Striving to Enact the Professional Development School Philosophy: George Mason University's Elementary Education Program

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Abstract

Standard 2 from the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) Standards focuses on the importance of partnerships between P-12 schools and universities to enhance student learning and teacher candidate preparation. In the midst of discussions on how to improve partnerships between P-12 schools and universities, this article adds to the conversation, describing how George Mason University's elementary education program engages in school-university partnerships. This article presents the Professional Development Schools (PDS) philosophy as a framework for supporting school-university partnerships. More specifically, this article seeks to describe how the PDS philosophy is enacted in George Mason University's elementary education program. The authors identify the process for schools joining their PDS network and explain the elements that are foundational to their collaboration with P-6 partners. Additionally, the article describes the formal roles and responsibilities between George Mason University and their school partners and how these roles enhance collaboration. The article concludes with the benefits and hurdles that George Mason University has encountered in enacting the PDS philosophy.

In recent years, national organizations in teacher preparation have called for more focused attention to systematic, reciprocal partnerships between university teacher education programs and P-12 school districts (Association of Teacher Educators, ATE, 2000; Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation, CAEP, 2015; National Council for Accreditation of

Teacher Education, NCATE, 2010). The success of these partnerships is critical for both institutions. Teacher education programs provide pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) and theoretical foundations for candidates, whereas P-12 schools provide candidates real-world contexts for enactment of their learning (Holmes Group, 1986). Similarly, school districts need to hire job-ready teachers, and districts' engagement with university partners gives them a stronger voice in teacher preparation.

Recent shifts to a clinically based model of teacher preparation further highlight the importance of purposeful partnerships between P-12 schools and teacher education programs (CAEP, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2014; Zeichner & Bier, 2015). The Professional Development Schools (PDS) model provides a framework for supporting robust partnerships between universities and P-12 schools (Kolpin et al., 2015). In this article, we first establish the importance of clinical preparation in teacher education. Next, we describe PDS as a philosophy. Then, we explain how George Mason University's elementary education program enacts the PDS philosophy. Finally, we discuss the benefits and hurdles we experience in this enactment.

Clinical Preparation in Teacher Education

The importance of situating teacher preparation in P-12 school contexts is rooted in Dewey's laboratory schools model of the late 1890s, which provided a university-based classroom setting for future teachers to test theory and educational practices (Hausfather, 2001). One of the critiques of the laboratory school model is that it presents an idealized context for teaching that is not indicative of many public school settings. The Holmes Group (1986, 1990), expanding on the idea of the laboratory school model, released their seminal reports outlining their recommendations for stronger collaborative partnerships between teacher education programs and P-12 schools through the formation of PDSs. PDSs are distinctive partnerships where university faculty, teacher candidates, veteran teachers, and K-

12 students engage in learning, studying, and researching together as a collaborative community (Book, 1996; Hammerness et al., 2005; Neapolitan & Levine, 2011). PDS partnerships, with their focus on innovation, represent a mutually shared endeavor to create high-quality field experiences, prepare teacher candidates, and positively impact P-12 learning (Castle, Arends, & Rockwood, 2008; Castle, Fox, & Fuhrman, 2009; Castle, Fox, & Souder, 2006; Kolpin et al., 2015).

Following the Holmes Group's (1986, 1990) reports, national organizations created standards delineating their interpretation of key elements of PDs partnerships. In 2001, NCATE outlined and defined PDS structures as "innovative institutions formed through partnership between professional education programs and P-12 schools" (p. 1). NCATE identified five standards for PDS work:

1. Recognition of PDS as an integrated, inquiry-based learning community

2. Ongoing assessment of impact on students, school, and community

3. Collaboration through shared roles in endeavors that impact teacher preparation and student learning

4. A focus on equity and meeting the needs of diverse learners

5. Partnership infrastructure including shared roles and responsibilities

The National Association of Professional Development Schools (NAPDS), formed in 2005, outlined their interpretation of PDS in their release of the *Nine Essentials* in 2008:

1. A shared mission broader than any one stakeholder

2. A commitment to teacher preparation

3. Reciprocal professional development for all stakeholders

4. Reflective practice

5. Sharing of results of action research/inquiry

6. Articulation of the responsibilities of all stakeholders

7. Shared governance structures

8. Formalized roles across contexts

9. Shared resources

Most recently, CAEP (2015) recommended that programs create strong partnerships and high-quality clinical experiences. Standard 2 outlines guidelines for building partnerships that are mutually beneficial and that ultimately enhance student learning. More specifically, Standard 2 calls for high-quality field experiences across teacher preparation programs, shared engagement in program development, and selection of high quality mentors for teacher candidates.

