

A dream not deferred: one school district–university partnership’s story of endurance and sustainability

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to describe how a school district–university partnership was sustained following the unexpected termination of federal grant funding. Drawing on mutualism as a lens for school and district–university partnerships, this paper explores how shared leadership, relational commitment, and problem-solving practices sustained our partnership during a period of disruption, termination, and beyond.

Design/methodology/approach – We used a reflective, storytelling approach to describe the journey of a district–university teacher residency partnership. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with university and district leaders, along with project leadership reflections, we highlight leadership decisions and partnership responses across key inflection points during the project. This approach allowed us to document how the partnership was established, navigated the abrupt loss of grant funding, and adapted to sustain its work.

Findings – A strong relational foundation established prior to the funding disruption enabled our partnership to respond collectively and adaptively during a period of uncertainty. Shared vision, transparent communication, and people-centered leadership fostered collaboration and supported the co-construction of a reformulated pathway forward for residents. Rather than weakening under pressure, the partnership deepened, resulting in revised agreements, reallocated institutional resources, and sustained support for residents.

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Originality/value – Our work contributes to an underexplored area in the literature by illustrating how one district–university partnerships endured following abrupt funding loss. By foregrounding sustained commitment, relational trust, and intentional collaboration, we offer practical insights for building resilient, sustainable partnerships that extend beyond the life of external funding.

Keywords School district–university partnership, Sustainability, Teacher residency, Grant termination, Grow your own

Paper type Practitioner paper

Universities and PreK-12 schools have a long history of partnering to achieve educational goals. Early collaborative efforts are often traced back to work of the Holmes Group (Murray, 1986), which established networks of professional development schools across the United States, and subsequently around the world. Continuing the sentiment posited by the Holmes Group, partnerships increasingly center the needs of schools and districts (Walsh & Backe, 2013), recognizing that schools and learners benefit when partnerships address locally defined challenges, including educator recruitment, preparation, and retention (American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education [AACTE], 2018; National Association for Professional Development Schools [NAPDS], 2021; Peel *et al.*, 2002). One way these efforts have materialized is through *Grow Your Own* programs, that recruit, prepare, and retain community members to become teachers in local schools (e.g. Gist *et al.*, 2019), a model we used to build our partnership which was initially funded through the *Teacher Quality Partnership Program*.

However, funding cuts from the U.S. Department of Education (2025) have significantly affected these collaborative efforts. Funding terminations included “over \$600 million in grants to institutions and nonprofits that were using taxpayer funds to train teachers and education agencies on divisive ideologies” (U.S. Department of Education, 2025, np). Among the grants terminated were teacher preparation grants funded through the *Teacher Quality Partnership Program*. In this article, we describe the aftermath of these grant terminations for one district–university partnership designed to prepare teachers through the parallel goals of filling teacher vacancies and providing teacher candidates (i.e. residents) and school professionals with previously unavailable opportunities to become certified teachers in their communities. Despite a devastating loss of funding, we tell a story of enduring partnership and resilience, presenting an account of how commitment, collaboration, and resourcefulness among school district–university partners enabled the sustenance of a *Grow Your Own*, residency-based teacher certification program against enormous odds.

School and district - university partnerships

Research consistently demonstrates that partnerships characterized by high levels of communication, shared responsibility, and mutual benefit are more likely to be sustained and deemed successful (Butcher *et al.*, 2011; Green *et al.*, 2020; Kirschenbaum & Reagan, 2001; López Turley & Stevens, 2015). For example, an analysis of various partnerships between one urban university and surrounding districts found that initiatives with stronger collaborative structures were consistently rated as more effective in meeting their goals than those with weaker arrangements (Kirschenbaum & Reagan, 2001). Similarly, López, Turley and Stevens (2015) emphasized that partnerships require more than goodwill; they depend on formal structures and routines that allow collaboration embedded in daily practices. Regular meetings and structured communication protocols were essential to maintaining transparency and trust, especially when navigating sensitive issues such as student placement or program evaluation (López Turley & Stevens, 2015). Research further conceptualizes school–university partnerships as evolving across phases, including development, implementation, and sustainability, with the latter remaining the least understood stage (Sarmiento-Marquez *et al.*, 2023).

Within this broader partnership landscape, models such as Professional Development Schools, Research–Practice Partnerships, and *Grow Your Own* programs illustrate several

types of school district–university collaborations that have been structured to support teaching and learning. While distinct in form, these efforts share a common emphasis on joint work across institutional boundaries, co-construction of practice, and reciprocal benefit. Scholars note that partnerships functioning as institutional boundary-spanning collaborations, rather than parallel or transactional arrangements, are better positioned to navigate competing priorities, resource constraints, and organizational differences (Firestone & Fisler, 2002; Madrid Miranda *et al.*, 2024; Meyer *et al.*, 2023; Penuel *et al.*, 2015).

School and district–university partnerships have also been shown to build educator and organizational capacity across multiple domains. At the teacher level, partnerships that support collaborative inquiry, co-teaching, and iterative reflection have improved instructional practice and professional learning (Desimone *et al.*, 2016; Schnellert & Kozak, 2023). For example, research findings from a school district–university partnership supporting rural elementary teacher preparation and structured as residency-based preparation model strengthened learning for residents and mentor teachers by engaging university faculty, district leaders, mentor teachers, and residents in collaborative inquiry, joint planning, and reflective practice (D’Amico *et al.*, 2022; Thompson *et al.*, 2022; Curcio & Harbour, 2025; Curcio *et al.*, 2025; Mein *et al.*, 2024; Valente *et al.*, 2022). At the school district level, partnerships have expanded pathways to certification and addressed critical workforce needs by increasing access to specialized credentials and locally relevant preparation. Clark-Gareca and Fontana (2018), for instance, found that district–university collaborations expanded ESOL and ENL certification pathways, increasing districts’ capacity to serve multilingual learners while strengthening teachers’ professional expertise. School leadership preparation embedded in partnerships has similarly produced educators better equipped to navigate real-world challenges while attending to equity and community context (Basom & Yerkes, 2004; Gooden *et al.*, 2011; Moyi *et al.*, 2022; Peel *et al.*, 2002). Collectively, these findings reveal how such partnerships function as capacity-building infrastructures that strengthen teacher learning, expand district workforce pipelines, and support educator development across educational systems.

