

Rice Creek Elementary School and the University of South Carolina: A Shared Vision for Excellence

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ABSTRACT: The 2011 Professional Development Schools National Conference recognized Rice Creek Elementary School for its outstanding collaborative accomplishments with the University of South Carolina, naming it as a recipient of the National Association for Professional Development School's Award for Exemplary Professional Development School Achievement. This article describes how Rice Creek and USC have used the NAPDS's *Nine Essentials* of Professional Development School work as the basis for their collaboration.

NAPDS Essential 1: A Comprehensive Mission that is Broader in its Outreach and Scope than the Mission of any Partner and Furthers the Education Profession and its Responsibility to Advance Equity Within Schools and, by Potential Extension, the Broader Community

The mission of Rice Creek Elementary School is broader in its outreach and scope and furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools as a result of the unique and valuable relationships gained as a Professional Development School (PDS). Through a shared vision for excellence and teamwork with our children, parents, faculty, staff, university partners, and the greater community, Rice Creek Elementary School is committed to providing developmentally appropriate, individualized learning experiences that

empower our children to be creative thinkers, responsible citizens, and productive life-long learners. In partnership with the University of South Carolina, our PDS is devoted to producing students who are successful, contributing members of society with a life-long passion to learn. Our relationship with the University of South Carolina has introduced us to the National Network for Educational Renewal and expanded our mission to include a commitment to providing access to knowledge for all children, educating students for citizenship through the democratic classroom structure, founding our teaching in the knowledge of subjects taught and classroom pedagogy, and being good stewards of the safe learning environment in our school. Our students come from diverse backgrounds and have a variety of experiences and exposure. We believe that economics, class, opportunity and experience are all things that influence a child's learning, and that is what makes our work as a PDS, both inside and outside of the classroom, rewarding yet challenging.

As we endeavor to promote and advance equity for all students, the mission of our PDS focuses on efforts to strengthen the profession by partnering with families, the community, and the University of South Carolina to enhance the knowledge base of all those involved as learners and to collaborate with others to improve teaching and learning. Forming partnerships with parents and families helps us to promote students' self-esteem and to foster relationships with those individuals so important to the development and education of our students. Our partnership with the university affords us the opportunity to stay on the cutting edge with the latest research developments and resources in the field of education. When our students realize they have a team of caring and committed individuals working on their behalf and advocating for them, they work harder to meet and exceed their goals.

Our site-based PDS Council members present at national conferences, speak at USC PDS Coordinating Council meetings, send out teacher candidates who have been immersed in best practices, and work together to improve elementary student achievement through teacher professional development. We also receive support from USC faculty members and provide a different perspective for USC students and faculty by keeping them abreast of current realities in the public classrooms.

We want students to enjoy coming to school each day and to share the passion we each have for learning. As a component of our mission, the Rice Creek PDS is committed to providing a learning environment that does just that—igniting the spark and passion for education. Through the work of our teachers, administrators, teacher candidates, university personnel, and community businesses and corporations, we have managed to create a learning environment that includes fundamentals of brain-based compatible learning such as absence of threat, nurturing reflective thinking, meaningful content, enriched environment, movement to enhance learning, and student choice. Our state-of-the-art fitness lab, funded through a partnership grant with a corporate donor, provides opportunities for students to improve their physical well-being, enhance their sensory

motor skills, and heighten their mental focus and concentration. The outdoor living laboratory, which includes a greenhouse, pond habitat, outdoor classroom, and wireless weather station, allows students to explore beyond the indoor classroom environment and generates real-world experiences and opportunities to apply content knowledge. USC's teacher candidates are instrumental in helping us facilitate and manage the use of these resources.

NAPDS Essential 8: Work by College/University Faculty and P-12 Faculty in Formal Roles Across Institutional Settings

The professional work of the members of the Rice Creek Elementary School PDS is instrumental in our preparation of teacher candidates, enhancement of professional development of faculty and staff, and modeling the use of best practices to improve student learning. The formal roles of our site structure include a USC liaison, a school-based clinical adjunct, coaching teachers, the lead magnet teacher/intervention coordinator, school administrators, district superintendent liaison, site-based PDS Council, and USC's Office of School University Partnerships and Clinical Experiences.

