# CHAPTER 2
## CREATING INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

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The Washington State University-Vancouver GK-12 project partnered with local schools to restore a pond.

### CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

▶ Have the university select a single liaison for communicating with schools to establish partnerships.

▶ Approach partnerships from two directions. Working from the top down to establish partnerships with school districts can be beneficial, but so is going directly to teachers at the grassroots level to recruit enthusiastic participants.

▶ Use established university-school networks. Also, use existing school projects to develop contacts and partnerships and to find teachers who are eager to partner.

▶ Learn about the demographics of the communities in which you hope to establish partnership.

▶ Cultivate partnerships by making sure that everyone understands and appreciates the benefits for all.

**PARTNERSHIPS ARE COOPERATIVE VENTURES** between two or more groups or individuals. Partners establish common goals and objectives and jointly determine methods for achieving those goals. However, each partner needs to recognize that mutual goals and benefits can be achieved only by working well together. Although one partner may initiate the relationship, have fiduciary control, or be the instigator of the joint project, all partners must have a voice in the implementation and evaluation process, or the partnership will break down and become an unequal dominant–submissive relationship. This kind of relationship often leads to a lack of cooperation and disagreement in the achievement of goals for the project. Thus, the careful development of partnerships is essential to the success of the GK–12 approach.

### INITIATING PARTNERSHIPS

In GK–12 projects, partnerships are generally established between a university and K–12 schools (school districts, principals, and teachers). Other types of partnerships may be involved, such as a partnership between a university and a nature center, science center, community group, etc., but this chapter focuses on university–K–12 partnerships. Also, since, in the GK–12 approach, the university usually initiates collaborations, the chapter assumes that the university will reach out to establish partnerships with the K–12 community. Chapter 5 elaborates on the "care and feeding" of these partnerships, and Chapter 7 gives examples of extending partnerships beyond this standard setting.[1]

The current chapter also discusses how to initiate university–school partnerships and provides guidelines as to what has proven successful. This discussion is followed with practical suggestions for how to best approach schools to form a partnership, as well as suggestions for how to utilize already established university connections to K–12 schools. Finally, we examine effective practices to apply when establishing partnerships aimed at various school or community demographics, at different types of institution (e.g., public vs. private), and at different geographic locations (e.g., rural vs. urban).

### FIRST STEPS

In establishing a partnership between a university and the K–12 community, consider a few key issues. It is a good idea to establish a single conduit for

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1 However, one case study provides an example of the reverse, a school approaching the university.

communication, to make it clear to schools who the university liaison is. Getting in touch with district administrators and teachers can also be difficult, so the hurdles of even basic communication need to be overcome and channels for effective communication built. Finally, determine whether there are any university or school requirements to formalize the partnership.

### Management

Who will be the point person in charge of communicating with potential partners? The person chosen for this task should understand the cultures and the methods of getting business done in both the university and the schools. The cultures and constraints found in each arena are different. The point person also needs to have a good understanding of the potential impacts (including both costs and benefits) that the proposed project has on the university, schools, and teachers so that the project can be "sold" to prospective partners.

### Communication with Schools

Many GK–12 PIs become frustrated when they try to contact schools and hear nothing in return. There are a number of understandable hurdles to get over. Emails are sent to superintendents or principals, and flyers are sent to schools to recruit teachers, and often no one responds. This tends to happen when the schools are located near a university and are bombarded with requests by outside groups, especially a neighboring university, and it may be inefficient to respond to all of them. In addition,



East Tennessee State University's 2011 GK-12 Team gathers for a team building exercise.

most school districts have highly restrictive filters on their incoming email, so administrators or teachers may never receive the message. Phoning schools can also be problematic, because administrators are rarely at their desks and teachers are usually busy (if they even have phone access) from 7:00 A.M. to 3:30 P.M. or beyond. Of course, leaving a message is always a possibility, and if you have not heard back in a few days, try calling again. Often, an effective first step is to set up a face-to-face meeting with the appropriate school personnel. This meeting then lays the groundwork for future communication.

Chapter 3 offers suggestions on how to recruit teachers into the project and tips for communicating with schools. Note that accumulating experience with each district is the best way to learn how to communicate with your potential school partners.

