Building Partnerships, Building Success:
A Network of Democracy

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Abstract: For over two years, we have been forging new ground in partnership work by creating a network of differentiated structures and equitable access to support cross-school and school district collaboration. This article chronicles three critical processes for partnership success: (1) offering differentiated levels of commitment; (2) providing equitable access for all schools to join the network; and (3) creating structures to ensure representation of all voices in network decisions. We discuss innovative structures and processes that move beyond the traditional professional development school model to a democratic system of selection, representation, and commitment.
Building Partnerships, Building Success: A Network of Democracy

We are very excited to be able to partner, share, and learn not only with a university, but also with partner schools that will help us reach our potential using the wonderful teachers and resources that are available.

—Partnership Network School Teacher

According to the report *A New Diverse Majority*, the South has the largest number and highest percentage of low income children in the nation, constituting a majority of public school students: South Carolina’s rate is 53% (Southern Education Foundation, 2010). In fact, in half of all SC schools, more than 70% of students live in poverty. Serious educational implications exist when research indicates that high-poverty schools are much less likely to have a stable faculty of qualified teachers (National Academy of Education, 2008). Poor schools are also less likely to have a shared vision, commitment to problem-solving, effective leadership, or ongoing professional development. This inferior work environment leads, in turn, to higher rates of teacher attrition that compounds the inadequate working conditions in high-poverty schools, reducing their ability to recruit and retain effective teachers (Miller & Chait, 2008). Without effective teachers, student achievement will remain stagnant.

John Goodlad began a conversation in 1984 with his book *A Place Called School* suggesting that, in order to improve schools and the work of teachers, a relationship had to exist between public schools and university teacher preparation programs. Although many years have passed, Goodlad’s message holds significant bearing on whether or not all students receive a high quality, equitable education through NNER’s *Agenda for Education in a Democracy*. The Agenda promotes the simultaneous renewal of P-12 education and educator preparation, providing an equitable education for all students, and engaging in nurturing pedagogy to meet the diverse needs of students. This paper describes an inclusive structure built to support ongoing, meaningful collaboration to achieve a shared four-fold mission: (1) Enhanced student achievement; (2) Continuing and meaningful professional learning (for teacher candidates, new and veteran teachers, mentor teachers, and university faculty); (3) Quality preparation of new teachers; and (4) Research and inquiry to inform teaching practice, school improvement, and teacher preparation.
While research affirms that university-school partnerships work and can even target the needs of high-poverty schools and those of teacher education programs simultaneously (Miller et al., 2005), building such partnerships is not a simple task. Scant narrative exists to depict exactly how to build a successful network that provides equal opportunity for public schools and university faculty to engage. For over two years, we have been forging new ground in partnership work by creating a network of differentiated structures and equitable access to support cross-school and school district collaboration. This article chronicles three critical processes for partnership success: (1) offering differentiated levels of commitment; (2) providing equitable access for all schools to join the network; and (3) creating structures to ensure representation of all voices in network decisions.

Historical Context of University-School Partnerships

Discussion of the question as to how to provide better opportunities for teacher training in the field emerged in professional literature in the early 1940s. During that time, the Commission on Teacher Education of the American Council of Education recommended a collaborative relationship between teacher education institutions and schools to better support in-service education. As time progressed, schools and universities have become partners in attempting to improve teacher education and, consequently, student education. However, traditional university-school partnerships have lacked the truly collaborative relationship necessary. Partnerships would begin as an agreement between school superintendents and university deans and be set in motion by outside consultants with little to no input from partnership participants in the implementation and decision-making process (Crawford, Roberts, & Hickman, 2008). Furthermore, once the partnerships were initiated, the collaboration schools and universities were more akin to fragmented “school improvement projects” with college faculty working independently on “theory” while school faculty drove “practice.” The two identities lacked any authentic communication (Teitle, 2008).