The USC liaison serves as a vital link between the university and Rice Creek Elementary School. Dr. Megan Burton, associate professor of math education at USC, spends a minimum of fifteen hours on-site each week. In that time, she teaches math classes to teacher candidates on-site and works with our students by coordinating math buddy and pen pal interactions between teacher candidates and Rice Creek students. Dr. Burton works with new faculty to provide a community of support. For example, she teaches model lessons for induction teachers to reinforce best practices and management strategies. She also assists in math instruction and is a resource in providing math strategies to Rice Creek faculty. In addition, she presents at national and local conferences and USC PDS retreats to school faculty, teacher candidates, and administrative staff. As a

member of the USC PDS Coordinating Council and Rice Creek's School Improvement Council, she acts as a liaison between school and university personnel. She collaborates with administrative staff and faculty members to write research proposals and other submissions for publication.

The clinical adjunct, Kathy Evans, a fourth grade teacher, serves as a co-chair of the USC PDS Coordinating Council and works in conjunction with administrative staff and coaching teachers to support our teacher candidates. She provides hospitality outreach each semester for our teacher candidates. She hosts a welcome reception, which allows teacher candidates to meet and greet school administrators and coaching teachers before the semester begins. She collaborates with administration to coordinate coaching teacher assignments to best match teacher candidates with coaching teachers. She assists the USC liaison with scheduling school-wide curriculum-based activities, such as Math Blitz, and helps to establish classroom partnerships for activities such as math buddies and pen pals. Her leadership role as co-chair of the USC PDS Coordinating Council enables her to act as a liaison between school and university personnel, presenting at national and local conferences and retreats, and to school faculty and teacher candidates. The clinical adjunct works in cooperation with Rice Creek and USC faculty to meet the needs of coaching teachers and teacher candidates in all curriculum/content areas throughout the school, including guidance, social work, and the arts.

The roles of our coaching teachers and lead magnet teacher/intervention coordinator are to assist in supervising teacher candidates and to provide resources and curriculum support for teacher candidates and USC faculty on-site. Coaching teachers meet daily with their teacher candidates to monitor their classroom experiences. The lead magnet teacher holds monthly grade level meetings with teachers and teacher candidates to discuss curriculum concerns and updates. This collaborative team gives tours of the school, shares with the community at large information about the programs at the school, and collects and interprets data to determine intervention placement services for our students.

Our school and district-level administrative team evaluates data to suggest areas for growth and focus, coordinates coaching teacher lists with the clinical adjunct and USC liaison, and attends and presents at school-based and Coordinating Council meetings and at national conferences. The team also provides direct support to teacher candidates in job search preparation, such as mock interviews, observations with feedback, and conversations about the interviewing process. Our district superintendent liaison supports the partnership and helps to secure funding for PDS operating costs.

The site-based PDS Council is a leadership team and decision-making body within our PDS that works within the larger PDS network. Collaboration with USC's Office of School-University Partnerships and Clinical Experiences allows us to determine the on-going needs for professional development for our professional staff and teacher candidates, which furthers our mission to provide the best learning experiences for our P-5 students. Members of this Council also attend USC PDS Coordinating Council meetings and professional development opportunities, present at various conferences, and work to establish a research agenda to enhance the learning community.

NAPDS Essentials 6 and 7: An Articulation Agreement Developed by the Respective Participants Delineating the Roles and Responsibilities of All Involved AND a Structure that Allows All Participants a Forum for On-going Governance, Reflection, and Collaboration

The structure of our PDS culture encourages strong communication among participants and allows school faculty and teacher candidates opportunities to examine practices, expand their repertoires, deepen their knowledge, sharpen judgments, and adapt their teaching to new findings, ideas, and theories. Both formal and informal meetings and discussions are held on a regular basis between coaching teachers and

teacher candidates. Informal meetings with coaching teachers and teacher candidates are held daily. Weekly formal meetings are held among teacher candidates and the USC liaison. Teacher candidates meet with administrators, the science lab coordinator, instructional technology specialist, and the lead magnet teacher to gain insight and strategies in ongoing professional development. Our USC liaison meets with first-year teachers each week on-site and twice a month with teachers off-campus to provide support as they transition from teacher candidates to teaching professionals.

