

# District Partnerships for Equity: Montclair State University and Paterson Public Schools Point the Way

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## About EdPrepLab

EdPrepLab, an initiative of the Learning Policy Institute and Bank Street Graduate School of Education, aims to strengthen educator preparation by supporting learning and sharing research and practices among programs, school districts, and policymakers. EdPrepLab supports programs and informs policies that incorporate the science of learning and development to enable deeper learning and equity, working to expand these approaches nationally and internationally.

## About This Brief

This brief highlights the partnership between Montclair State University's Network for Educational Renewal and the Paterson Public School District in northern New Jersey, showcasing how a coherent and transparent structure grounded in mutual accountability can support effective, long-term collaboration. It offers practical guidance for designing university-district partnerships that promote systemwide transformation. Through this collaboration, the university and district codeveloped a comprehensive professional learning series on transformational leadership, equipping district and school leaders with the tools to create inclusive learning environments and improve student academic outcomes.

## Introduction

Embedding equity principles into educational systems has the potential to transform classrooms and school communities into more inclusive spaces.<sup>1</sup> Research confirms that learning and development are deeply relational and context-sensitive, emphasizing the need for school environments grounded in trust, connection, and belonging.<sup>2</sup> To create these conditions, many schools are turning to professional learning approaches that help teachers and school leaders confront biases, cultivate critical thinking, deepen empathy, and respond more effectively to the diverse needs of all students.<sup>3</sup>

These professional learning efforts are strengthened when they draw insights from the science of learning and development (SoLD), an interdisciplinary body of research that demonstrates how learning is shaped by the integration of relationships, context, identity, and experience.<sup>4</sup> SoLD emphasizes the principle that supporting adult development requires more than isolated strategies. It calls for coherent systems that cultivate strong developmental relationships, emotionally safe environments, and culturally affirming learning experiences. When applied to educator development, SoLD provides a foundation for professional growth that is relational, reflective, and grounded in the coconstruction of knowledge. It also highlights the need for integrated supports, such as coaching and peer collaboration, that are aligned with the everyday responsibilities of school leaders and are sustained over time. By anchoring adult learning in SoLD principles, schools can build the capacity of educators to lead systemwide change.<sup>5</sup>

One promising way to advance SoLD-aligned professional learning is through university-district partnerships that bring together shared expertise, resources, and a long-term vision for growth. Research shows that such partnerships are most effective when they are built on collaborative structures, transparency, and consistent communication—conditions that help sustain an impactful framework for professional learning in schools.<sup>6</sup> This brief describes how the [Paterson Public School District](#) (Paterson) in northern New Jersey partnered with [Montclair State University's Network for Educational Renewal](#) (Montclair) to launch a multiyear, districtwide transformation effort. It explores the conditions that led to the partnership, details how a coherent structure helped guide the work, and offers practical insights for designing SoLD-aligned university-district collaborations aimed to create lasting, system-level change.

## Deep Partnership for Transformation

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Between 2021 and 2024, a deep, capacity-building partnership took shape between Paterson and Montclair. Drawing on Montclair's long-standing partnership model, the two organizations codeveloped a comprehensive professional learning series centered on equity-focused and transformational leadership. As Paterson emerged from state control in 2021, district leaders identified an urgent need to address long-standing disparities in order to strengthen student achievement and improve staff retention. This transition became a pivotal opportunity to advance systemwide change and partner with Montclair to support a sustained improvement effort.

Although Paterson had previously engaged with various organizations on equity initiatives, these efforts often lacked continuity, practical application, and accountability. Like many districts, Paterson had relied on one-time trainings that did not offer the consistent guidance needed for lasting impact. Recognizing the limitations of past efforts, both Montclair and Paterson committed to a deeper, long-term partnership aimed at building internal leadership capacity and supporting ongoing professional growth across the district.

The collaboration was established to support district and school leaders in developing the knowledge and skills necessary to lead inclusive, equity-centered improvement efforts across the school system. On Montclair's side, one of the authors played a central role in designing and facilitating the professional learning series that launched the effort. Paterson leveraged the initiative to engage a broad range of interest holders, including principals, assistant principals, teachers, deans, operational supervisors, and other instructional and noninstructional staff. In total, approximately 200 school staff participated in the professional

learning series over the 3-year period, creating a shared foundation for equity-focused leadership and collaborative district transformation. The professional learning plan was guided by distinct goals for each year:

- Year 1 focused on implementing early warning systems to identify and support students who were off track.
- Year 2 emphasized instructional improvement, equitable access to curriculum, and deeper understanding of student experience.
- Year 3 centered on inclusive leadership practices and supervision.