Understanding PDS Terminology

Clearly defined roles and responsibilities across stakeholders are essential elements of PDS work. Most teacher preparation programs rely on interactions among the triad of teacher candidates, school-based teacher educators, and university facilitators (ATE, 2000). The school-based educator, also referred to as the practitioner, mentor, or clinical faculty (ATE, 2000; Rust & Clift, 2015; Zeichner & Bier, 2015), must be a trustworthy content and pedagogical expert who intentionally and consistently facilitates desired learning outcomes for teacher candidates (Linton & Gordon, 2015). In PDS contexts, this mentor must be trained in supervision, aware of the goals of the experience, and have holistic knowledge about teacher education (ATE, 2000). To ensure meaningful experiences, the selection of high-quality mentor teachers in PDS partnerships is critical (Zeichner & Bier, 2015).

Similarly, university-based teacher educators must be involved in these clinical experiences and support not only the teacher candidate, but also the mentor teacher (ATE, 2000; Zeichner & Bier, 2015). Slick (1997) refers to the university facilitator as a "gate-keeper" whose responsibilities to "the triad" include connecting theory and practice, facilitating discussions among stakeholders, and addressing concerns that arise. In addition,

Slick (1997) emphasizes the difficult position university facilitators' face and argues that the role of the university member is critical for collaboration in the partnership. In PDS contexts, the university facilitator also experiences professional development through their consistent engagement in P-12 classrooms.

A key distinction between the triad in traditional teacher preparation programs and those in PDS contexts is that the roles are formalized and given specific expectations for participation in shared contexts. In addition, the triad is often pushed beyond typical expectations for the role by additional layers of support typically seen in PDS partnerships. For example, PDS programs often have a site-based teacher who serves as the point of contact for the university and conversely a university-based liaison who is the conduit for communication from the university to the school. Regardless of role, all participants have opportunities for pedagogical growth as a result of their multidirectional engagement in PDS work (Rust & Clift, 2015). Furthermore, all have clearly delineated pathways for engagement within the partnership network.

The Purpose of the PDS

With foundations in the constructivist learning theory, the PDS philosophy focuses on supporting all stakeholders in reciprocal learning and mutual benefits (Book, 1996; Linton & Gordon, 2015; Neapolitan & Levine, 2011). Through the use of field experiences, the PDS provides opportunities for stakeholders to engage in pedagogical discourse, shared visioning, and implementation of instruction in varying contexts (ATE, 2000; Hollins, 2015; NCATE, 2010). Understanding that learning for candidates is socially and culturally constructed, university facilitators and mentor teachers engage in epistemic practices by reevaluating and planning opportunities for each candidate (Linton & Gordon, 2015). Sustaining these effective learning experiences must rely on coherence, continuity, and consistency.

The basic tenets of PDS structures create opportunities for collaboration that support

teacher candidate and P-12 student learning. In PDS sites, teacher candidates are afforded opportunities to connect educational theories to practice in a classroom setting above and beyond traditional models of school-based experiences. For example, a common outcome of PDS partnerships is the situating of university courses in the P-12 school to draw on the expertise of teachers and connect courses with current curriculum (Hollins, 2015; Rust & Clift, 2015; Zeichner & Bier, 2015). PDS sites provide candidates with careful, systematic observation opportunities and guided practices in applying key elements of teaching under the expertise of trained mentor teachers. Frequent, sustained, and long-term collaborations by university based educators in PDSs allows for richer feedback, while simultaneously providing continuity and reflection time to the candidate (ATE, 2000; Rust & Clift, 2015; Zeichner & Bier, 2015).

