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Universities and Schools

The Two Sides of the Street and in Between

Successful school-university partnerships must be founded on a strong, mutual understanding of and respect for the culture and strengths each institution brings to the collaboration. Leadership roles in effective school-university partnerships will be diffuse. Faculty members from schools and universities share an equal responsibility to articulate, establish, and direct the collaborative activities that lead both schools and universities to improve themselves through the partnership.

Ultimately, the leadership role of the partnership director is crucial. She or he must know how to work in both school and university cultures and to lead while walking among and between them.

We are two educators who have spent our professional lives in either university or public school settings or both. We have walked both sides of the street and in between; we have learned the unique geography of each and have struggled to find a common ground. For the past three years, we have worked together in the Southern Maine Partnership—Lynne Miller as executive director and university professor, and Dick Barnes as a district superintendent and one of the founding members of the partnership. In this article, we develop understandings from our own experiences, reflection, and insights about what leadership means and what leaders do as they initiate and maintain a viable school-university collaboration.

Two Sides of the Street: Universities and Schools

Universities and public schools, though both engaged in the educational enterprise, function very differently as organizations, cultures, and work places. As Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller have noted, public schools, despite current efforts to restructure them, are still organized around bureaucratic principles. They have a distinct hierarchy of roles, a clear division of labor, and a top-down decision-making structure. Universities, on the other hand, are organized along more collegial lines. University faculty—unlike their public school counterparts—are involved in hiring and firing decisions, monitor

their own ranks, and function autonomously, often outside of a formal bureaucratic structure. There are constraints and limitations on their work, of course, but as a rule university professors act more like free agents than team players.

The reward structure for university faculty reflects this more collegial orientation. While teaching is important, it is at least accorded equal, and frequently less than equal, value with scholarly work geared to an audience of peers. University professors may derive intrinsic rewards from students, but they also depend on a more cosmopolitan and professional reference group for both their sense of worth and an assessment of their contribution to their field. Public school faculty, on the other hand, depend much more on students for their rewards and for their sense of efficacy as professionals.

In addition, university and public school faculty members serve different clients. For public school educators, the clients are immediate and concrete—the students they teach. For university educators the clients may be more remote and diffuse. They include students in university classes, practicing teachers in schools, other educators, and academicians. There is a good deal of tension among these client groups. What is valued by one is not so valued by the others. University faculty are only remotely connected to the public school students. While professors of medicine, law, or architecture are expected to maintain direct contact with their profession's clients by performing surgery on patients, filing briefs with courts, or designing buildings, education professors are not so encouraged. University faculty members who maintain an affinity for teaching K–12 students are not rewarded or encouraged for their efforts by the university, even though it earns them credibility with public school faculty. For professors of education, this represents a conflict of allegiance that public school faculty neither experience nor understand. On the one hand, there is the push toward the practical world of schools; on the other is the pull toward the theoretical and abstract world of the academy.

It is often stated that theory and practice are inextricably linked. The adage that there is nothing so practical as a good theory guides much of university-based research and inquiry. For most public school educators, however, the connection is tenuous, if not downright suspect. The conventional wisdom that universities *produce* knowledge and that public schools *use* knowledge is challenged daily in schools where "what works" takes precedence over "what the research says." How else can we account for the continued acceptance of instructional practices that fly in the face of sociological and cognitive psychological investigation?

Because of such differences in school and university cultures, misunderstandings are bound to exist when the two institutions make an effort to work together as partners. These misunderstandings are so commonplace

as to be predictable. For instance, the assumption often is that universities can "fix" schools. This notion derives from the knowledge-production orientation of universities and the aura of expertise and authority that it promotes. Because the view from the academy is more cosmopolitan and less parochial than the view from the public school, university professors are perceived as having an understanding of the wider picture and the capacity to prescribe the cure for ailing schools.

