

# NASUP Exemplary Mentor Award Winners – 2023 and 2024

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The following narratives describe how successful relationships between mentors and pre-service and inservice teachers go beyond observations and feedback. The purpose is to share the multifaceted approach mentors take to support teacher candidates in generative ways so they can develop their potential as practitioners and how they nurture a culture of professional respect and understanding about how the school–university partnership supports teachers and students across the school and beyond the individual placement classrooms.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The article contains first-person experiences of the recent National Association for School–University Partnerships (NASUP) Exemplary Mentor Award Winners for 2023 and 2024.

**Findings** – The work of mentors facilitates the growth of pre-service and inservice teachers, empowering them to innovate and enjoy a sense of autonomy within their placement site and supports the growth of the university program, making the partnership more responsive to the needs of the pre-service and inservice teachers. These narratives are evidence of the power of the school–university partnership in growing teachers who exemplify the profession.

**Originality/value** – A successful Professional Development Schools (PDS) partnership includes exemplary mentors who support pre-service teachers, in-service teachers and teacher candidates as they prepare for the profession.

**Keywords** Collaboration, Early childhood education, Clinical practice, Colleges/universities, Cooperating teachers, Clinical preparation

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction

Successful relationships between mentors and pre-service and inservice teachers go beyond observations and feedback. Mentoring involves supporting teacher candidates in generative ways so they can develop their potential as practitioners in classrooms. Mentors nurture a culture of professional respect and are models of how the school–university partnership supports teachers and students across the school and beyond the individual placement classrooms. The NASUP award for exemplary PK12 mentor teachers recognizes full-time



school-based clinical educators who demonstrate excellence in supporting, coaching and guiding preservice and/or inservice teachers in their professional growth. Exemplary mentor teachers engage in ongoing, reflective practices, high-quality coaching practices and modeling of effective pedagogical and andragogical practices, connecting theory and practice. They are effective communicators, conferring regularly with partners (university supervisor, principals and mentor teachers) to support understanding of the various roles in partnership and work to improve the efficacy of the school–university partnership.

The NASUP Exemplary Mentor for 2024, Christine Grabowski, a teacher leader at Middle Road Elementary School in Hazlet Township Public Schools, New Jersey and the NASUP Exemplary Mentor for 2023, Clara Outten, a teacher leader at Snow Hill Elementary School in Worcester County Public Schools, Maryland, are featured in this article and share how their involvement and leadership as mentors nurture teacher candidates and support their university partners. Their two stories are evidence of the power of the school–university partnership in growing teachers who exemplify the profession.

### **NASUP 2024 Exemplary Mentor awardee – Christine Grabowski’s story**

Jessica was a student in my Literacy Methods class at Monmouth University. She was insightful, diligent and eager to learn. She fostered a strong connection with Eva, a third grader from my elementary school class. She spent one hour a week with her student teaching literacy concepts and learning how to conduct reading and writing conferences at the Middle Road Elementary School–University Partnership placement along with her fellow university students. As the school–university partnership (SUP) liaison, the next semester I placed Jessica in the building for field hours, which led to her year-long clinical internship placement in a fourth-grade classroom as part of our Monmouth University Teacher Residency Program. I was able to continue to mentor Jessica and help guide her growth as a preservice teacher as her clinical faculty supervisor. Over the next two years, Jessica’s learning continued beyond the Residency Program, including serving as a substitute teacher in the building, her graduation from Monmouth University and working as a year-long leave replacement within our partnership while earning her master’s degree from Monmouth University. Those experiences provided her the opportunity to evolve and develop into a competent and dedicated teacher, ultimately leading to employment in a permanent second grade position at Middle Road School.

Jessica is just one example of the successful “growing” of teachers at the Middle Road School SUP. There are countless students with stories similar to hers. Rowan Elrais has a path that mirrors Jessica’s with much of her field experience at our SUP. [Figure 1](#) captures our collaboration when we attended the NASUP Annual Conference in Chicago in 2022 as co-presenters. Being able to select a standout clinical intern to attend the conference is a great way to showcase their successes. In our SUP, I perform several roles. Serving as the professor in residence, clinical faculty supervisor, SUP liaison and an elementary teacher in the school building provides me with a unique perspective and insight into the immersive elements of our partnership. In these roles, I go beyond conducting formal observations to include popping into a classroom for a walkthrough, collaborating with mentor teachers in the hall, and having students stop by my room for advice, to grab a chocolate from the jar or to tell me about the awesome lesson they taught. These encounters demonstrate the high level of comfort, trust and collegiality in our partnership. It is a partnership that makes a difference.

