



## BEING FORWARD

Ash Vasudeva

**The iLEAD network uses improvement science principles and practices so that districts and their university-based partners can address local problems of practice, enhance school and district leadership, and improve learning environments and outcomes for K-12 students.**

**Ash Vasudeva (avasudeva@carnegiefoundation.org) is senior vice president of strategic initiatives at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and president of the Learning Forward board of trustees.**

# DISTRICT-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS TACKLE WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

**W**hen Betsy Hargrove, superintendent of Avondale Elementary School District in Arizona, bumped into one of her district's teacher candidates in the local Home Depot checkout line, she realized she had a bigger problem than home repairs. The teacher candidate wasn't buying material for a DIY project — he was working the cash register. "I realized then that we needed a better way to support teacher candidates," she said. "They shouldn't have to juggle a part-time job to make ends meet while they finish their degree program and complete their student teaching in our classrooms."

Fortunately, Hargrove had forged a close partnership with Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College of Education and volunteered the district to be a pilot site for the university's Next Education Workforce

project, an effort to redesign career pathways and structures. The project focuses on developing better ways for teachers to enter and advance in the profession and replacing the old model of one teacher isolated in a classroom with a team approach.

To support this fledgling effort, the district and university joined the Carnegie Foundation's iLEAD network of district-university partnerships. The iLEAD network uses improvement science principles and practices so that districts and their university-based partners can address local problems of practice, enhance school and district leadership, and improve learning environments and outcomes for K-12 students. The Carnegie Foundation, where I lead strategic initiatives and support implementation of improvement approaches, launched iLEAD in 2017 to build closer and more productive, practice-centric relationships between school districts and schools of education.

The network is an opportunity to build improvement infrastructure that can align the two types of institutions around big issues that both care about but rarely collaborate on. That infrastructure includes routines, processes, and protocols to enable enduring and relational partnerships that would be adaptive to the needs of local communities, rather than opportunistic and transactional connections that would likely fade over time and achieve little impact.

Avondale's sustained work with Arizona State over the last five years illustrates the power and potential of this approach. Avondale embraced two key elements of the Next Education Workforce model: forming teacher teams that are responsible for cohorts of students and hiring teacher candidates as full-time teachers even as they finish their degree programs. By hiring teacher candidates to be full-time district employees, the district not only reduced student teachers' reliance on external employment but also provided them with immersive, on-the-job training. And by ensuring that skillful teacher leaders led the teacher teams, the district provided growth opportunities for veteran staff to mentor candidates and share building-level responsibilities for students' growth and development.



To support building- and district-level implementation of these elements, the district and university applied improvement practices developed through the iLEAD network. In particular, Avondale used consultancy protocols, which provide a structured process for thinking about a problem of practice, and improvement reviews, sessions during which teams ask for and receive feedback on specific aspects of their work. These practices enabled open communication, fostered a collaborative culture within schools and across the district, and strengthened implementation of the teacher workforce innovation.

As a result, the district saw meaningful changes for teachers and students. For example, the district's teacher vacancy rate decreased from 22% to 13%, and, at the same time, the quality of instruction improved because long-term substitutes were replaced by teacher candidates. Teacher

candidates benefit, too, in a long-term way. In Arizona, the teacher candidate who had been working at the Home Depot became a district employee while finishing his degree program and later served as a full-time teacher at the same school where he had been a student teacher.

In addition, teacher survey data revealed improvements in self-efficacy and satisfaction with the teacher teaming model, which also provided additional career paths for teacher leaders. Furthermore, 75% of students taught by teacher teams outperformed students taught in traditional classrooms, as assessed by value-added models.

These improvement strategies and approaches can also be used to address other problems of practice as they arise. For example, the Avondale-Arizona State partnership that began with workforce development reforms remained a vital resource to addressing emergent (and

unexpected) problems such as the COVID-19 crisis. Their sustainability is a key part of their power.

And the iLEAD infrastructure is itself enduring. The edited volume *Improving America's Schools Together* provides early lessons from the network (Gomez et al., 2023). In 2023, iLEAD will continue to create improvement-based partnerships at its new home at the University of Mississippi's National Center for School-University Partnerships. I'm confident that with this new center — and other state, local, and national improvement-based partnerships — we can continue to build educational infrastructure that improves learning opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for teachers and students.

#### REFERENCE

Gomez, L.M., Biag, M., Imig, D.G., Hitz, R., & Tozer, S. (Eds.). (2023). *Improving America's schools together*. Rowman & Littlefield. ■

MEMBERS  
SAVE 20%

## LEARNING FORWARD BOOKSTORE

Establish best practices and a common vocabulary with your entire team using our large-order discounts.

[learningforward.org/store](https://learningforward.org/store)

