

R. Carl Harris

A university professor elaborates on the challenges and successes of the Brigham Young University-Public School Partnership, in which university and public schools work together to restructure public schools and teacher preparation. The partnership focuses on four areas: preservice education, in-service education, curriculum, and research/evaluation. Through the partnership, new evaluation models have been developed, discretionary time has become available for various types of teacher in-service activities, curricula have been updated and developed, and teacher-guided research is being initiated. Problems in restructuring education also are discussed. These include concerns over time commitment and resources, faculty support, and lack of correlation with advancement procedures.

Educational Renewal

Not by Remote Control— Work of a University Professor in a Partner School

At 8:00 on a typical weekday morning, I am on the job in my role as an associate professor of elementary education at Brigham Young University, in a “partner school,” an elementary school that has joined forces with the university to restructure schooling and teacher preparation. Four of five weekdays, I will spend at least five hours in one of three partner schools for which I am responsible, working with student teachers from the university, school faculty, principals, and district administrators.

Now in my fourth year, I know the schools and district well, have a good grip on their challenges and strengths, and have established solid rapport with the teachers, principals, pupils, and district administrators. Early on, I realized this wave of renewal was different from others I have experienced or read about. The work of collaboration for renewal could no longer be done by remote control, as professors have traditionally made their contributions. Let me illustrate further.

My day begins in a meeting with the Partner School Council in Larsen Elementary School, a group organized around preservice, in-service, curriculum development, and research—the four functions of a partner school—and chaired by a teacher. There is time in the mornings for this now, because our well-prepared

student teachers are able to take over for a couple of hours. The first item on the agenda is a request for in-service education in a math program on error analysis. I agree to schedule a university expert who will come to the school. Next item: the first-grade teachers have been pleased with a reading program they have designed and used for a year in their classes. Now they want some hard data on its effectiveness. What about some help in designing a research project which they also will use as their career ladder project? The principal listens and encourages, obviously respecting the professionalism shown by these teachers. Another agenda item: I request the teachers' cooperation. I want to film and analyze their teaching of problem solving for a study on explicit modeling of metacognitive processes. They ask probing questions, acknowledge their interest, and agree to the request. Finally, we confirm our team observation and mentoring schedule for the week's supervision of student teachers. Supervision is no longer the solo process for me that it was before the partnership was created.

After the meeting, I move to a classroom where one of our fourteen student teachers is presenting a lesson on productive thinking in solving story problems in mathematics. Two of us are on hand as observers—the cooperating teacher and I alternate in mentor and evaluator roles. We are interested in a new approach the student has learned in classes at the university. After the lesson ends, the three of us reflect on the presentation, while a teacher from the adjoining room—a teacher who supervises another BYU student teacher—briefly takes over the class. The principal has agreed to teach a follow-up lesson that the student, cooperating teacher, and I will observe and critique tomorrow. The atmosphere in the classroom and school, like that in the meeting, is relaxed and friendly. There is an empowering sense of collegiality and importance in our combined work.

Long-Term Partnership

Larsen School is one of nineteen elementary schools that have joined with Brigham Young University in what can be called “organic collaboration.” Based on the “key” school concept pioneered by educator and reformer John Goodlad, the partnership is founded on a long-term linkage between the university and school districts. Such an arrangement requires a willingness on all our parts to change and to risk. Much is accomplished in this partner school-based environment because of the freedom and empowerment felt by university and school partners. As one of my partners said: “It [the partnership] means to me that the university and the public schools are together. There is not one identity over in Provo and another here in

Spanish Fork. We work cohesively as a group, together. We are not pitting one against another. We are doing it [renewal of schools and teacher education] together. What they [BYU student teachers] learned over in the university is applied in my classroom.”

Though Larsen School is one of the most highly involved in the partner school collaboration, other schools are gaining a desire for expanded involvement beyond the preservice area. Originally, there was one school per district involved in the program. Then as more schools became aware of the partnership, they requested involvement. University faculty were asked to adapt their role to include two other schools. New models were developed collaboratively to share supervision and to coordinate responsibilities with public school personnel. Further expansion is being suggested as each district evaluates its needs toward renewal.

Currently, five districts are involved, each with a District Council composed of school and university representatives. Ideas are shared as each district sends representatives to a monthly Partner Schools Council meeting, where reports are made and issues are discussed. This council then sends representatives to a monthly Coordinating Council meeting, and minutes from that meeting are sent to a Governing Board meeting of the overall partnership.

