

# *Dreher High School and the University of South Carolina College of Education: A Long-Standing PDS Relationship That Works*

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**ABSTRACT:** Dating back to 1990, the PDS relationship between the University of South Carolina and Dreher High School in Columbia, South Carolina, has had a persistent dedication to a partnership that not only benefits pre-service teacher candidates but also empowers early career teachers to actively engage in their school. This article describes how this long-standing PDS partnership has created a framework for preparing teacher candidates to work with diverse populations of students, improving ideas of self-efficacy among early career teachers, and professional development driven by teacher-identified needs all for the central purpose of enhancing student achievement.

*NAPDS Essentials Addressed: All of the “Nine Essentials” are addressed in this article.*

## **Introduction**

The PDS relationship between the University of South Carolina and Dreher High School began in 1990. Throughout the duration of this relationship, the mission has evolved in such a way that currently allows for the students, faculty, and administration at Dreher High School and the University of South Carolina to mutually benefit from the work done between the two institutions. As a result of this relationship, University of South Carolina College of Education faculty are able to teach education courses on-site at Dreher High School, provide practicum and internship experiences for university students, and collaborate in research and professional development with Dreher High School faculty.

## **Embracing Diversity**

Dreher High School is an urban school with a diverse student population. This diversity, and the culture of learning created by the school faculty, make it an excellent partner for the University of South Carolina. It provides pre-service candidates opportunities to work with students from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The positive climate at Dreher helps USC students feel welcome and allows them to be an integral part of the classrooms, enabling them to contribute to student learning, as well as contributing to their own professional development. Dreher’s diverse population is well-represented across academic courses which provides USC’s candidates the opportunity to navigate the wide-ranging demographics of an urban school. The USC students witness and engage in a productive environment where all students can be successful.

## **A Model for Collaboration**

In a profession where it is easy to fall into hierarchical perceptions from the “ivory tower” to the classroom teacher in the trenches, there is often a tremendous disconnect between higher education teacher preparation programs and P12 schools. The USC-Dreher PDS relationship is a model of how breaking down those barriers can lead to a positive climate which benefits all stakeholders. The commitment of Dreher High School to providing a welcoming environment for pre-service candidates has resulted in an environment in which the lines of communication are not only open but flow in both directions.

There are many teachers currently on the faculty of Dreher High School who began their careers as a University of South Carolina practicum student and are now giving back by hosting a university student in their own classrooms. In looking at the bigger picture of the successes that have resulted from this relationship, the principal of Dreher High School has indicated that this partnership has allowed her to recruit and retain some of the profession’s best and brightest for her faculty. She also indicated that these same teachers, many of them directly out of the USC program, have raised the bar for others. Through their commitment to student success, their collaborative spirit, and their willingness to find solutions to challenges has created a level of expectation where veteran teachers often examine their own practice.

## **Formal, Well-Defined Roles**

The stability in the roles of Assistant Principal, Clinical-Adjunct and PDS Liaison has resulted in a relationship that is able to foster the growth of pre-service candidates, provide support to early career teachers, tap into the expertise of strong veteran

teachers and provide ongoing professional development with the ultimate goal of student achievement always in mind.

The USC Liaison is housed on-site at Dreher High School two full days per week, and collaborates with the site-based administrator and Clinical Adjunct to secure appropriate placements for USC students throughout the stages of internship requirements. The Liaison teaches university courses on-site at Dreher, which allows students to see the pedagogy covered in class put into practice in the real world as they complete the practicum. The Clinical Adjunct at Dreher High School is a school-based faculty member who uses her knowledge of the school, its culture, and climate to take the lead in assisting with placement of USC practicum students and interns with appropriate school faculty. Being housed at the school full-time, the Clinical Adjunct is also able to assist Dreher faculty who may have questions, concerns or successes to share and then communicate with the Liaison.

A key factor in the success of the USC-Dreher High School PDS relationship is a Dreher Assistant Principal. Having a school administrator serve in a formal role provides representation of all stakeholders from the students and faculty to the University's pre-service candidates and faculty. In addition, the support of the PDS relationship by the full administrative team has played an integral role in this partnership. Dreher fully values and recognizes the benefits of this relationship and is committed to providing the support needed to maintain and grow this essential relationship. Building these relationships has created an atmosphere of trust so when the university reaches out to Dreher, teachers confidently and willingly host university students. These coaching teachers serve in the more informal roles of the PDS relationship but are an integral part of that relationship.

By having the formal roles of a site-based administrator, Clinical Adjunct, and University Liaison clearly defined, collaboration, reflection and communication are on-going. That is to say, ideas are shared readily in conversations in hallways, after class meetings and in general discussion among all interested parties. The availability of the Liaison has allowed the faculty and staff to build a relationship with the Liaison and welcome her into the Dreher High School family and culture. The Liaison is able to observe in a variety of classrooms, including those of veteran teachers, and then share positive ideas with University students and early-career teachers at Dreher to help them enhance their own instruction. While the Liaison has been welcomed by the administration at Dreher, she has been allowed to operate as separate from the administrative team. This has created an environment of trust both between the Liaison and the teachers, as well as between the Liaison and the Dreher administration.

The Liaison and Clinical Adjunct have many conversations about potential placements for University students. The Liaison is able to bring knowledge from program faculty at the University to the conversation, while the Clinical Adjunct is able to bring knowledge of Dreher faculty to make informed decisions when pairing University students with classroom

teachers. Again, this relationship is born out of the trust that has been developed as a result of stability in the Liaison role.

