Developing a Collaborative Partnership Between a College of Education and an Elementary School: An overview of a six-year grant funded project

Susan Donnelly
Western Washington University, susan.donnelly@wwu.edu

Recommended Citation

Developing a Collaborative Partnership Between a College of Education and an Elementary School: An overview of a six-year grant funded project

Susan Donnelly
Co-Editor of this issue of the Journal of Educational Controversy
Co-Coordinator of Collaborative Schools for Innovation and Success Grant
Western Washington University

Abstract

This introductory article will provide an overview of a state funded project to develop a collaborative partnership between the Western Washington University Elementary Education Department and an elementary school in a district with high levels of poverty and English learners. It will describe the history, the aims and goals, and the major results of the six-year project and provide readers with a context for the other articles that appear in this issue of the Journal of Educational Controversy. In the other articles, the authors, who also participated in the partnership, describe their personal involvement in particular aspects of the multi-faceted project and the initiatives that were collaboratively developed with the school faculty. A video interview with a state legislator provides a historical and political context for the legislation that funded the project. And, in another interview, the school district superintendent describes the impacts that a partnership with one school had on an entire district, now and into the future.

Introduction

In this issue of the Journal of Educational Controversy, we present several articles that report on various aspects of a unique partnership funded by the Washington State Legislature from 2012 – 2018 – the Collaborative Schools for Innovation and Success (CSIS) project. This introduction provides an overview of the grant and the activities of one of the funded partnerships drawing on interviews, annual reports and other grant documents. It also provides a context for the other articles in this issue that give the reader more detailed information on the activities of the partnership. The videos below are presented with the permission of the participants.

In the following interview with Representative Tomiko Santos, the prime author of the legislation that funded the partnership and the Chair of the Washington State House Education Committee, she provides the historical context and the political purposes behind the legislation which was passed in 2012.

An Interview with
Rep. Sharon Tomiko Santos
37th District
Washington State House of Representatives

WESTERN
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

May 4, 2018

Following a competitive application process, the proposed partnership between Western Washington University and Washington Elementary School was selected as one of three sites in the state to receive funding for a planning year and five implementation years. The other two sites were centered in large urban areas. In contrast, Washington School is located in a small city of about 30,000 people in a rural, agricultural valley. The school district consists of six elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school. All of the schools have similar demographics with a small majority of white students and a large minority of Latino students. At Washington School, many of the Latino families are from an area of Mexico populated by indigenous peoples and speak either Mixtec or Triqui as their first language and Spanish as a second language. They primarily work in the agricultural industry and a number of them are migrant workers following the harvests throughout the district or into other districts in the state. About a third of the students qualify as transitional bilingual and receive English language support. Poverty levels are high throughout the district at 75% or more, affecting many white families as well as the Latino immigrants. All of these factors indicate significant educational challenges for the schools.

Goals

In 2012, when we formulated our goals for the partnership, we described them in terms of the following questions.

> The overarching question of the project is how can teacher education programs, in collaboration with school partners, close the opportunity gap for P-5 students? The team is addressing this large question through four critical strands:

1.<u>Student Achievement:</u> How can instructional and assessment practices be enhanced to better meet the needs of all learners, especially English Language Learners and those living in poverty—with the result being significant gains in student achievement?

2.<u>Family Engagement:</u> How can teacher education programs, in collaboration with school partners, better prepare teachers to engage families in support of their children's academic success?

3.<u>Teacher Preparation:</u> How can teacher education programs, in collaboration with school partners, better prepare teachers to address the opportunity gap?

4.<u>Teacher Recruitment:</u> How can teacher education programs recruit and prepare more teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the local community?

Planning

During the planning year (2012 – 2013), the initial requirement of the grant was to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment and to develop an Implementation Plan based on the findings. The Implementation Plan was then submitted for approval for further funding.

The needs assessment identified a significant achievement/opportunity gap for many of the students at Washington School. Historically, despite a great deal of good will and hard work on the part of the teaching staff, there had been a disappointing trend in test scores as measured by standardized tests required by the state. From 2009 – 2012, reading scores remained static or showed slight gains and math scores declined. A value-added analysis showed that struggling students (those at level 1 or 2 on the state tests) were not catching up to their peers; in some cases, they were falling further behind at an alarming rate. These trends were particularly apparent when test scores were compared according to ethnic categories (white vs. Hispanic) and gender (girls vs. boys), with Hispanics and boys experiencing the largest gaps. By inference, we assumed that Hispanic boys were experiencing the most significant gap, although this level of disaggregation was not available in the needs assessment.

