

# Bridging Gaps in the System: Project PREP's Transformative Approach to Educator Development

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**Abstract:** Robust school-university partnerships can create continuous systems of educator learning that focus on systemic change and the simultaneous renewal of both educators and the organizations within which they work to improve outcomes, opportunities, and access for P-12 students and their teachers. This article is a case of the Project PREP school-university partnership, a complex integrated systems approach towards rethinking recruitment, preparation, support, and development of diverse teachers and leaders. We show how Project PREP has begun to design aligned and enhanced systems for teacher education that embody clinical practice, coaching, and high-quality professional learning for both practicing and future teachers and leaders.

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## Introduction

The U.S. teacher shortage is leaving P-12 students, especially students from minoritized and marginalized groups, without access to fully certified and experienced teachers (Cardichon et. al, 2020). Inadequate teacher preparation through alternative routes, a lack of high-quality induction programs, and the unaffordability of college is exacerbating the teacher shortage, especially for teachers of color (Carver-Thomas, 2018). This is highly problematic as increasing teacher diversity is essential for closing opportunity gaps (Milner, 2012) and improving student achievement (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Making teacher certification and advanced credentialing more affordable and attainable can increase the access students have to certified and experienced teachers (Cardichon et. al, 2020). Addressing the teacher shortage requires “a comprehensive and systematic set of strategies to build a strong teaching profession” (Sutcher et al., 2016, p. 7).

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Creating a comprehensive system to build a strong teaching profession has been a struggle for teacher education having yet to create a seamless continuum of educator learning beginning with certification and extending throughout a teacher's career (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Robust school-university partnerships can create one continuous system of educator learning (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education [AACTE], 2018; National Association for Professional Development Schools [NAPDS], 2021).

Also essential to teacher recruitment and retention through the educator pipeline are the principals and the cultures they create in their schools (Levin et al., 2020a). Yet, like teachers, principals are leaving the profession. Access to high-quality professional learning opportunities is one way to retain good principals (Levin et al., 2020b). Elementary school principals in particular want to deepen their understanding and skill in leading equitable schools, supporting diverse learners, and addressing issues of equity, but they report time, insufficient coverage, and lack of funds as barriers to professional learning (Levin et al., 2020a).

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how schools and universities can partner through a comprehensive, systemic approach to solve persistent problems of practice. We provide one example, Project PREP, to illustrate how a large, county-wide, school district and a college of education in a regional institution came together to rethink how they were recruiting, preparing, supporting, and developing a diverse group of teachers to become leaders who will remain in the teaching profession. We end with a discussion and conclusion that offers insights based on our experience with Project PREP for building and sustaining robust school-university partnerships in teacher education that foster systemic change.

### **Partnering to Create Lasting, Systemic Change**

P-20 partnerships are “two or more parties coming together for the good of improving the P-20 education system, where at least one party is a P-12 school and another party is an institution of higher education” (Smith, 2021, p. 5). Examples of P-20 partnerships in education include research-practice partnerships, community schools, teacher residencies, and Professional Development Schools. In education, three broad types of institutions can come together to form different combinations of partnerships. Those entities include universities, school settings, and community organizations (e.g., businesses, governmental offices, non-profit organizations). Because P-20 partnerships vary, Smith (2021) contends that partnerships should be identified not by their composition or structure, but rather, by the purpose and intended outcome(s).

School-university partnerships that focus on systemic change in teacher education can eliminate redundancies, enhance efficiency, and ultimately result in the simultaneous renewal of both educators and the organizations within which they work. Professional Development Schools are one kind of school-university partnership that are poised for creating systemic change (AACTE, 2018; NAPDS, 2021). While Professional Development Schools have nine essentials that distinguish them from other school-university partnerships, it is their collaborative structures for long-term sustainability, their commitment to research and innovation, and comprehensive mission to diversity and equity to provide professional learning opportunities for current and future teachers as well as teacher leaders, administrators, graduate students, and university faculty that make

them “exemplars for practice” that could lead to systemic change (Burns et al., 2020; Jacobs et al., 2020). In robust PDSs, teachers and teacher leaders have the opportunity to deepen and expand their *knowledge-of-practice* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) by being actively engaged educators in rigorous and challenging learning using research-based and inquiry-driven professional learning principles (Desimone, 2009, Jacobs et al., 2020). Strong school-university partnerships take a systemic approach to align research-based pedagogy across schools and teacher preparation programs while also providing high quality clinical experiences with frequent and targeted feedback at all professional learning stages.