### Formalizing Partnerships

You will need to check with various units on your campus, potential school partners, and funding agencies to determine whether formalized agreements are required when you develop partnerships. Often, schools will request a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to initiate a long-term partnership with a university. Also, the university's Office of Human Research or Office of Sponsored Projects may want documentation to formalize the university's work within a K–12 school. Sometimes, the MOU may require the superintendent of the school district to write a letter of support confirming the responsibilities of the district in the partnership. Such a letter helps to provide a template from which the superintendent can work.

### NEXT STEPS
**Working from the Top Down**

After identifying possible partner school districts and teachers, it is time to establish the partnerships.

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### KEYS FOR SUCCESS

■ Make sure that the establishment of a partnership is a high priority at the university and that a plan is developed for attaining successful partnerships.

■ Communicate with schools and teachers through persistence and multiple modes of connection.

■ Use established projects both at the schools and within the university to find partners and eager participants.

■ Clarify the benefits and responsibilities to everyone involved in the partnership.

Working from the top down in a school district makes it more likely that the partnership will develop and run smoothly. If you start at the top of the school district's administration—that is, the superintendent—then an email and a letter with a request for permission to work with the school district's principals to bring your project into the district will usually be successful. Be explicit in the letter: Explain what the project is and the benefits it will have for the district's teachers and students. If your project involves inserting new curriculum into the district's established and approved curriculum, be sure to demonstrate how the new material aligns with state standards and district learning objectives. Superintendents are busy people, so one option is to include in an email or a letter a phrase that says something like "If this meets with your approval and I do not hear back from you, I will be contacting the following school principals…." Doing this takes one thing off the superintendent's to-do list if he or she approves of your working in the district. Often, superintendents trust principals to be the gatekeepers for what happens in their schools.

Principals are also busy people, and they can be very protective of their teachers and students. They will want assurances that your project is going to have a positive impact on all parties and that it is not just for the benefit of the university. Sending a letter and an email introducing your project and requesting input from principals regarding which teachers to contact is a good way to get the conversation started. You should also mention that you have been in touch with the superintendent and have his or her approval.

Principals often ask for a phone conversation or meeting to discuss the project and to get firsthand knowledge of who is involved. A face-to-face meeting with the principal can get all parties on the same page



A GK-12 Fellow from the University of Oregon Institute of Marine Biology helps students conduct a field experiment.

very quickly. This is also an opportunity to get some very good "insider" information and explicitly discuss what type of teacher should be involved.

It is hard to generalize about what makes for a good K–12 partnering Teacher, but here are some of the qualities projects have looked for to achieve successful partnerships:

- Has at least five years of teaching experience,
- Has been teaching the same content for at least three years,
- Has a desire to learn or enhance inquiry-based teaching,
- Shows an interest in mentoring (has mentored new teachers, has taught student teachers, etc.),
- Has an understanding that teaching is a lot about teaching children rather than teaching content,
- Makes it a priority that students enjoy learning,
- Has the time to support the work of a Fellow.

## Working from the Bottom Up

If informal discussions of possible participation with teachers in a school have already taken place, be sure to mention this to the principal, especially if the teacher may already have spoken to the principal about his or her desire to participate. It is fine to recruit teachers informally, but always mention that you need to first get approval from the school administrators. Having an informational meeting with potential teachers, either prior to or after you receiving funding, is a good way to gauge the needs and desires of possible participants.

When talking with teachers, make sure that you lay out all of the benefits of participation for both them and their students. Also, be sure to discuss the responsibilities, especially the time that their participation will take. Time is a major consideration, and even with financial compensation for participating, teachers have only so much time each day. Teachers who coach three sports during the year, run the science club, and also have children of their own may not have the time required to devote to the project.

It is usually a good idea to have a formal application for teachers to complete (see Appendix 2.1 for an example). Use the application to get the basic information you need to contact the teacher, but also try to gain some insight into how the applicant views teaching and what his or her classroom is like. It also is advisable to make a classroom visit to see the teacher in action. Determine whether the classroom fits into the model in which you would like your university students working. Don't necessarily look for a specific type of teacher or classroom manager, but look for

teachers who meet at least a minimum standard when you consider their overall view of teaching and learning. Fellows can learn a great deal by working with different types of people, and the lessons they learn will carry nicely into their professional careers.

Each school district has its own policies regarding developing partnerships with universities and the placement of noncertified people (e.g., the STEM graduate students) into classrooms. Ask what procedures to follow at all levels. Often, superintendents do not know that the district Human Resources Office has developed protocols for having such projects in their schools, so be sure to ask principals for guidelines, requirements, and contacts.