An analysis of recruitment and retention efforts in elementary teacher education at Western Washington University revealed that, despite recent efforts to increase the number of candidates from underrepresented groups into the program, more work was needed to maintain steady progress in this area. Candidates in the program (and teachers at Washington School) continued to be predominantly white, middle class females who do not share the language and background of most of the students at Washington School or at an increasing number of schools in the state.

As a result of these findings, and in accordance with the recommendations made by the Center for Educational Effectiveness that conducted the school review, we focused our efforts on the following:

- promoting family engagement in the school by conducting family visits and developing parent leaders
- enhancing family literacy in both English and Spanish
- using educational technology to enhance assessment and instruction
- developing a pipeline to teaching for local students in order to diversify the teaching force in the future
- addressing the gender gap
- improving professional development for in-service teachers and modifying the preparation of new teachers to enhance their cultural responsiveness and ability to teach students with limited English proficiency (or ELLs).

Below is a logic model chart (Table 1) that gives some idea of how the various initiatives fit together and lead to the desired changes and outcomes.

Changes in communications, family support, instructional practices & increased numbers of bilingual/bicultural teachers = Changes in student well-being, engagement & learning			
Component	**Activities**	**Changes**	**Outcomes**
Family Engagement & Support • Initiating and ongoing activities that enhance parent participation in school planning and decision making	• Family visits • Changes in parent conferences • Parent action team • Social service supports via community agencies & Communities In Schools (CIS) • Staff PD on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)	School staff develop personal relationships with families; parent leaders emerge as participation intensifies; collaboration between school and families increases over time; staff able to provide support to students affected by ACEs	• Staff is more knowledgeable about family culture, needs & aspirations • Parents feel comfortable interacting with school staff & participate more in school activities • Participation in parent leadership group expands
Family Literacy • Ongoing activities that enhance families' abilities to support student achievement, with special emphasis on the needs of Latino families	• Family Read • Club de Lectura • Library access • Access to internet and mobile technology • ESL classes • Conversational Spanish	School supports parents' own educational goals and development of literacy skills; parents are better able to communicate with educators and social service professionals; parents become students alongside their children & gain digital literacy skills	• Students benefit from increased feeling of community and collaboration between home and school, resulting in fewer behavioral interventions
Assessment & Instruction Enhancement • School-wide efforts to implement an effective RTI system, use progress-monitoring assessments to inform practice and use differentiated instructional strategies that support English Language Development	• Revisions to Response to Intervention (RTI) System • Mobile technology • Extended day program • Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD) professional development • Increase in numbers of teachers with ELL endorsement	Teachers and interns regularly use instructional strategies that promote language development and literacy skills; teachers use educational technology to enhance assessment & instruction; teachers use data to focus interventions and extended learning opportunities	• Parents are supported in helping their children succeed • Parents are supported in continuing their educational goals & meeting economic, health and other social challenges • Students develop bilingual literacy skills and feel pride in their heritage • Students are engaged in learning, resulting in fewer behavioral interventions • Students develop academic language skills • Students succeed academically, as measured by classroom-based measures and standardized test scores
Professional Learning Communities • Collaborative teams using data-based decision-making model	• School-wide training in DuFour PLC model • Grade level PLCs meet regularly • Cross team conversations	Teachers, interns, teacher educators and specialists collaborate in data-based discussions; teachers develop assessments to inform practice; teachers collaborate on providing enrichment and interventions to further all students' learning; teachers guide their own PD	

Pathway to Teacher Education	• Cascading mentorship • Campus field trips • Collaboration with groups also working to create pathway	Students visit university for a vision of future possibilities; Latinx students at the elementary, high school and community college levels mentor younger Latinx students. Partnership project works with "grow your own" teacher prep group and CoE to link local bilingual/bicultural students with teacher ed programs	• More bilingual/ bicultural students entering WCE teacher ed programs. • More bilingual/ bicultural teachers in MVSD schools, resulting in more student & family engagement.

The Articles

The major activities of the partnership are described in more detail in various articles in this issue.

