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Proceedings Paper
Hawaii International Conference for Education Proceedings
2002

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Urban Education: Meeting the Unmet Challenge Through Partnerships

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Urban schools are failing students. There are an alarming number of our nations' schools that are in some form of academic warning. In addition to the all the factors of the condition of urban schools, are external factors in the environment impacting student safety, health, attendance and achievement. In order for schools to perform better, there must be higher levels of collaboration between the schools, institutions of teacher education and other colleges, and the greater community. This paper describes a partnership developed with the purpose to address failing urban districts. It presents the development of a partnership between urban districts and universities supported by a private foundation. The elements of accountability necessary for successful partnerships are detailed. In addition, it presents information on a current incident in an inner city that was representative of an extreme external factor with potential to negatively impact children and families. Finally, it discusses the successes, challenges, and accomplishments of the partnerships' interventions within the urban districts and evolving structure of the partnership.

Development of University-School District Partnerships

The field of education must be responsive to higher attainment of children, and successful and safe experiences as they grow to be responsible and productive members of society. Thus, it is critical for stakeholders and partners in education to demonstrate shared accountability in order to attempt to meet this difficult challenge. Since the publication of "A Nation at Risk" in 1983, by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, there has been increased scrutiny of the country's 3.1 million teachers. Concern for quality

instruction has spread to educational institutions (Fishman and McCarthy, 1998). Given this, higher education and schools must align.

There are five key guiding principles that drive the development of the university-school teacher education partnerships. These include (1) strengthening relationships and shared responsibilities among schools, colleges and universities, and communities in the initial preparation, induction, and continuing professional development of teachers, (2) building on success of current models of programs and establishment of professional development partnerships, (3) extending and improving school-based components for teacher preparation and continuing development, (4) strengthening the linkage between theory and practice of teaching and learning to know what is effective practice and how to apply it, and (5) focusing and sharing resources across partners to improve curriculum and increase learning in schools and teacher education programs (The National Commission on Education, 1983). All of these guiding principles represent effective practices for partnerships to embrace when working with teacher education and striving to demonstrate higher quality and accountability. When there is a development of university-school alliances, there is an enhanced quality of course offerings for students and an increased resource base for partners (Butcher, 1998).

Elements of Partnership Accountability

Quality and Mutuality. Within the context of urban schools, reform cannot take place in a vacuum; instead there must be a restructuring so that responsibilities among key stakeholders can be shared appropriately (Waddock, 1995, Draper, 1998). There is a national and worldwide demand for quality education, which translates into skilled and competent students exiting schools. Thus, there must be partnerships of many stakeholders including

educators, families and community members in order to make meaningful improvements in education (Draper, 1998). There is no one size fits all for partnerships. However, mutual capacity building and mutual benefits for participants must be emphasized. Models including an element of mutuality and empowerment are the first step in a paradigm shift in partnerships (Moja, 2001).

Concentration. Concentration of a partnership involves making that partnership fit into the environments in which it is attempting to impact. It must drive initiatives that are not just icing on the cake. School improvement research has found that in order for real change to occur, the reform must become part of the basic fabric of the school (Dantow and Stringfield, 2000). In addition, a change process can be best supported when there is ownership of initiatives (Englert and Tarrant, 1995).

Sustainability. It is important for partnerships in education to put into place supports for programs to ensure sustainability if they want to endure with quality standards. The National Institute for Urban School Improvement states in its mission that they support inclusive urban communities, schools and families to build their capacity for sustainable, successful urban education. No one state has incorporated programs infusing education for sustainability into the classroom fully into its formal and non-formal educational institutions. (Education for Sustainability: An Agenda for Action, 1994). This presents a challenge for partners in education to think upfront about issues of sustainability of designs for teacher education initiatives.

