DEFINING 'ENDURING PARTNERSHIPS'

Can a well-worn path be an effective, sustainable and mutually beneficial relationship?

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20 July 2012

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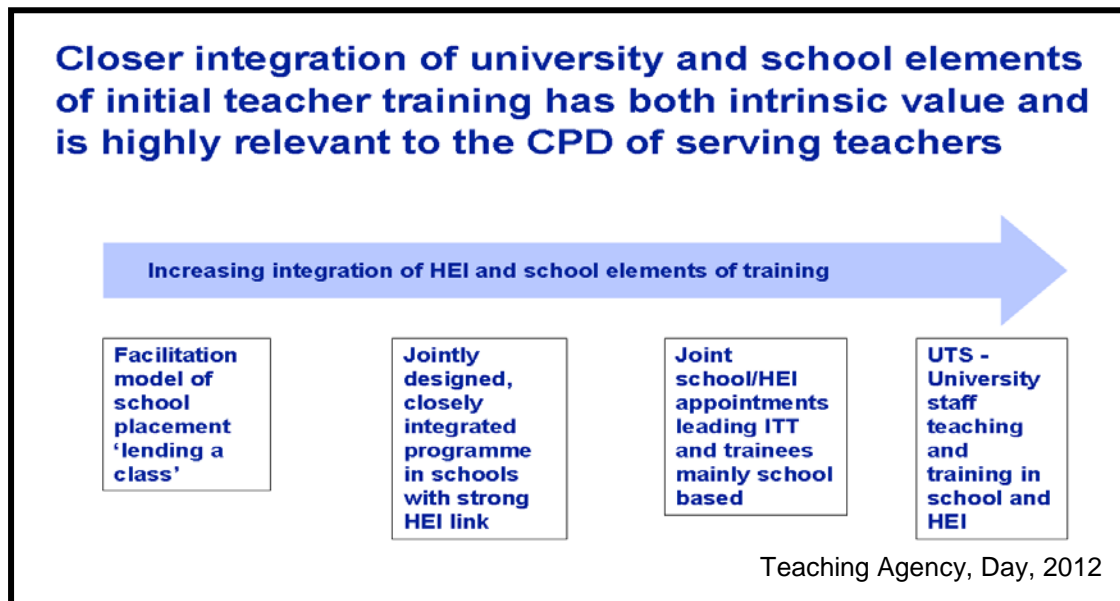
Introduction

The critical significance of the professional experience component of initial teacher education is widely recognised in research and policy. Supported, authentic professional experience characterised by strong collegial interactions and a focus on learning and development and student outcomes is central to the preparation of teaching graduates (Le Cornu, 2012; House of Representatives, 2009). Foregrounded in this research and policy is the effectiveness of purposeful collaborative relationships between higher education institutions and schools in facilitating improved teaching and learning outcomes.

The *Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia: Standards and Procedures* (AITSL, 2011, p.15) refers to this important collaboration between initial teacher education providers and schools as an 'enduring partnership'. Specifically, Standard 5.1 of the national accreditation standards requires a program provider to evidence the establishment of 'enduring school partnerships to deliver their programs, particularly the professional experience component.'

This paper examines the meaning of 'enduring partnerships' as applied to initial teacher education. Both descriptors 'enduring' and 'partnerships' are used in literature regarding relationships between initial teacher education providers and schools in a variety of ways. Reference is made to far-reaching systemic applications, both innovative and long-worn pathways and to pockets of good practice within an individual initial teacher education program. In establishing a common understanding for accreditation purposes of an 'enduring partnership', there is a need to determine more closely its meaning within the context of developing enhanced teacher graduate outcomes.

Characterising a partnership

In practice, partnerships between initial teacher education providers and schools can be represented on a continuum characterised by the level of stakeholders' responsibilities and professional interactions. The Teaching Agency is responsible for initial teacher education in England and describes these relationships across four junctures of integration from a loosely collaborative model based solely on links to the practicum, termed as 'lending a class' to an assimilated HEI-school partnership that merges the role of each partner (Day, 2012).

