



Strategies for Overcoming Challenges When Establishing and Sustaining Special Education Professional Development School Partnerships

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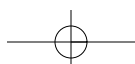
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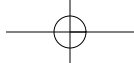
ABSTRACT: In this article, we share how a professional development school (PDS) partnership between several elementary school sites within a district and an institution of higher education prepares special education teacher candidates. The following challenges are identified for PDS stakeholders: recruiting qualified special education mentor teachers, designing a variety of rigorous field experiences for interns across disabilities and settings, maintaining a sense of community among PDS school sites, and attracting nontenured university faculty to become involved in PDS work. In addition to identifying and discussing these challenges, we present several practical strategies that we have found to be successful for overcoming them.

With the field of special education experiencing chronically high teacher shortage and attrition rates (McLeskey, Tyler, & Saunders, 2003; Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005), it is imperative for teacher preparation programs at institutions of higher education (IHEs) to develop and maintain quality relationships with their preK–12 counterparts. Grounding these partnerships in a professional development school (PDS) framework has been shown to have positive effects on all stakeholders—including preservice teachers, classroom teachers, students, and university faculty—by establishing a culture of collaboration, ongoing inquiry, and

continued growth (Castle, Fox, & Souder, 2006; Shroyer, Yahnke, Bennett, & Dunn, 2007). The use of a PDS model in teacher preparation has also been found to decrease teacher attrition (Latham & Vogt, 2007).

Although researchers continue to report these promising outcomes, the role and effect of the PDS model in special education teacher preparation remain scarcely addressed in empirical literature (Yssel, Koch, & Merbler, 2002). Prater and Sileo (2002) conducted an investigation surveying special education faculty members at IHEs in 43 states on the characteristics of their programs. Only 4 of the 115





respondents indicated that they used a PDS model to provide field-based experiences for their teacher candidates. The authors reported extensive variability in the processes that institutions used for preparing special education teachers—processes that appeared “rooted in the idiosyncrasies of the special education programs across the country” (p. 333). Results such as these make it quite difficult to describe a typical special education PDS partnership, as well as draw conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the model when used for preparing special educators.

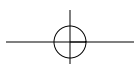
We can, however, provide an overview of how our IHE uses a PDS model to collaborate with preK–12 partners to provide enriching field-based internships for undergraduate students majoring in one of four programs, or tracks, within our Department of Special Education. Our special education teacher candidates are required to choose a concentration for their course work and field experiences in one of the following tracks: infant–primary (birth to Grade 3); elementary–middle (Grades 1–8); secondary–adult (Grade 6 through adulthood); or integrated elementary education–special education (EESE), leading to dual certification in Maryland in Grades 1–8 (special education) and Grades 1–6 (general education). All four special education programs at our IHE have been accredited and approved by the National Council of Accreditation for Teacher Education, the Council for Exceptional Children, and the Maryland State Department of Education. One of the most subscribed-to programs in the department is the integrated EESE track, which has more than tripled in enrollment since its inception, in the 2005–2006 academic year. In fact, because of the rapid growth in the EESE track, Towson University now graduates the largest number of special education teacher candidates in the state of Maryland.

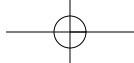
Description of EESE Program’s PDS Model

Three years ago, we established the first PDS partnership for the EESE program, and we have been working together ever since to sus-

tain and enhance our valuable relationship. The EESE program provides internship experiences via a PDS model in cooperation with the Howard County Public School System, a suburban school district in the Baltimore–Washington, DC, area. The partnership consists of three anchor schools, which are required by our IHE to (1) enter into a multiyear agreement to participate in formal PDS activities (e.g., engaging in collaborative professional development and agreeing to host at least six interns per year), (2) designate a school-based PDS site liaison (typically, an active or previously active mentor teacher) to serve as a point of contact in the school for all PDS-related business, and (3) provide school- and district-level administrative representation on the PDS’s governance committees. The program also relies on numerous satellite schools in the district to provide special education field experiences for interns. Satellite schools are typically in formal PDS partnerships with other departments in the university or with schools that are not official PDSs. In fact, some of our satellite schools are PDS partners with IHEs whose programs do not need special educators to serve as mentors. Unlike with anchor schools, university agreements with satellite schools are made on a year-to-year basis, and satellite schools typically do not participate in PDS governance activities.

The teacher candidates in the EESE program follow a 16-week, two-semester (fall and spring) academic year. During the final internship year, candidates complete what we refer to as an *A-B-B-A* rotation wherein they spend 8 weeks in general education and 8 weeks in special education during both semesters. For this rotation sequence, interns are placed in a general education setting (*A* placement) 2 days per week for the first 8 weeks of the fall semester and then move to a special education setting (*B* placement) 2 days per week for the remaining 8 weeks. When they return after winter break for the spring semester, they start attending their special education (*B*) placement full-time, 5 days per week, and remain there for another 8 weeks. Finally, they end their professional internship year by spending





the last 8 weeks of the spring semester in their general education (A) placement full-time. We believe that this rotation sequence is beneficial because it allows interns to become familiar with classroom routines before starting the full-time internship and because it provides opportunities for them to see growth in their students over an entire school year. We have such large EESE cohorts (22–24 interns per year) that half the interns begin in general education while the other half begin in special education for the first rotation (A), with all switching fields to either special or general education for the second rotation (B).