The goal of the BYU-Public School Partnership is to restructure schooling and teacher preparation simultaneously. This can be achieved only through total commitment to four primary areas of redesigning schooling:

- preservice education for student teachers,
- in-service education for practicing teachers and professors,
- curriculum and instruction renewal for school pupils and university students, and
- research and evaluation to examine and guide the total effort.

What follows is a brief description of progress and efforts made in each of these areas at the Larsen Elementary Partner School site.

Redesigning Preservice Teacher Education

BYU has long placed student teachers in local schools for preservice education. The teachers accepted student teachers from a sense of duty, but did not really expect to get—or give—much in return. For their part, the student teachers had to do a balancing act between the real-world demands of the classroom and the often untested requirements of the college supervisor. For instance, a university assignment might require a student to understand a particular theory of instruction, while the district might require performance in another area such as Essential Elements of Instruction.

Now, however, activities of the partner schools have attempted to make preservice education pay off for student teachers, classroom teachers, principals, pupils, and professors. This has occurred through redesigned supervision models, increased involvement from classroom teachers, and an aligned experience for student teachers. Here are a few examples of preservice approaches that the Larsen teachers, the principal, and I use.

Teaching and Evaluation Models

In our partner school, the classroom teacher, the student teacher, and the professor rotate as teacher, mentor, and evaluator. After the "teacher" has taught, the "mentor" points out strengths and the "evaluator" suggests improvements. The results have been encouraging. A teacher explained: "While working with the student teacher on some of her weaknesses, it caused me to be more aware of that component in my teaching. Trying to be a good model for her is causing me to be a better teacher."

Using this model, all of us share the risk and growth of being evaluated as we teach. We are more open and less defensive. One of my student teachers said: "I was nervous at first about evaluating my university supervisor. But when we met later, he was really responsive to the suggestions I gave him.... Having to evaluate made me pay more attention to what was going on too, since I was looking for things and taking notes. Then, when I took my turn presenting, I wasn't as nervous.... The feedback I got was very specific." When it was my turn to take the role of "teacher," I too saw strategies in my own teaching that needed upgrading and comprehended student characteristics from a perspective not previously attended to in my role as observer/evaluator.

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Orientation to School-Specific Expectations

Schools characteristically lament the trainees' inexperience with their particular curriculum and vocabulary. It takes time to bring student teachers up to speed. As a remedy, our partner school council organized an intensive two-week education period called the Academy. First thing each morning, the Larsen teachers, principal, and I presented formal lessons and simulations in such areas as math, science, reading, spelling, higher-level thinking, cooperative learning, etc. Following this, student teachers watched a demonstration in the classroom and did a structured analysis. Finally, the student teachers and I met to reflect on what we had learned. In a short time, student teachers were able to take over classrooms and teach lessons

that were aligned with school and district curricula and also reflected state-of-the-art research findings espoused by the university.

Practicum and Student Teaching Linkage

Our partner school committee recommended that BYU students complete their eight-week, half-day practicum and eight-week student teaching experiences in the same school with the same cooperating teacher, rather than in different schools. I persuaded my university department to approve the concept on an experimental basis. It was so well received in our partner school, that in a subsequent semester, other partner schools also adopted the plan. A teacher praised the move in these words: "Prestudent teaching and student-teaching students are in the same classrooms longer—it's not a short stint for eight weeks; rather, it's over sixteen weeks in the same room. They are getting exposed to more everyday problems, then are around long enough to see an end to some of the problems."

School-University Alignment

Early in our partnership experiment, the teachers and I realized we were negating each other's influence by requiring our student teachers to reconcile two different sets of terminology and expectations. In order to avoid this, we set out to create our own partner school instructional and evaluation models, with critical elements from both school and university points of view. We developed a Partner School Lesson Plan that students use to plan their lessons. The same form is used by the evaluation team to observe and critique the lesson. This plan includes elements from district guidelines, as well as university expectations. A Consensus Evaluation Form also was created through collaborative efforts to join university and school personnel in a summative evaluation of each student teacher. These forms are found in a handbook available from the Nebo School District.

Redesigning In-Service Teacher Education

Our philosophy in restructuring the profession of teaching is that pre-service improvement goes hand in hand with in-service improvement. Our cooperating teachers, as well as participating BYU faculty, must serve as effective models for student teachers, or renewal of teacher preparation will forever escape us.

