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Designing and Tailoring School/University Partnerships: A Straightjacket, Security Blanket, or Just a Loose Coat?

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Abstract

Formalized partnerships between colleges or universities and public schools have gained in popularity even though their impact remains uncertain. Such partnerships, existing under a variety of terms (the most common of which is Professional Development Schools [PDS]), are meant to bring together the resources and the expertise of the university and those of one or more public schools. PDSs typically center on three fundamental domains of activity: the preparation of new educational professionals, the continuing professional development of current staff, and the collaborative field-based research on issues of common interest.

This paper focuses on the process by which such partnerships are formed. Specifically, it addresses the oftentimes contentious issues of how an agenda of mutual benefit to both parties is established and implemented. Based on our own experiences in the formation of such partnerships, we discuss how partners are identified and then describe the negotiations as to the scope of work to be carried out. We examine in detail the provision of a formalized letter of agreement between the partners and whether such an agreement is restrictive or facilitative. We conclude that the crafting of partnerships between school and universities is a delicate process, one requiring candor, careful attention to the language used, and faith in the evolving nature of the partnership.

Professional Development Schools (PDSs) often emerge from an explicit partnership between one or more public schools and a university School or Department of Education. These partnerships, while they vary somewhat in their focus, generally are dedicated to "the development of novice professionals, the continuing development of experienced professionals, and research and development of the teaching profession" (Holmes, Group, 1990, p. 1). While evidence about the impact of a PDS is mixed (Teitle, 1996; Valli, Cooper, & Franks, 1997), the absence of convincing data has not, it seems, diminished the popularity of these partnerships. Many universities regularly tout their involvement in PDS-like organizations, though it is doubtful that all of these partnerships are as comprehensive as their proponents claim. Even the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) recognizes the popularity of PDS arrangements, having recently issued preliminary standards on PDSs and created NCATE-funded pilot sites in order to learn more about PDSs. Clearly, PDSs are an idea whose time has arrived.

Given the broad range of objectives that PDSs are said to meet, it is important to better understand how such partnerships are initiated and sustained. This paper addresses some of the broad issues which typically arise in the partnership formation process.

In order to achieve greater clarity in the establishment of PDSs, some partnerships have formalized their objectives and their expectations in the form of a written document. Such documents are meant to make explicit some of the many issues that might facilitate a strong partnership. Often integral to such written documents are discussions pertaining to governance within the partnership, to responsibility for resources, and to overall goals and objectives.

An essential value of written agreements lies in the clarification of expectations. Yet, an excessive specification of expectations can serve as a straightjacket, making the agreement too rigid and too inflexible and thereby limiting the partnership's ability to take advantage of opportunities. As an example, the partnership might initially agree to

support a particular reading curriculum in one of its schools. Yet, if a new principal were to be assigned to the school and decided to explore changing the reading programs, the partnership might lack the flexibility to explore these changes due to the rigidity of prior agreements.

On the other hand, a well-conceived formal agreement can create a sense of comfort and of certainty which serves as a security blanket for the partners as they move out of the comfort zone of working separately and enter into the new territory of collaboration. The presence of such a security blanket provides the user(s) something on which to depend in times of uncertainty which usually accompany entering uncharted territory. Specification of mutual expectations then may work especially well when the partnership is young and insecure.

We know, however, that just as a young child can become too dependent on a security blanket, so too may an organizational partnership become too dependent on past agreements. Over-reliance on prior arrangements then can stifle the maturation of the relationship. As an example, the school partner may expect that the university will always place interns in the school, because such is noted in the formal agreement. But, in order to provide interns with a broader range of experiences, the university might have a good reason to move (at least temporarily) placements from a partnership school despite prior agreements. Some degree of flexibility is then important, and the issue of how specifically the mutual expectations should be stated and followed is an important matter for the health of the partnership.

Is the agreement a straight-jacket or security blanket? Perhaps neither, and a loose-fitting coat might be the better choice of metaphors to describe the nature of expectations between partners. Such a loose coat would serve to ward off the most serious of weather, while at the same time, permit flexibility and maneuverability to the wearer. As with a loose coat, partnership agreements would need to be adaptable to changing conditions, but not so limiting as to constrain expectations and outcomes. At times, the coat might not even be worn. The formulation of

expectations and outcomes then should permit the partners to regularly review progress and to make changes when necessary.