In "Moving from family engagement 'toolkits' to reciprocal relationships and systems change," Marilyn Chu describes, at one level, the cluster of initiatives aimed at empowering families and engaging them in their own and their children's education. At the same time, teacher candidates in her courses were conducting service learning projects within these activities and reflecting on their experiences. Chu's analysis of her students' reflections demonstrates the importance of inquiry-based field experiences in the preparation of new teachers.

(For additional information about the family engagement initiatives, read "Everyone should feel so connected and safe": Using Parent Action Teams to reach all families" by John Korsmo et al, which was published in a previous issue of this journal.)

One of the major professional development initiatives, Project GLAD (Guided Language Acquisition Design) is described in "Synergy from co-learning: Preservice, inservice and teacher educators together." This article also demonstrates how the various initiatives we undertook often overlapped and amplified each other, as this one did with the Professional Learning Community training that happened concurrently.

The use of educational technology to enhance assessment and instruction is highlighted in "Hanging out and joining in: Bridging the university-school-community divide through collaborative learning and innovative uses of educational technology."

The article, "Using a place-based approach in preparing community teachers for high-need schools," focuses on the changes that we made to the teacher education side of the partnership equation throughout the course of the project.

Results

Excerpts below from our final report to the legislature in 2018 describe some of the notable results achieved by the partnership in the areas of student achievement and the preparation of new teachers. Dr. Jennifer Green conducted the data analysis and Dr. Joanne Carney wrote much of the interpretive text that follows.

Student Achievement

Tracking student achievement during the course of the project has been extremely challenging. Standards and assessment requirements changes several times at the federal, state and district level thus making tracking data over time difficult. Our data are housed in various places and a data management system at the district level was just adopted in 2016-17 to make data collection and analysis more efficient. However, despite these challenges we have used data available to us to assess impact and make decisions. Curriculum Based Measures in math and literacy are regularly used to assess students' skill levels and to decide on appropriate intervention strategies. Intervention specialists work with children who need additional support. The teachers and the intervention specialists do constant progress monitoring on targeted children. As children's skills improve, they are replaced with other children who need this more intensive support. Mobile technology is being used to collect data in real time, to capture samples of student work for later reflection and as tools for personalized instruction and practice via such applications as Lexia and IXL, which offer dynamic diagnostic assessment.

In 2016-17, we contracted with a university faculty member with a specialty in statistical analysis to take an in-depth look at our data to try to assess what measurable impacts our initiatives and interventions are having on student achievement. This analysis revealed several significant findings described below.

In our 2017 annual report, we presented the Smarter Balanced Assessment data from 2015-2016 in Table 2 below. In that data, we pointed out notable improvements in student achievement in math. Despite the challenges represented by the demographics of Washington students, there were numerous categories where the percentage of students meeting standard was above the state average. In grade 4, the four categories of ALL, Latinx, male and female are above the state average. In grade 5, male students met standard at percentages above the state average. The percentage of males meeting standard in math is especially noteworthy given the significant gap in achievement for boys when our project began in 2012. Further analysis of these math scores to determine the relative levels of performance reveals that, not

only are Washington Latinx students being brought up to standard (Level 3), but they are demonstrating mastery at level 4 in percentages that exceed both the state and district averages.

Table 2: Washington 2015-16 SBA Scores—% Meeting standard in ELA & Math

ELA meeting standard	State: ALL	State: Latinx	District: ALL	District: Latinx	School: ALL	School: Latinx	School: White	School: Male	School: Female
3rd Grade	54.3	35.1	40.2	26.8	34.6	25	63	36.3	34.1
4th Grade	57	38.8	45.2	32.6	50*	34.3*	53	55.5	45.4
5th Grade	60.1	42.2	45.8	33.0	44.1	36.3*	70	46.1	41.3
Math meeting standard									
3rd Grade	58.9	41.9	55.9	45.5	51.3	49*	63	54.5	48.7
4th Grade	55.4	37.5	46.5	36.5	60.6*	56.2*	59	66.6	55.8
5th Grade	49.2	30.4	41	28.8	47*	34.3*	85	52.6	41.3

*Note: shading indicates % above state average; * indicates % above district average*

Despite the gratifying improvements in math, we noted persistent challenges in the English language arts (ELA) test data: the percentage of students meeting standard in most demographic categories is below the state average. However, given the demographics of the school, with 29.3% of students identified as transitional bilingual, it should not be surprising that English language skills were lagging. When compared with schools of a similar demographic (focusing on percentage of free/reduced and percentage of English language learners), Washington students outperformed others in that demographic.

