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Collaboration: Some Principles of Bridgework

Successful collaboration between universities and schools is built on mutual need and mutual satisfaction, plus realistic expectations.

In his 1983 report to the Carnegie Foundation on school-college partnerships, Gene Maeroff remarked, "It is a sad commentary on American education that a book about *partnerships* can say very little about teacher preparation, which is, or should be, the most important connection between the nation's colleges and schools." Maeroff is not the only observer to lament this apparent disjunction between universities (and their colleges of education in particular) and schools; his message has been sounded repeatedly, almost from the inception of professional education for teachers (Silberman 1970). However, hope for increased bridge building, or at least for the laying of more planks across the chasm, is offered in the current focus of critical attention on teacher education.

WYNN DE BEVOISE



Jefferson County Public School teachers get chemistry laboratory experience from Professor Nathan Libscomb during the University's Summer Science Institute, 1985.

John Goodlad, professor of education at the University of Washington's College of Education, states that teacher education institutions are seriously threatened by the disaffection and sometimes outright hostility that educators in the nation's schools express toward them. "We need fundamental change," he remarked in a personal interview. "We need to enter an experimental mode in teacher education, perhaps in the direction of a new kind of institution—a collaborative research and training institution that serves as a half-way house between the university and the schools." But schools and universities are not likely to move toward such experimentation, or even increase traditional forms of collaboration, he warns, unless they both see it in their self-interest to do so. Goodlad cites Harry Judge's report

to the Ford Foundation, *American Graduate Schools of Education: A View from Abroad*, to point out that many of the teaching research institutions take pride in preparing researchers rather than teachers. Getting these institutions to recognize the importance of and to reward collaborative activities with schools constitutes an essential step in working toward meaningful school-university collaboration on a national scale. And while some school systems are aware of the benefits of working closely with universities, others have yet to be persuaded.

This article does not attempt to persuade schools and universities to collaborate. Rather, for those who already see it in their own as well as the public interest to work closely on joint projects, it distills principles of successful collaborative relationships from the experiences of those involved in the long-term cooperation between the University of Louisville and its School of Education and the Jefferson County (Kentucky) Public Schools. This cooperation, given additional impetus about five years ago with the arrival of three new administrators—University President Donald Swain, Superintendent of Schools Donald Ingwerson, and Dean of the School of Education Raphael O. Nystrand—is rooted in the belief that the university and the schools need each other to achieve the goals they hold in common.

Swain recalls that he and Ingwerson came to their new positions at a time when both institutions needed to change. The problems of desegregation and reorganization in the school district, the need to build public respect and support for all levels of education, and scarce resources encouraged an openness to risk-taking and to experimentation in seeking improvement. According to Swain, working with the schools is a natural outgrowth of the university's mission.

As an urban university, we have a self-conscious dedication to serving the surrounding urban area, to developing and enhancing our linkages with the community. In working with the schools, our self-interest and our theoretical ideals about bringing constructive change to our environment come together. Eighty percent of our students come from the Jefferson County Public Schools. If we help to improve education in the schools, we are improving the quality and numbers of our own student body. Moreover, we are de-

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Superintendent Donald Ingwerson (left) shakes hands with President Donald Swain after Swain's lesson in environmental history at a Louisville, Kentucky, high school.

pendent on the economic well-being of our community, and we are fully aware that economic development is tied to improving the quality of our public school system.

An openness to risk and innovation in both institutions is making possible the type of experimentation to which Goodlad alludes. Currently, the School of Education and the public schools are planning an academy that will be jointly administered, financed, and staffed. The academy will permit university personnel to work in and for the public schools and simultaneously allow school district personnel to work in and for the university in teacher education and administrative leadership. In addition, the academy staff will design and implement research and development projects that will respond to the school system's needs.

Toward an Understanding of Collaboration

While the effort to establish an academy in Louisville will probably require a contractual agreement and a new governance structure, collaborative activities can embrace diverse connections between institutions, from the formal agreement described above to an informal agreement between two individuals to coauthor a paper.

The nature of a collaborative relationship depends on what the cooperating parties hope to achieve. The goal of improving the way children learn in school, which should be at the heart of

school-university collaboration, necessarily involves the entire continuum of connecting relationships. Formal relationships often serve to coordinate and focus informal partnerships. The reverse is also true: relationships that begin formally can become informal and develop into the often unseen but intricate webbing that links members of two institutions.

Current use of the term collaboration emphasizes its reference to partnerships among friends, but Phillip Schlechty, director of the Gheens Professional Development Center for the Jefferson County Public Schools and chief designer for the new academy, points out that it also suggests "cavorting with the enemy." It is of course this latter connotation that must be faced and overcome in developing a truly collaborative relationship. In such a relationship, trust between the cooperating parties enables them to share authority. By giving up a portion of their sovereignty, the participants can accomplish goals that will bring greater strength and recognition to their individual institutions. The necessary trust and willingness to give up authority take years of shared experiences, patience, and nurturing, and the importance of individual commitment and personalities cannot be over-emphasized. Ultimately, the collaborators need to recognize not only their own interests but also the needs and perspectives of all represented in the collaborative venture.

