

Rural Education Partnerships: If Educators Perpetuate Excellence in Teaching, Leadership, and Learning (PETLL), Do Students Learn Faster?

Will Kayatin, PhD

Senior Director for Higher Education Affairs
Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative
Hazard, Kentucky

David R. Riel, EdD

Associate Professor of Education
Asbury University
Wilmore, Kentucky

Kelly Hall, MA

Instructional Supervisor
Knott County Schools, Kentucky
Hindman, Kentucky

Abstract

This article describes the impact of a federally funded project in the rural schools of Eastern Kentucky. The project involved a partnership between the Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative (KVEC), Asbury University (AU), and seven public schools in Knott County Kentucky over a 3 year period. The project was designed to enhance instruction, leadership, and teacher efficacy among the participating public schools. The project, Perpetuating Excellence in Teaching, Leadership, and Learning (PETLL), created by KVEC, involved teachers, administrators, and professors in collaborative professional relationships to inform and enhance their collective work. The results of the study indicate that faculty and staff believed that PETLL had a positive impact on student learning, student achievement, teacher morale and satisfaction.

The professional literature is replete with examples of school/university partnerships. From the initial implementation of Partner Schools and the student teaching process to the Professional Development School Model and beyond (Blackbourn, Edmundson, Rose, & Dye, 1996), the public schools and higher education institutions have a longstanding collaborative relationship (Shroyer, Yahnke, Miller, Dunn, & Bridges, 2014; Colwell, MacIssac, Tichenor, Heins, & Piechura, 2014; Holen & Yunk, 2014). While models in the late 20th century focused on functional and exemplary field experiences or the enhancement and alignment of public school curricula, more recently these partnerships have become increasingly pragmatic in nature (Knowlton, Fogelman, Reichman, & de Oliveria, 2015; Symcox, 2012). This ongoing movement

has resulted in partnerships that focus on and produce a “Win/Win” outcome for all parties involved. Green (2012), delineates such an approach as a prime foundation for enhanced school performance. Additionally, Carlson (2012) provides a framework for such efforts. The current project is such a partnership.

Perpetuating Excellence in Teaching, Leadership, and Learning (PETLL), was initially funded for expansion in 2013 as a continuous staff and school improvement program under a federal “Race-to-the-Top-District” grant. The grant served 17 school districts in the Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative’s catchment area. PETLL focused on regular, accelerated, personalized professional development activities for both teachers and administrators. The project also included personalized learning initiatives for students in the participating school districts. The individualized nature of the learning and professional development activities, combined with an embedded interconnection between both student and teacher/administrator activities that focused on strengthening a school’s culture of excellence in teaching, leadership, and learning, formed the foundation for school based learning communities. Additionally, a collaborative approach based on shared responsibility for training and evaluation was implemented between the school-based leadership and higher education faculty involving both training sessions and school visits.

There are multiple components to PETLL, but the primary ones include the school visits and the artisan teacher talents. The project involved an initial visit conducted by a team of highly skilled, external educators from contiguous districts. During this period, every classroom in the building was visited. The project also involved ongoing data collection, which the team members shared in individual school building meetings that include each building’s principal. During these after school meetings a summary of the data collected during the classroom visits and from surveys designed to measure school culture was shared with the faculty. School building personnel used the data presented, including an analysis of their school data, to identify three instructional priority goals for their unit. During subsequent visits, the visiting team collected additional data on the implementation of those three goals as well as data on each individual teacher’s artisan teacher talents. The data collected formed the basis for future meetings and ongoing planning with the school building’s professional staff.

Methodology

Following the 2015-16 academic year, the teachers were administered a 10 item survey concerning their perceptions in regard to the degree of PETLL’s impact on school culture, student learning, and personal efficacy as a teacher. A seven point Likert Scale was employed as the indicator of teacher responses to the survey questions. The survey had a return rate of 75% for a total of 95 participants. The data obtained was aggregated by 4 dimensions: 1) Overall Years of Service; 2) Years of Service in a School; 3) Grade Level/Specialization Area Taught or Professional Title/Role; and 4) Gender.

A One Way Analysis of Variance was employed as the means of analyzing the data collected. The data were organized across the different divisions embedded within each dimension, yielding a mean score for that specific group. F values were obtained between each group’s mean score on the survey instrument and that groups mean within the dimension of interest.

