

REAL-TIME LEARNING, REAL- WORLD TEACHING

UNIVERSITY TEAMS
WITH SCHOOL DISTRICT
TO IMPROVE CURRICULUM
AND INSTRUCTION



By Steven Koch and Terry Borg

At 4 o'clock on a Monday afternoon, more than an hour after students have left, 30 teachers gather in a classroom at the district office to discuss leadership styles in a seminar co-taught by a Northern Illinois University professor and a district administrator. Across the hall, another cohort studies instructional strategies, looking for strengths

and weaknesses. For three hours, both groups discuss and reflect, preparing to bring new expertise back to their departments and students, and they will continue to do so over the next 14 weeks. This is effective ongoing professional development, and it has been taking place for 10 years.

Community High School District 155 in Crystal Lake, Ill., and Northern Illinois University (NIU) College of Education engaged in a partnership that has provided significant benefits, posed limited challenges, and resulted in a high return on investment. Learner cohorts included teach-

ers and current and future administrators working to build their knowledge and skills to benefit students in the district and to travel on their career continuums.

BENEFITS

The personnel involved in the cohorts — the teachers taking classes and the instructors who lead them — derive the most immediate benefits. As students, the district teachers study current literature in the field and are exposed to the perspective of a university professor and a district administrator as they co-teach classes. The subject matter is pertinent and the assignments job-embedded, as the instructors expect participants to apply classroom learning in real time in their buildings. They process their experience and receive feedback in subsequent classes through reflective exercises. Examples of this abound. Teachers from a curriculum and instruction class study a research-based teaching strategy such as concept attainment or cooperative learning and work with each other to craft lesson plans to use in a current unit of study. Later that week, they implement the lesson with students. In a subsequent class, teachers reflect on the experience, examine student work to see how the new strategy impacted student learning, and share stories with peers and instructors. Teachers in the administrative cohort investigate current district policy with an eye on validating or updating the language, perhaps looking at policy on foreign exchange programs or for the use of online learning as professional development for teachers. On the classroom level, these teachers might study change theory in action by working with a school administrator to lead implementation of a new program in a school, such as designing a new schoolwide test prep approach for juniors. One teacher's recent project resulted in the creation of an induction and mentoring program for new department chairs, addressing a gap in support for the district's newest leaders.

As an instructor, district administrators are able to form deep relationships with teachers taking the course, promoting a healthy district culture, and work with the teach-

ers to connect the subject matter to relevant, ongoing district issues. As a result of the co-teaching arrangement, both the administrator and the university professor gain a clear view of how the theory of the subject matter translates into the reality of the high school classroom. For both, the process is enlightening and paves the road for future collaboration, such as potential joint research projects.

The district administrators' roles in the partnership ensure shared ownership of the experience, which leads to greater success. Such partnership programs tend to have a higher rate of completion because participants are part of a team with district-reinforced educational goals. Goals can come from teacher needs (such as a high number of inexperienced teachers forming a cohort for the curriculum and instruction class), from the administration (an anticipated number of administrative openings precipitating a cohort earning a particular type of administrator certification), or from the students (low reading scores engendering a cohort pursuing a reading endorsement).

Other systemwide mutual benefits include:

- **Recruitment:** The district's participation in the selection process ensures that each cohort is full, maximizing a return on the investment, and that the most highly qualified people are admitted;
- **Academic advisement:** With a standard established program, advisement is consistent and direct across all students;
- **Relevance:** The curriculum is tailored to the district's current reality and future needs;
- **Communication:** The school district coordinator drives information to all participants ensuring consistency for the district and reducing university staff time;
- **Travel:** Travel expense and time is reduced to conduct internships and other learning experiences.

Such a partnership makes financial sense, as well. The joint ownership of partnership programs provides financial security for both parties: predictable professional develop-

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DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

Are you ready for a school district-university partnership? Consider these questions:

- Does the school district have a need that leaders can't address internally?
- Does the school district have a three-year revenue

source to support the program?

- Does the school district have a suitable number of candidates willing and able to participate in the proposed program?



- Is the university partner willing to be flexible with its curriculum?
- What are the incentives for a school district's teachers to be involved in this type of professional development?
- What are the incentives for the university faculty to address challenges that arise in the district-university partnership?
- What are the incentives for the college and academic department to establish a school district-university partnership?

ment costs for the district with a consistent revenue stream for the university. Districts can use economies of scale to reduce program costs by locking into a multiple-year agreement, while the university can plan on this income stream to provide program full-cost recovery, including the ability to fund co-teaching arrangements, which helps strengthen the program and adapt it to the district's needs.

Ultimately, the benefits of any partnership program must be evaluated on program quality and intended impact. District 155 and NIU have a vested interest in making the program work. With clearly defined program goals for each cohort, regular communication, and the district's proactive approach to the curriculum, the partnership creates quality learning for ongoing improvement. The partnership provides the vehicle to a stronger and long-term working relationship where program quality is expected in the delivery of degree and professional certification programs.