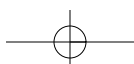
In our experience as PDS partners for the EESE program, we have faced numerous challenges while building and maintaining our learning community that relate to our interns' special education experiences. One such challenge has been finding sufficient numbers of qualified and available special educators to serve as mentor teachers. A second challenge has been ensuring that interns get intensive and extensive experiences with students across a variety of disability categories and in settings that follow the least restrictive environment continuum. Third, because of the large number of satellite schools that we use to provide adequate numbers of special education mentors, we have found it difficult to establish a sense of togetherness and unity. Finally, enticing nontenured university special education faculty members to get involved in PDS work has been yet another challenge. In forthcoming sections, we describe each of these challenges in detail, as well as provide strategies that we have developed and found to be effective for overcoming them.

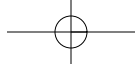
Recruiting and Retaining Qualified Mentor Teachers

We have found that PDSs that focus on preparing general education teacher candidates (early childhood, elementary, and secondary) typically have two or three anchor schools in their partnerships that can accommodate full cohorts of interns without having to utilize satellite schools. In addition, the

general education cohorts at our IHE tend to be much smaller than the special education cohorts. A unique challenge that we face in the EESE program is that the elementary schools in our area have, on average, only two special education teachers on staff who are certified and tenured and thus able to serve as mentors. These numbers may be even smaller depending on whether a principal grants permission to recruit the teachers as mentors; that is, she or he may be reluctant to even ask a special educator, given the larger amount of paperwork and other administrative responsibilities involved in the nature of the position. Moreover, one of these two special educators is often the school's special education team leader and so might choose not to serve as a mentor for an intern, because she or he needs to mentor a new special education teacher at the school.

Therefore, given the limited number of available special education mentors in any one school, we are often required to utilize 10 to 13 schools in total to fulfill the special education placement requirement for our program. For example, during the 2007–2008 school year, we used, in addition to our three anchor schools, eight satellite schools as well. To help identify and secure mentors in these much-needed satellite schools, we have found it necessary to work closely with the local school system's PDS office for leads on schools outside our anchor PDS cluster that might have special educators able and available to serve as mentors. This process involves a great deal of fieldwork on the part of university personnel before the start of an internship year. It includes meeting with teachers and administrators at the recommended satellite schools to provide an overview of the program, outline specific intern and mentor responsibilities, highlight potential benefits to the school and greater community, and discuss the availability of qualified mentors. In reality, the process most closely resembles a mass-marketing blitz. In that regard, we have thus far been fortunate to sell the program well enough to these satellite schools to bring on board the number of mentors needed to support all special education placements.





Creating Intensive and Extensive Field Experiences for Interns

With the growth of inclusive practices in public school systems, it is essential that teacher education programs expose future teachers to a diverse range of students in settings that utilize least restrictive environments to meet students' needs (Gartland & Agness, 2004). The anchor and satellite schools in our PDS partnership are purposefully selected, based on the availability of a variety of special education service delivery models spanning a range of educational settings. The schools serve racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse student populations, with arrays of needs in numerous disability categories, including physical disabilities, learning disabilities, communication disorders, autism spectrum disorders, developmental disabilities, and behavioral/emotional disabilities. Interns are exposed to intensive professional development at the school district level, as well as through their university course work, on a variety of topics specific to supporting students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment, such as differentiating instruction, collaborating with other professionals and families, and using alternative methods for assessing student progress.

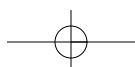
Implementing field-based performance assessments during the professional year helps to provide our teacher candidates with authentic feedback related to the development of their skills as special educators. Field-based performance assessments provide opportunities for teacher candidates to work on real-world tasks typically required of teachers working in any special education setting, from inclusive to self-contained classrooms. Our IHE and PDS school-based partners have collaboratively worked to design and implement these assessments, and they have been diligent in aligning the objectives of each assessment with the teacher preparation standards established by the Council for Exceptional Children (2003). The assessments are designed to address standards-based competencies as well as provide practical services to the school's

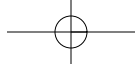
population (as opposed to being assignments completed in isolation as university course requirements).