## WORKING COLLABORATIVELY WITH YOUR UNIVERSITY ENTITIES

There are many units on the university campus that can help create the partnership foundation for your GK–12 project.

If your campus has a college of education, its placement staff can be valuable allies and collaborators. These are the people (or person) who place preservice teachers in schools. They have an intimate working knowledge of school districts and teachers and can assist in developing partnerships. They also can help with school district requirements, such as the need for having background checks performed on all of the university students who might be working with K–12 students.

Note that, historically, some GK–12 projects had a policy which stipulated that GK–12 Teachers could not have a student teacher while participating in the GK–12 project. Because this may cause some problems for the college of education in placing preservice teachers if you "take" all of their "good" teachers, be sure to communicate your intentions clearly and work collaboratively with the placement staff. This is not a problem in placing Fellows in elementary school classrooms, as there are many more elementary school teachers than there are grades 7–12 science and mathematics teachers in a district.

Other excellent collaborators in the GK–12 model have been K–12 outreach centers. If the university has a center, contact it early in the planning process. Outreach center personnel can provide many of the same resources and information that a college of education can supply.

### Proven Effective Practices in Various Situations

There are many variables determining university and school district partnerships. Universities can be small



Students work with a University of Colorado at Boulder GK-12 Fellow to record measurements from a monitoring station.

or large, can be located in rural or urban settings, and may focus research broadly or on specific fields. School districts can be rural and small, with a single school housing K–12th grade and having only one science or math teacher, or huge and urban, with one school having 3,000 students and with all the science and math teachers available as partners.

In larger school districts, you can take advantage of the community of educators that already exists. In this case, it is best to find a teacher who comes highly recommended or is a known enthusiastic participant and ask him or her to recruit other good teachers for the project. This cadre can become the core of your Teacher collaborators. Also, school district administrators may allow time to present the project to all of the science or mathematics teachers during a professional development day. Consider gathering with interested teachers beyond that meeting to pursue the best partners.

In smaller districts or schools, with a limited number of teachers in any one subject, determine whether the teacher's schedule is compatible with the needs of the project. For example, in cases where a teacher has five or six different courses to teach in a day, it may not be possible for a graduate student to master a lesson plan by teaching the same content lesson at least three times. To remedy this shortcoming, the graduate student may be able instead to work in multiple schools, but this approach presents other problems, including finding more than one partnering Teacher for each student.

Charter schools are other institutions that can present some unique opportunities. Often, charter schools have more flexibility in their curricula and therefore can accommodate working with outreach projects more easily. They also often pick a theme (e.g., "The Wonders of Water," "Energy," or "Ecology") for an academic year, and all teachers in the school

A Brown University GK-12 Fellow and high school students discuss the concept of density during an in-class experiment.

incorporate that theme into their unit plans. If the proposed project can provide "experts" to support the teaching and learning within a specific content area that is the focus of instruction of the charter school, the administration and teachers may jump at the opportunity for collaboration.

### Getting Buy-in From Everyone: Keys for Successful Partnerships

A partnership must be collaborative, but should not be required, or just one more thing added on to everyone's already busy schedule. All participants need to see the benefits of participating for themselves as well as for their "constituents" (e.g., students for teachers, teachers for principals, and schools for the superintendents). Everyone also needs to feel that they have input and influence on the partnership activities. There are some distinctive elements of the GK–12 model that are worth stressing in your initial discussions with school personnel that may make the model more appealing than ideas from other outside participants who may simply want to use the K–12 schools to accomplish a task. As the PI for the University of New England (UNE) GK–12 project stated,

> *"A strong partnership was developed ahead of time in seeking out the schools to explore ways in which the University could be of service. This firm foundation of reaching out to the schools and demonstrating an issue to be of service to them fostered immediate commitment on the part of six area school districts to support UNE in their GK–12 proposal."*

First and most importantly, GK–12 projects are partnerships between equal parties: They are not projects designed for the university faculty or graduate students to "fix" the schools and teachers; rather, they

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop partnerships prior to attaining funding so that partners have input into planning goals and objectives.

- Make sure that all parties know the responsibilities and benefits. Include university entities, such as the Office of Sponsored Projects and the Institutional Review Board, as well as the school district administration, including the superintendent, principals, and human resources.

