# The Impact of School District-University Collaborative Research on a Full-Inclusion Preschool Program

**Susan R. Warren, Ph.D.**
Azusa Pacific University
701 East Foothill Blvd., Azusa, CA  91702
United States of America

**Richard S. Martinez, Ed.D.**
Azusa Pacific University
701 East Foothill Blvd., Azusa, CA  91702
United States of America

**Lori A. Sortino, Ph.D.**
Upland Unified School District
390 N. Euclid Ave., Upland, CA  91786
United States of America

**Abstract**

*This investigation explored the impact of collaborative research, between a school district and university, on a full-inclusion preschool program. In particular, the study documented the planning, processes, and outcomes resulting from the partnership over a two year period. The results of (a) a yearlong research study on the program conducted by four preschool staff and three university faculty members and (b) collaborative capacity building of staff the following year were documented using case study methodology. Results reveal the importance of relationships, communication, and commitment in the success of school-university partnerships. Additionally the study outcomes acknowledge the benefits for both institutions. This research will inform any educational organizations interested in collaborating to enhance student learning and contribute to school improvement.*

**Key Words:**  School district, university, collaboration, partnerships, research, full-inclusion, preschool

## Introduction

Collaboration among educational agencies such as school districts and universities has been documented in the educational reforms since the 1980s (Clifford & Millar, 2007; Sandlin & Feigen, 1995). When institutions of higher education and school districts collaborate and share their ideas, efforts, and resources, it can result in processes and end products that are richer and benefit both groups (Oja, 1990/1991; Verbeke & Richards, 2001). Also abundant in the literature are examples of failure in such collaborations due to a lack of initial communication and planning or misunderstandings by one of the parties. According to Sandlin and Feigen, a successful, "joint intellectual effort" can result in the school district-university collaboration when "care is given to the initial planning stage of the collaboration as well as establishing clear guiding principles and choosing a cohesive group of members" (1995, p. 76).

Examples of school/district and university partnerships, successful and not, are throughout the literature, however, there are few examples of partnerships formed around a collaborative research study (Clifford & Millar, 2007). The purpose of this study is to document a two-year research collaboration between a school district full-inclusion preschool program and a university. The study documented the design, process, and outcomes as a result of the partnership. The following research questions guided the investigation:

1. What are effective ways of approaching school district-university partnerships?
2. What is the impact of a collaborative research model between a school district and university on a full-inclusion preschool program?

### *Review of the Literature*

The theoretical framework for the methodology of the study is grounded in case study theory (Creswell, 2003). The review of the literature focuses on P-12 school/district and university partnerships (Verbeke & Richard, 2001). The underlying assumption is that these types of collaborations are beneficial to both the P-12 program and the university and that the outcome is to enhance student learning and increase school improvement (Wasonga, Rari, & Wanzare, 2011).

A review of the literature on collaboration between P-12 schools and universities reveals a lack of an adequate definition for such partnerships (Clifford & Millar, 2007). School-university partnerships range from cooperative agreements to true collaborations. They often transform from what was originally intended due to lack of structure and sound practices (Marlow, 2000). Marshall (1999) emphasizes the importance of both partners engaging in a shared teaching and learning experience. Not only should the school/district program be viewed as the recipient of expertise knowledge, but the university partners should value the benefit of engaging in authentic P-12 schooling experiences outside of the usual observations (Walkington, 2006). Stephens and Boldt (2004) propose that the main goal of school/university partnerships should be the concurrent revitalization of schools of education and of P-12 schools.

Effective collaboration between a district and university requires attention be given to the collaboration as well as to the program. Hasslen, Bacharach, Rotto, and Fribley, (2001) highlight the importance of communication among partners and with the community, the relationship, and the commitment of all of the individuals involved in creating and maintaining an effective partnership. Roles must be defined including equity in the workload, amount of responsibility, and any recognition potentially gained from successes in the partnership (Horrowitz, 2005). Additionally, Glickman (2002) asserts that the partnership must also be supported by the highest level administrator in each organization to optimize success.

Acknowledging the contributions of each partner group and working together to build the capacity of all members involved is key to the collaboration (Wasonga, Rari, & Wanzare, 2011). School/districts and universities each bring unique contributions to the collaborative partnership (Garmston & Bartell, 1991): School-based educators bring:

1. familiarity with the challenges in the classroom;
2. an understanding of the environment where students and teachers interact;
3. knowledge about the culture of the school;
4. familiarity with the curriculum of the teacher; and
5. information about institutional responsibilities and expectations about instruction and student achievement.

