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**Courageous, Collaborative Leadership
 Using Online Resources, Presentations, and Public School Partnerships to Structure
 a Preservice Internship Program**

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Abstract

The Field Experience Improvement Project (FEIP) began in October 2009. The FEIP focused on the development and implementation of a structured mentorship program that intended to strengthen the public school partnership between Appalachian State University (ASU) and two Caldwell County public schools. This mentorship program included an online resource and interactive blog webpage, workshops given by public school mentors to Block II teacher education majors in their second year, and ongoing collaboration between classroom teachers, university faculty, and university students taking courses in both on and off campus cohorts. This project aligns with both Standard 1 of the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards (NCPTS): Teachers Demonstrate Leadership and the constructivist philosophy for collaborative learning upon which the Reich College of Education conceptual framework is

based. The author-researcher is hopeful that this program may come to serve as a model to other teacher education programs in the university (e.g., middle grades) as well as other schools and districts that host ASU interns.

**The Challenge to Revise Teacher
 Education Programs**

In August 2006, The North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission (NCPTSC) published new Professional Teaching Standards (<http://www.ncptsc.org/Standards.htm>). In conjunction with these new standards, the Commission issued a mandate to all North Carolina teacher education programs. Programs were required to review the new NCPTS and re-vision their teacher education programs to align with them. Among other fundamentals, the NCPTS listed Public School partnerships and the development of 21st Century skill sets as critical components for all teacher education programs. The author of this article was a participant in

several re-visioning initiatives in the College of Education. Many of the initiatives and conversations focused on the significance of multiple authentic and meaningful field experiences for teacher education majors. As instructor and supervisor in a field-intensive course, I began to formulate questions about the interrelatedness of the varied re-visioning focus areas: “How can teacher education programs provide rich experiences that develop mastery in preservice teachers’ 21st century skills and encourage authentic partnerships between public schools and the university faculty?”

Description of the Project Anticipated Outcomes

In response to the NC initiative for Teacher Education faculty to align their current programs to reflect the NCPTS, the elementary education faculty examined the Block II¹ mentor-intern program for alignment with the new NCPTS. This program is currently situated within a set (block) of five courses that teacher candidates take simultaneously in the semester just before their student teaching semester. In the cohort for which the author serves as instructor and supervisor of the internship, teacher candidates were placed in two Caldwell County elementary schools for the entire fifteen-week semester: For the first ten weeks, teacher candidates were taking college courses on four days and then in public school classrooms for one full day. For the last ten weeks, teacher candidates

served as public school interns full-time Monday through Friday. The mission of this Block II experience is aligned with the Department of Curriculum and Instruction’s philosophy that centers around the commitment to rigorous preparation for preservice and inservice teachers who will provide significant contributions to the field of education. Faculty and students come together as a community of learners who inquire about and examine the nature of teaching, education, and learning.

Teachers must have the ability and commitment to solve problems, make effective decisions, use emerging technologies, and develop alternative strategies for culturally diverse and exceptional students to meet the demands of the 21st century (Reich College of Education, 2008).

At the end of the previous semester, the author interviewed several of the teacher candidates (interns) to ask about their experiences as they related to teacher/student communication, internship expectations, and the quality and quantity of cooperating teacher feedback. Some interns reported that their cooperating teachers were very supportive in giving feedback, making instructional suggestions, and answering questions. Other interns reported that their cooperating teachers were less forthcoming with feedback or provided little instructional guidance throughout the semester. Next the author asked several of the cooperating teachers about their expectations and practices mentoring interns. Data from these interviews showed that different understandings about the role of the mentor as well as varied levels of knowledge about the academic requirements and NCPTS were the main cause for the inconsistencies (described

¹ Block II is a cluster of five methods courses and an intensive 200-hour internship experience for first semester seniors in the semester prior to student teaching.

above) found in the field placement. Cooperating teachers often acted from their own assumptions about their role as a mentor. Some teachers reported that they “give the intern lots of freedom to experiment” and to “do things their own way.” They added that that is how they, the cooperating teachers, learned best. Other cooperating teachers reported that they were “more structured” because they “wanted to keep the tone of the classroom consistent for the students.” These teachers often provided materials, instructional advice and management models for students. However, these models and materials may or may not have been reflective of the NCPTS. From the analysis of both intern and cooperating teachers’ responses, the author developed research questions to guide a study of the collaboration among teacher candidate interns, classroom teacher mentors, and university teacher educators:

1. How can teacher educators facilitate a more consistent field experience that reflects NCPTS for interns and cooperating teachers?
2. How can teacher educators strengthen university/public school partnerships and involve public schools and teachers in the university re-visioning process?
3. How can teacher educators share the findings from this inquiry with other university programs and surrounding area public schools?

