

# University of Georgia and Clarke County School District: Creating a Dynamic and Sustainable District-Wide Partnership

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**ABSTRACT:** The UGA/CCSD Professional Development School District (PDS) partnership began in 2009 with one school, and has grown to serve all schools in the district. The premise of the PDS is that equity is achieved by providing high quality education for all students through programs and processes that are emergent, organic, dynamic and collaborative. All stakeholders share the goal of long-term sustainability and have developed a creative cost-sharing model towards this end. The PDS partnership has fostered the use of clinically-rich practices that support teacher candidates. In addition, several innovative extensions have grown out of the on-going collaboration between UGA and CCSD.

*NAPDS Essentials 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; and #8/Work by college/university faculty and P-12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings.*

## Introduction

The Professional Development School District (PDS) is a multi-faceted partnership between the University of Georgia (UGA) College of Education (COE) and the Clarke County School District (CCSD). Launched in 2009 with one elementary school, our PDS has grown to serve all 21 PreK-12 schools in the district and is deeply rooted in 13 schools, serving more than 8,000 of the district's nearly 13,000 students.

As a result of the partnership, resources are shared for mutual benefit, structures have emerged to sustain cooperation, and collaborative inquiry that bridges theory and practice has developed. The PDS is continually expanding and developing new programs as outgrowths of the partnership. Participants in the PDS have published ten scholarly articles and books and have shared lessons learned through over 50 conference presentations and three annual PDS Workshops.

## The Context and History of Our PDS

CCSD and UGA are located in Athens-Clarke County in Northeast Georgia with a city-county population of 117,000. The

social and cultural context of Athens-Clarke County provides insight into the types of challenges affecting the school district. The community faces poverty issues that would normally be found in a high population density urban city. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Clarke County's poverty rate is 35%, which is more than double the rate for Georgia, and is ranked as the fifth poorest county in the nation among those with populations over 100,000. Based on the number of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, 78% of CCSD students are economically disadvantaged.

Within this challenging context, school-university partnerships become increasingly important to maximize resources and share expertise. Though CCSD and COE had informal partnerships over the years, they had not been sustained and in 2008 representatives from CCSD and COE began meeting to consider ways they might again try to work together. The following year they jointly participated in site visits to school-university partnerships across the country, and as a result of these visits, extensive research, and many discussions, the partners agreed to focus their efforts on the Professional Development School (PDS) model.

The implementation of the PDS model began August 2009, with the opening of J.J. Harris Elementary Charter School, serving a population of 95% economically disadvantaged children. A COE Professor-in-Residence (PIR) was selected and worked 50% time in the school in close collaboration with the principal. Clusters of teacher candidates were placed with mentor teachers, two COE courses were taught on-site at the school, and professional learning was co-developed. The success of this school paved the way for a more comprehensive partnership design.

In 2011, CCSD and the COE committed to expanding their partnership to include the entire school district, forming the PDS. The UGA Provost and the CCSD Superintendent signed a three-year Memorandum of Understanding, which has subsequently been renewed. The mission and vision were co-constructed by the partners, structures were created to ensure shared decision-making, and several different models were created based on different levels of school involvement.

We purposely designed a collaborative organizational structure where planning and decision-making are shared at multiple levels within and across institutions. There are four essential PDS groups that meet regularly to collaborate, innovate, and solve problems together. This thoughtfully co-constructed design has resulted in continual growth over the past six years.

The PDS connects theory and practice, making a positive impact on both institutions. With additional support and resources, P-12 student learning is improving in PDS schools and teacher-faculty collaboration results in instructional innovations that benefit both CCSD and COE students. The PDS model of teacher preparation better prepares COE students for the realities of teaching, and CCSD hires COE graduates in increasing numbers. Over time, these new teachers often become mentor teachers themselves, continuing to deepen and strengthen the partnership.

## Key Elements of Our PDS

In this article, we highlight four components of our PDS that we think are particularly important to our success and longevity. As you will discover, some of our work extends beyond the traditional boundaries of PDS work; however, we believe that all of these examples support the NAPDS Nine Essentials. The four elements highlighted include:

- Equity results from emergent, organic, dynamic, and collaborative partnerships
- Sustainability is essential
- Clinically-rich practices develop through on-site courses
- Extension programs grow from and strengthen our partnership

### 1. Equity Results From Emergent, Organic, Dynamic and Collaborative Partnerships

Inherent in the vision, mission, and pathways for action crafted by the PDS is the premise that equity is achieved by providing

high quality education for all students. Our PDS's vision is, "to transform education at all levels through a systemic, sustained and comprehensive partnership." The first sentence of our mission states that our goal is to, "improve the quality of education for all students through a student-centered approach."

