

University of North Carolina Wilmington Watson College of Education PDS school-university partnership with Isaac Bear Early College and Southeast Area Technical High School

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Abstract

Purpose – This article highlights the recipient of the Exemplary PDS Award given by the National Association of School–University Partnerships. In 2024, the University of North Carolina Wilmington’s Watson College of Education (WCE) PDS School–University Partnership with Isaac Bear Early College (IBEC) and Southeast Area Technical (SEA-Tech) High School were recognized for their collaborative work. This article highlights the structures and major activities involved in a longstanding, successful PDS partnership.

Design/methodology/approach – The article is derived from the award proposal and written in an informative, narrative style, embedding references to each of the NAPDS 9 Essentials to assist in highlighting key aspects of the partnership.

Findings – Due to the nature of this piece, there are no research findings.

Originality/value – This article draws additional attention to various aspects of this exemplary partnership and may inspire future nominations.

Keywords Leadership, Professional development, Teacher education, High school, Professional learning

Paper type Conceptual paper

The University of North Carolina Wilmington’s Watson College of Education (WCE) Professional Development System (PDS) is a school-university partnership (SUP) that spans across 11 school districts, a university laboratory school and two public charter schools in the southeast region of our state. The university is a large public institution with over 18,000



students, offering a range of baccalaureate, graduate-level and doctoral programs. The WCE is home to over 1,300 of those students engaged in undergraduate- and graduate-level programs for both future and current educators, Pre-K through high school. The university is situated in the New Hanover County school (NHCS) district. With an estimated student population of over 24,000, it is the 12th largest school district in the state with 45 public schools, 4 of which are identified as innovative, cooperative, non-traditional high schools. For the purposes of our Exemplary PDS Award application, we chose to highlight our partnership with two of these schools: Isaac Bear Early College (IBEC) High School and Southeast Area Technical (SEA-Tech) High School.

The mission of IBEC is “to promote a diverse student body, including first-generation college students, in pursuit of higher education and civic responsibilities as they serve the community and extend their education from IBEC to the university” (Isaac Bear Early College, n.d.).

SEA-Tech was established in 2014 and offers a unique blended curriculum, project-based learning, flexible scheduling and the opportunity to receive stackable credentials and industry certifications through real-world, work-based training, job shadows, internships and apprenticeships in collaboration with our local community college and other local partnerships. Students at SEA-Tech develop an individualized career action plan and explore up to three career technical areas throughout their high school career.

Our PDS collaboration with IBEC and SEA-Tech adds significance to school–university partnerships because it reflects our shared PDS commitment to improve student learning by enhancing the quality of teaching and school leadership to ensure that student work is challenging, engaging and relevant. As hubs of innovation, IBEC and SEA-Tech see students for who they are and for their potential, which enhances not only our PDS mission and vision but also the broader overlapping mission and value statements of the college and university, focusing on transformation, innovation, inquiry and diversity, to name a few. The size of each school, their priority on recruiting a diverse student population and their intentional focus on building personalized student relationships and community provide the ideal setting for pre-service teachers in our secondary program, which places a high value on building strong relationships and the importance of knowing the whole student, their backgrounds, student and community assets and the ways in which these factors inform and influence teaching and learning.

In addition, both partnerships exemplify the college’s broader commitment to our value statements focused on innovation, inquiry and diversity. Each partnership recognizes and utilizes the value of difference as a requisite to maximize human development. Partnerships generate and adopt innovations as imperative to meeting the changing needs of society, and these partnerships share a commitment to a lifelong attitude of inquiry as core to transformative education.

While each school works towards the goals of our overall partnership agreement and engages in various elements of our broader SUP, IBEC and SEA-Tech partner in distinctive ways that further enhance the mission and vision of the National Association of School–University Partnerships and the 9 Essentials (National Association for Professional Development Schools, 2021).

SEA-tech distinctive partnership

Our secondary undergraduate students matriculate through the program via a cohort model with sequenced field experiences included in each block (semester). Prior to partnership with SEA-Tech, the program had for many years placed pre-service teachers to tutor at two large traditional high schools in block two of their field experience. This was a mixed experience, as teachers sometimes left little time for pre-service teachers to tutor and pre-service teachers were often assigned to work with different students each week. The limited time and rotating students made it difficult for pre-service teachers to build relationships, one of many program

goals. As a result, the secondary program partnered with SEA-Tech to co-design a block two weekly tutoring experience that is mutually beneficial to all partners and directly impacts student learning (*Essential 2 and 3*). The school's small learning environment, shared emphasis on relationships, caring and supportive faculty and a curriculum that allows students to explore their interests provided the ideal setting for block two students in our secondary program (*Essential 1*).

