.

II.   CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In September 2002, the Illinois Board of Higher Education contracted with the Illinois Education Research Council (IERC) to evaluate the TQE grant over a two-year period, with funding, in part, from the TQE grant. The IERC agreed to examine how teams at the four sites planned and organized to attain the goals of the grant, and what aspects of organizational culture and leadership behavior contributed to success. Formative interim reports were provided for each site in September 2003. Summative reports assessing the outcomes of the project using a collaboration framework to identify successes and challenges for each of the individual sites were provided in December 2004. *This report fulfills the requirement for a cross-site analysis report to draw lessons from each site to assist future implementation of multi-site higher education projects.*

A collaborative framework was envisioned for implementing the grant. The grant attempted to increase collaboration and mutual understanding among two- and four-year educational organizations and schools. Researchers at the Wilder Research Center developed the definition of collaboration as a "mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals with a high risk level due to shared authority and resources."[1] The Wilder researchers distinguished collaboration from both cooperation (i.e., informal relationship without any commonly defined mission with little to no risk) and coordination (i.e., more formal relationship and understanding of compatible, but not the same, goals with some increased risk to participants).

Based on the collaborative framework developed by the Wilder Research Center, the IERC evaluation team hypothesized the degree to which collaboration is achieved among grant partners will influence the magnitude of change in policy, organizations, and individuals, thus impacting the grant's success in strengthening teacher certification standards and improving middle-grade teacher preparation and recruitment. The framework was used to develop the

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[1] Mattessich, Paul W., Murray-Close, Marta, and Monsey Barbara R. "Collaboration: What makes it work." 2nd Edition. Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, 2001.

interview protocols and to guide our analysis. Specifically, the first interview protocol used for the Spring 2003 site visits was designed to assess the level of collaboration and the degree of change (e.g., procedures, practices, behavior, attitudes) achieved at the policy, organization, and individual level. The protocol focused on six categories derived from the work of the Wilder Research Center to be indicators of successful collaboration -- Common Vision; Process and Structure, including Membership, Leadership and Communication; and Organizational Environment.[2] The protocol helped the interviewers gain an understanding of how collaboration was manifesting itself at each site, and to identify successes and challenges. The October 2003 round of visits served the purpose of collecting clarifying information and an update on tasks being undertaken. The final round of visits in April 2004 returned to the collaboration conceptual framework to draw out from respondents their perceptions of the process. The interviewers were also updated on the sites' progress regarding the goals and objectives of the overall grant.

III. METHODOLOGY

A case study approach was used to conduct an in-depth analysis of the implementation and execution of the grant and the environmental context at the site and state level. Data from over 250 face-to-face and telephone interviews and program documentation provided by each site and the Illinois Board of Higher Education were used for the analysis. The IERC evaluation team conducted three on-site visits at each of the four consortia sites in Spring 2003, Fall 2003 and Spring 2004.

For the first round of visits, two teams of two interviewers undertook interviews of 30 to 45 minutes each at each site, focusing on collaborative efforts and the alignment of the goals of the grant. Some interviews were done individually, while others were planned for groups of two or more individuals who had similar roles in the project. Some sites required additional telephone interviews after the site visit due to scheduling conflicts. These were completed

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[2] Mattessich, Paul W., Murray-Close, Marta, and Monsey Barbara R. "Collaboration: What makes it work." 2nd Edition. Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, 2001.

within two weeks of the on-site visit. Across the four sites, the 135 participants interviewed can be classified as follows:

- 21 were administrators (Central, College, Department and Project)
- 59 were faculty or program staff
- 4 were a Middle School Teacher-in-Residence
- 6 were community college administrators
- 25 were community college faculty
- 12 were public school administrators or faculty
- 8 were student cohort members.

Two of the earlier team of four interviewers undertook a small-scale 'mid-year check' in Fall 2003, and an additional extensive round of interviews (in person and by phone) in Spring 2004. Of the 98 participants interviewed on the final site visit:

- 13 were administrators (Central, College, Department, and Project)
- 44 were faculty or program staff
- 11 were community college administrator
- 16 were community college faculty
- 1 was a Middle School Teacher-in-Residence
- 11were public school administrators or faculty
- 2 were student cohort members.

The experiences and behaviors captured by these interviews do much to inform our understanding of the challenges posed by work that is undertaken in a complex organizational environment.

