



Creating a Community of Learners

A Case Study

March 2020



Branch Alliance
for Educator Diversity

Prepared by Harley Consulting Group

About Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity

The Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity (BranchED) is the only non-profit organization in the country dedicated to strengthening, growing, and amplifying the impact of educator preparation at Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), with the longer-range goals of both diversifying the teaching profession and intentionally addressing critical issues of educational equity for all students. Their vision is for all students to have access to diverse, highly effective educators. BranchED's goal is to maximize the capacity of MSIs to deliver high-quality educator preparation by identifying and supporting what is working well and strengthening program weaknesses to drive continuous quality improvement and ensure program sustainability.



Cover photo: Illinois Continuous Improvement Community of Practice (CICP) kick-off event, June 2018 at Governors State University. In the photo shown, a facilitator leads a collaborative discussion between Educator Prep Program (EPP) leaders and K-12 district partners.

CREATING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

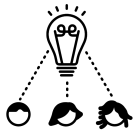
The Design Principle

The first design principle in the *Framework for the Quality Preparation of Educators*¹ created by the Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity (BranchED) details a critical shift in the way Educator Preparation Providers (EPPs) engage with PK-12 districts. The design principle calls on EPPs to establish a “Community of Learners” with their district partners that is centered on leadership, ongoing collaboration, and shared responsibility for the preparation of teacher candidates. The shifts outlined in the Community of Learners design principle are illustrated by a developmental trajectory that moves from “EPP-Centered” to “Community-Engaged” across five indicators:



Collegiality and Collectivism

This indicator underscores the need for strong professional relationships between EPP leaders and PK-12 partners that can be leveraged to enhance teacher educator preparation programs through collaborative interdisciplinary work.



Shared Responsibility

This indicator focuses on building a collective vision and fostering a sense of joint ownership for candidate learning. Establishing shared responsibility involves ongoing collaboration and alignment around critical aspects of the teacher preparation process.



Professional Collaboration

This indicator highlights the need for clear agreements between internal and external stakeholders on expectations, roles, and responsibilities. It also underscores the importance of frequent opportunities for EPPs and district partners to engage in high-quality, data-focused, solutions-oriented dialogue.



Organizational Learning

This indicator promotes organizational learning characterized by efforts to seek out, generate and apply high-quality research and best practices to teaching practice; course revision; and program and curriculum development regularly. It highlights the importance of the use and nuanced interpretation of data by EPPs and district partners.



Leadership

This indicator calls for EPP leaders to motivate others and set ambitious goals around improving their preparation programs, demonstrate a proven commitment to the greater good of the community, and seek to ensure a strong connection between candidates' success and instructional activity.

The Community of Learners design principle presents a clear progressive trajectory to guide and facilitate planning, implementation, and progress monitoring. The actual work of transforming these relationships, however, is anything but linear. It requires a vigorous commitment to continuous improvement and a willingness to navigate complex change. To pressure-test how well the developmental trajectory described in the design principle captures and clarifies the lived experience of navigating these changes, BranchED engaged with an outside consulting partner to gather input from EPP leaders and PK-12 district staff. Qualitative data to support this effort was gathered through participant interviews² that included EPP leaders, PK-12 district staff, state education agency partners and BranchED facilitators supporting the work.

¹ The *Framework for the Quality Preparation of Educators* can be found at https://www.educatordiversity.org/what-we-do/#support_our_work

² A list of interviewees based on their roles is included in the Appendix.

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Critical Shifts

2

Interviewees reflected on the changes they experienced or observed that were transformative for the partnerships between EPPs and districts. The themes that emerged from their responses, which are listed below, aligned most consistently with two of the BranchED Community of Practice Indicators- **Collegiality and Collectivism** and **Shared Responsibility**- and aligned in one case with the **Leadership** indicator.