Grow Your Own teacher preparation partnerships exemplify how school district–university collaborations can address persistent workforce challenges by preparing individuals to become certified teachers in schools in their local communities. These partnerships not only respond to teacher shortages but also contribute to diversifying the teaching workforce and valuing the community cultural wealth that Teachers of Color bring to classrooms in their communities (Gist *et al.*, 2019; Yosso, 2005). Despite systemic and structural barriers, including certification exams, economic exclusion, funding instability, and racially biased definitions of teacher quality (Gist *et al.*, 2019), research indicates that *Grow Your Own* partnerships demonstrate strong retention and better prepared educators to navigate real-world challenges and attuned to issues of equity and diversity when relational and institutional supports are in place (Basom & Yerkes, 2004; Gist *et al.*, 2019; Gooden *et al.*, 2011; Peel *et al.*, 2002).

Grow Your Own partnerships face the same challenges faced by other school and district–university partnerships. A common challenge is leadership turnover; when key administrators leave at university or district levels, collaborations can be disrupted or even dissolved (Kearney *et al.*, 2021). Divergent motivations such as universities prioritizing research and publication and districts focusing on immediate instructional improvements and student outcomes can strain partnerships and weaken commitment (López Turley & Stevens, 2015). Funding limitations are another persistent challenge. Ralston *et al.* (2016) found that even well-functioning partnerships frequently faltered without sustained financial support. Relatedly, imbalances in resources and responsibilities can emerge, threatening the success and sustainability of partnerships (Meyer *et al.*, 2023; Ralston *et al.*, 2016). Without clear mechanisms to address this imbalance, frustration and inequity can undermine collaboration (Firestone & Fisler, 2002). Fortunately, scholars have identified several safeguards to mitigate these challenges, including the need to clearly define roles and responsibilities to prevent conflicts stemming from ambiguous expectations (Sjölund

et al., 2023). Ongoing trust-building and relational work are consistently also emphasized as vital; when strong relationships are in place, partnerships are more likely to survive external disruptions (Dyson, 1999).

When considering the school district–university partnerships, researchers often focus on initiation and early implementation of partnerships but provide limited insight into how these collaborations are sustained over time (Kearney *et al.*, 2021; Ralston *et al.*, 2016). While research has documented the importance of trust, communication, and shared goals (Dyson, 1999; López Turley & Stevens, 2015; Meyer *et al.*, 2023), there is less attention to the mechanisms that allow partnerships to endure when formal financial or policy support is withdrawn. Emerging studies, however, suggest that partnerships can persist beyond formal funding when reciprocal benefits and stakeholder engagement are sufficiently developed (Jones & Clarke, 2024). Attending to these shared benefits is critical for fostering resilience when resources diminish and challenges arise (Firestone & Fisler, 2002). However, relatively little is known about how school district–university partnerships respond when major funding streams are abruptly terminated. Our story addresses this gap by examining how one partnership drew upon established relationships, reciprocal commitments, and collaborative problem-solving practices to adapt, reorganize resources, and sustain its work following the unexpected loss of federal funding.

Theoretical framework

Our partnership was grounded in mutualism theory, which originated in ecology and biology and describes relationships in which multiple parties benefit (Bronstein, 1994; Connor, 1995). We draw on mutualism to understand school and district–university partnerships as relationships that develop over time through shared work, evolving needs, and ongoing interaction, rather than fixed relationships. A mutualistic partnership perspective shifts the focus from simply whether both partners benefit to how those benefits are created, negotiated, and sustained.

Connor (1995) distinguished between by-product benefits (i.e. those that emerge incidentally) and invested benefits, which require intentional effort and contribution. This distinction is useful for understanding how educational partnerships take shape and deepen over time. Mutualism also highlights the importance of designing partnerships that intentionally support multiple stakeholders. For instance, Chorzempa *et al.* (2010) emphasized that university–school partnerships should extend beyond preservice preparation to meaningfully support schools and communities. Similarly, Johnson and Johnson (2002) highlighted partners as pursuing different, but complementary, goals. Rather than producing identical outcomes, what matters is that the work remains interconnected and supportive for both entities. This idea is reflected in the concept of simultaneous renewal, where schools and universities both benefit through working together to improve teaching and learning (Clark, 1999).

However, partnerships do not automatically function in mutualistic ways and can become imbalanced when power, resources, or decision-making are uneven (Hains & Hains, 2024). Prior research suggests that partnerships often evolve toward more mutualistic forms through co-design, shared expertise, and joint problem-solving (Vargas *et al.*, 2022). However, this shift requires sustained attention to relationships, communication, and responsiveness to context, especially during times of change or disruption (France, 2025). Related work points to the importance of shared goals, co-production, and trust-building in sustaining collaborative partnerships (Cooper *et al.*, 2021; Lezotte *et al.*, 2022).

Finally, mutualism attends to not only individual interactions, but across the partnership as a whole, which Powell and Walsh (2018) describe as entailing high-trust, cooperative engagement that moves beyond transactional exchange. This framing helps explain how relationships can deepen and become more resilient over time. Taken together, mutualism positions schools and

Story telling approach

In the following sections, we explore how one university–district partnership was established, implemented, and sustained after external funding was terminated. To do so, we adopt storytelling as a dynamic, participatory approach that foregrounds the exchange of ideas shaping our collaboration and captures the lived experiences of multiple actors, including district partners and university project leadership.

Storytelling shares its roots with narrative inquiry, and is grounded in constructivism and the understanding that reality is socially constructed, multi-dimensional, and ever-evolving (Gergen & Gergen, 2014). Scholars engaged in critical inquiry argue that “it is through storytelling that private and public interest are contested in the battlefield of meanings, with the prevailing narrative defined by the most powerful party” (Hou, 2025, p. 266). As Hou further notes, “even when recounting negative experiences may trigger emotional tolls, storytelling... offers the theoretical potential to help participants rebuild a constructive relationship with reality” (p. 267). Beyond its therapeutic value, storytelling has also been recognized for its capacity to stimulate reflection and foster the development of social ties (Slingerland *et al.*, 2023).

We selected a storytelling approach because our goal was not to evaluate program outcomes or generate a formal theory of partnership sustainability, but rather to understand and communicate how participants experienced and interpreted a period of significant disruption. Storytelling allowed us to preserve the sequence of events, center the perspectives of key partnership leaders, and explore how the partnership evolved as it navigated uncertainty. This approach enabled us to capture the interconnected decisions, relationships, and experiences that shaped the partnership’s continuation. At the same time, storytelling reflects participants’ interpretations of events and may not capture all perspectives or experiences. With this understanding, we use storytelling to trace how the partnership was established, responded to the abrupt loss of funding, and ultimately sustained its work through the voices of district and university leaders and reflections from project personnel. This retrospective account illustrates how a school district–university partnership can endure periods of uncertainty while offering insights for cultivating sustainable partnerships.

