Partnering with a Purpose: Developing Teachers and Leaders through a Faith-Based and Public Partnership

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Abstract

The challenges of maintaining a strong teacher pipeline are significant and have far-reaching consequences. Teachers who receive effective training, mentor support, and meaningful professional development are more likely to remain in the field. One way of supporting new teachers is through the development of public-private partnerships. This essay describes and discusses the successful partnership established between a faith-based university and a local school district to provide educational and training opportunities to new teachers.

Partnering with a Purpose: Developing Teachers and Leaders through a Faith-Based and Public Partnership

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As former classroom teachers and higher education faculty members, we understand the urgency of ensuring new classroom teachers have access to ongoing professional development and educational advancement. Ideally, these experiences build upon prior knowledge and classroom experience, collaboratively activate new learning, promote inquiry and scholarship, consider teacher self-efficacy, and apply to practice. According to Francois (2020), teachers' perception of their preparation path greatly influence their confidence and competence in the classroom. In many areas of the country, the difficulty of retaining new teachers remains persistent (Sutcher et al., 2018). The teacher shortage in our state, California, is at a critical level (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), around 16% of the national teacher workforce leaves the profession or changes schools every year. Teachers without high-quality preparation quit the profession at 2-3 times the rate of those who receive rigorous preparation with embedded and ongoing professional development, training, coaching, and support (Sutcher et al., 2018). A lack of highly qualified teachers and school leaders disproportionately impacts high-poverty schools and the most vulnerable populations. Additionally, many urban districts find it challenging to attract and retain highly qualified educational leaders and classroom teachers, especially in the content areas of mathematics, science, and special education (Sutcher et al., 2018). According to Sutcher et al. (2018), such shortages can undermine student achievement, the implementation of new standards, and the ongoing work necessary to address educational disparities based on race, income, or disability.

Some institutes of higher education and school districts have responded to the need to help strengthen the teacher pipeline with innovative relationships to support and sustain new educators and leaders.

> *One way to encourage and serve new educators is to help them build practitioner confidence and support their growth through engagement with these purposeful district-university partnerships. These partnerships can be invaluable as they provide a collaborative path to meet the diverse and evolving needs of new and developing teachers and leaders.*

The purpose of this essay is to describe and discuss a public-private partnership created by

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our faith-based university with the local county office of education to strengthen the teacher pipeline in our community. This partnership, which links our private, faith-based education program with a local public entity, has operated successfully for the past decade and benefits developing teachers, school district personnel, and our university higher education programs. In addition to describing the development, benefits, and nature of this public-private collaboration, we provide suggestions for program design for other entities interested in pursuing similar ventures in their communities. Finally, we explore future ideas for continued growth in our partnership program.

The Partnership

Nearly a decade ago, the online division in our faith-based university established a collaborative partnership with the local county office of education. This office of education has a program that provides an opportunity for new teachers in several county school districts who have an undergraduate degree and hold a Preliminary or Level I credential to earn their Clear or Level II teaching credential through inquiry, study, and practice in a teacher induction program. These district-based induction programs offered throughout the state provide new teachers a job-embedded two-year course of study toward earning their credential. There are induction programs for both general education and educational specialists or special education. The state commission on teacher credentialing approves and provides oversight for these induction programs. Throughout the two-year program, participants receive mentoring from highly trained practicing educators currently in the field. The program is individualized, collaborative, and growth-oriented, as participants adopt a mindset of continuous improvement. The coursework in the induction program encourages students to think simultaneously about their current work as practitioner-learners and set goals for future contributions to the profession. The vision, goals, and purpose of this type of program are important to note as we further describe our collaborative relationships with these district-led programs.

This public-private partnership began over a decade ago. It originated when our state began requiring an Autism certificate for all special education credentialed teachers. Recognizing that the demand for the certificate would be high, our university's online division began offering courses leading to the certificate and started to develop relationships with school district and office of education representatives in order to market the program. For several years, the certificate was very popular with local teachers. Eventually, the content for the Autism certificate was integrated into teacher preparation programs statewide and the demand for a separate certificate began to decline. Fortunately, by the time the certificate program was discontinued, many positive relationships had formed between leaders in our division and the county office of education. Through the implementation of the Autism certificate, our university developed a reputation for delivering high-quality professional development to educators. In reviewing the literature on best practices, credibility, reputation, good relationships, and clear communication have all been identified as essential components of successful public-private partnerships (Seghal & Dubey, 2019). Implementing the Autism certificate provided a space for these elements to develop between our division and the local office of education, which established a good foundation for a strong partnership.

