

The Power of University-School-Community Partnerships
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I. An Introduction to Partnerships

In 2005, the president of the College of Charleston (SC) asked the Dean of the School of Education, Fran Welch, to develop a proposal to help expand the work of the College into the community. Welch created a proposal for a university-school partnership to improve local schools with low-performing students. The proposal originally received funding from the South Carolina legislature; today its funding comes directly from the College. The Center for Partnerships to Improve Education (CPIE) was born in 2005. A planning team of teachers and administrators met with College of Charleston representatives and Charleston County School District (CCSD) leadership to organize CPIE's long- and short-term goals and create three strands of partnership work—Teaching and Learning, Research, and Community Outreach. In late 2005, Paula Egelson became CPIE's full-time director. Today CPIE staff work in the Charleston area with four schools with low-performing students. CPIE staff performs intensive contact with a school for three to four years before slowly transitioning out. Local nonprofit groups, governmental agencies, the faith-based community, and other institutions of higher learning work with CPIE to make positive change in schools.

The basis for the partnership came from the work of Hal Smith of the Annenberg Institute of Reform (2005). Smith stated, "The imperative to raise achievement for all students provides an opportunity to go beyond a school system and create an educational system: a web of connections between schools and community partners that provide the support that children and youth need." In addition, the approach that the CPIE staff used built upon the research of Joyce Epstein, director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University. Her theory of overlapping spheres of influence described the shared responsibilities of home, school, and community for students' learning and development (2002).

Districts and universities often agree to participate in partnerships in response to some type of crisis, whether it is a lack of school leadership, a declining school enrollment, escalating school violence, poor teacher and student morale, or negative student achievement results. In addition, school districts and universities take part in partnerships because they hope to gain something—whether it is resources, a solution to a problem, change for the good, or prestige.

Ideally, partnerships between universities and districts are productive and long term. Yet partnerships between universities and schools have the potential to be fraught with challenges. For instance, CPIE staff have found that "revolving door" leaders at the district level is detrimental to a school due to changing of goals on a regular basis, a variety of competing programs and differing areas of district emphasis. Goodlad and Sirotnek (1988) documented additional challenges (and solutions). They noted the following:

- 1.) There is a possible culture clash between school districts and universities at the onset of a partnership. The norms, roles, and expectations are entirely different between the two entities. Universities are often about theory, precision, and long-term planning, while

districts/schools focus on practice, utility, and the day-to-day complexities of operating a school.

- 2.) Working with Schools of Education (SOE) can be a challenge. Historically, SOEs can be difficult to manage or govern; professors can see themselves as free agents with research agendas that may not align with school reform. A commitment to community vs. scholarship is something that educators must continually weigh.
- 3.) For partnership success, both the mission and vision of the partnership need to be visible and supported by all levels within the district and the university.
- 4.) The funding of partnerships can be a challenge, particularly in times of economic uncertainty. Many partnership activities require personnel, but funding is necessary to support the work in schools.
- 5.) Collaboration between districts and universities should include inquiry and action. In addition, collaboration needs to be modeled by the stakeholders on a regular basis.
- 6.) Like it or not, partnership work is ambiguous and not sequential and concrete. Although it can be uncomfortable, stakeholders must learn to live with it.
- 7.) In the early stages of work, many partnership groups want to “get a quick win” to demonstrate that something is actually going on. It is critical, however, to develop structures and processes of a partnership and lines of communication before moving on to actual work in schools.
- 8.) The debates of “theory vs. practice” or “talk vs. action” should be nonissues in the implementation of partnerships. Being open to creating new ways of doing the work needs to be paramount.
- 9.) Avoid over- or under-structuring partnerships as neither can move forward or be sustained. Coordination should be focused on where the real work is happening.
- 10.) Partnership leadership should be spread around and not concentrated in one or two individuals. Shared leadership is crucial for partnership sustainability.

How does the CPIE measure up when taking into consideration Sirotnik and Goodlad’s partnership lessons? In many ways we have been fortunate in our partnership work. Since the origination of CPIE in 2005, school district leadership, city of Charleston mayoral leadership and the deanship of the School of Education, Health, and Human Performance have been consistent and steady. The Dean, the Superintendent, and the Mayor work together in a highly collaborative manner for the good of public education in the Charleston community. We realize that this is somewhat of a unique situation in comparison to other cities across the country.