Results

The comparison of Mean scores in the data revealed a consistent overall pattern in participant responses across all dimensions and questions. Participants felt that PETLL had a significant positive impact on student learning, teacher efficacy, and school culture. Analysis of data revealed specific differences among certain divisions within the study's major dimensions.

Specifically, the significant F values obtained in the Analysis of Variance were produced primarily by those teachers who worked in grades 9-12. These teachers consistently rated their perceived impact of PETLL with values significant at the .05 level. Those areas of the survey where the responses of the high school level teachers were found to be statistically significant were:

1. PETLL's 3 overarching Goals formed a foundation for improved student learning.
2. Focusing on PETLL's artisan teacher talents helped to improve student learning.
3. Regular Recurring PETLL visits helped to support teacher efforts and improve student learning.
4. PETLL training helped improve instruction in individual school buildings.
5. PETLL training improved individual methodological capacity as a teacher.
6. PETLL was a valuable Professional Development experience.
7. I believe there is a correlation between the implementation of PETLL in my school and my district's State Assessment results.
8. I would recommend PETLL to other school districts.

While the grade level taught by the respondents was the prime factor in the significance of the survey responses, an additional factor was identified by the statistical analysis that was of interest. The degree of experience that the respondents possessed also influenced the level of positive response that they produced. Specifically, those respondents who possessed seven or more years teaching experience tended to respond more positively to the survey questions than those with fewer years experience. Their responses on three of the survey questions yielded F values significant at the .05 level. These were:

1. Regular, recurring PETLL visits helped to support teacher efforts and improve student learning.
2. I believe there is a correlation between the implementation of PETLL in my school and my district's State Assessment results.
3. I would recommend PETLL to other school districts.

In this analysis, it was determined that the responses by high school teachers were significantly more positive regardless of the number of years experience possessed. Additionally, those teachers who possessed seven or more years experience were significantly more positive regardless of the grade level taught.

Summary

Based on the analysis of the available data, it appears that the PETLL Project was successful in terms of teacher perception. PETLL was a beneficial project for all teachers within the district, regardless of the grade level taught, years experience, specialty area, or gender.

While district all personnel tended to rate PETLL in a positive manner, the positive ratings were most notable among those teachers who worked in the grades 9-12. Additionally, those teachers who had been members of the profession for seven or more years rated PETLL in a significantly positive manner across a limited number of survey areas. The results of this study hold several implications for educators.

First, PETLL appears to be a well designed and implemented program. The Kansas University Center for Research on Learning (2012) provides a framework for professional development activities. Effective professional development programs, regardless of their content, are built upon five (5) key components. These are:

1. Training that involves research based practices.
2. Modeling of those methodological procedures trained.
3. An opportunity to work directly with the procedures trained using actual content and materials (e.g. textbooks actually used in class).
4. Trainer corrective feedback to participants as to the appropriateness of their efforts.
5. Regularly occurring follow-up visits to participants for ongoing feedback and training.

When professional development activities contain the first four of these components only, application and integrity of those practices taught ranges between 10%-25% over time. However, when the incorporation of regular follow up visits as a fifth component to professional development training is included, application and integrity rates increase to 80%-95%. Indeed, Knight (2009) identifies such activities as the foundation for effective professional development and meaningful professional practice. Regular follow-up visits to the participating school district and the interaction of PETLL personnel with program participants was likely a critical factor in the projects perceived success.

Many professional development activities simply involve the presentation of content and/or methodology only. Once the activity is complete, the presenters “pack up” and take their “dog & pony show” elsewhere. There is no follow up, no means of tying procedures to practice, and no focus on the contextual issues that individual teachers might be facing in the application of those procedures presented. It is very likely that the PETLL project addressed the above issues in its follow-up visits to the district.

Second, significantly positive rates of response occurred among two specific groups, teachers who worked in grades 9-12 and teachers who had seven or more years of teaching experience. This feature of the study could possibly be explained by the history of these participants with previous professional development activities and their previous experience in the classroom environment.

It is likely that these teachers, due to their longer years experience, compared the PETLL project and its activities with previous professional development activities and saw PETLL and its supportive components in a more favorable light than other teachers with fewer years experience. This extensive teaching experience might have also given these teachers greater insight into the relationship between the PETLL activities and student learning and student growth in their individual classrooms.