Closer integration of university and school elements of initial teacher training has both intrinsic value and is highly relevant to the CPD of serving teachers

Increasing integration of HEI and school elements of training

| Facilitation model of school placement 'lending a class' | Jointly designed, closely integrated programme in schools with strong HEI link | Joint school/HEI appointments leading ITT and trainees mainly school based | UTS - University staff teaching and training in school and HEI |

Teaching Agency, Day, 2012

Parallels can be drawn between the facilitation model, the first on the Teaching Agency continuum, and a more traditional view of teacher education practicum, which requires distinct roles for theory and teaching practice directed by supervisors rather than guided by mentors (Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008). This first model is comparable to models of partnerships where the benefits of services received are unilateral and organised by a 'managing' partner and mutual benefit and exchange are absent from the relationship (Tushnet; Barnett et al in Callahan and Martin, 2007). As the continuum progresses to increased integration, the models demonstrate a more active engagement, with collaborative understandings and a shared focus. This shared focus incorporates collective space and resources with the final model aligning with the 'teaching hospital' concept. In Australia, an example that is closely aligned to this model is the clinical teacher preparation program at Melbourne University that promotes the idea that: 'theory and practice become one coherent learning experience and new knowledge can be applied into practice' (Rickards, 2010). For purposes of national accreditation of a teacher education program, it must be clear as to what type of integration satisfies Standard 5.1 and how these partnerships demonstrate a potential for longevity.

The concept of a genuine university-school 'partnership' connotes a collaboration of professional conversations, collegial learning and aligned processes. Partnerships, within this context, have been defined as consisting of 'two or more parties that share common goals that cannot be reached by either party independently' (Barnett et al. in Callahan and Martin, 2007, p.136). It is clearly articulated in research and internal feedback from Queensland College of Teachers' stakeholders that a hierarchical relationship characterised by irregular contact with a school, with a primary goal of satisfying a provider's practicum placement needs, that stretches goodwill of the profession, neither equates to such a partnership nor provides strengthened outcomes for teaching graduates. It could be suggested that programs demonstrating these characteristics would represent the Teaching Agency's 'lending a class' model rather than an 'enduring partnership'. However, a sustainable collaborative approach need not be represented by a singular highly prescriptive model. It should be positioned as a shift towards developing locally relevant, collegial learning relationships and maintaining these 'learning communities' over a sustained period of time (Bloomfield, 2009; Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008; Wegner, 1999).

In research conducted by Victoria University commissioned by the former body, Teaching Australia, partnerships are defined as 'social practices achieved through and characterised by trust, mutuality and reciprocity among preservice teachers, teachers and other school colleagues and teacher educators.' (Kruger et al, 2009, p10). The qualities of trust, mutuality and reciprocity are consistently identified either collectively or individually as characterising sustainable, meaningful partnerships (Bloomfield, 2009 European Commission, 2007; Le Cornu, 2012; Peters, 2011). Research identifies a particular meaning of each quality, these terms and their meanings tend to be used vaguely and interchangeably within an education partnership discourse. Kruger et al, for example, defines 'reciprocity' within the context of 'recognising and valuing' (2009, p10) the commitment and expertise of each stakeholder whilst Le Cornu and Ewing refer to reciprocity as each stakeholders' (or learners') actual commitment to and responsibility for shared and individual learning (2008, p1808). Valuing the expertise of a stakeholder versus taking responsibility for all stakeholders' learning represents two different paradigms of partnership. In recognising the importance of these qualities then, two fundamental difficulties arise: how to consistently measure a program provider's 'enduring partnership' without mandating overly prescriptive criteria and evaluating how these qualities can be maintained over time. These issues suggest that the demonstration of an 'enduring partnership' needs to address the 'how' of the sustainable process in addition to the details of the 'what' occurs in the process.

Whilst acknowledging the value of 'enduring partnerships' there is also a need to understand the challenges they present, particularly the complexity of establishing a meaningful and responsive collaboration and the resources required (Bloomfield, 2009; Le Cornu, 2012; Turner, 2008). Re-defining the working relationship between an initial teacher education provider and a school can be impacted upon by time, space, financial resources and even pre-existing professional tensions and conflicting views on roles and responsibilities amongst the partnership stakeholders (Levers et al, 2012; Sim, 2010). However, the benefits of a collaborative relationship as opposed to a loosely integrated approach to professional learning relationships and partnership communication outweigh the complexities. Importantly, they are also required. To achieve national accreditation, a provider must be able to demonstrate the authenticity of professional experience is not simply left to chance as it is an element of an initial teacher education program's quality. In managing a consistent approach to evaluating providers' 'enduring partnerships', there is a need for caution against a definition so prescriptive that it may restrict the application of local context and the development of a fluid, authentic partnership (Bloomfield 2009; White, Bloomfield & Le Cornu, 2010). However, some common understanding must be recognised.