If the members of a university-school partnership are willing to change and transform their practice from an independent to a collaborative effort, the next challenge is acceptance and acknowledgement of the new partner’s expertise. Relationships between schools and universities have commonly been characterized by conflict and distrust (Trubowitz & Long, 1997). From the school's perspective,
college faculty have not been in the classroom for years, if ever, and, consequently, have no concept of reality. Therefore, these “expert outsiders” fill the heads of students with abstract theories rather than preparing them with the basic essentials like classroom management. On the other hand, college faculty have felt that their efforts toward preparing students with effective instruction wear off in the less-than-ideal school environment (Teitel, 2008). Determining that school faculty are responsible for the poor preparation of their entering students, professors criticize them for becoming so absorbed with survival that they dismiss best practice and are unwilling to implement new ideas. Therefore, when it comes to the traditional university-school partnership, toleration rather than collaboration has become the norm (Osguthorpe, Harris, Harris, & Black, 1995).

In addition to the differences in the daily lives of the potential partners, the focus and goals of their professional lives also differ greatly. Teachers focus more on practical and everyday problem solving in the aim to improve student learning outcomes, whereas college faculty often have the long-term in mind, attempting to develop teacher learning through an improvement in content knowledge and theory (Burton & Geher, 2007). In order to develop a strong collaborative partnership, both parties must overcome their differences, recognize the potential to learn from one another, and appreciate the mutual benefits that may arise from a truly collaborative partnership (Trubowitz & Longo, 1997). Roles must be clearly understood, and energy must be dedicated to building the relationship between school and university. Such a partnership requires moving beyond the traditional professional development school model to a democratic system of selection, representation, and commitment.

Three-Tiered Partnership Network
Ask any highly effective educator to list characteristics of good teaching, and “meeting the needs of all learners” will emerge at the top of the list. Differentiation as an instructional strategy acknowledges the necessity for teachers to consider students as individuals with diverse needs and contributions. We utilized the same approach when determining how to construct our partnership network—a network that was designed from the outset to facilitate interactive sharing, learning, and working across districts and school settings as well as with the university. We needed a dynamic and developmentally flexible approach to our network’s organizational
design that acknowledged the various perspectives, relationships, and institutional structures coming to the table. Just as students’ needs are different, so are the needs of teachers, college faculty, schools, and universities. Where one school may be poised and ready for a significant level of commitment, others may want to ease into the partnership a bit more slowly. Still others, recognizing the advantage of a partnership, may only have the resources to participate through minimal capacities. In the development of our Partnership Network and in true university-school partnership fashion, faculty from both entities met extensively to construct a network structure that would allow for and facilitate public school participation at three differentiated tiers – professional development schools, partner schools, and satellite schools. Each structure varies in the level of commitment required from the school faculty and the university faculty as well as the time devoted to the partnership work.

**Professional Development School.** A Professional Development School (PDS) engages in unique and intense school-university collaboration designed to prepare future educators, to provide current educators with ongoing professional development, to encourage joint school-university faculty investigations into education-related issues, and to promote the learning of P-12 students. The primary qualification of a PDS is its high commitment to this collaborative endeavor; the school may or may not be a school in need of renewal. A PDS is a dedicated school with the majority (2/3) of the school’s teachers committed to the shared mission and willing to support teacher candidates. A significant university presence exists at the school with a university faculty member serving as a Winthrop Faculty-in-Residence for approximately 50% of their workload. PDS faculty engage in the university through course instruction, partnership governance processes, and special events. The PDS has an identified school liaison (teacher or school leader) to help facilitate partnership-related activity.

**Partner School.** A Partner School engages in school-university collaboration designed to prepare future educators, to provide current educators with ongoing professional development, to encourage joint school-university faculty investigations into education-related issues, and to promote the learning of P-12 students. The school is committed to collaboration; however, there is not necessarily a majority of the school’s teachers committed to the mission. Nevertheless, there is high interest and the school is in the process of building capacity or may be in waiting to become
a PDS. This school has similar benefits as the PDS but will not necessarily have site-based university presence. A university Partnership Coordinator serves as liaison to the Partner Schools and helps facilitate the networking of the Partner Schools with each other, the Professional Development Schools, and the university. Each Partner School has a designated school liaison (teacher or school leader) to help facilitate the partnership-related work.

**Satellite School.** A Satellite School is a school in a partnering school district where individuals (teachers and school leaders) engage in activities related to Partnership Network goals but school-wide commitment to the partnership collaboration is not possible for various reasons. This tier of the Partnership Network is designed to include individual teachers or school leaders who have a desire to be involved, have contributions to make, but are not situated in a school that is ready or able to commit to ongoing partnership work. In this case, individuals in a Satellite School often participate in teacher preparation or engage in collaborative professional development but they are not in any way obligated to do so. The Partnership Coordinator facilitates communication and networking opportunities for individuals in Satellite Schools. Some Satellite Schools use this opportunity to build capacity and eventually apply to become a Partner School.