Our purpose in this paper is not to address the overall efficacy of school-university partnerships. We do however propose to address two questions of central importance in the formation of partnerships:

1. How do the university and a school or schools initiate a relationship that can lead to productive collaboration?
2. How do expectations become clarified so as to promote continued development of the partnership?

The emphasis of both of these questions is on the delicate early stage of the partnership building process wherein the parties jointly explore future roles and expectations. We believe that these issues greatly influence the success or the failure of Professional Development Partnerships.

To address these two questions, we first examine selected literature that addresses the two cultures (university and school) which must be understood when partnerships are developed. Next, and based on our own experiences, we discuss the processes used at Portland State as we initiated our own school-university partnership process and focus particularly on the delicate process of negotiating mutual expectations. Finally, we summarize the somewhat contradictory nature of partnership formation and provide some guideposts for handling these contradictions. Throughout, we use the metaphors of straight-jacket, security blanket, and loose coat to examine the role of formal agreements in the partnership building process.

Literature

The overarching goals of PDSs are wide in scope and fundamentally ground-breaking for both public schools and higher education institutions. As Darling-Hammond (1994) noted, PDSs are "places of ongoing intervention and discovery; places where schools and university faculty together carry on the applied study and demonstration of the good practice and policy the profession needs to improve

between the changing cultures of schools and universities is a clear challenge. However, this challenge might be addressed. One point is clear: a successful PDS partnership requires that both parties (but particularly we believe higher education) operate within a normative structure based upon dialog and interaction rather than on intervention (Whitford, 1994). A partnership based upon differential power or status, subordinate or superordinate authority relationships, or agendas not mutually agreed upon and supported by each partner-member stands little chance of success. Weaving these mutually determined expectations into one garment is fundamental to the partnership-building process. It is to further discussion of the process that we now turn.

Methods

The data used in this study are based upon our own experiences in establishing partnerships (called Professional Development Partnerships or PDP) between our School of Education and the local schools. These partnerships were initiated during the 1995–96 school year. In that year, we contacted schools in over twenty local school districts regarding their possible interest in participating in a partnership focused on professional preparation, on continuing staff development, and on school-based inquiry. As a result of these contacts, we entered into a dialogue with six elementary schools and eventually established formal partnerships with three of those schools. The three partnerships were variously configured, and each raised a variety of issues about the partnership formation process.

Both authors were participants in the PDP process. Stevens served as Director of school-university partnerships, and Everhart was Dean of the School. We took advantage of our participation to also be observers of the very process in which we participated. This joint role is sometimes referred to as the participant-as-observer, meaning that the primary role as participant in a setting may also permit a secondary role as an observer (Gold, 1958). In our participant-as-observer roles, we frequently debriefed after meetings and informal interviews in order to discuss and to clarify issues that were to be part of our field notes.

Data Sources

A variety of data were collected over the year, and those used in this analysis included: (a) the Call for Participation (hereafter referred to as the Call), (b) the Letter of Commitment (hereafter referred to as the Letter), (c) analysis of the minutes from the Professional Development Advisory meetings, and (d) analysis of the field notes collected over the year and containing primary observational data.

The Call for Participation. The Call was a document designed to invite schools to enter the partnership. Analysis of the Call consisted of examining the written and oral comments made by university and school-based educators as to their role and value.

The Letter of Commitment. The Letter was a document developed by the authors in order to outline initial expectations for the partnership. Analysis of the Letter consisted of examining the written and the oral comments made by potential partners (both before partnerships were formed as well as after) as to their role and value.

Analysis of the minutes from the Professional Development Advisory meetings. The Developmental Advisory group was staffed by university faculty and school representatives. They were held every other month during the course of this study.

Analysis of the field notes collected over the year and containing primary observational data. The data largely were compiled by Stevens, who served as coordinator of school-university partnerships. Reference to the field notes in this paper consists of the notation FN, followed by the date.

Data Analysis

At the end of 1996, the documents, field notes, and interviews were reviewed by both authors who, following Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Glaser and Strauss (1967), searched for information that specifically addressed the two research questions noted earlier. As this analysis proceeded, we were struck by the manner in which both the Call and especially the Letter appeared to facilitate partnership-building in some cases, but less so in others. We came to define this as the security-blanket-straightjacket dilemma, and further exploration of this dilemma led to the emergence of the metaphorical framework noted earlier.