We also ran a series of specialized tests comparing different groups of students from the 2024 graduating class (students who were in 4th grade during the 2015-16 school year). This particular group of students was selected since they had attended Washington since at least grade 2, the first year of partnership project implementation, and thus had the most exposure to the numerous project interventions. Our analyses occurred in three stages: first, we analyzed the patterns of achievement in this group for males and females; second, the achievement of White vs. Latinx students; then we sorted the students into what we defined as a *higher vs. lower impact* group.

When we ran comparisons between the two genders in our grade-level focus group, we discovered that there is **no statistical difference in male and female mean scores in 2015 or 2016 in either English language arts or math**. This represents a significant change from the situation in 2012 when our school-university partnership project began. In 2012, our analysis of state- required standardized test scores from 2007 to 2012 showed a persistent gender gap, particularly in reading, for the boys.

The second stage of our analysis involved comparison of the test scores of White and Latinx

students currently in grade 5. Our finding was **that there is no statistical difference between these two groups means that the achievement gap has been essentially closed in math for the Latinx students then in grade 5.**

The third stage of our analysis compared the achievement between the students who have been at Washington for the duration of the partnership project vs. those who may have entered the school later. Our theory was that to better see the effects of our project, we ought to look at the students who have been most highly impacted by our initiatives, simply because they have remained at the school for the duration of the grant. **These data indicate that Latinx students who had attended Washington since grade two scored significantly higher in math than those who entered the school later.**

Although we were not able to do the same detailed statistical analysis of the Washington 2016-2017 Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA) scores, we are able to show data on the percentage of students meeting standard in Table 3 below and indicate areas where the school exceeds state averages. These data continue to show notable successes among Latinx students in Math. The percentage of both males and females in grade 4 meeting standard exceeds the state average. In grade 3, the percentage of females meeting standard exceeds the state average in both English language arts (ELA) and math.

Table 3: Washington 2016-17 SBA Scores - % meeting standard in ELA & Math

ELA meeting standard	State: ALL	State: Latinx	District: ALL	District: Latinx	School: ALL	School: Latinx	School: Male	School: Female
3rd Grade	52.6	34.2	44.4	33.3	40.0	34.0*	23.2	58.5*
4th Grade	55.2	37.3	43.7	32.8	43.8*	34.0*	37.8	51.4*
5th Grade	55.5	40.9	40.2	29.4	29.0	16.6	25.9	32.1*
Math meeting standard								
3rd Grade	57.8	41.7	56.8	49.5	55.8	54.1*	44.1	69.0*
4th Grade	54.3	36.9	49.6	40.1	53.4*	44.0*	54.0*	54.2*
5th Grade	48.6	30.5	31.1	19.8	29.0	13.8	22.2	35.7*

*Note: shading indicates % above state average; * indicates % above district average*

Although we are disappointed that the 2016-2017, scores are not quite as high as the previous year, we recognize that variation in scores can be expected, given that a somewhat different population of students is being tested each year. As noted previously, we have not done in-depth statistical analysis, but it appears that the gender gap between males and females that had disappeared in the 2015-2016 data, has reappeared in these latest scores.