PDSs provide the collaborative structures necessary for designing meaningful experiences for teacher candidates (ATE, 2000; CAEP, 2015; Kolpin et al., 2015; Linton & Gordon, 2015; NAPDS, 2008; NCATE, 2010; Rust & Clift, 2015; Zeichner & Bier, 2015). As the field of teacher education continues to develop more systematic approaches to educating future teachers in clinically based programs, PDSs are increasingly recognized as one approach that supports this mission. In the sections that follow, we outline how the George Mason University elementary education program exemplifies the PDS philosophy in action.

How George Mason University's Elementary Education Program Enacts the PDS Philosophy

George Mason University's elementary education program has been guided by the PDS philosophy since 1991. Currently, our PDS Network includes 30 elementary school sites in four school districts. Every four to five years, schools have the opportunity to apply to the PDS Network. The application process includes evidence of school commitment to partnership, to ongoing professional development, and to supporting a minimum number of

teacher candidates each semester. In our most recent application cycle, we created multiple

pathways within which schools could choose to engage with our program as partner sites,

clinical practice sites, or collaborative inquiry sites. Partner sites work with early field hours

students, and clinical practice sites work with interns. Collaborative inquiry sites have a

faculty member onsite once a week and work with yearlong interns. These differentiated

pathways to partnership (see Parker, Parsons, Groth, & Brown, in press for an expanded

description of the pathways) were created to provide flexibility to all stakeholders and allow

for responsiveness based on unpredictable contextual changes that have a significant impact on

partnership work (e.g., changes in administration, staff turnover, university faculty resources).

Regardless of partnership pathway, two elements are foundational to our collaboration with

school: (a) close collaboration with local schools and school districts, including collaborative

structures and shared governance and (b) extended clinical practice that is closely supervised

and aligned with coursework.

Collaborative Structures

Formal roles and responsibilities across our school-university partnerships include:

- Program Coordinator – the elementary program coordinator leads the network by

  organizing and facilitating all aspects of the elementary program and the PDS

  network.

- University Facilitators – elementary education faculty members and adjuncts serve as

  university facilitators. Faculty members serving as university facilitators work with

  collaborative inquiry PDSs and receive a one-course credit in their teaching load. Six

  out of seven adjunct university facilitators are former elementary school

  administrators. University facilitators work with specific PDS sites in the network. In

  this role, they spend one day a week at the school supervising teacher candidates,

cultivating relationships with school faculty, participating in professional development activities, and engaging in inquiry.

- University Facilitator Liaison – one university facilitator, who is *not* a university faculty member, serves as a liaison between district leaders and attends all elementary education program meetings and PDS associated events. As a former school administrator in the area, he brings a unique lens and perspective to implementing the PDS framework.

- Site Facilitator – each PDS has a school-based site facilitator. The site facilitator serves as the liaison between the school and university. Along with the university facilitator, the site facilitator organizes placements for teacher candidates and is a point of contact for teachers and teacher candidates for information regarding the PDS partnership. Site facilitators receive a stipend for serving in this role.

- Advanced Mentor Teacher – school-based teachers who host and mentor teacher candidates; all advanced mentor teacher complete a three-credit hour teacher mentoring course developed to prepare teachers in the new PDSs to supervise teacher candidates.

- Mentor Teachers – school-based teachers who host and mentor teacher candidates.

In addition, to further ensure close collaboration that is mutually beneficial, we have created a structure of shared governance that includes: (a) an advisory board, (b) regular meetings with school-based site facilitators and university facilitators, (c) principal breakfasts, and (d) university facilitator meetings located at rotating PDS sites.

The advisory board is composed of university faculty, school system administrators, school administrators, practicing school-based teachers, teacher candidates, and community/business partner representatives. The advisory board meets three times a year. In addition, advisory board members participate on one of three working groups (i.e., research, field hours, and diversity) that communicate, plan, and act between formal meetings.

Additionally, the network includes regular meetings of site facilitators and university

facilitators. These joint meetings occur four times throughout the academic year. They bring together all the site facilitators and university facilitators in the network with the primary goals of sharing effective practices, cooperatively addressing any difficulties, and planning for the enhancement of our collaborative work. Similarly, the network hosts a principals' breakfast. The purpose of this gathering is to bring together the school leaders of each of the PDSs in the network to reflect on the mission and progress of the network, share effective practices and successes, address any concerns or issues, and plan for continuous improvement. Finally, all university facilitators meet monthly to discuss their work within their PDS sites. The previously described meetings include leaders across the entire network.

