COMMENTARY

The Power of Institutional Partnership in the Development of Turn Around School Leaders

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In The Power of Institutional Partnership in the Development of Turn Around School Leaders, Stephen Davis, Ronald Leon and Miriam Fultz describe the strategies used by educational leadership faculty members at Cal Poly Pomona and officials from the Pomona Unified School District (PUSD) to collaboratively establish and operate the Great Leaders for Great Schools Academy (GLGSA), California's first accredited *experimental* principal preparation program (funded by a School Leadership Development Grant from the United States Department of Education). Success required strong interagency collaboration and was dependent on the willingness of each party to subordinate traditional practices of institutional autonomy to a mutually-derived program vision and shared responsibility for program oversight, content, functions, and outcomes. Ultimately, the strength of this partnership emerged from the unwavering resolve of agency leaders to bridge organizational boundaries and to reframe traditional roles and relationships.

Informed by adult learning theory, research on administrator preparation, and PUSD needs, the GLGSA program design includes a rigorous, performance-based selection process, full-time administrative apprenticeships under the direction of skilled mentor principals, thematically-integrated and problem-based curriculum, cohort-based professional learning communities, multiple formative and summative evaluations of candidates and the program, and post-program on-the-job executive coaching for graduates who acquire teacher-leadership or administrative positions in the district.

The authors offer useful strategies for establishing and maintaining the relationships necessary to develop and support durable, university-school district partnerships. In particular, they make seven recommendations for university programs interested in building similar partnerships with school districts. These include:

1. Engender mutual support, trust, and buy-in for the program through **multiple, honest, and deep conversations** before taking concrete steps to implement program elements. Be proactive in reaching out to local school districts. Meet on school district "turf," listen first to district interests and concerns, and do not approach formative conversations with a "pre-ordained action plan."
2. **Identify and clarify the needs, interests, and capacities of both parties** . Ultimately, the success of the program will depend on systems and structures based upon forthright dialogue and the ability of both parties to "meet in the middle" if necessary.
3. Involve a **skilled external evaluator** from the very beginning of the program planning process and throughout the various stages of program maturity. The external evaluator should *not* be someone who pops in and out of program planning and operations, or who arrives on the scene when summative evaluations are needed. Rather, the evaluator should become an integral part of the program planning and operations team. The external evaluator helps to frame program purposes, goals, strategies, outcomes, and assessments, *and* helps to ensure that program activities and evaluation protocols maintain fidelity to the program logic model.
4. **Periodically reaffirm and revisit** program goals and mutual needs. Don't assume that the foundations of a collaborative agreement, or the circumstances that influence the agreement, will endure indefinitely. Healthy partnerships require constant cultivation, adaptation, and support.
5. Anchor the program on the **needs of the constituents** served rather than the needs of the program provider. Move away from generic, one-size-fits-all approaches to leadership development and toward more contextualized strategies.
6. Likewise, ground the program upon the **goals, objectives, and strategic plans of the school district** rather than the university. This may require that university programs and their affiliated faculty shift focus from acting as *knowledge providers* to *knowledge brokers*.
7. Use candidate and program **evaluation evidence** to inform program improvements *and* school district practices. Help school district partners learn from, and institutionalize, successful program practices (e.g., leadership selection, development, and support strategies). In this manner, university providers can meet their primary obligations as *licensure agents* while extending their influence to school districts by acting as *constructivist partners*.

An important consequence of the GLGSA/PUSD partnership is the district's increased internal capacity to assist in the cultivation of practice-ready administrators who possess transformative leadership knowledge, skills, and dispositions based upon authentic learning experiences and context specific workplace environments.

The full study is in Stephen H. Davis, Ronald J. Leon, Miriam L. Fultz (2012), Chapter 2 The Power of Institutional Partnership in the Development of Turn Around School Leaders, in Karen Sanzo, Steve Myran, Anthony H. Normore (ed.) Successful School Leadership Preparation and Development (Advances in Educational Administration, Volume 17), Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp.25-48

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