In the next section (IV), we draw our findings together to assess our hypothesis that the degree to which collaboration is achieved among grant partners will influence the magnitude of change in policy, organizations, and individuals, thus impacting the grant's success in strengthening teacher certification standards and improving middle-grade teacher preparation and recruitment. In section V, we present our lessons learned in the context of the Wilder framework for organizational approaches to collaboration

IV. THE COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

The underlying premise of this project was that teacher quality enhancement for middle level teachers required the efforts not only of Illinois' teacher preparation units, but the community colleges and the middle schools. There needed to be a collaborative effort that

helped to prepare a new generation of ethnically diverse middle-grade teachers who were prepared to teach in "hard to staff" schools in the state's urban and rural areas. For this evaluation the IERC evaluation team has hypothesized that the degree to which collaboration is achieved among grant partners will influence the magnitude of change in policy, organizations, and individuals, thus impacting the grant's success in strengthening teacher certification standards and improving middle-grade teacher preparation and recruitment.

When collaboration occurs, we will find a "mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals." The partners entering the collaboration will be taking a risk by sharing authority and resources, as well as their reputation. Collaboration is distinguished from coordination (i.e., more formal relationship and understanding of compatible, but not the same, goals with lower risk levels) and cooperation (i.e., informal relationship without any commonly defined mission with little to no risk). In this section, we address the questions 1) at which level were the four consortia sites working during the TQE process; and 2) to what degree did the TQE grant change individuals, organizations, and policies?

A. LEVEL OF COLLABORATION ACHIEVED

Each site attempted to develop a collaborative process. Some were more successful than others and in different aspects of the grant implementation. The spirit of collaboration was most evident in the Design Teams, which were the working groups charged with implementing the grant's objectives. Project Directors at each of the sites sought out appropriate individuals from their partnering institutions, bringing them together early and often to develop relationships and trust. At most of the sites, members felt they were on equal footing, shared a common goal, and believed they and their institutions benefited from involvement in the project. Skilled project leadership contributed significantly to the collaboration efforts.

Within the Design Team activities, the collaborative process was most successful in efforts relating to curricular development. Members of the Design Teams worked together to "unbundle" their existing curriculum to design or redesign courses for a middle level program. Although a middle grade certificate did not come to fruition, the efforts to revamp existing courses and programs were rewarded. Many of those interviewed said that due to the TQE

activities, their teacher preparation programs have improved in terms of better preparing all of their education majors to teach middle level students. The collaborative approach was less successful in the development of modules. More on this will be discussed later in the Lessons Learned section.

Through the TQE activities, the collaborative approach fostered a new level of partnership between the Colleges/Schools of Education and Colleges of Arts and Sciences within the four-year institutions. Some sites achieved more success than others, partly due to senior leadership intervention or existing ties between the colleges. Other sites experienced institutional barriers that created challenges in creating a fully collaborative environment among colleges and departments. However, the collaborative approach did break down some barriers between disciplines at these sites, particularly at the individual level, resulting in improved communication among the colleges and increased understanding of one another and teacher education.

Partnering with the two-year institutions had mixed success in terms of establishing a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship with shared authority, resources, and reputation. Based on our interviews and observations, we conclude that one site achieved a level of *coordination* with their partnering two-year institutions. Through the Design Teams, input from the partnering two-year institutions was included in some decision-making regarding curricular design changes and faculty from the senior institution understood better transfer issues for community college students. However, institutional barriers to collaboration outside the four-year university based on concepts of institutional roles and mission, as well as expertise, limited this site's ability to reach full collaboration with its partnering community colleges.

Two sites reached *collaboration* with their two-year partners through their Design Teams with the development of their Middle School programs. Through the TQE activities, one of these sites is poised to offer two middle level professional education courses in their partner community colleges once the AAT in science and mathematics programs are established at the partner two-year institutions. At the other site, middle level courses are being offered at two off-campus locations (although not in the community colleges) in the region. Subsequent activities with their partnering two-year institutions (e.g., module development, recruitment activities,

additional training for higher education faculty) successfully utilized a *coordination* approach. At each site, the Project Director managed the activities with specific individuals or small teams of individuals to complete the grant activities.

