Leveraging University Partnerships to Build Capacity in Rural Schools: A Case Study

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Cover Page Footnote

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Rural schools have a number of advantages. Research has suggested that campus leaders can have a big influence through strong interpersonal skills that bring people together, and through being change agents by balancing the politics of the region (Preston & Barnes, 2017). In addition, some research has suggested that parental involvement can be better in rural areas (Shu-Yuan, Isernhagen, Scherz, & Denner, 2014).   However, the lack of scale (fewer enrolled students) as compared to urban districts often results in fewer resources (Williams, Green, Tsemunhu, Truby, & Grimes, 2018). An urban school is likely to have more specialists that can be used to improve academic performance, especially if there are concerns. A director that can focus specifically on math instruction, or any other discipline, is a benefit that most rural schools cannot afford. There may be a generalist; a curriculum specialist that provides broad assistance, but nothing so fine-tuned that it narrows down work to a particular subject. This often becomes important if a district is struggling.

There are 339 schools in Texas that are struggling, defined as "improvement required" by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (txschools.gov, 2018) and received a "F" rating due to low academic performance. This designation is earned through a formula that measures general student achievement, school progress based on a comparison of previous year's standardized test scores, and the ability to close the academic achievement gaps among student groups (TEA, 2018a). Of these "improvement required" schools, 201 are elementary, 71 are middle, and 56 are high school (TEA, 2018b). This data suggests there is significant need for strategies that turn around the academic performance of schools, and rural schools have fewer resources to utilize. Leveraging university partnerships is one way for a campus to get support for turnaround initiatives. This case study will look at a rural elementary campus that took the steps to become a school turnaround campus through a partnership with a local university. This campus spent two years as a low performing campus ("F" rating) but took specific steps to increase academic performance through the development of strong partnerships with a university and other outside institutions and aligned initiatives with the components of the *Effective Schools Framework*.

Effective Schools Framework

The Texas Education Agency has recognized the *Effective Schools Framework* as an important model for school success. This model has as its overarching theme the importance of effective school leadership and strategic planning. Leadership has an influence on other characteristics of a high-functioning campus: Effective, well-supported teachers; high-quality curriculum; and positive school culture. These three components, influenced by leadership, drive effective instruction and high student achievement. Figure 1 shows the *Effective Schools Framework* (TEA, 2018c).
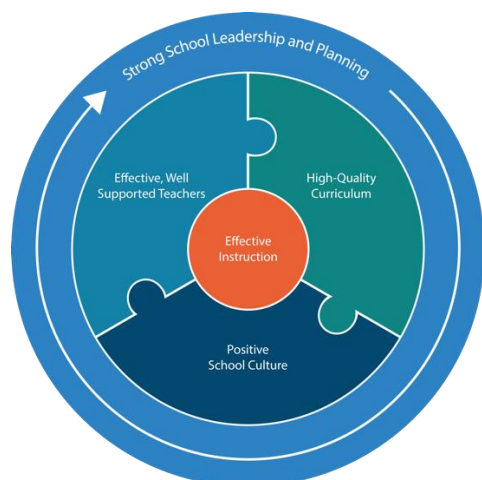
Figure 1. Effective Schools Framework

Prioritized Lever 1. The first lever of the *Effective Schools Framework* is strong campus leadership and planning (TEA, 2018c). This lever considers the importance of putting strong leaders in positions where they make the biggest difference in the academic achievement of students. This includes providing continuous professional improvement and creating enough flexibility that obstacles to success are removed. In addition, finding the right person to lead the school is equally important. Leaders are not interchangeable, and finding the individual whose talent meets the needs of the campus can be one of the most important factors in success.

The second part of this lever is strategic planning (TEA, 2018c). Campus leadership must assess the needs of the school and address them in a targeted manner, utilizing the support structures and resources that are available. This assessment is ongoing, as data used for informed decision making is a fundamental component of effective planning. The leaders must prioritize the strategies that will make the biggest impact, set specific timelines and measures of both formative and summative assessment and, make clear who is responsible and accountable for outcomes.

