

# Enhancing Public School Education: A Collaborative Partnership for School Resiliency

Henry R. Cunningham and Starr Lewis

## Abstract

*Urban schools are plagued with multiple issues that contribute to their low graduation rate. University of Louisville took a step forward by partnering with the school district to transform five schools into high performing schools. Building on the strengths of these schools, a collaborative partnership was developed that involved the entire university community. The partnership pooled university resources and expertise to address four areas—professional development, field placement of university students, educational enrichment, and social enrichment programs.*

Institutions of higher education play a critical role in community development by educating a skilled workforce with the knowledge necessary to compete in a global economy. In addition, institutions play a role in our communities having the right workforce to stimulate economic development through attracting and retaining employers (Grogan 2009). At the same time, educational institutions need to be neighborly and collaborate with agencies to address community issues. The practice of colleges and universities partnering with community organizations to address issues in the community is gaining momentum (Carriere 2008) but there is still a long way to go.

An engaged institution can dispel the notion held by some community members that universities are hostile environments to non-university people by providing opportunities for access and dialogue with university members (Carriere 2008). Sandy and Holland (2006), in referring to the works of others, described this partnership between universities and communities as one of “crossing borders” (31). What was foreign and unavailable to both partners become the familiar and acceptable. There are many challenges to these partnerships (Bullough et al. 2004; Carriere 2008; Ledoux and McHenry 2008; Sandy and Holland 2006), but likewise there are benefits for the university (Carriere 2008; Peters 2002).

The number and nature of issues facing our communities vary across the nation. Educational institutions need to look at their history (Ledoux and McHenry 2008), talents, and resources (Grogan 2009) to address identified needs of their city. Educational attainment is a major concern in many urban areas, where schools are plagued with problems that contribute to low graduation rates. University of Louisville is cognizant of this issue and of the significant economic benefit to communities with a highly educated workforce (Grogan 2009). It takes pride in its role as a major metropolitan research university and an “anchor” institution in the community. The

university understands the responsibility of being an engaged institution, as demonstrated by establishing as one of its primary goals a commitment to direct interaction with external constituencies and communities through partnerships and collaborations. Realizing the role it plays in community resiliency led University of Louisville to embark on a partnership with five public schools in a high poverty area of the city as part of its Signature Partnership Initiative.

## **Background on the Schools**

The five public schools—two high schools, one middle school, and two elementary schools—are all located in a high poverty area. Four of the five schools are considered neighborhood schools, as a majority of the students walk to school. Data from one school indicated that 97 percent of the students are on free or reduced-cost lunch and more than 50 percent of parents do not have a high school diploma. The picture is pretty much the same at three of the other schools in the areas of educational attainment and income levels.

These schools face several obstacles in their effort to educate students and increase educational attainment for their students. High teacher turnover is a major concern for two of the schools, with a high number of teachers transferring out of the schools at the end of the academic year. One school reported that more than 50 percent of its teachers transferred during one academic year, requiring virtually a new faculty with limited teaching experience. This seems to be primarily due to teachers finding a position in a more affluent school. The high teacher turnover leads to lack of stability for these schools.

There are also community issues that impact the schools. The high unemployment rate (38 percent) is a daily reminder of how tough life is for these students. There is a lack of economic development in the community, which subsequently impacts employment. Thirty-six percent of residents have an income below the poverty level. Sixty-four percent of residents over the age of twenty-five do not have a high school diploma, while less than 30 percent of those over the age of twenty-five have an education beyond high school (Jenkins 2009b). The community is also affected by the high incidence of crime and significant health issues faced by residents. These issues have all impacted educational attainment of students in the five schools and prompted University of Louisville to partner with the local school district to curb the problem and increase graduation rates.

As an institution that considers itself a “citizen’s university” and a friend of the community, University of Louisville realizes it has a civic responsibility to lend support in addressing community problems. Consequently, the university embarked on a comprehensive and ambitious program to revitalize the community.

## **The Signature Partnership Initiative**

The Signature Partnership Initiative was developed by the university to address four areas: education, economic development, health, and social and human services. The program was designed to utilize the university's human and financial resources to address the needs of the community, particularly in west Louisville where the needs are greatest. With its new mission of community engagement, the university "is drawing upon the expertise and energy of faculty, staff, and students from every school and college" within the university "to deal with the quality of life issues" affecting the community (Jenkins 2009a). Carriere refers to this model of using multiple university departments to address community issues as effective since it approaches such challenges in a "comprehensive manner" (2008, 90). The use of multiple academic units combining their efforts for a common cause is also supported by Cunningham et al. (2009) and Gifford, Strencky, and Cunningham (2005).