### **Project PREP**

By leveraging the existing school-university partnership between the University of North Florida’s College of Education and Human Services (COEHS) and Clay County District Schools (CCDS), Project PREP has begun to build an educator ecosystem built on the simultaneous renewal of the COEHS and CCDS to address the teacher shortage at multiple angles and create a strong teaching profession in CCDS by increasing teacher diversity and creating a coherent curriculum of teacher and principal learning that addresses common barriers of time, accessibility, quality, applicability, and affordability.

### **Context for Partnering**

CCDS is a large suburban school district that employs more than 2,500 educators serving over 44,000 students (40% minoritized students) in 43 public schools. It is in the top third in size of school districts in the state. The CCDS vision is to prepare life-long learners for success in a global and competitive workplace and in acquiring applicable life skills. Project PREP complements CCDS’s vision by promoting professional learning at all points of educator career pathways. CCDS’s five-year goals (2023-2028), in particular the goals of 1) student success, 2) talent recruitment, development, and retention, and 3) safe and positive learning environments are supported by the synergistic efforts that Project PREP affords by collaborating on efforts with the COEHS.

UNF is a regional R2 Doctoral Granting institution with approximately 17,000 students, 1,500 of which are in the COEHS. Project PREP leverages multiple COEHS programs and pathways from bachelor’s to doctorate degree programs and provides the space and resources to make university coursework and programming meaningful for and tailored to CCDS high school students; current and future teachers; and current and future teacher, school, and district leaders.

### **Purpose, Vision, and Goals**

Project PREP is an integrated systems approach committed to partnering for the development of educator pathways designed to enhance the recruitment, preparation, induction, and retention of teachers *and* teacher leaders. Dedicated to simultaneous renewal, Project PREP aims to design aligned and enhanced systems for teacher education that embody the tenets of clinical practice, coaching, and high-quality professional learning for both practicing and future teachers. Holding a collaborative spirit, Project PREP creates a space for shared responsibility for teacher and leader development across CCDS and the

COEHS, working together to establish and sustain innovative teacher education opportunities from initial teacher preparation to principalship.

Specifically, Project PREP seeks to achieve four goals: 1) prepare diverse teachers to graduate and obtain high-need certifications, 2) retain teachers in high-need schools, 3) prepare school leaders to develop teachers and build a positive school environment, and 4) develop a systemic approach to foster equitable teaching outcomes. To achieve these goals, we have named the following values that guide our models for teacher education and learning: inquiry, partnership, leadership, systems of support, a practice orientation, and innovation. As Project PREP works towards its overarching vision, these values inform the development of five components through their enactment of the intention statements named in **Figure 1**.

**Figure 1.** *Intention Statements for Project PREP's Five Components*



### Project PREP Structures

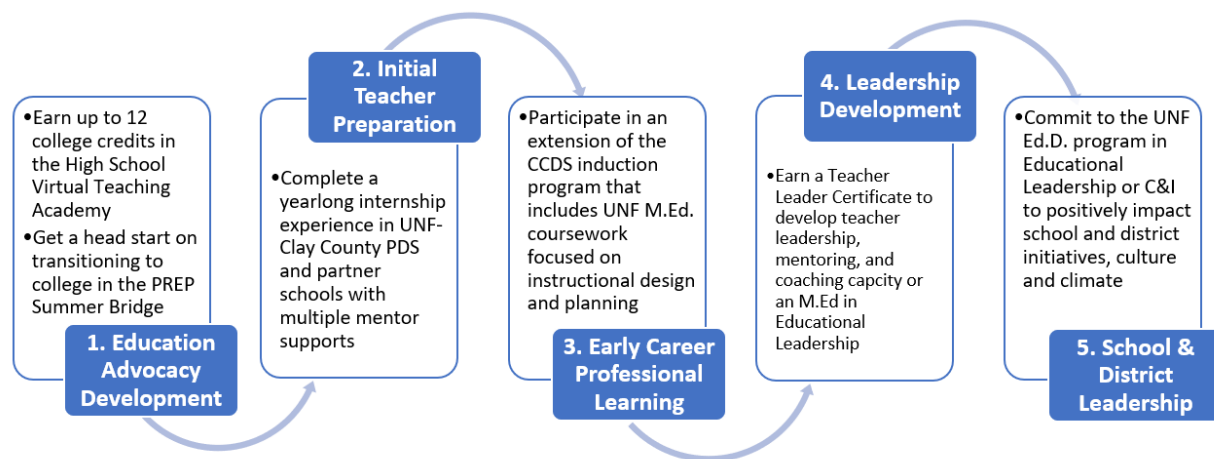
Project PREP is comprehensive in its systems approach to improve teaching and learning across the educator career span. Rather than viewing educator professional learning as fragmented career points, Project PREP intentionally connects existing components (e.g., dual enrollment coursework, summer institutes, advanced credential programs, new teacher induction programs, etc.) into a combined, integrated system of continuous supports that will ultimately have the power to impact the culture of a system.