Project Roles and Responsibilities

The author invited school principals, cooperating teachers, university faculty, and interns to collaborate in restructuring the field experience.

Together, in a series of meetings both face-to-face and virtual, this group developed descriptions of each member’s role in responding to the initiative to align programs (and field experiences) with NCPTS (A brief overview of the project plan of the FEIP can be viewed in Appendix A).

The role of *university faculty partner* is multi-faceted and can be best described as creator, facilitator, and organizer for the FEIP. The faculty partner stimulated critical thinking and creative problem solving with questions and ideas posed in a timely manner to individuals or small groups working together on a topic. The role of organizer was a big one and demanded a great deal of skill organizing so many collaborators as well as the webpage resources and workshops.

Mentor teachers were defined as cooperating teachers currently employed by the public schools. The mentor teachers who participated in this project were veteran teachers who had several years’ experience partnering with the ASU program. They were skillful collaborators, eager to try new ideas in their own classrooms. Finally, mentor teachers provided the checks and balances needed to improve the field experience in a way that was realistic for 21st century teachers, students, and pre-service teachers.

Project Implementation

The faculty partner began the FEIP by gathering information from the participants. For this specific project, information from interviews was collected from interns, cooperating teachers, and principals. Once the questions/problems were identified, the faculty partner proposed several

solutions to the FEIP participants. Proposed solutions included the following:

- (1) a more structured internship experience with common experiences and expectations that would be shared and disseminated to all participant groups via a webpage with resources and forms. The webpage was host to numerous resources such as internship expectations, assessment forms for both the faculty partner and mentor teachers to use, Block II project descriptions, course syllabus with reading and project due dates, and classroom management presentations from students.
- (2) compensation for participation as a mentor (CEU hours and formal acknowledgement for teachers' annual review: NC Rubric for Evaluating Teachers and monetary compensation for workshop presenters); and
- (3) an interactive blog. The students were placed in triads by grade level with a heterogeneous mix of school placement. Each week, students were assigned a broad topic (classroom management dilemma) to discuss on their blogs. They were encouraged to link theory from the course to their current classroom experiences. Students were encouraged to ask questions, pose possible solutions, and include live links to information they thought would be most helpful in solving the management dilemma. The faculty partner who would also comment, ask questions, or provide links for further discussion, monitored the Blogs. Teachers were asked to

monitor blogs on an informal basis and did this as time allowed.

Initial solutions were discussed with mentor teachers, interns, and the principals of each school. The process began with the principals. When the project was first discussed and solutions proposed, principals were enthusiastic and eager to incorporate mentor teachers' participation into their end-of-year reviews. Principals specifically recognized *NC Teaching Standard I: Teacher as Leader* as a place where the most credit could be attributed for teacher candidate mentorship activities. Both principals discussed the importance of this standard and the challenge of providing classroom teachers authentic opportunities to develop and demonstrate this critical ability.

Mentor teachers were excited about the project and commented that they would like more information about mentoring responsibilities, specific academic requirements, and varied ways to provide feedback to student interns. Teachers were most enthused about receiving CEU credit as well as credit on their annual review for their participation in the project. Many of these teachers had mentored interns for years without any compensation or recognition from the university. The value placed on their expertise in mentoring interns motivated the teachers to engage as partners in re-visioning the field experience.

Once principals and mentor teachers were on board with the project, it was time to move forward with the proposed changes. The faculty partner contacted the University-Public School Partnership representative and submitted the description of the program, participants, and detailed responsibilities. Within two days, notification was sent approving

two CEU credit hours for participating cooperating teachers.

Over a two-month period, the faculty partner worked to create a webpage and resources for cooperating teachers and interns. The webpage can be viewed at <http://sites.google.com/site/ci4000spring2010/home/internship-spring-2010>.

The webpage is considered a dynamic document that will change and grow over time. All participants were encouraged to submit ideas and resources for the webpage to help students and teachers better meet the goals of the FEIP. Creation of the webpage is ongoing throughout the FEIP. Another form of the webpage from the previous semester helped to direct the construction and content of the resource.