Behavior Intervention

Attendance and discipline referral data were also being used to help assess the effectiveness of the school's efforts to implement positive behavior strategies as well as initiatives designed to offer engaging curriculum and instruction and to provide scaffolding for English language learners in the classroom (i.e. Project GLAD, educational technology). Figure 1 below shows that there has been a general decline in behavior referrals since the initiation of the partnership though it is impossible to determine which initiatives had the greatest impact.
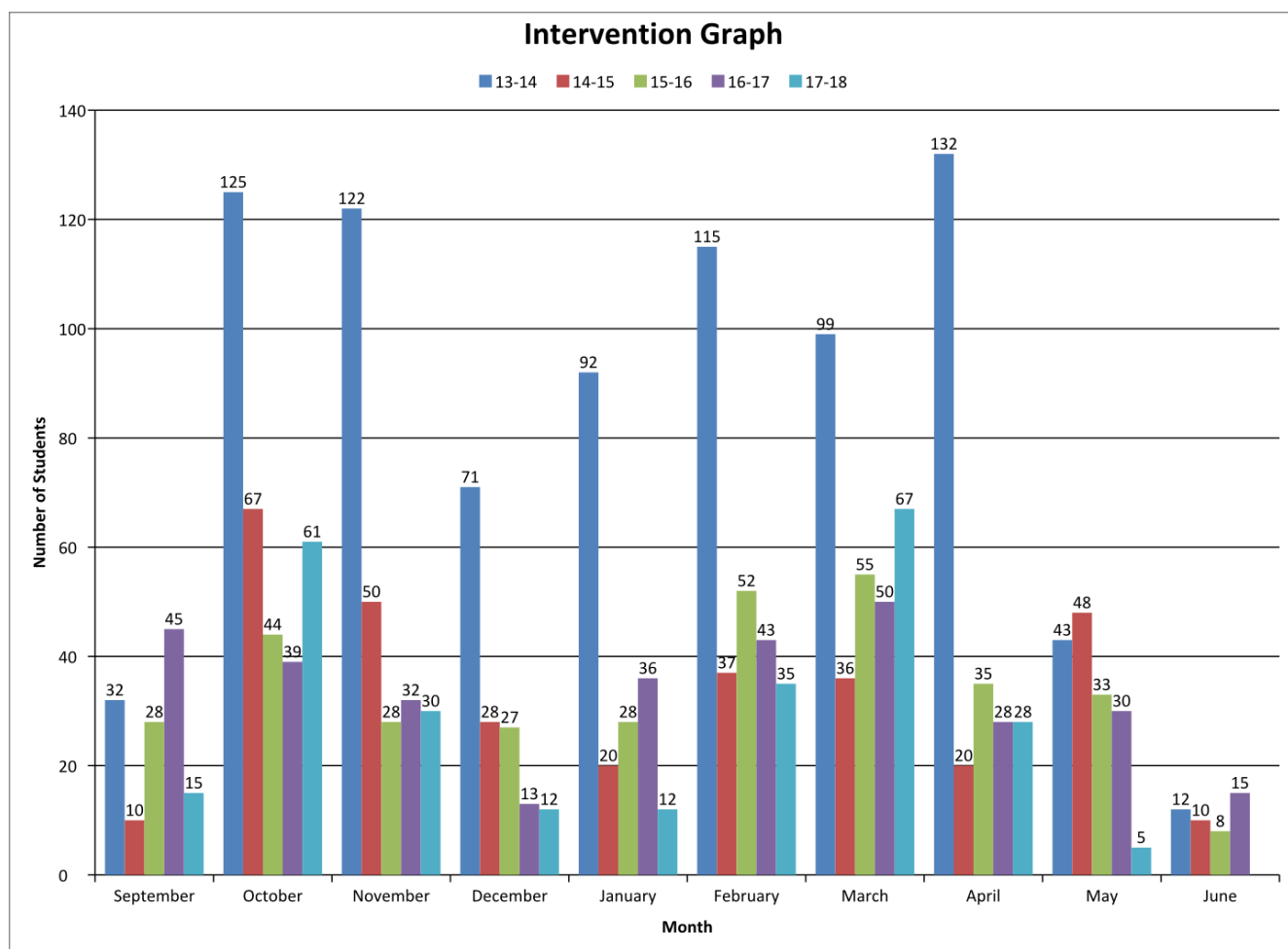
Figure 1 Behavior Office Referrals September 2013 – May 2017

Place-Based Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

Figure 2 below shows the rapid expansion of the teacher education presence in the Mount Vernon School District and the evolution of the partnership between Western Washington University and not just Washington School, but with the entire district, in preparing new teachers who are capable of working in schools with large English language learner and low

income populations. As described above, each year since the inception of the partnership project, we have placed a cohort of interns, in increasingly larger numbers, in Mount Vernon elementary schools. This has enabled us to offer coursework that occurs during Quarters 1 & 2 in Mount Vernon, to integrate the courses more closely with each other and with their school placements, and to use a place-based approach in the social studies methods class, which has deepened the interns' learning about the local contexts of their students' lives.

Having a high concentration of interns in one district has also made it possible to focus professional development opportunities for interns and their collaborating teachers on local and relevant needs such as support for English learners by means of Project GLAD strategies implemented widely in classrooms, mentoring, and adoption of new curriculum. In turn, these opportunities support collaboration and mutual learning between the intern and their mentor and amplifies the impacts on student learning in the classrooms.