University-based educators bring:

1. professional knowledge about academic pedagogy;
2. expertise in the dynamics of instruction and assessment strategies;
3. an understanding of the challenges of environmental and structural elements that impact the learning process;
4. degrees of flexibility in use of time; and
5. expertise in research and evaluation.

Furthermore, as educational professionals become more confident in the collaborative process, they are more willing to take risks and involve others in the process of enhancing student achievement "Leadership is not about making clever decisions…It is about energizing other people to make good decision and do better things" (Fullan, 2006, p. 10).

### *Methodology and Data Collection*

A case study approach was utilized to explore the process in depth and results of the school district-university collaborative research and two-year partnership. Multiple sources of data were collected over a constant period of time (Creswell, 2003). The methodology was chiefly qualitative, but included some quantitative methods.

### Participants

The primary participants in the collaboration included the school district preschool program partners (3 teachers; 6 paraprofessionals; 1 language, speech and hearing specialist; 1 school psychologist/program director; 1 occupational therapist; and a director of special services) and three university faculty from the School of Education who had all been public school teachers and administrators.  The initial purpose of the collaboration was to conduct a research study on the effectiveness of the relatively new full-inclusion program for preschool children. For this part of the collaboration, 46 children in the program were assessed for development over a one year period using quantitative measures and 30 of their parents (and the12 abovementioned program employees) participated in focus group interviews about their perceptions of the program benefits.

### Quantitaive Methods

Quantitative methodology was used in the research to evaluate the growth of the three and four year old preschool children in the program. The children were assessed on two valid and reliable (nationally utilized) measures at the beginning of the year and again at the end of eight months of participation in the full-inclusion program. The scores for the children with disabilities were grouped and analyzed for growth as well as the scores for children without disabilities.

Additionally other pertinent information about the collaboration was collected and analyzed. This included records of school member and university faculty participation at meetings, trainings, and presentations of the collaborative research. These data were descriptively analyzed for frequency (Trochim, 2000).

### Qualitative Methods

Qualitative methodologies included analysis of (a) focus group interviews conducted with the parents and staff of the preschoolers about their perceptions of the program benefits and (b) researchers' (both school district and university) logs of activities throughout the two years including meetings, trainings, and presentations of the collaborative research. Analysis of each source of qualitative data employed a constant-comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).  A team of seven researchers collaborated in identifying the initial coded categories. Then through a process of consensus the team re-confirmed, re-named, or re-grouped the categories as needed to identify the planning, processes, and outcomes resulting from the partnership.

*Results and Discussion*

**Effective Ways of Approaching School District-University Partnerships**

A dynamic school-university collaborative process was central to the success of the full-inclusion preschool program research. This collaborative model was strengthened by the knowledge base and dispositions of the school leadership team and the university partners. The contributions of each partner were reflected in the planning, conversations, and observations of directors, paraprofessionals, and university researchers.

The collaborative model emphasized participation at all levels of the school system. As Collins noted, successful leaders first get "the right people on the bus" in order to transform organizations (2001, p. 41). Initially, the director of the full-inclusion program sought out the expertise of a university director who also embraced student-centered approaches and was committed to issues of equity and diversity. Secondly, both directors met and discussed the vision for the project including the involvement of like-minded teachers, paraprofessionals, district-level administrators, and parents. Sharing a common vision or mission, having a commitment to the partnership with mutual respect, and shared decision-making are key conditions for successful school-university collaboration (Marlow, 2000; Wasonga, Rari, & Wanzare, 2011). All staff members of the preschool program, throughout the process, were encouraged to become active researchers in the collaborative study.

The preschool program director continually communicated about the research with the district superintendent and the director of special services to maintain their support. The university faculty members, likewise, gained the support of their department chair who provided funding for transcribing and other related research expenses. Gaining administrative support and committing resources such as time and monetary funding are also key factors identified for successful collaboration in the literature (Clifford & Millar, 2007; Walkington, 2006; Wasonga, Rari, & Wanzare, 2011). As the collaborative study evolved, the team decided that after the initial program evaluation, the two partner groups should work together for another year to build the capacity of the preschool program staff in the areas of leadership, vision, and planning. Additional preschool staff were encouraged to join the collaboration efforts and added to the study.