At the onset of CPIE, we decided it was critical to gain the trust of educators in the schools we worked in. It was not an easy task but it was accomplished over time. There were competing

demands on teachers and they were fearful that the College had come in to “take over the school.” We also felt it was necessary to be grassroots in our efforts rather than top down. When we entered schools we asked, “What do you need and what do you want in order to be successful?” If the request was reasonable and sound, we honored it. This really built our credibility in schools.

Although our funding and personnel have diminished over the years, we have had money to operate CPIE. We also learned to be quite flexible in our partnership work. This includes when events were scheduled (lots of weekend work), the creation of our partnership network (it took time at some schools), and meshing different leadership personalities. Our three strands of Teaching and Learning, Research, and Community Outreach complemented the notion of theory and action intertwined.

When we entered into partnership with our first school, Burke High School, we felt a need to show the district and the community that we were committed to making positive changes. We started an afterschool tutoring program to help Burke students pass the state competency test. It blew up in our faces. Very few students attended the sessions and those who did attend did not need the help.

Probably the greatest area of contention has centered on the role of School of Education, Health, and Human Performance professors in partnership schools. Professors, pressured by tenure and promotion requirements, have very specific research agendas. Many times their research agendas did not mesh with the work that needed to be done in partnership schools and professors felt left out of the process. This resulted in conflict and resentment on all sides. We are attempting to remedy this situation.

II. Welcome to CPIE Partnerships in the Charleston Area

Partnerships look differently in a variety of CPIE schools. The context is definitely different for each partnership school. Here is an overview:

1. Baptist Hill High School: A Single Gender Course for Teachers—In 2004, when James Winbush became principal at rural Baptist Hill High School (in Hollywood, SC), improvement was necessary in several areas. The small school was located in an impoverished community and there was not a push for completing school. In addition, the students desperately required supervision; they routinely roamed the hallways freely while school was in session and those who were in class were often disruptive. Winbush’s primary task was putting into place an operational school discipline plan.

Once the school discipline plan was achieved, he examined ways to motivate students to succeed and to build a quality instructional program. He believed single gender instruction was one strategy to help achieve these goals. Winbush studied the single gender research and examples of this type of instruction and decided to implement it in the school’s Freshman Academy. He soon realized that teachers needed targeted professional development in this area in order to make the program a success. The curriculum specialist at the school, Helen Plexico, created a semester-long, after-school course for teachers that was funded by CPIE. If teachers completed the pass/fail course

successfully (by attending class and completing assignments), then CPIE paid the course fees. Teachers also received professional development renewal credit from the College of Charleston's Professional Development Center.

2. Memminger School of Global Studies' Program for Three- and Four-Year-Olds—Memminger Elementary (serving students ages three to grade six), is located across from the downtown College of Charleston campus and has a long and proud history in Charleston. It is located in a neighborhood that includes million dollar homes and a large housing project. In the early 1900s, Memminger was a normal training school for women and then became a public high school for girls. It was later transformed into an elementary school. Today it is the Memminger School of Global Studies, a partial magnet in the CCSD. Memminger's student population has changed throughout the years. Originally white and primarily affluent students attended this downtown public school. With desegregation, Memminger's students were African-American and impoverished. When the partial magnet was established in 2009, one of the primary goals was to diversify the school.

One way to change the student population and promote improvement was to start with its primary program. With assistance from the College of Charleston's Early Childhood Development Center and its director Candace Jaruszewicz and Principal Anthony Dixon; the CCSD; and CPIE, a program for three- and four-year-old students was created for 20 neighborhood children. Memminger veteran teacher Jodi Gibson was hired as the teacher. The new program was announced to the community in Summer 2009, parents submitted applications for their children, and students were selected for the program via lottery. Early childhood students started school at Memminger in late August 2009.

3. Berkeley Alternative School: A Review of Its Program with Recommendations—Berkeley Alternative Program, located in the Berkeley County School District (SC), became a partner with CPIE in 2009. The small Moncks Corner (SC) school serves up to 120 middle school and high school at-risk students who are facing expulsion from the Berkeley County District. Students are usually referred to Berkeley Alternative by a hearing officer and are at the school for a limited period of time, usually a semester. They then return to their home school. Don Brown, a veteran principal in the district, works as the principal. Classes are small at Berkeley Alternative and teachers are attentive to students' needs. Due to the focused and individualized attention students receive at Berkeley Alternative, it is not unusual for them to wish to stay at Berkeley Alternative rather than return to their home school.