- Bring the main partners together to share ideas and to get acquainted in order to establish good working relationships.

are partnerships with scientists and engineers (not education departments), and they are for the long-term, built around the idea that all parties in the partnership have plenty to gain from the project over time.

There are some straightforward ways in which you can develop positive relationships between universities and the K–12 community: bringing the K–12 leadership into the development of the project, having meetings with potential partnering Teachers to make them aware of the project and its benefits, and working within and for already established school projects, among others. The exemplars at the end of this chapter also provide some good insight into methods that have worked and ways to build positive relationships.

There can be tension when placing a person in a K–12 classroom, which is the teacher's domain. As one GK–12 project administrator put it,

> *"The main component, we found, was mutual respect. It is a challenge for many of the Teachers to teach engineering—a subject they have never studied—and it is a challenge for our STOMPers (GK–12 Fellows) to teach (something most have never done.) In this way, we found lasting friendships/ collaborations develop between students and Teachers, leading to a strong school tie."*
> *—Tufts University STOMP GK–12 Project*

That strong partnership is the goal of any good outreach project between a university and the K–12 community.

### TOP-DOWN TURNAROUND **New Jersey Institute of Technology** http://c2prism.njit.edu/

The C2PRISM project started selecting teachers by a top-down approach through the public school system. (At a single private school partner, this process also worked well.) Coming from the central district to the principals and then from the principals to the department chairs, information or enthusiasm sometimes was lost. In the first year, for example, three teachers from one of the partnering schools showed up for the opening event. They had been told to be at a certain place at a certain time. Thus, the teachers had not really even considered whether they wanted to be a part of the project. Although things eventually worked out, we asked for and received permission from the school district to conduct a search for teachers in future years by a much more direct approach. We worked through individual school department chairs to identify good candidates, and put flyers in the mailboxes of all science and math teachers at selected schools in the partnering district. We found that self-selection (i.e., teachers directly applying for positions in C2PRISM) enabled us to find teachers who were interested in working on the project. Of course, teachers still went through their administrations to gain the necessary permission and support. Note that a search for teachers isn't the only way GK–12 Teachers were found: sometimes teachers who learned about Fellows in their schools or who were friends of participating Teachers found us.

### WORKING WITHIN THE SYSTEM **Arizona State University** http://gk12.asu.edu/

Our story of working within the Tempe Union High School District is one that may be similar to the story of many new GK–12 projects. One of our project directors had worked previously with one of the teacher leaders at Tempe High School and had made the initial contact with that person. This teacher was enthusiastic about bringing the Sustainable Schools project to his school, and he recommended the project to his principal and a cohort of teachers, helping us along the way with connections at the district level. The Tempe Union High School District encourages teachers to bring projects to their schools, so this approach of working through teachers at a school was a model that they preferred. The administration at Tempe High School allowed its teachers to form a "Sustainability Professional Learning Community" through which our GK–12 Fellows connected with the appropriate teachers. Again, this was taking a structure already in place and using it for our project. The "Sustainability First at Tempe High" Project (SF@TH) set high standards that paved the way for our second year, where we are now working in six of the seven high schools and on broader district projects, including a yearly sustainability survey for students.

### SCHOOL AS INITIATOR OF PARTNERSHIP **East Tennessee State University**

http://www.etsu.edu/cas/gk/

Developing a partnership with a school is a long-term commitment by all partners to ensure that all key players contribute equally, to respect distinct cultures in the school and the university, and to empower all participants to take on leadership roles wherever appropriate. In the case of the partnership between East Tennessee State University (ETSU) and North Side Elementary (NSE), initial contact was made by the NSE principal who wanted to ensure the school's success as a newly designated Signature School of Mathematics, Science and Technology. She believed that one of the first things to do was to form strong bonds with institutions of higher learning. We were quick to identify the NSF GK–12 project as presenting us with exciting opportunities for partnering. We asked one of the co–project directors and the science lab coordinator of NSE to contact the appropriate district superintendents and set up a meeting to explain the NSF solicitation and project. We actively involved superintendents, principals, and key teachers in the writing and planning of the NSF proposal. We solicited letters of support from key persons, including the superintendent, three senators and representatives, the ETSU president, provost, and dean of the graduate school. During the planning process, we held focus groups with the school's teachers and were able, with support from three principals, to enjoy a near complete buy-in. In addition, teachers were able to participate at three different levels, allowing us to accommodate those who could commit only a small amount of time to the project.