**The Impact of a Collaborative Research Model Between a School District and University on a Full-Inclusion Preschool Program**

The collaborative research model was more than a program evaluation. District administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents were actively involved in the research process along with the university faculty. This lead to professional learning for each partner group. The school district partners reported a sense of ownership as they learned through participation in the research process (Walkington, 2006). The university faculty acknowledged the importance of having the opportunity to engage in true education reform by making systematic change and development via this collaboration (Verbeke & Richards, 2001). The research model resulted in program improvement and expansion; capacity building of the instructional staff; leadership development in the areas of family involvement, marketing, and public relations; visioning/mission statements; and district fiscal support.

1. **Program improvement and expansion**. As a result of the research study the director, teachers, and district level administration reviewed the data and concluded that the full-inclusion model was a success in the areas of student achievement (both groups of children made significant gains and the adults interviewed perceived many benefits for all children as a result of the program), fiscal responsibility (adding to district revenue), and parent satisfaction. The study data also informed program development leading to several actions for improvement. Additionally, based upon the success of the program, the school district board approved the expansion of the full-inclusion program from one site and four classrooms to two sites and nine classrooms.

4

2. **Capacity building of the instructional staff**.  The joint partnership effort was the basis for the year two collaboration of instructional staff capacity building. The leadership team was comprised of the director, each full inclusion teacher, and two paraprofessionals – all volunteers. The topics for capacity building were: leadership development, analysis of program data, and leadership team planning skills.  Leadership team meetings were initially facilitated by the university research team. The concluding meetings of the school year were planned and facilitated by the school leadership team. The efficacy of the team leaders was enhanced to the degree that two teacher-leaders and the program director presented the research findings of the full-inclusion preschool program at three national conferences alongside the university faculty partners.

3. **Leadership development in the areas of family involvement and marketing**.  The university research team conducted parent focus groups which revealed parental support for the program was overwhelmingly positive. Program success resulted in the publication of supportive newspaper articles and a California Golden Bell Award presented the year after the two-year partnership. The state award representative commended the collaborative effort between the school district and the university research team.

4. **Visioning/mission statements**.  Prior to the collaborative research, the full-inclusion program did not have a well-defined vision/mission statement. The university partners led the school leadership team through workshops that refined the program vision. This process influenced the design of new promotional materials and created a sense of team empowerment.

5. **District fiscal support**.  Before the full inclusion program, pre-school students with disabilities were served by the local county office of education, often at sites several miles from their neighborhoods. Offering the full-inclusion program afforded parents the choice to enroll their pre-school children in a local school. Initially the district was reluctant to introduce a new program with potential fiscal liabilities. However, after recognizing the success of the program for students, the district soon realized it was one of the few programs generating revenue for the district. As a result of the success, the program expanded into other schools and grade levels in the district.

   Student-centered professional learning communities integrate an ongoing reflective process for continuous improvement (Walkington, 2006).  This collaborative research model emphasized reflective capacity building within the school for student achievement.

   Everyone in the school participates in an ongoing cycle of systematic gathering and analysis of data to identify discrepancies between actual and desired results, goal setting to reduce the discrepancies, developing strategies to achieve the goals, and tracking improvement indicators. (Du Four, 2004, p. 253).

Throughout the collaborative, informed decision-making, communication was ongoing and the research fueled a climate of cooperation and trust.

*Implications and Conclusion*

Now is the time for educational organizations to join collaboratively for program improvement as resources become increasingly limited. Educators at all levels are capable of being involved in research studies that inform school communities and lead to school improvement, particularly increased student achievement. School district-university collaborative research is an effective means to build the capacity of educators at all levels. University faculty have the expertise to guide evaluation studies.  Schools and districts have educators who are also capable and interested in moving their schools forward through evaluation and research. This study provides data indicating that working together in an educational partnership can result in a learning community in which all parties benefit (Walkington, 2006).

Careful consideration, however, should be taken in the creation and sustaining of the collaboration. Relationships, communication, and commitment are critical components in the success of school-university partnerships and must be nurtured throughout. Furthermore, partnerships that can be sustained over a longer period of time are particularly beneficial as much time is invested in the initial establishment of the relationship. Ultimately, the goal of the collaboration should be the satisfaction of both parties as they work toward increased student learning and school improvement (Clifford & Millar, 2007).

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