

Quinnipiac School of Education – The Importance of Our NAPDS Association

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ABSTRACT: The Quinnipiac University School of Education was one of two school-university partnerships honored with the 2016 NAPDS Award for Exemplary Professional Development School Achievement. In this invited article, Anne Dichele, the director of the school’s Master of Arts in Teaching program, describes their “small but innovative” program. Now in its fifth year of existence, the partnership uniquely consists of the School of Education, one public elementary school, and one charter school.

NAPDS Essential(s) Addressed: #1/A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community; #2/A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community; #3/Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need; #4/A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants; #5/Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants; #6/An articulation agreement developed by the respective participants delineating the roles and responsibilities of all involved; #7/A structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration; #8/Work by college/university faculty and P–12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings; #9/Dedicated and shared resources and formal rewards and recognition structures.

When Quinnipiac University School of Education was notified that we were to be recognized by the NAPDS with the 2016 Exemplary Achievement Award for our PDS work, our faculty and our partners were deeply honored but also excited to be able to share the many accomplishments and life lessons we experienced over the years. So much has happened to our small yet innovative program of teacher preparation over the last five years in particular, and so much is in part due to what my colleagues and I have learned during our attendance at the NAPDS conferences. We have not only built strong relationships with other professionals all over the country, but our discussions and our sharing of expertise and experiences has led to significant changes in our programs of teacher preparation and in our capacity to reflect and learn from our professional development school partners.

Quinnipiac University’s School of Education and their partnerships with the Side By Side Charter School and the Fair Haven Elementary School began unofficially more than fifteen years ago. However, it was the National Professional Development School Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada in 2011 that prompted our Quinnipiac Faculty, after attending the conference, to seek out ways to solidify the relationships we had with these schools; a relationship that would be more formalized and clarified. Through a Memorandum of Understanding the PDS partnerships were formally established on June 19, 2012, with a reception and celebration of the partnerships at Quinnipiac University’s School of Education.

In 1997, the Side By Side Charter School in Norwalk, Connecticut was established by six founders: five teachers from

the Norwalk, Connecticut system and one professor of education who had provided workshops for the district over the years. When the charter for Side By Side was approved, the design of the charter from the beginning was that of a laboratory school, or what is now called a professional development school model. The idea was that this Pre-K through Grade 8 program would become a place to provide innovative and unique models of education not only for the Pre-K through elementary students but also for the teaching staff and any education professionals who wished to collaborate.

Furthermore, there was a specific goal in the original charter that Side By Side become a place to train young teachers to be successful in complex, urban environments with mixed populations in terms of ethnicity and income, ability, and achievement. The specific goal was to have a teacher and a teaching intern in every grade, every year. So although there was not a formal Professional Development School title, the Side By Side Charter School began essentially as a PDS, and inasmuch as the professor/founder of the school became full-time faculty at Quinnipiac University in 1999, the ongoing relationship of Quinnipiac with Side By Side Charter School has been longstanding.

In those early years, there were multiple opportunities for advancement and collaboration by both Quinnipiac and Side By Side and we learned much from one another. Workshops were held both by university faculty and by Side By Side teachers, helping each other to stay abreast of all the changes during the first decade of the new millennium. In addition, as the teacher education program at Quinnipiac University grew, we began to

reach out to other schools in our area that had successful programs from which we could learn.

In the early days, we had many field sites in the program, and administrators were often grateful for our students coming in and “helping out,” but few schools had the spirit of openness and collaborative willingness of Side By Side – until we came upon Fair Haven School in New Haven. It was as if we knew immediately that we finally found a place that understood our mission – and we understood theirs. Fair Haven School is very different from Side By Side in size (832 students versus 236) but their populations and demographics are very similar. Most importantly, Fair Haven Elementary had a climate of openness and a desire not only to collaborate with Quinnipiac, but a secure knowledge that they, too, had much to teach our higher education faculty. The climate of the Fair Haven School, like Side By Side, was pervasively collaborative, engaging, community-oriented, and most importantly, prioritized student learning. Their literacy program was impressive – we wanted our teacher candidates to see and work with Fair Haven’s primary level teachers who promoted literacy in holistic and innovative ways with a population that was then 71% English Language Learners. Fair Haven School had much to teach our higher education faculty and Side By Side about how to best serve English Language Learners, and Quinnipiac and Side By Side had much to share from our years working in partnership.

The scope of our mission as a PDS partnership is most certainly to enhance student learning. So although a formalized MOU was not in place until June of 2012, the evolution of the partnerships with Fair Haven Elementary and Side By Side Charter School grew simultaneously with the growth and development of the teacher education program at Quinnipiac. Both public schools have greatly influenced many of the decisions we have made about curriculum, instruction and field placements based on this long-standing collaboration. The ultimate mission of the Quinnipiac Master of Arts in Teaching program has always been to promote both academic achievement and social justice, and to do what is in the best interest of each teacher candidate and public school student we serve.

