

**Off the Bench and Into the Game: A School-University Partnership to  
Prepare Teachers for Leadership Positions in one Urban School District**

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## **Purpose**

The purpose of this research was to investigate the administrative functions of an emerging school-university partnership designed to prepare urban school teachers for leadership positions in one district. Filling principal vacancies with highly trained and qualified professionals is one of the most important challenges facing schools across the country today (Fordham Foundation, 2003; Gilman & Lanman-Givens, 2001). In fact, the recruitment and retention of excellent building principals for our nation's urban schools has reached "crisis" levels (Jamentz & Kearney, 2003). Without effective site leadership, progress and reform for the neediest of schools is nearly impossible, in part because meaningful and lasting change, especially in urban schools, requires stable leadership (Kowalski, 1995).

## **Theoretical framework**

The shortage of applicants for school administrative positions is acute and widespread (Yerkes & Guaglianone, 1998) and the demand for new principals is growing (Gilman & Lanman-Givens, 2001). In order to attract more candidates to leadership roles, it has become increasingly necessary for superintendents, school board members, universities and concerned citizens to seek new ways of removing barriers that often hinder the successful completion of well-designed principal preparation programs.

To address the immediate need for qualified school leaders, a school-university partnership was formed between a urban school district and a regional state university located in the eastern United States. The primary purpose of the partnership was to identify and prepare a cohort of selected teachers whom possessed informal and formal leadership experiences for completion of an 18-month principal preparation program. Students who successfully completed the program qualified for a Master's degree in Education (M.Ed.) with a concentration in

leadership for teaching and learning. The school-university partnership described here is unique because it did not entail a professional development opportunity for all the teachers within a school (Grobe, 1993; Mattesich & Monsey, 1992; Trubowitz & Longo, 1997; Slater, 1996; Teital, 1997). Rather, the partnership included a small cohort of teachers selected by the Superintendent for the purpose of developing a cadre of leaders “for the bench.”

The “bench” is a metaphor used by Superintendent to explain a process of placing teachers into a program that would prepare them for future leadership positions within the districts’ schools; or in other words, to have players ready to get into the game.

To deepen the bench, the Superintendent purposely selected a small group of teachers who were currently serving in administrative roles or various managerial capacities. For example, several of the teachers selected working as Instructional Facilitators; a term used in the district to describe many of the duties of an assistant principal. Therefore, because a majority of the cohort was currently reassigned from their teaching duties to serve in these adapted roles; substitute teachers were not needed to cover program classes or seminars taught on Friday afternoons.

The university curriculum was slightly modified to make learning relevant to the needs of the district. For example, selected course readings and assignments such as a community relations project were modified to address the districts’ largely Hispanic student population and culture, and the needs of the students. The district population was comprised of approximately 40% Hispanic, 35% White, 20% African-American, and 5% Asian-American.

Other administrative adaptations included scheduling approximately half the college courses in the districts’ administrative building during regular school hours (i.e., Friday afternoons beginning at 1:30 p.m.). Full-time university faculty members taught all the courses

and traveled to the students' place of employment, rather than adjunct faculty who typically teach in the evenings or after school. According to Bremer (2004), "In many cases adjunct faculty have neither the time nor the resources to devote themselves to the research and continuing study that are essential to providing students with knowledge of the latest trends and developments in an academic field."

Additionally, the superintendent was encouraged to provide input on several courses. For instance, she suggested the inclusion of ISO 9000 standards. ISO is an abbreviation for the International Organization for Standardization, which operates a certification program based on a school's ability to meet a popular set of quality management standards.

The partnership described here was uniquely different from other school-university partnerships. Using a framework proposed by Goodlad (1988), this school-university partnership was examined through the lens of symbiotic relationships, that is, the conditions that must be present for such relationships to proliferate. These conditions included diversity of thought, satisfying self-interests, loyalty and trust.

## **Methodology**

The method used for this study was a naturalistic inquiry approach developed from an ethnographic case study perspective (Merriam, 2002). This method employs multiple research procedures to explore complex issues involving schools and is considered legitimate methodology for identifying the factors leading to the establishment of school-university partnerships (Borthwick, Stirling, Nauman & Cook, 2003; Ely, 1991; Knight and Wiseman, 2000).