What does an 'enduring partnership' look like?

In developing a typology of university-school partnerships, Callahan and Martin (2007) characterise 16 types of partnerships based on four continua: patterns of geographical participation, the frequency of engagement in learning, participative levels in decision making and the ability to adapt and respond to changes. Their research acknowledges that not all of these models may represent successful partnerships. However, the complexity of their model demonstrates explicitly that an 'enduring partnership' needs to satisfy a framework of qualities rather than a prescription of formula.

The concept of 'communities of practice' or learning communities is promoted as fundamental in the establishment of 'enduring partnerships' (Wenger in Bloomfield,

2009; Carter, 2012; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Sim, 2010). Within the understanding of the social practices of shared learning is the commitment to shared responsibility. Fostering shared responsibilities, however, can only occur when all stakeholders have an agreed understanding of their roles and responsibilities (Brady, 2002; European Commission, 2007; Sim, 2010), which is a product of mutuality and reciprocity. An initial teacher education, learning community may be characterised, therefore, by 'collaboration and constructive engagement, shared goals, interdependence and exchanges that foster individual and collective understandings, mutual respect and responsiveness, appreciation of differences within the group and concern for the well-being of the group and the individuals within it' (Sumsion and Patterson in Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008, p1808). The European Commission (2007) defined these elements critical to an effective partnership under three categories of conditions: the quality of structures, the quality of processes and relations and the quality of results.

In establishing a framework for understanding a collaborative relationship, the concepts that embody the understanding of 'partnerships' discussed above must be demonstrated. Shared and individual learning must be taking place. Further consideration should also be given towards the impact of the partnership on school student achievement, the preparation of preservice teachers, professional development of practising teachers, the quality of instruction from the initial teacher education provider and the involvement of decision making amongst partners (Callahan and Martin, 2007). Importantly, there is also a need for equity. Evidence of active engagement with only some 'partner' schools or groups to support a select number of students, neither achieves the intent of the national accreditation standards, nor enhances the quality of all graduate teachers or school student potential.

The accreditation process authorises 'new' initial teacher education programs and in effect evaluates how these qualities can be maintained over time. This may require evidence of the processes that ensure the partnership is responsive to a changing environment, including mechanisms to consider the needs of all stakeholders and sustainability from a resources perspective. Providing stakeholders with the opportunity to engage in ongoing evaluation and development of the partnership is integral to longevity (Peters, 2011).

Currently, there are a number of initiatives in initial teacher education in Queensland that demonstrate a commitment to stakeholder collaboration and the meeting of shared goals. Some have been founded through the work of particular individuals or organisations, others assisted in development by the Federal Government's *National Partnership Agreement on Improving Teacher Quality*. Consideration of some of these partnerships show that different models work through an explicit commitment to establishing effective learning communities or 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 2010).

Practising Examples in Queensland

In examining what might constitute an 'enduring partnership', we compared the features identified in contemporary literature with the benefits and complexities evident in a number of collaborations already in existence in Queensland. Some of these partnerships, through the benefits of being established for some time, demonstrate an on-going ability to continue, whilst others are emerging programs. However, all of the initiatives demonstrate a level of partnership that could be aligned

with either the 'close integration' or 'joint appointment' models described by the Teaching Agency's continuum.

Discussions were held with representatives involved in a number of these Queensland partnerships. These initiatives are outlined in Appendix A and are categorised as one of four types, briefly described below:

- Example One: Independent Schools and HEIs

Some independent schools in Queensland have established partnerships between their school and preservice education providers to enhance the quality of the professional experience for both the pre-service and mentor teacher.

- Example Two: System led Centres for Excellence – Education Queensland

A project to promote high quality field experiences, learning communities and professional learning networks has been created through clustered centres for excellence.