Forming the Partnership

The establishment of discussions with potential partner schools on the nature and on the purpose of a new relationship was the first challenge we faced early in the 1995 school year. Admittedly, we were anxious about this process because we did not know how schools might perceive our motivations in proposing more extensive and broad-based partnerships. Most importantly, we wanted to avoid presumptuousness, being perceived that our efforts were just more in a series wherein the university viewed itself as the receptacle of higher knowledge which it could share with the unwashed. We sincerely desired that potential partners would view our solicitation as an honest effort to craft a partnership that would be beneficial to the schools as well as the university.

Though the literature indicates that many of our higher education colleagues regularly note the importance of all parties entering a partnership on an equal footing, we have found that what really happens often contradicts, albeit subtly, such advice. In some cases, schools are invited to apply to join a partnership, a term clearly implying that the university is in the position to accept or to reject the applicant. In other instances, schools are invited to submit a proposal, a phrase which, while somewhat more inviting, still suggests that the university will render the final decision.

As we became increasingly aware of the importance of language in the process of inviting potential

partners to the table, we consulted with colleagues from institutions such as Ohio State and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, both of which have been involved in partnership-building for some time. Informal conversations at professional meetings with administrators at both institutions reinforced our early beliefs that the selection of language and of symbols was quite important in the partnership process. That spurred us to return to Fullan (1991) who argues persuasively that the change process is ultimately one of meaning and that until meaning systems are acknowledged and clarified, change is likely to remain muddled and ineffective.

We continued to examine the work of others, but realized how much more we needed to do within our own School before contacting colleagues in the public schools (see Figure 1 for a retrospective schematic of our year-long process). Though the Education faculty was generally supportive of the move to PDPs, it was obvious from their questions that greater specificity was necessary if the partnership process was to flourish. To aid in achieving greater clarity, we established a PDP Advisory Group comprised of both of us, two faculty within the School of Education, and two educators from the field. A major responsibility of the Advisory Group was to help craft a process for soliciting school partners that could in turn be embraced by both the schools and the university.

Over time, the PDP Advisory Group considered a number of issues, including:

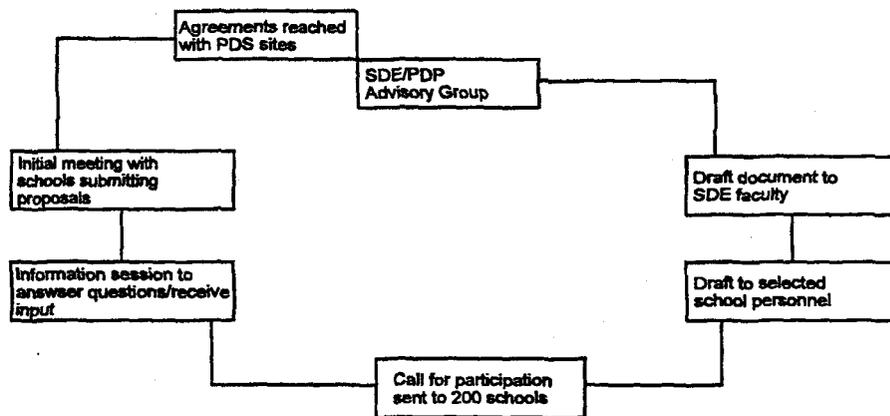


Figure 1. Cycle of Partnership Selection

1. To whom should an invitation to participate be sent (e.g., only to schools with whom we had previously worked or to a wider array of schools)?
2. Should there be some attempt at representativeness of partners and if so based on what criteria (e.g., geographical, size of district, characteristics of the populations served, programs, etc.)?
3. In order to evaluate potential partner applications, what information would we need from them and why did we need it? What type of information might schools need from us and how would we make it available?

The Call: Straightjacket or Security Blanket?

The PDP Advisory Group suggested obtaining faculty feedback about the Call and ultimately faculty ratification of the process to be used in distributing the Call. The Advisory Group then spent two months crafting and revising the document, and in November 1995, circulated a draft of the Call among the faculty.

The Call was designed to serve as an invitation to potential partners to join us in a school-university partnership of some yet to be determined scope. We believed that faculty concurrence was crucial prior to beginning the important and time consuming task of designing partnership arrangements.

After the faculty voted (unanimously) to support the Call, the draft document was then sent to a selected group of educators for further review. Our purpose was to obtain a wide range of opinions from those who would receive the Call as to how they might respond to both the concept as well as the manner in which it was worded. Some of the issues we asked them to address included:

1. Was it clear to them as to what a professional development project was?
2. Did the tone of the document reflect our desire for a truly mutual partnership?
3. Was there a sufficiently compelling rationale for a school administrator or faculty to even read the document?
4. Was the process for responding to the Call clear?
5. Was the information which we requested appropriate for schools to provide?

