

Improving Assessment Through a School-University Partnership, 3(8)

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Abstract

Student and teacher assessments have been enhanced through three partnerships between the University of Southern Maine and area schools. The Southern Maine Partnership currently includes over 30 school districts, independent schools, and postsecondary institutions. The Professional Development Center at the University of Southern Maine offers staff development courses and workshops in response to school proposals. The Extended Teacher Education Program includes a site-based yearlong postbaccalaureate internship jointly designed and delivered by school and university faculty. Partnership projects have included a learner centered school accountability system, courses for aligning curriculum with the state of Maine content standards for K-12 students (Learning Results), and the preparation and presentation of teacher portfolios.

Overview

Partnership between the University of Southern Maine and local school districts has served as a catalyst and provided leadership for improving education in southern Maine for well over a decade. According to university and school administrators, the partnership "has become part of the fabric of the schools...[It] provides opportunities to reflect on practice, which is valuable for all involved. A real strength is the people working in the program -- site coordinators, mentor teachers...faculty, administrators, students -- all working together" ([Ridlon & Major, 1997, pp. 23, 30](#)).

The partnership provides a forum for member-generated initiatives, both collective and individual, through which university and school leaders learn from each other by sharing research findings, innovations still in the conceptualization phase, work in progress, and strategies for effecting change at a local, regional, state, or national level. Teachers and faculty members generally perceive the greatest strength of the partnership to be professional affiliations and relationships among individuals from the university and schools. However, educators with leadership or policy-related responsibilities in the university or schools also emphasize the power of the formal structures that have been developed for shared governance and support of joint initiatives. The partnership is dynamic; as professional priorities of the members have changed, so has the form and nature of the partnership and partnership activities.

In this paper we examine how the effort to improve assessment is enhanced by complementary efforts within several partnership structures. First we discuss the core values underlying the partnership, then describe the types of activities offered through partnership structures to improve assessment, and finally identify some improvements in the preparation of interns and assessment practices within partner schools. We also highlight teaching portfolios as an example of an evolving assessment practice for documenting change at multiple levels.

Partnership Mission and Core Values

Three well established structures sponsored by the university's College of Education and Human Development to support leadership within the partnership are highlighted in this article: the Professional Development Center, the Southern Maine Partnership, and the professional development school districts of the Extended Teacher Education Program. While the purpose and roles of each differ somewhat, a [common mission](#) and set of core values undergird all of them.

Equity

The essential value partnership members share is a commitment to increasing equitable access to quality schooling (K-16+) by a diverse spectrum of learners. Within the partnership this involves continuously evaluating and improving schooling and learning opportunities for students in member communities as well as in professional preparation programs for teachers and administrators. It also includes attending to opportunities for ongoing professional development for faculty and educational leaders. Within the partnership, assessment is perceived as a process

of collecting and analyzing student data (preferably from multiple sources) for the purpose of making educational decisions ([Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1998](#)). Another presumption is that the basis for planning and modifying learning experiences for any learners should include their performance in situations requiring practical application of what has been learned.

Collaboration

Other core values within the partnership involve communication and collaboration among members. The elements of professional collaboration that members strive to achieve are consistent with those identified by [Friend and Cook \(1996\)](#): voluntary commitment, parity among partners, trust, shared goals, and agreed upon processes for joint decision making. Collaboration in this sense implies significant departure from traditional school-university relationships. A primary assumption is that both university faculty and administrators and school faculty and administrators can learn much from each other. School as well as university faculty may serve in a variety of "expert" roles in partnership projects, i.e., as curriculum consultants, course leaders, course instructors, staff developers, or project directors.

A second assumption is that professional preparation programs offered through the university should incorporate clinical experiences in school districts in which "best practices" are modeled and a spirit of inquiry supports ongoing reflection. As teachers in professional development school sites commented with regard to the impact of the partnership on assessment in their schools: "In some school districts assessment has become a 'hot topic' so partnership impact [per se] is harder to assess. University assessment of interns has sometimes become a model for teachers who use alternative assessment with their students, [and sometimes] the university has learned more through their interactions with the schools" ([Ridlon & Major, 1997, p. 18](#)).