In Spring 2016, the Mount Vernon School District initiated a program to hire 5 of the graduating interns on conditional contracts, providing them with immediate employment and professional induction opportunities. This conditional hiring process was very beneficial to the district as well as to the graduates. The district is able to reap the rewards of their substantial investment in preparing new teachers because they have advance knowledge of the candidates' skills and abilities and they are able to recruit very capable beginning teachers early in the hiring season during a time of teacher shortages. The induction opportunities afforded the five early hires were very rich and are now viewed as part of the district's beginning teacher support system. The district expects to continue and expand on this initiative in the coming years. Five additional graduates were hired by the district for the 2017-18 school year.

In looking ahead to sustaining the partnership between Western Washington University and Mount Vernon beyond state funding, we piloted a new Intern Mentoring Model during 2017-18 that will involve a new Faculty Liaison position and expanded roles for Collaborating Teachers in the mentoring and evaluation of interns. The university elementary education faculty is looking to this pilot to inform them about future permanent changes to the mentoring and evaluation system for all interns.

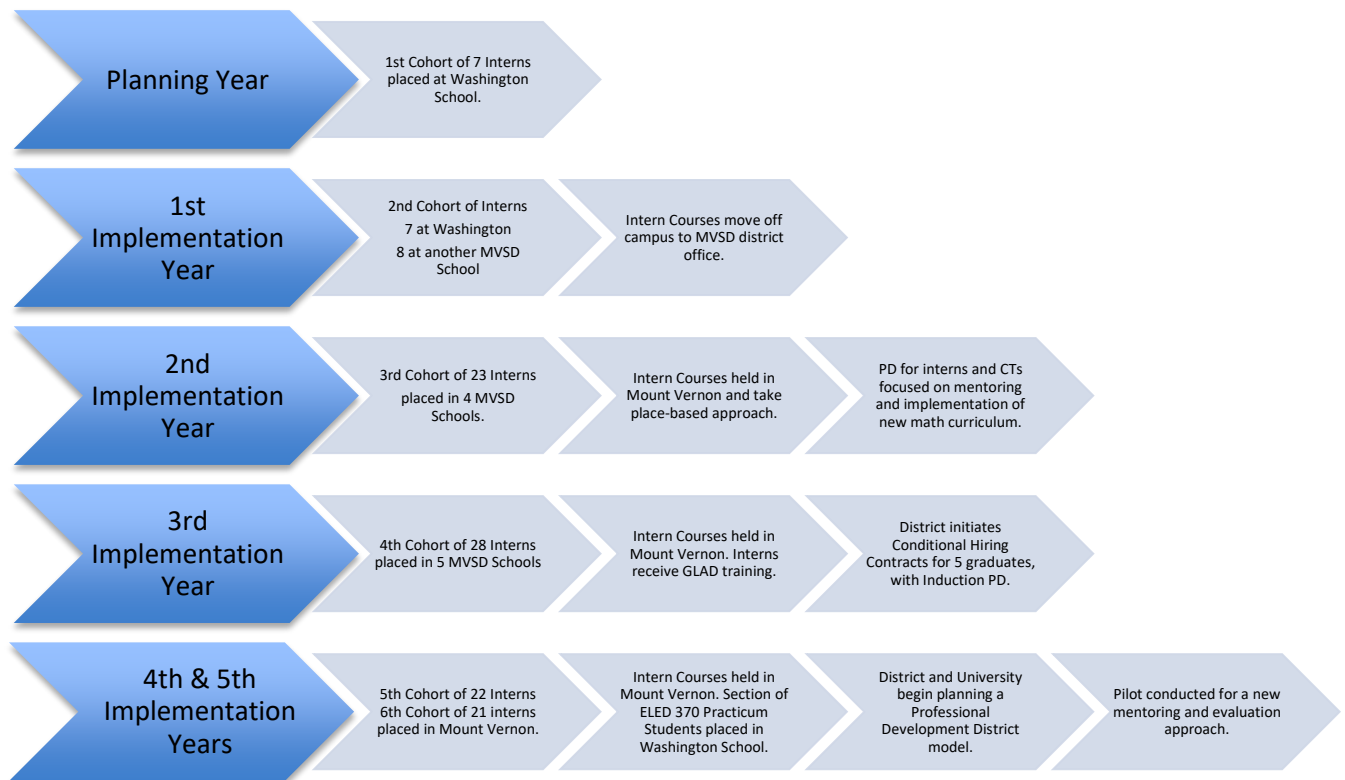| Planning Year | 1st Cohort of 7 Interns placed at Washington School. | | | |
1st Implementation Year	2nd Cohort of Interns 7 at Washington 8 at another MVSD School	Intern Courses move off campus to MVSD district office.		
2nd Implementation Year	3rd Cohort of 23 Interns placed in 4 MVSD Schools.	Intern Courses held in Mount Vernon and take place-based approach.	PD for interns and CTs focused on mentoring and implementation of new math curriculum.	
3rd Implementation Year	4th Cohort of 28 Interns placed in 5 MVSD Schools	Intern Courses held in Mount Vernon. Interns receive GLAD training.	District initiates Conditional Hiring Contracts for 5 graduates, with Induction PD.	
4th & 5th Implementation Years	5th Cohort of 22 Interns 6th Cohort of 21 interns placed in Mount Vernon.	Intern Courses held in Mount Vernon. Section of ELED 370 Practicum Students placed in Washington School.	District and University begin planning a Professional Development District model.	Pilot conducted for a new mentoring and evaluation approach.