In fact, many university faculty have difficulty in acknowledging that school people have anything to offer to the world of ideas. The university affiliation encourages them, often subtly, to view themselves as having privileged access to knowledge and wisdom not afforded to public school practitioners. Structures and norms in both universities and schools support this notion of privileged access. University faculty are provided time and resources to engage in reading and reflection. Compared to school faculty, they are given fewer courses and students, better library services, more secretarial support, and encouragement to attend professional conferences. School faculty are encouraged to see themselves as consumers of the knowledge generated by university faculty. They are rewarded financially for taking courses at the university, but are not encouraged to attend conferences or engage in research. Given this sense of privileged access to professional knowledge, university faculty do not, as a matter of course, accept as valid the craft knowledge that public educators possess. There is also the general reluctance on the part of those inside the academy to seek the opinions of those outside of it.

In addition, public school educators carry misunderstandings with them when they enter into school/university partnerships. A common perception exists among school people that universities have little of value to offer schools, that the university is, in effect, a noncandidate in the search for solutions to the problems they face. Research findings are, from this perspective, rendered useless, because they are naive, impractical, and ultimately not related to the "real world" of public education. This wholesale dismissal of the university's role in school improvement often is unconscious or politely implicit. As public school educators, we often accord professors a degree of social respect, congratulate ourselves on keeping current on research, and then continue with our work lives, virtually untouched by the messages the university had communicated. The area of teacher education comes under particularly harsh attack from public school educators. Teacher preparation courses are dismissed as "too theoretical," not practical, and generally useless. Public school educators often are convinced they can "fix" the university, just as professors believe they can "fix" the schools.

The renewal of schools and universities is intrinsically linked.

Our experience tells us that no institution can "fix" another; each has to tend to itself. Nonetheless, we believe that schools and universities do have something to offer each other, that theory informs practice, that practice informs theory, and that the renewal of schools and the renewal of universities are intrinsically linked. Because we acknowledge the two conflicting cultures that schools and universities represent, and because we understand the misunderstandings each institution has about the other, we believe it is essential to create a third culture—a haven from both university and school, where ideas can be exchanged, where theory and practice can clash and reconcile, and where university and public school faculty can reclaim their membership in a common profession.

In such a culture, school and university faculty each acknowledge the other as both researchers and practitioners and as members of the same profession. Together, they share an understanding of what's worth knowing and doing. They're interested in students as learners and how they experience schooling. They focus on the practice of pedagogy, how adults learn and work in schools and universities, and on improving the climate for teaching and learning. The school and university faculty who have joined to create a common culture know that it is not an easy task, but it is not so difficult as some would have us believe. Essential to the invention of the new culture is an expanded notion of what leadership is and who is capable of assuming it.

Learning and Leading: New Roles for School and University Educators

Leadership in school-university partnerships is shared and diffuse; it rests not only with the designated director of the enterprise but with superintendents, principals, and public school and university faculty as well. The Southern Maine Partnership, which links fifteen school districts and the University of Southern Maine, is quite unusual in its organization and decision-making structure. Yet, we think that it represents concerns about leadership and participation that may be generalized to other collaborative efforts.

In our partnership, university and public school educators work together in a wide range of role and task groups. For example, we have groups that focus on mathematics education, literacy, K-8 schooling, middle level education, secondary schools, teaching for social responsibility, multicultural education, and counseling in schools. Though loosely connected, the groups share a commitment to exploring issues of teaching and learning, assessment, and school renewal. In the past year, the renewal of teacher education has made its way into the agenda of these

groups as well. Autonomous and nonhierarchical in nature, each group defines its own agenda and a *modus operandi*. Most groups involve university and school faculty; some involve principals as well. A leadership forum draws district and school administrators together for discussions of the issues that leaders face in changing schools. In addition, a separate superintendents' group meets regularly and discusses the general direction of the partnership, but does not, however, make decisions affecting the work of the individual groups.

We have found that in our partnership, the district superintendent's role and disposition are critical. The superintendent creates and sustains an appropriate vision of what the partnership can become and sets realistic expectations for partnership activities and participation in them.

> "As superintendent, when I encourage teachers to drive to the university, to sit down to meet with their colleagues from the university as well as from other schools, I am promoting a different sense of professionalism—one that cannot develop from site-based staff development activity. In my role as superintendent, I view the partnership as offering an environment that is stress-free, where teachers can discuss, create, and build new visions for instructional practice in an arena that is free from the pressures of both daily routines and the deadlines of intra-district commitments."