Our collective missions through these partnerships are clearly broader than any one mission of the individual school programs. Quinnipiac’s Conceptual Framework (CF) is one that is based on social justice principles, wherein Quinnipiac wishes to develop teacher candidates who are not only teachers and learners but also leaders, teachers who see schools as opportunities for equity: to promote citizenship and empower our students to transform society. Our partner schools are each working with largely disenfranchised populations: students of color, students from impoverished homes, students who do not speak English. Both Fair Haven School and Side By Side Charter School have the majorities of their populations eligible for free and reduced lunch – 100% at Fair Haven School, 75% at Side By Side Charter. So we believe strongly that our partnership is vital both to serve the immediate needs of students through excellence in our classrooms, but also to move to action policy changes that can help close the achievement gap

and address issues beyond the classroom which deeply affect learning: poverty, hunger, medical care. By reflecting and sharing our pragmatic understandings from the classroom, it is our collaborative hope that any resultant research and writings can and will effectuate more lasting changes for all students.

For example, the Fair Haven School (whose reputation among our university faculty and the families and community within New Haven is simply stellar) was recently featured on the front page of the city newspaper as being one of the lowest performing schools as exemplified by the mandatory testing of students and subsequent school by school ranking by the city. Though the test scores were truthfully presented, what was not presented were the facts of the Fair Haven school community – how the climate of the school again and again had been rated as the highest in the city; how the vertical data indicated students were consistently achieving; how the students were required to take the tests in English when few speak English fluently; how Fair Haven Elementary has one of the strongest arts programs in the city, with offerings of ballet and African drumming and orchestra and art.

Needless to say, the teachers of Fair Haven were distraught over the publication of the paper, and they worried that the incredible work they consistently do could be so easily undermined by such one-sided reporting. They were also worried that they would lose their PDS status with Quinnipiac. Instead, Quinnipiac faculty took this instance to engage in a discussion to help the public better understand what testing of this kind can and cannot do, how the variables of working with a large ELL population plays a significant role in lowering standardized testing scores, and other facts not made explicit in the newspaper. An editorial to the paper was sent out by an education professor and published. This column defined the challenges, made clear that this school was the only one defined as a PDS in collaboration with Quinnipiac in the district, and why Quinnipiac would continue to value deeply this partnership.

The teachers were gratified that someone (especially an education university faculty member) had spoken on their behalf, but mostly we all felt that opportunities such as these were not to be missed – that the public needed to understand the challenges of contemporary classrooms and the limitations of standardized testing to either explain or meet those challenges. It is our belief that this is a critical example of the importance of a PDS from a broader community and political viewpoint – and an important way to advance equity in education.

All three units (Quinnipiac, Side By Side, and Fair Haven) are deeply committed to student learning, and how to best enact long-term improvements to both our PDS schools and to our program of teacher training. For many years now we have developed and run a clinical reading course that is housed at both schools. Field study students and graduate interns work with small groups of primary level students to improve their reading abilities through small group intensive instruction. Quinnipiac faculty supervises the instruction, all sessions are

held during the school day, and the subsequent seminars for the teacher candidates who provide the instruction are held at the public schools themselves.

This design allows both Quinnipiac faculty and the classroom teachers to collaborate as they instruct the teacher candidates within the follow-up seminars. The schools allow for release time for the classroom teachers to lead the seminars, often providing training to our teacher candidates and to Quinnipiac faculty, including training in ELL literacy methods. Our Quinnipiac teacher candidates maintain data on their students, providing teachers with examples of student work and assessments. Students' reading levels improve, and teacher candidates are able to meld theory and practice in very specific and realistic ways. This is only one example of many ways that the PDS collaboration provides opportunities for all parties to learn, all parties to gain.

Because of the long-standing relationship between all three entities (Quinnipiac University, Fair Haven Elementary, and Side By Side Charter School) there has evolved over the years a multiplicity of roles, both formal and informal, which continue to serve the needs of students and the enhancement of all our educational work. Formally, there is a paid liaison person on the staff of each school that works to oversee the field placements, internships and other collaborative endeavors with Quinnipiac University. This "point person" at each PDS works directly with the Quinnipiac University faculty and is the gateway person for each school. We have found that formalizing this position with a stipend increases accountability. Furthermore, the liaison not only assists the administration within each school to keep a clear and responsible record of all the various collaborations that occur, but also helps to articulate the role of the PDS coordinator on staff for each school.

Currently, in the case of the Side By Side Charter School, the coordinator/liaison is not only a third grade teacher but also someone who has recently received her sixth year degree in administration and wanted the opportunity to administer and oversee the complexities of the PDS collaborative. In like manner, the PDS coordinator for Fair Haven Elementary is a current Kindergarten teacher who also is enrolled in a sixth year administrative degree program at Quinnipiac. Both positions are stipend-based and the university provides the choice of either a monetary stipend or coursework as payment for their services. These positions are critical to developing the PDS, promoting future and current collaborations, meeting unique circumstances, handling problems, and providing opportunities.

Continuing with the formal arrangements, Quinnipiac faculty are also assigned as coordinators and liaisons to each PDS. In the case of Side By Side, the director of the Master of Arts in Teaching Program serves as the faculty point person for the partnership. For the Fair Haven School, a full-time faculty member (who is also the clinical coordinator of the reading intensive program) serves as the university liaison to Fair Haven. Faculty take this position very seriously, and this work is considered when reviewed for promotion and tenure as part of their service requirement.