Figure 2: Expansion of Teacher Education presence in Mount Vernon School District

Several factors contributed to achieving significant impact during the grant period.

- Expansive funding –
  The length and generosity of the funding made it possible for us to tackle complex and seemingly intractable problems in a holistic and organic way that was uniquely suited to the particular school and community context.

- Continuity of personnel over the course of the project -
  We benefited from extremely low turnover of teachers, administrative personnel, and university faculty. Consequently, the investments we made in teacher professional development have had lasting impact and implementation will be ongoing. In addition, empty or new positions were usually filled by someone within the network who already had some familiarity with the project so we did not lose momentum when changes were made.

- Cross-cultural openness of key personnel -
  K-12 schools and universities have their own cultures, hierarchies, and pressures. The university faculty involved in this project had all had extensive prior experience in schools and were thus able to enter into classrooms and professional conversations with a supportive stance. On the other hand, the teachers in the school gradually became

more aware of their impact as teacher educators in the mentoring and preparation of new teachers and became more and more involved in mutual planning of the interns' experiences.

- The size and nature of the school district -
  In this small, rural district, it was possible for the superintendent and school board to be informed and interested throughout the project. We kept our work in line with district goals and initiatives in order to have an impact on all the schools and on district planning. All schools in the district have similar diverse demographics, which makes it an ideal site for the cohort approach to the preparation of new community teachers. There are strong shared commitments at the district level and at the college of education to equity, social justice, and educational excellence.

Because of these factors, we achieved several notable successes and the lessons learned through the project are informing planning for ongoing work at both the School District and at the University:

- We began to see a reversal of the negative achievement trends for students that were apparent in the initial needs assessment.
- We were able to pilot and test out several professional development and intervention initiatives, which has informed the priorities and decision-making at the district level.
- We developed a place-based approach to the placement and preparation of new teachers that is informing the future planning of the program for all elementary education interns.
- We prepared over 100 new teachers in this community, many of whom will go on to work successfully in high need schools in the state.
- We developed a strong university/district partnership for teacher preparation that will continue beyond the end of the grant funding.

In the following interview with Dr. Carl Bruner, Mount Vernon Schools Superintendent, he describes the ways in which the partnership with Western Washington University has had several significant impacts on the entire school district including family engagement efforts, professional development priorities, and the preparation of new teachers.

Conclusion

As we stated in the controversy leading into this issue, partnerships between university schools of education and public schools "are considered to be central to effective teacher preparation and to positive P-12 student learning. Yet, such collaborations are complex to enact." We hope that readers will glean from the articles in this issue some insights into what makes for successful collaborations. Factors such as mutual respect and open communication are, of course, necessary. However, the personal stories of engagement told by these authors highlight the importance of relationships, which require time spent "hanging out and joining in," time to build trust, time to maintain connections. In our team reflections and evaluations, TIME was repeatedly cited as the resource that was in the shortest supply. I will add, from my own observations, that HUMOR and small acts of CARING are often overlooked requirements. The school already had a strongly established culture of sharing food, sympathy and laughter and the university team was able to join in in a way that, over time, made us part of the community.