Urban School Challenges

Urban school districts face great challenges in working toward continuous improvement and success of children. The profile of an urban child is one that suggests

greater risks for problems and failures in education. These children may be characterized by one or all of the following conditions which represent risk factors for academic failure:

- A minority, specifically African American, Appalachian or Hispanic
- Family typically of low socio-economic status or poverty, family members are working in low paying jobs or not working at all
- Child's parents often have low education levels
- Often from large family sizes
- Often from families where children are closely spaced
- Often live in a non-traditional family structure (living with others than biological parent(s) or living with parent(s) in addition to extended family or others)
- Often parent(s) are absent for periods of time, have no or low contact
- Often live in an overcrowded home
- May live in inadequate housing or be homeless
- Often experience frequent changes in residence
- May have poor nutrition and subsequent health issues
- Household may have individuals with substance abuse problems
- Mother may have mental health problems
- May experience exposure to family or neighborhood violence
- Parent(s) may have a history of criminality or be incarcerated

(Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2000 and Keogh, 2000)

These conditions can cause complex complications for administrators, teachers, and other staff who work with urban children. Alternative approaches to prepare these personnel are necessary. In a very real sense, understanding the urban experience of the child is a

necessary prerequisite for teaching in the city. Exploration of the locality of the school and its metropolitan system is an important element in teacher preparation programs and continuing education experiences (Danzer, 2001). We cannot expect to teach a child anything if we do not understand the child and environment in which s/he exists (Samples, 2001 and Holhut, 2002). Educational institutions must form partnerships to increase awareness of specific issues that affect educating urban children.

Cincinnati Inner City Civil Unrest

The city of Cincinnati recently endured what has been referred to as both 'civil unrest' and 'rioting' within its inner city neighborhoods (Emergency Response and Research Institute, 2001). The media presentation of events has been sensational. These reports have begun to be the subject of national news perspectives (Channel Cincinnati and The Associated Press, 2001 and John, 2001). The actuality of the problem and effect on those that live in the city need to be better understood. Specifically, this must be addressed in the professional development of the staff of public schools and related services in increasing awareness of the children and families they work with. On April 17, 2001 Cincinnati local news headline read: Week of spring break taught lessons Kids anxious to talk about shooting, riots. Nearly 42,000 students in Cincinnati Public Schools returned to school following that headline after their spring break, a week in which the city endured its worst civil unrest since 1968. Many educators seized the moment to turn the riots into a learning opportunity. Hopefully, they taught children to respect others, to use their communication skills to listen to others and to talk about their feelings; and to focus on positive actions such as using their educational experience to work toward being successful academically to positively impact their futures.

This is one commentary on the fact that the effects of reoccurring problems' in the urban environment are not isolated from the schools. The university partnership has taken an active role in bringing to the table the obvious stakeholders as well as untraditional ones. The goal is to make conditions better for educational systems and the realm of service delivery they entail, as well as strive to diffuse the biases.

Challenges to Higher Education

Colleges and universities in the United States and elsewhere in the North face major changes. There are many urban cities experiencing urban problems (Samples and Eckberg, 2001). Also, other urban cities seem to have root causes to urban strife that are similar to the city of Cincinnati, e.g. Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, and Miami. The global system that was organized for decades around the struggle between East and West has changed to a more complex, multipolar system. Higher education institutions are struggling to prepare students to be responsive to the pace of economic and technological change while adjusting to more stringent budgets (Delauder, 2001). But for many of those students the challenge is more simplistic as basic success in school. Thus, accountability is paramount and key to partnership forming to seek better avenues to specific as well as larger problems.

Teacher Quality

In Goals 2000, the United States Congress affirmed its commitment to education through bipartisan support of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. The fact that this support is bipartisan demonstrates a unique coming together of often greatly opposing viewpoints in a partnership for accountability of education to children and families. Within the Goals 2000, are principles reflecting quality teaching and professional development. This national leadership demonstrates guidance intended to raise academic standards. The result

would be a higher level of quality necessary. In the first century of the new millennium, the quest for improving our nations' schools is an important one that can be most successful when attempted within the context of partnerships with shared accountability.