To address questions about how the school-university partnership emerged and the administrative functions necessary for its success, an interview guide was developed by the lead

researcher and the program coordinator. The interview guide included eight semi-structured research questions. These questions, or probes, investigated the participants' perceptions of what items influenced the relationship or promoted the partnership as per the concepts outlined by Goodlad (1988). Listed below are the probes used during the interviews.

- 1). Please describe how and why this partnership evolved.
- 2). What have been your initial observations, your expectations, your concerns?
- 3). Why do you believe the school district and university decided to work together?
- 4). What has made the partnership possible?
- 5). How were students identified to participate?
- 6). What have been the obstacles? How were they overcome?
- 7). To your knowledge, was enrollment ever a concern?
- 8). What advice can you give others who may wish to establish a similar program?

Twenty-six informants were interviewed for this study and all responses to questions were documented on audiotape or in field notes. Participants signed an informed consent form that stated the known risks and potential benefits from participating in the study. The informants from the school district included the district Superintendent, her Administrative Intern (who was working on a doctoral degree in educational administration), the local Teachers' Union President, and 19 teachers (students) from the cohort group. The study informants from the university included the Dean from the School of Education, the Interim Associate Dean from the School of Education, the Coordinator of the graduate program in leadership for teaching and learning, and a full-time faculty member who taught in this collaborative program.

## **Data Analysis**

Responses to the questions were used to challenge the researcher's initial assumptions and to disprove any preconceived ideas about how the partnership emerged. For example, flexibility appeared to be an important factor that might explain why the partnership was successful. In other words, the school district gave teachers release time on Friday afternoons to participate in the program and the University faculty showed flexibility in their commitment to customer service by collecting personal checks for tuition, by walking admissions paperwork to the Registrar across campus, and by distributing textbooks directly to the busy working professionals in class. As the study progressed, selected informants were asked to identify examples that made the partnership feasible so to either accept or reject these initial themes. It is important to note that the lead researcher functioned as the analytical tool in this qualitative study. Initially, this individual had no preconceived ideas regarding the dynamics of the local school district or university department in which the program was housed, in part because he had recently transferred to the area from another State located approximately 500 miles away. The lead researcher, however, was an employee of the university and worked full-time as a faculty member in another department across campus. Therefore, as the data collection process progressed, this individual developed relationships with several key informants who worked for the university as a result of his increased interactions with them at campus events.

Thus, in order to triangulate findings, a preliminary report was given at a steering committee meeting called by the University Dean approximately three months after the partnership began. At the meeting, several points of clarification were made in response to the report. For example, the teachers (students) reported feeling disconnected with the university. After confirming the finding, several suggestions were offered for improving the situation such

as inclusion of the cohort students on university mailing lists and ensuring that each had registered for a student identification card. Other triangulation procedures were conducted individually with the Program Coordinator of the M.Ed. program and at a meeting with the co-authors prior to completing this paper.

At the end of the 18-month program, a focus group meeting was facilitated with 8 students who had recently completed their coursework. Many of the students interviewed during the focus group meeting expressed views similar to their earlier interviews. For instance, one theme that continued to emerge was the writings of Mary Parker Follett (1996) – “a visionary and pioneering individual in the field of human relations, democratic organization, and management” (Mary Parker Follett Foundation, 2003). Follett was one of the earliest writers to recognize that leaders and employees should view themselves as partners rather than as a boss and a subordinate. She argued that a leader’s job was to harmonize group efforts with the notion of “power with” versus “power-over” employees. The Follett philosophy plays an important role in this educational leadership program. It is reflected in the program’s vision statement and appeared to provide an anchor from which many of the program goals were based. In fact, several students cited the Follett philosophy with near missionary-like zeal.

## **Results**

In many ways, the partnership to prepare school leaders was a learning experience for the two institutions. From the ways to handle everything from admissions to scheduling to tuition to pedagogy all evolved in a bold attempt to be innovative and collaborative in the shared goal to prepare a cohort of strong leaders for the urban district.