According to Hodge and Greve (2007), the definition of a public-private partnership varies. They further explained that these partnerships can be "loosely defined as cooperative institutional arrangements between public and private sector actors" (Hodge & Greve, 2007, p. 545). There is a long history of cooperation between public and private entities in the United States. For example, the transcontinental railroad resulted from such a partnership (Kee & Forrer, 2012). The modern idea of private-public partnerships came into being in the United States in the 1990s, and by 2007 approximately 1000 of these relationships were formed annually (Custos & Reitz, 2010). Although we are a Great Commission university dedicated to sharing the Gospel, we have been open to and successful in collaborating with secular organizations in developing partnerships based on mutual goals.

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For the past decade, our university and county office of education have supported each other in meeting our respective goals by focusing on the specific shared goals of developing highly trained educators who are ready to serve students, families, and communities.

Over time, the relationship between our division and the county office of education has become increasingly dynamic and interdependent. About seven years ago, county education representatives reached out to us about the possibility of a new means of collaborating. They shared that many of the teachers who have completed their induction program and earned their teaching credential desired to earn a graduate degree. Recognizing this as a valuable convergence of mutual goals, representatives from the districts and county and our university worked together to develop a degree program for induction candidates. As teacher educators, we believed we could make a positive contribution to our local educational community by developing a partnership designed to meet teachers' desire for ongoing education. Undoubtedly, district officials also felt that the additional educational opportunities made available to their teachers through the partnership had the potential to yield positive outcomes. Currently, our programs are an extension of the teacher education and induction process established within the local office of education, which has collaborated with the teaching commission in our state and grants credentials to teachers completing their intern and induction programs. In turn, we offer additional options for teachers who want to seek continued education beyond these programs by earning a master's degree. This additional education and training strives to bolster the knowledge and skills of newer teachers in our community and provide teachers with the opportunity to increase their salary, since earning a master's degree moves them up on the pay scale in their school district.

Like other district-university partnerships, our partnership allows students to receive block credits toward a master's degree for their work in induction. It is also a way for the university to play a purposeful role in strengthening the teaching profession at the local level. Although the problem of teacher attrition is a multifaceted, complex one,

effective teacher education and induction programs that provide support for new teachers have been shown to increase teacher retention (Picucci, 2016). By enrolling in the master's degree program created for the partnership, new teachers earn university credit for their district-related induction activities and take additional courses to earn a graduate degree. At the university, faculty members review a candidate's practitioner portfolio completed during induction as part of the assessment plan for our master's in education degree courses. Faculty also review the candidates' work on their professional goals, content-specific outcomes, and feedback from professionals working with them throughout induction. These documents often include notes from mentors, evidence of goals and growth, and artifacts from the reflective inquiry process as they complete the requirements to earn a teaching credential. Participants from these partnership induction programs are well-trained and reflective educators looking for continuous learning, career advancement, and ways to collaborate with other practicing educators.

Because they enroll in our graduate program as part of the partnership we have formalized, participants also receive a tuition discount specified as part of the agreement between the university and the county when the partnership was formed. This means that new teachers pay fewer out-of-pocket expenses for advancing their education in our division, which provides additional incentive for teachers to choose our local program over other graduate programs in the area. There are other financial incentives for new educators to further their education. According to a recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), educators with a graduate degree can earn up to 15% more in annual salary, depending on the salary schedule for their district or state. Regardless of the motivation, new educators need access to growth-oriented training and professional development after fulfilling their credential requirements. Our partnership offers this through the provision of affordable graduate courses that allow teachers to engage with a supportive community of learners to improve their skills.

Leveraging Shared Goals and Objectives

At first glance, a faith-based university and a public school district may not appear to be natural choices for a partnership of this nature. However, as Christian educators we have experienced many benefits of partnering with secular organizations, and furthermore we believe it to be consistent with our faith as described in Romans 12:6: "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them."