Our partnership context and perspectives

Partnership participants and data sources

While many individuals contributed to the planning and implementation of this residency-based teacher preparation pathway, this storytelling account foregrounds the voices of two key leaders who played central roles in both the design and enactment of the project. These individuals worked to align the program with district needs, including addressing shortages of well-qualified teachers from diverse backgrounds, and to guide project implementation efforts. One was a school district leader, Dr Curry-Jones, and the other was a university professor, Dr Harbour, who served as principal investigator, and both brought prior experience with grant-funded alternative certification pathway programs. Together, they collaborated with university and district colleagues to guide the project.

Data for our reflective storytelling approach were drawn from two semi-structured interviews with these leaders, supplemented by follow-up email clarifications. Interviews were conducted approximately six months after the final grant termination notice, while the revised project was being implemented, and were recorded on Zoom by two members of the research team. Transcriptions were generated via Zoom and subsequently reviewed and edited by research team members who were not involved in conducting the interviews to ensure accuracy and consistency. Interview data were complemented by reflections from the broader

leadership team, including university-based project personnel (i.e. faculty and graduate assistants) and project evaluators, which provided additional context regarding key events, decisions, and partnership processes. These reflections emerged through structured discussions among the research team members during manuscript development, where key events, decisions, and partnership processes were revisited. Reflections were used to provide contextual information, clarify timelines, and corroborate interpretations generated from the interviews rather than serving as primary data sources.

Leadership and research team and positionality. It must be noted that individuals who contributed to this manuscript engaged in the partnership in different ways. This storytelling account was initially developed by members of the project leadership who were also members of a larger research team. The project leadership consisted of: (1) the Principal Investigator (i.e. White female), who was actively involved in the development, implementation, and sustainability of the project; (2) all three Co-Principal Investigators (i.e. African-American female, White male, and Latinx male) who are currently teacher education faculty and who were actively involved in the grant project; (3) grant project personnel including both the project manager and university-based instructional coach (i.e. African-American female and White female respectively); (4) two individuals that were members of the external evaluation team (i.e. White females) who were familiar with the partnership through past and ongoing evaluation activities of residency programs; and (5) the coordinator of recruitment and retention in our partner district (i.e. African-American female). In total there were nine members of the leadership team of which seven individuals were also members of a larger 10-member research team that included an additional teacher education faculty member noted for her expertise in qualitative research as well as two College of Education doctoral students; it must be noted that the project manager and instructional coach did not engage as members of the research team because their positions were cut when the grant was terminated. The research team as a whole contributed to conducting participant interviews, reflections, analysis, and the development of this manuscript.

Because many of the members of the research team were also participants in the leadership of the grant, we approach this work as a reflective account rather than an external evaluation. We recognize that our involvement in the project shaped how we experienced, interpreted, and told this story. The research team sought to engage in ongoing reflexivity regarding their assumptions, experiences, and relationships to the partnership while implementing systematic data collection and analytic procedures (e.g. [Berger, 2015](#)). At the same time, our proximity to the partnership also provided insight into the decisions, relationships, and experiences that influenced how the partnership responded to disruption and sustained its work. These experiences shaped how we interpreted partnership processes and informed our interest in understanding how school-university partnerships respond to disruption and sustain collaborative work.

Partnership context

The collaborating school district had a long-standing relationship with the university and College of Education, including having schools as members of the college's Professional Development School Network ([Field et al., 2010](#); [Field & Van Scoy, 2014](#)) for over 20 years; however, the specific schools involved in this project were not schools within the Professional Development Network. Participating schools were selected based on grant requirements and district recommendations, with an emphasis on serving high percentages of students living in poverty. Elementary schools ($n = 3$) served between 70% and 96% of students living in poverty (i.e. percentages of children qualifying for free and reduced lunch; eligibility for federal needs-based programs including SNAP, TANF; [South Carolina Department of Education, 2023](#)), while middle schools ($n = 2$) served between 84% and 96% ([South Carolina Department of Education, 2023](#)). Across the district, student demographics are diverse (67% Black, 18% White, 8% Latinx, 6% multiracial, 1% Asian; [U.S. News, 2026](#)), with the five

participating schools serving predominantly Black students (60%–92%). The district spans multiple community contexts, including urban ($n = 2$), suburban ($n = 2$), and rural ($n = 1$) settings (National Center for Education Statistics, 2026).

The partnership was informed by a previous grant-funded school district–university collaboration that provided alternative certification pathways in rural communities across South Carolina (D’Amico *et al.*, 2022; Thompson *et al.*, 2022; Curcio & Harbour, 2025; Curcio *et al.*, 2025). Richland County School District One district participated in that initiative during its final year of implementation (2023–2024). Building on those experiences, the current partnership drew upon improvement science and iterative design principles to connect evidence and practice in the development of an alternative teacher certification pathway (Hannan *et al.*, 2015; Lewis, 2015). Although the structure of the two programs differed, both were designed to prepare a diverse, community-based teacher workforce through residency-oriented pathways that provided academic, professional, and financial support to aspiring elementary certified teachers.

Project leadership brought extensive experience in teacher preparation partnerships, alternative certification pathways, and practice-based educator preparation. University faculty were active in the college’s Professional Development School Network and brought expertise across elementary education disciplines, while district leaders had substantial experience working with university partners and teacher workforce development initiatives. School-based practitioners participated voluntarily and were motivated by a shared commitment to mentoring and preparing future teachers. Although long-standing relationships can sometimes have a narrow perspective, this history of collaboration provided a strong foundation for navigating uncertainty and sustaining the partnership through significant disruption.

Establishing our partnership

As noted, the partnership between the school district and the university did not begin with the SC-DREAM Project. A longstanding partnership was in place, with the district hosting teacher candidates during their internship experiences, collaborating on previous grant projects, and participating in alternative teacher preparation pathways to certification. The current partnership emerged through a university-led grant proposal that invited district collaboration. However, from the outset, both partners sought to move beyond a traditional grant-recipient relationship by co-constructing project design and implementation through shared leadership and decision-making processes. Grounded through a mutualistic lens (e.g. Bronstein, 1994; Connor, 1995), this school district–university partnership was conceptualized as collaborative work across institutional boundaries that was grounded in co-construction, shared leadership, and reciprocal benefits (e.g. Kirschenbaum & Reagan, 2001; Green *et al.*, 2020; NAPDS, 2021; Penuel *et al.*, 2015; Walsh & Backe, 2013).

