

District and University Perspectives on Sustaining Professional Development Schools: Do the NCATE Standards Matter?

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Abstract

Professional development school partnerships can improve teaching and learning in our schools. To support these partnerships, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) developed standards for professional development schools. In this article, we address the questions, “What NCATE standards work from the point of view of school principals and university faculty members when sustaining PDS partnerships?” and “How can universities improve PDS implementations so that all partners see the benefit of each NCATE standard?” Although, there is wide agreement between school leaders and university faculty on the importance of the standards, there are also some notable differences in their functionality.

There is no doubt that a “fully functioning” professional development school (PDS) partnership can improve teaching and learning in our schools (Darling-Hammond, 2005; The Holmes Partnership, 2006; Levine, 2006; Tetiel, 2004; Van Scoy & Eldridge, 2012). These improvements manifest themselves in a variety of ways including, improved student achievement, powerful professional development opportunities for classroom teachers, and unique opportunities for undergraduate teacher candidates to learn their craft in a nurturing environment (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005; NCATE, 2006). School principals, district leaders, and university professors have opportunities to create meaningful partnerships that enhance both the school district and the university. However, building and sustaining quality professional development schools can be a challenge. Turnover in district and school-based leadership, changing areas of focus by universities or state policymakers, and limited financial and human resources can all place stress on a partnership. Having clear partnership expectations and lines of communication between the professional development school and the collaborating university are key to sustaining a meaningful partnership (Doolittle, Sudeck & Rattigan, 2008).

The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has developed standards for professional development schools (Table 1) that have been broadly accepted in the educational community (NCATE, 2001a). These standards are important in several ways. First and foremost, the standards address the essential characteristics (critical attributes) of a PDS (Brindley, Field, & Lessen, 2008). Second, the standards have been instrumental in bringing about a general consensus within the profession regarding the definition of a professional development school. Third, the standards are designed to accommodate the developmental nature of PDS partnerships and include guidelines meant to support PDS development and implementation across various levels. Finally, the standards provide a common framework across partnerships for investigating PDS outcomes, assessing PDS quality, and promoting continued partnership development through self-study (NCATE, 2001b).

Table 1
NCATE PDS Standards and Elements

NCATE PDS STANDARDS	
E L E M E N T S	Standard 1: Learning Community
	1. Support Multiple Learners 2. Work and Practice are Inquiry-Based and Focused on Learning 3. Develop a Common Shared Vision of Teaching and Learning Grounded in Research and Practitioner Knowledge 4. Serve as Instrument of Change 5. Extended Learning Community
	Standard 2: Accountability and Quality Assurance
	1. Develop Professional Accountability 2. Assure Public Accountability 3. Set PDS Participation Criteria 4. Develop Assessments, Collect Information, and Use Results 5. Engage with the PDS Context
	Standard 3: Collaboration
	1. Engage in Joint Work 2. Design Role and Structures to Enhance Collaboration and Develop Parity 3. Systematically Recognize and Celebrate Joint Work and Contribution of Each Partner
	Standard 4: Diversity and Equity
	1. Ensure Equitable Opportunities to Learn 2. Evaluate Policies and Practices to Support Equitable Learning Outcomes 3. Recruit and Support Diverse Participants
	Standard 5: Structures, Resources, and Roles
	1. Establish Governance and Support Structures 2. Ensure Progress towards Goals 3. Create PDS Roles 4. Resources 5. Use Effective Communication

Research on professional development schools has grown steadily since the mid-1990s (Neapolitan & Berkeley, 2006). Studies involving the NCATE PDS standards have been a part of this research. Teitel's (2004) review of PDS research included studies that conducted interviews of principals, teachers, and other key participants in relation to the PDS standards. Specifically, Teitel's work was a review of research documenting and assessing the impact of PDSs on students and educators. Some of the research cited examined PDS participants (preservice teachers, cooperating teachers, principals) views of self-efficacy, empowerment, beliefs, and perceptions of the PDS impacts on their school and students. Other studies used the PDS standards as a way to determine the extent to which a PDS partnership meets the definition of a PDS.

More recently, Field (2008) interviewed PDS principals to determine how they utilize research-based leadership practices that align with PDS Standard. Her findings illustrate how PDS principals actualize leadership practices (aligned with the PDS standards) and what the school district and

university could do to strengthen the partnership. Recommendations include a need for well-defined systems to support the PDS and the need to provide professional development for PDS principals as they facilitate the partnership.