Professional learning sessions were held 4 times each month via video conference. The first and second sessions—each lasting 1 hour—convened principals and district leaders and focused learning and discussion around a given topic. The third and fourth sessions each month brought together assistant principals, instructional coaches, and supervisory staff, promoting cross-role collaboration and shared learning across the district. In addition, principals met biweekly with their district supervisors to support alignment and implementation at the school level.

Monthly sessions addressed topics such as equity, goal setting, data analysis, curriculum audits, and conversations about identity and belonging. School leaders were also encouraged to examine personal assumptions, model inclusive behaviors, and make resource decisions that better served diverse learners. These efforts offered leaders structured opportunities to examine their own biases and areas for growth, while advancing a SoLD-aligned approach that recognized the interconnected roles of relationships, context, and adult learning in driving student success.

To support this work, the partnership drew on research-based learning protocols from sources such as [Expeditionary Learning](#) and [Harvard Project Zero](#). Activities included leadership walk-throughs, structured reflection, peer learning, and the development of a shared, districtwide definition of equity-informed leadership. Each summer, school district leaders and Montclair faculty reviewed progress, gathered feedback, and collaboratively shaped the learning priorities for the following year.

## Measurable Outcomes and Systemic Impact

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The outcomes of this professional learning series were significant. By 2024, district-collected self-assessments and survey data showed a 200% increase in leaders' understanding and application of equity-centered leadership practices. The percentage of leaders rated as "well on the way" toward reaching those goals rose by 75%, and the percentage of leaders incorporating equity into their mission and vision statements increased from 29% in 2021 to

78% in 2024. At a systems level, the district revised its grading policies and adopted *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms*<sup>7</sup> as a guiding framework for implementing more inclusive, student-centered assessment practices.

Reflecting on the structure of the collaboration, one district assistant superintendent emphasized its significant role in shaping the district's approach to equity:

I really enjoyed the learning experience. I was glad to see the administrators eager to have the conversation. This equity work has made some staff very uncomfortable and has sparked very necessary conversations about equity and white supremacy. This made the conversations more interesting in terms of focusing on student achievement and teacher practice. This provides me with hope for our children as we begin to embark on a new year.

The Montclair-Paterson partnership demonstrates how sustained, collaborative professional learning can strengthen leadership capacity, catalyze districtwide change, and promote more inclusive school environments. The measurable gains from this work highlight the potential of university-district partnerships to advance shared goals and support long-term improvement.

## Conditions for Effective Collaboration

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The success of a university-district partnership depends on intentional planning, thoughtful execution, and a shared commitment to long-term improvement. For universities, this requires offering strategic support that centers the needs and goals of the district, focusing on sustainable impact rather than short-term financial returns or research recognition. For districts, it means identifying a partner who is not only aligned in values but also willing to engage deeply in the work of systemwide change.

Montclair-Paterson partners learned that before launching large-scale improvement efforts, it is essential to invest time in building a strong foundation. Early conversations that establish trust, clarify roles and expectations, and develop a shared understanding of the work are critical for creating a collaborative environment. These initial steps ensure that both institutions can contribute their expertise, align their efforts, and engage in mutual accountability.

Drawing on the structure of this collaboration and evidence from other effective partnerships, four key preconditions emerged as essential for universities and districts seeking to lay the groundwork for equity-centered transformation:

1. **Commit to regular meetings and consistent progress monitoring.** Research shows that effective partnerships, marked by transparency and communication, actively track progress to ensure alignment with their goals.<sup>8</sup> Regular meetings provide a structure

for tracking progress, identifying challenges, and celebrating achievements. In this collaboration, monthly check-ins created a space for both partners to assess alignment with goals, engage in joint problem-solving, and maintain mutual accountability.