Although the three partnership structures are distinctive, the intent with this tiered structure is to ensure each remains strongly tied to a network of partners versus a singular relationship between one school and the university. Figure 1 is an illustration of this concept. All three types of institutions are members in the University-School Partnership Network. Mini-networks form through shared interests in inquiry-based projects, challenges faced, and/or explorations of innovative practices. Professional Development Schools (PDS) form the hub of the mini-network because of the significant commitment of the school to the partnership and the university faculty member dedicated to the school for half of their contract time. These faculty members orchestrate the workings of the mini-network with additional support offered by the university’s Partnership Coordinator. Partner Schools that share similar goals and objectives affiliate themselves with a specific PDS. Satellite Schools, as indicated above, can participate in any of the partnerships through opportunities such as professional development and teacher induction programs.
Figure 1. Mini-Network within the University-School Partnership Network
Equitable Access to Participation

A central theme of the NNER and the work of John Goodlad is the equal access to educational opportunities. When researching ways in which partnerships have historically formed, it was difficult to find a model in which all schools had an equitable opportunity to engage. Typical formations were from personal connections, historical relationships, and proximity. Of course, these are logical beginnings to a successful relationship; however, it does dismiss those who are interested and in need of specific support but do not benefit from connections, relationships, or proximity. Although the Network was open to participation by all regional school districts, knowledge about the potential of participation in the partnership network and specific information about how schools could participate was limited. To address those immediate needs and expose the Network to a broader audience, we initiated a carefully created plan to educate, market, and recruit partners. The plan targeted development of awareness of the goals and vision of the network and the benefits to participation as priority strategies. Marketing strategies focused on district office administration, school building administration, and faculty. Techniques used to publicize the Network included:

1. Visit each district superintendent to provide information and answer questions about the upcoming university-school partnership opportunity; share how participating in the partnership could benefit schools in their district and request to speak at a principals’ meeting.
2. Present information to the district’s school principals about the mutual benefits of university-school partnerships; highlight the concept of simultaneous renewal.
3. Initiate an open application system for all schools in the regional districts to join the Partnership Network (see submission requirements below).
4. Enlist a tripartite group from the university (Colleges of Education and Arts and Sciences) and the school districts to assess the applications based upon an established rubric; submit recommendations for selection to deans and superintendents.

Opening the Network to all schools provided an opportunity for schools with which we had no past relationship to consider becoming partners. We were not “cherry-picking,” but opening ourselves to new and exciting possibilities to engage
Building Partnerships, Building Success

with a diverse group of schools, teachers, and students.

Application system. A web-based application system allows schools to express interest in joining the Partnership Network. To apply, schools submit the following: (1) principal letter of interest; (2) self-study; (3) signed commitments of the administration and faculty; and (4) the school’s most recent School Improvement Plan. The self-study is based on the nine PDS essentials as identified by the National Association of Professional Development Schools (NAPDS, 2008) and integrates the National Council of Accreditation for Teacher Education Professional Development School standards (NCATE, 2001) and the NNER postulates that guide the work at the university (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, & Goodlad, 2004). A school leadership team completes the self-study document in collaboration with teachers and staff at the school. The school district superintendent and a designated district liaison to the Partnership Network must review and support the application prior to consideration by the Partnership Council.

Application assessment. Upon submission, a tripartite subgroup of the Partnership Advisory Council [described in following section] reviews the applications using the rubric illustrated in Figure 2. The rubric represents an integration of the NCATE Standards for Professional Development Schools, the NAPDS nine essentials, and key principles related to the NNER postulates. Commitment to teaching and learning is emphasized in the selection process, not necessarily documentation of high test scores. We want a Partnership characterized by a willingness to grow and improve and to collaborate for the benefit of all stakeholders. In addition, submitted applications must show a balance of work between the school and university and both institutions must exhibit a need for the other while highlighting possible contributions.
Figure 2. Partnership Network Selection Rubric

