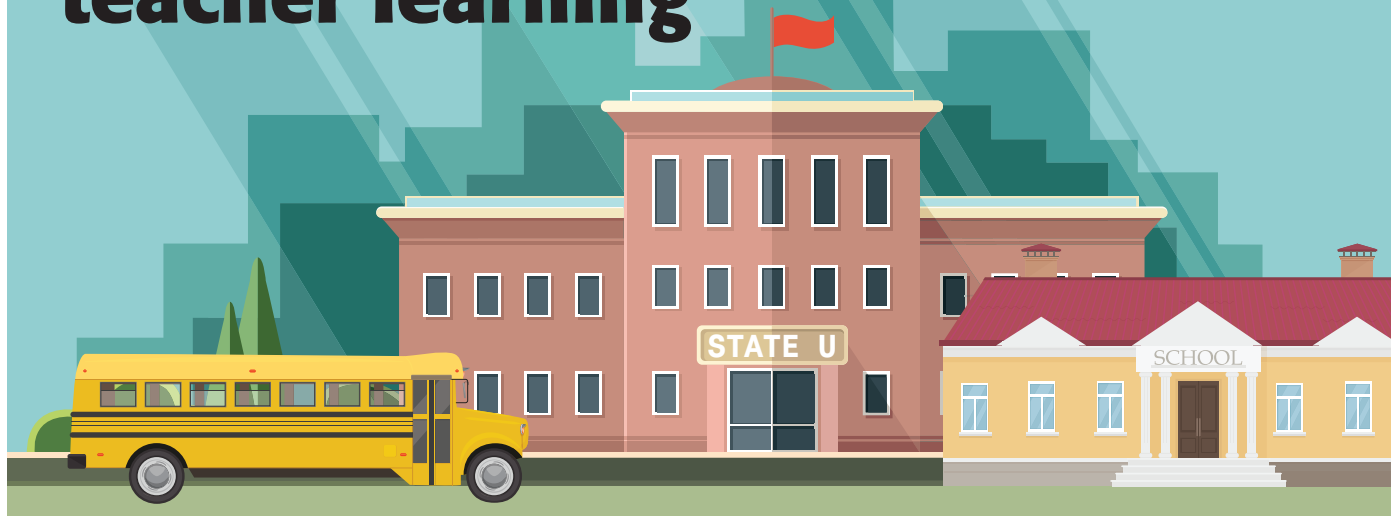


Cultivating a school-university partnership for teacher learning



R&D

A partnership between a research university and two schools in its community shows the power of collaboration to address achievement gaps while also preparing future teachers.

R&D appears in each issue of *Kappan* with the assistance of the **Deans Alliance**, which is composed of the deans of the education schools/colleges at the following universities: George Washington University, Harvard University, Michigan State University, Northwestern University, Stanford University, Teachers College Columbia University, University of California, Berkeley, University of California, Los Angeles, University of Colorado, University of Michigan, University of Pennsylvania, and University of Wisconsin.

By Catherine H. Reischl, Debi Khasnabis, and Kevin Karr

How can we combine the resources of public schools and public universities to benefit children, families, and educators? What structures and tools can sustain this kind of hybrid union? Those were the questions that confronted us when we launched the Mitchell Scarlett Teaching and Learning Collaborative (MSTLC), a partnership between the teacher education program at the University of Michigan and a pair of Title I schools—Mitchell Elementary School and Scarlett Middle School—in the Ann Arbor Public Schools.

When we began in 2010, we knew that working together would be challenging, given that our institutions had very different stakeholders, responsibilities, goals, and problems that needed solving. The University of Michigan needed to identify school sites with diverse enrollments, where it could implement and refine its new practice-based elementary teacher education curriculum (Davis & Boerst, 2014). The Ann Arbor Public Schools needed to address the achievement gap in its two lowest-achieving schools, which enroll the system's largest numbers of Title I-eligible students.

In spite of our differences, though, MSTLC has grown into a thriving partnership that benefits both the university and the schools, leading not just to better outcomes for local students but also to opportunities

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for experienced educators, teaching interns, teacher educators, and family and community members to learn from each other through and in practice (Ball & Cohen, 1999).

