

The Five C's of Partnership Work

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During the past 15 years, I have been involved in school/university partnerships as the primary liaison with four schools within one growing suburban school district. Initially, development of the partnerships was slow and steady, a pace recommended for such work (Rafferty, 1993). The degree of activity peaked about a decade ago and, since then, I have worked to maintain the many positive aspects of this partnership while taking on the role of chair of the department of teacher education. As a result of my close work with this district over a sustained period of time, I have learned a good deal about what factors contribute to successful partnership work and what mistakes detract from such progress. This article discusses a number of the lessons I have learned and places them into an organizer I call “the five Cs” — contact, commitment, communication, change, and context.

These five Cs are based primarily on my own experiences in attempting this work but are also supported by the research that has been conducted in this area. Knowing that “On-going, long-term partnership work is difficult to maintain” (Darling-Hammond, 2006), it is my hope that others just beginning to engage in the work

of establishing and promoting school/university partnerships may gain some insight from this simple organizer.

Contact

Partnership work must begin with a contact *person*, or liaison, who is willing to take the initiative to learn the relevant issues in the field of partnership development, allocate the time to set up initial meetings, and spearhead efforts to overcome obstacles. While the initial contact person is often from the university, it is imperative that the school quickly includes such a contact person as well—the most likely candidate being the principal. While having the support of the principal in no way guarantees the success of the partnership work, success without such support is difficult indeed (Metcalf-Turner, 1996).

One should be aware of a paradox (one among many) of partnership work at this point. A contact person is critical here. People develop trust with other people over time. Relationships thrive among people and not necessarily among concepts or institutions. Yet, as important as the roles of individuals are for the initial contact, in order for the partnership to truly work, the long-term growth or development of the partnership must not depend on one or two individuals. When such an over-reliance happens, the result is that the partnership easily falls apart when one of these contact people moves on or retires. The partnership must be institutionalized to survive this type of occurrence. Principals come and go and this is expected. The good news is that, once contacts have been firmly established, it is not difficult for the confidence and conviction associated with the initial relationship to be transferred to an incoming administrator. During the past 15 years, I have worked with 10 different principals in four buildings. Each transition has gone smoothly and each relied on the recommendation and hope from the out-going principal that the relationship be continued.

My university has been heavily engaged in partnership work during the past two decades and has established varying working relationships with over 20 schools. Most individuals involved with this work would agree that the university's partnership relationships

with four or five of these twenty-some schools has progressed well beyond the work of the others. In every case, the single characteristic that distinguishes these few schools from the others is that each of these partnerships has had an individual at the university and school level who is committed as a contact person for an extended period of time.

Commitment

Before partnership work proceeds very far, a strong commitment to carry on the work must be demonstrated by university and school administration and faculty. For this to occur, all parties must clearly see the benefits to be gained—to their institution, to the improvement of education generally, and to themselves professionally. Commitment at the university level is important; however, school “buy-in” is essential. And while strong administrative support of partner school goals is necessary, there must be a level of commitment by school faculty beyond what university or school administrators represent in order for a partner school initiative to be successful (Rakow, 1997). After all, the school is the setting wherein most of the partner school work will occur. Hence, the idea of a partner school must be well-received and supported by the school faculty in order for it to be successfully developed into a working reality.

One way commitment needs to be exemplified is by having the university and the school “put their money where their mouth is.” If the commitment to partnership work has been stated, it is necessary that resources follow. The ability for advocates of partnership work to secure adequate resources remains one of the stickiest challenges associated with partnership work (Zeichner, 2006). How resources, both in terms of finances and time, are being freed up or channeled to partnership efforts needs to be determined fairly early on in the relationship. I have been fortunate to be involved in several partnership efforts in which a strong commitment has been demonstrated at all levels. The school principals have fully supported this work in terms of releasing and supporting faculty as they have taken on new roles and responsibilities; the school faculty and staff have worked hard to adjust to new demands on their time; and the district’s su-

perintendent and assistant superintendent have consistently committed time and money to help promote the partnership agenda. The University has also contributed faculty release time and financial support for the professional development of school and university faculty. I have also been personally encouraged by my divisional dean. I am convinced that, without such commitment, much of the growth we have experienced would simply not have occurred.

Change

Change here refers primarily to the adaptations that must take place in the traditional roles of those involved with the education of K-16 students. The roles of faculty, both at the university and the schools, must change as they become more involved with partnership work (Lecos, 1997). All parties need to redefine and broaden traditional perspectives of their jobs to include multiple and overlapping roles as collaborators, learners, mentors, curriculum directors, and administrators. The partner school as an institution must also recognize this and respond with a more flexible organizational structure to support these new approaches and help facilitate the sharing of these responsibilities (Million, 1997; Powell, 1995). As difficult as it may be, real change cannot occur under a system of "business as usual." Traditionally, teachers taught, university faculty conducted research and published results, and administrators decided all the details. The changes necessary of the partner school renewal initiative are for teachers to not only teach, but also to conduct research, and for researchers to not only conduct research but also to engage in teaching. All must then be involved with curricular decision-making and implementation.