Once the materials and project details were created, the faculty partner presented the FEIP to teachers at both schools, soliciting membership for the following semester, Spring 2010. The presentation outlined the NC Teaching Standards, compensation for participation, and mentor responsibilities. During the presentation, the new website was introduced to demonstrate how it might provide support to mentor teachers and interns. An outline of the presentation can be viewed at <http://sites.google.com/site/ci4000spring2010/home/internship-spring-2010/callmentors>

Cooperating teachers signed up for the program and university preservice teachers were placed in their classrooms. The faculty partner continued to monitor and update the webpage and blog. The faculty partner solicited feedback from teachers, principals, and interns through a variety of sources: email, blog posts, informal meetings, phone conversations,

and formal evaluation/feedback meetings. Feedback from participants was incorporated into the ongoing process to answer the guiding questions of the FEIP.

As participants settled into their respective roles, the faculty partner contacted participating teachers who were interested in creating and presenting two workshops for ASU interns and public school colleagues: Classroom Management and Classroom Instruction. Both workshops incorporated elements from the NCPTS and were scheduled for April and May 2010. University interns placed at the schools were expected to attend and teachers from each school (both participants in the project and those not participating) were invited to attend. The faculty partner facilitated the development of these workshops and served to help five cooperating teachers as they created and presented the information. The faculty partner also secured monetary compensation for teachers who engaged in this activity.

The final phase of this project was to gather feedback from participants, prepare a final report, and share findings with other programs, specifically the Middle Grades Education Program, that has been seeking ways to strengthen partnerships within and across their network of Professional Network Schools. The faculty partner collected final feedback in several ways. One form of feedback was an informal questionnaire given to interns, principals, and cooperating teachers. Another form of feedback was the data recorded at several meetings with participants where an open forum discussion provided views about the FEIP. Finally, participants were asked to provide written feedback about anything

they wanted to add that was not asked about their participation in the project. This feedback was collected, reviewed, and synthesized. Results have been submitted to the College of Education dean's office in a final report. They have also been shared with other elementary education program faculty, and with NC teacher educators at the 2010 NC-ACTE conference.

The success of this project depended on the collaboration between public school partners and university faculty. Each had an integral role in re-visioning the current program to respond better to the needs of university preservice teachers, master teachers, and 21st Century learners. This project exemplified one way that teacher education faculty and public school partners can work together in response to the NC Teacher Education Re-Visioning initiative.

Middle School Connections Successful Schools for Young Adolescents: Leadership and Organization

This project was developed and implemented with elementary school faculty but clearly has many connections and benefits for middle grades programs as well. *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010) describes four essential attributes and 16 vital characteristics of successful schools. This project best reflects connections to five characteristics organized within *Leadership and Organization*.

A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision. (p. 27).

Prior to this project, one of the biggest challenges for this field experience was the absence of consistent expectations across participants. Teacher candidate interns, principals, cooperating teachers, and university faculty struggled with multiple visions for the experience. End of the semester evaluations showed that teacher candidates' experiences in the placement were varied and frequently did not align with the goals of the university program or research-verified practices. Creating a more consistent shared understanding among participants and providing easily-accessible online resources helped to bring the various interpretations of the experience closer to one shared vision that reflected both university goals and up-to-date research verified best practices. The FEIP demonstrated the importance of a collaborative shared vision that is owned and supported by the larger school community. The ownership provides the foundation for the vision to become operational and in the end, to influence teacher practice.

Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about...educational research and best practices. (p. 28).

The FEIP began, blossomed, and succeeded with supportive leadership. University and district leaders showed their support by providing CEU credits to teachers who participated in the FEIP. Principals fully committed to this program and used several aspects of the project to credit participating teachers for their end-of-the-year review (NC Rubric for Evaluating Teachers). Teachers were focused on creating and providing experiences aligned with university goals and research-verified best practices. This unified goal led to many "teachable moments" where leaders shared information or created

inquiry groups to investigate an idea or new teaching method further. University faculty facilitated and provided needed resources for new information or ideas. Most of all, this project opened lines of communication among stakeholders and increased the commitment of the school leadership to create an experience for preservice teachers that would reflect those goals established by NC Professional Teaching Standards and echoed in the university program.

Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration. (p. 29).