2. **Designate a skilled boundary-spanning facilitator.** Equity-focused improvement work often requires navigating complex dynamics and confronting deeply held beliefs.<sup>9</sup> To support this process, successful partnerships benefit from a neutral facilitator who can bridge institutional contexts, mediate challenges, and ensure that the interests of both organizations are represented. This individual plays a central role in maintaining trust, coordinating communication, and aligning goals across institutions. In the Montclair-Paterson partnership, the director of Montclair's Network for Educational Renewal served in this capacity, bringing deep experience in collaborating with both local school districts and university faculty. In this role, the director helped launch the initiative, define the scope of work, manage university-district research approvals, and promote trust through consistent, relationship-centered communication.
3. **Establish a partnership plan that integrates district initiatives.** A jointly developed plan clarifies the purpose, scope, and roles within the partnership while ensuring alignment with district priorities. Integration is key—rather than introducing separate or competing efforts, the work should build on and enhance existing district initiatives. Paterson's strategy focused on integrating the transformation efforts with initiatives educators were already engaged in, shifting their focus toward greater equity. For example, workshops on culturally responsive pedagogy and structured dialogues about equity were embedded within broader professional development efforts, reinforcing the message that equity is not a separate agenda, but an essential component of ongoing school improvement.
4. **Begin by engaging school leaders.** Research consistently shows that school leaders have a profound influence on both student achievement and teacher development.<sup>10</sup> As such, investing in leadership development is one of the most effective ways to drive sustained change. While principals often face competing demands, their engagement in equity-focused leadership work is essential. Without their active participation in examining bias, addressing inequitable practices, and modeling inclusive behaviors, systemic transformation is unlikely to take root. Designing the partnership with school leaders at the center ensured that the work was grounded in practice and positioned to support lasting change across schools.<sup>11</sup>

Together, these foundational conditions created a structure that enabled the university-district partnership to move beyond isolated initiatives and toward sustained, systemic improvement.

## SoLD-Aligned Implementation

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The partnership between Montclair and Paterson was grounded in the research-based belief that lasting improvement begins with honest, ongoing dialogue at both the individual and organizational levels. Rooted in SoLD, this approach reflects the understanding that leadership development is shaped by strong relationships, deliberate reflection, and learning anchored in daily practice. To enact this vision, the collaboration created intentional spaces for school and district leaders to examine their practices and the broader conditions influencing student and staff experiences. These structured conversations deepened understanding, established transparency, and established a shared foundation for school improvement.

Through workshops, guided protocols, and regular discussion forums, the partnership created effective conditions for adult learning. The approach drew from SoLD research and provided adults with deeper learning opportunities that were relational, experiential, and integrated into authentic problem-solving connected to system-level goals. The design was operationalized through tools such as Glenn Singleton's Courageous Conversation protocol, a structured framework for engaging in open, respectful dialogue on complex and often uncomfortable topics. The protocol encourages participants to remain engaged, embrace discomfort, speak honestly, and accept the ongoing nature of deep change. Integrated with responsive leadership practices, these learning experiences signaled that equity-centered reflection is not peripheral to leadership; it is central to the daily work of leading schools that serve all students well.

This structure helped school and district leaders move beyond surface-level conversations toward deeper dialogue that challenged assumptions and supported mindset shifts. Facilitators modeled key practices, such as active listening, perspective-taking, and vulnerability, enabling participants to build stronger relationships and a shared sense of purpose. These sustained conversations also reflected SoLD-aligned principles by promoting integrated learning experiences that engaged leaders' cognitive, social, and emotional development. As SoLD suggests, adult learners require learning opportunities that are flexible, personalized, and responsive to shifting school and system conditions. Over time, these practices became embedded in the district's culture, encouraging staff to view inclusion and reflective dialogue not as separate initiatives, but as essential elements of their everyday leadership and decision-making. This shift in mindset helped lay the groundwork for lasting improvement and a stronger, more connected learning community.

Once a foundation of trust and open dialogue was in place, the partnership between Montclair and Paterson shifted toward translating these conversations into system-level action. The focus moved to equipping school and district leaders with practical strategies to

integrate inclusive practices into the core of district operations. This included codesigning more intentional hiring and recruitment processes, revising curriculum and assessment practices to ensure broad relevance, and implementing data-informed decision-making protocols that prioritized student access, support, and success. To sustain these efforts, the partnership helped establish accountability structures, such as progress monitoring tools and internal review processes, that kept the work visible and actionable across schools and departments. Together, these strategies reflected SoLD principles by aligning structures and systems to ensure that policies and practices worked in tandem to support the learning and well-being of students and educators.

