

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN A SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

A School of Education has a unique opportunity to engage with their local and larger communities. This paper details how one School of Education within a private, religious university works to serve and learn from others through three different initiatives. These include: serving in elected office, creating professional development opportunities for educators and administrators across the state, and developing and implementing a research study involving a reading clinic for local elementary students and their families. We discuss how we have worked to inspire change to lead to improvements in society and the different methods we employed to lead to that change. We conclude by reflecting upon the benefits we have seen so far and describe our plans for community engagement in the future.

Keywords: higher education, community engagement

PURPOSE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

As a School of Education situated in a private Christian university, we are invested in creating change for a civil society. As Weerts and Sandmann (2010) and Farner (2019) describe, community engagement has become a major initiative for colleges and universities. Though outreach has been a part of many universities' missions, there has been a change from a traditional view of service to a more active view of community engagement (Farner, 2019; Nicotera et al., 2011; Roper & Hirth, 2005).

Our levels of engagement within the community range from macrosystems—such as national and state governing bodies—to microsystems—such as the local community, especially elementary students and their families. Through engagement beyond our campus and the scholarship of integration and application (Boyer, 1997; Boyer, 2016), our School of Education is leading and shaping the conversation around education while also learning from our community.

This article will highlight three ways that our School of Education is contributing to and partnering with our surrounding community. These include government service, professional

development opportunities for educators in the community, and a reading clinic for students in the area surrounding the university.

Context

The Dean of the School of Education serves as an elected member of the State Board of Education and is involved in influencing precise, inspiring language in legislative bills and drafting regulations that guide implementation of those legislative bills. In addition to serving in elected office, the Dean of the School of Education is also an engaged member of the community and is regularly asked to contribute to panels and webinars on topics ranging from special education and assessment to the charter school system to online education. These talks are broadcast on local stations, to alumni of the university, to parents in the community, and to other organizations.

Within our School of Education, we have also formed partnerships with local school districts. We hold multiple opportunities for professional development on and off campus. Educators from K-12 schools and higher education join from across the state to improve their pedagogical skills and to stay informed with the latest educational research.

In addition, our local partner schools help us identify how to strengthen our teacher preparation program. We strive to offer information that is useful and practical for educators, while also listening to their needs and suggestions. Our partner schools benefit from having our teacher candidates in their K-12 classrooms, while we benefit from their years of classroom experience.

Finally, we hold a reading clinic each semester to address the literacy deficit in our local schools. In 2017, 67,360 students (18.2%) across Colorado were identified as having a significant reading deficiency by third grade (Colorado Department of Education [CDE], 2018). This number dropped only slightly to 16.3% by the conclusion of the 2018-2019 school year (CDE, 2020), exposing a growing need for reading intensives and inspiring the development of a reading clinic offered through our school to address this deficit. Elementary students who live in the area receive individual tutoring sessions once a week in phonics and reading fluency. Our teacher candidates gain experience in literacy instruction while the families in the area receive free educational services for their children. We believe that helping elementary students improve their reading skills will benefit them, their families, their schools, and society in general.

PROCESS

The main goal for all of the community engagement activities described here is to improve the lives of those in our community. As a School of Education, we believe we are called to serve in our local and larger communities. In addition to this broader goal of service, each initiative had one or more separate goals, and different methods were used to reach those goals.

Our community engagement endeavors fall under the description of scholarship of application in the Boyer framework (Boyer, 1997; Boyer, 2016). We are taking our expertise and knowledge of special domains and using that knowledge to address community concerns (Greenberger & Mandernach, 2018).

Goals and Methods for State Board Engagement

The dean's goal of her involvement on our state board is to help influence and contribute to the development of education initiatives for the state, making education stronger for students who live in Colorado. The dean stepped into a role of leadership

as an elected official on the Colorado State Board of Education in order to share her expertise in and passion for improving children's education. She draws upon this expertise in education and in literacy to help influence legislation for the state and to pass regulations to guide implementation.

In this position, the dean aims to guide the creation, review, and implementation of legislation that will improve educational opportunities for Colorado students. The dean's knowledge of literacy and research experiences in education allow her to make a difference within the state school system. Though this form of engagement with the community and government is not a typical scholarly activity for faculty members, the dean uses her academic preparation to collaborate with other leaders and craft written language to imbue change.

As a member serving in elected office, the dean of our school also gives talks for local organizations. Her goal in this role is to disseminate scholarly knowledge that is accessible for laypersons. In addition, she has the chance to hear from parents and other community members regarding their concerns surrounding current issues in education such as charter schools, technology in education, and remote learning. She provides practical information and suggestions for administrators, educators, and parents who are interested in furthering children's education.

Goals and Methods for Professional Development Opportunities

The goal for professional development opportunities is to help educators remain connected to other educator networks and to help translate educational research into actionable strategies within the classroom. We invite experts in curriculum and instruction to give interactive talks on topics such as writing, mathematics, and educating diverse learners. In addition, we invite teachers to share their own experiences and recommendations from the field. We offer professional development workshops throughout the year. In addition, we host an annual teacher's summit. We have educators who often meet with each other and with us, and in doing so we help create communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) within our larger regional area.