Collaboration was the key to this project. The different phases of the project encouraged many different collaborative groups and leaders who rarely worked together in the past to engage in creating documents, investigating research, or brainstorming to solve issues. Consistent with the leadership metaphor in *This We Believe* which characterizes leaders “as architects for change,” who understand that “yesterday does not have to determine tomorrow” (NMSA, 2010, p. 29), leaders in this project were change agents who identified practices that were not in line with the vision of the program and worked collaboratively with others to create new materials, methods, and programs that were representative of the FEIP vision. The changes created in this project were integral to the culture of the school because they represented collective ideas and understandings. These were organic changes created and implemented by those who are stakeholders and hold great meaning for all involved in the process. This collaboration was valued and encouraged by school principals who shared power with group members and modeled true collaborative practice.

Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices

So often professional development is extraneous to actual practice and therefore nearly meaningless to teachers. In contrast the leadership in this project demonstrated the National Middle School Association’s assertion that “properly focusing a school’s professional development program calls for strong, collaborative, leadership. It requires a school leader who facilitates and models learning, listens thoughtfully, and builds a school culture that supports faculty as they engage in reflective practice” (NMSA, 2010, p. 30). School administrators and the faculty partner provided numerous ways for participants to learn new information that directly applied to their own questions and dilemmas. The collaborative nature of the FEIP set the stage for professional learning communities where participants discussed professional readings, student data and work, and instructional and assessment strategies. Teachers created and presented workshops that focused on the real issues of their particular contexts. This project provided numerous opportunities for real professional development to occur, and the lessons learned will hopefully play a positive role in teacher practice and student achievement for years to come.

Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships

A supportive organizational structure is a must for true collaboration to happen in a project like the FEIP: “The way schools organize teachers and group and schedule students have a significant

impact on the learning environment” (NMSA, 2010, p. 31). This was a demanding project and because of its collegial and collaborative nature, participants needed time to meet both formally and informally. Leaders could not and did not expect that all collaborative work be conducted outside of the school day. The schools involved in this project already had some positive organizational structures in place. Grade levels had shared planning times, interns were placed in classrooms regularly and for significant amounts of time, the university faculty member was in the schools each week, and principals were readily accessible. These organizational structures were critical so that different participants could meet and work with each other on a regular basis. These structures allowed for numerous groups to work simultaneously where participants might be involved in a grade-level inquiry project, information-gathering interdisciplinary group, and an intense mentoring project with the intern placed in their classroom. In the middle school context, teams are the norm, and collaborative work of this nature would be much easier to implement. Overall, the organizational structures provided the teams with the foundation for strong learning communities where “students and teachers on the team [became] well acquainted, [felt] safe, respected and supported, and [were] encouraged to take intellectual risks” (NMSA, 2010, p. 31). Throughout the process, participants experienced various levels of engagement and had the opportunity to connect with a variety of educators.

Lessons Learned

There were numerous positive outcomes for participants and some initial answers to the guiding research questions. Overall, interest was high for this project and feedback was positive. Mentor teachers reported that they “enjoyed collaborating with each other” and remarked that they felt “much more comfortable using technology” in their classes with the support from their interns. Interns reflected that they “learned a lot about teaching” by participating in collaborative grade-level and cross-grade level meetings. Interns and cooperating teachers shared expertise and came away from the experience energized with new ideas and methods for teaching 21st century students.

This project also significantly strengthened the partnership between university faculty and public school personnel. In the past, the partnership was solid but lacked passion and direction. With the introduction of this project and the critical input from the public school partners, the relationship became more purposeful and focused. Principals, interns, cooperating teachers, and university faculty worked diligently to construct, implement, and re-vise an internship experience that surpassed the initial goals set for the project. Lines of communication were open as never before and participants sought out others to brainstorm ideas, solve dilemmas, improve practice and learn new skills. Principals of each school remarked on the increased focus and energy of their mentor teachers and how impressed they were with the teachers’ professionalism, dedication, and expertise. This project provided an excellent opportunity for

principals to work closely with teachers and see them from a different perspective. After a teacher lead workshop, one principal commented that she “learned so much about each teacher’s expertise” and would “use that skill in future professional development opportunities.”

Most notable were the leadership abilities demonstrated by the mentor teachers. At every phase of the project, mentor teachers assumed leadership positions that helped them organize, create, and implement new ideas and solutions for the project. When asked about their roles as leaders, mentor teachers responded that they felt like part of the team and that their experience and knowledge were valued in the process. With mentor teachers in the lead, the project became their passion. Mentor teachers often approached the faculty partner with new ideas, methods, research that enhanced the project outcomes. It was these ideas that directed the course of improvement and changes for the FEIP.