- Example Three: HEI/System Regional Collaboration

An example of a partnership initiative where a system and local schools have developed and refined coursework within a program pathway, shared delivery of the course components and linked professional experience to future employment.

- Example Four: Partnerships in the Broader Context – HEI/School/Community

An initiative to respond to a full range of stakeholder perspectives through the establishment of faculty-led advisory groups to coordinate program development, professional experience issues and the promotion of the broader teacher learning community.

Clearly, these models are not an exhaustive list of existing successful partnerships between initial teacher education providers and schools, even within Queensland. However, they represent some examples of a conscious movement along the continuum of the Teaching Agency model toward greater integration and collaboration (Day, 2012). The stakeholders approached expressed a number of significant benefits and challenges in the establishment and maintenance of their partnerships. From these discussions, it is possible to draw out common characteristics also identified in the literature.

Characteristics Common to Practising Examples and the Literature

Commitment to reciprocal learning relationships
A high quality professional teaching practicum is characterised by mentors who are dedicated to and skilled in articulating and modelling best practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Peters, 2011). Schools with skilled staff, trained in developing relationships and engaging in reflective practice, further the learning outcomes and potential of both their students and the graduates of their profession. The mutual benefits of shared learning require the involvement and commitment of the teaching faculty of both partners, with a

number of schools furthering the learning community by access networking channels with other schools.

Professional development in areas such as mentoring and flexible access to post-graduate study for practising teachers will become increasingly important with the recognition within the national professional standards of highly accomplished and lead teacher career levels. A number of schools interviewed envisaged this as a focus area of developing mutuality with initial teacher education program providers.

In describing the outcomes of effective enduring partnerships, this is in accord with Kruger et al (2009) who suggest that, as a focus, learning is privileged. Responses from each of the stakeholder schools highlighted the positive impact on learning for both preservice and practising teachers and ultimately student outcomes.

Explicit and agreed roles and responsibilities
A commitment to the principles of best practice and professional responsibilities enveloped the partnership cultures of the initiatives outlined in Appendix A. Each partner was entrusted with distinct roles and responsibilities, with consistent communication from both the provider, the school and, in some cases system, to facilitate genuine collaboration. Initial strategies in establishing the guidelines for the partnership may include briefing sessions, clarification of roles, facilitating collaboration between participants and strategies for feedback and discussion (Kenny, 2012).

The recent review of teacher education and induction in Queensland (Caldwell & Sutton, 2011), particularly highlighted the value of trials of work-based pathways and peer coaching approaches to the teaching profession such as the system led Centres for Excellence (Example Two). While they require large resources and are confined to a limited number of preservice students, the partnerships developed have established clearly defined and agreed roles and responsibilities. The Review also emphasised the value of partnerships that are representative of a clinical-style or 'teaching hospital' model, promoting stronger integration between program providers, systems and schools.

The HEI/System Collaboration (Example Three) demonstrates a long-standing relationship that has not required significant ongoing financial input and aims to be accessible to a broader range of students. Each partner has a clear understanding of its role within the relationship and commitment to the quality preparation of the preservice teacher.

Genuine collaboration
School partners confirmed that strong relationships with providers strengthened the preparation for the preservice teachers' professional experience. Within the agreed roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders in each partnership, both the preservice teachers and the schools receive early advice of their allocation. This permits time for preparation, positive interaction and confidence building for preservice teachers prior to the start of the professional experience. This focused preparation time is considered critical by schools in the quality of the professional experience placement.

Importantly, genuine collaboration fosters the feelings of trust and respect with the expertise of each partner valued through the interconnectedness of

collaboration (Kruger et al, 2009; Turner, 2008). Stakeholders involved in the Queensland initiatives considered genuine collaboration ensures both collective and individual stakeholder priorities can be met. The partnerships considered have facilitated learning relationships on a school, system and community basis through authentic conversations and actions around teaching and learning, program development and community engagement.

