

Esperanza e imaginación: PDS Partners Working Together to Help Bilingual Middle School Students Build Hope and Imagination for their Futures

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ABSTRACT: The overarching goal of the Common Core State Standards is to graduate students from P-12 schools who are college and career ready (CCR). School-university partnerships play an important role in preparing students, families, and teachers to achieve this goal. University partners can be especially helpful as children begin to imagine how they can use the skills and knowledge they gain in school to make their hopes for the future a reality. This article details a PDS project that leverages the human, financial, and situational resources of a university to help bilingual middle schoolers take steps toward their college and career aspirations. Building on the CCR work described in Krist, White, & Whitelaw (2016), we describe our project to encourage other PDS partnerships to consider the value of CCR exploration for teacher candidate, student and community development.

This paper aligns with NAPDS Essential 2: A school-university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community.

Our PDS

Professional Development Schools (PDS) are in a unique position to develop “a school-university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community” (Brindley, Field, & Lessen, 2008, p. 3). The SUNY Buffalo State PDS consortium is a collaborative effort based on three main PDS frameworks: (a) the NCATE Standards for Professional Development Schools (2001), (b) the National Association for Professional Development Schools Nine Essentials (Brindley, Field, & Lessen, 2008), and (c) the NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel Report (2010). These frameworks provide the theoretical structures to guide clinically rich practice allowing us to explore innovative ways to engage with school communities.

Established in 1991, the Buffalo State PDS consortium began with one elementary partner school and has grown to encompass various levels of collaboration with approximately 45 schools in Buffalo, New York, and internationally across early childhood, elementary, secondary, and special education programs. One long-time partner is Herman Badillo Bilingual Academy (HBBA), a Spanish-English pre-kindergarten through grade 8 school in the Buffalo district. Since 2001, the school has hosted local and international teacher candidates for observations, shadowing, service-learning, methods field placements, and student teaching while HBBA teachers have participated in various professional development experiences offered by the PDS consortium. Monthly PDS liaison committee meetings that

include the principal, instructional coaches, school counselors, a representative mentor teacher, and PDS university faculty are held to inform, troubleshoot, and plan clinically rich opportunities at HBBA.

Responding to the Challenges Faced by the School Partner

The Buffalo Public Schools and HBBA face numerous challenges that the members of the liaison committee work together to discuss and address. Of the 32,000 students in kindergarten through grade 12 who are enrolled in the Buffalo Public Schools, 18.1% are Latino and 14% are English learners. At HBBA, those percentages are higher; 82.4% of the 720 pre-kindergarten through grade 8 students are Latino and 52% are English learners. The graduation rate for the Latinos in the district is 48% and 23% for English learners (www.nysed.districtreportcard). In 2014, the liaison committee began discussing ways the college and school could work together to help HBBA children meet the College and Career Ready goals outlined in the Common Core, support the goals and aspirations of the school community, and develop teacher candidate skills to encourage college and career exploration.

7th Grade College Exploration Event

The 7th Grade College Exploration is the first CCR activity of the academic year to help students connect their eventual high

school choices to their hopes for college and beyond. For this event, students are divided into small groups that are led by teacher candidates wearing Buffalo State clothing to emphasize their role as college students. Spanish-speaking children are grouped together with Spanish-speaking teacher candidates who help translate during large group activities and conduct the small group activities in Spanish. The day begins in the auditorium where the teacher candidates play icebreaker games related to college and career goals in their small groups. Then, as a large group, a panel of teacher candidates representing different college experiences, along with a high school student who is a graduate of HBBA talk about what they like best about high school/college, the challenges they face, and advice for students in middle school about preparing for high school/college. After a question and answer period, one of the university faculty gives a virtual tour of the Buffalo State campus to show students the variety of academic, social, and service opportunities available.

Next, the small groups rotate through interactive stations such as “Picking the Perfect Roommate,” “Decorating Your Dorm Room,” “A Day in the Life of a College Student,” “Study Apps that You Can Use Now,” “Getting Involved,” and “How to Pay for College.” The large group comes back together for a celebratory concluding event that has included the Buffalo State Latin Jazz Band members briefly explaining their college experience and playing music. Seventh grade classroom teachers conduct follow-up activities that include evaluating and writing about the event. A strong emphasis throughout the day is given to the many college and career opportunities, as well as the benefits of being multilingual. Also during the day, students are provided handouts they can take home and are encouraged to talk about the day’s activities with their families.

The 7th Grade College Exploration specifically targets 7th graders early in the academic year when they are beginning to make decisions about where they will attend high school within the Buffalo Public Schools district. The event is also intended to increase interest and excitement about the future more broadly across the school’s student body since the event is announced during morning messages and in the cafeteria, and teachers and siblings/cousins of younger students talk about the event. This “buzz” helps to encourage wide participation among the entire middle school in the next CCR event – the Career Fair.

5th–8th Grade Career Fair

Recognizing that students need more support in making appropriate high school selections as part of their path toward college and career, and also being cognizant that many students are interested in careers that require training different from a four-year college experience, the liaison committee began working with the Buffalo State Career and Technical Education Department (CTE) to open the CCR experience to grades five through eight. The CTE teacher

candidates, from trade and technical fields, business and marketing, family and consumer sciences, and technology education, participate in these career fairs as part of their field placement requirements.

