

Guest editorial: Concepts, critiques and possibilities for sustainability in school and university partnerships

145

This special issue has been some time in the making. In late 2024 and early 2025, a small group of researchers – based in the USA and South America – united around a shared curiosity regarding the sustainability of school-university partnerships (SUPs) both locally and globally. Early discussions centered on challenging traditional conceptions of sustainability and reconsidering its importance in educational contexts marked by rapid change. While some members were new to this work, others had been deeply invested in it for years.

As these meetings took place amid a shifting sociopolitical context in the USA and beyond, we became increasingly interested in how schools and universities respond to growing complexity, including financial constraints, staffing challenges, evolving community needs and persistent equity concerns. In such circumstances, sustainability in SUPs extends beyond partnership longevity to encompass the capacity for meaningful, collaborative adaptation and transformation.

As guest editors thinking about the sustainability of SUPs in this light, we became interested in the broader role that partnerships and collaborative action have played in advancing social and institutional change across diverse contexts over time. Two historically significant examples of collective action that came to mind were the US Revolution and the Civil Rights Movement.

During the US Revolution, diverse leaders and communities joined together in pursuit of a new vision for governance and civic life. Their efforts reflected a belief that institutions should be responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people, empowering citizens to help shape their collective future. This endeavor required collaborative efforts by a mosaic of actors outside of the battlefield – all a part of the larger battle for “liberty and justice for all” (Bellamy, 1892).

Similarly, the Civil Rights Movement brought together courageous people to challenge existing systems and to dream together of a brighter future for all (King, 1963). It was through their collective, direct action that historical breakthroughs occurred, forging new pathways of opportunity and progress. Uniting in peaceful protest, song, writings, strategic training and more, they marched for a more just world – one capable of upholding the foundational ideal of the Declaration of Independence (1776) that all people are created equal.

Today, powerful forces continue to shape educational systems, communities and public discourse in ways that raise important questions about democratic participation and the future of public education. In such circumstances, is it possible for school and university partners to provide a model for how people can work together to respond constructively to division and uncertainty? Can SUPs demonstrate through our collective efforts, our successes and our perseverance that the power of education remains an even stronger force? What can we learn from successful partnership work in different countries and contexts?

These were the questions that motivated us when our group first met in January 2025, and they continue to shape our thinking as we look to the road ahead. The answers are ambiguous, and the work of sustaining SUPs is hard. Yet we see the possibility in each of these articles, and in the collective work of us all, to make “good trouble, necessary trouble” (Lewis, 2020, para. 5) – the kind that can continue to open doors and reveal the endless sky to everyone.

The contributions selected for this special issue reflect a shared conviction that meaningful partnerships can create possibilities for learning and innovation that extend beyond any single institution. Together, they offer a story of hope and potential, pairing actionable frameworks with practical strategies for transformative partnerships that endure.



Overarching themes and insights on sustainability in SUPs

While not an exhaustive account, several connecting themes emerged across the collection. Every article emphasized some form of mutuality as central to sustainable partnership work. The collection highlighted the importance of equitable, co-constructed collaboration that is sensitive to context and the mutual roles and goals of both school and university partners. Qualitative methodology was employed across the studies to tell contextualized stories of the challenges and successes experienced in these partnerships as they worked toward the sustainability of their efforts. Throughout, conceptions of sustainability were questioned and reimaged as equity, resilience and mutual benefit were prioritized.

Relationships and mutualism as key components of sustainability

The studies in this special issue demonstrate that sustainability emerges not as a function of stable funding, formal agreements, or institutional permanence, but as the product of strong relational structures built on trust, mutual benefit, shared leadership and collective responsibility. The authors collectively challenge transactional models of partnership, arguing instead that sustainable school-university partnerships are sustained through ongoing relationship-building processes that enable participants to adapt to uncertainty, navigate disruption and pursue shared goals together.

Several contributions demonstrate that relational trust serves as both a protective factor during periods of turbulence and a catalyst for continued growth. [Harbour et al. \(2026\)](#) show how a residency partnership set in the USA was able to withstand the loss of federal funding because partners had cultivated a strong foundation of mutual commitment, transparent communication and collaborative problem-solving. Rather than allowing the funding crisis to fracture the partnership, these relational assets enabled participants to work collectively toward viable solutions, ultimately strengthening the partnership's resilience and sustaining opportunities for nearly all program participants.

[Rudder et al. \(2026\)](#) reconceptualize sustainability as an adaptive, iterative and responsive process enacted through ongoing boundary-spanning work. Their US-based critical, project-based (CPB) clinical model suggests that sustainable partnerships are characterized by reciprocal growth, shared decision-making and responsiveness to participants' evolving needs. Through metaphors of a "symphony," "tapestry," and "dance," they illustrate how sustainability is fostered when partners engage in meaningful collaboration rather than pursuing individual benefit.