Two heads are always better than one. Three, four, or five are even better. Working collaboratively with colleagues improves teaching and student learning immensely. Teacher candidates take a leadership role within our PDS structure and showcase their research and findings shaped by their classroom experiences at the end of their internships. Working as a collaborative team to problem-solve and develop strategies to differentiate instruction has helped us all to better manage and meet the needs of students with varying skill deficiencies. Coaching teachers who serve as technology mentors for our PDS provide opportunities to share new technology resources and strategies with our teacher candidates and USC faculty. Collaborating with teachers and administrators from other schools during our PDS network meetings has allowed for opportunities to share initiatives, activities, and programs that can spark ideas for implementation at our PDS. Mentoring young teachers in the profession allows us the opportunity to share our knowledge and to serve as role models. As collaborators, learners, and leaders in the classroom, we work to support and advance the profession and to produce highly effective teacher candidates ready for the field.

NAPDS Essential 9: Dedicated and Shared Resources and Formal Rewards and Recognition Structures

Rice Creek Elementary School allocates resources and collaborates both in and out of the

confines of our school walls. Collaboration allows us to synthesize our resources, skills, and expertise in an effort to produce innovative teaching and learning and is a very important part of our work as educators. By sharing ideas, strategies, resources, and insight with others, our PDS has gained so much. One area where we have seen the positive effects of collaboration is with our Math Blitz program, the resources for which are jointly provided by the university and Rice Creek. Math Blitz is coordinated by our lead magnet teacher, administrators, the clinical adjunct, and the USC liaison. The program offers teacher candidates the experience to design mini-lessons and teaching resources to share with our P-5 students. This experience is also beneficial for teachers in that it provides opportunities for development and implementation of new math concepts and strategies. This close relationship between Rice Creek and the university has been cultivated over several years. One of the things we have been able to accomplish in this time has been providing a classroom space used for the USC liaison to conduct her weekly classes on our campus. There is a reciprocal sharing of materials among the university and our school faculty. Our lead magnet teacher/curriculum coordinator works closely with our USC liaison in these efforts.

Coaching teachers are provided plaques by USC in recognition of their commitment to serving as leaders within the school and working with teacher candidates. As an incentive, the PDS partnership faculty members are given the opportunity to enroll in USC graduate courses at a significantly reduced rate. The university also provides a free course taught on Rice Creek's campus each contract term. The university helps to provide support for our P-5 teachers' attendance at national conferences and provides a stipend to the clinical adjunct for time devoted to the work of the PDS. In fact, the stipend and salaries for the USC liaison and clinical adjunct are jointly funded by USC and Richland School District Two.

As a tripartite member of the NNER, in support of our mission as a PDS, and in recognition of our commitment to equity for all students and dedication to the use of nurturing

pedagogy, professional development resources have been provided and shared with our school. Research materials, founded in brain-based learning, were purchased by the university for use by our professional community. Dr. Burton, USC liaison, facilitated training centered on the book *Brain Gym* and the effective use of brain-based strategies as described by Dr. Paul Dennison. Another USC faculty member, Paul Chaplin, led a book study and presented to our faculty on how to educate the young for citizenship in a social and political democracy. He provided a list of professional resources on the democratic classroom to support teachers in the implementation of these ideals.

NAPDS Essential 2: A School-University Culture Committed to the Preparation of Future Educators that Embraces Their Active Engagement in the School Community

In 2009–2010, Rice Creek Elementary School hosted twenty-two USC teacher candidates: eight undergraduate early childhood candidates and six undergraduate elementary candidates completing their final internships, as well as eight undergraduate early childhood candidates completing their initial freshman year practicum. Our commitment to preparing these candidates for the profession involved their ongoing participation and engagement in the Rice Creek community. At the beginning of each semester, our candidates are introduced and welcomed to the faculty and staff with a formal reception. During this gathering, teacher candidates, coaching teachers, the USC liaison, the clinical adjunct, and school administrators are introduced to one another. As the teacher candidates become a part of the professional community at Rice Creek, they participate in faculty meetings, intervention assistance team meetings, weekly team planning meetings, and other committee meetings.

