

LEAP UP: Service Learning as the Centerpiece of a University-School Partnership

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Abstract

A long-running university-school partnership is the foundation on which LEAP UP, the Literacy Enrichment and Active Participation University Partnership, is built. Service learners from a variety of The University of Akron programs provide one-on-one support for struggling readers at Leggett Elementary School. Key to the program's success is high expectations for achievement by the Leggett students; program materials aligned with state and national standards; and research-based best practices for developing literacy skills in developing readers.

There are a wide variety of projects that universities establish to advance access and success for urban youth throughout the P-16 pipeline. A common form of collaboration is to work in a sustained manner with one partner school. The University of Akron's seven-year partnership with Leggett Elementary School is designed to advance economically disadvantaged students' academic achievement, motivation, and self-efficacy through an ongoing service learning project focused on literacy.

The University of Akron (UA) serves more than twenty-four thousand students with two hundred undergraduate and 110 graduate programs. It is located in the heart of a vibrant urban neighborhood and is known for its community engagement partnerships. One such partnership, begun in 2001, is with Leggett, a kindergarten through fifth-grade school of 280 students within an easy walk of the UA campus. According to the Ohio Department of Education school year report card, 100 percent of Leggett students qualify as "economically disadvantaged" (2007).

LEAP UP—Literacy Enrichment and Active Participation University Partnership

UA's partnership with Leggett began with literacy service learners working with children in Leggett classrooms. In 2004 efforts expanded through a collaboration called LEAP UP—Literacy Enrichment and Active Participation University Partnership. In this program, service learners from a variety of university programs provide one-on-one support for struggling readers using research-based materials and strategies. Leggett Elementary students experienced significantly increased literacy achievement as a result of LEAP UP, and the program is expanding to include more ties to literacy courses at the university and to meeting literacy needs in the broader community.

Funding for the program has been provided by a philanthropic foundation and the University Park Alliance Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC). The partnership has been guided by UA faculty and staff who coordinate the service learners and lead the literacy programs with support from Leggett’s principal and teachers. In addition to the literacy tutoring, the partnership organizes an annual Day of Reading celebration on campus and the UA School of Nursing provides on-site services at the school. While the majority of the service learners are drawn from the College of Education’s literacy courses, students from the University College freshman Success Seminars and Honors College courses also participate.

LEAP UP’s goals are to:

- promote the development of literacy skills in elementary students through a standards-based tutorial,
- promote development of literacy habits through reading and writing for pleasure and purpose,
- engage pre-service teachers in a “real world” urban school setting, and
- engage parents in enrichment experiences to enhance their children’s literacy development and reading habits.

Several assumptions undergird the program: (a) set high expectations for the achievement of all Leggett students, (b) align program materials to state and national standards, (c) reflect research-based best practices for developing literacy skills in developing readers, and (d) develop a model program which can be replicated.

Service learning participants receive preparation for tutoring in several ways. For education students enrolled in literacy courses, the preparation for literacy tutoring is embedded in their coursework. Instructors of these courses demonstrate effective literacy strategies and respond to service learners’ written reflections on the experience. Orientation for freshmen enrolled in learning communities begins with a one-hour overview of LEAP UP purposes and principles, demonstration of effective ways to read and write with young learners, and instruction on appropriate dress and behavior for interactions at the school. Learning community instructors provide additional support during the tutoring experience by responding to the service learners’ written reflections on their service work.

After their orientation, service learners meet for thirty-minute tutoring sessions with students from all grades who are identified as needing assistance by their classroom teachers. Due to varying schedules, students cannot always meet with the same tutor, so student portfolios contain a record of their activities. Students and tutors meet in a room dedicated to the program and equipped with books for all reading levels, writing supplies, and colorful posters.

