New Technologies for New Learning Opportunities: Laying the Groundwork for a Successful Professional Development School/University Partnership

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ABSTRACT

Current research (Adkins & Vasu, 2000; Casey & Rakes, 2002; Dawson and Rakes, 2003) supports technology training for teachers for the purpose of using this technology as an instructional tool in the classroom to improve student learning. To meet this request for teacher educators, it is important to provide quality professional development. Connecting local public school teachers with university faculty for training opportunities was an excellent starting point since our university could provide a high degree of instructional delivery. Our PDS start-up grant enabled us to offer a very successful workshop that provided monetary incentives, ACT 48 credits (PA requirement for teachers), and a positive view on the part of the teachers in using new technologies as well as strengthen a collaborative partnership between the University and a K-12 school district in order to improve student achievement. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: PDS; SESS; Sychroneyes Software

INTRODUCTION

The professional development school (PDS) is a partnership between a school district and a university for the primary purpose of improving student learning (Teitel, 2003). Therefore, the success of a PDS depends largely on aligning with this goal of improving student learning and not shifting the focus to ancillary goals of student teacher placement, inservicing faculty, providing teaching experiences for graduate education teachers, etc. Here at Robert Morris University, we had a few superficial partnerships with local school districts but never really pursued this more meaningful path toward the goal of improved student learning with any one of the school districts. However, recently we
embarked on a grant opportunity with the PA Academy for the Profession of Teaching and Learning of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education.

Essentially, this grant provided interested Pennsylvania colleges and universities an opportunity to request monetary funds which would serve as seed money to initiate a more highly developed and functional PDS. We also felt that the best starting place would be with a local school district, Moon Area School District (MASD), since we had a token partnership in the past. The district administration wanted to see a closer tie with the university, especially in the area of working with teachers to better understand how to apply new strategies and technologies in the classroom such as web quests, smart boards, and Sychroneyes software to help manage the computers in the classroom. So, our goal was to plan a program that would address these technology requests using the grant funds to pay for the workshop expenses. This would be for us the catalyst to build future workshops and develop future plans to work with the school district.

Many of the SESS undergraduate students reside on the Robert Morris University (RMU) campus in Moon Township, Pennsylvania where the workshop was located. The establishment of a Professional Development School in the Moon Area School District (MASD) would provide our pre-service students with geographically convenient student teaching placements within an exemplary school district that supports the community, national and global vision of Robert Morris University.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We formulated the following research questions based on our preliminary work on the grant:

1. Will an intensive technology workshop improve the content knowledge and pedagogical skills for K-12 and pre-service teachers?

2. Will the K-12 teachers and pre-service teachers feel that this technology training is relevant to their role as a classroom teacher?

3. Will the K-12 teachers want to continue the staff development training program with the university?

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the increase in technology use and the increasing demand for teacher technology training in the public school system today, there is a definite need to better prepare teachers for this educational goal. Further, it is incumbent that school districts provide the most adaptable and most functional technological training that will have residual value in the classroom. As argued by Browne and Richie (1991); Harvey and Purnell (1995), and Stager, 1995), effective staff development should have flexible content and opportunities. Teachers should see purpose and value in training. This is especially important since much of the research (Strudler & Wetzel, 1999, Schrum, 1999; Willis & Mehlinger, 1996) indicates that teachers are under-prepared to integrate technology into their classroom teaching. Further, this may be exacerbated by many factors including a lack of understanding of new technologies, reluctance for pedagogical change, or general apathy. However, there is body of research that strongly supports the use of technology relative to a positive impact on student achievement (Bangert-Drowns, 1985; Christmann, Badgett, & Lucking, 1997; Jenks & Springer, 2002; Kulik, 1983, 1994, 2003; Kulik & Kulik, 1991; Waxman, Connell, & Gray, 2002; Schacter & Fangnano, 1999). The evidence is clear that teachers need to keep abreast of changing technologies and need to increase the effective use of technologies in the classroom. Johnson, Chapman and Dyer (2006) argued that education is unpredictable in the next decade; however, there will be pedagogical changes which will recognize the way students learn with the new technologies. Clearly, this is a direction that teachers need to
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