

A Ten-Year Partnership Journey

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This marks the tenth year of a formalized partnership between Miami University and the Talawanda Schools, a geographically large district that is comprised of 144 square miles in Southwestern Ohio. Over the course of the past decade we have connected almost every department, school, and college across campus with students P-12 in all content areas and the arts. Our partnership embodies John Goodlad's (1990) constructs of Stewardship and Simultaneous Renewal. Although we don't often explicitly engage in conversation about how our work aligns with the Agenda for Education in a Democracy, it is implicit in all that we do. Fully one third of the district's 3100 students annually receive targeted interventions from university tutors and mentors, and almost \$1,000,000 has been awarded in grants that support student learning and improved pedagogy. We celebrate the landmark of our 10th anniversary in a formal partnership while simultaneously keeping a wary eye on the road ahead. Our journey to this point has not been without potholes and roadblocks, but our most significant detour might still lie ahead.

Taking to the Road

A history of sporadic collaboratives over time, combined with rejection as a formal partner in the early 1990s, led to a deep chasm of distrust between Miami University and Talawanda Schools. However, just as a new millennium was dawning, so too was an opportunity to reexamine the relationship between our institutions. Personnel changes at both institutions enabled leaders to engage in more open dialogue and critique. Leadership recognized that they had several pressing problems, including the termination of the long-standing practice of open enrollment for any district graduate, as well as an increasing number of faculty who were choosing not to reside in the town or the neighboring townships supposedly due to the perceived shortcomings of the school district.

As it became evident that a collaborative approach was needed to address these issues, administrative representatives and the district's Board of Education decided to draft a letter of agreement for a new partnership. Both entities felt that a formal partnership could expand learning opportunities in each educational setting, as well as enhance institutional prestige. After extensive meetings for over a year between the two parties, an agreement was reached and signed in July 2001, the official birth of the Talawanda/Miami Partnership.

The programming efforts of the Talawanda/Miami Partnership closely mimic what Clark (1999) refers to as the "Evolution of Partnerships" (p. 35). He suggests that the first stage involves laying the groundwork and various organizational tasks. Participants are sought, and operating structures are put into place. Following the signing of our official Partnership Agreement, key players accomplished this by literally knocking on doors to gain support for the cause.

As soon as Co-Chairs from each setting were named, a Task Force was identified with strategic participants from the district and the university. A decision to engage practitioners established the construct for a grass roots organization. Through monthly meetings, these representatives would determine not only the direction of the

partnership, but also monitor specific activities in both institutions. Early work included the development of a mission statement, as well as the identification of several key programs that would promote increased student achievement across settings.

Cruise Control

After the launch of the partnership's inaugural programs, the next stage, according to Clark (1999), entails monitoring the results of these efforts, and celebrating their success. The Partnership Newsletter, posted on our website with hard copies distributed semi-annually throughout both settings, provides evidence to the community of these accomplishments. Major successes, posits Clark, can lead to the expansion of the partnership base as a result of the positive feedback. This occurred with many of our math initiatives that were widely reported in the newsletter. These cross-institutional sessions increased as a result of their promotion through this medium. Another example might be the various book studies that have been promoted through the partnership. New groups were formed to discuss current professional publications due to the success of past efforts. No doubt one of the most significant expansions during this era was the establishment of the Partnership Office in 2005, located within the School of Education, Health, and Society at Miami University. Goodlad (2004) speaks to the need for a "bridge facility" (p. 295) to assist with brokering partnerships between entities.

According to Clark (1999), the final stage in the evolution of a partnership is a maturity that is both rare and elusive. He defines this phase as one that is dominated by critical inquiry. Several key players involved in our partnership regularly engaged in this process, while others have reflected on the organization's strengths and weaknesses. Those most closely associated with the work on the ground understood the need for increased scrutinization of programming, as well as the use of both objective and subjective evaluative measures to critique our efforts. Perhaps their inquiry orientation is due to their proximity to those teachers and faculty members who implement initiatives that contribute to their keen awareness of this

component. But based upon Clark's criteria, our partnership has yet to fully enter this final stage, and some wonder whether it will reach this point or if it will simply return to our journey metaphor, break down roadside, and be left to rust in the junkyard of other failed educational programming and reforms.