In the days before the partnership, in-service education often was an extra frill, planned and administered by the district and offered after school hours to exhausted teachers. Now, it is planned by our teacher partners themselves, and takes place more frequently during school hours. Teaching

by competent student teachers provides discretionary time for cooperating teachers to conduct professional development work, since they can turn the class over to the student teacher. A recent count indicated that ninety student teachers logged in 14,131 hours over an academic year in the Larsen Partner School. Of this, 5,172 hours went to teaching, and 8,959 hours to other activities—preparing, observing, and directly helping the cooperating teachers.

In-Service Education within the School

Early in a school term, BYU students take over classes, enabling teachers to leave for short periods of professional development. On many occasions, I have been invited to give training to the Larsen faculty. On other occasions, we openly discuss implementation of new teaching and learning strategies we are jointly considering for both student teachers and the cooperating teachers. When invited, I arrange for guest presenters from the university or other districts. At other times, the teachers themselves conduct the in-service or bring in teachers from other partner schools.

In-Service Education beyond the School

As our cooperating teachers develop confidence in the student teachers, they feel comfortable about leaving their pupils for longer periods. This enables visits to other schools, businesses, or the university campus. A valuable side effect is that earlier in the term, we can observe a student teacher's full class management skills. Teachers, principals, and I have attended and presented at numerous national and regional conferences. Both the districts and the university have shared the costs. One teacher presenter commented: "Because of the partnership, teachers are able to present their ideas in conferences. I feel this gives us a more businesslike and professional sense to the educational system. Because of this partnership experience, our school is far ahead of other schools where they are just thinking about it."

Networking with Other Partner Schools

Four networking conferences have been sponsored that included teachers, principals, and university partner-school coordinators from all partner schools in four districts. Our most recent networking experience was a two-day retreat for intensive deliberations on how the school and university can link to make needed changes. Of that and other similar experiences, a teacher stated: "The partnership provides many more opportunities for

teachers to grow through classes, teaching peers, and working with others. Also, teachers see a more hands-on approach by the university—a more sincere effort.”

Redesigning Curriculum and Instruction

In many elementary partner schools, teachers did not have time for improving curriculum and instruction. Now, assistance from skilled student teachers allows classroom teachers more time to think about upgrading curriculum; in-service education provides the motivation and necessary skills. The examples below show how in-service education affects curriculum.

Fourth-Grade Reading and Language Arts

Fourth-grade teachers in our school were concerned about traditional reading ability groups. Frustrated with their reading curriculum, they spoke with the principal and me about possible changes. I suggested

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inviting a reading specialist from the BYU Elementary Education Department to an in-service meeting. Among other things, the specialist suggested giving fourth graders a choice in their reading materials and eliminating ability groups, changes that appealed immediately to the teachers. Soon, they had developed and implemented their own reading program, combining the specialist’s ideas with their own. One teacher said to me: “I have never experienced anything so positive and so rapid in the nine years I have been teaching.”

First-Grade Reading Redesign and Evaluation

Our first-grade teachers felt good about their reading program but wondered if there might be something better. To find some answers, they visited several schools within and outside of the district, all the schools being noted for innovative approaches. After observing the use of intensive phonics, they asked for a workshop to learn more about it. The teachers then were able to design their own program—a combination of structured phonics, a whole-language approach, and their own philosophy. These teachers’ example led other teacher teams to upgrade their reading and language arts curriculum. Renewal is contagious when inspiring models are encountered and educators are empowered to act.

Redesigning Research and Evaluation

Five years ago, teacher-initiated or guided research was virtually unheard of in our area schools. Now, some of our teachers and the principal are jointly initiating research with me that will give us information about curriculum or teaching methods; others are participating in BYU-originated research projects that serve partner school interests. Some recent instances are described below.

Teacher Efficacy

Several teachers participated in a study of teacher efficacy. The BYU researcher received her doctorate as a result of the study, but the main impact was felt by the teachers. For example, one of them came away with a desire to explore new directions and share her abilities. This eventually resulted in her becoming the recipient of a NASA teaching award, which in turn provided opportunities to present workshops and continue her growth as a teacher in other ways.

Evaluating First-Grade Reading

Three of our first-grade teachers have completed the first phase of a research project to determine the effectiveness of a reading curriculum they have designed. They are examining questions related to intensive phonics versus whole language versus a combination of the two. Says one of the teachers: "I am starting to ask some questions about my teaching. Is it really making a difference? I need some data, not just a feeling."

Not All Sweetness and Light

All of my colleagues who work in partner schools, and the vast majority of school people with whom we collaborate, acclaim our renewal efforts. There has been much support at district and university levels. External evaluators have said that in many ways we have gone beyond the experts' imaginations of what partner or professional development schools could be. We have won national recognition from the Association of Teacher Educators for collaboration in teacher education. However, we are not without our critics. As organic collaboration grows, implications of its cost are being considered more in light of university expectations, role definitions, professional advancement, and use of resources.