As a fourth-grade teacher employed in Hazlet Township, New Jersey, I utilize the partnership to enhance the learning for students P-16 and work to bind the school district to the university. One way I mentor and provide students with valuable learning experiences is through the Legacy Project initiated in 2012. Each year, clinical interns work together on a project that enhances schoolwide learning, going beyond their classroom placement experience. Students create and present a proposal to administration, executing the project during their time at the SUP. Two examples of projects implemented include one that



Photo credit and permissions provided: Christine Grabowski and Rowan Elrais

**Figure 1.** Christine Grabowski (mentor) presenting with clinical intern, Rowan Elrais at NASUP conference, 2022

addressed social emotional learning with positive affirmations in the student restrooms and one where a library of digital resources was created for students and staff to support remote learning during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. The interns gain visibility with local administration, widen their lens outside their placement and engage in meaningful activities to enhance the school environment. It is a wonderful way to grow!

Leveraging my role as a professor and elementary teacher, my university students have weekly interactions with elementary students in addition to those in their assigned field placements. The university students engage with elementary students, supporting weekly writing and reading assignments and conferring with them as they work on targeted skills. The university students have a chance to review and apply concepts taught in class with their students during these weekly interactions. Serving in a mentoring role, I provide feedback to the university students in real time, as they are teaching their elementary students one on one. This adds several layers to the support provided to our teacher candidates. At the end of each semester, I host a fun activity called “Hot Cocoa and Conversations” or “Lessons and Lemonade.” The elementary students create a presentation for the teacher candidates in which they share their favorite moments together and provide advice for them as they become teachers. After the presentation, I have the teacher candidates look for common themes among the advice that the children provided, and we discuss the impact it can have on them as future educators. It is always a special time for both groups of students and adds a unique reflective perspective.

Teaching in Tandem is an innovative program developed by our partnership that we took a chance on and has since become quite successful. The mentoring of teacher candidates is multifaceted and facilitated with not only me as a mentor and supervisor but with the students working with one another. In the host classroom, two university students in different stages of clinical practice are placed together for their year-long experience. One candidate is in the final

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full-time semester, while the other is experiencing their 100 field hours semester as part of that year-long internship. They work together and learn from one another in a peer mentoring relationship. I serve as a mentor to both simultaneously providing another layer of support for the candidates. This has also been expanded to include students in earlier field experiences, as we have found they add another level of collegiality, responsibility and collaboration to make this program even more successful.

Mentoring teacher candidates is not the work of one person. It is a team that ensures our university students receive a high-quality education that includes pedagogy, hands-on experiences as well as effective programs to help them achieve success. Everyone, including the dean, the university faculty, the clinical placement coordinator and the advisors, all contribute to this growth. One area that I have worked on with our team is the creation of academies that target specific groups within our partnership. The first and longest running is our Mentor Academy, where we provide targeted professional development for the mentors in our partner school districts. Our teacher candidates benefit by working with trained mentors who have learned how to provide actionable feedback, address the needs of teacher candidates as well as provide other professional strategies to support their success.

The Rising Teacher Academy is another area that has grown out of the need to assist teacher candidates in their journey. My colleagues and I noticed our teacher candidates had gaps in knowledge and skills that did not quite fit into coursework or academic counseling. Applying for a substitute license, developing interview strategies and addressing the social emotional needs of our students after the pandemic were all identified as areas where our teacher candidates needed intentional attention. Thus, we developed a three-stage academy that allows them to “Be Well, Learn Well and Soar Well.” The first session is focused on adjusting to college, coursework and building a community of support within the School of Education. The second session teaches them how to make the most of field experiences and resources on campus, as well as how to apply for their substitute licenses. The final session focuses on how to build a resume, be successful in the interview process and be ready to enter the teaching profession. I truly believe that the creation of these academies has enhanced our already strong program at Monmouth University for the benefit of our students.

As the 2024 Exemplary Mentor Award recipient, I am humbled and honored to be recognized for the culmination of more than a decade of work in our school–university partnership. I am just one person in a large community of educators that are doing this important work each and every day. It takes a village to grow our future generation of teachers, and I am grateful to contribute to our profession. Because of the supportive environment at Monmouth University and the Hazlet Township Public School District, I am able to hone my knowledge and skills and impart them to our teacher candidates. When the alumni of our SUP become mentor teachers for the next generation, as they have done, I am filled with pride. It is evident our partnership has created a clear cycle of mentoring that ensures our profession develops competent and dedicated educators.

The field of education will continue to change and evolve. We need to be open-minded to embrace the future. I believe strongly in innovation and creativity in education. Every SUP is unique and different. By harnessing the strengths of our colleagues and organizations, we can adapt and change based on the needs of our programs, students and faculty. Think outside the box. Take risks. Trust in yourself. Learn from mistakes. These are all ways to create a successful environment in the SUP for teacher candidates to grow and bloom.

### **NASUP 2023 Exemplary Mentor awardee – Clara Outten’s story**

In May 2023, I was honored to receive the National Association for School–University Partnerships (NASUP) first Exemplary Mentor Teacher Award. When I began mentoring in 2002 as a first-grade teacher at Snow Hill Elementary School, I certainly never anticipated any accolades other than perhaps a card or student-created gift showing appreciation from a teacher candidate. We are teachers. We do not enter this career with expectations of grandeur.