As a faith-based university, our missional goals seek to prepare students to be academically prepared, biblically rooted, globally minded, and equipped to serve. Additionally, program-specific goals for our department of education seek to equip educators with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for professional excellence to serve their communities as teachers and leaders. When forging the first partnership with the school district, it was helpful to look at their mission and vision statements to identify alignment and common purpose. The vision and mission of the school district communicates a commitment to ensure the success of all students through extraordinary service, support from highly qualified teachers, administrators, and staff, and to develop partnerships with other educational agencies, community and civic groups, parents, and students. Additionally, the district's core values focus on relationships, communication, and addressing the unique needs of all students. We find all these characteristics to be in alignment with our own goals and mission for serving and preparing students.

In the initial stages, we discussed the shared aspects of our goals, values, and mission statements in conversations about a potential partnership. We also shared program-specific objectives to ensure alignment. We found that frontloading these conversations in the initial

stages of forging such partnerships is essential. Focusing on our common goals and those values that we share helps bring purpose and clarity to the partnership. Developing these partnerships is a collaborative process, and key representatives from both organizations should be part of the initial conversations. Leaders from the recruitment and enrollment team, faculty, and academic leadership play an essential role in representing the university. District leaders in these conversations typically represent teachers, district trainers, administrators of partnering programs, and related staff. Having a representative group of collaborators helps to streamline communication should there be targeted issues that need to be addressed. For example, a student who completed the district induction program but waited a few years before continuing their education may have misplaced their coursework or digital portfolio from induction. In collaboration with enrollment services at the university, district induction officials, and academic leadership, we work to confirm the student's successful induction completion and help them gather the necessary documentation. We have also found that ongoing communication and periodic confirmation of the renewal of the partnership parameters, entailing reflection, program review, and sometimes revision is necessary to the success of the partnership. Our faculty volunteers to serve on district advisory boards to keep up with district initiatives or changes to their induction program. There is consistent communication between university enrollment, recruitment, and key district leaders.

In our experience, faith-based universities partnering with public organizations toward shared or common goals need not set their faith-based identities aside.

Daniels and Gustafson (2016) described the missional work of faith-based universities and the importance of finding ways to actively work toward the public good while serving and

engaging communities. We recognize that the diverse group of newly trained educators who enroll in our courses after induction come from varying faith backgrounds. Many are attending a Christian university for the first time. Our courses have relevant and clear faith integration threaded throughout the degree program. We believe in providing an inclusive space for students to explore faith, values, and ethics as they relate to their work as an educator. In their article on faith integration in the online classroom, Purper et al. (2020), cautioned against the assumption that all students will understand or be receptive to faith integration. "Relying solely on Bible verses or biblical terms and concepts can inadvertently isolate students who are not secure in navigating or interpreting the Bible" (Purper et al., 2020, p. 8). Through reflective assignments, scenario-based reasoning, and the exploration of worldviews, students enrolled in the partnership program have an opportunity to explore how faith and ethics align or even conflict with their work as an educator. We have found that our partnerships with public schools reinforce our commitment to the goals and responsibilities of training, mentoring, and developing educators. Moreover, these collaborative relationships offer us a way to strengthen the teacher pipeline and meet the missional goals of the university to equip students to serve through rigorous academic preparation in a faith-based environment.

Designing Programs to Support Teacher Education Students

In addition to addressing research and best practices to improve teaching and learning, curricula in ongoing continuing education programs should also reflect the various roles developing teachers and leaders will assume in their careers. Students seeking continuing education often are looking forward to other ways to contribute to the profession. Many students have a heart for their local schools and communities and are eager to find additional ways to use their training to serve. As part of their induction process with the school district, beginning teachers are often asked to reflect on how they see themselves serving in ways that advance and enhance the field. Many will be teacher leaders, administrators, mentors, directors, and coaches. Course work and training

must be able to be applied to any context. Neufeld et al. (2015) advocated adopting the mindset of developing people and building the capacity of educators ready to serve in any role or context. This idea aligns with both the goals of the district induction program and the university's missional goals of developing educators who are equipped to serve. Additionally, our courses are purposefully designed for students to explore how faith intersects with practice and their advocacy as educators. This supports our institution's missional goals of providing a Christ-centered education. For example, in a course on comparative education, students are asked to identify a contemporary issue in education and examine that issue locally, across the U.S., and in two other global education systems. Then students are asked to propose a solution to that issue. As part of the expectation for the proposed solution, students must describe how their ideas to address the issue aligns with their personal faith, worldview, and ethics. This component of the assignment is weighted heavily and requires students to go beyond inserting a scripture verse into the assignment; rather, we are looking for direct connections to their own faith journey, what they believe about ethics and integrity, and how their worldview informs their decision-making process and advocacy to solve issues within education systems. Requiring this level of reflection and purposeful thinking about faith and worldviews takes them beyond their work as educators in their local communities and compels students to think about themselves as globally minded citizens.