As Ken Zeichner (2015) puts it, our goal is to “democratize” school improvement by tapping the wisdom that each party brings to the table: Veteran teachers and administrators contribute their deep knowledge of everyday school life and the ways in which current practices do and do not succeed in engaging children; teacher educators offer their research expertise and their experience of helping novice teachers to translate their content knowledge into effective beginning teaching practices; aspiring teachers bring their intelligence, energy, and understanding of what it means to grow up and become educated in today’s complex, high-tech society; and parents and community members bring their intimate knowledge of their children’s talents, needs, interests, and goals.

The partnership in practice

At its core, MSTLC represents an effort to redesign teacher education by shifting the emphasis from university-based coursework to carefully structured and well-supervised clinical practice experiences (CCSSO, 2012; NCATE, 2010). Instead of taking methods classes at the university and then being given a student-teaching assignment, aspiring teachers are placed in full-year internships in the partnership schools, and much of their teacher education coursework is embedded into the regular school day, offered in designated classrooms at Mitchell and Scarlett. Intern Luke Willson characterized his clinically based teacher education experience in this way: “Not only are we learning the theory of teaching, we’re putting it into practice in real classrooms. For a beginning teacher like me, it’s an incredible opportunity. What makes it work is being able to collaborate with and get real-time feedback from experienced field instructors and mentor teachers.”

Traditionally, most teacher education courses have been designed and taught by university faculty working on their own. In MSTLC, though, many of those courses are cotaught by teacher educators and supervising teachers, and they are designed to follow along with what students are learning in their elementary or middle school classes. The idea is to anticipate the parts of the curriculum that are likely to be challenging for those young students and which can provide opportunities for the interns to help them, typically by offering one-to-one or small-group support. In the process, the interns learn essential “high-leverage” teaching practices (Davis & Boerst, 2014).

Consider, for example, a month-long unit that was

codesigned by Mitchell’s 4th-grade teachers and a teacher educator, based on Common Core standards for persuasive writing. The unit begins with a prompt from the school’s principal who asks the 4th graders to develop a promotional video that communicates to visitors what they really like about their school. To help guide their work, the teachers provide a series of minilessons, showing them how to create video and written texts for the school web page. Further, because each video is deliberately structured to include arguments, claims, and evidence, the minilessons serve as opportunities to provide instruction on key literacy skills and to support the students in writing and revising the persuasive texts that accompany their videos. The unit culminates with a lively premier night with students and their families cheering along as their videos are projected on a huge screen in the multipurpose room. Everyone celebrates being part of the “coolest school on Earth.”

Meanwhile, the unit also serves as an intensive, master’s level literacy course for 28 teaching interns from the university who spend the bulk of their time in the two 4th-grade classrooms and take a course taught on site by the teacher educator.

Prior to each class, the interns meet for 30 minutes with the supervising teachers to discuss the day’s minilesson, which has been posted ahead of time in a shared online folder. The teachers describe not only their goals for the lesson but also the decisions that they made when designing it, based on their use of formative assessments and their knowledge of each child’s needs.

Significantly, the teachers also engage and include the interns in professional dialogue, focusing on what the interns will do when they work with the students in small groups later in the morning. They ask the interns what they have observed about specific children’s progress, invite their suggestions of ways to improve the lessons, and ask for their help in solving classroom management problems and instructional issues.

During the next half hour, as students arrive and settle into their morning routines, the teacher educator helps the interns rehearse what they plan to do in their small-group sessions, giving them feedback on the questions they plan to ask and how they plan to engage students in extended discussion. Then, after this brief rehearsal, the interns join the 4th graders as they gather on the rug for the teacher-led minilesson, which the interns observe closely, taking notes on the language and instructional moves the teacher uses.

After the minilesson, the students move into their small groups, and the interns work with them on the specific focus of the minilesson and on planning, recording, and editing their videos. Later in the day, the interns take time to write about what

Design principles for partnership activities

The following considerations are designed to guide the development, implementation, and evaluation of MSTLC partnership activities.