As such, when we began work on this large-scale, federally-funded project, SC-DREAM, we worked to ensure that we approached it in a way that established a true school district–university collaborative partnership, rather than a transactional relationship (Green *et al.*, 2020; NAPDS, 2021; Penuel *et al.*, 2015; Walsh & Backe, 2013). In our project design, we were intentionally partnered with only one district as a way to dedicate the collaborative space and time needed to realize a fully developed partnership (e.g. Firestone & Fisler, 2002; Walsh & Backe, 2013). We understood the importance of developing a partnership that was attuned to our context and local community (D’Amico *et al.*, 2022; Gist *et al.*, 2019). Our long-term intention was to broaden our partnerships to other districts within our state as the five-year project progressed (2023–2028); however, as our story will tell, this did not come to fruition. As such, we centered our school district–university partnership on one community, where both the school district and university were located.

SC-DREAM was a teacher preparation pathway designed for individuals who held a bachelor’s degree and were interested in becoming an elementary teacher within our partner school district, Richland County School District One. Through a *Grow Your Own* partnership

model, SC-DREAM aimed to build on the assets brought by individuals from local communities through a strengths-based approach to create a more diverse teaching workforce that better reflects the students served within South Carolina elementary classrooms. In collaboration with our partner district and schools, SC-DREAM sought to equip educators to meet students' academic, social, behavioral, and emotional needs in high-need districts through collective efforts of equity-centered multi-tiered systems of support. SC-DREAM residents were to receive both professional and financial support for 18-months as they pursued a Master of Arts in Teaching degree and certification in Elementary Education. Simultaneously, residents were to engage in a unique, year-long residency experience working alongside a coaching teacher in an elementary classroom (i.e. grades 2–6) with professional support from a university supervisor. Following certification, residents were also to be provided professional induction support for a minimum of two years through a district/university partnership (i.e. CarolinaTIP).

With the project design and funding in place, we began to co-construct the unique, *Grow Your Own* residency pathway to address barriers to teacher certification for individuals, including residents from historically underserved populations, within the school district's local community. Both university and district leadership (i.e. project leadership) had previous experience, knowledge, and expertise in working within alternative preparation programs and preparation pathways to certification. Drawing on our collective knowledge and prior research on *Grow Your Own* teacher preparation models (e.g. [D'Amico et al., 2022](#); [Gist et al., 2019](#)), we recognized successes and challenges often associated with these models, which informed our practices and beliefs that positive outcomes were possible through the SC-DREAM Project.

Developing a relationship built upon trust and mutual benefit

To fully realize a strong school district–university partnership, dedicated time and intentional care at the outset of the project were essential. Recognizing that partnerships often privilege university priorities and operate unidirectionally ([Firestone & Fisler, 2002](#); [Penuel et al., 2015](#); [Walsh & Backe, 2013](#)), we approached our partnership with a deliberate commitment to mutual benefit, recognizing that both district and university participants brought important and complementary forms of expertise to the project ([Meyer et al., 2023](#); [Walkington, 2007](#)). Rather than positioning the district as an implementer of a pre-determined university vision, members of the university leadership team (e.g. co-principal investigators and evaluators), we grounded our partnership in shared ownership and joint decision-making.

District leadership experienced this partnership as distinct from other projects. Reflecting on prior experiences, Dr Curry-Jones explained, “Although I have worked with many residency programs, they have typically come to me as a package deal. . . whereas this one was a little bit different. I felt like it really considered the needs of the district and the needs of the residents, and we got to give input along the way.” The time we took to develop a strong foundational relationship and co-establish goals that would be continually maintained and negotiated throughout the partnership made our enduring partnership possible.

From the university perspective, honoring district input was essential to implementing a project that was truly reciprocal, attended to specific needs, and functioned in a productive manner, required university project leaders to foster dialogue and elicit district expertise while keeping the project goals and funding requirements at the forefront. Discussions centered on balancing institutional priorities, leveraging the distinct strengths of each partner, and co-designing a program that benefited both the university and the district (e.g. [Butcher et al., 2011](#); [López Turley & Stevens, 2015](#); [Meyer et al., 2023](#); [Walkington, 2007](#); [Walsh & Backe, 2013](#)). Although this approach required substantial time and effort, Dr Harbour emphasized its value, noting that “It took a lot of time on the front end, but I think it's been worth it. . . it is what I would consider an actual true partnership, as opposed to this tangential relationship of ‘We work in a district [rather than with a district]’.” This reciprocal approach was also evident to others. As one project evaluator noted:

From the earliest points of partnership, both university faculty and district administrators were fully engaged and responsive to one another's objectives. Due to the nature of the partnership (one school district partnered with the university), I believe each party was fully committed to the model and worked to make it as successful as possible.

This reflection underscores how early engagement, open communication, collaboration, and recognition of shared expertise laid a strong relational foundation for the partnership.

Key practices that supported a mutualistic partnership foundation

As we reflect on how the partnership was established, three key practices shaped the development of a mutualistic partnership grounded in shared ownership, voice, and trust: (1) co-constructing project plans, (2) intentionally co-designing and co-engaging in the interview process as residents were selected, and (3) spanning boundaries and space across university and school contexts. The events described below illustrate how we enacted these practices in our work. Each practice involved both university and school district leadership, positioning us as the “project leadership team”—a collective unit rather than separate entities working toward a common goal.

Co-constructing project plans. Co-constructing project plans was central to how we developed our partnership. One key example of this practice occurred during our trip to Washington, D.C., where project leadership attended the EED Annual Summit. The EED Annual Summit coincided with early project development and recruitment. The event brought together grantees to engage in program-specific learning, share presentations, and receive feedback from others facing similar challenges. These experiences created space for us to discuss and negotiate key aspects of the project and served as a catalyst for shared leadership.

In alignment with our commitment to co-construction, we ensured that both university and district representatives, including the principal investigator, a project evaluator, and two district leaders, attended the EED Annual Summit. Surprisingly, we were among the few project teams that included district representation, a decision that became pivotal in shaping our partnership. As Dr Harbour reflected, the experience “set the stage for how the rest of it worked. . . it was all co-constructed, all thought through together in that partnership capacity.” The Summit also allowed us to better understand the grant from multiple perspectives. As Dr Curry-Jones shared, “Although I knew that we were partnering as a university and a school district, I didn’t know all of the grants side of it, and so I really did learn a lot with that.” Our district partners were often sought out by other grantees who needed a district/practitioner perspective. This alone reiterated the importance of district expertise and voice in partnerships and decision-making processes (e.g. [Meyer et al., 2023](#); [Walkington, 2007](#)).