Renee McCaslin serves as CPIE's representative at Berkeley Alternative. Early in the 2009–2010 school year, the Berkeley County central office representative, Claire Freeman, requested that CPIE work with the central office in reviewing the Berkeley Alternative program and make recommendations for the future. Paula Egelson, CPIE's director, and Sophia Lee, a College of Charleston honors student, interviewed key stakeholders at Berkeley Alternative; McCaslin interviewed principals from the home schools; Freeman accessed the pertinent data on past and present Berkeley Alternative students; and Laura Donnelly, an external evaluator, wrote the evaluation report.

4. Burke External Partners—Burke High School, located in downtown Charleston, is 100 years old. Initially a vocational school for African-American students, it currently is a comprehensive school for seventh- through twelfth-graders located on a renovated campus. Today it serves primarily minority students from surrounding neighborhoods. From 1995–2005 Burke High was plagued by poor student performance, “revolving door” leadership, ineffective teachers, and little parental involvement. For six years, it failed to meet federal performance goals for Adequate Yearly Progress. Things changed for the better when Charles Benton became principal of the school in 2006.

Community partners had always been a part of the school due to its rich history, alumni support, and Burke’s location in the downtown area. When CPIE began its partnership with Burke High School, however, one thing was evident. Although many community partners wanted to assist the school, the partners did their work in isolation without communicating with school leaders and one another. In addition, the support work was not targeted and sometimes was unnecessary. To effectively mobilize these volunteers, CPIE staff members and Burke school leaders set about communicating and meeting with the community partners.

5. Clark Academy’s At-Risk Student Professional Development Course—Since 2008, CPIE has been in partnership with Clark Academy, a school for at-risk high school students in Charleston County. Principal Andrew HaLevi has been at the school for two years. Clark faculty members are primarily white and middle class and the majority of students are African-American and poor. Clark averages 100 students who are at risk for dropping out of school. Guidance counselors at the students’ home schools either refer students to Clark or parents do a self referral. Many Clark students were not involved in school activities (band, theater, sports, and clubs) of their large comprehensive high schools and prefer the personal attention they receive at Clark Academy.

Renee McCaslin, CPIE’s representative at Clark Academy, met with HaLevi during Summer 2009 to determine the best way to serve the school. They decided that offering targeted professional development to the faculty in the area of the at-risk learner over the 2009–2010 school year was most needed. McCaslin met with the teachers on a monthly basis to provide professional development throughout the school year.

6. School Improvement and How It Works Contextually—based on the results of a school improvement panel which include educators Juanita Middleton, James Winbush, Charles Benton, Archie Franchini, and Dana Mong from the CPIE Best Practices in School Improvement Institute that took place on March 26, 2010.

Section III: Key Players in the Partnerships Share Their Experiences

The following describes the partnerships in detail.

Baptist Hill’s Single Gender Course

In Summer 2008, curriculum specialist Helen Plexico designed the single gender class to educate and train the Baptist Hill faculty. She taught the class in Fall 2008 and Spring 2009. CPIE sponsored the single gender program at BHHS by providing the textbooks, supplying

Plexico's salary, and supporting the program through workshops and other forms of technical assistance. Plexico used book studies to increase knowledge base, but the course depended heavily on experiences from the classrooms as they occurred.

"Teachers were able to apply learned strategies immediately and report back to the class about their success," says Plexico. "The course challenged the stereotypes associated with gender education, and all teachers involved in the course related that their instruction improved during this time."

Nicola Williams, an assistant professor of literacy and culturally responsive pedagogy in the Department of Teacher Education at the College of Charleston, acted as liaison between Baptist Hill and CPIE.

"There seems to be continued excitement this year [from teachers and students] about the single gender class," notes Williams. The excitement is not surprising given the astonishing changes that have occurred at the school since the single gender classes were first implemented. According to Baptist Hill's principal, James Winbush, the retention rate for ninth- and tenth-graders has improved by 70 percent.

"I used to have to offer a separate class for kids who had failed ninth grade," says Winbush. "That's not necessary now."

In addition, since the single gender classes were implemented, grades have improved and class discipline problems have declined. Referrals have steadily declined over time—from 3,000 in 2004 to 1,200 in 2010.

The single gender class enables teachers to design their lesson plans to be more focused on instructional techniques that attract and engage students. Donnia Richardson, a science teacher at Baptist Hill, says that teachers have learned how male and female students typically respond to various instructional situations and, as a result, have tried to implement specific strategies within the single gender classroom.