Meeting the needs of these practicing student-educators must also include ongoing course and program feedback from graduates. A typical student in our induction partnership program is a classroom teacher who completed induction at the school district level and is continuing their education at the university. These educators and leaders are seeking to improve practice, continue with reflective learning, and find ways to extend the valuable collaboration and learning from induction with other practicing educators. Upon completing their graduate degree, feedback on course evaluations often includes comments that students were excited to have had an opportunity to learn about inquiry, specific theories of

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teaching and learning, action research, and project-based learning. They appreciate that they learn these concepts while simultaneously working in the classroom. Participants are grateful for the opportunity to build on the learning and success from induction through their coursework at the university. Jessica is a classroom teacher who completed induction and continued her education at the university. When she graduated, she echoed the feedback of many of her peers adding that she was grateful for the opportunity to build on her learning and success from her induction experience through meaningful and relevant university coursework that also embedded faith into practice. She felt that the induction program through the school district and her continuing coursework at the university complemented each other. Jessica's long-term goal is to serve as a teacher leader, engaging colleagues in action research and project-based learning. Ideally, our faculty would like to support Jessica and other teachers through their next professional goals.

The importance of course feedback from students, as described in Duesbery et al. (2019), includes providing an opportunity for students to give feedback mid-course, after each course, and upon degree completion. This feedback is invaluable and guides course improvement and often program changes. Research by Van Ooyik et al. (2021) found that new teachers value the application of the theories and frameworks taught in university courses to their practice. We want students in our master's degree program to tell us if they use the course theories, strategies, and topics as part of their professional practice as classroom teachers. Gathering student feedback regarding content is an important means of acquiring this information. We look to students to help identify gaps in their learning that could be filled through specific course offerings, help us identify targeted topics specific to the issues they are facing, and help us plan for future course offerings.

Our master's program also engages in a regular program review process that ensures meaningful connections between courses, program goals, and course-level objectives. During this process, which assesses the effectiveness and health of the program, solicitation of feedback from external

stakeholders like district partners is essential. Additionally, part of the work of ensuring that our course work is meaningful, relevant, and builds on their skills from induction is maintaining consistent and ongoing contact with partnering induction program leaders to discuss any planned program changes. We are continually engaged in a needs assessment to respond to new teachers and leaders and a constantly evolving profession.

Essential to any degree program, professional development structure, or continuing education offering is the sense of community that grows and develops as students share practice-based learning and growth. Although we do not have a formal cohort model, student educators often know each other from their district induction program or as colleagues from the same school or district. Having space within our university classroom for students to discuss and share their practice and informal opportunities to socialize and connect contributes to the growth of the learning community. Trust (2012) advocated for using technology to provide an environment for continual learning for highly effective and developing educators. The online classroom provides a targeted space to encourage this continual learning practice. Leveraging the digital space to build a professional community and support new teachers and leaders contributes to their professional growth and development. It enhances self-efficacy as these student professionals build confidence through sharing common and complex problems of practice. A study by Greene et al. (2020) asserted that high-quality online graduate programs targeted to educators should include content that allows practical learning where students can easily translate theory to practice immediately. The affordability, accessibility, and flexibility of online graduate programs for new educators are attractive for many students; however, within these digital learning spaces, the need for active, relevant, collaborative, and engaging content is essential.