Solicitation of the perspective of educators in the field proved to be valuable. For example, despite our attempts to present the Call as an invitation to openly discuss partnership possibilities, not all educators read the document in this manner. One school principal said that the language in the document inferred that schools would have to measure up to some unstated criteria in order to be deemed worthy of joining the partnership (FN, 11/29/95). Another noted that while districts were asked to indicate what resources they could contribute to the partnership, we had not volunteered to tell the schools what the university was providing (FN, 11/30/95). Finally, one reader (a principal) cautioned against being too optimistic about the partnership. She noted (quite correctly) that the history of partnerships between schools and higher education is brief and resplendent with false starts. Consequently, she speculated that we might have to establish a very loose partnership prior to negotiating the scope of work for the partnership. Then the partnership could capitalize on the trust created to formulate specific expectations (FN, 12/2/95). As it later turned out, we found her projections to be quite accurate.

Tailoring our document to include these and other suggestions, we sent the revised Call to more than 200 schools in December 1995 (see Figure 2 on next page). In the document, we attempted to address answers to commonly asked questions about professional development schools (e.g., history, purpose, processes for involvement, examples of possible shared activities, etc.). We also discussed the components which we believed were important in such a partnership (e.g., continuous professional development, professional preparation of school professionals, and collaborative research addressed in the final proposal (role of the partnership in the school's mission, governance structure of the school, the school's perspective on continuous professional development, preparation of new teachers, and ideas about school-based collaborative inquiry).

Built into the Call were opportunities for conversations between our School and the potential school partners on purposes and on processes of the partnership. In addition to processing queries via phone calls and e-mail, we established four informational meetings in schools throughout the region. We were disappointed that the meetings were sparsely attended, though a school principal later told us that just advertising the meeting's existence helped to establish an invitational environment which he appreciated (FN, 1/7/96).

One component of the Call was a request for what we termed a notification of intent. School name, contact person(s), and a brief statement as to the school's objectives in a possible school-university partnership were some of the items about which we asked potential partners to tell us. Receipt of the notification of intent (one month prior to the date for full proposals) was meant to provide us a better idea of the interest level of recipients and the characteristics of schools considering participation. These characteristics were especially important to us because, as an urban School of Education, we are particularly committed to public schools which serve poor and minority students. The statements of intent could also provide us an indication of whether some of our potential partner schools had these characteristics.

By February 1996, we received statements of intent from six schools or school districts. The two school districts were quite large with multiple schools. Initially, we were a bit surprised by the somewhat small numbers of responses, but came to realize that our expectations were probably too high. The Director of Personnel of one district, whom we thought would indicate interest but did not, later told us that simply sending an invitation through the mail to a school with whom we had not regularly worked usually was not a sufficient step to generate interest (FN, 2/26/96). Of the six statements of intent which we received, all were from schools with whom we had histories of involvement or personal contacts such as student teacher placements or graduates of our programs. As the Director of Personnel indicated, partnership-building requires a more active process of cultivation if

one is to expect a wider array of interest on the part of schools (FN, 2/26/96).

In the time between our receipt of the statement of intent on February 15 and receipt of the final proposal on March 15, we engaged in informal conversations with the principals and staff of those schools or districts which had expressed interest. These conversations provided an opportunity for the partners to explore mutual interests and served as another process wherein we could gain a better sense of how we might work together in the future. As it turned out, two of the those schools which had submitted the intent letters decided not to pursue the partnerships to the full proposal stage. The principal of one of those schools told us that she did not believe that her school had the personnel resources to commit to what they thought might be involved in the partnership (FN, 3/8/96).

On March 15, 1996, four complete proposals were received, three by elementary schools in Eagle School District and one by an elementary school in Heron School District. Through late March and early April, we continued discussions with these four schools regarding the issues of joint objectives, of governance and management, and of resources. Approximately 25% of our School of Education faculty visited at least one of the four schools in order that we could better understand their interest and they ours. After some of these visits, staff expressed their gratitude that the university had made the effort to see them on their turf and to engage in an extended discussion of hopes and of aspirations (FN, 4/9/96). Many questions were raised in these discussions, including:

1. How might student teachers be assigned to a PDP school and would the school have any input into that decision?
2. How might the teachers in the PDP sites become more directly involved in the teacher education program at the university? Could they indeed become adjunct faculty?
3. How exactly would the relationship between the university and schools be governed? How would decision about matters of mutual interest be made, and by whom?