Central Administration Concern

Recently, a graduate studies committee comprised of faculty from other colleges on the BYU campus, commenting on some of the data referred to above, criticized the time investments of BYU students and faculty in partner schools. The committee members seemed not to understand or appreciate our purposes for engaging so intensely with the schools. Their report, combined with discussions between the university central administration and several campus-based elementary education colleagues alarmed at the extent of department resources being devoted to collaboration in partner schools, aroused concerns with our recently appointed university president. During an open forum with our college faculty, he commented that if we thought we had discovered the “penicillin” to heal our educational problems, then we needed to prove it. Since he made the remark in response to an explanation of the partner school work, it left little doubt that he had heard our critics.

Faculty Concern Over Roles and Resources

Not all criticism has come impersonally through reports or witty metaphors. Some has been registered with wide-eyed candor. In one department faculty meeting during an explanation of the need for all faculty to participate with school and district colleagues in a linking workshop, one faculty member looked me straight in the eye and said, “This is not the work of a university professor. You should be a school principal.” He went on to declare that such participation with teachers was analogous to medical doctors seeing their patients at no cost or even paying them to enter the clinic for treatment.

Advancement Versus Collaboration

Passionate discussion has arisen between department members over criteria for advancement in rank. Proposals for advancement that include assessments of scholarly productivity other than publications in refereed journals have been sharply criticized. As field-based faculty, we have been accused of “hiding in the schools to avoid scholarly data analysis and writing.” Although our student contact hours are twice to four times as heavy as campus-based faculty, several remarked that if we were so naive as to voluntarily take such heavy loads, then we deserved the consequences.

They Are Dumping on Us Again

From extensive interviews with our partners in the schools, a small minority has expressed disillusionment with partnership work. In the words of one teacher: "They are dumping on us again by giving us student teachers term after term." A very few teachers feel they are putting more in than the university is. For example, when they see a university professor taking time away from direct supervision of BYU student teachers to conduct research, while school people take on more responsibility for supervision, they assert that they are being "used" by the university and should be compensated.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the vigorous and sometimes healthy skepticism of the critics, research findings have been encouraging. Karen Lofgreen's 1988 doctoral study at BYU compared perceptions of teachers in one partner school to those in a nonparticipant school. She found that teachers in partner schools perceived increased feelings of efficacy, a positive change in teaching and administrative behaviors, and increased confidence. Another study in 1987 conducted by Lynnette Bloom, one of my colleagues, surveyed teachers in all partnership schools and found them to be generally positive in their perceptions. They did note, however, a few concerns—general

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lack of communication, inadequate understanding of the partnership, and failure on the part of the university to value teachers' needs and opinions. In a follow-up study carried out by Bloom during the next year, satisfaction with the relationship increased. Interestingly, some of the areas perceived as weaknesses the previous year were seen as

strengths the second year, as teachers and BYU students improved in teamwork. Melanie Harris's master's study, conducted through the 1989-90 academic year, verified that most school, district, and university people want the partner schools model to be expanded. She concluded that with appropriate supporting policy from the governing bodies of the university and the districts, other resources were in place for additional partner schools to be created without diluting the effectiveness of the model.

My own experience indicates that the partner school-based redesign of schooling and entry into the teaching profession does hold promise. Close collaboration really exists in numerous instances. I also have learned that renewal of the schools and teacher education cannot be achieved by adhering to the professor's traditional role of teaching, gathering data, and

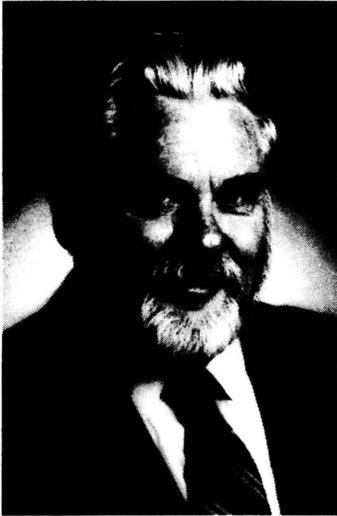
writing articles for publication. In this current wave of educational renewal, verifying what is and professing what should be are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for permanent change. We all need to get dirty in the messy work of renewing ourselves, our partners in the schools and districts sometimes, and almost always our policies and institutions.

Suggested Readings

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