

Timbercrest Elementary and the University of Central Florida: From Theory Into Practice - A School's Story

Sarah Banta, Timbercrest Elementary School
Mary Cool, Timbercrest Elementary School
Mary Hansen, Timbercrest Elementary School
Jessica Heckler, Timbercrest Elementary School
Trish Masker, Timbercrest Elementary School
Krista Plavchan, Timbercrest Elementary School
Michele Sobol, Timbercrest Elementary School
Lew Blessing, University of Central Florida
Mary Starzynski, University of Central Florida
Melissa Carr, Volusia County School Board

ABSTRACT: From an informal discussion to being awarded the National Association for Professional Development School's Award for Exemplary Professional Development School Achievement, this is the story of the Timbercrest Elementary/University of Central Florida Professional Development School Partnership journey.

NAPDS Essential(s) Addressed: #1/A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community; #2/A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community; #3/Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need; #4/A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants; #5/Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants; #6/An articulation agreement developed by the respective participants delineating the roles and responsibilities of all involved; #7/A structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration; #8/Work by college/university faculty and P–12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings; #9/Dedicated and shared resources and formal rewards and recognition structures

NAPDS Essential 1

In spring of 2007, our Professional Development School (PDS) partnership began with a conversation between the principal of Timbercrest Elementary and the regional internship coordinator for the University of Central Florida (UCF). As the intern program grew at Timbercrest, the elementary school administration and staff, along with the regional internship coordinator, quickly realized they had common goals for ensuring the success of both UCF interns and Timbercrest students and so developed a path to reach those goals. A steering committee was created to formalize those goals for our professional development school partnership.

UCF did not have an active PDS partnership in place with Volusia County, so Timbercrest faculty saw an opportunity to work together with UCF. Soon after, the initial founders met with the Volusia County Schools PDS Consortium to share ideas.

Timbercrest identified that the UCF Education Department was a valuable asset in educational research in mathematics, reading, and technology. It was further acknowledged that UCF's research of educational models could be used in the classroom to enhance our students, teachers, and future teachers. Thus, our mission statement was created: *The Professional Development School Partnership between Timbercrest Elementary School and the University of Central Florida (UCF) is dedicated to increasing academic achievement by providing data driven instructional support for students and teachers from Timbercrest and UCF.* We also became a member of the University of Central Florida School and Community Partnership (UCF/SCP) which is committed to the continuous improvement of student outcomes through professional development relationships with P-12 schools. Our humble yet lofty goal of increasing the academic learning of Timbercrest and UCF students blossomed into the PDS Partnership which is still growing as we continue our journey.

Several UCF instructors began conducting their classes in *How Children Learn Mathematics* and *Foundations in Reading* on the Timbercrest campus. UCF students were guided to work with classroom teachers and elementary students to create and teach innovative lessons in reading and math. Timbercrest developed the first Supervising Teachers and Interns Support Group, which met bi-weekly. This group provided meaningful discussions and support for future teachers, along with a cohesive program for the supervising teachers.

In an effort to bring our message of cooperative learning beyond our PDS mission, representatives from Timbercrest and UCF presented at the Holmes Partnership Conference where educational leaders from around the world were given an opportunity to experience how an elementary school together with a university can impact student achievement and develop future teachers. This presentation led to further interest and additional presentations throughout Central Florida. The Timbercrest/UCF model became a guide for other partnerships within Central Florida by bringing higher education classes to an elementary school campus along with recognizing the needs of future teachers.

As word of our PDS model grew, Dr. Starzynski and Dr. Cool were asked to assume leadership roles in the UCF/SCP. Dr. Cool became Co-Chair of the Clinical Experiences Committee of the Executive Council of the UCF/SCP. Both Dr. Starzynski and Dr. Cool are active members of the VCS Consortium and collaborate regularly with the Volusia County School Board. Dr. Starzynski represented the PDS on a panel before the President's Conference of the Florida School Boards Association and spoke of our model for preparing teachers for the 21st century.