Superintendents take a leadership stance, then, that encourages, but does not require, partnership participation and which acknowledges the authority of teachers and respects their ability to shape their own professional development. In addition, the superintendent creates an ethos in the district that encourages, rather than blocks, teacher-initiated change.

> "One thing I've noticed about teachers who are active in the partnership is that they never say, 'That's a good idea, but it could never work in my school.' Instead, teachers assume that good ideas will be considered seriously. It's the lack of negativism that strikes me most and I think that's due to the fact that partnership teachers feel supported by their superintendents. They know we're committed to the same things they are."

The university's counterpart to the school superintendent is the dean of the College of Education. Our dean is actively involved in partnership activities, attends all superintendent meetings, and participates in both formal and informal decision making. Like the superintendents, she creates an ethos that promotes and rewards partnership membership. She has made it clear that university faculty who take partnership responsibility seriously will be recognized in the university's tenure and promotion system. The dean also assumes a strong advocacy role and speaks for the partnership at the state and local levels, both inside and outside of academia. She influences the chief academic officers on our campus and

throughout the state university system, as well as community and business leaders.

School principals also assume important leadership roles within the partnership. Through interaction with each other in the leadership forum, they develop an appreciation for the complexity of being an empowering leader, and work together to build the capacity to influence, rather than direct, change. They champion ideas in their schools and protect and encourage teachers who want to change their practices.

Faculty members in both schools and the university are also leaders. For both groups, the requirements for leadership challenge commonly held assumptions about where knowledge resides and what leadership looks like. Though university faculty members serve as the conveners of the partnership groups, they do not control their form or content. The stance that professors assume is neither didactic nor managerial. Rather, they lead as colleagues engaged in collaborative inquiry. This is not easy; nor is it easily learned. For university faculty members to enfranchise others, they must first see themselves as co-learners. This needs to be practiced before it is mastered. And as with any new behavior, people seem to get worse before they get better.

For example, in the early days of our partnership, school faculty and administrators were content to let the university control the agenda for meetings. After a time, some group members voiced concern that meetings had become forums for the one-way transmission of research from the university to the school, or, conversely, that they were dominated by a few outspoken school faculty. Attendance faltered in some groups. When university conveners invited suggestions for future direction, the response was impatience about leadership responsibility, rather than ideas for improvement. Temptations to play the role of professor flickered anew. Over time, university and school faculty figured out ways to resolve these conflicts and work together. Because of such experiences, however, only a portion of the College of Education faculty has risked being involved as group conveners and in taking on these new leadership roles.

The evolution of leadership roles for public school faculty also was rocky. Elementary and secondary teachers, though attracted by the notion of collaborative inquiry and parity with university people, found the transition to new roles challenging and difficult as well as energizing and renewing. As traditional notions about the origins of professional knowledge were consistently questioned, new possibilities for teacher leadership did emerge. For example, two of the task groups now are led jointly by a university and school faculty member. And our newest group was not only initiated by public school educators, but is coordinated by them as well. In addition, public school faculty have taken the lead in "bringing the partner-

ship back home" and have initiated local task groups in their schools based on the partnership model.

The Director's Role: Walking Both Sides of the Street and in Between

Although our partnership challenges and expands upon conventional notions of leaders and leading, it still depends on its designated director to keep the organization focused, cohesive, and on course. The director's role is complex; it requires balancing a wide range of commitments and activities. In the course of her work, the director:

- identifies university faculty members who have interest in and the capacity for collaboration with public school educators;
- works with university faculty members as they assume and develop their roles as conveners and co-learners in the various task and role groups;
- connects university partnership faculty members with each other and leads monthly discussion groups;
- convenes the leadership forum and the principals' and superintendents' meetings, as well as two teacher-based partnership groups;
- works with public school and university educators both formally and informally as new ideas for partnership work are generated;
- communicates regularly with member superintendents;
- organizes lectures, presentations, and professional development opportunities for the general partnership membership;
- works with various constituencies to design projects and programs to meet emerging needs;
- directs the teacher education program at the university, which is located in professional development schools within the partnership districts;
- works with school staffs to design professional development schools and put them in place;
- participates in activities of the National Network for Educational Renewal;
- networks with other national coalitions engaged in school and university reform;
- establishes liaisons with the department of education and other educational agencies in the state; and
- keeps abreast of the comings and goings of people, groups, projects, and programs that comprise the partnership.

