

Come and take it: An unprecedented university – school partnership

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ABSTRACT

This study shares the results of a five-year effort to implement a school turnaround model facilitated through an unprecedented university – public school partnership. The high needs Hispanic majority demographic makeup of the public-school district amplifies the importance of this work.

Keywords: school improvement, Hispanic student success, university partnerships

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INTRODUCTION

The Texas Commissioner of Education announced in the summer of 2011 that a small rural district in deep South Texas, the Premont Independent School District (PISD), would be closing. Historically poor academic scores, poor attendance, and aging facilities left the state of Texas no other choice until Texas A&M University System John Chancellor Sharp announced that Texas A&M University – Kingsville (TAMUK) would partner with the school district in an historic effort to collaborate to address concerns from the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Ultimately, out of this unprecedented five-year university – P-12 partnership, a model for school turnaround emerged. The success of this alliance further resulted in these sorts of partnerships becoming an allowable school improvement model in Texas in August 2015 as provided for in Texas House Bill 1842.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For more than a decade, the federal government has been allocating funding to support successful school turnaround efforts. In 2009, the federal government overhauled the Title I School Improvement Grant Program, increased its value to \$3.5 billion with money from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), and spelled out four turnaround options from which perennially failing schools would have to choose, if they wanted to receive funding (Education Week, 2018). These four models included: 1) the *turnaround* model where among other stipulations, the principal must be removed; 2) the *transformation* model where among other stipulations, the principal must be removed and 50% of the teaching staff must be replaced; 3) the *restart* model whereby the school is to be closed and restarted under a charter model; and, 4) the *closure* model whereby the school is closed and students enroll in nearby districts.

Although schools began to meet No Child Left Behind mandates, some in part due to access to this additional Title I funding, school turnaround rates were less than impressive; although some turnaround schools were starting to show gains as time went on (Education Week, 2018). Additionally, during the Obama administration, initiatives such as Race To the Top, were implemented including some of these Title I school turnaround projects that have nationally shown promise. While school closure was one of these several options for Title I school improvement initiatives, Barley & Beesley (2007) have cautioned that “school consolidation, school closures, and a declining economic base for some rural communities create hardships for rural families and schools” (p. 1). Moreover, Tiekens (2014) notes that the state has labeled rural community problems as local problems. The schools have become ‘contested institutions so necessary to the community and so subject to the state’ (p. 167). Tiekens (2014) explains further, the school indeed IS the community.

Rural school districts have fewer financial resources and lower property tax bases (Diaz, 2008). Thus, they often seek opportunities such as external grant funding to support school improvement but they are often at a disadvantage lacking the capacity to develop these proposals.

Race To the Top, as well as Title I initiatives, have included specific components that focused on the particular needs of rural schools. Additionally, rural schools and rural community needs have increasingly become even more visible in light of the recent U.S. election. While much of the press has been negative, the benefit of all of this attention is that rural education issues have been highlighted particularly in the academic community. This increased awareness

of rural issues is important particularly since over ten and half million children were educated in rural schools in America during the 2008 - 2009 school year and 660,000 of these students were in Texas (Johnson & Strange, 2009). Moreover, according to the recent Texas Rural Schools Task Force Report (2017):

Texas has more schools in rural areas than any other state in the United States. In the 2015-2016 school year, rural schools, as classified by the TEA, accounted for 459 of the 1247 school districts in Texas, including charters, juvenile justice, and state schools for the deaf and blind or visually impaired. If independent towns and nonmetropolitan areas are added to this number, a total of 730 of the 1247 districts would be included. (p.7)

Rural issues and successful models for school turnaround are of critical interest particularly during this time when rural education is in the spotlight.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Not only are the large number of rural school districts a concern in Texas, but in South Texas, with the demographics of the region primarily Hispanic rural students, the challenges of educating these populations of students are of increased concern. The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, (2010) claimed that low college graduation rates among Hispanics could affect national education goals. Moreover, demographers claim that it is critical that Hispanic students graduate at similar rates to other student groups such as Anglos in order to satisfy the diverse needs of the modern educated workforce in the next two decades (Heinrich, 2012).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