This paper will focus on the collaborative partnership with the five schools located in the high-poverty area of the city. University of Louisville, through the Signature Partnership administered by the Office of Community Engagement, addressed four areas of need identified by the schools, namely (1) professional development for teachers, (2) field placement of university students in the schools, (3) implementation of educational enrichment programs, and (4) implementation of social enrichment programs.

### **Professional Development**

In order to reach the goal of improved educational attainment for the west Louisville community, the university must ensure that its teacher preparation program produces high-potential teachers who are able to support diverse learners in an urban setting. In addition, the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) is committed to providing professional development opportunities to current teachers that will improve their practice and encourage teachers to remain in the schools where they are needed most. To this end, the CEHD has implemented initiatives that involve university faculty, teacher faculty, and teacher candidates.

Strategies to support the professional learning of current schoolteachers in the five Signature Partnership Initiative schools included the Louisville Writing Project, the Kentucky Reading Project, and a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards cohort.

The CEHD has hosted the Louisville Writing Project (LWP), an affiliate of the National Writing Project, for twenty-seven years. Long considered one of the most effective professional development opportunities for classroom teachers, writing projects focus on connecting the very best and latest research on supporting student writers. With the university's urban mission in mind, the LWP has always focused on supporting diverse learners in urban schools. During its long history, the writing project has welcomed teachers from the five schools and counts several of these teachers among its Fellows. In addition, the LWP director has initiated long-term partnerships with two of the

schools. Crawford, Roberts, and Hickman (2009) support the long-term commitment working with schools, as they find short-term work ineffective.

The middle school initiative focused on content literacy skills for struggling readers. The latest LWP initiative involves one of the elementary schools and focuses on improving writing skills and resiliency skills by having students write about experiences they have had that involved a challenge that was addressed and overcome. The principal of one of the elementary schools is an LWP Fellow and is intensely focused on helping students focus their goals on a college education despite their challenges. To support the elementary students' writing skills, the principal encouraged teachers to become LWP fellows, and at this point this particular elementary school has significantly increased the number of teachers who have participated in the LWP summer seminar.

The principal was also instrumental in establishing a strong relationship between the Kentucky Reading Project (KRP) and the two elementary schools. The KRP is a state-supported effort modeled on the National Writing Project summer seminar design. A cohort of primary teachers participates in the summer session, which provides participants with the results of current research in teaching reading to primary students. Again, emphasizing the university's urban mission, the KRP focuses on supporting the reading skills of diverse students in urban schools. Just as the principal has encouraged teachers to participate in the LWP, encouragement was also given for participation in the KRP. In 2008 the principal offered the elementary school as the site of the KRP and suggested a focus on the two elementary schools. This focus has continued, and these two elementary schools have eighteen and six KRP Fellows respectively, a much larger number than most Kentucky elementary schools.

Both these projects have the additional benefit of involving university faculty in the Signature Partnership schools on an ongoing basis, therefore ensuring a direct connection for program improvement for the teacher preparation program. The directors of the two projects visit the classrooms of participating teachers twice during the year after the summer institute. This provides them a first-hand opportunity to observe the effectiveness of strategies taught during the institutes and allows them to make revisions to the institute syllabi to better meet the needs of teachers and students.

In addition to professional development opportunities for teachers in these schools, the CEHD has developed a pilot program at one of the schools to support a cohort of teachers pursuing National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) certification. The goal is to initiate the program this year at one site and to add an additional school each year. The larger goal is to use this opportunity to reach NBPTS certification as a means of recruiting high-potential teachers to these schools and to encourage them to stay at these sites. Teachers who participate in these NBPTS cohorts will receive funding for all fees. Once successful, they will receive additional compensation from the state and district. As part of this initiative, cohort members will commit to staying at their schools for at least three years unless they pursue an administrative position.

Professional development is also offered in other areas to meet the specific needs of individual schools. One school requested professional development on positive behavior management. Another school wanted intense professional development aimed at providing a clearer picture of who they can be as a team of educators and who their students truly are as they come into their rooms. All professional development programs are based on needs of teachers and the schools.