Principles of Collaboration

The experienced collaborators who were interviewed for this article—from university president to assistant professor and from superintendent to classroom teacher—use different vocabularies. They may view the same collaborative effort through different lenses. Yet, when blended together, their thoughts are remarkably compatible. This is not to suggest that collaborative relationships are free of conflict. In the actual practice of collaboration, politics, personalities, and financial difficulties can obstruct the best laid plans (Sarason 1982). Recognizing such pitfalls, potential collaborators need to be willing to try not just once, perhaps, but again and again. The trick, according to Nystrand, is to focus on the long-range working relation-

ship and to keep in sight the fundamental purpose of school-university cooperation: helping children learn.

Collaboration starts with administrative support. For significant collaboration to occur between the staffs of two institutions, top-level institutional support and cooperation is essential. In Louisville the university president, the superintendent of schools, and the dean of the school of education meet and communicate regularly. They remove bureaucratic impediments to collaborative projects, provide incentives and resources, and appreciate and recognize efforts by individual staff members.

Terry Brooks, formerly a middle school principal for the Jefferson County Public Schools and currently the director for middle school programs, notes:

[In the school system] the superintendent's priorities get carried out; they are supported by teachers and principals. But beyond that, when the superintendent places a high value on collaboration with the university, it's easier for individuals to get support from the district-level staff for such projects.

On the university's side, the president has publicly stated his support for a close working relationship with the schools. Last year as part of a joint team-teaching project, Swain taught a lesson on environmental history to a local high school class: "I derived personal satisfaction from that experience, and I recruited some new students to the university as well. But it was also important on a symbolic level to show my commitment to the public schools." The budget sheets of both institutions, where several university faculty members and school district administrators hold joint appointments, also reflect this school-university cooperation.

Not everyone is born to be a collaborator. Ideologues with rigid agendas for reform and practitioners who distrust theory and resist change will probably encounter frustration in initiating or responding to a collaborative project. Collaboration depends on a "community of believers," according to Schlechty, in which enthusiasm, flexibility, and a shared language help break down traditional institutional barriers. These "believers" form the core of a collaborative effort. They swap stories about their experiences,

travel back and forth freely between the university and school district, and are committed to the project for its duration. One common problem in school-university projects, Schlechty reports, is that "university consultants often come into the schools to sell their ideas and leave, just when the going gets tough. The school people are then expected to take the heat. What the university folks don't seem to realize is that good ideas seldom make things easier in the short run. They need to stick around and get into the nitty-gritty." By sharing in the trenchwork of carrying through a project, representatives of both sides contribute to a common culture that mutes the distinctions between practitioner and academic.

Collaborators should exhibit professional respect for those from the "other" institution. Where mutual respect is lacking, cooperation cannot occur. Neither partner can claim to have a corner on knowledge or solutions. Thus, when suggesting personnel for a cooperative project, administrators want to look not only for people who have good ideas but who are also good listeners, capable of hearing the opposite point of view.

The ability to develop and use networks, "skunkwork" in the terminology of some management literature, also distinguishes successful collaborators. Personal relationships between school and university personnel allow them to exchange information and obtain special assistance. By taking on a brokering role, collaborators serve as bridges to and from their institutions. Ideally, the number of bridges between the institutions is constantly increasing.

Such bridgework, it should be noted, takes perseverance on both sides. Nystrand believes that persistence is an essential characteristic of the collaborating individual. The administrator's role is "to encourage people to keep trying, to keep working together despite frustrations, misunderstandings, or perceived breakdowns to communication."

Collaborators need to have realistic expectations. While enthusiasm is important, it should not obscure the need for a hard-nosed assessment of resources and time required to do a good job. Collaboration, Swain points out, can be costly even though legisla-

tors may think such working relationships are free. Brooks lists insufficient resources as the number one pitfall in collaboration. "It's easy to get the icing," he observes, "but difficult to get the cake." Brooks advises that if adequate support is not available, the project should wait. He adds:

Identifying the resources needed requires understanding of the constraints collaborators face in their home institutions. Local school people sometimes get all fired up about a project and think the professors involved have nothing else to do. They don't see the total picture of a university teacher's commitment to teaching, advising, research, and publication. All they see is that the professors just need to meet a few classes three times a week. Then they wonder why they aren't spending more time in the schools. On the other hand, professors don't always recognize the rigid and sometimes unexpected time constraints of school people. If they make an appointment and I've been called away to an emergency meeting, they might mistakenly conclude that I lack interest.