In his work on engaging students in online learning environments, Garrison (2017) applied a constructivist model framework called The Community of Inquiry Framework (CIF). This framework uses three specific dimensions as its foundation. Teaching presence, cognitive

presence, and social presence are essential components in this framework. Our online courses are designed with these elements in mind, beginning with the expectation of a teaching presence for all faculty. There are opportunities for engagement and active teaching and learning. Students from induction programs are used to this level of engagement from instructors, and we want them to have a similar experience in our courses. Cognitive presence occurs when students construct meaning through reflection and discussion about practice with peers and faculty. We want to ensure this engagement is evident in our courses. Finally, social presence and the need for a sense of belonging and connection are especially relevant in our courses because these students completed induction programs that encouraged professional collaboration and communication as an essential tool for success. We want to make sure that we continue that practice as students enroll in our courses. We have found a number of strategies particularly helpful in encouraging collaboration and community among teacher-learners in an online environment. Such strategies include:

- The consistent provision of a dedicated digital space for learners to discuss problems and successes in their teaching practice, and evidence-based strategies;
- The fostering of targeted discussions on topics specific to practice;
- The designing of learning experiences that promote opportunities to debrief with other practitioners;
- The provision and prioritizing of time for students to reconnect and socialize through course introductions. Among tools, we have found the most engaging introductions include having student having students post video updates in lieu of written introductions;
- The promotion of practice-based digital book clubs for students to discuss texts in an asynchronous format to accommodate busy schedules; and
- The finding of new ways to celebrate practitioner accomplishments and advancements.

New teachers and leaders also need opportunities for targeted collaboration with faculty. It is common for students in our courses to reach out to faculty for guidance on teaching practice, learning to lead, employment recommendations, and research ideas. Viewing digital portfolios from their district induction experience can help build relationships between classroom teachers and university faculty and can serve as a springboard for future action research projects and lead to opportunities to engage with faculty in research studies both during coursework and beyond. The digital portfolios from induction tell us a story about what they value as educators, topics they are interested in, and how they want to contribute to the profession. Teachers and new leaders need to see themselves as researchers with opportunities to use the tools and strategies they acquired in their induction experience and their continuing education or advanced degree courses. Our partnerships with public school districts have not only helped us focus our work on the needs of new practicing educators but have also fulfilled our institution's missional goals of equipping students to serve through rigorous academic preparation. Our partner districts send us students who are seeking ongoing professional learning to help them solve pertinent and timely issues in the classroom. Our program benefits from hearing about relevant school and classroom issues from student learners and facilitators of induction programs. The ability to be timely and current with our curriculum and instruction is a direct result of our student relationships and ongoing collaboration with our district partners.

Looking Forward

The partnership built between the county teacher induction program and our university has been a dynamic one that has evolved to serve the changing trends in education over time. We continue to respond to the needs of our local school districts by tailoring our programs based

*on new initiatives emerging for
teacher training.*

As a recent example, our partner district recently started offering an induction program for new school administrators similar to the teacher induction program. We plan to offer these administrative induction students block units toward a master's degree, including course work in leadership theory and practice to complete their degree. By engaging with our teacher education students and local education leaders, we hope to continue identifying the needs of our local educators.

Another area for future growth in this partnership is in continuing education for teachers. Although we currently offer only the master's degree pathway for teachers, we are hoping to expand our offerings to include continuing education as a means of meeting local teachers' ongoing professional development needs. Examples of these stand-alone courses might include topics on formative assessment, inclusion strategies for the classroom, and best practices in collaboration. These course offerings would also fill the need for teachers seeking continuing education units to recertify their teaching credential as part of state requirements. Research by Richardson et al. (2019) supported the idea of sustained partnerships between universities and local school districts and describes how these collaborations can help fill the gaps in ongoing professional development opportunities for new teachers. Single session workshops offered by districts can often be supplemented with sustained professional development and specialized certificate opportunities provided by universities. An essential step in this process is to identify areas for ongoing teacher education in the local district, ideally by soliciting information from district leaders about teachers' needs and interests. Through continued collaboration and a focus on the developing needs of new teachers, we desire to continue to offer programs that support and strengthen the teacher pipeline in our community. Our experience has clarified that even entities with different missions can create mutually beneficial partnerships that support new teachers by finding common ground with shared

goals and objectives. Since 2015 over five hundred students who have completed induction and enrolled in our program to successfully finish their degree have gone on to work in their communities as academically prepared, globally minded educators who are equipped to serve.

*We hope that more faith-based
institutions will recognize the
value of these partnerships as
a means of meeting their
mission, sustaining their
programs, and strengthening
their local educational
communities.*

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