Graduate level courses in Clinical Education and Professional Development for UCF on the Timbercrest campus were initiated by UCF. Dr. Cool has taught the graduate level course, *Mentoring and Clinical Supervision of Pre-*

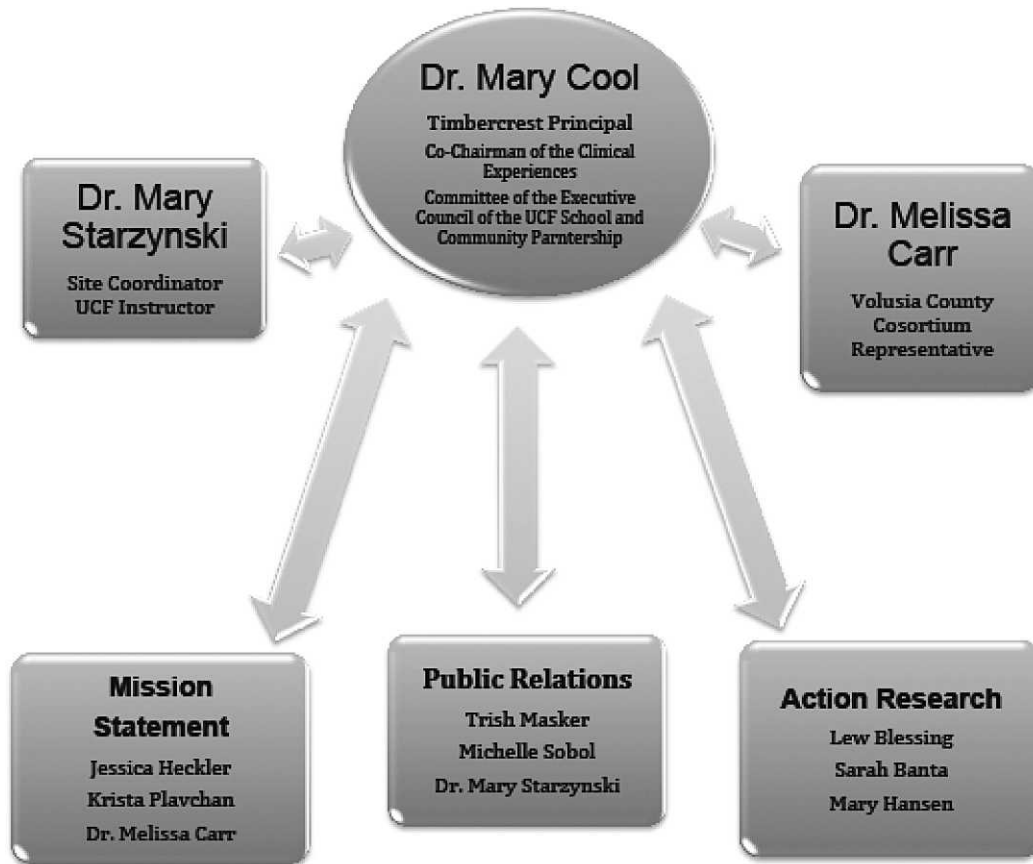


Figure 1.

Professional Educators, so teachers may supervise interns.

Dr. Starzynski moderated a panel discussion of *Response to Intervention: What Our Teacher Candidates Need to Know* at the 2010 Literacy Symposium held at UCF. The Symposium was attended by over 800 teachers and administrators from Florida and the Southeast.

NAPDS Essential 8

In an effort to develop awareness of the PDS, UCF and Timbercrest made a concerted effort to be visible within both organizations. Representatives from UCF became actively involved in faculty and team meetings at Timbercrest Elementary, while representatives from Timbercrest met regularly with UCF Education Department members. These meet-

ings allowed for the creation of formal and informal roles for PDS members. Dr. Starzynski and Dr. Lew Blessing from UCF are members of the PDS Steering Committee to help guide the academic achievement in the elementary classroom and further enhance the educational experiences of future teaching candidates through real life settings. Although Dr. Starzynski is not formally a “faculty member in residence” on the Timbercrest campus, her weekly presence as Intern Coordinator and UCF faculty has made her part of the Timbercrest family. She is often seen conducting classes, observing candidates and interns, mentoring UCF graduates teaching at Timbercrest, and participating in Timbercrest faculty and team level meetings. She is welcomed by teachers and students alike in informal as well as formal roles.

Elementary students receive tangible benefits from the direct instruction and guided reading classes being conducted in their classrooms. UCF students were given the opportunity to develop whole and small group lessons and then present them to actual students. Number sense was an area of concern for third grade. Dr. Blessing and UCF students provided assistance to create targeted lesson plans and tutoring for third graders. As a result, 100% of identified third graders successfully passed the number sense assessment. Dr. Blessing also assisted fifth grade teachers with math professional development and planning in science.