"Students may find the gender strategies more appealing to their particular learning styles," says Richardson. "For example, boys typically prefer movement while girls generally prefer collaborative assignments."

Winbush says that the majority of parents think the single gender classroom is a great idea.

"You've got to remember that this is a school that has been at-risk from the get-go, but over the past three years, all of that has changed," says Winbush. "With the reduction in discipline problems, as well as the improved grades, a more positive focus and energy have developed throughout the school."

Winbush notes that while girls tend to immediately "blast off" in single gender classrooms, boys typically pick up steam in their third year. But Plexico says that students understand why the genders are separated and are OK with the separation.

“You can walk into any classroom and ask students what single gender classes have done for them, and they will speak very positively about it,” says Plexico.

Memminger’s Program for Three- and Four-Year-Olds

During the 2009–2010 school year, Memminger launched a new all-day program for three- and four-year-old students. Those heading up the program wanted to increase diversity within the school, so they created a diverse population of students based on experience, socioeconomic backgrounds, and ethnicity. Jodi Gibson, a veteran teacher at Memminger, jumped at the chance to teach the preschool class, and she has been pleased by how the year has unfolded.

“I’ve taught here for 16 years and this is probably the most successful year I’ve ever had teaching,” says Gibson, who attributes the success to a number of things, including the academic and social/emotional goals that the children have accomplished. “There is also a great sense of community in the class,” says Gibson. “The children work together as they actively participate in their learning. And the parents have been helpful and very supportive of the class.”

Memminger’s principal Anthony Dixon thinks one reason the program has flourished is because they targeted the right age students.

“Parents are always looking for structured early educational experiences that offer a strong educational component,” says Dixon. This fun-filled, jam-packed, learning-centered program certainly delivers. The students start school at 8 a.m. with center time where they work on skills like counting and letter recognition. Children also rotate to a writing station, as well as computer, housekeeping, and block centers. Then comes group time when Gibson reads a book to the students and they discuss the story elements and sequencing of a story. The children also sometimes act out stories. Outdoor play time is followed by lunch.

“The most challenging part of the day has been getting the kids to walk in a straight line down to the cafeteria!” says Gibson with a laugh.

After lunch the class engages in math, science, and social studies activities on the Smart Board. The Smart Board is a large, interactive computer screen that is situated on the wall; the children can manipulate what is on the screen simply by touching it with their hands.

“The students are very interested in technology,” says Gibson. “It’s amazing how advanced three- and four-year-olds are when it comes to technology. Any new concept that is introduced to them, they take in like a sponge.”

Once a week the students attend special classes in art, dance, gym, music, and Spanish. Not surprisingly, Gibson says that the students’ social skills and language development have both increased significantly.

The partnership with the College of Charleston means that Memminger students often get invited to campus events. In addition, the college students drop in to volunteer in the classroom at least once a week, which the children love.

“The commitment and expertise of everyone involved to create high-quality opportunities for as many children as possible has helped make this program a success,” says Candace Jaruszewicz, director of the Early Childhood Development Center on the College of Charleston’s campus. “In addition, the opportunity for ongoing dialogue and willingness on the part of administration to let the program grow at its own pace has provided a level of support and encouragement that keeps the energy level high.”

Dixon acknowledges that the partnership has been very successful.

“Once we secure more funding, this class will be worth expanding,” he says.

Berkeley Alternative School: Alternative Education Program

Berkeley Alternative is Berkeley County’s disciplinary alternative school, serving students in grades 6–12 who range in age from 11 to 19. Students are sent by their home high school or middle school to this program prior to expulsion and the students stay anywhere from 45 days to an entire school year.

“It’s the student’s last safety net before expulsion,” says Claire Freeman, a Berkeley County school district administrator.

In Fall 2009, a partnership formed between Berkeley County School District and CPIE where CPIE staff provided staff development for the Berkeley teachers to better prepare them for working with the alternative learner population.

“The conversations that have come out of those monthly sessions with CPIE staff have been invaluable because before the partnership, teachers had not received much staff development regarding the particulars of working with the alternative learner,” says Freeman.

Renee McCaslin, CPIE’s drop-out prevention specialist and liaison to Berkeley, says that “the door at Berkeley is constantly swinging with so many kids coming in and out. As a result, the faculty has had a hard time grasping how to help students improve once they return to their home school.”