Time spent together at the EED Annual Summit allowed us to think strategically about our goals, work through what we wanted the partnership to look like and feel like, and how to best support the school district and our future residents. Although some planning occurred prior to travel, being together in person created the conditions for deeper collaboration. As Dr Harbour stated, “those days became so vastly important. . . because we were together thinking about what actually needed to happen.” One project evaluator summed up the experience stating,

The foundation of respect and responsiveness was created when project leadership and district personnel attended the EED Annual Summit in Washington, DC during the planning year. At this event, USC and Richland One representatives had meaningful, honest conversations about the district’s needs and how the residency program could help. This resulted not only in a shared understanding of how best to recruit, support, and develop teachers for Richland One, but also established a partnership in its truest definition - one in which both parties were working towards the same goal.

Viewed through a mutualistic lens, these early planning efforts represented invested benefits ([Connor, 1995](#)), as university and district partners intentionally contributed time, expertise, and resources to develop a program that reflected shared interests and complementary goals ([Johnson & Johnson, 2002](#)).

Intentionally co-designing and co-engaging in resident selection. Intentionally co-designing and co-engaging in resident selection was another critical practice in establishing our partnership. This was most evident in the development and implementation of the in-person interview process. The interview process reflected our collective efforts to identify the characteristics needed for residents to be successful as graduate students, teachers, and members of the district community.

Initial planning during the EED Annual Summit and continued collaboration with the project leadership team were crucial to shaping the in-person interview process. Together, we focused on identifying characteristics that would serve residents well in the program along with characteristics that would serve them well as district teachers. District leaders contributed perspectives regarding the dispositions and commitments needed for long-term success within the district, while university partners focused on characteristics associated with success in graduate coursework and teacher preparation. As part of this work, district and university partners jointly developed common evaluation rubrics for each interview task to ensure that candidates were assessed using shared criteria aligned with both program and district goals. During the interview process, all participating university and district personnel used the same rubrics to evaluate candidate responses and performances. Following the interviews, project leadership team members discussed candidate strengths, areas for growth, and rubric scores collectively to inform selection decisions. This early co-design effort became one of the most pivotal steps in solidifying shared ownership and trust within the partnership, while also establishing a transparent and intentional resident selection process.

From our collaborative planning discussions emerged a two-step resident interview process that complemented traditional graduate school application tasks. To ensure that candidates knew the importance of our collaboration, all SC-DREAM project personnel and participating district personnel were present for in-person interviews. Dr Curry-Jones noted the care and time invested in this phase, stating, “I do think that a lot of time and care has to be placed on the selection process for the candidates,” adding that the interview process “was thorough” and helped us “to vet our candidates.” Her presence during the interviews reinforced shared responsibility, signaling that resident selection was a joint endeavor rather than a university-driven decision.

The first interview task involved potential candidates answering interview questions related to motivations and disposition towards teaching. For example, we asked, “What experiences have you had or what personal characteristics do you have that make you feel you want to teach elementary students?” In addition to the question-and-answer portion of the interview, residents and project leadership engaged in a discussion of the article *How Data-Driven Reform Can Drive Deficit Thinking* (Bertrand & Marsh, 2021). Residents were asked to read the article prior to the interview. During the interview in small groups, we reflected on the reading, discussed its main points, identified areas of agreement and disagreement, and provided rationales for our positions. The decision to include resident responses to an article allowed the leadership team to understand the analytical and reflective abilities of potential residents who were seeking advanced degrees. Additionally, we wanted them to also notice how, as graduate students, we were hoping to guide them beyond passive consumption of literature toward a critical engagement with equity-oriented perspectives.

The second interview task required residents to develop an “expert teaching lesson” on a topic of their choice, allowing us to observe their capacities to plan instruction and receive feedback. Candidates were given two directions: (1) begin by introducing themselves and their area of expertise, and (2), present the key concepts of the topic, using explanations and relevant examples. Expert teaching lesson topics ranged from crochet, to music, to adding fractions, to baking a cake, and negotiating a deal. Through this process, we discovered the array of expertise brought by potential residents. Although the goal was not to evaluate candidates’ teaching ability, we were able to examine their capacity to clearly communicate information and engage an audience. In addition to informing selection decisions, the interview process generated insights that informed future coursework and program activities. As one member of the project leadership team reflected:

As an instructor of a course focused on preparing residents to use tools and strategies for supporting culturally and linguistically diverse students, observing their lessons prompted me to consider how teaching demonstrations could serve as a model for young elementary children to bring their own expertise into the classroom to teach subject matter content.

Collectively, the interview process functioned as more than a selection mechanism; it served as an early enactment of the partnership's values, expectations, and long-term goals. The process reflected a shared commitment to identifying candidates who could succeed as graduate students, effective teachers, and long-term contributors to the district community. As Dr Curry-Jones emphasized, "we were very careful to make sure that these were people who are going to stay with the profession for some time." This shared focus shaped both the design of the interview process and the criteria used to evaluate candidates. By involving the entire project leadership team in the development of interview tasks, evaluation rubrics, candidate interviews, and post-interview deliberations, resident selection became a space where university and district partners enacted shared responsibility for preparing future teachers. Rather than operating independently, partners jointly designed, implemented, and evaluated the selection process, drawing on their respective expertise to make collective decisions for candidate selection. These collaborative practices reflected the co-design and shared expertise that characterize increasingly mutualistic partnerships (Vargas *et al.*, 2022).

Spanning university and school boundaries and creating collaborative spaces. Spanning university and school boundaries was an important practice that supported ongoing partnership development. Recruitment events and the SC-DREAM project kickoff provided key opportunities to enact this work by bringing partners together across institutional spaces. These events allowed for university and district personnel to come together in one another's spaces to collaboratively engage, strengthen relationships, and nurture a collective sense of responsibility for the project.

To support recruitment, the district invited university partners to participate in district-wide events, creating opportunities for engagement with school leaders and potential candidates. As Dr Harbour reflected, "they welcomed us into their space as we welcomed them into our space." As Dr Harbour reflected:

Something I feel that was pretty unique with this was they invited us to their recruitment events. . . I believe all of us [university grant leadership team members] at one point went to a recruitment event. . . they welcomed us into their space as we welcomed them into our space.

These experiences reinforced reciprocity and demonstrated a shared commitment to the work.

The SC-DREAM project kickoff further extended this boundary-spanning practice. Designed as a welcoming and celebratory event, it brought together university leadership, district leadership, and residents in a shared space. Similar to an athletic signing day when high school seniors officially commit to play sports for a college by signing a Letter of Intent, we wanted our residents to also engage in a similar type of celebration to welcome them into the project and showcase their commitment.

