

An Urban Partnership: Embracing Collaboration and Feedback

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Abstract

Our research-practice partnership is between an urban, high-poverty high school and a neighboring university. Our collaboration focused on establishing trusting relationships, cultivating a shared language between partners, and learning from and with each other throughout the partnership. When COVID-19 began and impacted schools around the world, our community partnership pivoted to address new issues faced by the high school. We evaluated our partnership through a retrospective pretest-posttest, mixed-methods research design. Teachers, instructional coaches, and school leadership were asked to reflect at the end of the program on the growth of the teachers with whom they worked, as well as their own growth. The evaluation evidence revealed that the partnership was beneficial for both teachers and instructional coaches. Teachers demonstrated growth in pedagogical and content knowledge, integration of technology and virtual tools, student engagement, and sense of professionalism. In this article, we will provide readers with ideas and resources for initiating their own partnership.

We represent a grant-funded partnership between an urban, high-poverty high school and its neighboring university. In this article, we share our experiences and invite you to ponder how you might begin a partnership in your own school district. We provide examples of practice and share resources for initiating your own partnership.

The Setting

Our partnership exists within a small, urban school district located about 30 miles south of the state capital. This once-thriving community was at one time home to a tobacco manufacturing company, local businesses, and the only shopping mall serving the region. These factors contributed to the vitality of the community.

Over time, a new mall was built in a neighboring city, eventually forcing the one in our town to close. When the tobacco manufacturing company also closed, the city's economic base declined (Burnett et al., 2017). This decline impacted not only the city infrastructure but also the local school system.

Many people associate poverty with failing schools. Although there are some common threads, poverty is not a life sentence, nor does it determine one's aptitude. However, poverty does affect one's access to resources, making it difficult for schools in impoverished areas to thrive.

Ponder: What is the historical context in your town/city and how has this impacted your local school system?

The Backstory

Our state's department of education identified our school district as having "persistently low-achieving" schools, thus qualifying the district to receive external help. With this funding support, we initiated our secondary and higher education partnership in 2019. This partnership facilitated instructional coaching and monthly professional development for all core content teachers at the local urban high school. The school district previously offered instructional coaching to elementary and middle school teachers, but it did not have the available staff to provide instructional coaching to high school teachers.

The neighboring research university vetted and hired highly qualified content-specific instructional coaches and professional development staff to provide ongoing support for the high school teachers. We had detailed plans for professional development and instructional coaching, but a surprise changed everything: COVID-19. The COVID-19 crisis created many challenges for teachers and students that negatively impacted student learning and well-being nationwide, particularly among students in poverty (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). Our partnership quickly responded to the need for instructional support in a virtual environment.

The university, school leaders, and district leaders worked collaboratively to create goals for the urban partnership. The partnership's original goals were to enhance teachers' content

knowledge, share innovative teaching strategies, and strengthen pedagogical skills. We adjusted these goals during the pandemic to fit virtual learning, which we discuss below. What made the partnership unique was its approach. Rather than viewing teachers from a deficit perspective, instructional coaches used a strengths-based approach to build on teachers' prior knowledge and experiences. This strategy put the instructional coaches and teachers on equal footing and allowed a plan of action to develop based on mutual respect and collegiality rather than hierarchy (see Figure 1).

Ponder: Is there a local university you can partner with in person or virtually? How could you leverage the university's resources to change outcomes for teachers and students?

Relationships Matter

Relationships between the instructional coaches and teachers are of paramount importance in any school-university partnership.

Our dedicated teachers brought a certain level of knowledge and expertise to the table. The skilled coaches used that knowledge to build capacity where each teacher wanted or needed additional support. Coaches and teachers worked collaboratively to see each other as colleagues and to build trust—which was why the partnership was so successful.

The urban school teachers and university instructional coaches met weekly to set goals, share ideas, and reflect on feedback. In doing so, teachers had agency in developing their professional skills; they were encouraged to advocate for their own needs rather than relying on their coach to provide general assistance. In support, the district leadership team determined professional development session topics based on data trends and division needs, leaning heavily on teacher voice.

Ponder: How might your school/district offer instructional coaching to your teachers?

Figure 1. Roles Within the Partnership



Communication Is Key!

In any great partnership, communication is key! Consistent communication created trust in ourselves, each other, and our learning community. A lack of communication leads to misunderstanding shared goals, making it more difficult in turn for teachers to grow their professional practice. Our weekly meetings, classroom interactions, and monthly professional development sessions enabled school administrators, teachers, and instructional coaches to give and receive continuous feedback. This communication allowed the partnership to maintain shared values and goals throughout the program.

The need to adjust the partnership during COVID-19 inspired creative professional development delivery, such as creating custom virtual dashboards that functioned as tools for documentation, feedback, and resources. The professional development sessions were recorded and shared with teachers and instructional coaches, allowing for flexibility in time management and the ability to return to previous sessions at any time. Throughout the partnership, instructional coaches suggested practical ways of including technology in the classroom and actionable steps to foster student engagement.

Consistent contact with coaches with expertise in their field made it easier for teachers to ask content-specific questions. Further, the school district and university instructional coaches both relied on the coaching model and support found in Jim Knight's (2018) book *The Impact Cycle: What Instructional Coaches Should Do to Foster Powerful Improvements in Teaching*. A common language contributed to the stability and continuity of the district's coaching approach, thereby strengthening chances for student success and building teacher capacity.

Ponder: How can your school/district improve communication to maintain shared values and goals?