These comments from partnership members, and others included in this paper, were collected through focus group interviews and surveys for a National Education Association (NEA) sponsored project in which the University of Southern Maine is participating. The NEA's Teacher Education Initiative includes a longitudinal study of the impact of professional development schools on teacher preparation. It appears from data collected at USM in 1995-96 and 1996-97 that while there are areas that can continue to be strengthened, the partnership has enhanced the capacity of the schools and university to continuously improve educational opportunities for children, youth, and adults in Southern Maine. However, not surprisingly, the impact of partnership activities appears to have been particularly pronounced when multiple structures have simultaneously focused on a particular issue or problem, i.e., assessment. In this article we are focusing on the issue of assessment of student progress and how partnership activities related to standards and performance assessment within the three identified collaborative structures are supporting changes in practice in the school and university.

Assessment through Learning Standards

It is noteworthy that Maine recently adopted a [Common Core of Learning](#) and a set of [Content Area Outcomes for students, K-12](#), titled "Learning Results." Although many individuals from the partnership have served as leaders and made significant contributions to the development of the Maine Learning Results, there is not yet consensus on the manner in which implementation,

including assessment of the standards, should occur. This issue is, and will continue to be, the focus of many partnership activities. Helping students to acquire the attributes as learners -- as well as the content -- outlined in the Maine Learning Results will require teachers who have been oriented to performance assessment during their preparation. To assure new teachers are prepared to work with the new curriculum, draft teaching standards, with a common core corresponding to the learning standards, have been developed. Although not yet approved by the legislature, the draft teaching standards are based upon the teacher standards developed by the Extended Teacher Education Program and those of other pilot programs in the state.

Assessment Activities through the Professional Development Center

The [Professional Development Center](#) offers staff development courses and workshops in response to school/agency requests and faculty/department proposals. This is in accordance with the philosophy that "meaningful, effective staff development...meets the needs of the participants and contributes to long-term goals...and [has] an impact on the quality of school programs for students." [The Professional Development Center](#) generates and mounts new courses and offerings not already available through university graduate programs in a timely way using a delivery mode that meets professional subscribers' needs. For example, seven of last term's courses and workshops (approximately one tenth of the offerings) focused on assessment (e.g., [Aligning Curriculum with Learning Results, K-8](#)). School and university leaders from the Southern Maine Partnership and other units serve on an advisory committee, which oversees quality assurance and the programmatic integrity of the PDC.

Assessment Initiatives within the Southern Maine Partnership

The [Southern Maine Partnership](#), begun in 1985, currently includes 29 school districts, 2 independent schools, 2 colleges, and the University of Southern Maine among its members. As one of the original sites in John Goodlad's National Network for Educational Renewal, the Southern Maine Partnership had its beginnings in "dine and discuss" sessions, which provided teachers across districts with opportunities to gather and talk about literacy, teaching strategies, assessment, and other topics. These sessions soon led to monthly meetings for superintendents and principals to discuss issues in their districts and hear presenters such as Richard Stiggins talking about assessment. Many member schools, under the leadership of school and university faculty, have engaged in educational renewal projects and consulted with each other and partnership faculty as they went about the process of affirming their beliefs and visions for their schools. For example, when asked what impact the partnership had on assessment in their schools, administrators from professional development school sites responded as follows:

University leadership has helped schools develop assessment plans that have been adopted within the districts. Dialogue continues over specific issues in assessment they [we] are still wrestling with. Learning styles, multiple intelligences, etc. are brought into conversations about new theories in learning. (Ridlon & Major, 1997, p. 29)

As time went on, increasingly often, leaders in the university and partner school districts developed joint proposals to support broader-based systemic change across districts. As the partnership and partnership sites have matured the essential question has shifted from, "What can we do to improve...?" to "So what is the evidence of improvement?" This gradual shift in focus

has encouraged more attention to be placed on student performance relative to teacher performance.