In addition, the director has a regular tenure-line position in the university and must meet appropriate standards of teaching, scholarship, and service.

Given these diverse and often divergent responsibilities, the job of partnership director may seem overwhelming and undoable. We do not believe this to be the case. What a director needs is not so much an endless

supply of energy (though this would certainly help) but particular modes of thinking, acting, and planning. Let us explain what we mean.

First, a director has to think like both a public school educator and a university professor. She has to understand and appreciate, and not evaluate or judge, the habits of mind that each brings to professional work. It helps if the director has had experience in both schools and universities, but this is not essential. What is essential is a willingness to listen and observe, to see the world as each group of educators views it, and to consider in a thoughtful manner the multiple perspectives that are brought to bear on any new initiative, project, or pronouncement.

A director also assumes the stance of a reflective practitioner, acting, in the words of sociologist Donald Schön, "more like a researcher trying to model an expert system than an expert whose behavior is modeled." As both fish and fowl, the director continually monitors the work of university and school educators and advocates a process that leads from engaged thinking to thoughtful action and back again. The director works with all constituencies to create settings where university and school faculties work together with, as well as alongside, each other as they reform themselves.

Finally, a director has a distinctive approach to planning. Preferring a map to an itinerary, she depends on her internal compass, as well as the compasses of others, to lead to a final destination. As the playwright Edward Albee says, "sometimes you have to go a long distance out of the way to go back a short distance correctly." The director must be open to exploring detours. This is not to say the director does not plan, but rather to indicate that the planning is often nonlinear and is always responsive. The role of the director is to keep the vision of the journey alive, to provide checkpoints for progress along the way, to help safeguard clear passage, and to set a pace that allows for the greatest participation, commitment, and sustained effort.

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As a thinker, a doer, and a planner, a partnership director is a true hybrid—collecting qualities from a wide array of sources. Part public school teacher, part university faculty member, part administrator, part theoretician, part practitioner—she or he struggles to see the world and see it whole. If partnership directors succeed, they help others make connections, create new syntheses, communicate new possibilities, and invent new ways for schools and universities to do business together.

Lessons from Collaboration

If there is one lesson that our experience in school-university partnerships has taught us, it is this: We are, all of us, learners and leaders. As

schools and university faculty, as superintendents and as dean, as principals and as executive director, we all have struggled with new perspectives. We have been unsettled by our discovery of the extent to which we are embedded in our own cultures. We have faced the difficulty of stepping outside of one social world and into another. At the same time, we have been heartened by our ability to learn from each other, our willingness to accommodate our differences, and our capacity for problem solving and invention.

Since our partnership began in 1985, we have managed to accomplish much together. Of the ninety-four schools in the partnership, almost half have committed themselves to school renewal and restructuring. They have begun to make systematic changes in curriculum and instruction, student assessment, governance, and professional development. Six of our schools have received grants from the state to encourage these efforts. We have begun a Foxfire Outreach Network in our region and have organized a series of forums and action projects focused on assessment of student learning. School and university faculty have continued to meet regularly to discuss issues and to plan for collaborative action. The number of our groups has grown and attendance is at an all-time high. The superintendents have taken leadership in promoting state legislation for school change and they have provided support for teacher initiative in their districts.

Perhaps the most dramatic of our accomplishments is in the area of teacher education. Partnership schools now are working with university faculty to design and implement a five-year teacher education program. Central to the program is a full year's residence in a partner school where academic work and on-site experiences are combined. In 1991-1992, almost one hundred preservice interns will be enrolled in the program, at ten partner schools. Eventually our entire teacher education program will be based on this model.

The variety and quality of collaboration that have occurred in our partnership do not lend themselves to a simple linear analysis. They have been the result of intention and happenstance, of planning and serendipity. They owe as much to improvisation as to design. Central to our work have been notions of difference, reciprocity, and parity. We acknowledge the two sides of the street that we tend to walk on, and we make every effort to venture in between as well.

Suggested Readings

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