At the fourth site, it is our judgment that the working partnership between not only faculty members of the four- and two-year institutions, but also senior administrators, reached a *high level of collaboration* in which the institutions established a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship with shared authority and resources. Despite a challenging startup due to project management issues, this site evolved into a collection of productive collaborations among small faculty teams from the different institutions who learned to work together to design and implement a number of "paired" general education courses with the goal to increase the preparedness of lower-division students to take professional education courses. There was a laudable willingness on the part of the senior institution's faculty and administrators to "share" responsibility with their two-year partners in developing the "paired" courses. A further demonstration of the genuine collaborative spirit that occurred at this site is a "Memorandum of Agreement" that was developed by senior administrators of the four-year institution and one of the partnering two-year institutions, with the help of others at their institutions. This agreement addressed many administrative barriers, and perhaps most significantly, included the senior institution's commitment to count the new "paired" general education courses not only for general education credit at the four-year college but also for completion of content minors that lead to content endorsement to the Elementary Education certificate. There is now a strong partnership between the four-year and two-year institution that did not exist before the TQE grant.

B. IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND POLICIES

The level of collaboration achieved at all of the sites greatly impacted individuals. The TQE grant was quite successful in bringing about a new consciousness among participants of the role of middle grades and the importance of modeling good teaching practices, as well as the need for training and supporting middle grade teachers. Design Team members grew in their appreciation for working with others outside their department, college, and institution, particularly around issues of teacher preparation. Organizations and policies were greatly

impacted at the one consortia site that reached full collaboration between the four- and two-year institutions. Co-creation of "paired" courses and modules and a formal commitment to accept community college general education courses for credit toward a content minor for an Elementary Education certificate demonstrate the dramatic change in the institutions' cultures and policies in support of collaborative efforts. The TQE activities impacted changes in organizations and policies to a lesser extent at the other three consortia sites. The TQE project spearheaded discussions and policy changes (at one site) on transfer and alignment issues and increased intra-institutional collaboration within the four-year universities. In addition, the TQE grant helped move forward the partnering between the four- and two-year institutions. Finally, across all four consortia sites, the collaborative approach of TQE laid substantial groundwork toward the development of the Associate of Arts degree and future shared endeavors.

V.   LESSONS LEARNED

The Middle Level Teacher Quality Enhancement project represents a significant investment of resources and staff commitment. Much was accomplished, as we summarized in the individual site reports. Here we seek to draw some lessons learned from the experience across all sites as seen through our evaluative process. Our observations are by no means exhaustive, but are provided in the hope that they may help future efforts to build on what was successful, and approach differently those aspects that met with less success.

Our lessons learned fall into some of the critical factors of a successful collaboration as identified from the Wilder Research Center and are as follows:

A. PROCESS

➢ *Management openness is critical to collaboration.*

Given the traditional roles of higher education institutions, tremendous effort and vision are needed to break outside those boundaries to build relationships and form collaborations with other types of institutions. Management openness is critical in laying the foundation for projects like the TQE grant for collaborative efforts to succeed. In this project we saw those consortia sites with senior management open to crossing boundaries have more success with forming mutual and beneficial relationships with institutions different from their own.

> ➢ *A collaborative decision-making approach is best suited to issues concerning the core academic responsibilities of curriculum and program design.*

University faculty discussions involving curriculum and program design typically require extensive dialogue and negotiations. Although it can be time intensive, the collaborative environment is appropriate due to the need to develop relationships and to build consensus. All four consortia sites successfully utilized a collaborative approach with the Design Teams in developing a Middle Level program. One site, in particular, was successful in pushing back endorsement curriculum into the two-year institutions.

> ➢ *A coordinated approach is more effective in the development of specific products (e.g., modules).*

When specific products need to be developed and outside expertise is required, the coordinated approach provides the most efficient and effective method of achieving the goals by bringing in the appropriate expertise to direct and guide the activities of the group. One consortia site was very successful with this approach by utilizing instructional technology and design expertise in conjunction with faculty content experts to create high quality modules.

B. ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

> ➢ *Projects whose purposes match the mission of an institution and unit are more likely to succeed.*

Grants with missions that match their host organization are inherently supported by the organization's culture, while those that do not match (i.e., teaching versus service versus research) may face additional challenges and hurdles. If a mismatch exists, buy-in from all administrative levels will be needed in order to support the Project Leader and the grant team members in accomplishing the grant activities. Administrative processes may need to be modified, through the intervention of high-level administrators, to facilitate managing creative programs and grants outside the usual realm of the organization. In the TQE project, we saw sites at both ends of the spectrum. One site whose purpose matched the mission of the university received strong support throughout the organization, from the senior administration through the colleges and departments, that eased implementation. Another site experienced a mismatch

between the service-oriented TQE grant and the research mission of the university that created conflicts in terms of such things as promotion and tenure decisions, and administrative procedures.