Spring 2024 marked the 6th cohort of pre-service teachers at SEA-Tech. Currently, the school dedicates 1-h time slots throughout the day to the program. Three school-based leaders, including the school principal, site coordinator and a partnership teacher, collaborate with university faculty to design and supervise the field experience. SEA-Tech students are handpicked and matched with pre-service teachers based on many factors, including academic interests and needs, after-school activities and teacher-professor recommendations. Once matched, school leaders and university faculty meet with pre-service teachers to review program goals, describe course assignments and provide background about the school. One of many accomplishments of this partnership is the recognition of the importance of racial and gender backgrounds of tutors and tutees and an emphasis on building caring relationships.

A partnership teacher/faculty collaborative study of pre-service teacher reflections on their tutoring experience at SEA-Tech revealed various themes within pre-service teacher's approaches to tutoring and their insights that have since informed the design of the block two field experience ([Smith & Tompkins, 2022](#)). Specifically, school leaders and faculty learned the importance of tutors' understanding of self and identity as key to their tutoring approach and the relationship built with their tutee (*Essential 5*). Additionally, three key approaches to tutoring were identified, each building on the other to support student development. Based on the findings from [Smith and Tompkins' \(2022\)](#) study, three key changes have been proposed to the block two tutoring experience for secondary students (*Essential 4*). Recommendations include changing the title of the program from "tutoring to mentoring," making "explicit the social justice goals of the program to both mentors and high school students" and having "pre-service teachers examine their own identities prior to mentoring" (p. 19).

Since the inception of SEA-Tech in 2014, secondary faculty have engaged in other distinctive ways. In Years 1 and 2, faculty obtained university funds for collaborative schoolwide book studies focused on diversity, culture, seeing the unseen and storytelling (*Essential 9*). The schoolwide focus on *Seedfolks* ([Fleischman, 1997](#)) in year one culminated in the creation of a schoolwide garden, while *Whirligig* ([Fleischman, 1998](#)) in year two led to students creating personal whirligigs placed on the campuses of local middle schools, local businesses and UNCW, representing our unique partnership with the school.

IBEC distinctive partnership

The Future Teacher Career Academy (FTCA) at IBEC serves as another example of a partnership that uniquely fulfills the mission and vision of NASUP and the 9 Essentials. Our partnership with IBEC exemplifies our shared commitment to a broader impact that extends beyond the boundaries of any one partner or stakeholder group (*Essential 1*). Our PDS's professional learning continuum begins with the cultivation of future teachers, which is the key focus of the FTCA (*Essential 3*). Faculty and school partners co-construct opportunities for high school students to volunteer, teach and experience education through a variety of lenses. The FTCA Model at IBEC began in fall 2018. At the time, the school district and WCE identified the shared need to develop a collaborative "grow your own" model to prepare local students who were interested in becoming local teachers. An additional shared goal is to help recruit a more diverse group of students choosing to teach. The model and curriculum were, and continue to be, co-designed by university faculty in partnership with teacher leaders and is taught on site at the school (*Essential 3 and 4*).

Currently, most FTCA students are dually enrolled in university FTCA courses or choose to participate in courses as FTCA club members during their junior and senior years. Students in EDN 103 and 104 receive early advising support on their path towards teacher licensure, plan and design inquiry-based projects around education topics, visit innovative schools, connect with pre-service teachers, discuss education initiatives, receive priority consideration for acceptance in the WCE and, upon obtaining licensure, priority consideration for teaching positions in NHCSs. Each FTCA course is designed around overarching themes, introducing students to an examination of factors affecting education success, including race, social class and gender and follows a framework for inquiry. University and school-based instructors plan using the inquiry model: engagement, exploration, explanation, elaboration and evaluation. Semesters begin with a brief overview of topics. FTCA students then decide what issues they want to explore. Instructors support students in the explanation and elaboration phases of their inquiry and the semester culminates with student-driven research and experiential learning opportunities (*Essential 3*).

In fall 2023, a majority of students met the university course requirements and received university credit. Since its inception, 3 IBEC FTCA students have been awarded the school district's teaching scholarship, committing to teach in the district once they graduate from college and earn their teaching license. 5 FTCA students have continued their education journey in the UNCW WCE.

Through their applied learning experiences, FTCA students observe and assist in schools throughout our partnership. During these experiences, staff from UNCW, IBEC and other partnership schools throughout the region collaborate to achieve the broader goal of generating educational leaders who are equipped to advocate for the accessibility of quality education for all students. Additional strides in advancing the mission and values of our partnership are made by members of FTCA through service in education-based clubs and committees within their school district (most notably NHCSs' Superintendent Advisory Council) and attendance at school board meetings to advocate on behalf of fellow students (*Essential 3*).