By working together in this manner, Project PREP provides opportunities for a network of component and infusion strand teams of educators to come together and work together to recruit, prepare, and retain a diverse ecosystem of educators. This is done across Project PREP's five components and infusion strands. The five structural components of Project PREP are 1) high school student interest in education; 2) initial teacher learning in elementary education; 3) early career professional learning; 4) teacher

leadership professional learning, content coaching, and mentor development; and 5) school and district leadership professional learning.

The intentional alignment across dynamic and multiple pathways towards educator recruitment and retention allows Project PREP to create a culture of continuous improvement that values and uses an inquiry stance to continually enhance and align Project PREP's five components to advance P-12 student, teacher candidate, teacher, teacher educator, and leader learning. The five components of the Project PREP ecosystem and infusion strands are described in **Figure 2**.

**Figure 2.** *Project PREP's Five Components*



### ***Component 1: PREP for Your Future***

“Component 1: PREP for Your Future” focuses on recruiting future educators and education allies. This component allows Project PREP partners to work together to meet the needs of CCDS high school students, their transition to UNF and their first two years as COEHS undergraduate students. Through Component 1, the COEHS and CCDS collaborate more intentionally to get students excited about teaching, attending UNF, and returning to CCDS to teach upon graduating through support of education clubs, a Summer Bridge experience, and the UNF High School Teaching Academy (HSTA). The HSTA is a virtual dual enrollment 12-credit program (4 course sequence) offered for free to CCDS high school juniors and seniors. Courses in the HSTA are tailored to CCDS students and are mutually beneficial to the institutions in Project PREP - increased enrollment in undergraduate courses and increased college and career readiness for CCDS students.

### ***Component 2: PREP to Teach***

“Component 2: PREP to Teach” focuses on intensive, year-long clinical preparation for undergraduate elementary education teacher candidates, as well as mentor teacher development. This component creates a space for Project PREP to reimagine methods and

foundations courses for teacher candidates with input from mentor teachers and CCDS specialists so that teacher candidates' clinical experiences reciprocally inform and are informed by their coursework. It is the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, not a unidirectional (theory *to* practice or practice *to* theory) relationship that defines learning in clinical experiences. Teacher candidates are cohorted, providing opportunities for curricular collaboration through research-theory-practice based enhancements in Project PREP's Infusion Strands. Teacher candidates and their mentor teachers are engaged in high-quality clinical experiences with university faculty and supervisors that build collective capacity to identify real-world problems of practice and enact an inquiry stance toward pedagogical practices that are inclusive with regard to race, ethnicity, culture, language, gender, sexuality, and disability status so that they are better prepared to create inclusive, supportive, equitable, and identity-safe learning environments for their students.

### ***Component 3: PREP to Excel***

"Component 3: PREP to Excel" recognizes the need for intensive, sustained early career professional learning to retain CCDS's teachers. This component allows for CCDS and the COEHS to create an aligned three-year system of support for early career teachers by coupling relevant graduate coursework with ongoing, job-embedded professional learning, particularly in the CCDS-UNF COEHS Professional Development Schools. Currently, CCDS has New Teacher Support Coaches who engage in intentional coaching and mentoring with all first-year teachers across the district. Typically, first year coaching and mentoring focuses on acclimating to being the teacher of record and developing and sustaining a positive learning environment. To extend this experience seamlessly, cohorts of CCDS early career teachers will be identified to engage in systematic professional learning and earn a certification focused on instructional design and informed decision making via graduate level coursework that may be used towards earning a Master's in Elementary Education.