TAMUK as a regional higher education Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) agreed to partner with PISD. This partnership met not only the mission of TAMUK as an HSI and a regional institution (Gunasekara, 2004), but this partnership also represented and met the sort of praxis Furman (2012) beckons in the social justice literature with that call being for examples of leadership in K-12 schools and by extension in higher education (Maxwell, 2018). This study updates a previous research report on the progress of this partnership (McNair, Maxwell, Mosqueda, Gutierrez, & Ruiz, 2016). The purpose of this study is to share the P-12/university partnership model that ultimately resulted in the turnaround of PISD.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, we employed a positioned subject approach (Conrad, Haworth, & Millar, 2001). The lead researcher is a former public school administrator who worked in and with several rural districts on various university externally funded projects. She was afforded many “insider” opportunities to not only observe but also interact closely and frequently with the leadership within the district (see Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, on the value of insider research). In addition to the lead researcher, other researchers were afforded similar insider opportunities. As such, we acknowledge that the insider observations of researchers within the district informed this study.

As insiders, the researchers often navigated and often mitigated their fluidity of “participatness” (Patton, 2002, p. 145). That is that while researchers were interested in the

success of the district, they also were committed to providing professional development as well as technical support, thus their level of engagement aligned with what Patton (2002) suggests that being, “direct and immediate participation in the research environment is important to building and sustaining relationships” (p.119). Two of the researchers consistently were in the district several times a month throughout the five-year period. It was the goal of all researchers to be immersed in the setting and experience reality as participants in the school district do.

This level of “participantness” similarly to the notion of prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) afforded trustworthiness in the research. The “investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes” while also “learning the culture” of the district informed trustworthiness of the study (p. 301).

Researchers also relied on artifacts that were part of the day-to-day work of the partnership. These artifacts ranged from reflections of teachers on professional development to ongoing shared reflections among the researchers. Additionally, district documents that the researchers supported preparation of during their active roles as participants as well as other artifacts such as various media releases through the course of the partnership, contributed to the data collection. Most of this was more along the line of “doing the work” and unobtrusive and informal data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

RESULTS

The Model

At the onset of the TAMUK-Premont Alliance, the team of administrators and the Dean and faculty from the College of Education and Human Performance (CEHP) worked to set forth a vision for the partnership with PISD. Faculty serving on the Alliance board included experts in leadership and school administration, one of whom had experience in turning around several high needs low socioeconomic school districts previously. Another faculty member was a former South Texas superintendent. Yet another was a former highly effective K-12 literacy faculty member. These faculty as well as the university president, Dr. Steven Tallant, and the CEHP Dean Alberto Ruiz, worked to develop a model based on their expertise as well grounding the model in the extant best practices research literature. The primary components of the model as well as the implementation of the subcomponents of the model were complimented by the expertise of several consultants who facilitated the work in PISD. While efforts were made to proceed with a plan in mind, clearly the TAMUK administration and faculty were open “figuring it out” as was noted by President Tallant early on in the process. This openness to ambiguity aligned well with the expertise of the lead qualitative researcher who also understood that improving struggling turnaround schools required flexibility.

TAMUK based its work on leadership theory for effecting change (Fullan, 2007).

Guiding principles for change included the following components

- Tap into people’s dignity and sense of respect
- Ensure that the best people are working on the problem
- Recognize successful strategies are socially based and action oriented – change by doing rather than change by elaborate planning
- Assume lack of capacity is the initial problem and work on it continuously
- Stay the course
- Build internal accountability

- Establish conditions for evolution of positive pressure
- Use strategies above to build public confidence. (p. 44)

Additionally, the TAMUK team of higher education administrators and the CEHP Dean and faculty utilized the critical success factors for school improvement which are “foundational elements within the framework of the Texas Accountability Intervention system or TAIS.” These critical success factors were developed by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Texas Center for District and School Support (TCDSS) and include

- CSF1 -Improve academic performance
- CSF2 -Increase the use of quality data to drive instruction
- CSF3 -Increase leadership effectiveness
- CSF4 -Increase learning time
- CSF5 -Increase family and community engagement
- CSF6 -Improve school climate
- CSF7 -Increase teacher quality. (TCDSS, 2018)

Thus, using the Fullan (2007) change elements and the critical success factors as guiding best practices, the TAMUK Alliance developed a model which infused these components. Each of these components was correlated to a critical success factor although support of some of these components were not immediate and emerged as the project moved forward.

