

Blending Resources for a Collaborative Service Project in a Professional Development School Focused on Student Learning

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ABSTRACT: Collaborative Professional Development School (PDS) relationships require financing and other supports that may not be typically included in the budgets for partnering schools and colleges. In the current economic climate, budgets are especially tight in many educational institutions. In order to sustain PDS relationships in these times, stakeholders need to find ways to blend resources to accomplish joint goals. This article describes one project that utilized the staffing power of student teachers, the purchasing power of a public school, and a small PDS mini-grant from the Canisius College Office of Educational Partnerships to create literacy intervention kits to foster student learning. Benefits for all partners are discussed, and suggestions are shared for designing collaborative projects in other PDS settings.

NAPDs Essential(s) Addressed: #2/ A school-university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community; #4/A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants; #6/An articulation agreement developed by the respective participants delineating the roles and responsibilities of all involved; #9/Dedicated and shared resources and formal rewards and recognition structures

Professional Development Schools (PDSs) provide powerful arenas for improving teacher preparation and P-12 student learning (Castle, Fox & Souder, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2005; Holmes Group, 1986, 1990, 1995). A strong PDS relationship can lead to new approaches to teaching that support

increases in student learning (Castle, Rockwood & Tortora, 2008).

However, PDS activities require financial support that may be difficult to obtain in a tight budget climate. A growing number of schools are contacting colleges to let them know that they no longer have the capacity to

welcome large numbers of teacher candidates and site-based classes into their buildings, in large part because of reduced local, state, and federal resources. In order to sustain PDS relationships in these times, partners need to find creative ways to blend resources across institutions.

Background of the Project

Canisius College and Lindbergh Elementary School are long-standing partners and formed a Professional Development School relationship in 2007. As one element of this partnership, Lindbergh Elementary Schools hosts Canisius education methods classes and student teachers each semester. College faculty and Lindbergh teachers consistently co-teach these methods classes and jointly supervise teacher candidates in their field experiences. Additionally, pre-service teachers, college faculty, and Lindbergh teachers work together to develop action research projects that serve to inform instructional decisions at the school. College faculty sit on the school planning team, and the Lindbergh principal and a classroom teacher identified as the "School Site Coordinator" serve as members of the Canisius Educational Partnership Steering Committee.

This relationship has been guided by the National Association for Professional Development Schools' *Nine Essentials of Professional Development Schools* (http://www.napds.org/nine_essen.html). For example, Essentials 2 and 4 reminded us to form "A school-university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community," with a commitment to "innovative and reflective practice." As a result, members of the PDS leadership team made sure that student teacher cohorts worked together with teachers at the school to provide substantive service to the larger school community with projects designed to support innovative in-

structional practices in the elementary classrooms.

This work was guided by NAPDS Essential 6 in that we have "[a]n articulation agreement developed by the respective participants delineating the roles and responsibilities of all involved," which has allowed us to identify a site coordinator in the building who serves as the point person for joint projects. Our consideration of Essential 9, though, is the focus of this article, as we discuss ways that partners have been able to share resources to support our PDS work.

The Office of Educational Partnerships at Canisius College maintains a fund to support PDS projects through mini-grants. The project we describe here provided a unique way to blend resources to accomplish joint goals. Over the past four semesters we have coordinated fifteen student teachers' efforts at Lindbergh to engage in a joint service project with teachers at the school. The project's goal was to create phonological awareness kits as a resource for K-1 teachers to use as a common pathway to instruct, monitor, and ensure academic growth for at-risk students in accordance with English language arts goals identified in the school's Instructional Improvement Plan.

Thus, the impetus for the project came from school goals, rather than from Canisius College priorities or faculty members' research agendas. Student teachers at the college are required to complete a service project during student teaching in all schools. Usually, though, the choice of a project is left up to a student teacher, and projects are not necessarily coordinated among student teachers or aligned with school goals. The PDS structures in place at Lindbergh allowed us to work as a team to identify a meaningful project specifically designed to support student learning.

The kits that were eventually created by the student teachers included interventions and strategies aligned with district benchmarks and were utilized to support Response

to Intervention (RTI) activities. Elementary students identified as needing interventions beyond normal classroom instruction (Tier 1) utilized these kits. Students in Tier 2 received additional instruction delivered in small groups. Students in Tier 3 received daily one-on-one instruction. One of the goals of these kits was to include evidence-based practices that were classroom ready so that classroom teachers, pre-service teachers, and university faculty could begin to utilize them immediately. Each activity consisted of a file folder with laminated instructions and manipulatives to practice matching uppercase and lowercase letters, picture and sound matching, word sorts, and other word study tasks.

In addition to collaborating on the creation of the kits, student teachers were invited to create activities for their own use, test these out in the classrooms, and take these activities with them after student teaching. Student teachers met once per week after school throughout their seven-week student teaching placement with a classroom teacher (who was the PDS site coordinator) and a professor (who was the PDS liaison from the college) to assemble the kits—cutting, coloring, and organizing the materials for each kit so that they were ready for classroom use.

These two individuals jointly coordinated the overall project; this sort of collaboration—or “blending”—is an example of the type of resource sharing that we now know is vital to sustain the existence and impact of current PDS partnerships. The elementary school partner provided the materials and laminating machine to assemble high quality, long-lasting materials for these kits. The mini-grant from the Canisius Office of Educational Partnerships paid the teacher for her after-school work and provided snacks for the team of student teachers who were working to create the kits. Everyone connected to the project agreed that the funds from the mini-grant were central to our ability to bring this project to fruition. The ideas, staffing, and expertise were already in

place, contributed by both school- and university-based constituents of this partnership. All that was needed was a bit of seed money to move the project forward and effectively address some pressing, shared needs. The PDS structures also facilitated this project as the classroom teacher who served as the PDS site coordinator, the college professor who served as the PDS liaison, and the building principal had dedicated time at Lindbergh PDS steering committee meetings to discuss ways to align resources with shared goals.