One example of the changing roles assumed by some practicing teachers in the partner school in which I work has been in the area of student teacher supervision. For the past dozen years, student teacher supervision has been conducted by a cohort of teachers in the school. These teachers have been trained and hired by the university to assume the additional mentoring responsibilities associated with the supervision of student teachers while maintaining their primary responsibility as classroom teachers. Pre-observation

and post-observation conferences, as well as all seminars, are conducted before and after school. In class observations are done by videotapes and team-teaching settings, which free the supervising teacher for a period. Additional student teacher mentoring occurs almost continuously as the supervising teacher, cooperating teacher, and student teacher work side-by-side all semester long. The result has been that student teachers have received more timely feedback that they view as both more credible and contextually accurate (Socol & Eagle, 2008). This model could not have been implemented if either the school district or the university had argued that to do such non-traditional supervision was too time-consuming, expensive, inconsistent with their main mission, or a host of other reasons often put forth in support of not changing the status quo.

The result has been a degree of ownership by the supervising teachers in the buildings that I would have never anticipated. I have a tendency to think of the work that they are doing for the university as service, done more as a favor for us at the university than anything else — almost to the level of charity. I see supervising teachers who work all day doing their job well in their own classroom in a district with high expectations and standards, who then turn around and take on an additional role as a university supervisor of our student teachers. More than once I have offered to back off the number of teachers we place in a building or to revert to the traditional model for a semester or two to give the supervising teachers a break. The teachers have rejected these offers each time, and on more than one occasion, with some indignation. Are they not doing their job well? Is this not a better model? Why would we stop doing it? Instead, it is more common for me to be beset with requests to increase the number of student teachers in the buildings and to add additional teachers as supervisors.

Communication

All stakeholders in a partnership relationship need to constantly communicate about goals, budgets, governance, feelings, beliefs, . . . everything. There is a need to pay attention particularly to issues of trust and parity, recognizing that individuals serving in part-

ner schools often serve multiple masters and sometimes experience multiple frustrations (Metcalf-Turner, 1996). Social capital must be created and constantly invested in (Coleman, 1990). This is especially true when the interests of schools conflict with the university, which is often the case. Trust then becomes one of the foundational characteristics upon which successful school-university partnerships are built (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Fisler & Firestone, 2006). Clear communication should also include agreements on the related benefits and expectations of the partnership.

Communication is also needed for all parties to collaboratively plan ahead. This includes short-term and long-term planning for the professional development of staff and faculty; release time necessary for reflection, implementation, and inquiry; and planning for the growth and inclusion of those who currently are non-participants (Million, 1997; Dittmer, 1996). Not to maintain this communication ignores the complexity involved in establishing and maintaining a partner school and threatens the attainment of many of the partner school goals.

One reason for the growth and maintenance of partnership activities at several of my partner schools has been the level of communication that has been maintained at multiple levels. This has involved numerous before and after school meetings with faculty and administration from both the school and the university. The fact that the school and the university are located an hour apart has, at times, caused logistical problems and complicated day-to-day communication. This situation has been recently aided by the host of electronic communication opportunities now available. I am now able to communicate daily, if necessary, with the building principal, supervising teachers, and student teachers, in addition to maintaining my regular weekly visitation schedule through the use of the university Blackboard site. Such communication has helped to reduce misunderstandings and has increased opportunities for growth. In addition, the university has started to supply student teachers with portable packages of laptop computers loaded with iMovie software, Flip video cameras, and projectors, which allow them to record, critique, and share their teaching experiences with their supervisors

more easily, as well as with their colleagues in the building and back at the university setting.

Context

The fifth “C” refers to two different meanings of the word context. One meaning refers to the need to recognize and respect the different cultures, as well as the different accountability and reward structures of the school and university environments. These two contexts are very different and over the years a certain amount of distrust has arisen between many universities and school districts as a result of not fully understanding these differences. The second meaning of context here is the need to recognize that each school, and therefore each partnership, is unique. All partnership work must be driven by these contextual differences.

The friction resulting from the contextual differences of the school and university can be reduced by recognizing (and, again, respecting) these differences, focusing on those goals and outcomes which are common to both, and emphasizing strategies which best use the strengths of each institution to achieve them. The first step, however, is to take the time to explore some of these real and deeply ingrained differences.