Prioritized Lever 2. The second lever of the framework is having effective teachers (TEA, 2018c). Teacher have the biggest influence on the development of students, and research suggest that an effective teacher can provide the momentum for life-long financial and social benefits for students (Norton, 2015). The first step in having great teachers is recruitment and hiring. Hiring processes are often ineffective; interviews fail to determine the soft skills, like grit, that are often an important aspect of being a great professional educator. Nevertheless, there should be processes in place that vet candidates thoroughly. If the hiring committee misreads the talent of an individual, then processes need to be in place to make the teacher better, or he/she will need to go elsewhere for employment (Adnot, Dee, Katz, & Wyckoff, 2017). Teachers are too important to have someone ineffective providing instruction.

Prioritized Lever 3. Lever three focuses on the school culture (TEA, 2018c). School culture has a number of benefits: Teachers and students want to be in school; there is a feeling of support; good teachers are retained; there is an environment that is conducive for learning; and more. A positive school culture is one in which there is a clear understanding of the mission and vision of the school, and systems are in place to address behaviors that interfere with these fundamental purposes. In addition, an effective school culture gets everyone involved, from teachers and custodians to parents and students.

Prioritized Lever 4. Lever four ensures a high-quality curriculum that is being offered to students (TEA, 2018c). This curriculum should provide meaning and rigor in alignment with the

Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). A teacher who does a great job with instruction but fails to align it with the standards is setting students up for failure on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), the standardized tests that measure academic achievement in the state. There must be clear alignment with curriculum, instruction, and assessment. A well-aligned curriculum will provide for the opportunity to evaluate student performance based upon the TEKS standards.

Prioritized Lever 5. Effective instruction is lever five (TEA, 2018c), and it is the anticipated result of good leadership feeding a positive school culture with a strong curriculum and supported teachers. Effective instruction occurs when there is a strong focus on students; their background, needs, and within these, develop meaning to the standards. Effective instruction has several desired outcomes, including students who develop socio-emotionally and academically.

The Case of Northwood Elementary

Northwood Elementary, as part of a state initiative, partnered with a local university to provide support for increasing student achievement. The school is located in a rural setting and is composed of 579 students in EC- 5. Seventy-six percent of the students are economically disadvantaged and 49% are minority. Data collected by the Texas Education Agency (2016) suggested that low performing schools tend to serve a high number of economically disadvantaged students and are disproportionately located in rural areas, which was the case with Northwood Elementary. The fact that many of these low performing schools are rural provides an opportunity for institutions of higher education (IHEs) to provide services that may not be available otherwise.

The partnership determined that both entities, school district and university, would benefit from the relationship. A memorandum of understanding was written to formalize the partnership. The goal of this initiative was to increase student achievement through systemic school improvement that is sustainable. The project was based on the following premises:

- Campus leadership set the tone on campus through the development of a positive and effective school culture.
- Teachers needed support in implementing research-based best practices within classrooms, and this could be developed through the use of academic coaches.
- Principals needed to engage in instructional leadership through a focused use of the state curriculum and teacher support.

This partnership came with $100,000 a year grant funding to assist the university in providing these services. The partnership assisted the administration with strategic planning and implemented a needs assessment based upon data. Data-informed decision making allowed for a targeted approach to addressing the most fundamental needs on the campus. Although the ultimate goal was to develop systemic changes that could be sustained after the partnership, there were some immediate needs that had to be addressed in order to improve student outcomes.

Strong School Leadership and Planning

The impact of the school leader is clear. He or she sets the tone for improvement on a campus; connecting with stakeholders and setting priorities. The members of this partnership recognized the importance of the leader, and as such, worked to create targeted support based on the needs assessment. Collecting and analyzing data helped inform the partners of areas requiring improvement. The campus was finishing a school year in which they were going to be

"improvement required" for the second straight year. This suggested that there were several academic needs, but the needs assessment focused on root causes.

