

Partnership with a PDS Middle School and University Provides Support with Growth, Service, and Innovation Through Reduced Tuition Courses

Alexandria Booth, University of South Carolina

ABSTRACT: This paper outlines the logistics and discusses the benefits of the Professional Development School (PDS) partnership between Sandhills Middle School (SMS) in Lexington School District Four and the University of South Carolina (USC). Through this partnership as well as the University of South Carolina's Center for Excellence, teachers at Sandhills Middle are given opportunities to take graduate level courses to obtain their Project-Based Learning (PBL) Endorsement and additional credits. These opportunities for professional development align with the National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS) Nine Essentials (2008). This PDS partnership benefits not only individual teachers and students but Sandhills Middle as a whole, and as a result, teachers, especially new teachers, are provided with the support they need. By fostering continuous professional development as outlined in Essential 3 as well as innovate, reflective teaching practices as outlined in Essential 4, teachers at Sandhills Middle School are able to achieve their core values of growth, service, and innovation, placing students at the forefront of their learning and decisions.

This article addresses the National Association for Professional Development Schools Essentials 3 and 4: 3. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need; 4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants.

Just as the field of education is everchanging and advancing, it is essential for educators to foster that same growth mindset in ourselves in order for that mindset to be fostered within our students. Through the partnership between Sandhills Middle School (SMS) in Lexington School District Four as a Professional Development School (PDS) and the University of South Carolina (USC), Sandhills Middle School has strengthened its dedication to grow, serve, and innovate as outlined in the district's Core Values. As shown in the National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS) Nine Essentials (2008), Sandhills Middle's efforts as a PDS have strengthened its personalized professional development based on the needs of stakeholders (Essential 3) and the "innovative and reflective practice by all participants" (Essential 4). Lexington School District Four emphasizes the importance of innovative teaching practices to help educators grow to serve students in personalized ways.

As a rural district just below Columbia, South Carolina, Lexington School District Four has partnered with the University of South Carolina through USC's Center for Excellence to provide teachers with opportunities to take the coursework necessary to obtain the Project-Based Learning (PBL) Endorsement. This endorsement may be added to teaching certificates in South Carolina after the completion of four courses involving the planning, implementation, and impacts of PBL. As a Tier 3 Personalized Learning district, Sandhills Middle's support of Project-Based Learning continues to foster its goal of continuing professional development opportunities

(Essential 3) that will allow teachers to implement innovative, developmentally responsive teaching practices that allow students and teachers alike to reflect on their learning (Essential 4). Sandhills Middle has used its close distance of less than thirty miles to benefit from a PDS partnership with USC to continue those opportunities for professional development. Along with offering graduate courses for teachers to receive the Project-Based Learning Endorsement, teachers are also offered additional graduate courses at reduced tuition rates. These graduate credits are awarded to teachers in schools throughout South Carolina that are named USC Professional Development Schools in order to encourage continued growth for educators and closer ties with the University of South Carolina.

In order to receive these graduate credits, teachers submit a proposal with the name of the course and rationale for how the course will help the educator grow professionally with alignment to the school's and district's visions. Teachers must reflect on how the tuition credit hours will benefit teaching practices. With the start of each semester, Sandhills Middle is credited nine credit hours that can be used by teachers and carried over from semester to semester. If a teacher's proposal is accepted to take a class, the teacher contacts the University of South Carolina to register. Based on the credit hours awarded each semester, up to six teachers can benefit from the reduced tuition coursework per year. This model could be adapted for use in other PDS and university partnerships through the implementation of a similar credit system, allowing teachers to submit proposals to request reduced tuition credits in order to continue learning.

The courses taken by teachers at Sandhills Middle have had significant benefits on all stakeholders. In *From Isolation to Conversation: Supporting New Teachers' Development* (Rogers & Babinski, 2002), it is shown that “the first year of teaching is important in setting the stage for later growth” (p. 4). Through Sandhills Middle’s partnership with USC as a PDS, a number of first-year and veteran teachers have had opportunities to develop professionally through these graduate courses (Essential 3), which will impact educators’ future teaching growth. Along with allowing individual teachers to grow professionally, these reduced tuition opportunities allow teachers to foster students’ growth and colleagues’ growth (Essential 3).

