Leveraging Partnerships to Improve Teaching and Learning: Lessons from Kentucky, Florida, and Texas

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Introduction

At a time when the economy and new job creation are among the most dominant issues facing the United States, education reforms aimed at improving the learning of American students are essential. According to international assessments, students in the United States continue to lag the performance of their peers in other nations, among them students in nations far less developed. To better prepare American students to compete in the global economy and to be informed and productive citizens at home, many policymakers and business leaders have made education a priority. And many are finding productive school-business partnerships to be a critical lever to improve teaching and learning.

Among the efforts to improve American education, a few areas are increasingly gaining traction. Research demonstrates that teacher effectiveness is essential for student learning, and may in fact be the most critical school-based factor for improving student outcomes. Further, to prepare American students well for the economy of the 21st century, it is becoming evident that schools need to improve learning in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and to better integrate modern digital technologies for students and teachers in the classroom.

As a nonprofit, nonpartisan, business-led public policy organization that seeks to deliver well-researched analysis and reasoned solutions to the nation’s most critical issues, the Committee for Economic Development (CED) has long supported efforts to improve education from preschool through the K-12 and postsecondary levels. Recently, CED published a series of briefs that cover a variety of approaches to improving K-12 education through enhanced teacher effectiveness, improved STEM education, and the integration of digital learning. Two of the briefs examine efforts in Kentucky to evaluate teachers and to support new teachers. Three briefs discuss various aspects of a CED-supported model for using business partnerships to advance STEM education at a school in Miami, Florida, and the final brief looks at initiatives in Texas that are addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by digital learning and technology in the classroom. Although the initiatives differ in many ways, there a few important common themes—engaging and supporting teachers in the change and reforms efforts, providing opportunities for professional growth and support, leveraging partnerships between schools and businesses and other stakeholders, and integrating technology as a tool for learning among both students and teachers.
Kentucky: Evaluating Teachers and Supporting New Teachers

In 2012, Kentucky’s Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, a private, nonprofit advocacy group, created a Team on Teacher Effectiveness to review current practices and make recommendations for comprehensive improvement in the way Kentucky recruits, prepares, supports, retains, and compensates teachers. The team will publish a final report by the end of 2013. Among those various issues, that team has examined the state’s recent efforts to develop its teacher evaluation system, the Professional Growth and Effectiveness System (PGES), and its efforts to support and enhance the success of beginning teachers. With support from CED, the Team on Teacher Effectiveness and the Prichard Committee published two briefs describing the initiatives in those areas:

- Evaluating Teachers: Kentucky’s Approach to Creating a Successful System; and,
- Supporting New Teachers: The Importance of the First Year in Ensuring Success and Retention.

According to the Kentucky Department of Education, the new evaluation system, PGES, is meant to measure teacher and leader performance but also to drive professional growth and improvements in teaching and learning. The design of PGES emphasizes multiple measures of teacher performance, including principal observation, peer observation, reflection, professional growth, student growth, and student voice (gauged through student perception surveys). PGES is still under development and full implementation is scheduled for the 2014-15 school year.

The Prichard Committee’s Team on Teacher Effectiveness also examined the state’s efforts to support new teachers, and the second brief provides an overview of the team’s research and reviews, including a review of Kentucky’s mandatory Teacher Internship Program (KTIP) and findings from the 2011 Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) Kentucky Survey. KTIP is a mandatory one-year program for all new teachers. Each new teacher is assigned a beginning teacher committee that includes the school principal, a resource teacher (usually a teacher with the same certification), and a teacher educator. The committee serves as both evaluators and a support team. The TELL online survey is administered to teachers and school leaders statewide to provide data on educators’ perceptions of the teaching and learning conditions in their schools, including their views about new teacher supports and mentoring.

Florida: Business Partnerships to Advance STEM Education

CED, together with the Council for Educational Change, a Florida think tank, established the Business Partnership to Advance STEM Success (B-PASS) grant, and in 2012 awarded the grant to the José Martí Mathematics and Science Technology (MAST) 6-12 Academy (JM-MAST) in Miami, Florida. JM-MAST had previously been a traditional neighborhood middle school, but was recently converted to a STEM magnet school for qualifying students in grades 6 through 12. In the transition, school leaders have met many
obstacles related to teacher development and the implementation of a new and more challenging science and mathematics curriculum. Business partnerships have provided critical support in the areas of faculty training; practical, real-world experiences for students; and student recruitment and support, particularly among girls. Three briefs outline these challenges and the strategies JM-MAST and its partners are employing to overcome them:

- Business Partnerships to Advance STEM Education: A Model of Success for the Nation;
- Business Partnerships to Advance STEM Education: Building a Bridge to Careers in STEM—Focus on Girls; and
- Business Partnerships to Advance STEM Education: Building a Bridge to Homegrown STEM Talent—Focus on Teachers.