Responsiveness
Designated program coordinators in both schools and providers (particularly seen in Examples A and B) are identified as critical to the relationship working smoothly. While the literature highlighted the Professional Experience Co-ordinator role in schools as essential to the establishment of an effective school-university partnership and the quality of the professional experience placement (Le Cornu, 2012; Martinez & Coombs, 2001), school-based partnership stakeholders recommended the current liaison officer role needed to evolve to reflect the collaborative requirements of a partnership. Suggestions to support sustainability have included the creation of learning relationships between one mentor and a cluster of schools over a period of time (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). Such arrangements can be conducive to authentic communication, mechanisms for feedback and the capacity to respond to the changing school environment.

The emphasis on reciprocal learning, a common understanding of each participant's required contribution to the partnership and a collaborative effort to meeting shared goals were identified as common threads of good practice in both the literature and the Queensland initiatives.

In assessing the reciprocal benefits of the partnership, the stakeholders approached also outlined some of the difficulties that can lead to the collaboration faltering.

Establishing relationships
Commonly, it was the commitment of an administrator that initiated the collaboration. All schools commented that developing the link with a provider is the hardest aspect of the initiative and required their steadfast commitment to ensure the partnership could develop.

Existing processes and roles
Some schools found the role, often referred to as 'university liaison person' untenable from the perspective of developing authentic conversations around the initial teacher education program. Such a liaison person was usually a co-ordinator not an academic and as such, discussions regarding critical aspects of the program delivery were not possible. Commonly, the liaison person also had no prior knowledge of the preservice teachers in the school.

Sustainability and scale

Stakeholders acknowledged that sustainability required a firm commitment to the partnership from both a resources and personnel perspective. Where an existing personal relationship between a school based person and university coordinator drove the connection, strengthening the established relationship with the university was essential to maintain the program to ensure continuity if personnel changed. Ensuring sustainability of the partnership required whole school processes to be considered and a trust that should the university coordinator change, the partnership would continue.

Time limitations of both school principals and teachers also required schools to restructure practices. Despite a strong desire to engage in effective partnerships with all of the universities requiring professional experience placements, some schools interviewed believed it was only possible to achieve a genuinely deep relationship with one university.

It is also noted that where leadership or coordinating committees are in place (as in Example D), an approach that based in rhetoric or the work of a few key stakeholders may limit the success and sustainability of such an initiative. The establishment of a committee alone, does not indicate that a sustainable and enduring partnership is in place.

The Way Forward

To promote quality teaching, the literature affirms the necessity of moving beyond the tired practices of required partnerships for professional experience within the context of student learning, pre-service teacher development and teacher mentor practices to a model of greater integration, collaboration and shared learning. National accreditation Program Standard 5.1 requires that the quality of professional experience can no longer be determined on the basis of an adhoc arrangement between provider and schools but considered more thoroughly, as to how to demonstrate 'enduring school partnerships'.

To establish and sustain partnerships that promote reciprocity, mutuality and trust involves the acceptance of specific roles and responsibilities by each stakeholder to develop these effective partnerships. While some of the examples discussed do privilege particular preservice students or schools, the aim, however, must be for equity in access to quality professional experiences for all preservice teachers. This will require clear, consistent communication, collaboration and reflection to sustain an authentic learning community.

Whilst there is considerable research regarding partnerships between initial teacher education providers and schools, what characterises 'enduring partnerships' for national accreditation purposes is in the embryonic stages of development. The opportunity is present for continued discussion among stakeholders.

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APPENDIX 1

Example One: Independent Schools in South-East Queensland

Several independent schools with established partnerships and good practices in the area of preservice education have been able to enhance their initiatives through access to additional funding through the *Improving Teacher Quality National Partnership* agenda.

Driving Focus: Explicit Formal Professional Development
Committed to the principles of strengthening the mentoring skills of teaching staff and developing the profession, a number of schools initiated a connection with an initial teacher education provider to assist with explicit instruction in mentoring. The partnerships have included the professional development of all staff. For one school, this has included flexible access to postgraduate programs, for the other school, peer mentoring and developing a 'classroom without walls' culture has been established. In other schools, mentoring opportunities have expanded beyond the preservice period into induction practices for early career teachers.

Several schools highlighted the importance of the orientation to the practicum experience to understand the school environment, including key school policies and practices. This also allows space for the mentor teachers' understanding of particular course requirements that are often rushed or misunderstood in ad hoc arrangements.