An example of a performance assessment that each teacher candidate in the EESE program is required to complete during his or her full-time special education internship is an individualized education program (IEP) case study. For this assignment, each intern is instructed to collaborate with his or her mentor teachers and with other service providers in the building (e.g., general educators, speech/language therapists, and school psychologists) to develop an IEP for a student in one's placement. The candidates are also expected to be actively involved in engaging the child's family in the decision-making process by helping to provide proper notification of team meetings, by sharing progress, and by eliciting feedback related to family concerns and priorities. The assignment is designed to completely immerse teacher candidates in the IEP process, including preparing for and participating in IEP team meetings, collecting data to determine student strengths and needs, developing long- and short-term goals and objectives for the student, outlining necessary accommodations and modifications, and implementing the plan in the school setting. Feedback is provided throughout the process by the mentor teacher and university supervisor via informal formative discussions as well as the use of a summative assessment scoring rubric.

Fostering a Sense of Community Across PDS Sites

Given the large number of schools in which our interns are assigned for their special education field experiences, developing and sustaining a sense of community across PDS sites has been yet another unique challenge for the program. Providing open invitations to monthly steering committee meetings to mentor teachers in all partnership schools (anchor and satellite)—as well as other interested stakeholders, such as parents in the community and the interns themselves—is one way that our





program has helped to foster ongoing collaborative relationships. We also conduct what we call *mirror mentor meetings*, which are gatherings involving university faculty, interns, and mentor teachers from the two field placements (general and special education). These meetings serve as a means for stakeholders to simply mingle and get to know one another, as well as discuss and plan for internship requirements and placement-specific experiences. Advances in school technology offer PDS communities another way to stay connected. A new strategy that we are currently investigating is to use the school district's intranet system to develop an electronic message board dedicated to our PDS, in hopes of providing a convenient and continuous connection among partners in our anchor and satellite schools.

Attracting Nontenured University Faculty to Work in PDSs

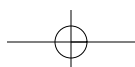
PDSs require an extensive amount of energy, dedication, and time commitment on the part of school and university partners to efficiently and effectively implement the recommended practices associated with the model (Gartland & Agness, 2004). With the intense demands placed on nontenured faculty at many IHEs to engage in scholarly endeavors that complement promotion and tenure within an institution's structure, the thought of devoting the time and effort required to work in a PDS can often be perceived as being unmanageable; however, in reality, a PDS is the ideal environment for new faculty to develop research agendas that can appeal to promotion and tenure requirements and address practical field-based needs. When working in PDS settings, faculty and other partnership stakeholders have access to a genuine living laboratory for research.

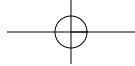
Research in all PDS partnerships affiliated with our IHE, including those for special education programs, has been promoted and stimulated by the following university-level initiatives: (1) the implementation of workshops to provide ongoing training to help teams (i.e.,

mentor teachers, university faculty, and interns) conceptualize, implement, and analyze school-based action research; (2) the development of annual research fairs as culminating events in which PDS research teams report and disseminate findings from their investigations; and (3) the availability of stipends to support research teams in acquiring needed capital or human resources for projects. Nontenured special education faculty members have been attracted to and taken advantage of these initiatives, which may very well explain why they currently account for more than half the university representation in our special education PDS partnerships.

Looking Toward the Future

Although we have already worked through the core challenges facing our partnership in its early years, we are dedicated to continuing efforts to refine our model and practices. For example, at our summer strategic planning sessions, we have continually emphasized the goal of increasing the amount of collaborative research conducted by PDS teams (mentor teachers, university supervisors, and interns). One of the challenges that we are now facing with regard to achieving that goal involves working to establish a seamless institutional research review process between our IHE and the cooperating preK–12 school district. Procedures for conducting research involving school system teachers, administrators, students, and families are strictly governed by the local board of education. Currently, the board's policy on granting permission to non-school-system employees (i.e., IHE faculty) to conduct research is quite restrictive and thus limits the ability of IHE faculty to codesign and implement projects with other PDS stakeholders. The inclusion of a research review and approval reciprocity agreement in our PDS partnership contract is one possible solution to this problem. With such an agreement, a proposed project that has been reviewed and approved by the IHE's institutional review board would automatically receive approval from the preK–12 board of education.





As the use of a PDS model in the preparation of special educators continues to expand in its definition and role, programs can expect to encounter growing pains along the way. The hard work and commitment that we have invested in overcoming some of the challenges facing our PDS partnership have undoubtedly paid off though. We have consistently high interest and enrollment in our integrated EESE program, and a large percentage of our graduates accept teaching positions with the cooperating school district. Also noteworthy is that we have retained the majority of our mentor teachers over consecutive school years. The key to our success has been our ability to put personal agendas aside and respectively engage in inquiry-based problem solving while focusing on the heart of why we are in this partnership to begin with—to create successful learning experiences for children. ^{SUP}

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Kim Durkan has been a special education teacher for 12 years and a mentor teacher for 6 years. She has taught in a variety of settings, mostly in fully inclusive classrooms. Kim also has Maryland teaching certification in visual impairments and general education.