The first brief provides an overview of how JM-MAST has used its partnerships with business organizations and individual businesses to provide effective teacher learning and development opportunities, to offer students real-world experiences that have made their learning more practical, and to both document the school’s challenges and opportunities and create resources and materials to market the school to potential students. The brief offers some advice for others navigating the same challenges: streamline project management and engage teachers and foster faculty buy-in. The latter requires that school leaders communicate clearly the goals and objectives of changes to curriculum and instruction as well as new professional development and business partnerships; empower teachers and allow them to establish partnerships and develop projects that will benefit their classes; and allow time for reluctant faculty and staff to become engaged and support changes.

The second brief examines more in depth the challenges of recruiting and supporting girls in STEM education given data showing lower participation and performance rates among girls in STEM fields. JM-MAST again relied on its business partnerships to develop recruitment and retention strategies for female students and to provide targeted professional development that integrates gender-specific teaching and student engagement strategies. JM-MAST has increased its female enrollment and retention rates. Further, female students are demonstrating improved performance particularly in STEM competitions and report that their attitudes and perceptions about STEM have improved. Finally, the brief offers some next steps in the areas of expanded all-girl course offerings, additional partnerships for developing internships in STEM fields for female students, providing additional professional development for teachers, and providing peer mentorships for female students.

The third JM-MAST brief examines more closely the needs of teachers and how to support teachers through cultural change within the school, use partnerships to provide active student learning experiences, overcome teacher resistance, and provide teachers with the tools and resources they need to succeed. JM-MAST also has engaged partners from
higher education in an effort to provide teachers with hands-on, active learning experiences themselves that would translate to more active and hands-on teaching and learning in their own classrooms. Another key element has been providing teachers with the tools and resources they need, including technology, facilities, and equipment. Some examples include upgraded computer labs, upgraded science lab equipment, hand-held devices and applications for scientific data collection and analysis, and Smart Boards.

**Texas: Digital Learning Opportunities for Teachers**

Recognizing that today’s students are “digital natives” and digital-age learners, Texas created the Texas High Performance Schools Consortium. The consortium consists of 23 school districts that “are working cooperatively to implement the principles of the Texas Association of School Administrators’ New Vision for Public Education, which include using digital information and technologies to transform teaching and learning.” To provide some insight and guidance from the consortium, CED cooperated with the Texas Association of School Administrators and the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce to produce a brief—*Digital Learning: Meeting the Challenges and Embracing the Opportunities for Teachers*—which documents experiences in two of the consortium districts, Northwest Independent School District (NISD) and McAllen Independent School District (MISD). The brief describes many of the efforts of these two districts to better support and train teachers in the use of digital technologies. The districts offer teachers professional development both in the use of the technologies themselves but also in the integration of the technologies as tools for student learning. Drawing from the experiences of these districts, the brief also offers implications for business leaders and policymakers.

**Common Themes**

The strategies employed by the states, districts, and schools in these briefs vary significantly, and yet, there are significant commonalities. All of them are:

- Engaging and supporting teachers in change and reform;
- Providing professional growth and development;
- Leveraging partnerships with business and other stakeholders; and
- Integrating technology as a tool for learning and evaluation or assessment of teachers and students.

**Engaging and supporting teachers**

First, each focuses on teacher engagement. They are deliberately engaging teachers in the reform efforts because the teachers and their effectiveness in the classroom are critical for effective implementation, and more importantly, for improved student learning.
Furthermore, for teachers to actively and effectively implement change, they must support the reforms and understand how to use them effectively to change their own practice.

Kentucky is working to make sure teachers understand and support the teacher evaluation process and has identified communicating with teachers and building their understanding as priorities for the future. The state department of education actively sought the participation of teachers in the design of the new evaluation system. Among the specific contributions of teachers were the recommendations to include professional growth measures and student growth objectives. Teachers also recommended training and certification for observers evaluating teachers. Furthermore, Kentucky has invested in the TELL survey to gauge teacher attitudes and opinions, not just about mentoring and support for new teachers, but on a broad array of teacher working conditions and issues that impact effectiveness.

JM-MAST has also made it a priority to engage teachers and foster faculty buy-in. School leaders have collaborated with teachers to identify partnerships and outside learning opportunities and projects. For example, JM-MAST is building teacher ownership by giving teachers an opportunity to submit mini-grant proposals for partnerships they thought would work well in their specific disciplines. School leaders have also identified communication with teachers about the goals of the partnerships and professional development as important for building their support.