Working with McCaslin provided the Berkeley staff with strategies to build a supportive community within the school that enhanced their program. Denise Taylor, a teacher at the school, says that many of Berkeley’s students are very capable and smart, however, their behavior has had a negative impact on their education.

“Renee guided us in the development of transitional supports and interventions for our students,” says Taylor.

To assist the school's faculty in determining how to best move forward, in Fall 2009 McCaslin and other CPIE employees began a data-collection project by interviewing the deputy superintendent, school principal, guidance counselor, and past students. Questions posed to students pertained to the students' experience at Berkeley—whether they felt they were successful at the school, whether they received the support they needed while there, and how they felt when they returned to their home school.

The data was compiled throughout the 2009–2010 school year. Compilation of data was completed in June 2010, and CPIE staff analyzed the data and offered suggestions on both a district and school level.

“Results of this study [has] help[ed] everyone in the partnership learn what needs to be done differently in the future,” says Freeman.

Taylor reports that this year they have had far fewer expulsions as compared to previous years. They have also had more of their students return successfully to their home schools.

“Our expulsion rate last year was 25%,” says Taylor. “At this point, our rate of expulsion is at 12%. That is a major improvement! And I truly believe that our partnership has had a major impact on our results this year.”

McCaslin says that the partnership has been beneficial on both sides. Not only has CPIE helped Berkeley improve, but she says she has also grown from the experience as well.

“This partnership helped me understand the community's needs better,” says McCaslin. “And that's partly because Berkeley administration let us do things the right way. They allowed us and the staff to take the time to get to know one another throughout the year so that we could work together and address the needs of the students.”

Don Brown, Berkeley's principal, is pleased with what has come from the collaboration with CPIE.

“The CPIE staff made us continuously think about what we were doing and how we could help our customer—the student,” says Brown. “The partnership has been a success because we received very personalized staff development sessions throughout the year with topics that pertained to us and to our students.”

Taylor agrees that the partnership has been a huge success.

“Our staff was shown ways to understand and help the kinds of students that we work with,” says Taylor. “Although we have been through trainings before on this topic, this course presented us with new topics and strategies. Renee always made us feel appreciated and honored. She made us really want to look outside the box to [help] our students.”

Taylor adds that having the College of Charleston staff visit the school to observe and interview the students was really beneficial.

“The [interviews] allowed Renee to tailor the course to meet our specific needs,” says Taylor. “That attention to our circumstance greatly improved the impact of the partnership.”

In the future, Taylor says that she would like to see more interaction between the College of Charleston students and Berkeley students.

“A mentoring program where the college student gets credit for working with our students would be very helpful. An overnight visit to the college for selected students may be a life-changing event for some of them,” says Taylor. “Many of our students feel that college is impossible for them. I think this partnership could change that.”

Burke’s External Partners

“To quote the African proverb, ‘It takes a village to raise a child,’ that is how we feel when it comes to partnering in the community,” says Andrew Lewis, a College of Charleston Health and Human Performance professor, who has been actively involved in community partnerships at Burke. “It takes a community to raise a school.”

Lewis says that without the community connections, students cannot take full advantage of the educational knowledge they have gained because they have a hard time seeing how what they have learned can potentially be applied to the community around them. When external partners teamed with Burke, however, they brought with them a different perspective in terms of teaching and learning and professional development. They also brought a wealth of knowledge, plentiful resources, and many enriching, real-life, service learning opportunities to the students. For instance, in the past few years, students at Burke have had the opportunity to shadow various occupations, visit a live television set, tour a distribution business, attend a Hollywood movie premiere, and listen, in person, to a successful author speak.

In addition, the external partners played an integral part in getting Burke’s students writing on a regular basis. And not only did the students write several books, but they also *published* their books.

“The external partnerships gave teachers the courage to promote writing in a different way,” says Juanita Middleton, who worked for three years as a principal coach at Burke. “I don’t think a lot of these youngsters ever realized that they could write so well.”

The partnership with the College of Charleston’s Addlestone Library enabled Burke students to obtain a library card and gain access to the library’s books, laptops, and other resources.

Charles Benton, Burke’s principal, says that the external partners have had a defining impact on Burke’s teachers, students, and parents.

“Any time you have the community supporting you, it makes a big difference in the day-to-day activities at a school,” says Benton. “The community’s support has dramatically improved the morale here at Burke.”

