

# *Immersion in the Field: The Elementary Block Network in the Watson College of Education at the University of North Carolina Wilmington*

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## **Introduction**

In 1989, the Watson College of Education at the University of North Carolina Wilmington started the Model Clinical Teaching Project and the Consortium for the Advancement of Public Education's School Reform Initiative (CAPE). Since that time, our partnership system has grown to include 146 schools across twelve traditional school districts and three charter schools. Within this partnership system, we have established a more intensive partnership network with four elementary schools. This network consists of schools that we refer to as "Block" schools because they host our elementary teacher candidates in a year-long residency experience.<sup>1</sup> Four schools are a part of this network—John J. Blair Elementary, Castle Hayne Elementary, Ogden Elementary, and Pine Valley Elementary. The Block network is mutually beneficial in many ways—our elementary teacher education can-

didates engage in extensive clinical experiences (including a service learning component); the teachers in these schools work more closely with us in the governance of the partnership; faculty collaborate with partnership teachers to shape the learning experiences for teacher candidates; we provide professional development for teachers, teacher candidates, and university faculty; and the partnership results in the creation of strong professional communities that include partnership teachers, teacher candidates, and university faculty. The NAPDS Nine Essentials for Professional Development Schools serve as constant reminders of the larger purpose of Professional Development Schools, their critical role in educational reform, and the diligence we must maintain to protect them (Teitel, 2003).

Our partnership structure is unique in that we have an extensive partnership network of schools with over 2,100 partnership teachers who have completed at least ten hours of professional development in our cognitive coaching model (Costa & Garmston, 2002). At a minimum, each of our partnership schools agrees to host our teacher

<sup>1</sup>In some instances, this is not a year-long residency experience. This happens if the school setting is not a good match for the candidate and/or the school. In select cases, a candidate may intern at a school that was not the same as the field experience site.

candidates for field experiences and internships. The partnership teachers are able to take advantage of free professional development that we provide, including technology workshops, and at least one full day of professional development in the semesters they host interns. Beyond this, we have established a partnership network with our four Block schools in an effort to create deeper, more intensive relationships with our partners. The work done with these schools generates consistent dialogue that informs our teacher preparation programs, fosters a spirit of collaborative inquiry that requires us to ask questions together, and extends the scope of our work beyond what any one of us could do in isolation.

## PDS Mission

Public schooling, as it operates today, struggles with serving all students well. In particular, we have witnessed the unfortunate consequences for students of color segregated in schools with inexperienced and minimally qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010). With high stakes testing framing much of the discourse of public schools, some educators have ignored the authentic, problem-based tasks that engage students in learning and have foregone the democratic processes that can possibly enhance that learning. Our mission allows us to work against the current discourse, enabling us to support teachers in fundamentally shaping their teaching around authentic tasks that connect to the real world, and in creating classroom and school governance processes that represent democratic processes that embrace multiple perspectives, encourage critical questioning, and foster a spirit of engagement (Carlson & Gause, 1997).

In our efforts to combat inequities and the teaching practices that exacerbate them, we have worked with our partners to identify the ways that these larger structural problems translate into the daily experiences of students

and teachers in our partnership schools. To that end, our PDS work is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner in five fundamental ways: (1) We renegotiate and sign partnership agreements every three years; (2) Our partnership work occurs in diverse communities; (3) Our governance structure includes regular meetings of three advisory groups which include teachers, administrators, district personnel, community leaders, faculty, and teacher candidates; (4) We conduct periodic needs assessments and partnership evaluations to examine the scope and outcomes of our work; and (5) We collaborate in advocacy efforts to advance the profession.

To maintain the partnership framework, we discuss and re-sign our partnership agreements every three years. Though we have re-negotiated the details of the agreements over the years, the primary goal remains constant—to improve the lives, learning, and opportunities for all students. Five other goals of our partnership are to: (2) Prepare teacher and administrator candidates in a professional, collegial environment; (3) Enhance the curriculum, structures, school culture and community ties for P-12 school and University of North Carolina Wilmington staff and faculty; (4) Provide professional support to beginning and veteran teachers through extended professional development opportunities; (5) Assess and evaluate the work done through this collaboration; and (6) Conduct research to enhance the field of education and disseminate the results of this work. In our focus on improving the lives, learning, and opportunities for all students, we have more specific objectives that illustrate our commitment to creating more equitable learning environments for all students. Our implicit belief is that we can work better together in meaningful reciprocal relationships.