Several findings included being flexible and supportive. For example, the school district was generous in its support of the teachers (students). The district supported released time for

the teachers so that they could take courses. The district also reimbursed the teachers for tuition upon course completion, and assisted in the purchase of required textbooks by negotiating a 20% discount between the bookstore and the publisher. The university demonstrated flexibility by tailoring aspects of its curriculum to meet district needs while maintaining important core components such as strong mentoring, competency based education and reflective practice identified in the literature as best-practices (Barth, 2001; Fawcett et al, 2001; Hibert, 2000; McCay, 2001). As a result, the students interviewed early in the program were so dedicated and industrious that many wanted to increase the pace at which they completed the program. Interviews conducted with teachers students shortly after completion of the program, however, suggested that compressing the courses and the fast paced nature of the content had a significant cost to their personal and family relationships. In other words, many students became burned out. Of the 20 students who began the program (15 Caucasian, 6 male, 9 female; 4 African-American, 1 male, 3 female; and 1 Latino female), 16 people completed it. Of the four students who did not complete the program, 3 were Caucasian, 2 male, 1 female; and 1 was an African-American male. Of those who completed the program, 7 students were either promoted or assumed formal leadership roles within the district (5 Caucasian, 2 male, 3 female; 1 African-American female, and 1 Latino female). One student (African-American female) was not interested in assuming a leadership role, but completed the program.

At the exit focus group meeting, one male student described the program experience analogous to raising children. He said, "... this experience was a lot like a family. Nancy held my hand and took care me at times when I had a lot on my plate, but in no way did we ever feel like kids. You know, it's a lot like raising a child, sometimes you have to give a little." Another student stated "everyone treated us like real professionals and we became a family." Because of

the faculty's commitment to a caring education, the students seemed to excel in the program in spite of their hectic and rigorous schedules.

Another important finding from the study revealed that the leadership provided from the titled administrators played a critical role in the initial success of the partnership. For example, the Superintendent was visionary in her hands-on approach to create a cadre of leaders "for the bench," and she worked closely with the University Dean who demonstrated leadership in her desire to increase enrollment for the graduate program, and in her vision to help meet the needs of the local community. The Interim Associate Dean played an important role by being able to identify and resolve potential conflicts during initial negotiations, and by modifying an important course in the program to meet the district needs. The Program Coordinator was deeply committed to an educational philosophy grounded in the writings of Mary Parker Follett and set the vision for the curriculum. These titled leaders made certain that the tenets of the program philosophy were not put aside in order to "fast-track" students through the program. This strict adherence to the Follett educational philosophy and the university leaders unwavering attention to principles appeared to give the partnership stability during the early phases of development, thus helping to convince the students that the program had integrity. In short, the partnership achieved what Goodlad (1988) identifies as satisfying self-interests.

The partnership also met Goodlad's loyalty and trust criteria in several ways. For example, there was a historical relationship between the two institutions. The districts' inner-city high school was located less than 20 minutes from the university campus and many of the teachers (students) who worked in the district had previously attended or earned undergraduate degrees in education from the university. Furthermore, the districts' vision for the partnership

was different enough from the university's to stimulate change, however, not so diverse to alienate the other. In the words of the Dean, it was "a marriage of needs."

## **Conclusions**

In order to attract more candidates to leadership roles it has become increasingly necessary to remove barriers that hinder successful completion of well-designed principal preparation programs. The school-university partnership described in this study, and the factors responsible for its development, is an important step to solving the leadership crisis affecting many schools across the country today.

Unfortunately, the partnership described here was discontinued soon after the first cohort graduated, in part because of the teachers (students) faculty union contract and fairness issues. That is, the union leadership argued that the program should have been made available to all teachers in the district, not just those with previous leadership experiences. Additionally, the Superintendent responsible for co-designing the partnership resigned her position from the district when the newly elected Governor selected her to lead State's Department of Education. Her replacement, the new Superintendent, did not endorse the program with the same vigor as the previous Superintendent.

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