There are junior and senior internship students on the Timbercrest campus. Dr. Starzynski is identified as the Intern Site Coordinator while two Timbercrest teachers—Trish Masker and Jessica Heckler—lead the Supervising Teachers and Interns Support Group. Timbercrest has recognized how overwhelming it is for a future teacher to find resources for their new classrooms. Mary Hansen, Timbercrest teacher, has played an important role as the creator of the Intern Yard Sale. Educational resources such as classroom supplies, books, posters, games, and room decorations were donated by Timbercrest teachers. This provides future teachers with an opportunity to pick up these materials for free! The appreciation by the former interns is evident in their fully decorated classrooms when they become newly hired teachers.

NAPDS Essentials 6 & 7

A Partnership Agreement was developed between the UCF/SCP and Volusia County Schools incorporating many aspects of the UCF and Timbercrest model such as the benefits of a PDS including the Intern Support Group and mock interviews conducted with interns by school principals in the partnership. Timbercrest's principal, Dr. Mary Cool, served as Co-Chairman of the

Clinical Experiences Committee of the Executive Council of the UCF/SCP where communication about the partnership is ongoing in monthly meetings and is constantly evolving.

Monthly PDS Steering Committee Meetings encourage collaboration, reflection, and regular communication among all members. For the past year, our school-based meetings have been attended by a representative from the Volusia Consortium. Three committees were established to delineate the roles and responsibilities of all involved. A Mission Committee developed a mission statement, which guides the common goals of the PDS. A Public Relations Committee shares the progress and successes of the PDS at faculty meetings. An Action Research Committee collects and analyzes data from the university-school partnership to impact professional development and improve student learning outcomes. The university's sharing of research-based practices and trends keeps the PDS on the cutting edge of education.

The bi-weekly Supervising Teachers and Interns Support Group was developed because of the necessity to communicate needs and offer assistance to both groups. The expertise of seasoned teachers meeting with interns full of fresh ideas creates synergistic dialogue that is driven by concerns and/or interests of those involved. Success stories are shared and support is offered for concerns. The UCF site coordinator, Dr. Starzynski, observes interns regularly to evaluate progress and meets weekly with supervising teachers to ask about intern's performance and to offer suggestions or support as needed.

NAPDS Essential 9

Throughout the past three years the PDS partnership has recognized the importance of shared resources. Members have written and received grants to purchase Greg Tang math kits for remediation, Numeracy Centers, and to provide substitutes for Timbercrest teachers

to attend professional development activities hosted by UCF. Steering Committee members were given priority to use these materials in recognition of their work in obtaining them. Furthermore, grant money and resources were geared toward interns and supervising teachers through the purchase of Mentoring Minds of Critical Thinkers wheels which were given to senior interns.

Supervising teachers who supervise a senior intern are given a Certificate of Participation (COP) from UCF offering monetary credit toward graduate courses at UCF or another Florida university. Many of our teachers are now taking advantage of this certificate and working toward graduate degrees.

To acknowledge the work of teachers on the Steering Committee of the PDS, Timbercrest and VCS discovered resources to fund travel for five teachers to attend the National PDS Conference. This professional development exposed the participating teachers to new ideas which they shared with colleagues and interns upon return.

NAPDS Essential 2

The work of the PDS relationship in preparing future educators includes encouraging the interns' active engagement with the school community. Senior interns are invited to attend pre-planning meetings with the supervising teacher before their internship begins to become skilled at setting up the classroom and preparing for the first week of school. They are required to attend all faculty meetings, parent conferences, and professional development events during their internship. Interns attend after school activities such as Open House, PTA, and Curriculum Nights. They are active participants in the Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings where data are analyzed to drive remediation and instruction. At Problem Solving Team (PST) meetings, the process is explained and interns offer data and infor-

mation on intervention with struggling students. Senior interns are required to create a teacher work sample developing a unit from pre-test to post-test and graph the data to demonstrate the impact on K-12 student learning. A meeting with the English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) teacher at Timbercrest is arranged to assist with the required ESOL Performance Profiles since all UCF candidates graduate with the ESOL Endorsement. Senior interns take over all duties and responsibilities of a teacher for a minimum of six weeks. Students are completely immersed in the school community in preparation for employment.