Parents have certainly taken notice of the positive changes. Though initially skeptical of people coming into their school, it did not take long for parents to recognize and appreciate the amazing opportunities that were opening up for their children.

“The external partnerships have given the school a better sense of community and given our partners a firsthand understanding of many of the positive things that are going on at Burke,” says Lewis, who believes that the partnership concept is one that should continue to be nurtured so that schools and communities can better understand each other’s needs and abilities.

“Sometimes there are gaps in what people think schools should be doing and what schools are actually capable of doing,” says Lewis. “Employers want certain types of prospective employees coming out of high school and college, so it would be great if our schools can implement projects and programs that will make students more employable upon graduation.”

Clark Academy’s At-Risk Student Professional Development Course

Clark Academy’s At-Risk Student Professional Development Course was devised at the end of the 2008–2009 school year when Andrew HaLevi, Clark’s principal, expressed to Paula Egelson, CPIE’s director, his desire for a professional development program that would focus specifically on at-risk learners who had not been successful in a traditional school setting.

“Although established for students needing an alternative setting, Clark’s program was largely traditional in terms of pedagogy and curriculum,” says HaLevi, who subsequently got his faculty and staff involved in the discussion.

“We felt that once the faculty had the chance to talk about Clark’s at-risk learners, we would then be able to devise new ways to reach students,” says HaLevi. Ultimately, a year-long professional development course was created that involved Renee McCaslin, a drop-out prevention specialist from the College of Charleston. She led monthly discussions about at-risk learners. During these sessions staff explored many different aspects of the at-risk learner, including: 1) What does it mean to be at-risk? 2) What students at Clark are at-risk? 3) What is characteristic of Clark students? (e.g., What do they excel at? What do they have difficulties with, both in and outside of school?) 4) What behavior issues does faculty have at Clark and how can these issues be addressed in a productive manner? 5) How can faculty make learning meaningful to the at-risk student?

Jordan Hoover-Dempsey Cooper, a social studies teacher at Clark, says that the sessions were constructive and revealed a lot about how Clark teachers feel about their students.

“As a faculty—which includes teachers, the guidance department, and the director—we worked together to better understand our students,” says Hoover-Dempsey Cooper. “One thing that was apparent to me was that this process of truly learning about our students and trying to reach them is both difficult and continuous. Through these sessions, I found that respecting the student and setting boundaries for students is key when trying to make a

connection with them. Without a connection, meaningful learning is much more difficult to achieve.”

Though each month’s class had a specific focus, the class was left open-ended enough to allow for spontaneous discussion.

“I was pleased to see how highly engaged the Clarke faculty was,” says McCaslin. “They welcomed me and were always willing to participate and have great discussions.”

HaLevi says that CPIE was a huge help in developing a school-wide approach towards those students who were not meeting the program’s goals. Prior to working with CPIE, the program director would decide whether a struggling student would continue in the program. But HaLevi did not like that strategy.

“I wanted to include teacher input,” explains HaLevi. “But there were challenges involving the process. We wondered if we should strive for consensus or simply invite input. We had other questions as well. So [the faculty] spent an afternoon [with McCaslin] developing a process [for how to best help] our struggling students. We wouldn’t have been able to do that without the CPIE partnership.”

Too often professional development run by schools is met with resentment or apathy on the part of the teachers, perhaps because they cannot always see how the professional development is applicable to their situation. This was certainly not the case at Clark, however, where faculty met specifically to discuss Clark’s students.

“The course gave the teachers a time to reflect and share their own best practices,” says McCaslin. “The faculty taught one another. As a result, a positive energy and unity was developed among the teachers.”

HaLevi reports that the program exceeded both his expectations and the expectations of the participants.

“Our faculty and staff enjoyed the professional development. In addition, the College of Charleston facilitators made a point to encourage feedback and to continually reshape the program to meet the needs and interests at Clark,” says HaLevi. “Now we’re working on using what we have learned this year in order to make changes that will positively impact the students in our program.”

McCaslin says that one nice thing about the partnership is that even after the course was completed, communication between CPIE and the school has continued.

“I stop in and visit weekly,” says McCaslin. “Checking in and working together on a regular basis is what makes a partnership thrive.”

Section IV: Working as Partners to Improve Schools

The partnerships described in this publication are specific in nature and support the overall school improvement work in a particular educational setting. What about partnering to improve schools in general?