So, in summary, there are two designated persons per PDS who are responsible for upholding and servicing the collaboration, one university-based and one school-based. Additionally, a formal PDS committee meets monthly and includes not only the four coordinators noted above but also all school administrators from each PDS and other faculty from Quinnipiac who either work within the schools or who have a specific interest in the PDS work. These meetings are rotationally held each month at either public school PDS or the University. These meetings become opportunities to visit each other's sites, to share and collaborate further within and between sites. Over the years we have developed and shared workshops and professional development work based on the unique strengths of each program. For example, Side By Side Charter has developed a very successful PBIS program called RISE, which promotes a positive school climate. That program was shared with Fair Haven School. In return, Fair Haven School has an extremely strong early literacy program for ELL students, and Side By Side teachers visited Fair Haven to learn new ELL strategies. Quinnipiac faculty learns from both.

Other formal arrangements have developed through the PDS model. Both the executive director of the Side By Side Charter and the Director of Curriculum and Instruction from Side By Side have served and continue to serve as adjunct faculty at Quinnipiac. Both teach very successful courses on diversity in the graduate program. Additionally, they have begun to teach in our Educational Leadership program as adjunct faculty. Teaching staff from the PDS schools have also taught not only as adjunct faculty, but also as seminar leaders and as internship evaluators, and as cooperating teachers. Additionally, faculty members from Quinnipiac provide workshops and professional development opportunities for the staffs of both PDS schools. Workshops related to mathematics instruction, reading, accountable talk, academic vocabulary, responsive classroom techniques and other topics have and continue to be provided to teaching staffs of both schools.

In the last year, as a number of our newly-minted graduates have been hired by the PDS schools with whom we collaborate, we have begun to develop a new post-graduate mentoring program for first and second year teachers. Still informal at this stage, the program began as a grassroots response to our teacher graduates, now hired, who were in the PDS buildings as teaching staff but still desirous of Quinnipiac faculty supporting, advising, and mentoring them in their early teaching. The success of this informal weekly mentoring and support was phenomenal. This year, both professors are pursuing research based on the early data of their experiences, as well as expanding the program to include others. Meanwhile, at the university level, we are holding discussions as to how we might develop a more formalized post-graduate mentoring program. The discussions are in their infant stages, but the work is exciting and has tremendous potential to affect the retention and success of young teachers, especially in challenging urban environments.

An important aspect of these collaborations is a formal committee for the PDS partnerships that meets monthly,

rotating the sites for the meetings at each school and the University. The meetings are held the third Wednesday of the month at 4:30 PM and chaired by the Associate Dean of the Quinnipiac School of Education and another faculty member. Minutes are taken and distributed and all parties contribute to agenda topics. So although the monthly meetings do become an opportunity to share concerns, knowledge, events and ideas, the additional formality of liaison people at each site, designated persons to whom one can connect at any point and the general demeanor that we are “all in this together to learn from one another,” has made communication among the participants both warm and supportive.

The key aspect has been and will always be mutual respect and collegiality, and a willingness to take risks and share when difficulties do arise. And they do arise. For example, two years ago, a number of interns placed at the Fair Haven School were experiencing difficulties of one kind or another, all in the same year. One student teacher was placed only to find out there was no one trained to mentor her in her area for student teaching at the middle school level; another student teacher was not doing well and the relationship between the student teacher and the cooperating teacher was faltering. It was an accreditation year for Fair Haven, and many teachers and staff were stretched to the limit. There was evident frustration.

When all this came to the attention of the Director of the Quinnipiac program, we held a meeting of the principal, the Quinnipiac director, and the PDS liaison from Fair Haven to sort things out. It was an open, honest, and enlightening conversation. Perhaps earlier in our years, we may not have been able to have this conversation. Why we share this however within this article is to avoid presenting our PDS partnerships as all

roses and wonderful: while much of it is very, very, good, we are realistic that incidences happen that are difficult, that competing responsibilities are difficult, that not all teachers or all teacher candidates are always ready to work collaboratively. But what was and remains important is that our goals are the same – we want the very best education for every student – and to that end, the rest can be worked out through respectful, fair, and honest conversations. We changed some things after that meeting and clarified more directly the roles of the liaisons and the principal. We are sure these conversations will continue to happen, and each time we learn a little more how to go forward.

There are many other elements of our PDS collaborations – too many to list in this brief article. But we know, as a School of Education, the work of the PDS partnerships has been and will continue to be the lifeblood of our practices, our innovations and our mission. We know, too, that professional organizations such as the NAPDS are so necessary to support and sustain the work. At Quinnipiac University, we continue to learn daily from these professional relationships and school partnerships. We invite our colleagues to share with us their stories, their experiences, their research and their challenges. We believe it is only in these professional collaborations that we can grow in the knowledge of how best to bring pre-service candidates into the complex and challenging world of teaching. ^{SUP}



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