

# A BRIDGE BETWEEN TEACHER EDUCATION AND SCHOOL

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SCHOOL DISTRICT SETS GOALS FOR AN ENTIRE DISTRICT

BY RACHELLE CURCIO AND KATE ASCETTA

**U**niversity-school partnerships can be a powerful mechanism for educator professional learning, but they have varying degrees of success. In South Carolina’s School District 5 of Lexington and Richland Counties, superintendent Christina Melton

wanted to make sure her district’s partnership with the University of South Carolina would strategically and systematically attend to enhancing educational opportunities for *all* stakeholders within the district. “What if the university and the entire school district engaged in a systematic partnership? What if we created a

professional development school district?” asked Melton.

Dating back to the work of John Goodlad (1994), professional development school partnerships have been identified as spaces that promote the “simultaneous renewal” (p. 632) of schooling and teacher preparation. They embody the principles of collaborative



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partnerships, which have been lauded as vehicles for sustained, systemic school improvement solutions (Fullan, 2011; Senge, 2006).

Professional development school partnerships “offer perhaps the strongest bridge between teacher education and classroom outcomes, academics and clinical education, theory and practice, and schools and colleges,” according to Arthur Levine (2006, p. 105).

But a professional development partnership with a whole district would be a bigger undertaking. The commitment was one that we at the University of South Carolina College of Education were ready and enthusiastic to make. Our initial conversation with Melton evolved into an innovative professional development school district partnership.

Unlike traditional professional development school partnerships that create new collaborative school sites, our professional development school district focuses on long-term systematic improvement across the entire district. The emphasis is on enhancing the social, emotional, and physical well-being of students and staff. Our vision encapsulates three overarching goals. One of these goals, which is the focus of this article, emphasizes the well-being of preschool-aged children.

## GOALS

We began in 2018 by developing specific goals that emphasize ongoing

opportunities for reciprocal professional learning across the district. This goal development was guided by tenets of improvement science (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015), a model in which stakeholders engage in rapid cycle testing of new ideas and adaptation based on data. We also drew on existing improvement structures that have been shown effective in professional learning, such as action research, professional learning communities, and lesson study.

The work of establishing goals and measurable action items for achieving them was overseen by a steering committee consisting of district and university leadership. One of our three overarching goals emerged out of a mutual belief in the need to enhance teaching and learning for all preschool-aged children.

This focus grew out of a prior commitment the district had made to providing high-quality, inclusive learning environments in public school preschool classrooms for 4-year-olds. We sought to extend this commitment to all 3- and 4-year-old general and special education classrooms.

Steering committee members agreed that a key component of this goal is the development, implementation, and monitoring of ongoing professional learning for all District 5 preschool teachers, teaching assistants, and staff. These professional learning experiences would be co-constructed and co-

facilitated by District 5 leadership and University of South Carolina faculty.

This would be the first time that general and special education teachers would engage in simultaneous professional development. Additionally, this would be the first time that lead and assistant early childhood teachers across the district would receive access to the same content. Developing this initiative would be a three-year process. Here is what that process looks like.

## ESTABLISH A PARTNERSHIP:

MAY-JULY 2018

How does a partnership begin between a university and a school district? It takes trust among all parties.

**Listen and learn.** At the start of a new partnership, it is the university liaison’s job to listen and learn about the schools’ goals and their barriers to reaching them. This often means actively fighting our traditional approach as researchers to go in with questions and attempt to answer them. Instead, we must seek to learn from schools what questions they need to have addressed.

In 2018, Kate Ascetta was a new faculty member looking to make lasting connections within her new community. District leaders invited her to hear updates on the inclusion practices of District 5’s early childhood programs. During the introductions of those in attendance at the meeting, Ascetta shared a bit about her



From left, assistant teachers Ruby Williams, Shelia Mickens, Cynthia Keller, and Kimberly Hales collaborate while brainstorming strategies to teach specific social skills to children.

background as a former preschool special educator who found herself in a new state in a new job looking to build a genuine partnership with schools. But mostly she listened.

It is then critical for university liaisons to immerse themselves in the schools they plan to partner with. In our partnership, this immersion began when the director of special education offered to take Ascetta on a districtwide tour to visit their early childhood special education classrooms.

Several weeks later, as they drove around the district, popping into classrooms, they got a chance to chat about their educational backgrounds. The director of special education shared hopes for the district’s early childhood classrooms and the perceived barriers to reaching them, and Ascetta shared her own interests and areas of expertise.

It was during that car ride that the two began to build trust and mutual respect. For university educators, it is important to keep in mind that school district administrators, staff, and teachers are the experts in their

community of learning.

**Initial planning.** Planning is an iterative process of identifying goals, designing solutions, and beginning to implement them, while continuing to build relationships. As the next few months went on, their relationship began to solidify through a specific commitment to engage in a multiyear professional development experience with all early childhood teachers, including general and special education teachers.