Considerations for individual projects

- ▶ **Coherence with the mission and vision of the partnership:** How does this project address the goals described in the mission and vision statements?
- ▶ **Benefit/effect on children, practicing teachers, and interns:** Specifically, what will be the benefits/effects on those involved or peripherally affected?
- ▶ **Sustainability (use of resources):** What are the costs — time, space, transportation, communications, food, operating costs, energy, materials, staff? Are there possibilities for continuing or replicating this project?
- ▶ **Communication:** How will opportunities for participation be communicated to staff, families, and children? How will lessons learned from the project be communicated to the school district and university communities? In what ways will the project be shared so that parents and community members can easily comprehend it (including regular use of multiple languages)?
- ▶ **Curricular “accounting”:** How does the project support or affect the curriculum? Is the project supplementing, enhancing, augmenting, or replacing district curriculum? Is there a balance between enrichment activities and academically focused activities?
- ▶ **Evaluation:** What is the plan for evaluating the effect of the initiative? How will evaluation results be shared?
- ▶ **Research:** Will aspects of this project be part of a research project? Are there procedures to obtain informed consent? What are the plans for engaging participants in the research process and reporting on findings?
- ▶ **Access:** Which children/adults/families will be involved (e.g., low and higher achievers, special needs students, English learners)? What are the logistics (e.g., using multiple languages to communicate with families) that will make access possible? Are there ways to expand access to involvement?

Considerations for the partnership activity as a whole

- ▶ **Collective effect:** Is there a balance of small vs. large initiatives? What is the cumulative effect of the array of projects?
- ▶ **Origins of the initiatives:** Is there a balance of projects that are proposed by the university and by the teachers? Have the resources first been focused on Mitchell-Scarlett and School of Education initiatives? Have initiatives proposed from outside the partnership been vetted using the design principles?
- ▶ **Coherence of the learning agenda for teachers:** Are there strands or themes to the professional development opportunities? Are teachers involved in determining what “coherence” means?
- ▶ **Intensity of workload:** Are there reasonable expectations for everyone involved, including teachers, children, teacher educators, and interns? Does the cumulative “load” for all involved constitute a reasonable workload?

they are learning, either posing questions or comments or describing a key instructional moment that has informed their own developing practice. Their reflections are shared with the teachers and the other interns on a Google Doc, and the teachers draw on their ideas as they create subsequent lessons.

Note that in this unit, everybody contributes to classroom instruction and to the effort to make their instructional decisions visible to each other. Teachers make their thinking public both as they plan with the teacher educator and as they discuss upcoming lessons with the interns. Interns are able to see teachers enacting their plans and modifying them midstream, revealing both their routine and adaptive, in-the-moment forms of expertise (Bransford et al., 2005). Further, the interns help the teachers revise their plans by offering their observations about students' progress and by contributing ideas based on their research-based course readings and discussions. Similarly, the teacher educator also learns and contributes, puzzling through problems of practice alongside beginning and experienced teachers while also suggesting new research-based approaches for integrating the Common Core into writing instruction.

Erica Hatt, the teacher who coplanned and taught this unit and who is now the elementary literacy coordinator for the district, reflected on her work:

I experienced the best professional development of my teaching career during my years working with the partnership. I would often plan and teach alongside a university teacher educator and debrief my lessons with university interns. During this process, I learned more about my strengths as a teacher and became aware of the power of my teaching. I felt the responsibility of sharing my practice with future teachers and strove to learn and grow as much as I could, often using the resources that were made available to me through the partnership.

Finally, while this example features a single unit on persuasive writing, MSTLC's work includes many other kinds of collaboration as well, addressing a wide range of content areas, grade levels, and activities — from leading 7th-grade book club discussions to strengthening 5th graders' knowledge about fractions, teaching middle schoolers about digital safety, leading kindergartners in generating oral language before writing poetry, developing ESL curricula that integrate cultural and community-based knowledge, and many others.

Tools that support partnership work

MSTLC relies on three important tools to ensure its success: an annual school improvement planning process, a “high-leverage practices” document from the University of Michigan's teacher education program, and a set of design principles for the partnership. These serve as organizational blueprints that help balance the interests of the two institutions, summarize key ideas and priorities, and communicate the focus of our work to everyone involved (Leslie, 2011). These also help us narrow and refine the scope of our work, allowing us to focus on trying out and improving just a few new program elements at a time.

Tool #1: School improvement plans

The state of Michigan requires every school to create an annual school improvement plan (SIP), relying on performance data to identify a few goals and activities to promote children's social and academic growth. Rather than treating the annual SIP as just another bureaucratic hoop to jump through, Scarlett and Mitchell take their SIPs very seriously, using them to decide exactly where to direct their energy and resources. University partners, teachers, family members, and community members participate in this decision making, and any proposed or ongoing university activities must be directly linked to specific school improvement goals.