Our partnership agreements are made with districts and schools. Prior to each re-signing year, we convene working groups to review the goals and outcomes of the

partnership. Once the final document is agreed upon, it is signed by the Dean of the College of Education, the Chancellor of the university, the Superintendent of each school district, and the Chair of the district's school board. Once district agreements are made, the PDS Director meets with principals and disseminates needs assessments to schools to determine the work of the next three years. Second, our work across the entire partnership occurs in diverse communities in urban and rural areas. During each three year cycle, we identify particular schools in which we conduct intensive partnership work. As much as possible, we select schools for the Elementary Block Network that have a racially and socio-economically diverse student population.<sup>2</sup>

Our governance structure includes regular meetings of four advisory groups which include teachers, administrators, district personnel, community leaders, faculty, and students. One advisory group—the “Dean’s Advisory Group”—meets regularly each semester. At these meetings, program revisions and other college initiatives are discussed. A second advisory group—the “Master Teacher Cohort”—is composed of twelve teachers who are identified by university faculty and public school partners as outstanding teachers who model the best practices our partnership promotes. They provide input through meetings with our PDS Director. A third advisory group—the “Site Coordinators Work Group”—is composed of public school partners who are paid to help us coordinate field experience and internship placements in the schools. They also provide input on the field experience and internship process, new directives from the state, and the changing structures and processes in our P-12 schools.

<sup>2</sup>The selection of Block schools is also dependent on how large a school. A Block cohort is typically 24 students, so the school has to be able to accommodate that many students. So while we may have schools in our partnership that have a more diverse student population and that want to be Block schools, they may not have the teaching staff that can accommodate 24 teacher candidates.

In addition, they lead site seminars for our teacher candidates during the internship semester. Finally, our “Student Ambassadors” meet regularly with the Associate Dean of Academic Programs to provide input on academic programs and partnership processes.

We also conduct periodic needs assessments and partnership evaluations to examine the scope and outcomes of our work. In recent years, these needs assessments have extended the professional development focus to include grant writing and research. As state funding has decreased significantly for our partners and the university, we are working together to secure more grant funding. And, as teaching practices have moved away from being inquiry-based to being standardized test-driven, we are working with our partners to conduct research in schools to ensure that students and teachers are engaged in meaningful learning experiences.

Finally, we collaborate in advocacy efforts to advance the profession. For example, our PDS has hosted a regional education summit including 125 participants from our partnership districts, university faculty, teacher candidates, and community leaders. Participants engaged in dialogue concerning innovative practices and have discussed how budget cuts were affecting their ability to sustain and/or initiate those practices. From that summit, we formed cross-district collaborative research teams that investigated particular educational practices in our region.

## Preparing Future Educators

The Watson College of Education is committed to providing field experiences in P-12 classroom settings that allow teacher candidates to gain meaningful learning opportunities through experiences in practical teaching contexts. Throughout the program, there is evidence that faculty strive to provide models of best teaching practices through a diverse myriad of classroom “real world” settings. The Elementary Block program developed in 2008

from conversations with our elementary school partners. In the fall of 2008 we piloted a mini-Block experience in two elementary schools. At the completion of that semester, elementary faculty met with partners to determine what went well and what needed improvement in the program design. By the spring of 2009, the block was formalized and preparations were made to move all elementary students to the Block. Ultimately, these revisions were made in an effort to close the gap between theory and practice by providing substantial and sustained field experiences in public school settings.

The elementary program sequence includes a progression from 10 hours in a classroom the first semester to 152 hours in the classroom prior to the full time internship. Faculty members provide direct supervision and support for all field work, working closely with school partners to design the experiences. In the first semester of the senior year, elementary education students participate in the Block experience. They are paired with another teacher candidate and a partnership teacher. The following semester the school hosts one of the two teacher candidates at the school for the full time internship. This year-long internship model provides intensive support and collaboration thus resulting in an optimal learning environment for the teacher candidate.