- Governance oversight including school board training – CSF 3
- Establish alliance structure and communication flow – CSF 3
- Increase teacher capacity and self-efficacy – CSF 7
- Increase leadership capacity – CSF 3
- Assess needs comprehensively and act on that data – CSF 2
- Secure grants to support instructional initiatives –CSF 1-7
- Ensure student success and access-CSF 1; CSF 6

Governance efforts included initial and monthly school board training especially in the first year of the Alliance effort. The primary focus of this professional development provided by a former South Texas superintendent, who also serves as a TAMUK faculty member, was effective and efficient governance and a clear understanding by the school board of trustees with regard to their role was in this process. Simultaneously, while working to clarify governance in the school district, the Alliance also worked to establish an organizational structure and communication flow. Quarterly meetings of the Alliance were proposed and held throughout the first three and half years of the Alliance until the superintendent whom had just been named in that role upgraded from interim, was asked to step down due to a legal personal matter. At this point in the partnership, communication struggled somewhat with a new interim stepping in for six weeks, and the naming of a new superintendent in January 2017. Nonetheless, several other sub-components of the initiative were underway and continue to support the work of turning around the district.

Additionally, at approximately this same point in time, in summer 2016, with potential closure of the district imminent, student achievement on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) afforded the district a designation of Met Standard and based on those scores (which were in the top 1% of improvement in the state), the district could remain open renewed for another five years before any further closure action could be imposed by the Texas Education Agency.

In addition to quarterly meetings of the Alliance, the initial curriculum work for the district was supported by an annual contract with an external consultant group through the Dean of the CEHP. This initial curriculum consultant group worked to increase teacher capacity and self-efficacy of the instructional staff. The tri-part effort included a laser focus on curriculum, alignment of assessment to curriculum and use of the data from that assessment to inform instruction, and instructional delivery of the curriculum. The goal was to reconcile alignment between curriculum and instruction and data to inform effective instruction (see Figure 1).

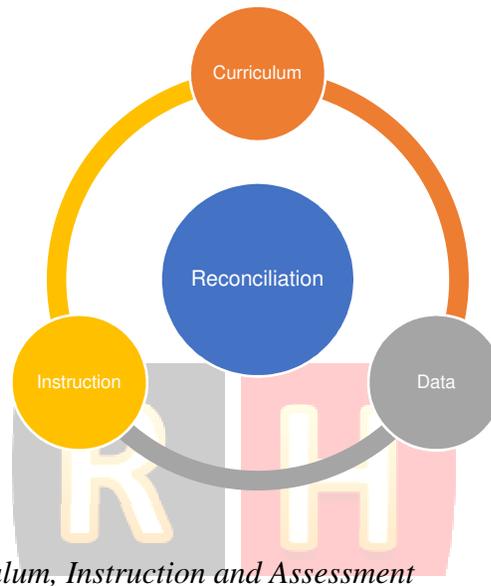


Figure 1. *Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment*

In an effort to build leadership capacity, the Alliance hosted an annual three-day leadership institute attended by leadership from both TAMUK and PISD. With on-going turnover in leadership at the district level as well as at the campus level, these leadership institutes held in early August each year of the Alliance, served an increasingly significant purpose in bringing the partnership together at the start of each school year.

Another component of the Alliance model included conduct of an annual needs assessment (CNA) of PISD. The external consultant hired by the CEHP conducted a comprehensive needs assessment gleaned both qualitative data and quantitative across the spectrum of stakeholders in the district. The comprehensive needs assessment data was reviewed at the annual leadership institute to inform the work of the district and campuses for the upcoming year. Use of the CAN was significant in the application for the TTIPS funding according to the lead researcher who authored that funding.

While it may seem unusual that one of the components of the Alliance model was to seek grant funding to support the district, the very specific goal of this component being expressly grant funding was critical. Decreasing enrollment, dilapidated buildings, lower than average teacher salaries, and a declining tax base contributed to the need for infusion of external funding, especially to support critical success components including building teacher and leadership capacity, enhancing teacher salaries through opportunities for performance pay as well as funding to support improved curriculum and technology needs.

Efforts to secure external competitive grant funding from the Texas Education Agency as supported by CEHP faculty included securing an initial \$1.9 million in funding over two years

for the Educator Excellence Innovation Program grant which was then renewed for two additional years at \$1.9 million resulting in \$3.8 million in funding overall extending from April 2015 through October 2018. The approved grant proposal worked to support the Teacher Advancement Program or TAP Model. This model included focus on four areas: induction and mentoring, professional development and collaboration, evaluation, and, strategic compensation and retention (NIET, 2018). A second grant project funded by the TEA, for the grant period January 2016 through July 2020, the Texas Title 1 Priority Schools or TTIPS grant, was funded for \$5.6 million over five years to support various initiatives at the elementary campus in particular specifically an early start focus and supporting enhanced pre-kindergarten programming. The TTIPS grant also sought to sustain the initial two years of programming in the EEIP grant prior to funding of the third and fourth year which had been contingent upon legislative approval of that funding. The Alliance and the district were committed to the critical success factors originally as described in the Alliance model and specifically as were articulated and implemented in the TTIPS awarded proposal.