During a planning discussion, Ascetta asked teachers, “How can I help you reach your goals?” and “What are common areas of concern for teachers and staff in early childhood?” The district and school representatives quickly focused on the social and emotional development of young children and, tied to that, the goal of reducing challenging behavior.

From this, the collaborative goal was to design, evaluate, and implement evidence-based practices that develop the emotional, social, and physical well-being of preschool-aged children. The

specific objective that followed from this was to increase teachers’ confidence and competence in supporting the emotional development of their students.

**DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION:**  
AUGUST-DECEMBER 2018

In the second phase of this collaborative work, the group designed multiyear professional development that would be adapted over time based on data to meet the district’s evolving needs and barriers. The challenges to address included the number of professional development days spelled out in the teachers’ contract, the number of hours assistant teachers worked, the vast size of the district (covering almost 200 geographical miles), and teachers’ varied levels of experience with professional development related to social and emotional development.

During planning, we kept in mind the need for professional learning that sustainably and effectively built capacity for all early childhood educators in

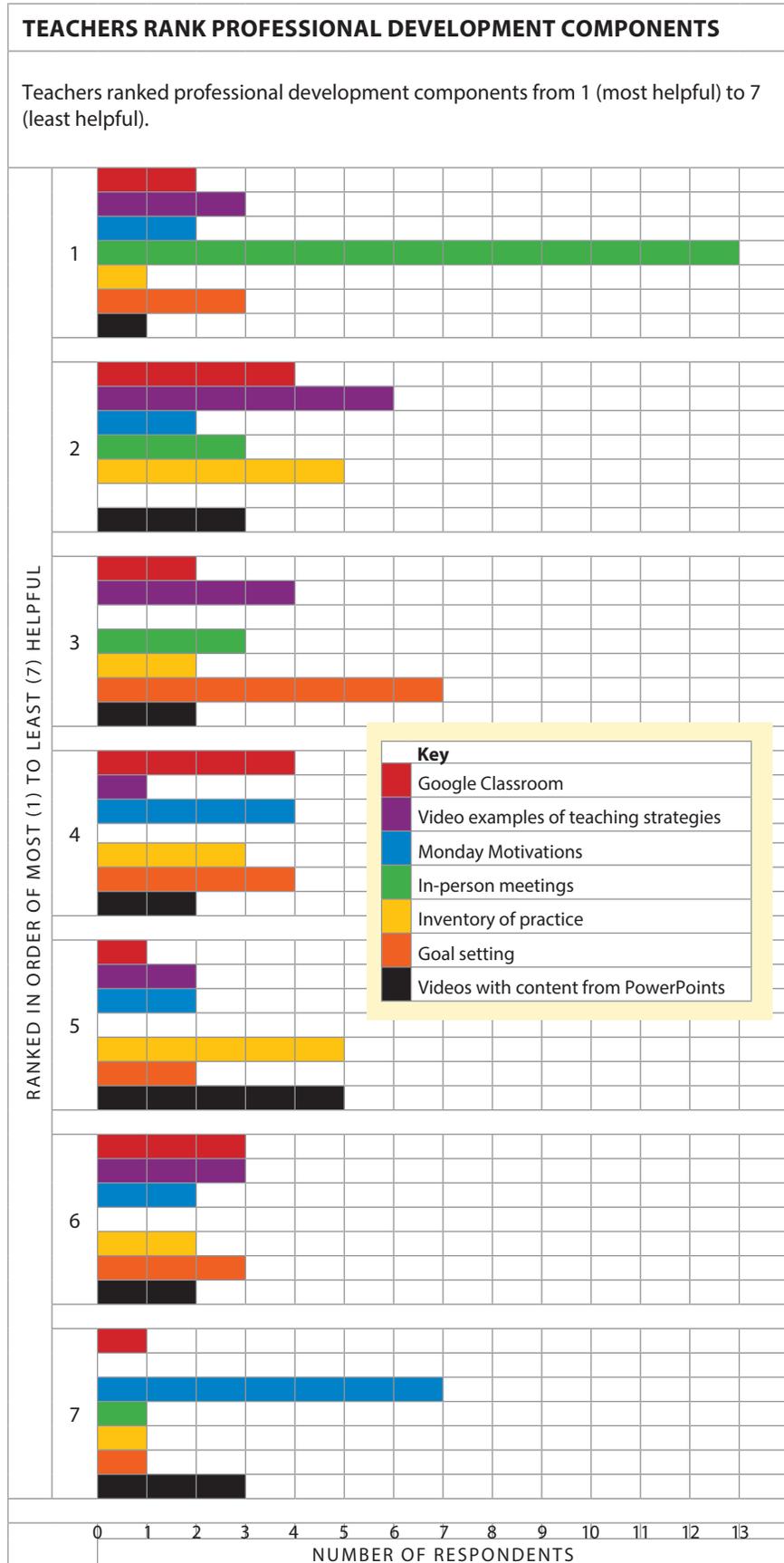
the district to support social and emotional development. Often, addressing challenging behavior is relegated to special education, rather than being a shared understanding that all children may present at some point with challenging behavior because they haven't been taught the skills (e.g. sharing, emotional literacy, problem-solving, etc.) needed to successfully navigate through the world (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003).