The Assistant Principal makes a concerted effort to build bridges between the university and the high school by hosting orientations for university placements, speaking to students in USC courses held on-site, and ensuring all stake holders are part of the decision-making process as related to the PDS.

## Welcoming University Students into the High School Culture

Each fall and spring semester, university faculty teach an introduction to secondary education course on-site at Dreher, which includes a practicum experience, and each USC student is placed in a classroom, based on their content area major. The Assistant Principal speaks with the university students on the first day class meets, takes them on a tour of the school, talks with them about expectations and encourages them to become an active participant as they complete their practicum experience. The coaching teachers accommodate the USC students into their classrooms one full class period per week through an entire semester. The practicum students assist with teaching tasks, serve as facilitators in the classroom and are required to teach a minimum of one full, class period. In preparation for this lesson, the USC student must collaborate with the practicum teacher in planning a lesson which falls in a logical sequence within the class curriculum. This relationship provides the USC students with some of their first experiences collaborating with other education professionals in the role of teacher. This course is, for many of the USC students, their first opportunity to be an active part of the classroom. The USC students are able to build their confidence, their professional practice and to make a positive impact on student achievement.

In addition to this practicum experience, Dreher hosts multiple student teaching interns each semester. Most of the secondary level programs at USC require an internship experience in the fall, in which the pre-service candidates spend a minimum of seven to ten hours per week in a coaching teacher's classroom observing, assisting and teaching. Many of these fall interns return to Dreher for their full-time student teaching internship in the spring. Because of the positive experiences in their practicum and initial internships, candidates feel comfortable returning to Dreher and are provided opportunities to assist with, and participate in, extracurricular activities beyond the classroom. Interns are given increasing levels of responsibility through the internship which are incorporated into the school and classroom culture, with the emphasis on student achievement, as well as the university students' professional growth. This combination of university- and field-experiences enhances the university student's learning beyond what is learned in either environment on its own (Putnam & Borko, 2000).

USC student teaching interns who complete their student teaching internship at Dreher largely have positive experiences and find themselves hoping for a permanent job at the school. In

turn, Dreher's principal has frequently stated that, by hosting USC students, she has been able to hire some of the strongest candidates to add to their outstanding faculty.

## Teacher-Driven Professional Development

The university offers free training on the state's candidate evaluation instrument to all Dreher faculty who host full-time student teachers from USC. In addition, the University offers a variety of courses to the Dreher faculty for graduate credit. In 2013-14, the USC Liaison collaborated with the Dreher administrator to plan a course that would address a particular area of interest identified by his faculty, the majority of whom selected adolescent brain development. With this information, the USC Liaison worked with USC's Office of Educational Outreach to design a course. Through the PDS agreement, this three-credit hour graduate course was offered free of charge to Dreher teachers, as well as its feeder school Hand Middle School. The USC Liaison served as the instructor and collaborated with a neuro-psychology professor in the USC psychology department who was a frequent guest lecturer in the course. This design allowed participants to learn about the neuroscience of the development of the adolescent brain and then discuss the implications for their classrooms. This course brought together the ideas of middle and high school classroom teachers, current brain research and the application of that research into practice. The success of the course also strengthened the collaboration between Dreher and the University of South Carolina. At the end of this course, the class participants were encouraged to continue to reach out to USC's neuro-psychology department for any further assistance, and conversation has begun about offering additional courses.

As part of their professional development, Dreher has implemented professional learning communities (PLC) whereby teachers collaborate based on their own areas of interest and expertise. Recognizing that early career teachers who are given the opportunity to form trusting relationships within in their faculties, are likely to feel more confident in their own abilities (LeCornu, 2013), the Assistant Principal created a PLC at Dreher, known as Jumpstart, that serves teachers within their first three years of teaching and/or who may be new to Dreher High School. This group has the opportunity to meet 10-13 times per year in order to discuss successes and challenges they are experiencing in the classroom. The USC Liaison to Dreher is also a participant in these meetings.

The Jumpstart group is founded on the knowledge that a key factor in teacher retention, and in turn enhanced student learning, is having strong support in place for beginning teachers. Teachers who are members of this particular PLC are also supported by the USC Liaison. The Liaison is invited into these teachers' classrooms to complete informal observations, provide constructive feedback, and work with the teacher to develop or implement strategies that improve instruction.

Often the Liaison is able to work with the Assistant Principal and Clinical Adjunct to identify a veteran teacher on staff with whom the early career teacher can be connected in order to help them become competent and confident. Jumpstart has provided a non-threatening, collegial environment in which early career teachers can seek assistance, share successes and collaborate to enhance their professional well-being, and thus improve student achievement. This collaboration allows early career teachers to build lasting relationships. This spirit of collegiality is most apparent and rewarding when early career teachers and veteran teachers work closely together to problem solve, share resources and help students be successful. By providing this forum for discussion and collaboration, they are able to build their confidence in bringing effective, innovative and reflective practices to the discussion and their classrooms. Jumpstart has led to improved ideas of self-efficacy for Dreher's early career teachers, which has also resulted in those teachers being willing to serve as mentors to University practicum students and, at the appropriate time, as coaching teachers to USC's student teaching interns.

## Full Circle

Through this stable, long-standing PDS relationship, the University of South Carolina and Dreher High School have created a collaboration that has resulted in a full-circle tradition of university students starting a practicum at Dreher, continuing through their internships, securing employment, growing in their profession and giving back by hosting practicum students in their own classrooms. The collaboration and resulting trust between the high school and university in this partnership has created a grow-your-own model which benefits all stakeholders in this long-standing PDS relationship. <sup>SUP</sup>

## References

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