Informal exit interviews revealed that teachers and interns really enjoyed and learned a great deal from the classroom management and instruction workshops. In their interviews, teachers and interns used words like, “exciting,” “real world,” and “confidence building” to describe the experience. To prepare for the workshops, mentor teachers reflected on their own practice, shared/discussed ideas with other presenters, and conducted outside research on their topic. Mentor teachers created and presented workshops that were well organized, connected theory to practice, and offered multiple perspectives. Interns reported that they learned a great deal from these workshops and really enjoyed hearing

from veteran teachers who “really know what works.” The workshops were a great opportunity for classroom teachers to shine as the experts.

Conclusions

Clearly, the FEIP was a success on many levels. The main objectives of this project were to strengthen university/public school partnerships by working together to create a more comprehensive and consistent field experience for Block II interns. These objectives were met with some facilitation by the faculty partner and many opportunities for mentor teacher leadership. This project was a grassroots effort in that the improvement plans, implementation, and final evaluations, were, for the most part, conducted by mentor teachers and student interns. The impetus for change came from the teachers and students and was facilitated by the school principals and the faculty partner. This dynamic was a great opportunity for new roles in the university/public school partnership. In many cases the university partner can assume the lead role with the public school partner feeling less than equal in the relationship. The FEIP reversed the traditional roles and encouraged mentor teachers to be leaders who organized, created, implemented, and evaluated new ideas. Mentor teachers reported that they perceived a closer relationship to the faculty partner with this dynamic. In return, the faculty partner also felt a stronger connection to the public school partners. With increased communication and collaboration, relationships moved from superficial to more meaningful interactions. These deeper

communications were a source of great learning for the university faculty partner and will inform her ideas about teaching and learning in the future.

Teachers in leadership roles were inspired to work collaboratively with other school personnel as well as the university faculty partner to create and implement a field experience for Block II students that was more closely aligned to the mission of the experience. Because the teachers created the revisions to the field experience there was significant buy-in to the ideas and methods for providing a more consistent experience from classroom to classroom. The increased rigor and consistency in this field placement enhanced the teacher candidates' learning. In turn, teacher candidates reported significantly higher satisfaction with the placement.

Finally, the teacher candidates learned an important lesson from this experience: Classroom teachers can and should take leadership roles in school/program improvement plans. Teacher as Leader is a vital professional standard for preservice teachers to witness. Many of the interns remarked that they had no idea that as a classroom teacher they could play such a crucial role in improving an aspect of their classroom experience and the experiences of teacher candidates to come. Through this experience, the preservice teachers gained a new insight into their future role as a classroom

teacher. They observed and experienced the FEIP first hand and will take those new understandings with them as they move into their own classrooms as change agents and teacher-leaders for the 21st century.

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Appendix A
PROJECT ROLES AND PROPOSED TIMELINE

Date	Activity	Parties
October	Initial meeting with principals and teachers to identify needs and interest in THE FEIP	Faculty Partner
November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact University School Partnership contact person to begin process of obtaining CEU credits for participants • Work with principals to align tasks with Rubric for Evaluating NC Teachers, Standard 1: Teachers demonstrate leadership • Begin developing webpage resources and mentorship packet resources 	Faculty Partner
December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to develop project resources • Work with principals to align tasks with Rubric for Evaluating NC Teachers, Standard 1: Teachers demonstrate leadership • Continue to complete the process of attaining CEU credits for participants 	Faculty Partner
January	Present mentorship project to teachers and solicit membership	Faculty Partner
February	Monitor and update webpage and blog	Faculty Partner
March	Facilitate classroom management workshop for university students given by mentor teacher(s)	Faculty Partner and mentor teacher(s)

April	Facilitate classroom instruction workshop for university students given by mentor teacher(s)	Faculty Partner and mentor teacher(s)
May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete program, collect documentation for teacher evaluation and CEU credits, submit documentation • Elicit feedback from principals, university students, and public school teachers enrolled in project. • Prepare final report and share findings with elementary education and middle grades faculty. 	Faculty Partner

Diane Marks, Ph.D., has been a classroom teacher for over twelve years. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor in Curriculum and Instruction at Appalachian State University. Dr. Marks enjoys working with both preservice teachers and classroom teachers to improve instruction and better meet the needs of 21st Century learners.