4. What type of assistance would or could the university provide for professional development in the schools? Would this be provided gratis or would the schools need to pay for it?
5. What kind of research would be done in schools and by whom? Does the university have carte blanche on the topic of research, or could the school veto it?

The Letter of Commitment: The Loose Coat

By May 1996, we reached verbal agreements with all four schools as to the nature of the partnership into which we would enter in September. Excitedly, we anticipated that by September, there would be four Letters which outlined the specific objectives for each partnership. Following Goodlad (1990), staff development, collaborative inquiry, and preservice preparation were to be the anchor points of the Letter, and during the one month until the school year ended we worked hard to reach agreement on specific objectives which each school and the university would try to meet during the upcoming year.

Only one such Letter from the school in Heron District was completed by September of 1996. At first, we were troubled that the absence of Letters from three of the four schools signified an inability on our part to conclude a major milestone in the partnership process. We shared our feelings with the PDP Advisory Group, which urged us to continue working with these three schools despite the absence of Letters (FN, 9/28/96). We followed that advice, and Stevens interviewed the principals of those three schools to learn more about their perception of the barriers to completing the Letter. The principals told her that some schools were able to act more quickly to craft such a commitment, because they had a clearer idea of how the partnership could play a significant role in their long-term objectives. These three schools were not however, at that point and wanted to use the existence of an informal partnership to continue developing their plans in relation to new learning standards which the state required all districts to implement (FN, 10/12/96).

Progress on the Letters continued through the Summer of 1997, and we began our second year of

actual PDP work with in addition to the prior Letter from the Heron school, a Letter from one of the three schools in the Eagle District. Another Eagle school finally completed the Letter by the Spring 1998. The earlier remarks by the principal who had read drafts of the Call, as well as the PDP Advisory Group's advice, proved to be accurate. Working on partnership agreements may often best occur in process, a situation that requires understanding and a great deal of patience from all parties.

There was, however, the one remaining school in Eagle which had submitted a proposal but still had not completed a Letter. This case is an illustration of the complex environment in which partnership-building occurs. In this school, the district changed the school principal in the middle of the 1995-96 school year. A new principal was appointed, but he was not familiar with the PDP process. He told us that he was too involved in his new role to define or even to know what he expected from the university (FN, 4/22/96). During this principal's first full year (1996-97), our School remained involved in his building through workshops on state standards, through student teacher placements, and through university students serving as reading tutors. These activities helped the principal and his staff to better understand how a formal partnership could facilitate the school's primary objective, which was to increase student performance on statewide assessments. By the end of 1998, with a Letter finally in draft form, the principal abruptly resigned to assume a principalship in a neighboring district. This succession in leadership (the second in two years) contributed to a loss in momentum in the partnership process, and a Letter was never completed.

Tailoring a Garment

Each stakeholder in a partnership can benefit from the collaborative process used to design and to tailor the formal expectations of the school-university partnership. Based upon our experiences and upon the data presented in this paper, we identified three themes which we hope will assist others as they become involved in school-university partnership building.

Conclusion

Public schools do not need the university as a partner. Schools will be involved in the education of children whether the university is its partner or not. Indeed, universities are guests in the schools and will remain in that role, unless they can work more closely with schools to achieve common purposes.

Attempts to specify, through a formal statement of purpose such as the Letter, the intent and the structure of a partnership between schools and universities can aid in the search for common purpose. The process helps to put the schools and the university on a more equal footing. Both partners can work toward greater commitment to those same ends by specifying the expectations and the responsibilities. This shared vision has the potential to forge a closer link between the schools and the university.

As this paper reveals, the processes by which we negotiated elements of our partnership arrangements reveal complexities and difficulties. The Call initially served as a security blanket, permitting the partners to enter the process feeling confident and safe. Once that confidence was established and the partnership began to take root, even the security blanket proved to be too cumbersome. Our use of the Letter emerged to serve as a loose coat, permitting variability and flexibility to meet some, but not all, new situations.

As schools and universities work to create fresh, meaningful, and enduring relationships, we believe that the careful building of these risky but rewarding relationships can be enhanced by tailoring expectations through the processes discussed herein.

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