For example, Mitchell's SIP includes the goal of helping students achieve certain levels of proficiency in prealgebra as measured by grade-level math outcomes. To support the effort, Mitchell teachers, University of Michigan faculty, and interns analyze data from performance-based and standardized math assessments and work together to design, teach, and assess an after-school math program, Mitchell Mighty Mustangs. Findings indicate that students who have consistently participated in the program have shown significant growth on the targeted grade-level outcomes. For example, the fall 2015 cohort of 3rd-5th grade students participating in the program showed an average growth of 33 percentage points from the pretest to the posttest, while the control group of students grew 15 percentage points. Similarly, the fall 2016 cohort of 3rd-5th grade students showed an average growth of 22 percentage points while the control group grew 14 percentage points. After ana-

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lyzing these results, the program was deemed a “gap closer” for its effectiveness in addressing the needs of underperforming students.

Tool #2: High-leverage teaching practices

A second tool that guides the work is a foundational document about high-leverage practices developed by University of Michigan teacher education program. This document names — and provides common language with which to discuss — 19 distinct teaching practices that have been found to advance children’s learning and promote equitable teaching across multiple contexts and content areas (University of Michigan School of Education, n.d.; Davis & Boerst, 2014). While not an exhaustive list of all that teachers need to know and be able to do, these high-leverage practices represent key elements in the teaching practice of a well-positioned beginning teacher, including skills related to setting up and managing small group work, posing questions about content, and leading whole-class discussions. Melissa Schmidt, a graduate of the teacher education program and current Mitchell teacher, frames her experience this way:

As a University of Michigan alum, I fully understand the rigor of the teacher preparation program that my intern is experiencing. I cherish the moments we have to discuss the high-leverage teaching practices he is learning, as it reminds me of how effective these practices can be when used intentionally. I used to feel like I taught in a silo, but working with the MSTLC has allowed me to open up my practice. It has helped me to become a better communicator about my work as a teacher and a learner.

Tool #3: Design principles

Like Tyack and Cuban (1995), we’ve seen that “change where it counts the most — in the daily interactions of teachers and students — is the hardest to achieve and the most important” (p. 10). In addition to the tools above, parents, teachers, administrators, and University of Michigan faculty have also developed Design Principles (see sidebar on p. 50) that guide project proposals and implementation. This document surfaces issues regarding time and resources, communication, distribution of benefit, and other aspects of collaborative work, and it challenges the range of people involved in MSTLC work to recognize and address any tensions that may arise.

Lessons learned

The three tools described above have been critical to the success of internships, professional development, and coursework and research that happens within our partnership. To readers who are developing their own partnerships across schools and universities, we recommend developing and using similar tools — with all stakeholders at the table — that name and provide structures for working toward the core goals of each institution as they relate to the partnership.

Of equal significance, the success of the MSTLC depends on ongoing trust building among university and school partners. We recommend paying vigilant attention to relationships as key to partnering across the university and school cultures. Demands on teachers’ time have probably never been greater, and it can be challenging to find opportunities to talk together about problems of practice and to draw on each other’s expertise, so we’ve tried to make the most of coplanning and coteaching to get to know each other as people — for example, we grab moments of conversation at the copy machine, or as we observe and offer feedback to an intern, to build personal and professional relationships. Such interactions, which accumulate over time, cultivate a sense of trust and mutual engagement in the work.

We’ve also learned that the work of partnering deepens and changes over time. As we finish our seventh year of work together, we see how important it has been to have begun our partnership with a five-year commitment — that’s a long stretch of time to those of us working in schools and universities. “It is crucial that as partners we consistently revisit and revise our work, drawing on the perspectives of all participants and keeping the best interests of our K-8 students front and center,” advises Gerald Vazquez, principal of Scarlett Middle School. We try to listen to, really hear, and value the varying views that partners who have different roles and different forms of knowledge bring to the table and to consider our partnership as an effort that is always under construction.

We believe that change that positively affects children often happens not in grand, sweeping reforms but through highly contextualized, thoughtful participation of key players in joint productive activity in schools (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). We’ve offered glimpses of the daily partnering practices in the MSTLC and have named design tools that have

worked well for us in the hope that other educators will find useful connections for their own settings. In an era of highly centralized, large-scale efforts to overhaul public schooling, we've chosen to give deep attention to teaching practice. By pooling school and university resources and by focusing on the particulars of practice, we believe we can create powerful opportunities for growth for children and for the adults who serve them. **■**

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