

George Mason University's Elementary PDS Program: Embracing Innovation

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The Elementary Education program at George Mason University (Mason) is rooted in research and theory on effective teacher preparation (AACTE, 2010, 2011; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012; Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005; Zeichner & Conklin, 2008); guided by national teacher education standards (CCSSO, 2011; NCATE, 2000); and embedded within inquiry and ongoing, rich collaboration with partner schools. The Mason Elementary PDS Network (PDS Network), a multi-district network of clinical field sites, embraces collaboration with key stakeholders as a means to broaden its impact on the education profession and the larger community. Noted as a fundamental component to quality partnerships, we underscore our network in collaborative partnerships initiated by the school, school community, and university. Specifically, the mission of our PDS Network is to take joint responsibility for teacher preparation, faculty development, enhanced student learning, and inquiry directed at improvement of practice. By growing and nurturing a reciprocal relationship among K-6 educators, school and district leaders, and university faculty, we believe we can improve and inform the knowledge base in teacher education, the professional development of practicing teachers, and the learning of students.

The design of Mason's innovative program is informed by research and theory on effective teacher preparation, specifically on Professional Development Schools (PDS) (Book, 1996; Hammerness et al., 2005; Holmes Group, 1990; NAPDS, 2008). Our program has three tracks all situated in our PDS Network: One for part-time students culminating in a final semester-long internship and two for full-time students culminating in a final year-long internship. We select highly competent teacher candidates through a rigorous admission process that includes a writing sample and an individual interview conducted by a university faculty member and a school partner. Our teacher candidates complete coursework that emphasizes knowledge and theory teachers need for effective instruction (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005). They participate in extended field experiences and internships in diverse schools and are placed with Mentor Teachers, school-based teacher educators who are trained to support teacher candidates and who are committed to the PDS framework. Additionally, a University Facilitator, a university-based teacher educator, fosters the relationship with each PDS, providing extensive mentorship

and scaffolding to teacher candidates while also supporting teachers and administrators.

Our Program's Innovative Structure: Pathways to Partnership

Mason's Elementary PDS Network includes 30 elementary school sites with a shared commitment to improving K-6 education and impacting teacher preparation. Schools are chosen through an application process. The selection criteria include: diverse student populations, technology integration, faculty commitment, inquiry-based initiatives, and coherence with the university's teacher education program. Flexible pathways for growing collaboration between the university and the school address the tenuous balance of providing robust support for all network partners with a limited number of faculty and resources (Parker, Parsons, Groth, & Brown, 2016; Parsons, Parker, Brunying, & Daoud, 2016). Mason's Elementary PDS Network provides an innovative response to this need for flexibility through our pathways to partnership model. School partners choose their level of participation by applying to be a partner school, clinical practice school, or collaborative inquiry school.

Partner schools host teacher candidates completing clinical field hours experiences. We designed the partner school route with several tenets in mind. First, we wanted a scaffolded entry point for schools new to PDS to gradually acquire an understanding of PDS work. Partner schools have access to our Mentor Teacher training modules, participate in meetings of various key stakeholders, and begin working in structured clinical field hours experiences with our students. By not requiring these sites to host teacher candidates for internship experiences, we can work collaboratively to grow Mentor Teachers for engaging in internship experiences in the future. This pathway is particularly important for schools in low SES settings where it is typically difficult to find teachers with the necessary years of experience to work with teacher candidates. Our goal is that these partner sites will participate in professional development with us, growing a stable, experienced cadre of teachers.

Additional pathways for engagement in our PDS Network are *Clinical Practice sites* and *Collaborative Inquiry sites*. These schools work collaboratively with all PDS Network stakeholders to support final internship teacher candidates. As University

Facilitators, adjunct faculty members support Clinical Practice sites. Mason faculty members facilitate PDS engagement at Collaborative Inquiry sites. Inquiry is further enhanced in Collaborative Inquiry schools by the presence of full-time university faculty. Faculty engage in organic, inquiry-based research and grant projects emerging from the collaborative work of university and school faculty. Our three pathways to partnership create a much-needed degree of flexibility to meet the ever-changing needs in K-6 contexts. These pathways also ensure that the teacher candidates placed in a given site are all from the same cohort, the same program track, and thus have the same course and field expectations. Schools are able to move in and out of these pathways of engagement in response to readiness, school context, and students' needs.

Our Program's Innovative Practices

We are also proud of our attention to innovation and ongoing program renewal in collaboration with our school partners.

Using Video

This innovation is evidenced in our efforts to engage with a new tool for collaboration and reflection in clinical practice. Edthena, a video coding tool, provides a forum for stakeholders to upload videos of instruction and then add real-time comments and questions to the video. Because it is accessible to teacher candidates, Mentor Teachers, and University Facilitators, Edthena facilitates conversations about instruction and moves toward a common understanding of effective practice (Parsons et al., 2015). This shared reflection creates a learning laboratory that uses teaching episodes by teacher candidates and/or Mentor Teachers to foster critical reflection focused on linking theory and practice. Principals and Mentor Teachers were supportive of adopting Edthena and we are now brainstorming how to also use the tool as part of the teachers' and schools' professional development goals. This shared reflection will foster our candidates' and their school-based teachers' professional growth, which will positively impact their K-6 learners.

Site-Based Coursework

In designing innovative coursework, we strive to break down barriers between the university and PDS sites. Further, in consideration of how our network advances equity and informs teacher education, several of our program courses are situated in PDS sites where instruction, field-based observation, and reflection occur simultaneously with school-based stakeholders and fellow community members. Students observe elementary classes then meet onsite to learn and discuss theories of instruction and how these theories were applied in the practices they observed. The K-6 teachers at the school are able to debrief with the graduate students to further strengthen theory-practice links. By embedding courses in clinical practice our PDS

Network is breaking ground in the national call for more clinically centered teacher preparation.

Intern Stipend for Subbing

Because of our longstanding collaborative partnerships, our yearlong teacher candidates have the unique opportunity to gain valuable experience while serving as substitute teachers in their internship site. Through grant funding provided by our partner districts, each yearlong teacher candidate brings 45 days of substitute teaching availability to their internship school site and earns a \$4,500 stipend across the school year in return. Through careful scaffolding, teacher candidates gain valuable experience substitute teaching in their mentor teacher's classroom, then for their grade level team, and then across grade levels. This allows our school partners to pull from a highly qualified cadre of substitute teachers and allows teacher candidates to gain experience, independence, and confidence in the safety and familiarity of their internship.

Growing Our Own

Program innovations are possible in part because a number of our program completers are hired by network schools. Program data show that many of our graduates go on to teach in our PDS sites, complete Advanced Mentor Teacher training, and then mentor teacher candidates themselves. Collaboration, reflection, and inquiry are evident in our graduates' practice as they strive to maximize student learning. As a program, this longitudinal and ecological work helps us to focus our effect on students' and teacher candidates' learning and our impact on the teacher education field and communities at large.

Conclusion

Together the university faculty, administrators, and teachers within the Mason PDS Network help to continuously evolve the program. This ongoing reflective review and revision with our stakeholders speaks to our program dedication to ensure that our work does not rest on its laurels or occur in the bubble of the university, but rather impacts the broader communities of our school partners. Ultimately, this is the purpose of PDS work, and we are proud of our dedication to innovation in partnership throughout our program and in partnership with our schools.

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