

University-District Partnership—COBRE School District
A Shared Vision between a University and District Partnership—Building Leadership Capacity
to Facilitate School Improvement
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The changing landscape of education has prompted the evolving role of the principal. The idea that principals should serve as instructional leaders—not just as generic managers—in their schools is widely subscribed to among educators (Fink, 2007). In practice, (Fink, 2007) though, few principals act as genuine instructional leaders. This changing paradigm shift for the principal role has potentially significant implications for university-district partnerships. Although university-district partnerships are not new, the changing landscape is requiring universities to provide new interventions and levels of support necessary for assisting districts to build leadership capacity; essential for increasing student achievement.

A growing body of research posits the need for continued professional development for principals, spanning the scope of the training received at educational institutions. Continuous coaching and mentoring is grounded in adult learning theory and research-based practices on the elements of effective professional development. Principals receive problem-based learning opportunities which are embedded into their job, enabling them to foster collegial school cultures and provide professional development to their teachers, as they more effectively meet the demands of an increasingly complex and non-linear educational system (Walker, Michel, and Turner, 1999).

In adherence to the mission and guiding principles of the Alliance, an outreach center at New Mexico State University, a partnership between the COBRE School District and the Alliance was established. This ongoing collaborative effort between the district and university, strived to foster a shared vision that centered on implementing research based practices intended

to facilitate increased student achievement in the district. This unwavering focus shared by the stakeholders, was fundamental for implementing research-based practices and structures instrumental to creating a collegial culture, and to advancing system-wide change. A collegial school culture as defined by Glickman and Gordon, is one that demonstrates evidence of adult practices, behaviors and conversations centered on student needs, for the goal of raising achievement for all students in that community.

Initially, the services provided by the district were in the form of technical support intended to build capacity of teachers and principals in using data to inform instructional practice. As the partnership evolved and the vision to change the existing culture to a collegial culture by changing system-wide practices solidified, the need to build principal leadership capacity became the immediate priority. It was agreed upon that the structures and interventions that were put into place would have limited efficacy and hold little promise for sustainability; if the principals did not buy-in to the change, have the instructional skills and capacity to guide teachers' development, or were able to maximize the use of interventions and structures that the district provided.

After two years of continuous and aligned work grounded in research based practices system-wide, the efforts of the partnership resulted in significant gains on AYP designations district-wide. Most of the schools made AYP in both math and reading on the additional indicators in the AYP report. The transformational process of this district reinforces the existing body of research suggesting that student achievement will increase when a focus on effective practices that support student-centered learning permeates the school culture, and an emphasis is placed on continuous improvement. While the partnership realizes that the efforts are not

complete, the partnership has been successful in embedding into the district culture, values that foster continuous improvement and capacity building for all stakeholders.