Previous studies have either focused on PDS participant perceptions of their role in relation to the PDS standards, or they have been used for program assessment. It appears, however, that there has been little investigation into the perspectives of PDS principals and university faculty as to the functionality (or importance) of the PDS standards for sustaining a PDS. In this article, we describe a study that examines PDS principals and university faculty perspectives on the functionality of the PDS standards and provide recommendations for further study in this area. Specifically, the following research questions guided the study:

1. How are the NCATE standards perceived by school principals working in professional development schools?
2. Which standards are valued by school principals?
3. Which standards, if any, are viewed as superfluous or burdensome by principals?
4. What do principals believe contribute to successful PDS partnerships?
5. Do university partners agree with school principals on the value of the standards? If not, how do their perspectives differ?

Method

A qualitative research methodology with open coding procedures was used to identify a common set of themes that describe perspectives toward the NCATE PDS standards (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). This study targeted seven school principals, all of whom were veteran leaders in their schools. While the principals all came from one large school district (64,000 students), their partnerships were with five different colleges and universities. These partnerships included two large state universities, two small private liberal arts universities, and one large state college. Six of the seven participants in the study were elementary school principals, and one was a middle school principal. While the schools represented various geographic regions of the county, they were all Title I schools.

Data collection from school principals consisted of a series of structured phone interviews conducted individually with each of the seven respondents. The NCATE PDS Standards and Elements (see Table 1) were provided to each participant in advance, along with a generic description of the purpose of the interview. The interview questions were not provided in advance in an effort to facilitate an open-ended discussion with the participants (see Table 2). Notes from the interviews were analyzed, and emergent themes and patterns were identified.

The study also included four university faculty participants who have worked in professional development schools for more than 18 years. The four participants have more than 80 years of combined experience in PDS environments. Although all participants teach at the same small private liberal arts university, they have worked at multiple PDS sites (several schools in the same district as the principal respondents). The university perspective was gathered through focus group discussions where participants responded to the importance of the standards in their PDS work. University participants also shared how their experiences related to each standard. As with the principal

responses, university faculty responses were analyzed, and themes were noted (emerging themes identified from the principal interviews were available to the university focus group).

The following four themes emerged over the course of the interviews and focus group discussions (discussed further in the findings sections): 1) Relevance and immediacy of PDS activities, 2) collaboration and partnership between school and university, 3) planned data-driven PDS activities, and 4) aligned professional development opportunities for teachers.

Table 2
Interview Questions for PDS Principals

QUESTIONS FOR PRINCIPALS
Question 1: Why did you apply to become a PDS school?
1. Describe school population. 2. How long have you been a PDS?
Question 2: Describe the strengths and weaknesses of your PDS partnership.
1. From your perspective as a principal 2. From your perception of how your faculty feels about the partnership 3. From your perception of how your university partners feel about the partnership
Question 3: How helpful is your university partner in meeting your school goals?
1. What additional assistance do you need from your university? 2. Is there anything they should focus less on?
Question 4: What are the biggest faculty challenges you face with your PDS?
1. Buy-in? 2. Time? 3. Collaboration? 4. Other?
Question 5: What are the PDS components and activities that ultimately make a successful partnership?
1. With teachers? 2. With university partners?
Question 6: NCATE PDS standard 1 is Learning Community. How important is that standard to the success of your PDS?
Question 7: NCATE PDS standard 2 is Accountability and Quality Assurance. . How important is that standard to the success of your PDS?
Question 8: NCATE PDS standard 3 is Collaboration. How important is that standard to the success of your PDS?
Question 9: NCATE PDS standard 4 is Diversity and Equity. How important is that standard to the success of your PDS?
Question 10: NCATE PDS standard 5 is Structures, Resources, and Roles. How important is that standard to the success of your PDS?
Question 11: Looking at all 5 PDS standards, how would you rank them in order of importance from most important to least important?
1. Why? 2. Would your faculty feel the same way?

Findings

Findings from Principal Interviews

While all five NCATE standards are important and understood by principals in this study, not all standards are deemed to have equal significance in the eyes of the school leaders. Based on the interviews, principals repeatedly and consistently identified “collaboration” and “data driven” activities as the most important contributors to a successful PDS experience.