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a passion and who interact regularly to learn more about their interest (Wenger, 1999; Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Administrators and educators from our local regional area and across the state come together at the professional development opportunities to discuss how to improve our educational system and their own pedagogical skills. Just like our participants, we have a passion for improving education. We regularly survey our participants and ask what skills they can highlight at future workshops or meetings and what educational opportunities they would like us to provide.

In 2019, we offered professional development workshops on engaging culturally and linguistically diverse students in the classroom. We asked speakers with expertise in teaching and working with English Language Learners to lead the workshops. Within the workshops, our speakers discussed how incorporating students' culture can help them engage with academic content (Hammond, 2014). In addition, the speakers discussed how incorporating language objectives into daily instruction will help all students and, in particular, English Language Learners (ELLs). Kondor et al., (2019) explain that one of the biggest problems facing American schools is a lack of educator preparation to address the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in classrooms, making this topic extremely relevant to the educational community in Colorado.

Goals and Methods for Reading Clinic Intervention

This was the first year that we implemented the reading clinic for our local community. It was planned over the previous year and summer, and we began the clinic in the fall of 2019. We set multiple goals for the different participants in the reading clinic, including the elementary students, their parents, and our teacher candidates.

The overall goal for the reading clinic is to increase literacy in upper elementary students in order to benefit them and the community in the long-term. Elish-Piper (2018) stated that reading is a critical skill, which not only "predicts success in school and is foundational to most careers and to navigating life" (p. 58), but that also "can foster citizenship, the ability to understand different perspectives, and discuss difficult topics" (p. 59). By

working to improve these skills in our communities we promote the success of these students, thereby creating avenues for change in civil society. Using pre- and post- assessments, we will research if time-intensive, focused practice on phonics will increase students' reading fluency. Within reading fluency, we are focused on students' ability to read with speed (Suggate, 2016; Therrien, 2004). The phonics intervention focuses on increasing phonemic awareness, decoding phonemes, and associating phonemes with letter combinations (Ehri et al., 2001; Suggate, 2016).

The goal for parents is to help them be able to support their children at home by implementing research-based reading strategies. As Goodman and Hooks (2016) stated, fostering parental involvement is a wonderful way to support students, particularly culturally and linguistically diverse students. In the future, we plan to implement additional forms of parental support, such as weekly parent newsletters, parent group meetings, and suggestions for parent-child activities at home.

Our goal for teacher candidates is for them to become familiar with research-based instructional strategies and to gain practical experience teaching these strategies, so that they enter their own classrooms prepared to promote effective reading strategies, which benefit their students. Before the tutoring sessions begin, our teacher candidates go through weeks of training in phonics and decoding. By teaching children how to become aware of the different sounds that compose words and how to connect phonemes with letter combinations, we can increase students' reading fluency levels (Ehri et al., 2001; Suggate, 2016). We use a research-validated, multi-sensory curriculum to train our teacher candidates to work with our students (Donnelly et al., 2019).

OUTCOMES

In this paper, we described how the School of Education at a private Christian university has developed partnerships with our local, regional, and state communities. Everyone in the School of Education is involved in our community engagement initiatives, including the dean, the faculty members, and our teacher candidates. In this section, we identify the outcomes and benefits that have resulted from each of our community engagement efforts, including serving on the

Colorado State Board of Education in elected office, the professional development opportunities we offer for educators in our region, and the reading clinic intervention for students in our community.

Outcomes for State Board Engagement

In her elected position on the Colorado State Board of Education, the dean of the School of Education has been able to help influence legislation and write regulations with other members of the board that will lead to higher levels of student achievement and more accountability within the school systems. She has been able to connect with other government officials, school administrators, teachers, and students in this role. This allows the influence of her community engagement to spread beyond the immediate community and into the entire state.

One of the articles of legislation that the dean aided in crafting was the amendment of the READ Act of Colorado. In 2012, Colorado passed the Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act (READ Act) (CDE, 2017). The major goal of this initiative is to ensure that Colorado students will be proficient readers by the end of third grade. According to the READ report, the legislators chose third grade as the milestone for this skill based upon research that identifies this time period as critical for students' future high school performance (Hernandez, 2011). The READ Act amendment provides more clarity on the use of funds and describes steps to increase teacher knowledge of evidence-based practices in reading instruction (CDE, 2018). Amended READ Act programs and changes will be implemented across the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. More data on the success of the amended programs will be available at that point, but the increased accountability for spending and emphasis on research-based reading instruction is expected to be instrumental in reducing the alarming number of Colorado students with significant reading deficiencies over time (CDE, 2020). The passage of this amendment is a key marker of progress in the dean's efforts to effect legislation, which promotes vital skills and which will allow the students of Colorado to grow into successful, engaged citizens.