National Network for Educational Renewal: A Partnership GPS

That rare and elusive partnership may indeed be more attainable by continuing to collaborate with other partner sites through the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER.) Transactions with individuals and institutions involved in similar work can provide a new lens through which to view partnership efforts, a jumpstart so to speak. Goodlad (1990) suggests that many longstanding partnerships recognize that networking has proven to be a useful strategy for strengthening local collaborative entities (p. 22). In addition to serving as a sounding board for challenges and potential solutions, the network fosters the kind of broad relationships that strengthen a partnership from the outside in, and the inside out. Identifying individuals willing to reach out and make these connections over the next few months will be critical. Nurturing new relationships is key, both within the partnership and extending to the wider, more divergent publics involved.

Backseat Drivers or Complacent Passengers?

Local school and university visionaries understood the importance of relationships when our partnership was founded, based in part on both the literature and their own experience in partnership work with other settings. They recognized that a committee of equal representation from both institutions with broad backgrounds, a Task Force if you will, could make or break the effort. Clark suggests what he calls "Boundary spanners" (p. 241) as critical to understanding the cultures of both institutions. Our current Partnership Committee consists of several who fill this role. However, Clark also states that building administrators must act as boundary spanners, and in this time when principals are being asked to accept increased responsi-

bilities in terms of instructional leadership and accountability, it is all too easy for them to take a back seat when it comes to collaborative work with the university. Despite empirical evidence that many of our partnership efforts increase student achievement, few school administrators take a direct role in promoting cooperative efforts.

Clark (1999) indicates that a system of support from the university and the school district administration is critical to the successful operation of a collaborative effort (p. 241). During this time of transition within our partnership, at times this support seems somewhat veiled. In a cost-saving measure, university officials merged several administrative positions and included partnership among the job responsibilities of a new Associate Dean. Beyond the School of Education, Health, and Society, retirements at the Provost level and within the university President's Office could impact financial backing of the work. The ability to direct both monetary and in-kind resources to the partnership, as well as key proximity to the President's Office, has been critical to the success of the partnership over the past decade. Additionally, leadership changes are occurring on a district level, and include the elimination of several administrators. As of this writing, partnership will be housed in the newly created Human Relations department. The ongoing support from both district and university administration must remain or the organizational infrastructure will be in danger of collapsing, unable to buttress the scaffold.

A Ten-Year Tune-up

Given all of these challenges, the players that remain integrally involved with the partnership are wrestling with whether this is time for a tune-up, or if we'd be better served with a major overhaul or even a new model as we continue on our journey. Faculty members have been brought to the table to help facilitate this process, one that could well take a long period of time. Prolonged conversations are consuming much of our monthly meetings, with some calling for a leaner, more fuel-efficient partnership vehicle. Throughout this process it's important to note that discussions are respectful of the cur-

rent economic realities facing both the university and the schools, and that no one is looking to compromise the strong relationship that has been, in the eyes of many, the strength of our partnership.

Fostering relationships with the greater learning community may prove to be the most significant work of our partnership. Harkavy (1998) refers to this critical connection of schools, community, and society as the Deweyan Trilogy. Within this partnership, steps have been taken to accomplish this connection through our own efforts to publicize the work, as well as coverage through outside media. This publicity consistently emphasizes the benefits for learners and the how the work results in a stronger community. Presentations have been made at various meetings and forums throughout the region that frame the work of the partnership in a cost-effective manner, an aspect that not only appeals to this fiscally conservative community, but one that resonates in this new economy.

Perhaps of greatest importance will be the opportunity to rekindle former relationships, establish new connections, and build trust during this transitional stage in our journey. We recognize that the most important relationship building will take place one person at a time. It is evident that over the ten-year arc of this partnership, it has become well-grounded in the theoretical constructs of those who promote democracy and inclusiveness. As we move forward, it will be through the efforts of experienced partners and interested new parties that this organization supports programming with its peers, encourages teachers and faculty to take advantage of existing partnership activities, and explores new and creative initiatives.

This year we're marking the tenth anniversary of our partnership by tuning up our vehicle, changing drivers, and most important, realizing that while the road might get bumpy at times, it's the journey rather than the destination that leads to successful partnerships.

References

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