Beyond meetings for all stakeholders, each PDS has school-based PDS leadership team meetings that include an administrator, the site facilitator, the university facilitator, an advanced mentor teacher representative, a teacher candidate representative, and others as determined by the PDS. These meetings occur at least annually in each PDS. One PDS, for example, holds one school-based leadership team meeting in the fall semester to set a common understanding of who the teacher candidates are, where they are placed throughout the year, expectations for all stakeholders involved, review of specific initiatives (professional development and/or research), and schedule dates and times for PDS events throughout the year. Then this PDS holds a school-based leadership team meeting again at the end of the school year to reflect and plan for the next academic year. By consistently bringing together key stakeholders in the network both at the large and local levels, we are able to capitalize on the collective expertise of the participants, address difficulties collaboratively, and maintain consistent excellence throughout the network.

Extended Clinical Practice

In addition to collaborative structures and shared governance, another core value of our program is extended clinical experience that is closely aligned with coursework. Each course

in our program is accompanied by 15 hours of fieldwork, during which students conduct structured observations and field-based assignments such as conducting a series of literacy assessments with a struggling reader and designing differentiated lesson plans for the student. In the final year of our program, students complete either a yearlong internship or a semester-long internship at one of our PDSs. The yearlong teacher candidates begin their internship during the week before the students return to school. Their internship continues through the last teacher workday of the school year. During their year in the schools these teacher candidates have extended time to hone their skills in all areas of planning, instruction, management, assessment, and professionalism. They also have ongoing opportunities to collaborate with a variety of school-based professionals (e.g., special education and English language learner specialist). Participating in professional development with their advanced mentor teachers provides teacher candidates with extended opportunities for reflection on teaching practice and student learning. The semester-long internship also occurs at one of our PDS sites, but it is much more concentrated, beginning in January and finishing in May.

Furthermore, in designing coursework, we strive to break down barriers between the university and PDS sites. For example, during the last two summers, the math methods course was set up as a school-based teacher education course supporting enrichment for the students at two PDS school sites. Hosting the course at the school site offered opportunities for teacher learning to occur along the professional continuum, from teacher candidates' field experiences to a multitude of opportunities for in-service teachers to engage in job-embedded learning. In the summer semester of 2013, we developed a Math Enrichment for Young Scholars experience, where teacher candidates worked with a math instructor and a school-based enrichment specialist to model lessons and enrich the elementary students' math learning. In the summer semester of 2014, we developed a STEM (Science, Tech, Engineering, Math) camp for elementary students where our teacher candidates were able to support the enrichment camp while learning more about ways to implement an interdisciplinary approach

to teaching STEM concepts.

Literacy professors have also revised courses to be more practice-based and more situated in PDS contexts. In fall 2014, a literacy methods course was taught onsite at a longstanding PDS (the instructor of the course had served as the university facilitator at the PDS for six years at the time of this study). The instructor and a teaching assistant organized group observations (7-8 teacher candidates plus the instructor or TA) of literacy instruction at the PDS. Teachers at the school volunteered to participate; two teachers in each grade level (K-6) were observed, and then the observed teachers attended class, which took place after school in the library, to debrief with the observers and answer questions. The teacher candidates also conducted a strategic read-aloud and a guided reading lesson in PDS classrooms. Teacher candidates' reflections were overwhelmingly positive about the innovations (Gallagher & Parsons, 2016)

Another innovative course structure was a collaboration between one PDS and the instructor of an Assessment and Differentiation course. The course is a summer course, but it occurs in late May and early June, when K-6 schools are still in session. The course instructor collaborated with the PDS principal and teachers to move portions of the course onsite, to build in a supported field experience and to create opportunities for students to collect data on students' learning to design and deliver high-quality differentiated lessons and units. We expanded these on site course collaborations in the 2014-2015 school year.

Results of Our PDS Work

The program has experienced four major shifts in structure since its inception in 1991 (Parsons et al., in press). Major changes from one program "generation" to the next have been informed by findings from research activity, collaboration with PDS district partners, and changes in state licensure requirements. Throughout our PDS history, faculty members have researched components of the program to inform ongoing efforts to graduate highly effective

teacher candidates (Lavandez & Hollins, 2015).