The final component of the Alliance model focused on career and college readiness as supported through the TAMUK Office of Student Success and Access. Activities supported in this component included career assessment for high school students, fall 2016 support for PISD graduates including housing waivers and work study employment. Community engagement activities such as tailgates, college signing day, and summer bridge programs were just a few of the offerings to PISD students to support career and college readiness.

The Legislation

Based on the success of the TAMUK-PISD Alliance efforts, HB 1842 was passed by the 84th Texas Legislature effective August 31st, 2015, formalizing university partnerships as a turnaround option for failing schools. HB 1842

- Amended several provisions pertaining to accreditation interventions and sanctions, including changes to the required information investigators must present and the inclusion of school board members in hearings before the commissioner to explain a campus's low performance, lack of improvement, and plans for improvement.
- Outlined sanctions so that after two years of unacceptable performance, a district would undergo a school turnaround plan that could include alternative management, a board of managers, a local charter or closure. After three more years of unacceptable performance, a school would be closed or placed under a board of managers.
- *Allows public school districts to partner with universities to implement a turnaround plan.* It also makes changes to monitor reviews and special accreditation investigations of school districts, including allowing TEA to interview district staff without district screening.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The Future

The future for PISD is bright. PISD received a Met Standard accountability rating according to the TEA in 2016 and 2017. The new superintendent who came on the job in January 2016 had a busy and productive eighteen months working to shift the focus of the district to a

college going culture. He did this in part by renaming both campuses in the district including the Premont Early College Academy (serving Headstart through grade 5) and Premont Collegiate High School (serving grades 6-12). A recent successful ten-million-dollar bond election will build a new elementary campus soon. While the TAMUK Alliance five-year effort has come to an end, Premont high school students will continue to attend TAMUK twice weekly to earn dual credit at the university campus. Other grant initiatives are still in place. The district has sought additional partnerships across a spectrum of interests to support the district and campuses.

The reach of the TAMUK-PISD Alliance extends beyond South Texas. In fall 2016 at the Texas A&M University System (TAMUS) Chancellor Conference, the CEHP Dean, faculty and PISD school partners presented this work. The TAMUS members were asked shortly thereafter to initiate their own high need public school partnerships. Dean Ruiz provided an invited presentation in January 2017 to the Texas Council of Public University Presidents and Chancellors regarding the work of the TAMUK/PISD Alliance. Just recently, the University of Texas (UT) system responded to the call. UT Austin, UT Dallas, UT Rio Grande Valley, UT San Antonio and UT Tyler have all committed to partner with improvement required (IR) public schools across the state (UT Press Release, 2018).

What began as a last resort option for PISD, a high needs public school in threat of closure by the state, bolstered by Dean Alberto Ruiz who said (five years ago now almost to the day), "If we are not doing these kinds of partnerships with public schools, why are we as Colleges of Education here?" This big idea, fostered by a willingness to struggle through the ambiguity of the work by the participant researchers in this study, has yielded a bright future not only for PISD but for high need public schools across the state. What these Colleges of Education learn from *having boots on the ground* in public schools will provide relevance and an opportunity to learn for both public schools as well as Colleges of Education.

Note:

This study does not use pseudonyms. This partnership has been a high-profile project in Texas highlighted in the state and occasional national media during the five years of the partnership. The title is a nod to one of the interim superintendents who coined this motto for the district during the period he served.

This study has as its focus, the model for school improvement developed in partnership by the TAMUK/PISD Alliance. This study does not address student achievement scores specifically in this publication except to note that PISD was not required to close its doors in the summer of 2016 because the accountability ratings based on student achievement scores earned the district a Met Standard designation three years into the Alliance partnership. A previous publication provided a mid-project update on the secondary campus (see McNair, Maxwell, Gutierrez, Mosqueda & Ruiz, 2016). A doctoral student's dissertation defended in Spring 2017 analyzed student achievement trends during the Alliance period (see Gutierrez, 2017).

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