Themes	% Interviewees	Related BranchED indicators
<p>Professional Power Dynamics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> District partners should be allowed to provide input on key decisions. When districts are acknowledged as experts alongside EPPs, it makes a difference. Establishing trust where it has been broken requires deliberate effort by leaders. 		<p>Leadership</p> <p>Collegiality & Collectivism</p>
<p>Evolution of Mentorship Models & Clinical Experiences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clinical experiences better serve teacher candidates and schools when designed with input from districts. Immersive, collaborative clinical experiences benefit everyone. Designing more collaborative clinical experiences is a powerful first step in strengthening partnerships. 		<p>Shared Responsibility</p> <p>Collegiality & Collectivism</p>
<p>Exploring New Recruitment and Retention Pathways</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> EPPs need to own their role in supporting teacher retention beyond initial placement. Collaborative partnerships drive innovative thinking about recruitment & placement. 		<p>Shared Responsibility</p>

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Critical Shifts

3

Themes	% Interviewees	Related BranchED indicators
<p>Alignment Between EPP Course Content and District Priorities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing trust with district partners results in more meaningful feedback about curriculum. Enabling EPPs to see district initiatives in action can prompt shifts in course content. 		<p>Shared Responsibility</p> <p>Collegiality & Collectivism</p>
<p>Coherent Expectations about Teacher Proficiency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaging in shared classroom observations and discussions about observation rubrics is a prime opportunity to level-set about practice. Establishing coherent expectations helps teacher candidates. 		<p>Shared Responsibility</p> <p>Collegiality & Collectivism</p>



REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Enabling Conditions

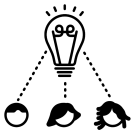
Interviewees were asked to reflect on what they considered to be “enabling conditions” necessary for district-EPP partnerships to evolve into an authentic community of learners. The prevailing themes that emerged from their responses, which are listed below, aligned with three of the BranchED Community of Learners Indicators: **Professional Collaboration**, **Organizational Learning** and **Leadership**.

Themes	% Interviewees	Related BranchED indicators
<p>Effectively Structured Facilitation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective communication protocols and facilitation create a solid foundation for collaborative work. As partnerships are developing, they benefit from accountability that is productive, not punitive. 	<p>53.6%</p>	<p>Professional Collaboration</p> <p>Organizational Learning</p>
<p>Use of Data for Non-Traditional Problem Solving</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussions about data should be meaningful and candid. Exploring new data sets can spark new opportunities for collaboration. 	<p>50%</p>	<p>Leadership</p>
<p>Protected Time and Space to Meet with the Right People</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dedicated time together in a neutral space builds trust & accelerates improvement. Engaging both decision makers & department staff who can get the work done is key. 	<p>50%</p>	<p>Professional Collaboration</p>

There was clear alignment between the changes interviewees recognized as impactful in transforming EPP-district partnerships and the indicators in BranchED's Community of Learners design principle. This provides support for use of the framework as a tool to guide planning, implementation and progress monitoring. For the benefit of EPP leaders and district partners already engaged in the work of building collaborative partnerships - or those seeking to initiate new partnerships - trends in the participants' experiences captured here offer additional insight.



Collegiality & Collectivism



Shared Responsibility



Professional Collaboration



Organizational Learning



Leadership

The changes that participants identified as impacting the nature of the EPP-district relationship were consistently associated with the indicators-- **Collegiality and Collectivism**, **Shared Responsibility**, and **Leadership**. Participants' reflections about their experience challenged several common assumptions about how EPPs and districts approach the work of teacher preparation: that EPPs own the content expertise; that there is a handoff when teacher candidates graduate and enter the classroom and the EPP no longer has a role; that there are "lanes" for both the EPP and the district to stay in when it comes to clinical experiences and student teaching. Instead, participants emphasized the importance of acknowledging shared expertise; the utility of "crossing lanes" to design coursework and clinical experiences collaboratively; and the need to abandon the idea that the process of preparing teachers is a "hand-off". Such shifts require everyone involved to navigate a series of nuanced adaptive changes, including coming to consensus around a collective vision; changing mindsets about ownership of the work; and creating functional interpersonal relationships. As EPP leaders and district teams work to transform partnerships, they must maintain flexibility in planning the critical adaptive component of the work, paying careful attention to context and building momentum around a shared sense of ownership.