## **Field Placements**

The Signature Partnership Initiative represents a university-wide commitment to the five schools. As such, field placements from Social Work, Nursing, and Education are concentrated in the five schools. This ensures the university's ongoing commitment to the schools while at the same time ensuring preparation programs are focused on producing professionals who are able to support diverse learners in urban settings. University students are placed in the schools each semester, providing assistance to teachers and helping to enhance student learning.

Nursing students work with teachers to provide health education classes for students, providing them with tips to stay healthy. Students from Social Work are placed with the Family Resource Center. They have developed programs to enhance students social and leadership skills. In one school, they implemented a program for students to be assigned "important jobs" in the school in an effort to provide them with a sense of belonging in the school.

Students from Education have been involved in a number of projects in the schools. One group of university students worked individually with public school students to develop and implement a tutoring plan for those who were identified as needing additional assistance. Another group of education students, as part of their observation in the school, were asked to observe the different kinds of questions teachers asked their students. The principal used the data collected from the informal survey to design professional development for teachers to assist them in asking higher-order questions. Candidates are also placed in the school for student teaching. The number of candidates placed is limited in almost all schools due to a lack of master teachers to work with the candidates.

## **Educational and Social Enrichment Programs**

Several programs were introduced in different schools to enhance the educational enrichment of students. Career magnet programs were introduced in the two high schools to spark students' interest and to expose them to various careers. The magnet programs allowed high school students to interact closely with university faculty and students, who served as their mentors. Career magnets in law, dentistry, business, and urban planning and design were introduced. Students in the career magnet programs sat in classes taught by university faculty and students and had the opportunity to interact with them on a personal level. In addition, students visit the university campus to tour the law school, shadow faculty from the school of dentistry, and listen to guest lecturers who visit the university campus.

A dual credit program was introduced in which students could take courses in high school and receive college credit. In one such course, students from the high school actually attend classes on the university campus alongside college students. This provides the high school students the experience of actually being in college, which is expected to ignite their interest in enrolling in college.

In order to increase services to students, the College of Education and Human Development, the School of Social Work, and the School of Nursing became strategic in placing their students in the five targeted area schools for field placements, practica, and student teaching, as in the case of the College of Education. Placing university students in the schools provided additional help for teachers and more access to an adult for students in the school. In addition, university students introduced educational programs to the schools. Nursing students introduced a health education class while students from Social Work implemented programs in leadership and social skills development.

Other programs introduced in the schools include ACT preparation classes in the high schools. This was to address the problem of low ACT scores that had blocked many students from being admitted to college. The School of Music introduced a music program in the elementary and middle schools in which music education students exposed students in these schools to formal music education. For many of the students in the schools, this was their only exposure to formal music education.

The Upward Bound program also has a presence in some of the schools. Educational support is provided to students to enhance their academic achievement. Students also participate in weekend and summer programs to supplement activities offered in the schools. Education and assistance are also offered on college admission and financial aid procedures.

Even the staff senate at the university is involved in the partnership. Staff Senators collected school supplies to stock schools' "wish lists." The collected school supplies were given to students who were without so they could work effectively in the classroom.

Social enrichment programs were also introduced in the schools. The Seven Habits of Highly Successful Teens, a program designed to assist teenagers to develop successful habits that can sustain them for life, was implemented in the high schools. A mentoring program was implemented in the middle school where university students met with their mentees once a week for the fall and spring semesters. Mentors assist students in setting personal goals and educate them about college in an effort to increase a college-going culture among them. Campus visits are also conducted for students of the targeted schools to increase their knowledge of colleges and for them to experience being on a university campus. The campus visits include meeting and interacting with faculty, staff, and students. Ballroom dancing was introduced in one of the elementary schools when the principal and teachers identified it as a possibility to teach the students basic social and interpersonal skills. The elementary students were able to showcase their newly learned talent of dancing to parents and teachers during school functions.

## **Conclusion**

The collaboration between University of Louisville and the five schools has strengthened the ties the university has with these schools. Principals and faculty of these schools have been invited to university functions such as receptions and sporting events. The university president visited several of the schools as part of his community outreach. The university recognized one of the schools for its commitment to partnership and for being a model for community partners in helping the university meet its mission of educating students.