[Xu et al. \(2026\)](#) reveal the fragility of partnerships when relational capacity is concentrated in particular individuals rather than embedded within partnership structures. Their examination of leadership turnover reveals how the loss of key personnel can disrupt trust, weaken collaboration and threaten sustainability for a partnership set in the USA. Importantly, however, their findings also point toward a solution: sustainable partnerships require relational infrastructures that distribute leadership, institutionalize communication and support shared ownership of the work. In this view, sustainability depends not solely on strong relationships between individuals, but on creating systems that enable those relationships to endure beyond personnel changes.

Taken together, these studies suggest that sustainability is fundamentally relational. Whether partnerships are responding to funding cuts, evolving local needs or organizational transitions, their capacity to endure appears tied to the extent to which trust, mutual accountability and shared leadership have been intentionally cultivated.

[Harbour et al. \(2026\)](#), [Rudder et al. \(2026\)](#) and [Xu et al. \(2026\)](#) advance a conception of sustainability grounded in mutualism – one that shifts attention away from maintaining programs and toward nurturing the relationships that make ongoing adaptation, learning and collective action possible.

Centering context, equity and co-constructive collaboration

Centering equity and shared voice requires partnerships to understand distinct local environments in order to design research that is responsive to dynamic contextual factors. This work suggests that sustainable partnerships emerge not from the replication of predetermined models, but from responsiveness to the unique conditions, histories, cultures and aspirations of participating communities. By questioning the traditional duality of researcher and practitioner roles, partners can co-construct a mutualistic space where the needs of the school context directly drive research inquiries and research actively supports and informs the everyday needs of the school.

Within this theme, the authors argue that sustainable school-university partnerships require more than effective organizational arrangements; they demand ongoing attention to the social, cultural, geographic and political contexts in which partnership work occurs. Sustainability, therefore, becomes a process of adaptation and co-construction rather than implementation and standardization.

A central insight is that context is not merely a backdrop for partnership activity but an active force that shapes educational opportunities, constraints and possibilities. [Forell \(2026\)](#) demonstrates how socio-spatial conditions influence educational experiences in Germany and how greater awareness of these conditions can help partners move beyond deficit-oriented interpretations of students and communities toward more asset-based and locally responsive approaches. [Narayanan's \(2026\)](#) comparison of leadership development partnerships in Portland, Oregon and Pune, India illustrates that sustainable initiatives emerge when programs are designed around local capacities, cultural realities and community needs rather than imported models of practice. These studies suggest that sustainability depends upon the ability of partnerships to remain attentive and responsive to the unique environments in which they operate.

An equity-centered understanding of sustainability is advanced that foregrounds questions of power, representation and knowledge production. [Peña and Rincones \(2026\)](#) argue that sustainable partnerships require continual reflexivity regarding identity, positionality, and the distribution of voice within collaborative work. Duoethnographic analysis of their research-practice partnership along the Mexico–Texas border shifts attention from the technical management of partnerships to the ethical dimensions of partnership activity, prompting participants to interrogate whose knowledge is privileged, whose perspectives influence decision-making and whose interests are ultimately served. In doing so, they position sustainability as an ethical commitment to equity rather than simply an organizational goal.

Traditional distinctions between researchers and practitioners are further challenged through an emphasis on co-constructive collaboration. Rather than treating schools as sites of implementation and universities as sites of expertise, the authors envision partnerships as mutualistic spaces in which knowledge, leadership and problem-solving are shared responsibilities. Narayanan highlights how broadening understandings of who constitutes a partner can strengthen local capacity and support equity-focused transformation, while Peña and Rincones call for more critical and reciprocal forms of engagement that acknowledge the expertise embedded within communities. In a similar vein, Forell demonstrates the value of collaborative inquiry that is deeply informed by local contexts and community realities.

These papers suggest that partnerships become sustainable not by maintaining fixed structures or predetermined agendas, but by cultivating the capacity to listen, adapt, reflect and co-construct solutions with the communities they serve. From this perspective, sustainability is achieved through ongoing engagement with context, commitment to equity, and the creation of collaborative spaces where multiple forms of knowledge and expertise can inform meaningful educational change.

A focus on resilience

Intentional partnership designs and frameworks can cultivate the agency and resiliency of SUPs. Across this collection, sustainability is increasingly framed not as stability or permanence, but as the capacity of partnerships to adapt, learn and remain productive amid changing conditions. Rather than portraying disruption as a threat to sustainability, the authors suggest that uncertainty is an enduring feature of partnerships and that sustainable SUPs are those intentionally designed to respond constructively to challenges while maintaining their core commitments. Resilience emerges as a defining characteristic of sustainability rather than simply a response to crisis.