Teacher candidates participate in, and are integral in the implementation of numerous

programs throughout the school, such as Math Blitz and math and reading buddies. Their responsibilities include lesson planning, teaching mini-lessons to students across all grade levels, co-teaching with seasoned professionals, and building relationships with the students and teachers with whom they work. In the math buddies program, our P-5 students help teacher candidates understand the ways students think about math. They met weekly with small groups of students to have conversations about math concepts and strategies. The teacher candidates create math games for the students to support development of numbers and operations concepts. They also meet one-on-one with students to provide assessment feedback for use by classroom teachers. Rice Creek's teacher candidates also assist with reading buddies, a program coordinated by our lead magnet teacher to foster a love of reading. In collaboration with another PDS in our network, we provided opportunities for a teacher candidate to research our single gender program for her honors thesis. Her findings were presented at the 2010 Professional Development Schools National Conference in Orlando, Florida.

Our teacher candidates are provided with instructional support from our entire faculty and district curriculum coordinators. They are offered numerous professional development opportunities provided by our school and district staff. Our coaching teachers, instructional technology specialist, lead magnet teacher, USC liaison, clinical adjunct, and administrators are instrumental in planning, presenting, and encouraging the teacher candidates' implementation of these ideas and strategies to enhance their pre-service and future teaching endeavors.

Technology is an integral part of instruction at Rice Creek, and teacher candidates are encouraged to integrate components of technology within their lessons. Each classroom is equipped with a Smart Board to which teacher candidates have full training and access. Smart Board technology is used by teacher candidates on a regular basis to enhance instruction. Additional technology training is provided by our instructional technology specialist on the

use of digital and flip cameras and classroom performance response systems. Teacher candidates also participate in data meetings and are introduced to the interpretation of state and national test data used to inform classroom instruction.

Teacher candidates collaborate with the USC liaison and coaching teachers to develop and finalize research project ideas. The findings of their completed action research projects are formally presented to our professional community. At the conclusion of their internship, teacher candidates are invited to a celebration in their honor sponsored by Rice Creek's coaching teachers and clinical adjunct. Our clinical adjunct and administrative staff present gifts in recognition and celebration of their achievements.

NAPDS Essential 3: On-going and Reciprocal Professional Development for All Participants Guided by Need

To ensure that all students have sufficient knowledge and skills in every content area and to ensure their future success, our PDS is committed to attract, prepare, and retain well-educated and effective teachers. Education research makes clear that the quality and performance of the teaching staff is the most important ingredient in any successful school. USC and Rice Creek together help prepare exceptional teachers who understand the academic, educational, and social needs of the students they come in contact with each day. Therefore, the need for highly effective and relevant professional development opportunities is essential.

Professional development for our teaching staff and teacher candidates is provided through several different means. On-site courses are provided by the university and by district personnel. Professional learning communities have been organized to provide teachers with learning support, and resources are shared by all PDS participants. All members of our school's professional community participate in national,

state, and local conferences to build their teaching capacity and content skill knowledge. Teachers and teacher candidates participate in monthly curriculum contact meetings to engage colleagues across the district in professional discussions regarding content, assessments, and best teaching practices. As teacher leaders within our community, we facilitate and lead professional development opportunities presented by our district twice a year. In the past year, nearly half of our faculty presented on their area of expertise at district or state-sponsored forums. Our USC liaison has modeled math lessons for the primary and intermediate grades. She has spent numerous hours helping teachers develop and implement lessons which incorporate strategies and the use of manipulatives from our new math curriculum series. These varied means of professional development allow us to ensure that our teachers and teacher candidates are highly qualified to deliver instruction each day. Rice Creek's continuing partnership with the University of South Carolina has helped us produce teachers who are prepared to meet the requirements of our public schools. These professional development opportunities have also provided training for veteran teachers to take part in experiences that are practical, rigorous, and relevant to their continued growth.