> ➢ *The academic approval processes in higher education are not conducive to innovation.*

Institutions of higher education are known for their bureaucracy and long-standing procedures. Newly developed courses or programs must undergo institutional review and approval, which can take months, and even years. Providing potentially innovative programs in a timely manner can be contrary to the standard operating procedures that are in place to protect academic quality and program integrity. One TQE site experienced difficulty when newly developed innovative "paired" courses were offered with "pilot course numbers." This new practice was introduced to help implement some of the TQE grant's efforts at this university. However, advisors were reluctant to recommend the courses to students since it was uncertain how the new courses would count toward program completion. On the other hand, another TQE site illustrates what is possible by moving their Middle Level program through governance in less than six months. Although factors such as the size and mission of the university may come into play, this site was able to get their Middle Level program "on the books" and nearly 70 students enrolled by the end of the grant timeframe despite the failure of the middle level certificate.

> ➢ *Grant activities that dovetail with existing grants in terms of goals and approaches are more likely to continue after the initial funding.*

Grant activities that dovetail with other grants in terms of goals and approaches are more likely to continue after the initial funding. Frequently, several grants with similar objectives in various stages of implementation may co-exist at one institution. Due to the related goals, one grant may assume another's activities in order to continue the focus on a specific issue (e.g., increased technology use). Joining efforts with similar grants may thus facilitate institutionalization of grant activities. In the TQE grant, one site joined its TQE effort with a technology-related grant to co-sponsor activities that benefited both grants' objectives. On the other hand, it can become difficult to maintain distinction between the grants to ensure that the

original intent of each grant is preserved and that those involved with the grants, as well as outside audiences (e.g., university community at large), understand each grants' role and purpose. Appropriate safeguards can ensure that the benefits of cross-grant fertilization outweigh the potential concerns.

C. MANAGEMENT INVOLVEMENT

➢ *Projects that cross college and institutional boundaries need institutional management on board with the process and intended outcomes.*

Given the tendencies of higher education to stay within its own borders, high-level administrative support and commitment is needed to facilitate and encourage moving outside one's comfort zone. A formal mechanism (e.g., a senior advisory committee at the consortia site level) for ensuring communication during the early stages of the project would educate senior administrators and make them more aware of the grant's activities. Solidifying buy-in for projects that may seem outside one's direct interests and addressing institutionalization of the grant activities could also be achieved by convening senior administrators. One site established a senior management team, including senior administrators from the four- and two-year institutions along with the TQE Project Director, mid-way through their grand period to resolve administrative issues that were delaying the progress of the grant. This site also established a council consisting of Deans from the Colleges of Education and Arts & Sciences, and representatives from TQE and a related grant to ensure that aspects of both grants continue after the funding ends.

D. SUSTAINING PARTNERSHIPS

➢ *Partnerships need a reason to come and stay together.*

Relationships between individuals were developed due to common interests and involvement in the TQE grant. If the relationship is not formalized and a common purpose is not sustained, the partnership will erode as individuals move on to other pressing responsibilities. Many of those interviewed said that their informal networks would continue past the funding of the grant. However, they conceded it would be difficult without a common purpose or project.

> ➢ *Funding provides a purpose and helps to keep partnerships together.*

Funded projects provide legitimacy for time spent on activities, particularly collaborative projects, which can be very time intensive.

E. COMMITMENT

> ➢ *Commitment wanes if individual efforts are not rewarded.*

Faculty in higher education institutions need to account for their time and efforts in order to be successful. The grant activities need to fall within the criteria for tenure and promotion decisions in order for faculty to become and remain committed to the project. In the TQE grant, we saw community college faculty rewarded for their contributions to the project. Some four-year universities credited their faculty for their TQE involvement while other sites had difficulty recruiting faculty to commit to specific grant activities (i.e., module development) because their home institutions placed higher priority on publications and other research activities for tenure and promotion decisions, rather than service oriented activities like those of the TQE grant. Thus, involvement in TQE was viewed as a potential liability if the service component did not lead to publications.