A current example of an activity sponsored by the Southern Maine Partnership that school personnel have found very useful in reviewing assessment practices is a learner centered accountability visitation process. Modeled on the [School Quality Review \(SQR\)](#) process, a team of school and university teachers visit a school for three days to look at student work and teaching plans, visit classrooms, and talk with students and educators. The team then synthesizes its findings in a report to school and community members. The process is not an evaluation visit and does not result in a laundry list of recommendations. It does result in a detailed report of what was observed for the school to use in its quest for improvement. Constructive action by the school is the ultimate goal. Teachers sharing and analyzing their own work and the work of their students, talking through issues and ideas, and committing themselves to improving learning for their students and themselves is at the center of the SMP's mission.

The Southern Maine Partnership strives not to get caught up in temporary "fads." It supports capacity building, however, by providing professional development and "role-alike" study groups who meet regularly to discuss their successes and challenges in implementing specific innovative practices. Currently, a group of curriculum coordinators from districts which are developing and field-testing various authentic performance measures for assessing student progress on the new Maine Learning Results has formed and is meeting regularly with SMP staff. A related project of the SMP is the [Electronic Learning Marketplace \(ELM\)](#). In this project, cosponsored by the SMP, the University of Southern Maine School of Applied Sciences Department of Engineering, and the Old Orchard Beach school district, area school districts are serving as studio sites for production and mounting of teacher developed materials related to the Maine Learning Results. After reviewing many instructional units and assessments, a committee of teachers and staff members have decided on [criteria and format guides](#) for the lesson plans and assessments which will be mounted on [ELM's](#) world wide web site for collegial feedback and discussion.

Assessment in Professional Development School Sites

Professional development school sites for The Extended Teacher Education Program (ETEP) add a preservice teacher education dimension to the partnership between the University of Southern Maine and area school districts. Consistent with the principles of the Southern Maine Partnership, the heart of ETEP is a year long graduate level internship in which cohort groups of interns, school and university faculty, and school-age students work together from August to May simultaneously to prepare the interns for certification and to assist the students on their continuing paths of learning. Five ETEP professional development school sites (which incorporate 8 Southern Maine Partnership member districts and 29 individual schools) each serve as the home for a cohort group of 15-20 interns who spend the year working with students, teachers, administrators, parents, and other members of the site community(ies). The five sites each are jointly coordinated by a school faculty and a university faculty member. The ETEP partnership is having a growing influence on the administrative organization of the university. University and school faculty together serve as members of the Department of Teacher Education, working on matters of program structure, curriculum, and budget.

A comprehensive performance assessment system guides all candidate decisions in the program, from screening and admission through to the exit interview and recommendation for certification. Interns' development is assessed in reference to eleven teacher standards, or outcomes, that were adapted from the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards by program faculty and mentors. Portfolios, in combination with a set of five other shared assessments, provide the sources for documentation used for progress checks and program completion decisions. As has been documented by others (Potthoff, Carroll, Anderson, Attivo, & Kear, 1996), the benefits of using portfolios in preparing new teachers are multiple; they require reflection, can document growth, and provide a good connection with school reform efforts to develop alternative assessment approaches.

Improved Intern Preparation

What impact has the assessment focus had on the preservice teachers in partnership site schools? All respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that ETEP interns were better prepared ([Ridlon & Major, 1997](#)) and 75% of university faculty and 50% of school faculty strongly agreed that ETEP interns were better prepared than are other preservice teachers to "use alternative forms of assessment for evaluating student learning (e.g., portfolios, interviews, exhibitions)."