For their part, university collaborators sometimes forget that the use of teacher time requires the money to buy released time. Unlike academics, school teachers do not have a portion of their time allocated to research and service. As Brooks pointed out, "It is unfair to ask them to collaborate after a full day of classes." However, if representatives of either institution are unwilling to give of their time and energy beyond what is stipulated in the agreement, the project will probably suffer. A certain portion of any collaborative work is accomplished because the partners care enough to make it happen.

Collaborators should work toward consumer satisfaction. Schools and universities should each consider the other institution as a consumer of their services. Thus, the first step in a collaborative project is to appreciate what the rewards are for each side. Often, schools and universities list their goals only in terms of their own needs, and they compose a statement of common purpose that means something different to each partner (Maloy 1985, Sarason 1982). If they understand what each institution hopes to derive from the project in the beginning, and each institution then works to meet the needs of its consumer-partner, there will more likely be opportunities for further collaboration rather than frustration from working at cross-purposes.

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Leaders who want to nurture collaborative projects "need to find common and unifying interests," remarks Swain. "They need to understand the different world views of school systems and universities and take account of these differences in a constructive way. Most important, they should design projects that allow individuals on each side to gain professionally and personally. Now that takes a lot of thought and care."

Collaborators should avoid becoming involved in the internal politics of the other institution. Politics is the point at which cooperating institutions must separate. Each institution must preserve the integrity of the other by remaining publicly objective and, in many instances, noncommittal. As Nys-trand asserts:

There is no faster way to lose trust than to become involved in the internal politics of the school district, or vice versa. There are some things going on in the district that I don't want to be involved with, that I feel are not the business of the School of Education. I can count on the superintendent to feel the same way about the university. We focus instead on the long-term nature of our relationship, on the projects we are carrying out together, and on joint determination of new possibilities. There is a spirit of mutual benefit rather than competition.

School and university collaborators also need to recognize the diverse political realities of their institutions (Sarason 1982). Schlechty, who has been working between universities and school systems for many years, finds that academics are naive about

power politics, especially in large urban districts, and that public school people do not understand university politics. While members of school systems tend to respond more quickly to bureaucratic authority, university people, accustomed to a collection of "fiefdoms," tend to resist such authority. Stated more bluntly, a dean is more likely than a superintendent to need faculty consensus for a particular action. And where both need consensus, it will probably take the dean longer to obtain it.

Meanwhile, each institution can see the other as a cumbersome bureaucracy. In some respects, says Schlechty, working with a university, a large school system, and a well-organized teachers association is like trying to "get dinosaurs to do a ballet." Without persistence, a clear perception of how these dinosaurs move, and the personal relationships that help expedite bureaucratic procedures, potential collaborators could easily give up in despair. The good news is that with mutual understanding and trust, even dinosaurs can dance.

Collaboration relies on effective delivery and reception systems. For each new collaborative effort, the means for delivering and receiving services—the plugs and sockets in Schlechty's vocabulary—need to be in place. Increasingly since 1970, Schlechty contends, universities have been concerned about better delivery of their services, but schools have given little attention to receiving them. He believes that if universities are to help schools receive what they can offer, university professors need to get into the schools long enough to view themselves from the "outside." It helps to have personnel from both institutions who are assigned the task of matching needs and services.

John Pollock, director of educational services for the university's School of Education, sees the university classroom as a seedbed for projects that bring together the mutual interests and capacities of the school system and the university. As coordinator for a program that funds research and development projects jointly proposed by at least one university faculty member and one employee of the Jefferson County Public Schools, Pollock sees many ideas come to fruition that begin in a graduate class. In these projects,

university faculty and school professionals leave the teacher-student relationship behind to work as coinvestigators. The funds for the projects are contributed equally by the university and the school district.

One area in which universities need to develop better receptivity, according to Booker Rice, deputy superintendent for instruction in the Jefferson County Public Schools, is in using the experiences of the public schools to inform programs in the schools of education. This, of course, is a chronic concern. Academics often criticize school systems for being slow to accept change, but experience demonstrates that universities themselves do not respond with alacrity to the possibility of change (Sarason 1982). Clearly, designers of the "plugs and sockets" for collaborative projects need to understand the change process and to assess realistically the resistance to change in both schools and universities.

The Necessity of Committed People

Any of the general principles outlined above could serve, and in fact have served, as the focus of an entire book. The gist, however, has been well-stated by Randall Powers, former dean of Louisville's School of Education and participant in much of the groundwork for the collaborative relationship that exists today. Says Powers:

In the end, collaboration depends on people on both sides being willing to make it work. You can have as elaborate a mechanism as you like, but that won't carry things through. It's the people that matter. □

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Wynn De Bevoise is a research associate, Center for Urban Education Research, School of Education, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292.

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