The Block program design is distinctive in several ways. Students take all of their methods classes in the Block (Language Arts, Science, Social Studies, Cultural Arts, and Mathematics). Each Block cohort thus has five faculty assigned to the team. There are 2-4 cohorts each semester depending on enrollment. At the beginning of the first semester, all Block students and faculty attend an orientation at the school with partnership teachers and administrators. The following week, candidates are in schools for half days during the entire week. At least one faculty member is always present at the school while students are in the Block field experience.

After this initial week in schools, candidates are involved for six consecutive Mondays at the school. During this time, candidates work with a partner to collaboratively plan and implement an integrated lesson for each of their methods courses, receiving comprehensive verbal and written feedback from both their methods instructors and their partnership teacher for each lesson.

After six weeks of observation and methods instruction, candidates develop two weeks of lesson plans. Faculty members and partnership teachers facilitate the development of these plans. In November, for example, during the Fall block, methods classes stop and candidates are in a designated classroom full-time for two weeks. During this time, candidates co-teach their lessons with another student. Methods instructors observe these lessons and at the end of the semester, all candidates share a reflective project with instructors and other candidates in their Block cohort.

The elementary Block experience is also distinctive in that all candidates do a service learning component at some point during their Block experience. This component takes place in partnership with a local homeless shelter. Candidates spend five to seven hours in the shelter with young people and families. During this time, they design and facilitate educational activities specifically for the young people and their families who live in the shelter. In addition, with the cultural arts course all Block students participate in arts integration field trips. For example, candidates have visited the Cameron Art Museum to study a recycling exhibit that methods instructors then use to teach them how to integrate arts, science, mathematics, social studies, and language arts. These are just a few examples of how the Block experience fosters interdisciplinary teaching and community-based engagement.

Finally, the Block experience fosters collaboration between university faculty and partnership teachers. After each Block faculty

Table 1. Demographics of Schools in the Elementary Block Network

<i>School</i>	<i>Racial Demographics 2011–2012</i>	<i>Economic Characteristics Poverty Free &amp; Reduced Lunch Percent 2011–2012</i>	<i>Geographic Characteristics</i>
John J. Blair Elementary	White, 390 (68%) Students of Color, 185 (32%)	48%	City, Small
Castle Hayne Elementary	White, 309 (64%) Students of Color, 174 (36%)	69%	City, Small
Ogden Elementary	White, 634 (98%) Students of Color, 42 (2%)	16%	City, Small
Pine Valley Elementary	White, 462 (74%) Students of Color, 161 (26%)	54%	City, Small

visits the students in the schools, that faculty member sends a summary email to all Block faculty members to alert them of what happened during the day. Faculty members then use this information to initiate dialogue with the partnership teachers and teacher candidates in schools on the following day. Doing so allows them to address areas of concern or strengths so that faculty can coach candidates appropriately.

In preparation for the Block experience, teacher candidates tutor in the Betty Holden Stike Educational Laboratory. The Lab provides print and non-print media, instructional tools for math, and a wide variety of technology, materials and supplies for our teacher candidates and the P-12 students with whom they work. In the Education Lab, teacher candidates practice the methods they are learning in their courses by tutoring a child in a one-on-one setting focusing on reading and math. Each year, more than 150 children from surrounding counties are served by the Ed Lab's one-on-one teaching programs. Candidates are coached as they learn new strategies and skills in reading, writing and mathematics. Open communication with parents and classroom teachers is also an important part of the Ed Lab experience. Partnership schools share information about the tutoring services with parents, and many encourage independent tutoring as interventions in personalized education plans. Also, each year more than fifty partnership teachers accept WCE students to complete their tutoring requirements in their classrooms.

## Achievements of PDS

Overall, we are proud of our collaborative efforts to improve P-12 education across the partnership and are particularly pleased with the intensive efforts in our Elementary Block schools. Without such partnerships, we fear that colleges and universities will remain isolated ivory towers unable to exercise any significant change in educational policy discourse. We believe that our partnership work has indeed made “schools better places for practicing teachers to work and learn” and has relieved the “sense of desperation” that many of our constituents feel about the quality of public schools in their neighborhoods (Holmes Group, 1995, pp. vi & 5). The fact that we continue to have requests from districts to admit schools to the partnership and/or to the Block network, that most of our schools have expressed an interest to work with us in more intensive ways, and that our graduates have been recognized as positively affecting student achievement in a recent policy report (Henry et al., 2011) indicates that we are making a difference in the lives of teachers and students. <sup>SUP</sup>

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