The Timbercrest internship experience is unique due to added requirements. Senior interns experience a principal observation with a pre- and post-conference simulating a new teacher evaluation. Mock interviews are held to model effective interviewing techniques. Feedback and reflections are provided by the school principal. The use of videotaping helps the interns reflect on their teaching and track their personal development toward becoming an exemplary educator. After the experience, a Timbercrest Internship Survey is completed. This combined with interviews with former interns, now employed as teachers, help to guide the development of the PDS. At present, we have ten former interns on our teaching staff, which is a credit to our dedication in grooming future teachers.

Junior interns spend two days a week in a classroom for sixteen weeks: an eight week session in a primary setting and a second eight week placement in an intermediate setting. During each session the junior interns spend one full week of the session in the classroom. Each junior intern must complete a reading case study on a child selected by the supervising teacher. The UCF site coordinator is available to assist supervising teachers with senior interns.

Several UCF classes are held at Timbercrest allowing an opportunity for teacher candidates to teach planned lessons at the

elementary school. Each semester, students in the *Children's Literature* class become pen pals with fourth grade students after reading the same novel. Students in the *Foundations of Reading* class practice guided reading and direct instruction in classrooms at Timbercrest. In lieu of UCF class assignments, UCF students provided tutoring opportunities to third grade students in number sense to improve academic achievement.

UCF graduates continue to volunteer to tutor elementary students and make an impact on learning in the classroom and the community at large. Open communication with former interns provides feedback on the Timbercrest internship experience and guides the revisions and improvements of this unique model.

NAPDS Essential 3

Dr. Starzynski attends Timbercrest faculty meetings regularly and keeps faculty members informed of UCF's work on campus. When Timbercrest teachers were interested in learning more about Singapore Math®, Dr. Blessing provided information and training on the concepts. Teachers were introduced to the Greg Tang Program for mathematics through Dr. Blessing, which resulted in the purchase of Greg Tang Math programs. Dr. Blessing trained Timbercrest's Math Coach and PDS Steering Committee member to use the program. Exemplary teachers were then trained to use the math program with at-risk students in the Timbercrest Summer Math Camp.

Interns enhance classroom teaching by using technology in their creative and innovative lesson plans, along with informal workshops for teachers on the latest technology in the classroom such as Prezi, PowerPoint Presentations, and Clickers. UCF instructors have helped teachers develop action research projects in reading and math. Through this partnership and the increased professional development on the campus of Timbercrest

Elementary, yearly scores have increased. Students in the lowest quartile in math have improved their learning gains from 42% to 64%. Overall, math students have increased their learning gains by 11%, while the learning gains in reading have increased by 18%.

Currently, Timbercrest Elementary has nearly 50% of its staff trained in Clinical Education through the efforts of UCF and the PDS partnership. Nearly 10% of the Timbercrest faculty has earned or are working toward their graduate degrees.

NAPDS Essential 4

A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practices by all participants is evident in the structure of the PDS. The novel idea of establishing a Supervising Teachers and Interns Support Group paved the way to support all future educators throughout their careers. The Timbercrest Internship Experience Survey contributes to the changes to the partnership through communication of successes and weaknesses in the experience.

The pre-internship UCF students who teach on campus are learning pedagogical theory and content material and are simultaneously putting that knowledge to work in a real setting. Immediately after their lessons, they debrief with UCF faculty to analyze and evaluate their performance. Armed with concrete suggestions of what "really works," they return to the same student to teach another lesson a few weeks later. Input on inventive best practices by interns is promulgated and becomes part of the curriculum at Timbercrest for years to come. Supervising teachers must reflect on teaching practices when having an intern model best practices, which promotes professional development on both levels. Using student data, including the teacher work sample, interns share successful intervention strategies with struggling students. These strategies in turn become part

of the arsenal of intervention in Response to Intervention (RtI) at the school.

Student academic achievement is impacted in a positive way with additional support by UCF students. The Director of Clinical Experiences at UCF, Dr. Bryan Zugelder, visited classrooms to observe interns teach and interact with students. After his visit, he started a pilot program in Seminole County with many aspects deliberately modeled after our innovations.