The relationship is proving to have an impact on both the university and the five schools. For the first time since the inception of the collaboration, schools are hiring the education students who were placed in them. These teachers are already familiar with the school environment and culture and are more likely to adjust to the school quicker than a teacher who had never worked in the school before. Other students who were placed in these schools are receiving referrals and recommendation for jobs in other schools because of their outstanding performance.

Teacher retention is improving in the schools. For the first time, there was less teacher turnover than in previous years. The schools' administration and the attention given to teachers and students are likely to play a role in teacher retention.

Students in all schools are more knowledgeable about college. The access they have to faculty and students from the university as well as the visits to campus are helping them to learn more about college and to develop more interest in attending college. In one of the elementary schools, each student when asked can tell the year they will start college. There are constant reminders about college. In several schools, students sport university t-shirts in the classroom and hallways, banners from different colleges hang from the ceilings in the hallway, and teachers are decorating the classrooms with items they collected from their favorite college. In one school there is even a mural with the "path to college" painted on the walls of the gymnasium.

The concept of college is infused in the culture of several of the schools, yet we know it will be some time before we see the full impact of these strategies. Thus, engagement with schools must be sustained over the long term. With continued collaboration between University of Louisville and these five schools, more will be done to enhance the resiliency of these urban schools.

## **References**

Bullough, R. V. Jr., R. J. Draper, L. Smith, and J. R. Birrell, 2004. Moving beyond collusion: Clinical faculty and university/public school partnership. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 20 (5):505–521.

Carriere, A. 2008. Community engagement through partnerships—A primer. *Metropolitan Universities Journal* 19 (1):84–100.

- Crawford, P. A., S. K. Roberts, and R. Hickman. 2009. All together now: Authentic university-school partnerships for professional development. *Childhood Education* 82 (2):91–95.
- Cunningham, H. R., J. Kennedy, T. Clark, K. L. Walker, J. L. Hart, M. H. Hutti, R. Mainous, M. T. Coleman, B. J. Strenecky, and D. D. Todd. 2009. Providing healthcare: An interdisciplinary international service-learning approach. In *Service-learning in higher education: Paradigms and challenges*, ed. M. Moore and P. L. Lin, 357–372. Indianapolis: University of Indianapolis Press.
- Gifford, D., B. J. Strenecky, H. R. Cunningham. 2005. International service learning successfully engaging adult learners. *Metropolitan Universities Journal* 16 (2):53–62.
- Grogan, P. S. 2009. Anchor institutions in a shifting economy. *Metropolitan Universities Journal* 20 (1):11–17.
- Jenkins, S. 2009a. Signature Partnership. University of Louisville Office of Community Engagement. October 6, 2009. <http://louisville.edu/communityengagement/office-of-community-engagement/signature-partnership> (accessed March 29, 2010).
- Jenkins, S. 2009b. Signature Partnership: Profile of Target Area. University of Louisville Office of Community Engagement. November 30, 2009. <http://louisville.edu/communityengagement/signature-partnership/profile-of-proposed-target-area.html> (accessed March 29, 2010).
- Ledoux, M. W. and N. McHenry. 2008. Pitfalls of school-university partnerships. *The Clearing House* 81 (4):155–160.
- Peters, J. 2002. University-School collaboration: Identifying faculty assumptions. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 30 (3):229–242.
- Sandy, M. and Holland, B. 2006. Different worlds and common ground: Community partner perspectives on campus-community partnerships. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 13 (1):30–43.

## **Author Information**

Henry R. Cunningham, Ph.D., is Director of Student Engagement at University of Louisville. He works with faculty, students, and community partners to enhance community engagement efforts. Prior to this role, he was involved in International Service Learning for eight years.

Starr Lewis is Liaison for School and District Partnerships in the College of Education and Human Development. Before coming to University of Louisville, Starr was with the Kentucky Department of Education, where she served for many years.

Henry R. Cunningham, Ph.D.  
Office of the Vice President for Community Engagement  
209F Grawemeyer Hall  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, KY 40292  
E-mail: [h.cunningham@louisville.edu](mailto:h.cunningham@louisville.edu)  
Telephone: 502-852-6026

Starr Lewis  
Nystrand Center, Room 123A  
University of Louisville  
College of Education and Human Development  
Louisville, KY 40292  
E-mail: [starr.lewis@louisville.edu](mailto:starr.lewis@louisville.edu)  
Telephone: 502-852-4356