For example, faculty members in multiple disciplines in the Elementary Education PDS program investigated student teachers' professional growth across time and across program tracks, including the semester-long and yearlong internships, using a faculty-designed performance evaluation tool (Brown, Suh, Parsons, Parker, & Ramirez, in press). Overall findings indicated statistically significant growth across all program tracks in the domains of planning, instruction and management, assessment, and professionalism. Further, data analyses suggest candidates scored quite well in the internship experience in practice-based skills related to organizational skills and logistics of planning and teaching. Conversely, they scored lower in working with diverse learners, differentiation, and teaching skills that called for adaptive, responsive teaching. Based on these findings, faculty recognized the importance of moving coursework into structured field experiences earlier in the program to increase opportunities for situated practice with these skills (Hollins, 2015; Rust & Clift, 2015; Zeichner & Bier, 2015). All coursework has subsequently been modified to include 15-hour field experiences. With increasing frequency, these field experiences are connected to site-based courses, thus situating the learning in context and maximizing the expertise of staff and faculty at the host school.

Similarly, faculty collaborated to examine how the cultivation of a vision for teaching can support teachers as they develop their purpose for teaching, above and beyond the desire to promote students' academic success (Parsons, Malloy, Vaughn, & La Croix, 2014). The faculty investigated how these visions affect future literacy instruction, as well as obstacles that may affect enactment of their visions. In this longitudinal study, the faculty members dedicated several years to follow the graduates from the PDS model and an alternative certification route into the first several years of their teaching careers. The data suggested that teacher visioning could promote advocacy among teachers and their students. As a result, the faculty members of the PDS program continue to have teacher candidates form a vision in the

first of two literacy methods course and work with candidates to develop these over the two-course sequence.

While our program has not yet conducted a large-scale study of effectiveness and retention, anecdotal evidence such as minutes from principals' meetings and requests for program graduates suggest our teacher candidates are in high demand, particularly those who have completed the yearlong internship. Many principals see collaboration with our program as an opportunity to get an early jump on the hiring process. For example, in Spring 2015, 20 of 52 graduates who responded to our placement survey were hired in their internship placement site. Our program is beginning to explore collaborative studies with our partner districts to understand effectiveness of our PDS model in terms of retention and teacher effectiveness, and yearly program review efforts by the faculty assist in monitoring the PDS program and adapting course and fieldwork as needed to develop highly effective teachers.

Benefits of Our Model and Hurdles We Face

The benefits associated with situating teacher preparation in PDS contexts are immeasurable, and our long-standing history with this work speaks to our belief in this approach. First and foremost, the PDS model allows for purposeful consideration of teacher preparation in collaboration with school partners and in K-12 contexts. Juxtaposed against historical issues associated with teacher preparation, including haphazard placement of teacher candidates, unsystematic communication with schools, and limited attention to supervision, the structures of the PDS model provide a framework for ameliorating these issues. Adherence to the PDS philosophy of teacher preparation guides decision-making in the face of university contexts that often work against high-quality teacher preparation. The PDS 'road map' facilitates the construction of a clinical model.

In addition, the George Mason University's PDS program structures create space for higher education and P-12 districts to build close relationships. Rather than just observing

teacher candidates a couple times a year, PDS structures help stakeholders participate in the various facets of each other's lives to the extent that meets their needs. For example, schools in our PDS network complete an application and attest to faculty buy-in as a PDS site—this indicates that they are open to engagement with the program and in the preparation of teacher candidates. In addition, schools are asked to self-evaluate and determine the pathway to participation that best fits with their needs and readiness for engagement in collaborative work. Our program focuses on 'just right' levels of collaboration and does not ask schools to engage at levels that tax the building or the faculty.

Similarly, faculty recognize that they cannot be spread too thin, so our pathways of partnership pairs faculty with schools ready for intense collaboration and attention to shared research endeavors. In addition, our governance structures routinely bring all stakeholders together. This consistent interaction among all stakeholders establishes a safe space for sharing ideas and facilitates communication. Having university facilitators at school sites one day per week provides access and increases teachers' and teacher candidates' comfort with university facilitators. Conversely, consistent presence in classroom settings is vital for university facilitators as it allows them to maintain relevancy and currency and informs their own professional development.