Standard 1, the formation of a learning community, Standard 2, the development of accountability and quality assurance (particularly in the areas of collecting data and using that data in a meaningful way), and Standard 3, collaboration, were clearly evident in the interview responses as the “must have” components for a PDS to last. Principals want to see their PDS focus directly on where their student achievement data needs improvement. Further, principals reported that they want to see their PDS assist in the development of professional development activities that align with what their data are showing. As one principal commented, “If teachers don’t feel that the professional development they are receiving from the PDS experience is relevant to their academic situation and is helping them help their students do better, they will quickly disengage from the process.” When asked why his PDS failed, another principal reported that “a lack of focus on meaningful academic goals that made sense to the teachers’ current conditions killed our partnership.”

Principal participants consistently reported that teachers need to see why PDS partnerships are important to them and their students. Responses indicated that principals felt their teachers were overwhelmed with state and district mandates and needed to see an immediate connection between the time they spend on PDS activities and the relationship of those activities to their daily work as teachers. Responses also showed that principals need to know that the time teachers are spending in PDS meetings and activities are aligned with the demands of the district and their particular academic areas of focus. This need for relevance and immediacy was clearly evident in all responses.

PDS principals identified collaboration, communication, and true “two-way” partnerships as critical to the success of their PDS. One principal who just moved from a PDS environment with one university to a new school with a new PDS partner reported that her last partnership was stagnant due to a lack of collaboration. “My teachers were turned off and felt disrespected by what they perceived as a top down approach from the college partners. I could never get faculty buy-in once that attitude took hold.”

Of equal importance to PDS sustainability from the perspective of school principals is the alignment of professional development with student academic achievement and the teaching framework in use by the district. Principals identified their role in helping teachers understand the pedagogy behind the teacher evaluation system as a powerful component of any successful PDS. Moreover, principals felt their PDS experiences were positive and important when the university created opportunities for developing instructional strategies that both support the instructional framework of the district and build upon the data driven strengths and weaknesses of the students.

Findings from University Discussions

Based on the university focus group discussions, a basic framework for what constitutes a healthy and successful PDS environment emerged. While there was a great deal of overlap and agreement between the university respondents and the principals, there were also significant differences regarding the value of the NCATE standards and what it takes to form an effective PDS partnership.

The focus group discussions revealed an immediate agreement that a natural alignment should exist between the standards that principals find as powerful and necessary for the success of a PDS and the standards that university partners typically identify as their main areas of focus. Focus group participants agreed that the standards identified by principal respondents are essential for PDS sustainability. University partners recognized that the NCATE standards are important because they represent the essential attributes of a PDS and are designed to support PDS development and implementation and assess PDS quality. This same level of recognition was not as evident in the responses from the PDS principals.

University focus group participants identified Standard 1, learning community, as the heart of a PDS. This standard requires a commitment among all participants to support multiple learners through practice grounded in a shared vision of teaching and learning guided by inquiry focused on learning (Teitel, 2003). University partners agreed that the time invested in nurturing a learning-centered community pays off in educational dividends through initiatives that target identified student learning needs, provide meaningful faculty development, and support quality teacher candidate preparation. The structured phone interviews with PDS principals revealed this same commitment to Standard 1 (learning community) as a key requisite for PDS sustainability. While Standard 2 (particularly the element of “develop professional accountability”) was seen as key for PDS success by principals, the principals were silent on the other elements of this particular standard. For example, none of the 7 principals focused on public accountability. The university focus group, however, took a broader view of Standard 2 and its importance in PDS overall quality.

The focus group respondents agreed with the focus on student academic outcomes but felt that this was just one, albeit important, dimension of the standard. In addition to ensuring that the learning-centered outcomes established in Standard 1 are achieved, Standard 2 also provides for public accountability at the local, state, and national level. University focus group members were more interested in Standard 2’s capacity for PDSs to leverage change in policies and practices at all levels.

Focus group members agreed with principals that Standard 3, collaboration, helps participants engage in joint work to improve outcomes for students, preservice teachers, faculty, and other stakeholders. Focus group members felt the standard of collaboration also ensures that there is parity in the decision-making process of a PDS. This standard is strongly connected to the other NCATE standards and is considered foundational to Standard 1, learning community (Teitel, 2003). Again, school principals agreed that collaboration is an essential component to effective partnerships.