The kickoff event began with an introduction from the Dean of the College of Education and the school district's Chief of Human Resources, followed by introductions from project faculty and other SC-DREAM project team members. We opened the celebration with a reading of Jacqueline Woodson's poignant picture book, *The Day You Begin* (Woodson, 2018), which highlights the courage needed to connect with others. Recognizing the program as a significant commitment for residents that would impact their lives and their families, we wanted to publicly recognize that while taking bold steps could be intimidating, forming connections with others through new journeys could lead to possibilities and growth. We captured the signing of contracts with photos and celebrated with food and comradery as the residents entered this new chapter. The kickoff event emphasized connection, commitment, and community.

Together, these experiences highlight how boundary-spanning created opportunities for collaboration, relationship-building, and shared responsibility. By bringing university and

district partners together across institutional contexts, these activities fostered the mutualistic high-trust, cooperative engagement that moves partnerships beyond transactional exchange (Powell & Walsh, 2018). In doing so, they strengthened relationships, built trust, and established a relational foundation that not only supported the initial development of the partnership but also proved critical during the tumultuous times ahead.

Enduring tumultuous times

Approximately two months after our kickoff event, the unexpected termination of the grant funded project and funding brought about feelings, hardships, and chaos. Residents had just begun taking prerequisite coursework – only five weeks into their first semester – during the spring semester in 2025 when the grant was initially terminated. This initial termination, reinstatement, and subsequent final termination of grant funding occurred within less than a two-month period, causing a period of sustained uncertainty and disruption (see Table 1 for a timeline of events). Needless to say, this was a tumultuous time for everyone involved.

The day of the abrupt, initial termination of grant funding, immediate shockwaves hit and reverberated widely. Immediate effects were far-reaching. Individuals lost their employment, residents lost financial support, faculty and graduate assistants lost funding, the district lost resources that would have supported the project (e.g. stipends for mentor teachers, funds to support professional learning), and countless other repercussions were spurred by the abrupt termination. Our project was in jeopardy of ending. Unsurprisingly, leadership described feelings of shock, helplessness, anger, and sadness manifested. Dr Curry-Jones reflected, “I felt like we had put so much effort into what we had planned that I was also sad that it wasn’t going to be able to work out that way,” while Dr Harbour described the experience as “the rug pulled out from under your situations.” These reflections capture both the emotional weight of the moment and the sense of sudden loss experienced by project leadership.

Despite this shock, the response to the termination was immediate and proactive. Upon receiving the late afternoon initial termination email through subsequent days, a flurry of activity unfolded. Leadership at the college, district, and grant administration levels were in continuous communication identifying the most pressing and urgent actions. College and grant leadership met immediately, with discussions continuing well into the night. Notifying district leadership, university leadership, grant personnel, and residents became a primary focus. As Dr Harbour reflected, “I texted Dr Curry-Jones that late afternoon and she called [me]. . . We [Dr Harbour and college leadership] talked to her that evening.” Phone conversations with full-time grant-funded personnel were prioritized to ensure they received the devastating news from grant leadership. Shortly thereafter, attention turned to communicating with the grant leadership team and the residents. Within a day, an emergency, virtual meeting was held that night. Letters of appeal were immediately drafted in an attempt to preserve the project. The flurry and intensity of activity continued for days and weeks. As Dr Harbour noted, “It wasn’t even that it [the grant project] ended in mid-

Table 1. Timeline of key events

Time period	Key event(s)
Fall 2024	Resident recruitment, selection, and project kickoff
January 2025	Residents begin coursework
February 2025	Initial federal grant termination &
March 2025	Temporary reinstatement of funding
April 2025	Re-termination of grant
Spring – Summer 2025	Partnership redesign and restructuring
2025–2026	Continued implementation of revised pathway

February. We had this ongoing turmoil for, like, a solid month... reinstatement, re-termination, what's going to happen?"

Throughout this tumultuous time, we were confronted with a critical decision: *Do we simply end the project altogether or do we find a way forward for this group of residents?* For many *Teacher Quality Partnership* initiatives, abrupt termination marked the end of the work. As Dr Harbour observed, "A lot of grant projects just ended." Reflecting back, one option for our project would have the residents completing the semester (i.e. when the termination occurred), and then ending grant activities. However, this option was never seriously considered as Dr Harbour explained, "What we could have done was get them [the residents] through the spring semester... but that never crossed our paths." Instead, we shifted our focus on how we could move forward. Rather than a stopping point, the termination of the grant became a demonstration of commitment to the residents and the project's underlying purpose. As Dr Curry-Jones reflected, "We could have stopped the project because of the hiccup in the road, but I think this project really shows that the people who were involved in this project were in it for the right reasons." This sentiment underscored a shared belief that the disruption did not negate our responsibility to the residents. Even as the original plan became untenable, the decision to continue in some form remained clear: "Just because this is not going to work out the way we planned, that doesn't mean we stop" (Dr Curry-Jones, interview). These decisions reflected reciprocal commitments that had been cultivated over time. Faced with significant uncertainty, district and university partners worked together to identify new pathways forward, demonstrating the joint problem-solving and responsiveness that characterize resilient mutualistic partnerships (France, 2025; Vargas *et al.*, 2022).

Sustaining our partnership

Once the decision was made to continue our project, sustaining the partnership became our moral commitment and collective endeavor. While many projects were forced to terminate following funding loss, leadership across our college and district centered discussions on residents, many of whom had longstanding ties to the district and "have been wanting to be a teacher for years" (Dr Curry-Jones, interview). A substantial portion of leadership team discussions centered on how the defunding impacted our residents as human beings and not just as program participants or teacher candidates. As the project leadership team, we recruited people into the program, and now the people we recruited were facing an extreme life crisis as a result of trusting us and our promises. This knowledge spurred heightened feelings of responsibility amongst project leadership about how this new reality would impact residents. As Dr Curry-Jones stated: "We had people invested in what we had basically sold to them... we needed to do the best that we could in order to make this [still] happen."

The resident-centered approach shaped how leaders approached the uncertainties that followed. While the policy landscape remained unsettled – with ongoing lawsuits related to the grant terminations – project leadership worked to focus on what was best for the residents and what was realistic given the circumstances. While we lived in uncertainty, the actions of the district, college, and grant leadership quickly shifted toward problem-solving. Dr Curry-Jones described being "solution-oriented" commenting:

Okay, so this is not going to work out. Well, what can we do? What will work? Just because I was upset about losing the grant and staying in that space wasn't going to move the program forward, and we had all of these great residents who were really excited about this opportunity.

This solution-orientated mindset was evidenced through ongoing, continuous discussions and meetings with leadership and residents across the grant initial termination, reinstatement, and ultimate final termination.