In ETEP, interns have opportunities to practice with a variety of rubrics and performance-based measures, including portfolios, that produce more relevant, frequent information to help students learn than standardized tests, periodic pencil and paper quizzes, and examinations. Also interns' work in partnership sites with school-age students developing portfolios throughout the school year provides models of recording and reflecting on student progress. As university and school faculty coordinators report: "The portfolio strand is the same for both students and interns, and other parallel layers are present as well. ETEP and the schools are talking the same language around teaching and learning" ([Ridlon & Major, 1997, p. 29](#)).

Improved Student Assessment

"For many teachers, watching interns structure their assessments and instruction around the learning results has prompted teachers to do the same" ([Ridlon & Major, 1997, p. 29](#)). For example, in one of the ETEP partnership sites, the Gorham school district, through partnership and other activities, educators, students, and community members have come together to develop a system to support continuous improvement of students. Portfolios join projects, student/parent/teacher conferences, exhibitions, and compulsory performances such as reading and writing to form [five areas of concentration](#) in the district's strategic plan. The plan is aimed at meeting three [organizational goals](#): developing a system of continuous individualized learning for students, developing accountability systems for the results of the system's work, and connecting the school and community. Parents, university faculty, and teachers all support students as they document their learning and growth through exhibitions of their projects and portfolios at each level of schooling.

Portfolios in ETEP Partnership Sites: More than an Assessment Tool The concepts of ongoing assessment and improvement are just as important for teachers as for students. Lee Shulman's definition of teaching portfolios has been most helpful to our work:

A teaching portfolio is the structured documentary history of a set of coached or mentored accomplishments, substantiated by samples of student work, and fully realized only through reflective writing, deliberation, and serious conversation. (As cited in Wolf, Whinery, & Hagerty, 1995, p. 31)

In this situation a portfolio is both a process and a product which prompts teachers to think about their work and learning in preparing exhibits of their teaching and reflections to share with others ([Loughran & Corrigan, 1995](#)). A partnership setting where school and university faculty, students, and others work together immersed in schools and the students' education is a natural setting for portfolios to flourish as more than individuals' records of accomplishment. Multiple voices share varied perspectives. As one faculty member put it, "I was trying to be a critical friend and someone who brought other perspectives, not necessarily better perspectives, but...to stretch the thinking of the people who were doing it as to what was possible" ([Davis & Honan, 1998, p. 99](#)).

Posing, considering, and responding to such questions is invigorating for experienced teachers as well as interns. [Wolf, Whinery, and Hagerty \(1995\)](#) emphasized that the process of presenting and explaining is an important aspect of teaching improvement. The dialogue that ensues contributes to a social and intellectual culture in which construction of new knowledge and new ways of thinking are valued. Teaching standards developed by the university and school faculties, listed in the [Appendix titled Extended Teacher Education Program Standards](#), guide the interns' observations and inquiry throughout their school experience, although they are encouraged to design their own format for the portfolio.

Portfolio Presentations

Interns make several presentations of their draft portfolios and exhibitions to school and university mentors and site coordinators throughout the internship year. The presentations may include other shared assessments, or intern projects, such as an interdisciplinary unit or a case study of a student with exceptional learning needs. The intern assessment process is described more fully in [Kimball and Hanley \(1998\)](#). At the conclusion of the internship, the intern prepares and presents a final exhibition synthesizing the work and learning of the entire year. The organizing framework for the final presentation may include the ETEP outcomes, the individual's personal vision of education and teaching, and progress toward professional goals. This formal presentation is attended by all the mentor teachers who have worked with the intern over the course of the year, the site coordinators, and other school and university educators. All people in attendance provide feedback as "critical friends" and the caucusing that follows the presentation informs the decision to recommend the teacher candidate for initial certification.

The final presentation helps the interns reflect on and synthesize the yearlong internship and continue to refine habits of documenting and analyzing (both their own progress and that of the students with whom they work). Interns increasingly have the work of their students as a central element of their presentations. It is a powerful experience for the school and university educators to see and hear their classrooms and the program being documented and explained through the voice of the intern. New teaching strategies and assessment approaches being undertaken by the school and mentor teacher are mirrored through student work and the interns' reflections on "how" and "why" their implementation evolved. The work and progress of students are

intertwined with the interns' description of their ideals about teaching and how they have been influenced by their study and experiences throughout the year. The consistent reaction of panelists is, "I should be doing this. This is what it's all about!" The power of partnership enhances the learning of all who are involved.