CPIE staff had the opportunity to talk with our partners in school improvement as a panel and discuss critical components of the school reform process. Participants included principal James Winbush (rural Baptist Hill High School), principal Charles Benton (urban Burke High School), principal Juanita Middleton (urban North Charleston High School), central office administrator Archie Franchini (Berkeley School District), and program director Dana Mong (Community in Schools). These are all individuals who work intensively in schools with low-performing students and have been successful in helping to improve grades, attitudes, and morale in these schools. Our partners all discussed three critical components to foster school improvement. They include: 1) teacher quality, 2) student outcomes, and 3) school environment.

Teacher Quality

It was apparent from the partner discussion that the strategies associated with improving teacher quality were specific, targeted, and planned. The group discussed specific teacher recruitment, mentoring, and professional development opportunities.

Teacher recruitment strategies included developing home grown teachers and expanding the high school teacher cadet program. Discussants believed they could teach beginning teachers about lesson plans and new instructional methods, but they had to have applicants who wanted to be at their schools and had a positive and child-centered approach to teaching and learning from the onset.

They believed effective mentoring of new teachers by veteran teachers was critical for their success, whether support was in the area of classroom management or academics. The idea of new teacher support groups was also mentioned as a method for retaining and improving teachers.

All the educational leaders believed that creating a sense of family among the faculty was crucial so they would work together and support one another's efforts. One way to accomplish this was to establish professional learning communities within schools where teachers planned instruction and assessment and solved problems together.

Our school leaders were clear that professional development for teachers had to be targeted and ongoing to meet teachers' specific needs. They believed a shotgun approach (short-term and not targeted professional development) was neither desirable nor effective.

Administrators often asked teachers questions like, "Are your students learning?" and "How do you know?"

In addition to pursuing strong content knowledge, school leaders acknowledged that teachers should have a good sense of humor and genuinely like children. They added that teachers needed to get to know their students and understand their culture in order to enhance student education.

School leaders also felt that the teacher evaluation instrument, if used properly, was an effective tool for improving teacher quality. This process included regular classroom observations and feedback by an administrator. the teacher providing continual documentation about ongoing instruction and assessment, goal setting, and the documentation of teacher growth.

Student Outcomes

Our school partners emphasized that the assessment of teacher quality and the assessment of student outcomes were deeply intertwined. All the leaders stated that decisions about achieving outstanding student outcomes had to be data driven. They stressed the need for upfront, clearly described high expectations and rigor for both teachers and students.

School leaders discussed the negative perceptions in the community about schools with low-performing students and how school staff could work to change the negative image. As an example, Baptist Hill High School dropped its technical classes and raised its expectation for students.

Specifically, school representatives reported about initiatives that supported strong student outcomes like year-long block English and math classes, Freshman Academies, student-led conferences with teachers and parents, and school-community partnerships like Communities in Schools and CPIE that supported student growth. Leaders also mentioned formative assessments of students like Measures of Academic Progress, state-level content summative assessments, and opportunities for student credit recovery online.

School Environment

Administrators noted that administrator and teacher longevity at a school was a real plus. “Revolving door” principals and teachers at a school site led to inconsistencies in expectations, instruction, and management of students. One leader noted that this was his fourth year at a high school and students were just now beginning to trust him. He believed the trust developed slowly because before he arrived, the school had endured seven different principals in nine years.

Others noted that a school’s history—long or short, eventful or calm—can impact its current environment. Principals agreed that there is not a cookie cutter approach to a positive school environment. What works in one school might not work in another.

Section V: Conclusion

University-school-community partnerships really *can* impact everyone involved—including the school administrators, teachers, parents, and most importantly the students. Improving communication and trust among and between staff and students, boosting school morale, molding and maintaining strong leadership, and ultimately improving student achievement all takes a good deal of time, effort, and patience on everyone’s part. No effective change can happen quickly, nor could it be maintained without the implementation of the necessary steps and the cooperation of both the school and community players.

Effective and amicable partnerships take time to create, build, maintain, and flourish, but the end result is well worth the effort. CPIE's partnership with the five schools mentioned in this publication was successful for two reasons: constant collaboration and clear communication. At each school the administrators, teachers, and CPIE staff talked openly and honestly about how to best meet the needs of the students. Focused communication amongst everyone involved meant that nothing happened by random chance. As a result of implementing these various programs, all five schools have gained additional knowledge and information, which will help administrators and teachers determine how to move forward in the future.

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