A brief overview of the focus group participants’ experiences informs their views on the relative importance of the NCATE PDS standards. Their experience with professional development schools began in 1993. Supported by a grant, the university faculty worked with a local elementary school as their first PDS pilot. Since preservice teachers were placed in the elementary school for field experiences and the school itself was in close proximity to the university, administrators from the university decided that this school would be selected. Although the partnership, as described in the grant proposal was approved by the district and school principal, the PDS partnership experienced challenges from the beginning. These challenges were primarily due to a lack of quality implementation of Standards 1 (learning community), 3 (collaboration), and 5 (structures, resources, and roles). It is interesting to note that the focused interviews with school principals identified Standards 1 and 3 as priority standards. School leaders, however, did not view Standard 5 as a high-priority standard. In fact, principals routinely placed Standard 5 at the bottom of their list of standards

that have a significant impact on the overall success of their PDS. Yet, it was the opinion of the university focus group that failure to implement Standard 5 with fidelity doomed their first PDS pilot.

According to focus group participants, the issue that sparked the biggest challenge for the newly established PDS began when the school's principal identified a select group of teachers to participate in the planning and act as the "PDS Team." It was the university's goal that this planning team would be representative of the entire school, however, not all teachers were directly involved in the planning of the PDS. Consequently, animosity developed among the rest of the school's faculty. The team in charge of the PDS became known as the principal's "dream team." Further, efforts by the university faculty to become involved in the school as a whole were received with resistance. University focus group members later realized that the faculty on the "dream team" did not share with their grade-level teams the ideas discussed at the planning meetings, nor did they ask for their input. Consequently, the other teachers at the PDS site did not have a stake or ownership in the PDS partnership. In the discussions, university faculty highlighted that although this was not a successful first PDS attempt, they learned an important lesson regarding teacher buy-in, open communication, and establishing a governance structure. Standard 5 mattered. Without the structures, resources, and roles for the PDS firmly established as a foundation for success, the ability to form a true collaborative partnership failed.

As a result of lessons learned, the university participants described a second PDS partnership that began with a deliberate and systematic focus on Standard 5 as a prerequisite for success. An inclusive and open selection process between the university and school district was step one for the partnership, something that did not happen the first time. **A school's expressed interest in becoming a PDS partner initiated an application process.** At that time, university faculty made a presentation to school faculty that outlined the roles and responsibilities of all parties, including the district, school-based personnel, and university personnel. Focus group members repeatedly emphasized that having all responsibilities explicitly discussed and understood was important to the success of any PDS. They mentioned that outlining the individual responsibilities makes it easier for stakeholders to commit to the partnership agreement and be personally responsible for their individual and collective roles. University faculty learned from the second PDS experience the importance of a governing structure to the overall effectiveness of a partnership (Standard 5). While none of the 7 practicing PDS principals recognized Standard 5 as particularly necessary, the university partners saw this standard as the structure from which the work of the PDS is identified and monitored, roles and responsibilities delineated, resources secured, and outcomes assessed (Heins, Tichenor & MacIsaac, 2002).

As school principals highlighted in their interview responses, they are concerned with Standard 2, accountability and quality assurance, particularly as it relates to collecting and using data in meaningful ways. Standard 2's focus on using data is an area that university faculty and school principals have in common. This is evident by one of the PDS projects initiated by a school principal who (based on various assessment data) saw the need to address the learning gap of African American boys in her school. The discussion group participants described how the PDS partnership fully supported the school's goal to better reach this student population by beginning a single-gender program, the first in the district. Both groups of respondents felt the PDS must be data-driven and must use data as a rationale to plan, support, and measure the success of any PDS initiative. Both groups were in agreement that the planning of study groups, workshops, and other professional development activities should emphasize how to enhance K-12 student learning.