NAPDS Essential 4: A Shared Commitment to Innovative and Reflective Practice by All Participants

In support of the shared mission of our PDS and that of the University of South Carolina PDS Network, we have initiated and developed many insightful programs that meet the needs of our diverse learning community. Collaboration with university faculty and teacher candidates has allowed us to implement these programs using the most recent and innovative learning practices, strategies, and resources available. Rice Creek's Environmental Fitness Academy (eFIT) is an innovative program designed to promote an understanding and awareness of the natural environment, cultivate scientific and

technological literacy, and stimulate stewardship attitudes toward a healthy lifestyle and the environment. Through hands-on outdoor learning experiences, children are immersed in opportunities that instill and encourage a healthy life and an appreciation for the natural world around them. Students are challenged through integrated instruction to work collaboratively, to analyze and interpret data, to make decisions, to become critical thinkers, and to be skilled communicators in the 21st century.

Rice Creek is continuing efforts to become a model school for increasing physical activity, decreasing childhood obesity, teaching healthy decision-making, and promoting environmental stewardship. Our goal is to continue to provide Rice Creek stakeholders with an increased understanding of fitness, nutrition, and environmental issues. Numerous opportunities to participate in personalized fitness programs, health initiatives, and challenging field studies have been provided to all. These opportunities, in accordance with our shared commitment to the NNER's mission, develop students who are physically fit and feel personally and civically responsible toward maintaining and saving our world's natural resources. In collaboration with our USC liaison and teacher candidates, students participate daily in physically challenging activities presented by their classroom and physical education teachers.

In 2009, Rice Creek entered into a partnership with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources. In support of our school's mission to create responsible citizens and lifelong learners, and in conjunction with the mission of our eFit magnet program, Rice Creek was chosen by the state and school district superintendents as South Carolina's first natural resources elementary school. The concept to integrate fish, wildlife, natural resources, outdoor skills, and conservation education into all aspects of the classroom to improve student achievement, behavior, and critical thinking provided a unique and engaging opportunity to enhance the educational experiences for our students. One of only three schools in the state with involvement in such a program, we are able to provide unparalleled opportunities for stu-

dents to participate in real-world experiences otherwise not afforded.

NAPDS Essential 5: Engagement in and Public Sharing of the Results of Deliberate Investigations of Practice by Respective Participants

The routine examination of best practices is an integral component of our work as a PDS. We take joy in opportunities to share the success of our PDS. We share our achievements through publications; district, state, and national conference presentations; and site-based meetings. Several Rice Creek faculty, in conjunction with the USC liaison, have published work regarding the best practices used in their classrooms. Submissions have been accepted by *Young Children*, a peer-reviewed professional journal published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children focusing on students' thinking about math and problem solving strategies. Submissions were also accepted by the NAPDS magazine regarding our work integrating brain-based research and the incorporation of the Active Math curriculum. Leaders in our PDS have presented to the USC PDS Coordinating Council and have shared original strategies integrated in our classroom instruction. Our successes as a PDS have routinely been shared and highlighted in district, national, and USC College of Education newsletters. The USC Network newsletter, *Partnership Proceedings*, has highlighted many of our initiatives and programs. This publication is not only sent to the twelve other PDSs within our network, but is distributed to over 100 additional area schools that work with the university's teacher preparation programs.

Teachers and teacher candidates participate in district-sponsored instructional fairs and present best practices used in their daily instruction. In collaboration with our district personnel, several of the coaching teachers at Rice Creek serve in key roles that involve planning and coordinating such events; as a result, our teachers are well represented. At last year's district instructional fair, more than half

of our faculty presented to over 2000 teaching professionals. Teachers receive professional development credit for presenting at and attending these workshops. In addition to sharing with colleagues in our district and state, multiple teams from Rice Creek have presented at annual PDS National Conferences. These experiences allow teachers and teacher candidates on our presentation teams to interact with colleagues from across the nation and provide opportunities for invaluable feedback from education professionals. Our interns also take leadership roles in sharing best practices and research. This past year a teacher candidate researched the effectiveness of the single-gender classroom model and presented her findings at the PDS National Conference. Our teacher candidates are also required to showcase the results of their semester-long inquiry research projects to the school's faculty at the end of each semester. We are extremely proud of the manner in which we integrate candidates into our school community and relish the idea that they share knowledge gained from their experiences in our PDS with other professionals in the schools in which they are hired to teach. This provides yet another opportunity for the successes of our PDS to reach beyond our PDS network and its members.