> ➢ *Products need owners in whose self-interest success is lodged.*

Related to the item above, individuals need to believe they will directly benefit from their involvement in an activity in order to stay committed to completing the task. Within higher education, this translates to whether or not the work counts toward an individual's evaluation and subsequent reward. Individuals participating in activities that are not directly tied to the their own success are likely to be easily distracted with other activities that will advance their careers. In the TQE project we saw one site have difficult recruiting non-tenured faculty to participate in module development, which did not count toward tenure and promotion. On the other hand, module development was directly recognized at their partnering community colleges for promotion and tenure.

F. PROJECT LEADERSHIP

➤ *Projects need one designated person who is clearly seen to be in charge of the project.*

Even when leadership is shared, as may be needed in large and complex projects, there should be one person in charge. In the TQE project, the sites in which there was clearly one person in the lead moved ahead in grant activities. One consortia site experienced difficulties when Design Team members were not clear about the roles and responsibilities of the two Project Directors. This, coupled with a vacuum of senior leadership, initially slowed progress on grant activities. When the university's senior leadership was in place and able to commit more time to the TQE grant, and when the two Project Directors' roles and responsibilities were clarified, the grant was able to move forward and complete its objectives.

➤ *Project leaders need the support of senior management on project goals.*

Even if the overall responsibility for a project is delegated to a day-to-day Project Director, it is essential that institutional management be on board with the project goals. In addition, senior management needs to be held accountable for accomplishing the goals of the project. Challenges can occur when the senior leadership changes in projects that extend over several years.

➤ *Complex projects need adequate clerical support.*

Support structures need to be in place at the start for large and complicated grants to allow a Project Director to direct the grant rather than be pulled into administrative details. These supports could include administrative staff that knows the university systems (e.g., budget, personnel, grants) and a full-time university faculty member as project co-leader to share in the responsibilities of the grant. Experience from the TQE project demonstrated that Project Directors who had access to clerical and administrative support spent less of their direct time working through the administrative hurdles of their universities.

➢ *People with appropriate expertise need to be full partners in the process.*

For the TQE grant, module development and implementation required experts in the field of instructional technology design in order to produce high quality products. While faculty could provide content expertise, it was not reasonable to expect them to implement complex web designs for the modules. Sites that allowed the instructional technology design staff to take the lead in module development, complemented with faculty content expertise, were more successful in producing high quality modules.

G. THE ROLE OF STATE AGENCIES

➢ *Flexibility provided by the Illinois Board of Higher Education was useful for overall implementation, but a challenge for module development.*

Flexibility and latitude in the implementation of the TQE grant contributed to its success at the four differing consortia sites. Although a specific work plan was developed for implementing the grant, each site was able to carry out the grant activities to fit their unique circumstances and institutional environments. However, this flexibility was not beneficial for the module development. Given that technology and perspectives had evolved since the modules were first envisioned when the grant originated (four years prior), more guidance and direction from IBHE would have facilitated the creation of the modules. In fact, it might have served IBHE well to have re-evaluated the appropriateness of the modules in light of advances in technology and availability of existing on-line instruction. Despite these circumstances, many of the sites produced modules that will be available for faculty to use with pre-service teachers and for in-service teachers to use for professional development.

➢ *More cross-site communication would have been helpful.*

A senior advisory panel of deans and/or provosts from the two- and four-year institutions participating in the consortia sites, convened by IBHE, could serve the purpose of educating senior administrators of the grant's goals and objectives, as well as the activities of the other consortia sites. Attendance by representatives from the other state agencies (i.e., State Board of Education and Community College Board) would facilitate communication regarding other state

initiatives related to the grant. In addition, a cross-site technical team for module design and implementation would have smoothed the process for all of the sites.

> ➤ *The ongoing reversals on middle-level certification highlight the challenge of planning to improve teacher quality in uncertain environments.*

Illinois proved to be a challenging environment for the four consortia sites with regard to middle grade certification. The uncertainty of the outcome created significant obstacles. Projects in uncertain environments, like the TQE grant, need to build in allowances and flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. Although many of those involved initially thought their work was for naught when the certificate did not pass, they came to believe that gaining knowledge about middle-level teacher preparation and developing collaborative relationships within and across institutions were enormous benefits for their efforts.