



Quind Pro Quo

A university-school district partnership improves the quality of teacher candidates and the knowledge and skills of high school graduates.

Several years ago, I was having lunch with Lynne Clark, the dean of professional studies at Western Connecticut State University, when she complained that too many recent high school graduates from my district did poorly on her university's placement tests and were required to take remedial reading and mathematics classes in their freshman year. She explained that the remedial courses, while charging the same tuition and fees as other university course work, did not count toward the graduation requirements. For the students, the need to enroll in these remediation courses was hardly a satisfying way to begin a university career. For the university, the fact that 62% of the state's freshmen required

remediation course work created an unnecessary expense to the school in terms of personnel and materials. The high schools had to do better!

Not to be outdone in terms of negativity, I expressed my concern that the teaching candidates who graduated from her university were not as well prepared as we hoped; that there were serious gaps in their pedagogical understanding; and that they were, in fact, the ones teaching our remediation-bound grads. The university had to do better!

Before dessert arrived, we came to the conclusion that we were describing the same problem from different perspectives. To address it, we moved past our circular firing-squad approach and instead employed a two-part strategy that has produced encouraging results.

The Teacher Strategy

The university expanded its preservice (pre-student teaching) experience to include a two-week observation/seminar period during which teaching candidates spend one week in Bethel (CT) High School and one week in Bethel (CT) Middle School. The students are assigned to specific mentor teachers and told to look for and make observational notes on the differentiation strategies, questioning skills, assessments, and behavior management strategies that they witness.

They also teach a short class, debrief several times a day with their mentors, and attend after-school seminars that are led by school administrators. The seminars include detailed information about interviewing, class planning and management, assess-

ment, and even teacher evaluation.

These teaching candidates ask lots of questions because they understand that they are with real-life experts who they may work with someday. Being part of an active school, dressing like a professional, having the guidance of mentor teachers, and listening to frontline administrators give the aspiring teachers a more-accurate picture of what it means to be part of an education community than university course work can.

University students are invited to attend school district professional development activities throughout the year. Sitting alongside veteran teachers in a workshop lets the students experience how professionals learn. School district personnel are also invited into university classrooms to teach such seminar topics as reading comprehension and formative assessment as they apply in actual classroom settings.

The third part of the partnership takes the form of a university tuition discount for employees in Bethel Public Schools who are pursuing more advanced study. This benefit encourages professional learning, relevance, and current thinking. All parties have valuable experience to offer.

The Student Strategy

In February, each high school junior completes the university's placement tests, which are graded, in part, by university personnel. Marking those tests gives university instructors an overview of students' skills and impressions that they can share with teachers in the district. The two groups are brought together to disaggregate the performance data and to identify global strengths and weaknesses that can be addressed during students' senior year. For example, if

the results from a science test indicate that students have a general inability to identify independent variables, teachers can remedy that shortcoming during the senior year. In fact, some large-scale curriculum adjustments to senior level courses have resulted from this process.

The test results also tell students what their college freshman placement in English, mathematics, and science could be 16 months before they graduate from high school. The advanced testing gives students a valid assessment of their abilities and serves as a wake-up call for some. They have a year to address any academic shortcomings, sometimes by changing their senior course schedules, before they take the test again for real. Parents, of course, like this assessment because it serves as an accurate gauge of their children's readiness to do collegiate work before they set foot in a university classroom and before that first tuition bill comes due.

The Results

There are two areas of positive outcomes from this partnership. First, it strengthens the quality of teacher candidates the university produces. The in-school training gives teaching candidates a better understanding of the expectations that public schools have of their teachers. The teaching candidates interact with teaching professionals at an earlier stage of their education and begin to feel the demands of the profession and the nature of professional learning. This experience provides a more relevant

backdrop for ensuing course work at the university.

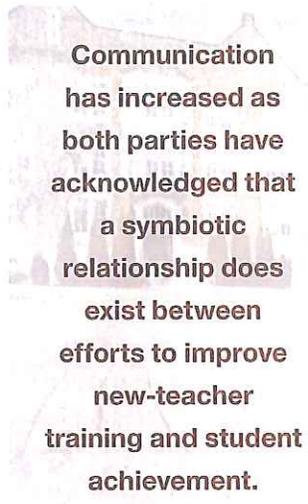
Second, the partnership has improved the knowledge and skills that seniors who graduate from Bethel High School have. The percentage of high school graduates who required remediation decreased from 62% to 34% in the first year, thus validating

the testing process to students and their parents and teachers. The high school has made changes in its curricula in response to test results, which has further decreased the number of students who have needed remediation after the junior testing. Senior students and their teachers know where their weaknesses are and can address those specific deficiencies. High school

and college classrooms are now better aligned.

This partnership has established an alliance between school district practitioners and university professors. Moreover, the school district personnel take more responsibility for contributing their expertise to developing the next generation of the profession. Communication has increased as both parties have acknowledged that a symbiotic relationship does exist between efforts to improve new-teacher training and student achievement. Our efforts have not gone unnoticed; the program is being replicated by other Connecticut state universities and high schools. And lastly, the occasional lunch with Dean Clark is far more pleasant. **PL**

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