Rather than trying to preserve the original design of the project, we needed to reframe the project. Taking actions to restructure, modify, and adjust our project after funding was terminated was not easy and sustaining the partnership required coordinated action across

institutions. As Dr Harbour described, “Both sides sort of immediately went into problem solving. . . what can the university do, what can the district do?” This response was echoed across district leadership. Dr Curry-Jones recalled that the superintendent “immediately” asked “What can we do?” and noted that the Chief of Human Resources “immediately went into a mode of How can we make this happen?” Our shared orientation toward action set the tone for how the partnership would collaboratively navigate disruption, signaling that responsibility for sustaining the partnership was broadly shared rather than solely located with the project leadership team. What became clear during this time was that sustaining the partnership depended not only on the commitment of individual project leaders, but also on support from senior leaders across both institutions. University and district leadership created conditions that enabled collaborative problem-solving, flexibility, and continued investment in residents despite the loss of external funding. In this way, support for the partnership extended across multiple levels of the district and university, strengthening its capacity to adapt and move forward during a period of significant uncertainty. Viewed through a mutualistic lens, these collective efforts reflected a shared commitment to residents and the partnership itself, illustrating how collaboration was sustained through shared responsibility and support for multiple stakeholders (Chorzempa *et al.*, 2010; Powell & Walsh, 2018).

This resilience and collective action were further evidenced by the efforts of the project leadership team. As Dr Curry-Jones observed, “Dr Harbour and all of her colleagues worked even harder for these people after that grant was taken away.” Dr Harbour was careful to emphasize that sustaining the partnership was not the work of two individuals, noting:

I don’t want it to come across that it was just the two of us [Dr Harbour and Dr Curry-Jones]. . . there’s a whole group of leadership on the project and leadership in our college and in her district that all have collectively worked to not only develop the partnership but sustain it across time. “We were the connectors. . . but it certainly wasn’t just the two of us doing this work.”

As the re-envisioned pathway moved forward, Dr Harbour appreciated the accessibility and receptiveness of school and university leaders. She reported that when she and Dr Curry-Jones approached school and university leaders, they asked “for anything and everything that we could get our hands on.” These collective efforts resulted in a revised program agreement that preserved a pathway to degree completion, certification, and district employment but required residents to assume unanticipated financial costs. Although the unanticipated financial burden placed on residents was substantial and unexpected, the revised project agreement reflected a continued commitment to residents as individuals navigated complex circumstances. As Dr Curry-Jones explained, “Everyone had different circumstances, different types of support that they needed. . . and we were careful to care for everyone as an individual.” We recognized that the program revisions might not be sufficient to allow all the residents to continue with the program, and that tailored, thoughtful support was required.

Despite the significant financial burden placed on residents following the loss of grant funding, persistence remained remarkably high. Of the fifteen residents who were admitted into the program, only one ultimately withdrew due to financial constraints. The vast majority of residents continued their journey to become certified elementary teachers, underscoring their commitment to the profession and the effectiveness of the partnership’s collective efforts to sustain support during an exceptionally challenging period. These themes of persistence and commitment were reflected across leadership team comments and are captured by this representative quote:

I think our residents have been very understanding since you know, the trajectory that we’re on right now has caused them to have to spend some money out of their pockets and it’s some expenses that they were not expecting. But I feel like we selected [our residents] so well. We selected people who really have the drive, and they really want to be classroom teachers; they have risen above that [the loss of the original plan] and they’re okay with where we are right now, and that just says a lot about their character, and it says a lot about our selection process. (Dr Curry-Jones, interview)

While resident commitment was important, persistence should not be interpreted as evidence that financial barriers were inconsequential. Residents faced substantial and unexpected costs following the termination of grant funding. Their continuation was supported not only by personal determination, but also by extensive advising, revised program structures, institutional flexibility, and collaborative problem-solving by university and district leaders. For example, district leaders allowed residents to participate in a district supported tuition reimbursement program, while university leaders allowed faculty to use travel and/or professional funds to purchase residents' textbooks and pay other course related costs. Project leadership also coordinated information sessions for residents to learn about and access teacher loan repayment assistance programs. These efforts, and others, were intended to minimize barriers where possible and preserve a pathway to certification despite the loss of external funding.

By sustaining the partnership through and beyond tumultuous times, project leadership consistently emphasized depth of care and collective responsibility. As Dr Curry-Jones noted, "It just lets you know that people still care about people. . . everyone, all hands on deck." Rather than fracturing under the strain of disruption, the shared experience of navigating uncertainty ultimately strengthened the partnership. Collaboration and trust deepened, with Dr Harbour reflecting that "the partnership didn't break. If anything, we supported one another more through those chaotic times. . . We did this together. We can probably get through just about anything at this point." Resilience, support, and collective action became not only the means through which the project endured, but defining characteristics of a school district–university partnership capable of sustaining itself beyond crisis. Viewed through a mutualistic lens, these experiences illustrate how invested benefits, reciprocal commitments, and high-trust collaboration (Connor, 1995; Powell & Walsh, 2018) can strengthen partnership sustainability during periods of significant disruption and uncertainty.

Mutualism across the partnership journey

Our story illustrates how concepts associated with mutualism were reflected across multiple phases, from initial project planning to termination of grant funding to sustaining support through a revised pathway. Rather than appearing in a single event or interaction, mutualistic practices were woven throughout the partnership's development, disruption, and sustainability efforts. Table 2 highlights examples of how concepts from the mutualism framework were reflected in partnership practices across the project.

Recommendations for sustainable school district–university partnerships

As we reflect upon our school district–university partnership, there are several recommendations that have emerged from our collective experiences, reflections, and interview data. These recommendations align with prior research on productive and sustainable school district–university partnerships. We offer the following three overarching recommendations as a way for others to anchor partnerships: (1) co-constructing a shared vision and establishing a strong foundation; (2) centering participant voices and transparent communication; and (3) building relational commitment across partnership participants.

