

# The Research Intensive PDS: How to Sustain Inquiry Across PDS Faculty, Pre-service Teachers, and University Faculty

*Neal Shambaugh and Sara A Steel, West Virginia University  
Terry Morris, Rivesville Elementary/Middle School (WV)*

## *Developing an Inquiry-Based Learning Community*

The first NCATE standard for Professional Development Schools is developing a learning community. How does a PDS network develop a learning community that “supports learning and development of P-12 students, candidates, and PDS partners through inquiry-based practice?” (NCATE, 2001). At present our five-year, dual-degree teacher education program requires fifth year pre-service teachers to complete an action research project during their full-time internship. PDS teachers serve as Action Research Fellows and help pre-service teachers focus on projects that meet the needs of students in their respective schools. University faculty work with pre-service teachers on campus to help them build their skills in conducting action research.

However, the research agenda should involve all participants in a PDS network and should be negotiated in the same way as other features of the partnership. To support an atmosphere and habits of reflective and inquiry-based practice across our 30-school PDS network, a county-funded internal grant program, “Research Intensive PDSs,” was created to develop pilot research projects that involved teacher candidates, PDS teachers, and university faculty members.

## *Features of the Research Intensive PDS Initiative*

Proposals were required to address the NCATE PDS standards, as well as the following responsibilities: (a) advancing the learning/understanding/achievement of students, (b) enhancing teaching practice, (c) preparing novice teachers, and (d) embedding action research into the PDS. The proposal was to feature a strong “action research” focus and involve representation from the university and pre-service teachers, and a report on findings at the network’s annual Teacher Inquiry Conference. Projects could focus on one PDS or could involve collaboration with other PDSs.

Twelve proposals were reviewed by a joint PDS-University committee. Four proposals were accepted and involved the following projects: reading fluency issues through an elementary school’s Professional Learning Community, examining a K-8 writing curriculum, and using iPad applications to improve elementary-level vocabulary. The fourth project involved a consortium of four PDSs (elementary and middle levels) within a single county designing,

teaching, and evaluating Project-Based Learning (PBL) units using West Virginia’s 21st Century standards and the state’s PBL development guidelines. All seven of these schools were designated as “Research Intensive PDSs” and initial projects were conducted during the spring of 2011.

## *Year One Results*

Teachers at one PDS conducted a survey on job embedded professional development and chose fluency development as a focus for professional development and research. A group of teachers attended a seminar from a fluency expert, Timothy Rasinski. After the seminar, one National Board Certified Teacher realized that there were new ways to teach fluency. Based on this seminar and the excitement generated by collaboration with the university liaison, the teachers agreed to follow through on their project, even without funding. During the spring of 2011, the teachers conducted sessions on the action research cycle, lesson study and videotaped lesson practice, and fluency research. The teachers videotaped and analyzed three fluency lessons, a process that the teachers admitted was at times “painful.” A post survey on job embedded professional development revealed that the teachers wanted to expand their work on comprehension.

The goals of the K-8 writing curriculum project were to achieve horizontal alignment for each grade and vertical alignment across grade levels. A university liaison facilitated a book study and the writing of units using the materials of Lucy Calkins, as well as building on the previous use of these materials from another PDS. Work completed in the spring of 2011 included working through Calkins’ Units of Study and writing workshop materials. Work for next year will pull data from student writing samples, student portfolios, state test results, and teacher/student surveys to develop writing units based on the Calkins guidelines.

In another elementary PDS, iPads were used along with iPods that the school currently integrates into literacy and math instruction. The teachers reported that they learned alongside their students when it came to using the new iPads, although having had the iPods greatly eased the introduction of the iPads. When using a large number of iPads or iPods it is advisable to invest in a cart where the devices can be charged up at the end of each day as well as new apps downloaded and installed. Small group instruction

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was used along with iPads to increase vocabulary knowledge. Pre-tests were used to determine vocabulary knowledge and a post-test will be administered at the beginning of the next school year.

In the project involving four PDSs from the same county, PBL units were designed and taught by pre-service teachers at the elementary and middle school levels. A university liaison coordinated the PBL instruction and unit development through a semester course. The units were based on actual professional development guidelines and materials adopted by West Virginia. The units were evaluated by the university instructor and the PDS teachers. Actual teaching was evaluated by the PDS teachers using the state's rubrics. Professional development events were held at each school sharing the results of the unit teaching. Benefits from the unit included connecting to multiple content areas and addressing state 21st century standards. One PDS teacher observed the high level of student engagement and responded, "We should be teaching like this all the time." Results also reported that multiple assessment options need to be in place and that rubric development need several trials to optimize. Teachers also found that peer review was useful in upper elementary grades and that multiple assessment options motivated older students. Students also needed time to practice presentation and review what they had learned. Math units, in particular, required more teaching time.

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#### *Recommendations for Developing an Inquiry-Based PDS*

- Examine your strategic plan and review how Standard 1 is being met
- Conduct proposals during the spring in order to begin in the fall and include a full school year
- Obtain the support and buy-in from the county/district office
- Carve out a budget line to support teachers with guest speakers, seminars, and materials
- Align projects to match school priorities and focus on student achievement
- The university liaison is key to organizing a research-focused PDS, particularly in the proposal and data analysis aspects of the projects.
- Job-embedded inquiry and professional development set the stage for simultaneous teacher inquiry rather than isolated, one-time projects by teacher candidates.

#### *Next Steps*

This project has addressed developmental guidelines to meet Standard 1 in NCATE's Standards for Professional Development Schools in at least two elements: (1) support of multiple learners and (2) work and practice that are inquiry-based and focused on learning. A second year of work can begin to address the other five elements of this standard, which are to (3) develop a common shared professional vision of teaching and learning grounded in research and practitioner knowledge, (4) serve as instruments of change and (5) extended learning community.

Because this work is a focus for the Benedum Collaborative, PDSs that were not selected to be part of this pilot, but had submitted proposals and were clearly committed to developing an inquiry stance among their faculty, were given the option of revising their proposals with the assistance of an "Inquiry Coach." These coaches—who were doctoral students who provide leadership in support of the pre-service teachers' inquiry efforts—worked with this group of PDSs to build their understanding of teacher inquiry and enhance their original proposals. During the 2011-2012 academic year, these PDSs will have the opportunity to resubmit their proposals and become the new cohort of Research Intensive PDSs. The original set of Research Intensive PDSs will continue their work in 2011-2012 as well. Their initial projects may be expanded to include more faculty and reach more students. Our goal is that over the next several years, the Benedum Collaborative will become an entire community of inquirers and life-long learners.

*Neal Shambaugh is an Associate Professor of Education at West Virginia University; he can be reached at [neal.Shambaugh@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:neal.Shambaugh@mail.wvu.edu). Sarah Steel is an Instructor and Coordinator with the Benedum Collaborative at West Virginia University; she can be reached at [sarah.Steel@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:sarah.Steel@mail.wvu.edu). Terry Morris is a teacher and the Teacher Education Coordinator at Rivesville Elementary/Middle School (WV) and can be reached at [terrym2nd@yahoo.com](mailto:terrym2nd@yahoo.com).*

#### References

NCATE (2001). <http://www.ncate.org/documents/pdsStandards.pdf>