The Texas school districts have put teachers and their growth and development at the center of their efforts. They are providing teachers with leadership roles among their peers and with multiple opportunities to improve practice. MISD trained an initial cadre of teachers and then used them to train additional groups of teachers in their schools. Both MISD and NISD are providing teachers with needed tools and resources including individual devices for students.

**Providing opportunities for professional growth and development**

In addition to engaging teachers and building their support for the changes at hand, these sites are providing high-quality professional development as an integral part of the reforms. In Kentucky, professional growth planning is an integral part of the evaluation process. “A teacher engages in professional growth planning specific to individual needs based on feedback and data from multiple sources and self-reflection.” Furthermore, Kentucky seeks to support the growth and development of new teachers through the KTIP program, which includes a beginning teacher committee, one member of which is a resource teacher. The resource teacher is required to spend at least 70 hours working with the new teacher as a mentor and guide.

JM-MAST partnered with Florida International University (FIU) and Miami-Dade College-North Campus and various local businesses and organizations to provide teachers with professional development experiences that would model the classroom practices that school leaders hoped teachers would then employ in their classrooms. For example, teachers worked in interdisciplinary and grade-specific groups to conduct simple experiments around the core content in science courses.
NISD promotes the use of online courses, as well as traditional face-to-face classes, for teacher professional development, and promotes educators’ efforts to connect and collaborate with colleagues through newer social media, such as Twitter and Pinterest. MISD provides teachers with a professional planning period, in addition to a traditional planning period, which is used for professional learning and student data analysis; master teachers who support and coach other teachers and model strategies in the classroom; and professional learning communities that host face-to-face instructional training in digital teaching strategies.

**Leveraging partnerships**

In Kentucky, the Prichard Committee has been long been an effective private, nonprofit advocate for education reform. In this case, the committee’s Team on Teacher Effectiveness is working with the public sector to review current policies and make recommendations for improvements in teacher evaluation and new teacher induction and support.

In Florida, JM-MAST has benefited in many ways from a variety of partnerships with business, higher education, and community organizations. The B-PASS grant has supported real-world experiences, such as field trips for students, resources for marketing and recruitment materials, and teacher supports, professional development, and mentoring. Partnerships with FIU and Miami Dade College-North Campus have provided opportunities for high quality professional development. Partnerships with Zoo Miami and NASCAR have provided additional opportunities for students to engage in real-life applications of scientific and engineering concepts.

In Texas, the 23 consortium districts are working with one another and the Texas Association of School Administrators to implement a new vision for public education that involves the integration of technology. The Texas digital learning brief concludes with lists of implications of their work for business leaders and policymakers. The brief calls on business to create business and school partnerships that can help provide mentorships for teachers, create real-world connections to classroom learning, invest in schools and teachers by providing technologies, expertise or funds, and spotlight teacher successes in the community.

**Integrating Technology**

The initiatives in Florida’s JM-MAST Middle School and in Texas’ two highlighted districts (and the other 21 consortium districts) are firmly focused on better integrating technology in the classroom. JM-MAST is more broadly focused on STEM education, which includes technology explicitly, but is also interested in using technology as a tool across the curriculum and for teacher learning. The Texas consortium districts are focused on teacher professional development that promotes the integrated use of technology in the classroom. Their efforts include the use of technology to individualize instruction and to transform assessment and promote the analysis of student assessment data to inform instruction.
Kentucky’s integration of technology is less obvious and ripe for additional efforts. The TELL survey is administered online to teachers and administrators statewide. The results data are available online for analysis and can be used to help guide change in policy and practice that can improve teaching conditions and drive school improvement planning. Kentucky leaders might also consider how technology could help support more consistent, high-quality mentoring and support activities for new teachers, or how technology could be used to facilitate certain aspects of the PGES. The Measures of Effective Teaching project, on which Kentucky is basing much of the design for the PGES, is exploring the use of video for conducting classroom observations, providing teacher feedback, and for training and assessing observers. As implementation proceeds, leaders in Kentucky can consider additional refinements that better harness technology to support teacher evaluation and induction.

Looking Ahead

The strategies illustrated in these six briefs have much in common and will have some interesting results for these schools, districts, and states to share with others as they move forward. However, most are in relatively early stages of development and implementation. The leaders of each will continue to monitor results and the impact on teaching and learning. They also plan to adjust their approaches to meet both teacher and student needs, and will continue to seek ways of leveraging the resources of stakeholder organizations to connect classrooms to the real world and make better use of external resources in the community. As a result, business can continue to leverage its expertise and to deepen and expand its increasingly important partnership role in education.