Leaders also participated in professional learning communities and ongoing coaching, which provided regular opportunities to refine their approaches. Coaching, in particular, is recognized as a key component of high-quality professional development for school leaders, with research consistently linking it to increased leadership capacity and improved school outcomes.<sup>12</sup> These structures reflect SoLD design principles by providing sustained, relationship-driven supports that are personalized, contextually relevant, and responsive to leaders' developmental needs. By offering job-embedded, goal-aligned coaching and moving beyond one-time training sessions, the partnership supported leaders in applying inclusive practices in their everyday decision-making.

These implementation efforts reflect core principles of SoLD, which emphasize the importance of adult learning environments that are relationship-rich and continuously reflective. The use of job-embedded coaching, collaborative inquiry, and data-informed decision-making mirrors SoLD-aligned strategies that support the development of adaptive expertise and shared responsibility. Alignment to the SoLD framework can not only strengthen practice-based competencies but also cultivate the habits of mind and professional dispositions essential for leading equitable, whole child-focused schools.

## **Strategic Disengagement and Offboarding**

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Recognizing that lasting transformation requires sustained leadership beyond the life of the partnership, Montclair worked closely with Paterson to develop a strategic disengagement plan. This plan emphasized a gradual shift from external support to internal leadership and included concrete strategies for sustainability. These included identifying and empowering internal champions, creating peer learning networks to promote continued collaboration, and establishing accountability structures to keep improvement efforts on track. Montclair also provided access to alumni networks and ongoing resources to support continued learning and connection after the formal partnership concluded.

To ensure sustainability beyond the formal partnership, Montclair and Paterson devised a comprehensive, strategic disengagement plan centered on cultivating district capacity for lasting transformation. Key strategies included identifying and empowering internal champions, leaders within the district who could continue to advocate for and guide equity-focused practices after the partnership's conclusion. By equipping these individuals with targeted coaching and leadership development, the district established a cadre of change agents capable of driving professional learning and facilitating collaborative improvement efforts. To foster ongoing collaboration, the partnership also established professor-in-residence programs, providing regular opportunities for leaders to share challenges, reflect on equity initiatives, and collectively problem-solve. These residencies helped build a supportive community that could sustain progress even as district staff or priorities changed.

In addition, Montclair worked with Paterson to build durable accountability structures, such as ongoing self-assessment routines and annual equity reviews, ensuring that progress could be monitored and improvement efforts maintained. Together, these strategies promoted district-led ownership, reinforced a culture of continuous growth, and embedded the practices needed for long-term, systemwide improvement.

By transitioning from a direct facilitation role to a consultative presence, the university helped the district maintain momentum, troubleshoot challenges, and stay on course toward long-term goals. This intentional approach to offboarding reinforced the idea that the ultimate goal of partnership is not dependency, but durable, district-led progress. Through careful planning and capacity building, the collaboration demonstrated how universities can support school systems in sustaining growth long after formal engagements end.

## Conclusion

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While school districts often need support to examine and change long-standing policies, practices, and structures, universities also have a responsibility to reflect on their own institutional histories and engage as collaborative, accountable partners in the work of school improvement. Montclair and Paterson approached district transformation work through a comprehensive, sustained model of partnership and support that centers on building the leadership capacity, habits, and mindsets needed to advance equity at scale.

Rather than relying on short-term training or one-off events, the partnership with Montclair promoted ongoing collaboration grounded in reflection, responsiveness, and alignment with district goals. This work reflected SoLD-aligned strategies by prioritizing sustained adult learning, collaborative leadership, and supportive environments that enable deeper learning



for all students. This model challenged both university and district partners to redefine the nature of their collaboration, engage in mutual learning, and prioritize long-term investment in leadership development.

Strong partnerships, particularly those that bring additional capacity, expertise, and shared commitments to long-term improvement, can support meaningful transformation. The partnership between Montclair and Paterson exemplifies what is possible when professional learning is codesigned, strategically aligned, and built to last. It offers a model for how university-district collaborations can create the conditions for deep, sustainable change in schools.

## About the Authors

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## Endnotes

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