The changes that participants identified as enabling conditions to create and sustain the partnership were associated with **Professional Collaboration**, **Organizational Learning** and **Leadership**. The responses associated with these indicators highlight the importance of logistical considerations, such as adhering to specific facilitation protocols, availability of personnel, and access to data. From a planning perspective, this technical aspect of the work gives EPPs and district partners an opportunity to attend to a set of important but more straightforward tasks than the adaptive shifts described above. With sufficient forethought and planning around these logistics, educators involved will have access to the protected time and structured space needed for the collaborative work to thrive.

Leadership was the only indicator associated with both the adaptive and technical categories of change reported by participants. Participant responses provide additional insight into the ways that leaders can support this work most impactfully. With respect to adaptive change, EPP leaders are uniquely positioned to set the tone for the relationship. This is especially true when the relationship between the EPP and the district has lacked trust in the past. With respect to the technical side of the work, both EPP and district leaders can create a strong foundation for moving partnerships forward productively by ensuring that sufficient time and space are allocated and protected for teams to do the work.

Interviews Completed

EPP leaders who participated in the interviews represent six different Universities; PK-12 district Staff interviewed represent two districts Approximately half of the EPP leaders interviewed were part of a Continuous Improvement Community of Practice (CICP) facilitated by BranchED during the 2018-19 school year. The other participants represent three different university-district partnerships from BranchED's Transformation Center cohort.

Educator Preparation Program Staff

- Director of Educator Preparation
- Associate Dean of the College of Education
- Chair of Dept of Special Education
- Dean of College of Education
- Associate Vice Provost Educator Licensure and Preparation
- Director of Teacher Preparation
- Chair, Department of Education
- Assistant Professor
- Assistant Professor

District Leaders:

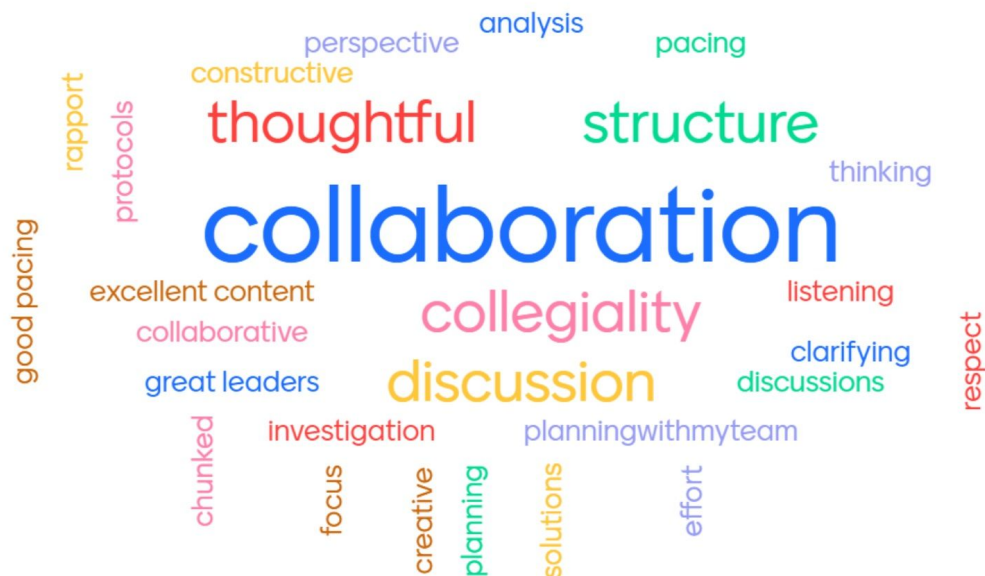
- Teacher on Special Assignment
- Director of ELA, World Languages and Social Studies

State Agency Partners:

- Principal consultant in Educator Effectiveness
- Director of Regional Office of Education

BranchED Staff

- Consultant
- Vice President of Strategy
- President and CEO



Goals for collaboration, captured by participants in the CICP kick-off at Governors State University in June 2018



Branch Alliance
for Educator Diversity

7500 Rialto Blvd., Ste. 1-270
Austin, Texas 78735
Toll-Free: (800) 519-0249
Fax: (512) 686-3747
info@educatordiversity.org
www.educatordiversity.org

h.

HARLEY CONSULTING GROUP
www.harleyconsultinggroup.com