The dean of the School of Education has also been able to influence outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic on public schools. She has been

working with other elected officials and medical professionals to review the research and current data in order to inform best practices for future education in the state, to the benefit of all schools and students.

Outcomes for Professional Development Opportunities

Our professional development workshops have been well received by the educators in our region. At the end of every session, we ask our participants to provide us with their honest feedback, including which aspects were implemented well and which aspects we can improve upon in the future.

The sessions that were held in 2019, included professional development workshops on culturally and linguistically diverse learners and on teaching writing at the elementary and secondary levels. We chose speakers who were experienced classroom teachers or college professors who had dedicated themselves to further education on their topics. The participants reported that the speakers were informative and engaging. A number of participants reported that they had received new ideas about how to implement language instruction and language objectives into their classrooms. The speakers at our professional development workshops are able to reach and engage with local educators, who are able to better serve the students in their classrooms.

For our 2020 workshop, we had invited educators who specialized in math instruction and in literacy, while also including information on culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Unfortunately, our scheduled in-person meetings for 2020 were canceled due to the pandemic. We have been altering the content and format of the meetings in order to connect with educators and administrators virtually.

Outcomes for Reading Clinic Intervention

In the fall of 2019, eight students participated in the pilot semester of our reading clinic. The students were second through sixth graders and completed 10-14 hours of intervention with qualified teacher candidates. They were assessed using the Woodcock Johnson Reading Mastery III Word Attack Subtest to check for improvement in basic skills required to further reading ability. Six of the eight showed improved results on a post-assessment compared to their pre-assessment.

After reflecting on the methods and results

from this initial trial, we determined that numerous changes needed to be made and more data collected to refine the clinic into an impactful resource for community schools. Plans to continue the clinic under this design were postponed due to COVID-19 restriction in local public schools, and an amended, fully online approach was piloted in the fall of 2020. This clinic worked with another eight students, and—due to the platform and the increased stress associated with online learning for many students—the focus was on student comfort and teacher candidate (TC) preparedness. As a result, data is not available on the long-term impact of this strategy, but we hope to compile more data and further develop the clinic in future semesters, including options for remote support of students.

Of the participating students, all of them demonstrated an overall positive response to the clinic. Feedback from teacher candidates and students has helped direct plans for future implementation. We are also soliciting feedback from parents, which we will use to evaluate the effectiveness of the program's goal of encouraging reading at home.

A number of our teacher candidates reported being nervous before the start of the reading clinic. They were worried about teaching reading strategies and connecting with their students. However, after the reading clinic, our teacher candidates reported that they had learned so much during the instruction time before the reading clinic. In addition, they reported that they felt confident that they were able to implement the teaching strategies during their time with their students.

Our teacher candidates stated that the unique format of the class and reading clinic ignited their interest and passion for teaching. They enjoyed learning the intervention techniques from specialists and immediately applying their knowledge to help their elementary students. They also discussed that they now realize how much instruction is needed to bring students up to reading proficiency levels. Overall, teacher candidate feedback affirmed that in addition to offering new opportunities for students, the reading clinic helped prepare teacher candidates to better support students in their own classrooms, meeting our goal of delivering well-prepared student teachers and graduates into Colorado schools in order to benefit the communities in which they teach.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

In this community engagement profile, we show how our faculty works with and within the community to lead change. In addition, we show how we contribute to creating a more “just society” and making “the nation more civil and secure” (Boyer, 2016, p. 18). We know that our community extends beyond our campus walls, and we seek to help and learn from those in our local, regional, and state communities. Though these types of activities have not typically been thought of as scholarship, there is an increasing call for them to be included and for universities to be more engaged with their communities (Boyer, 2016; Roper & Hirth, 2005; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

James 3:13 (New International Version) reads, “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.” This is a charge that we take seriously in our School of Education. We consider how we can use our collective knowledge to serve others and humbly listen to their needs. We seek to empower those we help to in turn help others.

The dean's involvement in the State Board of Education as an elected official has given her the opportunity to serve the needs of the public, particularly in the areas of literacy and education. She aims to help create the conditions for success for all students in Colorado so that students can learn to read and read to learn. She is working with others to influence legislation that will affect school funding, the implementation of research-based teaching strategies, and teacher education, among other areas. In addition, the dean is influencing others within our university community. Other faculty and staff have heard that she serves beyond our local community as an elected official for the state and have acknowledged her commitment to this larger community.

The professional development opportunities will affect not only the educators who participate in them and share their knowledge, but also the students they teach. Our reading clinic is providing parents with an opportunity to support each other and their children's academic success. The teacher candidates who work with the reading clinic are being instilled with confidence and skills that will serve them well as they continue into their professions. Finally, the students who are tutored in the reading clinic will

acquire reading skills that will lead them to future success in their academic paths.

We have seen positive results from our community engagement initiatives, and we have personally benefited from reflecting upon our involvement in these activities. The dean and faculty in the School of Education are inspired to improve upon our current initiatives and to engage in new ways. We seek to continue learning with and about our communities, and we seek to use our talents to make a difference in the world.

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