Guiding Evaluation

Examining the partnership from a big-picture perspective was important to our team. To that end, two doctoral students at the university evaluated the partnership and provided formal feedback on its impact on teacher growth. The evaluation employed a single-group, retrospective pretest-posttest, mixed-methods research design. Our team worked together to create the following evaluation questions (EQs), which guided the reflection:

- EQ1: What is the perceived impact of the partnership on teachers' instructional moves that promote thinking and learning?
- EQ2: What is the perceived impact of the partnership on teachers' integration of technology and virtual tools?
- EQ3: What is the perceived impact of the partnership on teachers' skills in promoting student engagement?
- EQ4: What is the perceived impact of the partnership on teachers' sense of professionalism?

Once the evaluation questions were created, our team decided that a survey would be the best way to evaluate the partnership.

Creating Opportunities for Feedback

Next, the doctoral-student evaluators created online surveys with Likert scale and open-ended questions that allowed program participants to provide feedback. At the end of the program, teachers, instructional coaches, and school leaders reflected on their personal growth, the teachers' growth, and the program's overall effectiveness. Participants were asked about their pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, teacher professionalism, student engagement, and technology integration before and after participating in the partnership program. The survey concluded with open-ended questions that asked for participants' perspectives on the partnership and solicited recommendations for improving the program for the following year.

In addition to collecting the survey responses, the evaluators analyzed the coaches' collaborative logs and reviewed recordings of professional development sessions that had taken place during the year. These data sources were used as evidence to answer the evaluation questions. The evidence showed that teachers and coaches not only felt the partnership was valuable but also experienced positive growth from participating in the program. Teachers self-reported many areas of growth; the top four were:

1. evaluating the effectiveness of activities for promoting student learning,
2. feeling comfortable collaborating with their coach,
3. incorporating appropriate technology, and
4. effectively using data to design instruction.

The evaluators' final report revealed a successful partnership and initiated an ongoing cycle of feedback that supported current practice and informed next steps. The report also provided participant feedback and suggestions for moving forward with the partnership in the next school year, such as starting the program in the summer, creating teacher-led skill-focused video workshops for the dashboard, and additional classroom modeling. The program evaluation both ensured that the partnership was meeting shared goals and created opportunities for feedback and reflection.

Supporting Teacher Development

Teachers experienced professional learning in many of our partnership learning spaces. Discussions and actions took shape in content-focused departments, course-focused teams, professional development breakout rooms, and interest-based weekly workshops. Creating space for teachers to try out ideas and make new mistakes was essential to empowering teachers in the partnership. We embraced the following goals:

1. Enhance teacher knowledge and skills of innovative, engaging, equitable instructional strategies with data to provide quality learning for ALL students.
2. Provide viable and effective strategies to enhance teacher knowledge and skills related to virtual teaching, professionalism, and student engagement.

The next sections provide examples of how we addressed these goals.

Learning From Student Data

One focus of the partnership was demonstrating the power of student data to enhance teacher practice. These sessions were guided by the following goals and actions:

1. Enhance teacher knowledge of data utilization to improve instruction.
2. Involve and support teachers in analyzing data.

The partnership provided opportunities for teachers and coaches to examine data and to consider what the data revealed. Content teams spent time exploring the process of lesson planning: learning targets, discovery, modeling, and tasks. Teachers gathered in small groups to look closely at their lessons and student work. They shared ideas, offered feedback, and considered actionable steps based on data

provided in formative assessments and learning management systems (e.g., Performance Matters and Schoology).

Teaching in a Virtual Environment

As the partnership pivoted to virtual instruction due to COVID-19, teaching skills such as accessing Zoom, the chat feature, breakout rooms, and virtual whiteboards became a priority. Equally important was learning to use these tools for student engagement, next-step instruction, and groupings. Ensuring equity in virtual learning was vital to the partnership, especially in the context of a high-poverty school such as ours.

An early professional development experience focused on virtual instruction; teachers could select from one of three breakout mini-workshops, each of which focused on a different subject:

1. Equity: Explore strategies to remedy equity gaps in virtual learning (meeting students' basic needs, ensuring equitable access to resources, designing responsive and restorative structures).
2. Teacher clarity: Discover intentional and concise virtual instruction tools through a series of questions, videos, and activities.
3. Engaging tasks: Reflect on current engagement practices while learning new engagement strategies for working with students in a virtual environment.

These rich and valued topics enhanced teachers' knowledge and enabled them to apply newfound virtual tools.

Reflecting on the Partnership

During an unprecedented academic year, the partnership directly addressed novel challenges and the needs of the school through collaboration and feedback. The advent of the COVID-19 crisis in March 2020 forced our partnership to shift from a traditional format to accessible and flexible learning spaces. Our partnership targeted professional development topics to address the areas of deepest concern based on teacher feedback. Through implementation of one-on-one content-specific coaching, our teachers received individualized support. Engaging in our school-university collaborative partnership increased teacher development and student achievement.

Ponder: How might a partnership between your school and a university target school/district goals to improve instruction and student achievement?

Additional Resources

Are you interested in learning more? We recommend looking into these resources for more information about coaching, research-practice partnerships, and teacher reflection:

- Knight, J. (2018). *The impact cycle: What instructional coaches should do to foster powerful improvements in teaching*. Corwin.
- Coburn, C.E., Penuel, W.R., & Geil, K.E. (2013). *Research-practice partnerships: A strategy for leveraging research for educational improvement in school districts*. William T. Grant Foundation.
- School Reform Initiative. (n.d.). *ATLAS: Learning from student work*.

References

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Knight, J. (2018). *The impact cycle: What instructional coaches should do to foster powerful improvements in teaching*. Corwin.

Masonbrink, A.R., & Hurley, E. (2020). Advocating for children during the COVID-19 school closures. *Pediatrics*, 146(3), Article e20201440. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-1440>

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