Supporting change through co-constructed partnerships across school sites

Educators at both IBEC and SEA-Tech, as well as faculty from our secondary program and beyond, provide leadership in our broader PDS signature initiatives and networks. These co-constructed partnerships serve as mutually beneficial spaces for leadership and change in our PDS partnership and beyond. In addition to maintaining the key partnership roles that contribute to the sustainability and depth of our partnership at each school site (PDS Site Coordinator, PDS Partnership Teacher, University Faculty, etc.), each site has served as a pivotal partner to our PDS in distinctive ways.

From 2018–2022, faculty and school partners were recipients of the Fulbright Teaching Excellence and Achievement Grant through the United States Department of State Office of Global Educational Programs. The initiative provides a seven-week robust professional development program for international teachers, which includes a strong academic program taught by highly qualified faculty and opportunities to partner with accomplished teachers in our local schools. Both IBEC and SEA-Tech partnered as placement sites for international Fulbright teachers. Fulbright teachers collaborated with PDS site coordinators and partnership teachers to teach cultural lessons and contribute to the professional discourse at each school site (*Essential 3*). Each innovative school was highlighted as a model for all 72 visiting teachers and school leaders from 44 countries over the duration of the program. In one partnership, PDS and Fulbright educators co-taught lessons from the novels set in Fulbright teachers' home countries. In another collaboration, visiting teachers connected with immigrant students. To this day, PDS teachers continue to engage in educational games and methods shared by visiting educators and many have maintained contact with visiting teachers over time (*Essential 3 and 4*).

Yet another distinctive co-constructed partnership exists through the support of our PDS Master Teacher Program. This initiative pairs outstanding teachers in partnership schools with WCE faculty associates for 2–3 years to collaborate on the design and implementation of a shared professional growth opportunity impacting their students, school, district and/or the broader professional community. One example of a teacher-faculty partnership at SEA-Tech initially planned to merge a faculty member’s course on the Social Change Model of Leadership Development with a Master Teacher’s high school English II curriculum to create a socially relevant leadership platform for sophomore students. The intended outcome was for students to be able to use their knowledge of leadership to promote social change in a chosen area of interest. The team was forced to modify their plan during the pandemic but instead secured funding for books needed to create a 4–6 week unit, which incorporated modules from the Social Change course into an English II curriculum unit entitled “Extending Freedom’s Reach” (*Essentials 3 and 4*).

PDS Site Coordinators and Partnership Teachers at each school site also collaborate as leaders in our broader National Board (NB) Certification and edTPA Support Networks. Our NB Network employs certified teacher leaders as peer mentors and readers for initial, advanced and renewal teacher candidates. Through this shared PDS initiative, teacher leaders at each school site impact up to 60 teachers annually, providing guidance to veteran teachers as they examine teaching and learning in their classrooms and the larger impact they have on the teaching profession as a whole. Similarly, teachers at each school serve as supports for pre-service teacher interns engaged in completing the edTPA portfolio for teacher licensure. Teachers work with university supervisors to pose critical questions, provide feedback and support students as they make the transition from student intern to first-year teacher (*Essentials 2 and 3*).

Over the last ten years, 436 field placements and 29 internships have been supported by IBEC and SEA-Tech teachers and school leaders. Each of these students has experienced the distinctive partnerships and collaborations that occur within and across each partnership setting, experiences they apply within their own classrooms in new educational settings with students and future teachers in our PDS and beyond (*Essential 2*).

Receiving the Exemplary PDS Award elevates our PDS partnership and the depth of the collaboration that is happening with IBEC and SEA-Tech. Our partnership thrives under a shared governance structure consisting of several key roles, and a PDS Advisory Board with representation from each of these stakeholder groups, among others, who participate in shared decision-making focused on key problems of practice, share input on operationalizing our PDS model and signature programs and inform partners about PDS programs, activities, accomplishments and challenges. Receiving the award reaffirms our commitment to this collaborative structure and the co-constructed initiatives that have become the bedrock of our PDS. In addition, receiving the award offers a platform to share the successes of our partnership, the innovations and scholarship it has produced and encourages further collaboration for future students and educators.

Our partnership work consistently refuels our shared passion for education. Bringing partners together, sharing in key decisions, creating collaborative teaching and leadership opportunities for school and university-based faculty – these opportunities have only served to strengthen our College of Education and, more broadly, the impact of our school partners on P-12 student learning. However, partnership work is messy. It’s not easy. And the time and energy spent on building relationships, nurturing those relationships and valuing the insights and expertise of educators in different roles will only serve to strengthen outcomes and add to the longevity of a school-university partnership. Many of the issues we face in education are complex and affect all educators spanning Pre-K to higher education. Creating partnerships across sectors, with university faculty and P-12 teachers, offers perspectives on dynamic issues from a variety of lenses. Working together develops a mutual respect across partners and supports individuals in becoming leaders. And a large part of the key to improving schools and student outcomes involves writing about our partnership work to engage a larger audience.

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