CHALLENGES

The District 155-NIU partnership encountered several challenges. Both institutions shared the first challenge equally, resulting from the natural change of personnel over time. With changes in leadership on either side, a new decision maker may come in who doesn't understand the original vision of the program, requiring time and effort to ensure that all stakeholders understand both the end goal of the program and the means for achieving it. On an instructional level, an individual scheduled to teach in the original sequence of coursework may also become unavailable, prompting a search for a suitable replacement of equal expertise. Again, having instructors understand where the cohort has been and where it is going is essential for continuity.

The second substantial challenge posed a greater difficulty for NIU in its attempt to respond to the district's reality. While the literature and theory remain constant with classes outside of the partnership, NIU faculty must invest time to learn about the District 155 context in order to make learning

more relevant and ensure instruction is aligned with district needs. This requires a flexible attitude to ensure the integrity of the coursework while allowing for curricular adjustments.

Administratively, staffing and planning are the most significant challenges. Staffing is a challenge, given the balance among when courses can be available, when administrators are available to teach, and when university faculty are available. Also, financial planning has proven to be critical in keeping the business model solvent with a two- to three-year completion cycle for most programs.

Both institutions face a final important challenge as they strive to continue to meet their commitment to quality for the program. District 155 has committed to providing high-quality professional development that is tailored to the needs of its teachers and students, and NIU has committed to delivering high-quality programs that are responsive to District 155's vision and needs. Frequent and open communication between partners is all the more critical with the constantly changing higher education environment. Both partners have had to adapt program quality assurance measures.

RESULTS

The District 155-NIU partnership started with a process of discussing mutual needs and expectations to establish shared goals. Leaders at both institutions participated in these discussions and focused on crafting a vision for each cohort from the start: What specific knowledge and skills should teacher participants have at the end of the experience? What is the best scope and sequence to achieve those goals? Once both partners agreed on the goals as well as a path to get there, District 155 and NIU negotiated a contract and began to market the academic programs to District 155 teachers, promoting the benefits of the proposed degree, certification, or endorsement program. As the cohorts started, the two leadership teams engaged in ongoing collaboration to respond to emerging concerns and changing needs. The teams had to exercise creativity in instructional staffing, often resulting in multiple iterations of scheduling, to ensure that the right people were in place to fulfill the original vision.

Both partners had incentives for successfully participating in this partnership. On the district side, administrators had the opportunity to work within their area of expertise with district teachers, investigating questions of immediate relevance while learning to work in a university environment as adjunct faculty. The university built in incentives within each initiative to ensure shared ownership of the academic programs and recognition of the value of the partnership with the district. Incentives include real-time experience with practicing educators, a consistent revenue stream, and a source of data for research.

To date, results for the district include improved instruction from the early career teachers in the curriculum and instruction cohorts. Steadily increasing student indicators of success — test scores and graduation rates — suggest that district teachers are serving their students well. Data from the Illinois school report card (Northern Illinois University & Illinois State Board of Education, 2010) show a steady increase in these areas from 2005 to present, with district schools consistently scoring above the state average. Additionally, three cohorts of almost 30 teachers each have earned administrative credentials, ensuring continuity of leadership for years to come. The newest partnership has as its focus a reading endorsement, which will serve the district goal of improving students' reading ability. Other results for the district include ongoing relationships between district teachers

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and university professors, a body of district teachers familiar with the most up-to-date literature in the field, and a department at a major university highly familiar with a district's history, vision, demographics, and professional development. The NIU results to date include faculty becoming more aware of the contemporary school experience and infusing the curriculum, both at District 155 and other locations, with greater relevance to district needs. The NIU academic departments have a new pool of part-time instructors — district administrators who have co-taught — to draw upon for future course offerings. Additionally, the university is further exploring co-teaching models, thanks to the investment in program improvement funded by the funding stream from the District 155 relationship.

As the saying goes, the work is first planned and the plan is then worked. A shared vision, flexible approach, and frequent and ongoing communication form the cornerstones of a successful partnership. District 155 and NIU have enjoyed the ben-

efits, surmounted the challenges, and reaped the rewards of a long-term relationship that resulted in ongoing, job-embedded professional development responsive to the needs of the students and teachers in the district. Looking ahead, such a partnership seems well-equipped to continue to evolve and stay relevant in a dynamic field, even in challenging financial times.

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The light bulb clicks on

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building the capacity of district staff to take over after the partnership ends. The SEDL team will concentrate on four groups: principals, instructional coaches, lead teachers, and district instructional staff. During site visits, SEDL staff will engage these various groups in learning experiences focused on the following:

- Maintaining a culture of collaboration;
- Facilitating professional learning teams;
- Developing authentic assessments to assess student learning;
- Using student work and benchmark data to guide instruction;
- Ensuring time for job-embedded collaborative work;
- Promoting leadership that nurtures and sustains professional learning teams; and
- Measuring the impact of professional learning teams

During the coming year, the partnership between the district and SEDL will gradually shift. SEDL will move from being a full partner to an occasional supporter, to a co-celebrant as the district takes on increasing responsibility for sustaining the ongoing professional learning of all staff. In a recent conversation, principal Mike Caviris stated, “When we first established professional learning teams last year, we had a great start, but without the depth we have this year. With SEDL’s guidance, our teachers are having more aha experiences about their teaching and its impact on student learning.”

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