Benefits for the School

Teachers at the school were surveyed about the impact of the project upon its completion. Teachers were asked about the value of the project, and ways that the project could be improved in future years. Importantly, the teacher who coordinated the program noted that the project allowed the student teachers to spend substantially more time together and to more frequently share ideas than she had witnessed previously in this PDS. She appreciated the opportunity to get to know the student teachers better. This project gave her a purpose for meeting with the student teachers after school each week. Over time, student teachers felt comfortable bringing up issues about their placements, their work in the classrooms, and their concerns about the future, and she was able to offer meaningful mentoring during these sessions.

Based on this survey, other teachers made the following important observations:

- “The project contributed something tangible to the classroom.” (via the kits that would remain in each classroom for student use)
- “The project provided teachers resources for small group and individual review and remediation.”
- “When (my students) used the kits in the classroom, they were on-task, excited, and eager to work.”

- "I have seen definite growth in student learning."

The building principal reported that the service project allowed the school to fill a significant need within its literacy program. Student teachers enabled the school to move ahead with plans for developing literacy intervention materials while providing teachers with an opportunity to collaborate with student teachers outside of the classroom.

Benefits to the Student Teachers

Student teachers appreciated the weekly get-togethers as time for professional collaboration. The work kept their hands busy, but there was plenty of time for open conversation about the challenges, questions, and successes they were encountering. Student teachers wrote reflections about the project at the conclusion of their student teaching experience. Their feedback emphasized the value of this collaborative spirit. One student teacher wrote, "I felt very close to my fellow student teachers after the weeks we spent together." Student teachers also appreciated the time spent with the building site coordinator, who became a key mentor for them. One student teacher observed, "It was an excellent chance to ask the PDS site coordinator questions about the school and any other questions we may have had about our futures."

Student teachers also wrote about the value of the products they created. One noted, "I got the satisfaction of helping kindergartners and struggling first graders for years to come." Another was grateful to have an entire set of literacy games to use in her future classroom. Several wrote about their new expertise in knowing how to work with struggling readers. When asked for suggestions to improve the project, student teachers recommended even more involvement with students utilizing the instructional materials.

Finally, we asked the college PDS liaison to write a reflection about the project, and

she noted that student teachers were able to engage in a focused, meaningful, and tangible service activity as a consequence of this joint project. She also observed that through this project, student teachers became much more connected with one another and with the faculty PDS liaison. In addition, the college PDS liaison wrote that student teachers involved in this project viewed the site coordinator as a mentor more than student teachers had in previous semesters. This project made the faculty PDS liaison and school-based site coordinator roles meaningful for the student teachers so that they could fully access the mentoring and expertise from these individuals. The PDS liaison also noted the vital contribution made by the building principal, who emphasized the importance of the project at all levels by presenting certificates to the student teachers at a public ceremony and providing them with letters of reference emphasizing the value of the project.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Designing Collaborative Service Projects

Key findings from the surveys and reflections collected to study this service project offer guidance for development of such projects by other PDS teams. We briefly detail these below.

Base the Project on Collaborative Goals

Contrary to many such activities in other teacher licensure programs of which we are aware, including many set in PDS contexts, this project was not developed in order to meet a student teaching requirement of service. Rather, the project was conceptualized based on the needs of the PDS site. Outcomes of the project were more authentic—a mentor teacher benefiting from building relationships with student teachers, classroom teachers gaining resources for their classrooms, student teachers profiting

from a feeling of truly and immediately contributing to the students' learning and to the educational legacy of the school. The project also resulted in the provision of additional teaching materials for all of the educators involved, and elementary students were provided with additional interactive resources to enhance their learning.

Combine Available Resources to Meet the Goal

Without the funding of the project offered by Canisius, the student teachers' service requirement, and the leadership of the PDS site coordinator and the PDS liaison, the project would not have been possible. The mini-grant funding from the Office of Educational Partnerships was particularly valuable in launching this project. The PDS site coordinator was paid \$25 per hour for 15 hours of after-school work for a total of \$375, and \$125 was used for snacks and supplies. While these resources might seem nominal, this funding was pivotal in getting the project off the ground.

Recognize Dedication

The principal formally recognized the roles the student teachers played in meeting an important school goal. Certificates of appreciation and letters of recommendation validated the student teachers' contributions to the school, its teachers, and its students.

This true collaboration resulted in positive outcomes for all constituents of this PDS partnership, enriched the student teaching experience for a grateful group of teacher candidates, and further cemented the dedication to this PDS relationship of the college and the strength of the partnership itself. It became obvious that the cross-institutional and cross-cultural collaboration inherent in this PDS relationship contributed to innovative practice and engagement of future educators (PDS Essentials 2 and 4). It was necessary for identified roles to be established (PDS Principle 6) to provide the structure that fostered the collaboration within this project.

Finally, the Professional Development School model and the framework provided by the Nine Essentials provided an important focus for this meaningful work. By combining resources and expertise, increased learning opportunities were made available for elementary students and educators from a variety of levels. This project demonstrates that during challenging economic times, Professional Development School partnerships might look to unique opportunities to blend resources in order to promote P-12 student learning and other positive outcomes for teacher candidates and teachers in our schools and universities. ^{SUP}

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