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<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>HIGHLY COMPATIBLE</th>
<th>COMPATIBLE</th>
<th>LESS COMPATIBLE</th>
<th>Comments/Evidence</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Application</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Total = ___/5</strong></td>
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<td>All parts of the application are complete. Effort to provide supporting evidence is clear. Principal letter strongly addresses all of the required elements. (5)</td>
<td>All parts of the application are complete. Supporting evidence is provided. Principal letter addresses most of the required elements. (4-3)</td>
<td>Parts of application are left blank. Questionable or missing evidence provided for support. Principal letter addresses few of the required elements. (2-1)</td>
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<td><strong>Teaching and Learning</strong></td>
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<td>(NCATE 1, NCATE 2, NCATE 4, NAPDS 4, NAPDS 5)</td>
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<td><strong>Total = ___/30</strong></td>
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<td>Commitment to reflective practice is evident. School faculty and administration are inquiry-oriented and willing to adjust strategies. Efforts to use multiple and varied assessments are evident. All initiatives reflect research-based practice. (30-27)</td>
<td>School faculty and administration suggest use of reflective practice in teaching and learning. Data is used to make instructional decisions although assessments may lack variety. Most initiatives are supported by research-based practices. (26-19)</td>
<td>School faculty and administration suggest using assessments although not a common school practice. Data is gathered only for required accountability reports. Initiatives are linked only to mandates versus research-based practices. (18-9)</td>
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<td><strong>Collaboration</strong></td>
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<td>(NCATE 1, NCATE 3, NAPDS 2, NAPDS 7)</td>
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<td><strong>Total = ___/25</strong></td>
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<td>School faculty and administration embrace collaboration as a learning community with other schools, families, organizations, and Winthrop University. Commitment is reflected through a shared professional vision of developing partnerships. (25-22)</td>
<td>Materials highlight importance of collaboration with some of the following: other schools, families, organizations, or Winthrop University. May suggest common planning or shared initiatives. (21-16)</td>
<td>School faculty and administration express desire to collaborate only with Winthrop University in order to meet the needs of the school renewal plan. Other schools, families, or organizations may be mentioned but not as collaborative partners. (15-8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Element</td>
<td>HIGHLY COMPATIBLE</td>
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<td><strong>Diversity</strong> (NCATE 4, NAPDS 1)</td>
<td>Materials suggest a focus on advancing equity for all learners. Partners have the opportunity to support students from diverse groups and communities. Multicultural and global perspectives are a part of the school culture. (20-18)</td>
<td>Partnership provides opportunity to work with students from diverse groups and communities. Materials emphasize one or two focus areas to improve equity. Perspective highlights school and district needs. (17-13)</td>
<td>Minimal opportunities to support students from diverse groups or communities exist in the partnership. Initiatives lack emphasis on equity for all learners. (12-6)</td>
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<td><strong>Balance &amp; Commitment</strong> (NCATE 1, NCATE 3, NCATE 5, NAPDS 9)</td>
<td>School faculty and administration express desire to be an instrument of change. Commitment to shared norms and structures is evident. Resources are available to support growing partnership. (20-18)</td>
<td>School faculty and administration express understanding of partnership goals and are willing to provide resources, if available, to support growth and development of all partners. Shared norms and structures are desirable. (17-13)</td>
<td>Advantages of partnership may not be of equal benefit to both partners. School faculty and administration are hesitant to provide resources to adequately support growing partnership. Little indication of movement towards shared norms and structures. (12-6)</td>
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**Total Points** - ____/100
Once reviewed, the tripartite subgroup forwards rubric scores to the College of Education and the College of Arts and Sciences deans who then communicate with the district superintendents to finalize the selection process.

**Acknowledgement and celebration.** We acknowledge all applicants to the Network. For those not accepted into the Network based upon the outcome of the assessment, the tripartite subgroup sends a letter explaining the rubric score in greater detail and encouraging future application should the needs and goals of the school move in greater alignment with those of the Network. The district superintendent and/or district liaison to the Network assist in this process. For schools selected, we also send a letter and present the school with a banner. The banner names the school and university as members of the Partnership Network. The two upper corners illustrate logos from each institution. This banner is presented to the school at an assembly, parent-teacher meeting, or other venue and is then displayed prominently in or outside the school for the community to celebrate.