We believe that our PDS mission advances equity within schools and the broader community because we begin with the premise that every individual is valuable, all ideas are worth consideration, and that all systems and structures have both strengths and weaknesses. By using this stance as our starting point, we have developed a partnership that is emergent, organic, dynamic, and collaborative.

The PDS is emergent because it is developed based on the needs and interests of the teachers and students in the schools and on the interests and the capacity of the faculty in the COE. The activities and programs look different from school to school and from year to year.

It is organic because it is created by the people (faculty, teachers, and students) who are doing the work. Rather than being imposed from the top or expected to conform to a particular model, we have grown organically based on faculty, principal, and teacher interests grounded in school-based needs. No faculty member was "assigned" to a PDS nor was any school "assigned" to become a PDS school.

The PDS is dynamic because it is constantly changing to meet the needs and aspirations of those involved. High quality education is, by definition, different from person to person and from place to place. And because the institutions and learners involved in our partnership have different strengths and different needs, we have developed an approach that is responsive to these varying characteristics and situations.

Finally, it is truly collaborative because the planning and decision-making are shared at multiple levels within and across institutions. Through an Executive Committee, a Coordinating Council, our COE PDS Collaborative, and Site-Based PDS Steering Committees, there are many opportunities for discussion, learning, and joint decision-making at all levels.

These four characteristics of our partnership have made it possible to create educational opportunities that are responsive to context, to people and to place. In this way equity is not a lofty goal, but frames the processes by which we work and is the responsibility of each of us, enacted through daily practice. Ultimately, equity for our PDS is not a goal for which we strive, but the foundation upon which we stand.

### Different Models Provide Flexibility

How do we involve all 21 schools in the district? A very intentional structure that includes four different models was designed to give schools flexibility in their level of participation. These models, described below remain fluid, allowing for schools to change models from year to year based on their needs.

*Model 1.* At the Model 1 level all schools in CCSD have the opportunity to participate in the PDS through interaction with district-wide PIR and/or contracting with the COE Office of

Outreach and Engagement for specific professional development activities (with a specific faculty member and/or around a specific topic for a specific period of time). Currently, three district-wide PIRs work in the areas of leadership development, special education, and school climate and all schools have access to the expertise of these three faculty members.

*Model 2.* Model 2 schools include all of the above, as well as the placement of clusters UGA teacher candidates in classrooms for fieldwork and/or student teaching experiences.

*Model 3.* Model 3 schools include all of the above as well as one or more COE courses taught by On-Site Instructors (OSIs). Currently, Model 3 schools include four elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school.

*Model 4.* Model 4 schools are the most robust model in the PDS. These schools have all of the above, plus a PIR, a COE faculty member who contracts for a period of 2-3 years to be at the school 50% of the time during the academic year and up to 20 days when UGA faculty are not ‘on contract.’ Currently, Model 4 schools include one Pre-Kindergarten site, two elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school.

Typically, schools that begin as Model 3 schools eventually become Model 4s as relationships are built and trust established. In 2009, we began with just one Model 4 school and now six schools have this robust level of PDS involvement.

## 2. Sustainability Is Essential

One of the achievements we are most proud of is the sustainability of our PDS model. Our PDS is not dependent on grant funding; instead, funds contributed by both institutions are reinvested in the PDS to further its impact and mission. From the outset, both CCSD and the COE were committed to developing a creative cost-sharing model with long-term sustainability as the primary goal. The COE contributes partial salary for the Director of the Office of School Engagement, the part-time salary for the Project Manager of the Office of School Engagement and 25% of the salary for each PIR by locating part of their instructional load within the schools. CCSD contributes 25% of each PIR’s salary and some additional summer funding for PIRs. CCSD uses Title II federal funds (for professional learning) to cover their contribution to the salaries of PIRs. Rather than CCSD’s portion of PIR salaries being absorbed by the COE, every dollar is then *reinvested* in the PDS to support mentor teacher stipends for summer workshops, graduate assistants who support work in PDS schools, faculty and graduate assistant travel to annual NAPDS conference and other conferences, and summer support for faculty who work on summer PDS activities. In essence, for every dollar CCSD contributes, they receive \$2 in return in the form of support for their schools.

Teachers and learners at both institutions experience the long-term benefit of this win-win investment. CCSD schools provide diverse, real-world learning environments that better prepare COE students to become effective teachers, and CCSD students benefit from ongoing interactions with pre-service

teachers who are eager to help them learn and grow. Teacher professionalism is cultivated, and collaborations among teachers, administrators, and COE faculty result in instructional innovations, impactful professional learning, and scholarship that contributes to the field of PDS work.