Conclusion

Partnership has enhanced what either the schools or university could have achieved independently. For example, regarding assessment, 87% of university faculty and 60% of mentor teachers surveyed in the Teacher Education Initiative (TEI) study believe that linkages to student outcomes, student needs, and authentic alternative assessment (the principle of Teaching and Learning) are highly implemented in our partnership and teacher education program. The remaining respondents believe the principle is adequately/moderately well implemented. Comments of administrators and teachers in TEI focus groups confirm that the partnership continues to be a valuable resource for university faculty and students as well as schools in working toward assessment-related goals.

Our partnership has national as well as regional connections. At the national level, ETEP and the Southern Maine Partnership have affiliations with other schools and universities through the [National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching \(NCREST\)](#), the [National Education Association Center for Innovation](#), [the Center for Educational Renewal](#), and the [Coalition of Essential Schools](#).

The words of [Lynne Miller, Executive Director of the SMP](#), reflect the sentiments of all those involved in these joint efforts:

The Partnership has built a reputation as an organization that respects the professional knowledge of educators and tacitly acknowledges both their skills and the trying conditions under which they work. At the same time, the Partnership nurtures teachers' potential as inventors and change agents. It is a place where ideas are exchanged, where teachers show their work and prod and encourage each other, where administrators engage with new learning rather than constant problems, where university and public school faculty inform and enrich one another's practice, and where educational research gets examined through the lens of daily school experience. (Miller, 1998, p. 20)

The opportunity to test diverse ideas and practices is what attracted many professionals to the partnership in the first place and it is what compels us to continue it.

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Appendix

Extended Teacher Education Program Standards

1. **Knowledge of child/adolescent development and principles of learning-** The teacher demonstrates respect, concern for children, and an understanding of how they continue to develop and learn. She or he uses this knowledge to plan and guide instruction and to create a challenging, supportive, learning environment.
2. **Knowledge of subject matter and inquiry-** The teacher understands the framework of the subject matter(s) she or he teaches and makes accessible to students the discipline's tools of inquiry, central concepts, internal structure and connections to other domains of knowledge, in a manner that promotes the learner's independent inquiry.
3. **Instructional planning-** The teacher consistently plans and evaluates instruction based on knowledge of the learner, the subject matter, the community, the intended student outcomes, and the curriculum.
4. **Instructional strategies and technology-** The teacher understands and uses a variety of teaching strategies, including appropriate technology, to promote learning, and independent inquiry for all students.

5. **Assessment-** The teacher enhances and documents learning through continuing use of formal and informal assessment strategies, communicates feedback, and promotes guided self-evaluation in learners.
6. **Diversity-** The teacher models respect for individual differences among students and co-workers. She or he plans and creates instructional opportunities with sensitivity to individual learners.
7. **Beliefs about teaching and learning-** The teacher clearly communicates his or her beliefs about learning, teaching, assessment, and the role of education in society, and demonstrates practices that support those beliefs.
8. **Citizenship-** The teacher understands principles of democratic community and plans instruction to promote ideals, values, and practices of citizenship.
9. **Collaboration and professionalism-** The teacher demonstrates professional responsibility to school and community. She or he works collaboratively with colleagues, parents, and community members to improve the conditions of learning for all students and adults.
10. **Professional development-** The teacher recognizes she or he is, above all, a learner. She or he continually reflects on and evaluates choices and actions, and seeks out opportunities for professional development as well as ways to improve teaching and learning.
11. **Classroom management-** The teacher understands and implements classroom management techniques that support individual responsibility and the principles of democratic community.

Authorship Information

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