During the needs assessment, it became obvious that culture and climate was a significant issue with a number of teachers, who felt unsupported in regard to discipline. Interviews with teachers regarding a shared understanding of classroom and campus management found confusion. As a result, a survey was sent to determine the general campus-wide perceptions of this issue. The survey had two questions that allowed teachers to provide a rating on a Likert scale that went from one to ten. In addition, there was an opportunity after each question for the teacher to provide comments. The questions were as follows:

- How comfortable are you with Northwood Elementary's discipline procedures? This would include a personal understanding and feeling of support. Your answer should be based on a 1 to 10 scale (1 indicates no comfort and 10 is very comfortable).
- How comfortable are you with Northwood Elementary's classroom management training/development? This would include a personal understanding and feeling of support. Your answer should be based on a 1 to 10 scale (1 indicates no comfort and 10 is very comfortable).

The initial survey showed a mean of 6.05 (n=21) for comfort with discipline procedures, and a 5.14 (n=21) for classroom management. There were some comments on discipline, such as "we have a clear discipline plan in place", but the majority of comments were concerning: "Teachers are not supported", "discipline procedures are lacking", and "I do not feel I have any support in regard to discipline" were some of the examples. In regard to classroom management, the comments were similar. The written responses said "there is no training" and that students "can't concentrate because of the chaos".

This perceived lack of support seemed evident, and the survey bore it out. Members of the partnership met with the campus principal to discuss the results, and they eventually developed a training session for teachers to create a shared understanding of discipline and classroom management, along with support systems that needed to occur afterward. There was agreement that the survey would be redistributed in a few months to determine if there was improvement.

The discipline and classroom management workshop took place during a scheduled professional development day, and it was presented by the principal. University personnel were present and worked with the teachers on projects, but they did not present. They had helped in the development of the materials, but there was agreement that having the campus principal lead the discussion would be best. Along with the training, the administration had several weeks to change perceptions of support. A strategy of walk-throughs, and a clear process of handling students who were removed from the classroom were developed.

The data informed the partnership that there was significant concern regarding the discipline on campus, and there was philosophical belief among all that if the environment was not conducive for learning and teachers did not feel supported, improvement was unlikely to occur. This fundamental precept meant that a follow-up survey needed to occur in order to see if the intervention was having any impact. The teachers responded to the survey a second time three months later, and the results were disappointing.

The follow-up survey showed a mean regarding comfort with discipline procedures of 5.08 (n=12), and the classroom management query had a mean of 4.5 (n=14). Each of these had dropped since the professional development session that was supposed to clarify discipline procedures, and there were more concerning outcomes. One of these was a phone call from a teacher.

A teacher from Northwood Elementary called saying she could not participate in the survey. She had participated in the first one, and her comment had been identified by the principal. As a result, she was called out and berated in a faculty meeting. Another teacher came by the university to let the team know that the principal was going room to room and telling teachers how to respond to the survey.

The results of the survey, as well as the unsolicited contacts by teachers, painted a picture that explained many of the school culture problems. Principal leadership is important for the achievement of students, and this occurs in many ways through the principal's interactions with the teachers. An environment where there was a lack of support, and worse, teachers felt retaliated against, was unacceptable. There was a discussion with the principal, and as a result, he decided to resign from his position.

A vacancy in the principal position is an important opportunity to find a leader who will drive the vision of the campus. The superintendent put together a team to hire the next principal, and with a clear understanding of what was needed, they hired an individual who began the process of building a strong culture for school turnaround.

The incoming principal made it clear that he valued everyone involved with the campus: students, parents, staff, and community, as well as the university partnership. He embraced the university support, and a few months into the job, wanted to see if there were any changes in the support teachers felt regarding discipline. The survey that had been sent twice with the previous principal was emailed to teachers again.

This survey informed decision-makers that the school was heading in the right direction. The question on comfort level with discipline procedures (n=11) had moved to a mean of 8.5, with comments that ranged from "principals are consistent and support teacher 100%" to "very happy with discipline procedures". The comfort with classroom management training and development was a little lower, with a mean of 7.3, and comments that suggested that "new staff need more training." However, the results showed an increase of over three points in each area over the survey given six months prior.

Effective, Well-Supported Teachers

An early meeting among partners indicated that there were some teachers who were struggling to address students' academic needs. Partners noted one teacher as a major concern. She was in her first year as a fifth-grade math teacher and was part of an alternative certification program. Her struggles in the classroom were evident since it was mid-year, and as a result of her performance, the district was concerned whether she needed to remain. The partners agreed to attempt an intervention that provided increased support for the teacher.