NAPDS Essential 5

Reflection has always been the key to the success of this partnership. All senior interns are tracked and remain on a Timbercrest email tree in which collaboration continues long after the internship. In all, there have been 38 interns that have moved through the program. A unique aspect of the intern program is when interns are provided several days to experience the best teaching practices of other experienced teachers on campus. Interns are able to witness a variety of grade levels and subjects by observing several different classrooms throughout the school.

In an effort to best match personalities, supervising teachers and interns complete a personality survey. The results of the survey help place interns with the appropriate supervising teacher. This practice was added after reflecting with PDS members.

Interns are given a unique opportunity in which they are observed and evaluated by the school principal in an effort to provide the most realistic teaching experience. At the close of their internships, senior interns experience a mock interview to better prepare them for future interviews. Though intimidating, the senior interns have expressed that participating in the mock interview was a beneficial experience.

Three times a year the Partnership shares and learns from others within the Volusia County Schools Consortium. Members of the Steering Committee have attended and pre-

sented at the Professional Development Schools National Conference for the past two years. The development of a brochure provides others in the community such as School Advisory Committee (SAC), Parent-Teacher Association officers, and business partners an opportunity to get a snapshot of the program. Dr. Cool has shared our PDS model with other Volusia County School principals to assist schools in developing and implementing their PDS Partnership.

We have forged an alliance among the K-5 teachers and principal, UCF faculty, and VCS administrators which has improved academic learning for all constituencies. This is demonstrated by higher test scores for Timbercrest students, hiring and retention of Timbercrest interns in Volusia County, and an increase in the use of innovative best practices by both Timbercrest and UCF faculties.

Upon reflection, we are most proud of the academic successes and also the systemic changes which have been implemented as we continue to think out of the box and create new synergies among our PDS stakeholders. As we shared our journey with other stakeholders, our model became a blueprint for other schools in Central Florida and across the nation.

The dialogue that began between two individuals evolved into a successful PDS through the hard work and dedication of teachers and students at both institutions and continues to grow and thrive today. Innovative collaboration between new and supervising teachers has energized the Timbercrest staff and UCF faculty. The cooperation between the two groups has generated daily opportunities to problem solve and create solutions to face the challenges of teaching in the 21st century. ^{SUP}



Mary Cool, in partnership with UCF, began the PDS work at Timbercrest Elementary.

Mary served as Timbercrest's principal and previously held leadership positions at the district level in Elementary Education, School Improvement, Accreditation, and Staff Development. She served as a classroom teacher, Media Specialist, and District Resource Teacher before joining the leadership ranks. Mary can be reached at mcool@cfl.rr.com.

Jessica Heckler is a third grade general education teacher and grade chair and has her National Board Certification as a Middle Childhood Generalist. She is the Timbercrest PDS Steering Committee chair, and she earned a Bachelors of Arts in Elementary Education at Austin Peay State University and is currently a graduate student in the Masters of Educational Leadership program at the University of Central Florida.

Patricia "Trish" Masker is currently a teacher of third grade gifted children at Timbercrest Elementary School in Deltona, Florida. She earned a degree in Elementary Education, Hearing Impairment, and Early Childhood Education from Flagler College in St. Augustine, FL. She also is endorsed to teach gifted and ESOL students. She has been a Grade Level Team Leader and Union Steward for the last twenty-two years. She has been a member of the Timbercrest/UCF PDS since the beginning in 2008 and has mentored over 25 teacher interns.

Krista Plavchan is a 3rd grade teacher at Timbercrest Elementary School. She has been teaching at Timbercrest for eight years. She has been participating in the PDS Partnership with UCF as part of the Steering Committee for three years. She also works closely with the Intern Support Group program at Timbercrest Elementary.

Michele Amoroso Sobol is a separate class special education teacher and has her National Board Certification in Exceptional Student Education. She earned a Bachelors of Arts in Elementary Education from Stetson University and a Masters of Education in Exceptional Student Education.

Lewis Blessing is a lecturer in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership at the University of Central Florida. Dr. Blessing teaches mathematics and science education courses and involves his students in working with Timbercrest students to increase their understanding of mathematics and science concepts.

Mary Starzynski has been an elementary school teacher and administrator, a university reading instructor, and an intern supervisor in each of those capacities. She has B.S. and M.Ed. degrees in elementary education from Kean University and Georgian Court University and an Ed.D. in educational leadership from University of Central Florida.