Conclusion

Rice Creek Elementary School is extremely proud of our work in the area of school-university partnerships and collaboration. However, we are most proud of our work in three areas, the first of which aligns best with *NAPDS Essential 8* and is best summarized in the words of our USC liaison. While her statement was intended as an assessment of her own relationship with our school, it applies to Rice Creek's PDS in its entirety. She said, "This truly is a partnership. University faculty are known and accepted as members of the P-12 community, and the clinical adjunct and other Rice Creek professionals are known and accepted as members of the university community. All share ideas between institutions to improve teacher

candidate and P-12 education. Rice Creek is a community focused on learning where everyone feels ownership in learning through the partnership. When Rice Creek asks for resources from the university, USC provides them; at the same time, when USC asks something of Rice Creek it also is provided. Both university and P-5 faculty agree that this is a partnership. We are colleagues consistently learning and growing together." In other words, we are proud of creating and maintaining a strong and genuine school-university partnership.

Our second proud accomplishment has been our ability to sustain the efficacy of our school's PDS over time. Seventeen years is quite a long time to sustain any relationship, let alone one involving a revolving door of faculty and an ever-changing agenda of initiatives. However, aligned with *NAPDS Essentials 4 and 5*, we have succeeded in designing and implementing well-crafted, innovative, and reflective practices and share these with others within and outside of the PDS partnership. We are committed to outreach and sharing the benefits of our partnership which make a difference in the educational community. Most faculty members have presented their work to other professionals in a variety of venues. Faculty members have published articles highlighting best practices used in their classrooms; have presented innovative practices at district, state, and national conferences; and have provided professional development opportunities for other educators within the field. Our continued growth as professionals is manifested through completion of graduate courses leading to additional degrees. A large percentage of our teachers are USC graduates, which demonstrates how highly we value our PDS partnership.

Finally, we are exceptionally proud that our PDS has made substantial contributions toward the advancement of the education profession, as highlighted in *NAPDS Essential 1*, by taking a leading role in the promotion of other schools becoming USC PDS sites. As the community has grown and new schools have opened within the district, Rice Creek Elementary School has been a leader and model for other schools to

follow in the PDS development path due to our participation in research, instructional support, and service to the community as a whole. We have developed a vibrant community that supports teacher candidate growth throughout their professional programs, not just during the final internship. From freshmen and sophomores who observe and are pen pals with elementary students, to the math courses taught on-site during junior and senior year, USC candidates are consistently supported in their professional growth. In addition, we are proud of the fact that former USC candidates who were a part of this partnership are now moving into leadership roles at the school and district levels. ^{SUP}



Kathy Evans is a fourth grade teacher and the PDS Clinical Adjunct at Rice Creek. Kathy received her Bachelor's Degree and Master's Degree from the University of South Carolina.

Jessica Holley is a second grade teacher and a member of the PDS Council at Rice Creek.

Jessica earned her B.A. and M.A.T. degrees from the University of South Carolina.

Felicia Richburg-Sellers is a fifth grade teacher and former science lab director at Rice Creek. She earned her Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the University of South Carolina.

Susan Robey is the eFIT magnet lead teacher at Rice Creek. She earned her B.A. from Coker College and her M.Ed. from Francis Marion University and is National Board Certified.

Shawn Suber served six years as assistant principal at Rice Creek before taking a similar position at Lake Carolina Elementary School, another member of the USC PDS Network.

Megan Burton, an assistant professor in elementary mathematics education, served as the USC Liaison at Rice Creek before taking a position at Auburn University in Spring 2012.

Bruce E. Field is the executive director of school-university partnerships and clinical experiences in the University of South Carolina's College of Education.