

Finding the Answers in Partnerships for Teacher Quality

Nancy L. Zimpher

Change, says educator Michael Fullan, is too important to leave to the experts.

As one of those “experts”—former dean of a school of education and current chancellor of an urban public research university—I could not agree more. The need for change in our educational system—pre-kindergarten to college—has never been greater. Our urban schools are poorly funded, inadequately maintained, and face a critical shortage of qualified teachers, a shortage that is predicted to rise in the coming decade as our urban centers grow. The landmark report *A Nation at Risk*, now almost 20 years old, shocked the nation with its picture of public education awash in a sea of mediocrity, yet the challenges it identified only seem to grow more insurmountable with each decade.

Calls for change abound, not the least of which ask for a greater role from our colleges and universities, especially our metropolitan universities. We are on the front lines of the educational crisis: the teachers our professional colleges train must serve the schools in our cities, and the students they prepare will be those we will educate in the years to come. Not only are we involved, we are increasingly held accountable for the state of P-16 education in our communities.

Higher education, however, no more holds the secret to our crumbling educational system than does any other “expert,” whether from the federal government, teachers union, or media editorial board. We do not have the magic solution—all locked up somewhere in the proverbial ivory tower—to failing schools, falling scores, and frustrated students.

But we do know two important facts. The first is that the best predictor of student success is a good teacher. The 1996 Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, for example, concluded that the single incontrovertible key to student achievement in elementary and secondary schooling was the quality of the teacher, citing emerging evidence that clearly links teacher quality to learner outcomes. Good teachers make a difference, and, through our colleges of education, we have a vital role to play in helping to improve teacher quality. The second important fact is that while metropolitan universities may not have the secret to educational change, we do know what it will take: sustained, creative, and broad collaboration among higher education, our communities, government, teacher organizations, parents, and students. What we bring to this collaboration, in abundance, are talented scholars, creative visionaries, and institutions and individuals ready to roll up our sleeves and join together to prepare qualified teachers to help our children learn.

This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* is devoted to exploring the partnerships that have grown up—and continue to grow—around recruiting, preparing, and retaining quality teachers for our urban schools. Authors from around the country describe innovative ways in which they are partnering across disciplines, communities, regions, and states. They describe the challenges of preparing young people to teach urban students with widely different cultures, backgrounds, and needs. And they offer lessons, hard learned, about the realities of partnerships that seek nothing less than to change how we educate our children for the future.

Kenneth Howey grounds this issue in the realities of urban teacher education and identifies two challenges to change: a simplistic notion of teaching and a failure to link reforms in teacher preparation to reforms in P–12 schools. He suggests that if we are to find new and better ways to train teachers, new and better schools must be ready for them. An important first step to realizing these goals will be through active partnerships between universities and P–12 school districts.

Howey also writes about the culture shock many new teachers face when they enter their inner-city classrooms for the first time. Preparation of teachers for urban, often high-poverty schools requires contextualizing teaching and learning within the urban environment. Highly effective teaching involves knowledge of children’s lives *outside* of school as well as innovative pedagogy within it. But, as the leaders of an innovative general education program called “Cultures and Communities” at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee are discovering, asking pre-professional education students to challenge their racial and cultural assumptions requires risk-taking by instructors as well. Professor Greg Jay and public school teachers Thomas Brown and Darrell Terrell share a first-person perspective on their experiment in multicultural learning.

But before we can begin professional training, we need to recruit women and men—2.2 million of them over the next decade—who not only want to teach, but are aware of the challenges and rewards they can expect. Efforts at the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond underscore the importance of multiple pathways for student recruitment: from mentoring middle-school students, to college apprentice programs, to transitioning community college students. All require strong partnerships with local schools, colleges, teachers, and between schools of education and the arts and sciences. As the authors note, “Our hope resides in our partnerships.”

Multiple partnerships are also the secret to retaining teachers, as Georgia State University has discovered. In 2001, one in five new teachers in Georgia left teaching after their first year; nationally, that number climbs to half within three years. In response, GSU has partnered to create an induction Consortium across four school districts, discovering that “induction communities are more powerful than a single institution” in providing the mentoring and teacher development needed to retain and support teachers. As the authors note, induction programs are not extraneous to successful schools, “they are essential” and are the responsibility of the entire educational community.

Interdisciplinary partnerships are the hallmark of “Bridges to Success,” a full-service school collaboration in Indianapolis that includes the public schools, United Way of Central Indiana, and IUPUI schools of education, nursing and social work. The benefits to the university in terms of field service and educational opportunities are numerous, but as Gerald Bepko and Sylvia Payne describe IUPUI’s involvement in creating schools that also offer nutrition, health services, counseling, tutoring, recreation and social skills development, they also discovered a real need for education to collaborate. The realities of community building—the “delicate dance” of university/community engagement, as they call it—require that universities also prepare teaching and health professionals to be the team builders our communities need.

The dance of collaboration works best when no one partner insists on leading. Too often when universities reach out to their communities, it is on the university’s terms, and as a result, the path to university engagement is littered with a long trail of failed collaborations. But we are learning. Professor Martin Haberman and community leader Jean Tyler team up to dissect three case studies of education-community partnerships from the community’s perspective—with some instructive conclusions. Leadership matters, they say, but even more important is planning for leadership changes, which inevitably affect every partnership. And, as they observe, the stakes are constantly being raised as our communities focus increasingly on systemic, not pragmatic change.

Systemic change is the subject of three articles in this issue: a look at how an urban P–16 Council is re-designing teacher education in Milwaukee, Donald Langenberg’s discussion of statewide P–16 partnerships, and Peggy Kirby and Charles Desmond’s description of the Urban Educator’s Corps, a coalition of 17 urban public research universities. The Milwaukee Partnership Academy, as Zimpher’s “Partnering for Systemic Change” narrates, is tackling Howey’s challenge to transform both teacher education and school reform simultaneously and systemically. Zimpher’s article, in telling the story of the Milwaukee Partnership Academy, also provides a blueprint for the development and work of such a P–16 Council. On a broader scale, the P–16 state partnerships and UEC coalition emphasize the benefits of learning from each other and dreaming together.

“Where are metropolitan universities in all this?” asks Langenberg. Right in the middle of the action, as usual, he says. The Urban Educators’ Corps estimates that its 17 member universities prepare one in five of the nation’s future teachers. As our nation becomes increasingly urban, it is the metropolitan universities that will continue to train women and men who will impact the futures of millions of our young people. The challenges are great, but as the articles in this issue of *Metropolitan Universities* attest, the answers lie not within our walls, but within the partnerships we are creating.

Author Information

Nancy L. Zimpher is the Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She is the author or editor of several books and articles on teacher education.

Nancy L. Zimpher
Chancellor
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
2310 E. Hartford Ave.
Milwaukee, WI 53211
Telephone: 414-229-4331
Fax: 414-229-2347
E-mail: zimpher@uwm.edu