The differing contexts are perhaps most clearly seen when comparing the reward structures characteristic of each institution (Tietel, 1994; MacNaughton & Johns, 1993; Button, Ponticell, & Johnson, 1996). Tenure and promotion for university faculty largely rests on faculty members’ ability to: (1) conduct research, publish the findings in nationally refereed journals, and make scholarly presentations at professional conferences; (2) receive average to excellent teaching evaluations; and (3) provide service to respective departments, colleges, universities, state/regional/national professional organizations, and local communities—including schools. Though the weight given to each of these categories varies among institutions and colleges and departments within universities, research generally is considered more important. In and of itself, collaborating with school faculty to improve a teacher education program (even the profession), oddly enough, is not as valuable as the publi-

cations resulting from conducting research on the processes and outcomes related to such initiatives (Bullough, Kauchak, Crow, Hobbs, & Stokes, 1997; Shiveley & Taylor, 1998). In that creating a partner school is incredibly time consuming, in regards to tenure and promotion, some take the position that it would be more beneficial for faculty (especially non-tenured faculty) to focus their attention on studying any one of the many facets of a partner school instead of participating in the creation of a partner school.

Conversely, school teachers, administrators, and counselors may never need to conduct a formal research study, publish an article, or make a presentation at a state, regional, or national conference in order to get tenure. They are so busy “doing” the tasks of education that there is little or no time available for them to engage in the inquiry and research marked by their profession (Button et al., 1996; Bullough et al., 1997). Where universities have often focused on theory, the focus of schools has been on more practical matters, such as test scores, attendance, and classroom management (Book, 1996). Additionally, just as there are few extrinsic rewards for university faculty to collaborate with school faculty in creating a partner school, there are also few extrinsic rewards for school faculty to develop the “scholarly” activities associated with partner schools.

The second meaning of context here refers to the fact that each partnership is unique, and, therefore, has different issues and concerns. There is no “recipe” to building a partnership and there are many paths that lead to the top of the mountain. It becomes important to recognize that the focus and purpose of each partner school relationship must be molded to suit the setting in which a particular college of education and school are placed, as an “organic institution” evolving and adapting, in definition and function, to best address the specific needs of the participants involved (Rafferty, 1993). Simultaneous renewal, by definition, is a two-way street. If contextual factors are not taken into consideration when conceptualizing and initiating partner school relationships, the participants may find that they have a partner school on paper, but one that is functionally worthless.

A respect for contextual differences may be seen by visiting our most active partner schools. One would quickly become aware of how the university's relationship with each school is totally different. In no two school districts is the role of the university liaison the same. In no two school districts is the professional development program or inquiry procedures the same. In no two school districts is the supervision of field experience teachers or student teachers the same. Even though each partnership relationship is driven by a commonly held set of principles, how those principles play out in the real world context of each school is entirely different. Even within the district in which I work weekly there are contextual differences between buildings. In one building a set of assistant principals have taken on the responsibility of personally supervising each of the student teachers in their building, while in each of the other buildings practicing teachers conduct the supervision work. In two of the buildings, we agreed to add another level of support by creating the role of lead supervising teacher whose duties include coordinating the placement of the student teachers in their building, setting up and conducting seminars, and collecting all of the paperwork associated with the program.

Finally, I notice that the more we work together, the deeper the understanding of each other's working culture becomes. I must continually remind myself before entering a building that my concerns for that day may be of high priority to me or my university, but may be somewhere between 20th and 25th on the school's priority list that day, depending on what has gone on in the school that morning. Similarly, after attending a number of professional development meetings between university and school faculty, one of my partner school principals commented to me on how he is just now beginning to understand the different areas of focus and evaluation that exist for faculty at the university level.

Final Thoughts

Partnership work can be incredibly difficult and frustrating. In part, this is due to a host of contextual variables, some of them unknown at the start, which must be considered when doing such work.

Each school has its own goals and obstacles, and each individual involved his or her own strengths and weaknesses. Administrators and faculty at both institutions come and go and work is often in transition. Communication is difficult at best under such real-world conditions. Additionally, there are few, if any, support systems in place for partnership work. The make-up of the school day, the demanding schedules of all involved, the competing priorities, and the ambiguous reward structures often lead to the logical question, "Now tell me again, why am I doing this?"

Yet, it is also important to remember just how gratifying partnership work can be for those engaged in it. Here is a chance for school and university faculty to finally break through old barriers, both real and perceived, and work together on issues that improve the lives of children. School faculty and administrators do not mind working hard on issues in which they believe their efforts will make a difference for their students. Similarly, university faculty involved in partnership work will often tell you that the days they spend in the schools working with teachers and children are the days they find most rewarding. These are the days that ground and connect the rest of their work. Hard work that makes sense is easier to do.

Partnership work can be simplified if one remains focused on the five Cs discussed above. They help to provide some structure to the work of building and maintaining strong school/university partnership while also keeping fundamental issues squarely in front of those engaged in the process. In this light, much of the work becomes easier because each successive step, when done well, is natural and logical. Each next move is the one that makes the most sense at that time. Such a strategy leads to the slow, steady progress I believe most helpful to long-term institutionalized change. It is my hope that the "five Cs" presented here will help make sense of the important work at hand. In doing so, partnership work will become "easier" and more faculty, both in the schools and at the university, will become involved. Only then will such efforts move from the arena of pilots or reform movements to the way business is done toward true renewal.

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