While the principal perspectives for Standard 2 focus exclusively on accountability and quality assurance, the university focus group also saw the importance of other elements described in Standard 2, such as assuring public accountability and engaging with the PDS context. The university participants agreed that annual school board presentations highlighting major initiatives (as well as data from the projects) should be a joint undertaking between university faculty and school-leaders. Moreover, school-based personnel should participate in conference presentations with university faculty, thus sharing the work of the PDS with a wider audience. Although not a must for school-based faculty, the university focus group felt participating at professional conferences and publishing scholarly work was a must for university partners. Highlighting PDS initiatives through these types of activities is highly beneficial to university faculty for promotion and tenure decisions. Principals did not emphasize these elements in Standard 2 and did not see them as important parts of a successful PDS.

Another NCATE standard that showed a discrepancy in perceived value between school principals and university faculty was Standard 4, diversity and equity. In the structured phone interviews with principals, this standard was never rated as a “top three” standard. When questioned about the apparent lack of significance with this standard, principals routinely focused on the issue of diversity within their faculty population, as opposed to their student population. There was an underlying assumption that all students benefit from quality PDS experiences, but the need for diversity or even equity among PDS faculty participants was not seen as important to the principals. One principal respondent replied that she was more interested in making sure the “right” faculty were involved in PDS activities and training than having a diverse or democratically arrived-at group of teacher participants. When questioned as to whom the “right” faculty were, the response was the faculty who she felt would benefit the most from quality PDS professional development.

The university focus group felt that, like Standard 5, Standard 4, diversity and equity, directly connected to Standard 2, accountability and quality assurance, by ensuring equitable opportunities to learn. University faculty agreed that PDS initiatives should naturally focus on diverse populations that typically have not fared well in our schools. They believe that through PDS partnerships, many diverse issues can be addressed, including gender equity, poverty, second language learners, and exceptional student education.

Another interesting point made by university faculty was that they felt the PDS standards serve as practical guidelines when working with individual school partnerships or multiple school partnerships. They pointed out that for a network of professional development schools to be effective, the partnership must work to increase collaboration and support among area schools and the university. University faculty discussed how school personnel in a PDS network of multiple schools must have opportunities to interact with other school-based educators, while continually focusing on measureable outcomes. They agreed that the network governance structure, major PDS initiatives, and ongoing projects should address the unique interests and needs of the individual schools, school district, and university. However, PDS activities should also be developed and implemented within the framework of all five standards.

Implications for Future Study

An examination of the findings of the structured interviews and focus group discussions points to several areas of alignment and of concern regarding the functionality and understanding of the PDS

NCATE standards. Potential areas for further study include how to build into the PDS framework and governance structure guidelines that support communication, participant involvement, systematic planning, and flexibility among all stakeholders. Other research questions may include the following: How can partnerships assure that professional development schools create a collaborative relationship with the aim of achieving the educational goals of both the school and the university? Is the quality implementation of all five standards an important prerequisite for district administrators, school-based personnel, and university faculty to feel that they are a valued part of the partnership? Finally, since the goals, needs, and resources continually change for both the school site and the university, do the standards provide the flexibility to meet the needs of principals reporting significant stress and lack of time to achieve their goals?

Conclusion: Do the Standards Matter?

Yes, the NCATE standards do matter when sustaining professional development school partnerships. While the structures, resources, and roles for effective PDSs (Standard 5) and the responsibility for PDSs to address equity and diversity (Standard 4) are clearly important prerequisites for overall PDS quality, school leaders do not view them as the variables that make or break a PDS relationship. We see this disconnect between school and university partners regarding the need for a focus on Standard 5 in both the feedback from principals of PDS schools and in the actions of the pilot school administration in the initial design of the roles and structures for their PDS (as described in the university focus group findings). However, the findings do not indicate that principals see no need for establishing the governance structure of the PDS (they did recognize the necessity for establishing roles and structures for the work). What the principals did not recognize, however, was the foundational importance of how those roles and structures were established and maintained. School principals assumed that once there was a focus on Standard 1 (learning community), Standard 2 (accountability and quality assurance), and Standard 3 (collaboration), it did not matter how Standards 4 and 5 were built or maintained.

All partners must be willing to recognize the purpose and necessity of each of the standards for long-term program viability, while demonstrating flexibility to meet the needs of the school. To ensure sustainability, it is important to build partnerships that are part of both university and school cultures. When partnerships are built on a foundation of collaboration and professional development activities aligned with the needs of the schools, a meaningful and sustainable professional development school partnership will certainly occur. We can confidently say that school principals and university faculty would agree.

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