All of these seemingly small strategies interact together to create avenues for communication and engagement and build strong, reciprocal relationships. For example, it is not uncommon for district leaders to engage with George Mason teacher candidates in specifically tailored job preparation sessions, or for classroom teachers to be tapped to lead class sessions with university faculty. Similarly, schools reach out to George Mason PDS faculty members for support with various initiatives (e.g., engaging faculty in book clubs, leading lesson study professional development sessions). District leaders routinely work with the George Mason elementary education Program Coordinator to ascertain district needs and to facilitate the hiring process. Because stakeholders routinely engage in work across contexts,

149

they are able to experience ongoing professional development and simultaneous renewal.

The structures and relationships created by PDS work provide a space for university faculty and P-12 faculty to engage in innovative, collaborative efforts to positively impact P-12 learners and teacher candidates. While this positive impact is ultimately the goal of PDS work, it is not possible without the careful creation of structures that foster positive relationships. At George Mason these innovations include efforts to move course instruction to field-based settings. Additionally, we continue to consider strategies for engaging pre-service teachers in field-based activities with careful scaffolding from both the university facilitator and classroom teacher. Our yearlong internship model is highly valued by school administrators because of the dual benefit of preparing highly qualified new teachers and simultaneously putting extra hands in classrooms for a full academic year.

While we are ardent supports of the PDS philosophy, it would be short-sided not to acknowledge the hurdles and challenges associated with our work. First and foremost, our approach to teacher preparation with a PDS framework is time and labor intensive— particularly for university faculty. This is especially evident when faculty try to fit PDS work into the typical/historical structures of the university—calculating load, defining service, meeting tenure and promotion requirements, and engaging in practitioner-oriented research agendas. In many instances, explaining the work in the context of traditional notions of academia is challenging at best. As faculty, intersecting research, teaching, and service agendas is essential in meeting the demands of university life and fulfilling the mission of PDS work.

Because PDS work is time and labor intensive, it is also perceived as expensive. The tension of recognizing and rewarding faculty for the time and effort spent versus the lumping of these into the already crowded 'service' bucket is palpable. Faculty are often balancing the labor intensive demands of the work, driven by their belief that it is the best structure for the

preparation of teachers, with frustration over lack of funding and recognition of the work. Schools face similar challenges in rewarding, recognizing, and compensating teachers for their roles as teacher educators working with teacher candidates day-in and day-out for extended periods of time. This arduous role is often perceived of as 'giving back to the profession' and is grossly underpaid when considered in light of the responsibilities and requirements of the work.

Furthermore, PDS efforts have focused significantly on the elementary education program. The elementary education PDS work is situated in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University, and it has supporting partnerships with a variety of districts in the northern Virginia region. It is within this context that the elementary education program developed and grew its PDS model in terms of longevity and depth of collaboration. Other licensure programs are exploring the development of more formal collaborative relationships with schools and districts. However, these partnerships can be challenging to create, sustain, and develop. The secondary education programs have engaged in PDS partnerships in the past and are currently working to reestablish this structure for their licensure programs. There are also college-wide efforts to enhance partnerships in other licensure programs so they more closely align with key aspects of PDS work.

Closing Thoughts

Teacher preparation embedded in PDS contexts purposefully places the responsibility of educating teacher candidates in the hands of both K-12 expert teachers and highly skilled university faculty. The collaborative focus on teacher education and K-12 student learning is at the heart of the PDS philosophy and is enacted in our elementary PDS program. Because of the PDS framework, we are able to collaborate with teachers, administrators, students and district leaders to continuously revise and refine our approach to teacher preparation.

These partnerships have allowed us to continue to develop a program that not only

enacts the current policy push (CAEP, 2015) but also enhances the development of highly effective teachers. Faculty consistently conduct research and take the necessary steps to ensure that teacher candidates are given an experience that allows them to develop in all areas. Through the PDS, candidates are given several meaningful field experiences, beneficial coursework to help connect theory and practice, and a supported internship to implement their vision. In an era of increased attention to clinical preparation (CAEP, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2014), our work strives to enact the PDS philosophy, as it develops highly effective teachers who are valued by schools and districts.

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