Driving Focus: Equal Conversations
Several schools initiated conversations with a particular initial teacher education provider to establish explicit understanding and 'equal' conversations with a provider with regard to developing a two-way relationship with the provider. In one instance, this included selecting the needs of the pre-service teachers to fit with the particular needs and philosophy of the school. In another, school staff had opportunity to exchange ideas about the design of the university's assessment items. The schools have established a specific school co-ordinator role to maintain a strong connection between the school and the provider through regular communication and understanding of equal needs.

Recognising the importance of a shared space, three schools established a dedicated physical area for pre-service teachers, mentoring teachers and academics to share and engage in learning and conversations. In one school, this shared space includes a specifically built observation room for both peer and pre-service teacher mentoring. A strong school culture in mentoring and progression of the profession forms part of the schools' ethos. Other schools also accept the preservice teacher as a 'fully-fledged' member of staff, extending support to access to ICT resources, access to staff handbooks and inclusion in all aspects of school life. The view is held that if the school cannot resource them or provide a quality school experience then they shouldn't accept them into the school.

Currently, of the schools interviewed by the QCT, one school is seeking to further this work through the creation of an Independent Schools Queensland network of schools who were also interested in working towards centres of excellence for preservice teachers.

Example Two: System-led Centres for Excellence – Education Queensland

Established through the *Improving Teacher Quality National Partnership* between the Queensland and Australian government, five centres for excellence have been created in state school clusters to provide high quality field experiences for preservice teachers and professional development for teachers. The aim of the Centres for Excellence is to provide quality supervision and mentoring of the preservice teacher, promote quality teaching to improve student learning outcomes, strengthen links between initial teacher education programs and support a smooth transition to employment as qualified and skilled teachers. In some cases, professional experience coursework is provided on site by school staff. Although the centres for excellence are only in the early stages of existence, as a partnership model, they provide networks of learning for both preservice and practising teachers and links to employment for graduates.

The five centres for excellence address a range of priority areas as follows:

- Special Education - centre provides specialised extended experiences for high-achieving preservice teachers and relevant continuing professional learning for existing teachers. Preservice teachers combine course work with extended field placements to gain greater knowledge and practical understandings of a range of disabilities as well as support by trained mentor teachers.
- Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) – the partnership focuses on developing effective teaching skills in STEM-related disciplines so that graduates are 'classroom ready'. Each participant in the program is supported throughout the program by a dedicated and trained teacher mentor. The program targets experience STEM professionals that are transitioning to teaching.
- Rural placements – centre inducts and prepares third year preservice students as new teachers for work in the early, middle and senior phases in Education Queensland schools. Students are supported by trained mentors and after successful completion of the professional experience requirements, complete a paid internship in a rural school.
- Low socio-economic schools – the partnerships aims to build the capabilities of preservice teachers to work in diverse, contemporary Queensland state schools. Individualised learning and engagement, including individual learning plans and personalised mentoring from experienced teachers are provided to participants in the final year of their program and continued through their first years of teaching.
- Indigenous perspectives – the partnership involves creation of a learning community with a focus on linking theoretical knowledge of indigenous students and communities with extended practical experience with highly trained coaches. Key elements of the program focus on differentiated instruction for all learners, particularly catering for indigenous students and innovative ICT practices.

Example Three: Regional model – HEI/System collaboration

A regional initial teacher education provider has a long-standing agreement with a regional school system. Subjects within the program pathway are collaboratively developed and refined. Entry into the pathway offered is available to pre-service teachers through an application and interview process conducted by the school system. The school system contributes to the development and refinement of selected coursework, assists in the delivery of key course components and is then responsible for the delivery of all third and fourth year professional experience placements for the students accepted into the pathway option.

Example Four – Partnerships in the broader context – HEI/ School/Community

A number of initial teacher education providers coordinate their partnership agenda through Faculty Advisory Committees linked to their programs. These representative councils of key school/ community and university stakeholders offer leadership to a program beyond the focused practicum experience and can drive the program development, respond to trends in the profession, promote the profession within the community and influence the professional development available to the school communities. In many cases, subcommittees of the Advisory Committees focus on the professional experience component of the program, coordinating the school partnerships within the local context and determining the partnership model with schools.