The intervention was simple: Provide an instructional coach. The partnership contracted with an experienced, retired elementary math specialist to assist with the teacher who was struggling. The plan was to provide this support for eight hours a week. The intervention seemed obvious, but there was a concern to how receptive the teacher might be to receiving it. The Northwood district administration, university team, math specialist, and the struggling teacher met one day after school. The teacher was told that the math specialist would be working with her as an instructional coach. The teacher began crying and thanking everyone for the assistance.

These tears indicated something that we often forget. Teachers who are struggling are often clear that they are having difficulties, and they do not know what to do about it. Teaching is incredibly difficult when there are feelings that parts of it are out of one's control, and that is

common among struggling teachers. This lack of support, along with the concerning results of the discipline survey, was one of the reasons the previous principal was getting poor outcomes. Principals have numerous roles, but providing instructional support for all teachers, and especially struggling ones, is vital.

The instructional coach began to work with the teacher immediately, and improvements in student achievement followed. The most obvious immediate change was the management of the classroom. The teacher was coached in classroom structure to support instruction, and the environment became more conducive for teaching math.

Once the classroom management issue was resolved, instructional methodologies were addressed. This took a little longer, but the teacher consistently got better, and the benchmark scores indicated it. Along with the academic achievement, walk-throughs by both district and university personnel indicated a marked improvement.

The strategy of using instructional coaches was extended to reading classes. Some of the reading classes had inexperienced teachers, and the scores reflected it. Providing targeted interventions for struggling teachers became expected and accepted on the campus. The instructional coaches earned trust in the teachers, and through a process that measured consistent improvement, built more effective classrooms.

High Quality Curriculum

Students who do not read well will struggle with all tests, both in the traditional classroom and state standardized tests. The first few years of a student's life are important for development, especially in regard to creating the academic base for reading comprehension. Schools do not have control of the pre-school years, but they can put initiatives in place to improve reading once children start instruction.

With this in mind, the partnership provided a plan for a summer literacy camp for kindergarten through second grade. Data had shown that students were not entering third grade with the reading level to effectively perform academically. One of the university faculty provided training in providing an effective summer camp, and students who were from low socio-economic families in the lower grades were recruited to attend.

The reading literacy camp started well and began to get attention from other districts. The local newspaper ran a story on the purposes of the camp, outlining some of the activities for engaging students. This was something that resonated with educators, but the issue was whether there was a clear benefit to the camp. Data was collected to determine efficacy.

The data suggested that the camp helped with increasing reading levels among the students who attended. Second graders who participated the previous year did better on the STAAR. In addition, local assessments were showing increases. Of the 35 students who participated in the summer reading camp, 100% avoided the summer slide (losing academic reading levels during school breaks), and 20 (57%) of the participants gained in reading comprehension the equivalent of one school year. Reading is fundamental to achievement on all academic measures, and getting these interventions early were important.

Effective Instruction

Effective instruction can be measured in a number of ways, but one of the more accepted and common is through the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR). The state

gives these standardized tests to students beginning in third grade in order to provide data on both the individual and the school. The individual student is evaluated on academic ability, and the campus is measured based on its ability to keep the overall student population scoring at high levels. Furthermore, the campus scores are used to provide a grade, A through F, of the campus based on an algorithm.

The algorithm used to measure the effectiveness of schools, as mentioned previously, includes scores in overall student achievement, student progress, and closing performance gaps among minority students (TEA, 2018d). Northwood Elementary earned an F rating for the two years previous to the partnership, and afterward the rating was increased to a B. Table 1 shows the 2019 scores as compared to 2018:

Table 1: Comparison of STAAR Scores from 2018 to 2019 at Northwood Elementary

Test	2018 Passing Rate	2019 Passing Rate
3rd Grade English	69%	79%
3rd Grade Math	49%	89%
4th Grade English	53%	83%
4th Grade Math	66%	79%
4th Grade Writing	36%	58%
5th Grade Math	84%	79%
5th Grade English	73%	75%
5th Grade Science	42%	74%

The data showed a clear overall increase in academic achievement; every subject increased passing rates except 5th grade math, which had a 5% drop. Most of the increases were significant, up to 40%, which occurred in 3rd grade math. The signals that a school turnaround is occurring are multifaceted, ranging from the feelings of increased support for teachers to parental involvement, but the data that the students are achieving academically at a higher level provides an important sign of change.