The University Partnership Model Elements of Accountability

To ensure high standards when collaborating together, this paper examines a partnership to increase the educational outcomes of urban children through teacher education programs. An evaluation model of excellence for productive partnerships in accountability is applied. The model contains four elements that together may promote successful programs with data driven results that may be sustained. It shapes these in the context of teacher education program cadre series. The four elements are: quality, mutuality, concentration and sustainability.

Quality. The first element is quality, which has two key dimensions. First, how has the quality of service, support and collaboration been for the program design from the different partners perspectives? Very importantly, the second dimension is how effective is the program, what evidence will be seen? This element represents both the relationships that drive a program; as well as the impact of the program on individuals participating, including their learning, changes in behavior and/or attitude, and how these may positively affect student learning and success. Essential to demonstrating effect is seeking ways of producing evidence of quality in design, implementation, evaluation and use of information gathered about an initiative.

Mutuality. The second element is mutuality. In order to be successful, initiatives must contain mutual benefits to all stakeholders. This partnership represents possible impact across school districts, individual building sites, teachers, students, families, universities, the

citizens of the community, and to members of business, religious and government organizations. It addresses what are the true costs of energy and effort, and how do people feel about these costs. In addition, it seeks to know how partners will achieve open communication and higher levels of approachability between universities and districts. Traditionally, there often exists a hierarchical feeling of knowledge and role. Presenting an initiative with an examination of mutuality may assist in diminishing these feelings.

Concentration. The third element is concentration. A program must be instilled within participants a lasting impact. In addition, a program that is an integral part of an institution rather than an appendage has greater chance at impacting all involved. It may not only increase the knowledge of the participants, but also have a reciprocal effect on the educators. This may be greatly enhanced through a participatory design.

Sustainability. Finally, the fourth element is sustainability of programs developed through a partnership. The components of a program initiative must show a measured and sustained track record of accountability of academic and social improvement of students, as well as impact of benefits to other stakeholders. Another measure of sustainability is- can a teacher development program that is partnership created, continue in whole or in part in spite of district budget restraints and other barriers after the partners no longer participate fully or at all? Within the political context of education in the United States, as well as across individual communities, the ability to continue an effective preparation program and demonstrate accountability can represent a great challenge.

The Martha Holden Jennings Foundation - University of Cincinnati Partnership for Urban Initiatives

The Martha Holden Jennings Foundation support for urban education is commendable. The foundation forwards a vast amount of funds to many initiatives across the state of Ohio and its twenty-one urban districts. In addition, the foundation supports individual teachers willing to do more to help students achieve academic success. The partnership discussed in this paper was formed in 1998 and involved the foundation, the university and four districts in the southwest of Ohio, including the large district of Cincinnati Public Schools.

The essence of the problem for the partnership was finding ways to arrive at shared accountability, across four elements (quality, mutuality, concentration, sustainability), central to the success of a partnership for a program of professional development for teachers in an urban school district. In addition, there must be present the leverage necessary to enable the expansion of the initiative across the districts and into other urban districts. The problem is further complicated through the different stakeholders that are representative within a format of partnerships between schools and universities.

Stages of the Partnership

The first stage of the partnership was planning or the forming stage. The university and the districts had to collaborate in order to determine the mutual goals and benefits of the team. These need to have equity and involve cooperative support and accountability to each other. This stage took time but was integral to the development of trust. At this time members tend to be on their good behavior (Tuckman, 1965).

The second stage of the partnership was the initial identification of outcomes. Then, activities were planned to meet those outcomes. A strong evaluation component was designed along with program activities to ensure quality, level of achievement, and accountability toward outcomes. As expected in this stage of teaming, it was marked by conflict among team members (Tuckman, 1965). Team members had different perceptions of their benefits (mutuality) from the project as well as what represented quality in project design. The important result of this friction was that districts began to build their capacity at identification of their outcomes for urban children, design projects that would support those goals, and put into place evaluation that could present evidence of impact. All districts developed systemic professional development targets supporting: that all school activity is aligned and targeted at helping all students achieve academic success. This represents the concentration of the partnership to support initiatives such as professional development of teachers that will be lasting and strengthened in practice in the classroom.