We teach because we are passionate about sharing knowledge and enhancing the lives of our students. In 2002, when I mentored my first intern, my biggest hope was that I would not mess things up! I had no thoughts of school–university partnerships or the potential for anything more than an extra pair of hands here and there to bolster my students’ success.

Fast forward a few years, and the role of Professional Development School (PDS) site coordinator was added to my role as mentor teacher. As the number of interns present in my classroom, school and life continued to increase, I quickly began to see the impact these university teacher candidates were having on my first-grade students. Additionally, it became very clear that I was a better educator with Professional Development Schools and a Salisbury University partnership as a staple in my classroom. As a mentor to university students, I can model, support, encourage and enhance the learning and growth of university students while simultaneously elevating the learning of the elementary students in my classroom. The school–university partnership allowed me to share my ever-expanding knowledge as a classroom teacher while continuing to grow and evolve my classroom skillset. University teacher candidates coming and going each semester kept me abreast of new strategies while also reminding me of the solid foundations of best practices. While supporting and encouraging candidates to step out of their comfort zone and try new techniques, I too was growing my pedagogy with enhanced learning impact on the students in my classroom.

As our partnership has grown, so have the possibilities that exist and manifest in any relationship. Snow Hill Elementary School (SHES) has benefited immeasurably from the partnership that has evolved over the years. Salisbury University teacher candidates have engaged with students and teachers at SHES in student learning and action research to document the benefits of our symbiotic partnership. We have been very strategic and excited to try new things with placements in hopes of discovering the best possible scenarios for mentors and teacher candidates while continuing to bolster student success. We have utilized teacher candidates in their final semester prior to internship, placing them throughout the school as assistants for intervention for struggling students and saw remarkable growth. We flooded SHES with SU candidates to document the growth possibilities for P12 learners when co-teaching was an everyday occurrence in multiple classrooms.

When I look back on the past 20 plus years of collaboration with Salisbury University, I am immensely proud of the work we have accomplished and the lives we have impacted. In fact, with the support of both Salisbury University and my school district, Worcester County Public Schools, I have had the opportunity to attend and present at the NASUP (at the time NAPDS) conference on several occasions. Additionally, SHES and Worcester County have received Exemplary PDS achievement awards in 2011 and 2017 for their partnership with Salisbury University (SU). Our partnership continues to grow exemplary teachers who continue to enhance the learning and lives of children in our community. In 2018, Shelby Ennis was awarded the Emerging Leader Award. Shelby (now Shelby Matassa) is currently a kindergarten teacher at SHES. Receiving these awards emphasizes the importance of the partnership between SHES and SU and highlights the productivity that can occur when schools and universities collaborate.

This fall I will co-teach with another teacher candidate. She will be the 32nd full-time teacher candidate placed in my care over the past 22 years. Additionally, I usually host a few candidates starting out in field experience who come about once a week. It has been an honor and a privilege to engage in co-teaching with each and every one of these future educators. My advice to other mentor teachers working in school–university partnerships is to get involved whenever and wherever you can! Volunteer for anything that can get your school more involved with university happenings. Be willing to step out of your comfort zone and try new strategies and techniques. Embrace the success that can occur from co-teaching and school–university partnerships. The stronger your relationship with the university, the more opportunities will arise for you, your school and the children sitting in the classrooms of your school. At the end of the day, isn’t that why we all became teachers in the first place?

### About the authors

Christine Grabowski has taught at Middle Road Elementary School in the Hazlet Township Public School District in Hazlet, NJ, since 1996 and is presently teaching fourth grade. She has served in various school–university partnership roles since 2010, including Adjunct Professor at Monmouth University, Clinical Faculty Supervisor, Academy Facilitator and Professional Development School Liaison. Christine is Recipient of the 2024 NASUP Exemplary Mentor Award.

Clara Outten is beginning her 25th year of teaching at Snow Hill Elementary School, Worcester County Public Schools, where she is presently teaching first grade. She has mentored 32 full-time interns in her school–university partnership with Salisbury University over the last 22 years and was awarded Outstanding Mentor in 2006. She has served as Site Coordinator, helping this partnership achieve the NASUP (formerly NAPDS) Exemplary PDS Program Award in 2011 and 2017. She has presented and co-presented with interns at several NASUP conferences and with her encouragement, at least one intern from her school has presented action research annually at the conference since 2006. Clara serves as Adjunct Faculty at Salisbury University, teaching several courses, including the senior internship seminar. Clara is Recipient of the 2023 NASUP Exemplary Mentor Award.

Charlene O’Brien teaches elementary education courses and works with teacher candidates within the George Mason University (Fairfax, VA) Professional Development School program. She was Elementary Teacher and Literacy Coach for over 38 years in public schools. Charlene O’Brien is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [cobrien@gmu.edu](mailto:cobrien@gmu.edu)