### ***Component 4: PREP to Lead***

"Component 4: PREP to Lead" focuses on building teacher leadership capacity and expertise within CCDS. The COEHS and CCDS work together to create complementary and comprehensive pathways to leadership development in order to develop a strong bench of school-based teacher educators with the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to support teacher recruitment, learning, and retention. Teacher leaders will have both *instructional competence* as well as the *coaching expertise* needed to support job-embedded professional learning of the Infusion Strands and other areas identified through problems of practice through a Teacher Leadership Certificate. In addition, CCDS teacher leaders may pursue a leadership credential as part of the M.Ed. in Educational Leadership degree, in which they will study problems of practice through Gap Analysis projects, analyze data from CCDS, and devise strategies to assist their schools to address these gaps. Project PREP provides the time and resources for district and university faculty to collaboratively enhance teacher leadership development for CCDS teachers interested in becoming professional learning community (PLC) facilitators, mentors, instructional coaches, and/or specialists.

### ***Component 5: PREP to Transform***

“Component 5: PREP to Transform” addresses the preparation of school and district leaders to cultivate leaders of a school system with the knowledge, skills, and ability to support recruitment, high quality preparation, on-going opportunities for professional learning, and the ability to cultivate a professional culture capable of retaining teachers, building teacher expertise, and enhancing student learning. The contents of these principal learning opportunities, through the engagement in a Project PREP PLC will be inclusive of building leaders’ commitment to the Curricular infusion strands and develop deeper strategies for recruitment, preparation, and retention of a diverse educator workforce. Given that the dissertation experience of the UNF doctoral student is to study a local problem of practice, Project PREP Ed.D. participants will identify and examine a problem of practice related to Project PREP goals as the focus of their doctoral research. By studying problems of practice related to the recruitment, learning, and retention of a diverse pipeline of educators, these CCDS leaders will position themselves as knowledge generators with an inquiry stance.

### ***Infusion Strands***

“Infusion Strands” are a mechanism for curricular integration and innovation woven across the curriculum in Project PREP’s five components that realize equitable teaching practices and student outcomes. Each infusion strand has Lead “Infusion Architects,” boundary-spanning teacher educators from the COEHS and CCDS with disciplinary expertise in a specific infusion strand. Rather than approaching curricular enhancements through piecemeal and/or discrete checklist-style reforms, Infusion Architects collaborate on intentional, systems-level professional learning that is meaningful and innovative. The representation from both the COEHS and CCDS ensures programmatic enhancements through shared voice and curricular decision making.

Infusion Strands provide a space for university and district partners to cultivate shared capacity on common research-based infusion strands. Collaboratively, CCDS and COEHS content-area specialists identify and inquire into areas of commonality and shared problems of practice while simultaneously developing and identifying innovative methods for coherent integration of key concepts across program structures and curriculum. This concept integration allows Project PREP scholars and other partners to better actualize equitable teaching practices and P-16+ student outcomes, engage in professional learning through badge content, and infuse current scholarship, practices, and theory into COEHS and CCDS curriculum.

### **How Do We Make It Work In Partnership?**

Partnering to design, implement, and sustain a comprehensive, systemic approach requires attention to communication across the system and intentionality in the development of collaborative leadership structures. Acting in partnership, perspectives and voices representing both school- and university-based partners are threaded throughout

all facets of Project PREP's design, enactment, and program refinement. Below we describe three collaborative leadership structures up to this point.

### **Collaborative Leadership Structures**

Project PREP is a complex partnership for systemic change designed to build a system with multiple components and comprehensive involvement by both university and school partners, which requires a high level of coordination, communication, and facilitation. To facilitate conversions across the Project PREP ecosystem, various collaborative leadership structures have been put into place. First, the *Project PREP Leadership Team* consisting of the principal investigator (PI), Co-PIs, and lead representatives from CCDS, meets monthly to discuss items evolving across the system. This team discerns persistent problems of practice that may present as barriers in our quest to rethink teacher recruitment, preparation, and ongoing professional learning. Additionally, the *Project PREP Leadership Team* ensures that the system is operationalizing in a manner that is coherent with Project PREP's vision, commitments, and goals.

The *Component Leads Team* also meets monthly, which is composed of COEHS and CCDS leads from Project PREP's five components. Individuals with essential expertise and experience to carry out the activities within the component, component leads are responsible for oversight of activities, curriculum revisions, and collaboration in their respective component. Individual component teams meet regularly, and the leads of each team come together monthly in a collaborative space. In these meetings, leads provide insight into individual progress to inform the system, engage in collective problem solving, and participate in data analysis to inform continued program development and enhancements.