The third stage of the partnership represented norming, the time when team members become comfortable, and there is greater mutual support (Tuckman, 1965). The districts worked well with the university and activities were in progress.

The fourth stage was performing, when members of the team produce constructive (quality) work (Tuckman, 1965). However, the partnership experienced shifts to prior stages in response to external influences that pressured the schools in different directions. The partnership worked hard to maintain continuity and focus efforts toward initiatives that would demonstrate measurable impact on urban districts success with educating and graduating students.

The fifth stage, adjourning (Tuckman, 1965) also known as mourning (Catalyst Center University of Queensland, Australia, 2002) is not applicable at this time because the partnership is ongoing and still working on projects and evaluation of outcomes. However, the ceremonial component of this stage has been annually achieved through events of celebration of the partnership, where presentation sharing and individual communication has been welcomed and promoted.

Strengths of the Partnership

- Foundation support of personnel
- Pairing district and university expertise
- Responding to changing needs of districts
- Allowing the districts to design projects
- Assisting districts with evaluation training, structuring, implementation, data collection, data analysis, reporting
- Empowering districts to utilize information from evaluation to make decisions
- Empowering districts to define outcomes and demonstrate accountability

Challenges and Lessons Learned

- Communication is critical
- Communicate project across districts
- History is important
- Relationships take time
- Relationships take effort
- Capacity needs to be further developed
- Cultures of the districts differed which was imperative to understanding

Accomplishments of the Partnership

- Focus has moved to a greater shift to student learning outcomes
- Data collection efforts are connected to student achievement
- Partnership has created equity among the districts
- Districts determined their focuses through University support
- Focus has included a efforts to represent a systemic change
- Students have progressed on proficiency exams
- Districts have moved out of academic watch into continuous improvement

Implications to Future Partnerships

This partnership has begun the work to form additional collaborative partnerships with other urban initiatives within the greater community, university, and other university partners across the state, and the school districts. This work has potential to enhance the knowledge base of literature on partnerships across universities and schools for effective teacher development program initiatives. It not only stimulates discussion concerning shared accountability, but it also provides a model that allows for an in-depth use of reflective practices by partners of quality, effectiveness and sustainability of their efforts.

The work of this partnership can provide information on shared accountability among a partnership that spans across many stakeholders. Urban teacher professional development initiatives are highlighted and present their experiences leading to particular components necessary in our nation's urban districts, which are too often failing our children. The content provides information concerning barriers to shared accountability directly related to urban issues and educational institutions that should be considered.

In addition, readers will hopefully better understand the different perspectives of partners through considerations of their potential or current partners' affiliations and the reflection on agendas of all participants in collaboration. The partnership described demonstrate that urban districts administrators and teachers, private foundations, and university partners all present different yet aligned voices concerning successful programs for better-educated and practicing teachers.

Conclusions

The focus of this work was to demonstrate the development of district initiatives supporting teacher development and ultimately impacting outcomes for children. These were described through a partnership supported by a private foundation which focuses on urban educational outcomes and the work resided between an urban district and a university, in the broader context of a model supporting positive outcomes driven by shared accountability. This is an issue that faces the nation and its educational communities. In order to provide the necessary ingredients for successful programs that support students to become productive members of society, stakeholders in education must examine the key players and how they can optimally interact to do the job of educating young people. If the paint is chipping off the walls and the tile is cracked, and civil unrest is boiling in the pot, these may be great deterrents; however, the individual conveying information in a manner that is embraced by children overcomes these things and many more. Supporting the growth and development of that teacher is essential and leads to necessary collaboration of many stakeholders.

The ideas generated in the initiative that serve as the focus of this paper on how to attain shared responsibility are not "cast in stone". Through literature and discussion solutions will emerge. The hope for the solution of the problem of shared accountability,

specifically involving urban districts and their partners throughout the country is that in the broader academic context, through research and evaluation, publications and presentation, successful urban initiatives will be implemented in our urban environments.

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