Both [Erwin and Watson \(2026\)](#) and [Froehlich and Raberger \(2026\)](#) – [Erwin and Watson \(2026\)](#) in the USA and [Froehlich and Raberger \(2026\)](#) across multiple international contexts – argue that resilience is not an accidental byproduct of successful partnerships but a quality that can be deliberately cultivated through intentional design. Their work challenges assumptions that sustainability naturally develops over time, instead suggesting that partnerships can proactively establish the conditions necessary for long-term adaptability and growth. Their studies show that sustainability can be linked to structures that support reflection, collaboration, learning and shared responsibility, enabling partnerships to remain responsive as circumstances evolve.

Specifically, [Erwin and Watson \(2026\)](#) emphasize resilience-building practices as an integral part of the partnership model that strengthen both individual and organizational capacity. Reflective dialog, instructional walkthroughs and structured agreements are essential practices that prioritize the human relationships and collective learning processes that support sustainable collaboration. Their findings suggest that resilience develops when partnerships create opportunities for participants to engage in continuous inquiry, build trust and cultivate a shared sense of agency.

[Froehlich and Raberger \(2026\)](#) identify adaptive resilience – the ability of a partnership to remain functional, equitable and generative under changing conditions – as a central feature of sustainability. Their work extends the conversation beyond resilience as recovery from disruption to resilience as a design principle that can be embedded within partnership structures from the outset. By intentionally creating systems capable of responding flexibly to change while preserving shared values and purposes, partnerships can maintain continuity without becoming rigid. Their work suggests that adaptive designs can support partnership work across diverse educational and international contexts, highlighting the transferability of resilience-oriented approaches.

A throughline of the articles in this special issue is the vital importance of co-constructive collaboration, grounded in trust, that seeks to shift the boundaries between scientific research and on-the-ground educational practice and that foregrounds context as a key consideration for the sustainability of SUPs. The collection shows that relational frameworks that honor mutualism, and that have the potential to cultivate adaptability and build resilience, are needed for sustainable and equitable partnership work.

A call for optimism and hope

Several insights emerge from this collection that move SUP scholarship beyond traditional concerns with partnership longevity and institutionalization toward a more dynamic understanding of sustainability rooted in mutualism, equity, contextual responsiveness and adaptive resilience. As this special issue demonstrates, sustainability is not simply about preserving partnerships; it is about continually reimagining them.

First and foremost, the intentional development of trust-based relational structures must be treated as a priority. Trust is not merely a byproduct of partnership work; it is the core foundation. School and university partners should build agreed-upon relational frameworks that cultivate adaptability and build the resilience necessary for sustainability during turbulent times.

Within these relational structures, utilizing distributed leadership supports equity and actively counters an overreliance on select individuals or the destabilization that can result from leadership turnover. Along these lines, school and university partners should commit to deep reflection and critical reflexive inquiry around shifting issues of power and positionality.

Partnership designs must remain deeply responsive to dynamic contextual factors, including spatial and socio-geographic characteristics. It is essential that partnerships honor the lived realities of schools and their communities rather than rigid agendas and researcher expectations.

Ultimately, these goals are actualized through a commitment to equitable, co-constructed collaboration. Sustainability in SUPs may be realized when participants collectively define goals, negotiate challenges and create shared pathways forward. This requires a deliberate shift away from transactional relationships and toward a genuine mutualism where research and practice fluidly inform one another, and boundaries blend into shared third spaces. Such a journey demands institutional openness, humility and a shared willingness to learn across traditional boundaries.

While educational systems have historically faced – and will continue to face – significant uncertainty, the value of shared inquiry and collective action remains enduring. The contributions presented in this special issue offer reasons for both optimism and hope. They demonstrate that partnerships grounded in trust, mutual benefit, contextual responsiveness and adaptive resilience possess the capacity not only to endure disruption but also to create new possibilities for educational improvement.

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Ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI) disclosure

During the preparation of this guest editorial, the authors used Microsoft Copilot and Google Gemini to organize, format and synthesize author-generated notes, as well as to refine author-generated prose. These tools were utilized solely as a drafting and editing resource to improve clarity and readability. The final text was thoroughly reviewed, edited and approved by the authors, who maintain full responsibility and accountability for the accuracy, integrity and originality of the content.

Acknowledgments

The guest editors would like to thank the reviewers who lent their time and expertise to providing valuable feedback on the articles. We would also like to thank the participating school and university partners for being courageous enough not only to do this work but to document their challenges and successes while doing it. Lastly, we would like to thank the working group who initiated the call for this special issue, as well as the *School University Partnerships* editorial team for their unending patience and support throughout the creation of it.

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Further reading

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