Additionally, we host quarterly partnership meetings with administrators from the five CCDS-UNF COEHS PDS and partnership schools. These meetings are intended to share highlights from the Project PREP ecosystem and connections to our partner schools. The quarterly meetings also serve as an opportunity to gain administrative insight into Project PREP's current initiatives, identify possible spaces for continued partnering, and provide another avenue for collective problem solving.

### **Partnership in Action**

In Project PREP's first year, several partnership initiatives have launched from the intentional, collaborative planning in the varied Project PREP leadership structures. Two concrete examples of ways that Project PREP has partnered are how we have begun to partner for college and career readiness and partner for coherent and meaningful coursework.

#### ***Partnering for College and Career Readiness***

One mechanism Project PREP is utilizing to recruit and build interest and advocacy for public education is the Project PREP Summer Bridge program. Summer Bridge is a week-long, overnight stay experience on the UNF campus for rising CCDS high school juniors and seniors. Throughout the week, Summer Bridge students engaged in academic,



social, and physical activities and challenges to develop their understanding of community engagement, difference/change-making, reflection, and comfort and skills working with diverse groups and in diverse environments. The middle of the week was marked by a meaningful service learning experience at a PDS school that was collaboratively planned by school and district administrators, Project PREP leadership, and COEHS faculty/staff. Summer Bridge support staff included current COEHS teacher candidates, graduates of the COEHS teacher preparation program, and a CCDS elementary school teacher. By partnering together, Summer Bridge students could begin to develop an enhanced sense of belonging to the COEHS teacher preparation community and develop deeper connections to fellow CCDS students, outlined in the CCDS vision.

### ***Partnering for Coherent and Meaningful Coursework***

Component 4 is centered on building teacher leadership and educational leadership capacity and expertise within CCDS. A major aspect of this component is the opportunity for cohorts of teachers to either a) earn a 9-credit teacher leadership graduate certificate or b) earn an M.Ed. in Educational Leadership. With partnering and systems thinking in mind, these courses are co-designed by COEHS and CCDS faculty in a manner that reflects the tenets of high-quality, job-embedded professional learning (Desimone, 2009). Taught in a hybrid manner, the face-to-face sessions are co-facilitated by COEHS and CCDS instructors, occur in a CCDS school, and have been situated on the CCDS learning management system, as opposed to the university system. These decisions were intentionally made to eliminate barriers and create a third space for learning (Zeichner, 2010). Course learning experiences were developed to align with CCDS's vision for learning. With the goal of creating coursework that looks and feels differently than traditional graduate coursework, Project PREP's vision has served as a catalyst to engage in an overarching MEd redesign that will influence our Project PREP population and beyond.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Project PREP is a complex integrated systems approach towards rethinking recruitment, preparation, support, and development of diverse teachers and leaders. Project PREP's commitment to synergistic partnering is complex and is reliant upon the intentional development of structures to support our collective vision. Recognizing the complexities of partnering, we lean on the lens of complexity theory to ground our work and to deepen the understanding of our local contexts in connection to the broader foundation for teacher education (Cochran-Smith et al., 2014).

Noting that continuous change and evolution are ever apparent in our contexts and the field of teacher education, we are engaged in design-based research to examine the complex evolution of Project PREP's ecosystem. Our goal is to truly cultivate an educational ecosystem, as opposed to individual silos working in isolation. Project PREP acknowledges there are no quick fixes, and through partnering we seek to cultivate a community of school- and university-based partners committed to intentional curricular design and implementation that represents the CCDS context and is developed with input from all stakeholders. Thus, Project PREP is dedicated to researching the complexities of systems

approaches to improvement and the role of intentional partnering to solve persistent problems of practice in teacher education.

Moving forward with our vision, and when identifying opportunities for future systems-oriented practices, it is essential to consider the cultivation of authentic partnerships. Complex work of this nature should be situated on a foundation of trust and relationships. In our context, while the institutions have had a longstanding partnership committed to teacher education, Project PREP has positioned us in a new space for partnering. A space that has entailed the development of a common vision, norms, and commitments to nurture relationships committed to shared values across our ecosystem. Currently, we are still in the initial stages of design, implementation, and evaluation. However, we are committed to building a robust and lasting partnership that results in systemic change.

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### Notes

The corresponding author acknowledges that this manuscript was collaboratively written by the Project PREP school-university leadership team and includes university faculty/staff, boundary-spanning educators, and school district leadership faculty. And this project received Institutional Review Board clearance.

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