Finally, those teachers who worked in grades 9-12 produced the more consistent of significantly positive responses in regard to PETLL and its activities. Several possible hypotheses can be put forth to explain this factor. PETLL may be structured in a manner that serves the needs of those teachers more effectively than teachers in grades PreK-8. The nature of the teaching profession and practice is necessarily different between the different grade levels and ages of students, if educators are to use developmentally appropriate practice. The structure of PETLL and its activities may lend itself to more appropriate practice among 9-12 teachers, than PreK-8 teachers. Blackburn and Kritsonis (2010) state that the philosophical orientation of teachers tends to differ according to the level of school that is taught. Elementary teachers tend to teach a curriculum (i.e. they teach 3rd grade) and Secondary teachers tend to teach content (i.e. they teach Biology). It may be that the PETLL project and its activities addressed the needs of secondary teachers to organize their content they teach in order to make it more accessible to their students rather than helping elementary teachers follow their grade level curriculum.

Additionally, all teachers work in the “real world” (Ossorio, 1971, 2006; Shideler, 1988) of their classroom. In this world, they are constantly trying to bring about desired outcomes among those students for which they are responsible. It may be that the activities and procedures associated with the PETLL project had great applicability to this “real world” of secondary teachers. If so, it would explain the high levels of positive perceptions concerning PETLL by this group.

The PETLL project was well received by the personnel in the school district of interest. Its activities and procedures seemed to be effective and useful, based on the responses by district personnel. Both groups mentioned above as producing significantly positive responses on the survey felt that there was 1) a correlation between the implementation of PETLL and their successful performance on the State mandated Tests and 2) that they would recommend the implementation of the PETLL process to another school district. These two factors, in and of themselves, is sufficient to warrant the implementation of PETLL and its activities and procedures as a means of school improvement.

References

- Blackbourn, J. M., & Kritsonis, W. A. (2010). The question every teacher educator must ask. *National Forum of Teacher Education*, 20(2), 27-30.
- Blackbourn, J. M., Edmundson, S., Rose, R., & Dye, C., (1996). Beyond partner schools and professional development sites. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 5(1), 86-89.
- Carlson, C. B. (2012). From partnership formation to collaboration: Developing a state mandated university-multidistrict partnership to design a PK-12 principal preparation program in a rural service area. *Planning and Changing*, 43(3/4), 363-375.
- Colwell, C. MacIssac, D., Tichenor, M., Heins, B., & Piechura, K. (2014). District and university perspectives on sustaining professional development schools: Do the NCATE Standards matter? *Professional Educator*, 38(2), 1-11.
- Green, R. L. (2012). A response to the call for effective leadership in today's schools: Three essentials-preparation, competency, and dispositions. *National Forum of Applied Educational Research*, 26(1/2), 3-16.
- Holen, M., & Yunk, D. C. (2014). Benefits of 25 years of school district-university partnerships to improve teacher preparation and school renewal. *Educational Considerations*, 42(1), 49-54.
- Kansas University Center for Research on Learning. (2012). *The Strategic Instruction Model*. Lawrence, KS: Author.
- Knight, J. (2009). *Coaching: Approaches & perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Knowlton, S., Fogelman, J., Reichsman, F., & de Oliveria, G. (2015). Higher education faculty collaboration with K-12 teachers as professional development experience for faculty. *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 44(4), 46-53.
- Ossorio, P. G. (1971). *What actually happens*. Ann Arbor, MI: Descriptive Psychology Press.
- Ossorio, P. G. (2006). *The behavior of persons: The collected works of Peter G. Ossorio*. Ann Arbor, MI: Descriptive Psychology Press.
- Shideler, M. M. (1988). *Persons, behavior, & the world: The descriptive psychology approach*. Lanham, NY: University Press of America.
- Shroyer, M. G., Yahnke, S. J., Miller, T, Dunn, C., & Bridges, N.Y. (2014). The development of the KSU PDS Model: 25 years in the making. *Educational Considerations*, 42(1), 3-10.
- Symcox, L. (2012). Forging new partnerships: Collaboration between university professors and classroom teachers to improve history teaching, 1983-2011. *History Teacher*, 45(3), 1-26.

For Additional Information, Contact:
Jeff Hawkins, EdD, KVEC Executive Director
jeff.hawkins@hazard.kyschools.us