Expanding the Partnership

It is important to understand that the primary component of LEAP UP—service learning through literacy tutoring—is embedded within the larger context of the

UA/Leggett partnership. Responding to the need for partnerships to be mutually beneficial, (Padak et al. 1993), additional opportunities have expanded the service learning tutoring and literacy experience within Leggett and out into the neighborhood and larger community. For example, teachers and service learners have worked together on upper-grade writing projects. Faculty members have held clinical literacy assessment courses at the school, working one-on-one with Leggett children in after-school programs. Pre-service teachers have developed and taught mini-lessons to Leggett classes. Further, the school and university are partnering on a writing initiative in response to Ohio Achievement Test results indicating where the Leggett students needed to improve their writing abilities.

Reaching beyond the school to the community, the University Park Alliance COPC grant funded efforts to establish a family lending library at the neighborhood community center. Faculty members work with the ethnic Mon families—immigrants from southeast Asia—holding conversation-practice workshops in the neighborhood. And UA students participating in Jumpstart-Akron created book and activity packets for Leggett families with preschoolers.

Impact of the Partnership

One of the easiest and most readily observed ways to indicate program strength is to count program participants. The number of service learners in LEAP UP has grown steadily from forty in the fall of 2004 to 120 in the fall of 2006. During the same time period, the number of Leggett children served has increased from approximately seventy children to more than one hundred forty.

Outcome data is more convincing than participant numbers alone. Using the Ohio Department of Education Report Card data, Leggett Elementary experienced significant positive outcomes during the years of LEAP UP implementation. Over the three-year period from 2004-2006, Leggett Ohio Achievement Test (OAT) grade 3 pass rate in reading increased from 64 percent to 86 percent. Further, Leggett's Ohio Department of Education designation improved from Academic Watch in 2004 to Effective School in 2006. Although this data is encouraging, it must be acknowledged that there is no direct empirical link between the LEAP UP tutoring and these positive outcomes. However, the coincidence of these outcomes during the implementation of LEAP UP suggests it contributed significantly. More research will be conducted in this regard.

Leggett teachers report positive outcomes are closely tied to their students' participation in LEAP UP. They also cite benefits in addition to academic achievement. One teacher commented in a recent interview (September 2007) that amazingly her first graders saw The University of Akron as the place they will attend as a result of working closely with UA students. Her students were thrilled to see their tutor when attending the Annual Day of Reading at the UA Student Union and told her they were "going to go to college here too!" Over time the actual impact on college attendance can be studied.

UA student perceptions of the value of LEAP UP service learning are also positive. A review of seventy Leggett literacy service learning student reflection reports gathered from fall 2002 through spring 2007 indicates the experience increased service learners' teaching confidence and awareness of learner diversity.

Lingering Questions

LEAP UP is grounded in elements that distinguish successful tutoring programs: they are structured and organized around consistent tutoring sessions; they employ high-quality, research-supported learning materials; tutoring is coordinated with classroom instruction and faculty professional development; and finally, family members are involved as partners in children's literacy development (Allington 2006; Rasinski and Padak 2004).

Not all of these program components have been fully realized, however. Partnerships between two complex systems, such as a university and a public school, yield as many questions as they do answers. In the LEAP UP partnership, classroom and tutoring connections were sometimes compromised when substitutes filled in for absent teachers. Consistency was difficult to maintain at times because Leggett children worked with a variety of tutors. While opportunities for family participation were provided—a Mommy and Me reading club for Leggett moms with preschoolers was offered—they were not widely used by the parent community. Plans are proceeding to strengthen these areas through more frequent communication with the classroom teachers to ensure the tutoring is tied to their instructional program. In addition, Leggett teachers have approached UA faculty to talk about new ways to engage parents more fully through adult literacy learning.

LEAP UP is an excellent example of a sustained partnership with a single school that has adapted in multiple ways to enhance academic achievement for urban, low-income children. How the service learners, over time, motivate the children's engagement in reading, expand their language use for academic purposes, and affirm the possibilities of higher education for them and their families will be measured more fully in the future.

References

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