## 3. Clinically-Rich Practices Develop Through On-Site Courses

A recent publication by Ingersoll, Merrill, and May (2014) reported that the content of teacher preparation programs has a notable impact on the likelihood that new teachers will remain in the profession. They found that programs that provided teacher candidates with the opportunity to observe a variety of classrooms, engage in practice teaching, and receive feedback on their teaching produced teachers who were less prone to leave the classroom. These results confirm a foundational principle of PDS work—that teacher candidates receive the best preparation when they are actively engaged in work in schools and supported by their college or university instructors during this process.

Our PDS has made it possible to explore and enact this type of intensive clinical preparation for our teacher candidates. We began on-site courses in 2009 and now have between 18-23 courses taught on-site each semester. Approximately 20 COE faculty teach one or more courses as OSI at 13 CCSD schools, serving over 350 COE students in teacher preparation programs. In all cases, OSIs take advantage of teaching courses in a school-based setting by giving teacher candidates opportunities to observe a variety of classrooms styles and settings and to engage with P-12 students one-on-one and in small groups.

OSIs have shown remarkable ingenuity and dedication in developing a vast array of approaches that take advantage of the particular context in which they work and respond to the needs of teacher candidates as well as the needs of the teachers and students in the schools. Clinically rich experiences have spread from one school to the next as faculty and teachers increasingly build trust with one another. Pedagogical experiences such as “Teaching Rounds,” “Scavenger Hunts,” and the “Supported Collaborative Teaching Model” are now common across many of our elementary PDS sites. Three examples of clinically rich practices are described below:

1. **Teaching Rounds.** The PIR works with teachers at the school and solicits one or two volunteers each semester. The volunteer teacher chooses a lesson or activity structure they are proud of and invites the entire class of teacher candidates (about 25 students) to observe for 15-20 minutes. Following the observation, the volunteer teacher returns to the UGA classroom to debrief with the teacher candidates (Dresden, Kittleson, & Wenner, 2014)
2. **Scavenger Hunts.** Teacher candidates are dispersed throughout the school to find examples of the topic for the day (e.g., graphic organizers, transitions, classroom space, and materials). These examples are then used to

add context, depth, and variation to the theoretical principals being discussed (Dresden et al., 2014)

3. **Supported Collaborative Teaching Model.** Teacher candidates teach small group inquiry-based science lessons. Teacher candidates work in groups of three and teach the same lesson six times to different groups of elementary students. Teacher candidates take on different roles (lead teacher, supporting teacher, observer) and are encouraged to modify their lessons between groups (Kittleson, Dresden, & Wenner, 2013)

In fall 2012 we began collecting survey data from COE students about their experience in on-site courses. On-site course survey results in spring 2015 show that 93% of students believe that their on-site course helped them better understand the realities of teaching, helped them connect theory with practice, and better prepared them for student teaching. In focus groups, teachers report that they benefit from opportunities to share their expertise with pre-service teachers and opportunities to reflect on their practice. They find that their P-12 students also benefit from the increased individual attention when COE students work in their classrooms.

#### 4. Extension Programs Grow From and Strengthen Our Partnership

One of the strengths of our partnership is that we do not confine ourselves to a limited definition of what a PDS can do or become. Because of the trust and relationships that have developed through our collaborative PDS work, we have maximized the expertise in both institutions to develop joint extension initiatives over the last four years. Four of these initiatives include:

- a) **Experience UGA:** Together we established a university-wide initiative with the goal of bringing all 13,000 Clarke County students on field trips to the UGA campus each year. PreK-12<sup>th</sup> grade students have the opportunity to engage in learning experiences that take advantage of university resources for curriculum and foster interest in post-secondary education.
- b) **Teach to Learn:** CCSD and the COE jointly applied for and received a two-year \$850,000 Race to the Top grant that supported early career teacher mentorship to increase retention of secondary math and science teachers (July 2012-June 2015).
- c) **Kindergarten seminars:** Together, we developed a series of professional development seminars for Kindergarten teachers focused on developmentally appropriate practices.
- d) **Summer Learning Program:** Together with members of the Athens community, we are currently developing a summer learning program to launch in summer

2016. COE faculty, along with CCSD teachers, will offer innovative courses that give COE students opportunities to work with K-8<sup>th</sup> grade students in hands-on, project based environments while earning course credit. CCSD students will have enriching summer learning experiences that prevent ‘summer slide.’

## Conclusion

Our PDS is always a work in progress—as with any partnership, we have ongoing challenges that result from crossing boundaries and working in each other’s spaces. However, we believe that what we have created together is built to last. We maximize the resources and expertise of the school district and the university to improve education at all levels, mutually benefitting students, teachers, faculty, and administrators. Though our PDS activities and programs vary widely from school to school and from year to year, what remains constant is our commitment to respect, equity, inquiry, and a focus on student and teacher/faculty learning. <sup>SUP</sup>

## References

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