Legal Considerations

When engaging a university to assist in school turnaround efforts, leaders must appreciate some legal considerations associated with these arrangements. Although administrators often talk about "partnerships" with universities, very few agreements between K-12 institutions and universities create legal partnerships. The particulars vary by jurisdiction. But, generally, a partnership is created when two or more persons associate to carry on a business for profit. If a legal partnership is created the partners can become liable for the debts of the partnership. Partnerships can create unwanted tax consequences. Educational institutions often go to great lengths to avoid creating partnerships in the legal sense. It is always a good idea to consult with counsel to make sure agreements are not creating obligations beyond those your organization intends.

The purpose of legal agreements is to transfer and mitigate risk and set the rights and responsibilities of parties. There is a common misconception that an "MOU" or "Memorandum

of Understanding" creates less risk or fewer obligations than a "contract", when in fact, an enforceable MOU is a contract. Whether the agreement is called an "MOU", a "contract", or an "agreement", an exchange of promises and something valuable creates legal rights and obligations for the parties.

Three elements in agreements for services from universities are particularly important: (1) associated resources; (2) term and termination provisions; and (3) scope of services. The extent of the resources tied to an agreement is a key element. Undoubtedly, managers must evaluate the amount of money that will flow to the university. Managers should also evaluate the agreement for other resource expenditures such as the management, educator, and instructional time that will be expended in conjunction with the agreement.

The term and termination provisions are also key elements of an agreement with a university. The "term" relates to the agreed length of the relationship. Agreements that are set up to automatically renew create increased, indefinite obligations, which educational institutions often want to avoid. The "termination provision" refers to the part of the contract that describes the circumstance wherein a party can exit the contractual relationship. Termination provisions for reasons such as a loss of funding are often advantageous for educational institutions. Generally, shorter terms and easier exits reduce legal risk.

The scope of services in the agreement should be evaluated closely as well. A solid general rule is that, if a promise is not explicitly spelled out in the contract, the other party has not agreed to it. Especially when the parties have conducted extensive conversations regarding the potential benefits of a relationship, they should look closely at the description of the scope of service to be provided.

Conclusion

The Effective Schools Framework makes its outer layer the leadership of the principal. Northwood Elementary School had a long-time principal who was not able to provide the sense of support and alignment that resonated with the faculty and staff. Bringing in fresh leadership was a central point in creating the change that led to a school turnaround. The concept that some leaders may work in particular situations and not others may be true, but having someone who connects and resonates with those on campus is important.

The new principal created a fresh cultural feel to Northwood Elementary. Everyone connected to the school felt valued, from the students to teachers to parents. Even the pre-service teachers who were providing tutoring services were excited about how well they were treated. This component of leadership is hard to overstate. Individuals who feel valued will work harder toward a common goal. Isolation, intimidation, and lack of expectations is a recipe for disaster; turning that around made a huge difference on the campus.

Aligned with the campus leadership was instructional coaching. This should be a systemic part of leadership, but in cases of low achievement, it had to be put in place to improve teaching in weak areas; in this case, math and reading. Instructional coaching has at its foundation a strong relationship between teacher and coach. If trust is not there, it will be difficult for the teacher to increase effectiveness to the point needed. This is true in the classroom, as well. If the students do not feel attachment to the teacher, instruction is more difficult.

Making instruction more effective was the fundamental role of the partnership. Putting a leader in place that developed a supportive culture and provided the assistance to improve a

teacher's craft created momentum toward improvement. Add the appropriate curriculum and the characteristics are in place for an effective school that increases student achievement.

Northwood Elementary put together the components of the Effective Schools Framework to create positive changes that led to successful student outcomes. The culture changed in a way that supported teachers, created a school environment conducive for teaching and learning, and increased academic achievement. The university partnership allowed for additional assistance in areas that provided support for the campus. The relationship that existed between the entities and alignment with the vision of the school made the partnership effective.

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