**Supporting Structures**

To support the ongoing work and decision-making required for a successful partnership, especially one as complex and dynamic as our Partnership Network, clearly articulated structures and roles are essential. These structures and individual roles provide the leadership and coordination needed to ensure equal voice and participation.

**Partnership Council.** The Partnership Advisory Council is the governing body of the Network. It provides coordination, communication, and oversight of the university-school Partnership Network with a focus on the networking of schools. The Council includes representatives from each Network school (thirty schools as of fall 2012), University Faculty in Residence, the director of the Institute of Educational Renewal and Partnerships, leadership from the three universities that prepare teachers, university academic vice-president, and superintendents’ designees. The Council establishes subcommittees to focus on specific aspects of the Network especially as it relates to planning professional development, selection of schools as Network schools, planning inquiry projects, and evaluating the overall program and individual initiatives.

**School liaisons.** Each PDS and Partner School has a designated School Liaison
who is a site-based staff member (teacher or school leader) committed to the goals, mission, and vision of the Partnership Network. The primary responsibility of the liaison is to serve as a facilitator and conduit between the university and the school, most particularly to individual classroom teachers in coordination with the Partnership Network, Professional Learning Coordinators, and the Director of the Institute for Educational Renewal and Partnerships. The liaison supports the networking of the school to a partnering Professional Development School and/or Partner School. The liaison provides leadership and support in the partnership effort including, but not limited to, high quality teacher preparation, professional development, educational renewal, and addressing educational challenges through inquiry and research at the building level.

*University Faculty in Residence.* The University Faculty in Residence (UFIR) is a university faculty member assigned to work with a particular Professional Development School (PDS) to fulfill the goals of the Partnership Network. The UFIR assists in the networking of affiliated Partner Schools with the PDS. The UFIR has the overall responsibility of providing leadership and support in the partnership efforts, including high quality teacher preparation, professional development, educational renewal, and addressing educational challenges through inquiry and research. The faculty member must have some level of expertise in at least one of the identified areas of need or interest expressed by the assigned PDS. During the initial years in establishing relationships and while financially sustainable, the UFIR will spend no less than 50% of the assigned teaching load working with the PDS to serve as a conduit between the university and the school.

*Institute for Educational Renewal and Partnerships.* The Institute for Educational Renewal and Partnership (IERP) facilitates and supports initiatives that involve internal and external collaboration, partnership, and outreach to ensure cohesive, quality programs. The IERP works closely with the Partnership Advisory Council to identify and meet the needs of all Network stakeholders through the five goals listed below.

1. Facilitate formal and informal collaboration and cooperation among university program areas and public schools.
2. Provide leadership for partnerships to support preparation programs and simultaneous renewal efforts as well as service learning and clinical placements in schools.
3. Promote a well-integrated experience for education majors to address the issues and ideals related to the social, moral, and political implications for living and teaching in a democracy.

4. Coordinate and support cross-disciplinary program and field-based initiatives, including grants, research, and outreach that impacts professional practice and provides sustainability.

5. Facilitate and support collaborative professional development activity, including joint professional learning with P-12 educators in the university-school Partnership Network.

In Closing

Currently there are six Professional Development Schools and 24 Partner Schools collaborating together and with the university to fulfill the shared goal of improving student learning and teacher quality. Of the nine school districts in the Partnership, five are identified as “high need” based on U.S. Census poverty data; however, all nine districts struggle with issues related to poverty and growing diversity. Partnership Network schools range from high achieving to struggling schools, suburban to very rural schools, and schools close to campus to 60 miles away from campus. The Partnership Network honors the strengths and challenges of each school and the communities they serve and is tailored to meet common interests and needs as well as individual contexts. Hundreds of university faculty, teachers, and school leaders are currently engaged in Partnership work, drawing from the talents and expertise of educators in all school and university settings. This dynamic and evolving Network is coordinated by strong structures that facilitate regular meetings, communications, and joint decision-making and by invested leaders at the school, district, and university levels to ensure a true collaboration between all partners. As changes and challenges to the Network occur (e.g. changes in personnel, budget challenges, etc.), the Network should be positioned to change and adapt as needed, providing a process model for future partnerships in facilitating the democratic process for its participants.
References