The original concept was created by the CTE department chair to satisfy a grant requirement for children to have an opportunity to explore careers. Each of the teacher candidates has expertise from the years of experience in the field in which they have worked – culinary arts, dental, automotive technology, or any of the 40 or more career areas that have been represented at the career fairs over the years. For example, students can build a birdhouse at the carpentry station, change a tire at the automotive station, and prepare a dish at the culinary station. Each of the CTE teacher candidates develops a three to five minute hands-on, interactive activity that represents the work he/she does. This gives the attendees at the event the opportunity to “try on” many career options in one evening. The teacher candidates talk with the attendees, giving information and gaining experience in speaking to small groups. Display boards and brochures to take home complete the career exploration experience for the participating children and their families. Informational tables are also staffed by guidance counselors to explain scholarship opportunities to support post-secondary education and the district CTE Director to explain the wide range of high school options within the Buffalo Public Schools.

Experience has shown that the career exploration alone does not bring in the desired attendance. Therefore, refreshments, music, prizes for students who complete a number of activities and door prizes are provided as part of the 5th-8th Grade Career Fair. The intent is a celebratory experience to get students excited about their futures and to begin to see a path toward meeting their goals. Afterwards, the HBBA technology and family and consumer science teachers, as well as guidance counselors, conduct follow-up discussions and activities about high school choices and post-secondary opportunities.

8th Grade Campus Visit

The 8th Grade Campus Visit occurs in spring to build on the momentum of students’ excitement about transitioning to high school (and the Buffalo State campus is at its best in the warmer weather). During the 7th Grade College Exploration Event and the Career Fair, students are told about the 8th grade campus visit they will experience when they are in 8th grade, and HBBA teachers talk about the importance of this culminating event as students are looking toward their future.

The visit to the Buffalo State campus begins similarly to the 7th grade event with small group icebreaker activities conducted by teacher candidates in Buffalo State clothing to emphasize their role as college students. The teacher candidates then conduct a campus tour that is responsive to the college and career interests of their small groups. During the tour, the

groups stop by the library to receive a photo college identification card labeled, "I Am College Bound." The small groups then gather in a large room for interactive stations that build on the experiences of the seventh grade event. The sessions include a "college class" with professors from various disciplines to give them an idea of what academics are like in college. A boxed lunch is provided and the small groups eat in one of the campus quads to give students a chance to talk informally with the teacher candidates. The day closes with a wrap-up activity sponsored by a Buffalo State student organization such as the Step Team directing the eighth graders in a short performance or the football team leading lawn games. Afterwards, 8th grade teachers ask students to reflect on their experiences orally and in writing.

Our Next Steps

Each event has received very positive feedback from the HBBA teachers, the teacher candidates, the college faculty, and most importantly the participating middle schoolers. However, we also take specific suggestions from stakeholders into account to be sure the CCR events meet the desired goals. We have also begun to integrate CCR into the day-to-day experiences of children prior to middle school. Our liaison committee drafted a list of phrases/expressions and routines for teacher candidates to use to encourage children to see themselves as going to college and entering careers. For example, the teacher candidates are beginning to strategically mention their work as college students when they are teaching and are using key phrases with the children such as, "Good morning, scholars."

Additionally, we are exploring ways to build skills and knowledge among our teacher candidates to help students receiving special education services prepare for their futures. Transition planning, which is required by special education law, involves educational teams working with students with disabilities to set post-secondary goals and identify priorities to help work towards those goals while in P-12 systems; we are working to integrate this process into the CCR program at HBBA.

Suggestions

If you are interested in leveraging the resources of your PDS organization to support the CCR goals of your school partners, we make the following recommendations based on our experiences. (1) A strong PDS liaison committee is very helpful for the success of any school-university collaboration. Including representatives of the various constituencies involved in your PDS ensures that all perspectives are included and is important for troubleshooting. We recommend regular meetings to discuss past events and plan for upcoming work. Preparing a formal agenda with follow-up minutes ensures that the time (so valuable to school personnel) is used most effectively and efficiently. (2) Securing necessary funding is always challenging. We use in-kind resources whenever

possible – the work of our teacher candidates, willing faculty, and friendly offices on campus. Funding is secured through agreements supported by the Buffalo State PDS consortium, an Action Research Project Mini-grant, and faculty scholarship support from the Exceptional Education Department and our union. (3) Conducting an action research project as part of the CCR program provides numerous benefits to the various constituents of the PDS. Teacher candidates begin to learn about developing survey instruments and analyzing data; faculty engage in scholarship to support promotion and tenure processes; mentor teachers and/or building leaders can be invited to present the project at conferences and write for publication; and most importantly, data is available to make informed decisions about program improvement. (4) It is important to consider how to promote attendance at events. For CCR events that happen during the school day, participation is high. The HBBA liaison committee spent a great deal of time considering ways to ensure strong attendance at the Career Fair held in the evening. Announcements were made in homerooms and during lunch. Flyers were sent home with students encouraging families to attend and noting that food would be served and prizes awarded. Automated calls via the district phone system were made to the homes of the middle schoolers. The HBBA technology and family and consumer science teachers offered extra credit for students who attended. Finally, the music teacher planned a chorus concert the 30 minutes prior to the start of the Career Fair.

Conclusion

It has been our great privilege to work together as PDS partners as we seek to build "a school-community culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community" (Brindley, Field, & Lessen, 2008, p. 3). Through our work together, the participating faculty at Buffalo State and the school personnel of HBBA recognize that we share similar goals to help educators create the circumstances for children and their families to make real their hopes and dreams for future success in college and career. ^{SUP}

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