Recommendation 1: co-construct a shared vision and strong foundation

Sustainable partnerships must be grounded at the outset in a clearly articulated shared vision and strong foundation (Desimone *et al.*, 2016; Dyson, 1999; Green *et al.*, 2020; López Turley & Stevens, 2015; Meyer *et al.*, 2023; Walsh & Backe, 2013). Dr Curry-Jones underscored the importance of early alignment, noting that "both partners have to have a shared vision for the work that they're doing," to ensure that collaborative efforts remain coherent and mutually beneficial over time. From the university perspective, Dr Harbour reinforced this idea, emphasizing the importance of slowing down at the beginning and "pausing. . . to think about

Table 2. Alignment of mutualism concepts and partnership practices

Mutualism concept	Partnership practice example
Invested Benefits (Connor, 1995)	University and district leaders jointly designed the residency pathway, attended planning meetings together, and co-constructed project plans
Co-Construction and Shared Expertise (Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Vargas <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	University and district personnel collaboratively designed and implemented the resident selection process, bringing together district priorities and university expectations to guide decision-making
High-Trust Cooperative Engagement (Powell & Walsh, 2018)	Boundary-spanning activities, such as recruitment events and project kickoff, and ongoing collaboration across institutional contexts fostered trust and strengthened relationships among university and district partners
Reciprocal Commitments and Responsiveness (Cooper <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Lezotte <i>et al.</i> , 2022; France, 2025)	Following the loss of grant funding, university and district leaders worked together to reorganize resources, revise program structures, and identify pathways forward for residents
Support for Multiple Stakeholders (Chorzempa <i>et al.</i> , 2010)	University and district partners collaboratively revised the pathway to balance the needs and commitments of residents, schools, and both partner institutions following the loss of external funding

Note(s): Drawing on mutualism theory (Bronstein, 1994; Connor, 1995), the table illustrates how concepts from the theoretical framework were reflected across the partnership’s development, disruption, and sustainability efforts

the foundation of the partnership” while asking, “What are we both looking for? What do we both want out of this partnership?”

It is important for school district–university partnerships to recognize that challenges will arise. Our challenge was the crisis and chaos associated with the termination of grant funding. Although this is an extreme event, most partnerships will encounter tumultuous events, challenging times, and potential roadblocks. During these times, we must lean on strong, established foundations to navigate the challenges via collaboration and commitment to the shared vision and goals. Reflecting on our partnership’s ability to endure the termination of grant funding, Dr Harbour noted that “that strong foundation has actually helped keep the partnership.” Collectively, these insights suggest that early investment in intentional beginnings, developing a shared vision, and establishing a strong foundation are essential for partnerships to withstand inevitable challenges and remain aligned, collaborative, resilient, and sustainable (e.g. Butcher *et al.*, 2011; Firestone & Fisler, 2002; Meyer *et al.*, 2023).

Our experiences further suggest that a strong foundation must extend beyond individual partnership leaders. During periods of disruption, support from senior district and university leadership provided the institutional flexibility, shared responsibility, and problem-solving capacity needed to sustain the partnership. While interpersonal relationships remained critical, broader organizational commitment strengthened and reinforced the efforts of project leaders, creating conditions that allowed the partnership to adapt and move forward despite significant uncertainty.

Recommendation 2: center participant voices and transparent communication

Building upon the importance of a shared vision, effective partnerships invite and respect the voices of all partners, and foster transparent and open communication through a consistent, collaborative approach (Green *et al.*, 2020; López Turley & Stevens, 2015; Penuel *et al.*, 2015). Dr Curry-Jones stressed the importance of district voice in collaborative work, explaining that “voice is important from school district partners, just so that we can make sure whatever we’re

creating is going to work with the culture of our district.” Attention to participant voices was sustained through intentional communication practices, including “consistent meetings,” where “each time we took on something different that would be a piece of the grant” (Dr Curry-Jones, interview) allowing all partners to remain aligned as the work evolved. Dr Curry-Jones noted that strong communication practices helped ensure transparency, stating, “I also feel like our communication was strong. . . so that we are all always all in the loop.” Dr Harbour echoed this collaborative approach, emphasizing that decision-making was shared rather than unilateral, noting that “it wasn’t us coming up with these ideas in isolation,” and cautioning that “sometimes the word partnership just means that you might be working in parallel, but [partnerships should] be working in tandem.” Taken together, these insights underscore the importance of participant voices, open communication, and consistent collaboration – not as incidental features of effective partnerships, but as necessary features for developing trust, mutual accountability, and collective ownership (e.g. [Butcher et al., 2011](#); [Penuel et al., 2015](#)).

Recommendation 3: build relational commitment across partnership participants

Strong partnerships are sustained not only through structures and communication, but also through intentional alignment of people and values. Dr Curry-Jones identified candidate selection as a critical feature, noting the importance of a “strong selection process. That’s one of the most important parts.” As she explained, the partnership was deliberate in selecting candidates who were motivated by commitment rather than short-term benefits, noting, “we definitely did not select people that were here just to get a stipend. . . we were very careful to make sure that these were people who are going to stay with the profession.” This careful vetting process was recognized as foundational to the program’s resilience, as it resulted in selecting residents who were willing to persist through uncertainty and change.

Beyond candidate selection, project leaders highlighted the importance of building genuine relationships among partners. Dr Curry-Jones framed this relational commitment through a people-centered lens, explaining, “when I think of leadership, I think of people first. . . leaders need to invest in their people, and then people will stay.” Similarly, Dr Harbour described how relational commitment deepened during the crisis, noting that “during those chaotic times, she [Dr Curry-Jones] and I supported one another . . .” and became “a support system for one another.” Taking time to establish genuine relationships was identified as necessary for establishing trust, respect, and open communication ([Butcher et al., 2011](#); [Green et al., 2020](#); [Kirschenbaum & Reagan, 2001](#); [López Turley & Stevens, 2015](#)), conditions that enabled the partnership to remain responsive, adaptive, and collaborative during tumultuous times.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting this storytelling account. First, this account reflects the experiences of one school district–university partnership during a unique period of disruption following the loss of external funding. As such, the experiences described here may differ from those of partnerships operating in other contexts or under different circumstances. Our goal was not to generalize across all partnerships, but rather to share the story of how one partnership responded to significant challenges and worked to sustain its commitments.

Second, this account foregrounds the perspectives of project leadership, particularly a district leader and university leader who played central roles in the partnership’s development and sustainability. Although reflections from other project personnel informed our interpretations, resident voices and the perspectives of additional stakeholders are not represented directly. In addition, several members of the research team were active participants in the partnership. While this involvement provided important insight into the relationships, decisions, and experiences described throughout the paper, it also shaped how the story was interpreted and told. Consistent with our storytelling approach, this work should be understood as a reflective account of participants’ experiences rather than an objective evaluation of the partnership.

Concluding thoughts

These three overarching recommendations highlight that the sustainability of school district–university partnership is not accidental but intentionally cultivated through relational and collaborative practices. Co-constructing a shared vision and foundation, centering participant voices, transparent communication, and building relational commitments across partnership participants created conditions that enabled our partnership to endure disruption and remain aligned with its core purpose. In sum, as Dr Curry-Jones reflected, “the original name of this project was SC-DREAM. . . and I do feel like it lived up to the original name. It really is answering dreams. It’s making dreams come true for people.” This reflection underscores that when partnerships are grounded in trust, shared leadership, and collective commitment, they not only sustain themselves over time but also generate meaningful outcomes for the individuals and communities they serve.

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