To build this shared responsibility, District 5 clearly communicated that supporting children's social and emotional development wasn't just the job of general educators, special educators, lead teachers, or assistant teachers. All students, regardless of educational placement, deserved to have a teaching team that felt confident and competent in its ability to support their growth, and that meant all teachers deserved to participate in professional learning.

With this in mind, what was the long-term professional learning initiative going to look like? How would we meet the needs of a diverse set of teachers? The blending of general education and special education teachers created some design challenges. How would we meet with 60-plus teachers, and what would this look like for such a large group?

To address these challenges, we flipped the traditional professional development model and provided weekly content in smaller chunks throughout the school year. We used Google Classrooms to provide content because District 5 had already been using Google Classrooms to share information and have discussions, so it was a familiar tool for teachers. We created a joint online classroom for all early childhood and early childhood special education lead and assistant teachers to access.

Then, during the district's 15 professional development dates, we planned to come together and unpack the weekly content provided through



video clips in Google Classroom. The first session was held in late August, and the remaining in-person sessions were held each month to unpack the issues as a larger group.

The weekly content was based on needs identified by teachers. It was important to hear teachers' voices and empower them in this process. We began to develop content by asking teachers to complete a self-evaluation about their perceptions of how they implemented a variety of strategies that lead to supportive teacher-child relationships and learning environments (e.g. greeting children by name upon arrival, their beliefs on challenging behavior, etc.).

Then, informed by these data, teachers received weekly email notifications to view brief content videos about a variety of topics all building on one another. For instance, teachers viewed examples of evidence-based strategies related to creating smooth transitions, infusing choice into the daily routine, and using a visual schedule with children. Ascetta created and edited the videos, guided by the pyramid model (Fox et al., 2003).

### JANUARY 2019 AND BEYOND

The work of our professional development school district partnership is an iterative process, inspired by improvement science. We are constantly collecting data and feedback and adapting and improving our work to meet participants' needs and move toward effectiveness. One of the ways we are informing adaptation is a teacher feedback survey we developed for the project. To date, we have administered the survey once, at the end of the first semester of implementation, with plans to continue to implement biannually at the end of the spring and fall semesters.

On the survey, we asked questions aligned with our mission and collaborative plans: Do you feel your voices are being heard? What future topics would you like to get support in? We also asked participants to rank and provide specific feedback

on the components included in the professional development (e.g. videos, Google Classroom, in-person sessions). Of the 60 staff members surveyed, 21 responded. See their responses in the chart on p. 33.

When analyzing the survey responses, we looked for patterns that emerged. Teachers reported a range of responses. As the chart shows, they had a wide range of opinions about the components of professional development that were most and least helpful, although in-person meetings and video examples of practice were consistently highly rated. Open-ended responses ranged widely, from "I enjoy the meetings being a shared experience as opposed to a PowerPoint" to the following comment: "To be totally honest, I really just do not have time to respond to everything. I barely have time to keep up with all the other emails and tasks I am required to do or respond to. It is not that I don't see the value. It is just one more thing on a plate that has been heaping full for quite some time."

Based on the survey data, we reduced the frequency of content delivered, via Google Classroom, to one video every other week. Additionally, working closely with the district, we found time to increase the number of face-to-face sessions.

District 5 received a grant to train the district-level early childhood staff in the use of a classroom-wide observational measure that will capture teachers' implementation of strategies provided in ongoing professional development. Paired with data schools collect (for example, suspension rates, behavioral consultation calls, increase in students' use of social skills), the results will allow us to continue to capture the impact of our work together and plan for next steps.

We are using the data to respond to teachers' needs, and we will continue to find ways to adapt our work to meet the ever-changing needs of the early childhood teachers and children in District 5.

We will continue to be guided by the principles of improvement science and our process of plan, implement, adapt, and repeat. We will also maintain our focus on building trust as we build something new because, although the professional development school district is now well-established, there is always something new to learn.

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- Rachelle Curcio (curciora@mailbox.sc.edu) is a clinical assistant professor in elementary education and serves as the liaison for the University of South Carolina and School District Five of Lexington and Richland Counties professional development school district partnership. Kate Ascetta (ascetta@mailbox.sc.edu) is an assistant professor of special education and a member of the professional development school district coordinating council. ■**