Service to Students

This PDS partnership allows Sandhills Middle to better serve its students. According to Larmer and colleagues (2015) in *Setting the Standard for Project Based Learning: A Proven Approach to Rigorous Classroom Instruction*, Project-Based Learning provides students with opportunities to authentically learn the “qualities of an ideal graduate” (p. 1), ensuring that students are college and career ready. Through these graduate courses, teachers at Sandhills Middle plan and implement Project-Based Learning experiences for students that meet the seven Gold Standard Elements of a challenging question or problem, sustained inquiry, authenticity, student voice and choice, reflection, critique and revision, and public product (Larmer et al., 2015). These essential elements ensure innovate teaching practices that call for reflection from students and teachers alike (Essential 4), resulting in this personal and professional growth.

Innovation in Action

When planning an interdisciplinary English Language Arts and mathematics PBL for USC coursework, one teacher created an authentic problem by challenging students to brainstorm ideas to improve the local park. By partnering with community members, the teacher shared feedback from an interview with local town council members about the budget constraints for a new park design proposal and allowed students to create a proposal for the use of a budget to redesign the community’s parks. Students were required to write an argumentative essay, giving reasons, evidence, and elaboration of evidence to support their claims of why their parks were the best choices for the community. These essays were sent to the local town council as an authentic audience for the public product. Throughout and at the end of this PBL, students were required to reflect on their progress and their overall products. By fostering this metacognition within students, they are better able to understand their learning and the “problem-solving strategies” used within that learning in order to adjust their behaviors and choices accordingly (Larmer et al., 2015, p. 43). Along with fostering this metacognition within students, the PBL courses through the

partnership with the University of South Carolina allow teachers to reflect on personal teaching practices (Essential 4).

Collaboration with Coaches and Colleagues

As part of the coursework, teachers are required to submit recordings or be observed in person by professors and are assessed on the effectiveness of the essential elements of PBL. Through self-reflection when viewing the recordings as well as through cognitive coaching, teachers are supported in knowledge of these innovative teaching practices. As shown in *Cognitive Coaching: A Foundation for Renaissance Schools* (Costa & Garmston, 2002), all educators, especially first-year teachers, “need and want support” (p. 21). Through this support, educators are able to grow professionally, impacting the intellectual growth of students (Essential 3). This support also provides new and veteran teachers alike with the professional relationships needed to establish a support system.

The benefits of the coursework offered by Sandhills Middle through its PDS partnership with the University of South Carolina do not stop at individual teachers and their students; they impact the whole school. Along with planning and implementing Project-Based Learning in classrooms, teachers have also hold professional development sessions, sharing PBL experiences, data, and findings with colleagues, to help the school as a whole grow. Rogers and Babinski (2002) explained that many first-year teachers do not have opportunities to be a part of authentic “professional dialogue” (p. 2). However, through this PDS partnership, new teachers are provided with the collaborative support needed from colleagues, and veteran teachers are able to not only share their expertise but grow in their practices as well. Miller (2019) supports this practice of PLCs learning together. Miller explains, “The whole process of the PLC fosters each individual’s professional growth, but teams need to create time to learn together.” Through these professional development sessions at Sandhills Middle, teachers support and learn from one another, analyze data, celebrate accomplishments, and create action steps to continue to grow to serve students.

Continued Growth

After only one year of offering reduced tuition credits to teachers, Sandhills Middle has benefitted greatly from teachers’ service to students through these innovative teaching practices that not only contribute to teachers’ growth but students’ growth alike. Teachers are able to continue professional growth as reflective practitioners. By using credits to complete coursework, teachers not only more easily maintain their teaching certification, but they also have more opportunities to further their certification, which promotes teacher retention. Teachers are able to model growth for students, encouraging them to be lifelong learners. Students benefit from personalized learning pathways, Project-Based Learning experiences, and student-centered learning. Because

of these benefits, this project should continue in the future. As teachers earn credits through reduced tuition courses, teachers form a community with one another and with USC. This professional learning community will continue to benefit teachers long after they complete the coursework. Through the partnership between Sandhills Middle School and USC, students are taught to be college and career ready as the future leaders of society, serving as an example of the power that school and university partnerships can hold. ^{SUP}

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Alexandria Booth graduated from the University of South Carolina with a Bachelor of Arts in Middle Level Education and a Master of Education in Teaching with a specialization in Project-Based Learning. Prior to her current position as a fifth grade English/Language Arts and social studies teacher at Dover Elementary School, she taught English/Language Arts and mathematics at Sandhills Middle School.