

Uniting a Community: The School and University Partnership Conference on Education

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Abstract

The College of Education and Human Development at Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi hosts an annual School and University Partnership Conference of Education (SUPCE), where teachers, future teachers, school leaders, community members, university faculty, and the business community focus on educational challenges, learning opportunities, community engagement, and professional development. The 2022 conference theme focused on the #heartwork of recruiting and retaining teachers and included a powerful keynote speaker and sessions in areas such as the recruitment and retention of teachers, STEM, and digital learning. Based on positive feedback from participants on the importance and impact of the conference, the planning committee plans to continue it in 2023.

Keywords: school and university partnerships; professional development; educator preparation program; education conference; conference planning

Origin and Tenets of the School and University Partnership Conference of Education

The School and University Partnership Conference on Education (SUPCE) conference began in 2016 as an idea among university colleagues to celebrate and strengthen the partnerships key to their successful educator preparation program. The first year, the conference had just 25 participants, but those participants provided enough strong positive feedback to encourage organizers to bring back the event the following year. Since then, SUPCE has grown rapidly into one Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi’s (TAMUCC) leading conferences for professional

development and networking. By the third year, it hosted 125 participants, and by the fourth year, it topped out at nearly 300, the maximum that its venue can accommodate. Attendance has held strong since then, even when the conference went virtual for a year during the pandemic.

SUPCE showcases the varying degrees of work in which students, faculty, and school districts are engaging across the university, partnership schools, and community, especially involving the field-based component of clinical teaching. It has grown to become a venue where partners such as school faculty, community members, and local university- and community-based organizations can present

strategies, teaching methods, and research from their respective professional capacities and diverse perspectives. The conference has a growing number of different colleges and programs from within the university participating, whether by presenting a session or hosting an information table to showcase their many programs and research.

The growing annual conference is designed to work toward solutions to complex issues related to the profession of teaching, such as teacher shortages, the creation of quality teacher preparation programs, integration of community partnerships, and elevation of social equity for all students. “One of the main focuses of the conference is how we will continue to love and sustain those we are trying to bring into the profession as well as those who are already in it,” said Dr. Tejada-Delgado after SUPCE 2022. “We have to provide teachers and incoming teachers the support they need and are asking for.”

SUPCE conferences feature numerous breakout sessions on topics such as retention, literacy, technology, STEM concepts, leadership, mentoring, and more. Many of these breakout sessions focus on topics that are labeled “hot” in literacy and education (Grote-Garcia & Ortlieb, 2022). The conference also features poster sessions and roundtable discussions. These sometimes less intimidating ways to present knowledge and practice are embraced by teacher candidates, clinical teachers, and undergraduate and graduate students who may be presenting at a conference for the first time. The call for breakout session proposals opens for about six weeks approximately eight months before the conference date. After a committee scores the proposals based on a rubric, the presenters are notified of the outcome. SUPCE committee members work to recruit and identify stakeholders in educational partnerships who may be strong presenters. They also suggest that teachers who have never presented before partner with professors or principals who may be more familiar with presenting on a larger scale.

One of the pillars of the conference is to create a platform for the university’s Noyce and Grow Your Own grant participants to showcase their work and experiences with their respective clinical teachers and students as part of the working grants. The National Science Foundation Robert Noyce Scholarship Program provides \$30,000 in scholarships to outstanding junior and senior STEM majors who plan on teaching math or science in a high-need school

district (<https://www.nsfnoyce.org/>). In return, recipients commit to completing two years of full-time teaching in a high-need school district for each year of scholarship support received. The Grow Your Own program provides \$15,000 scholarships to education students who complete a two-semester field experience at one of two local high-need partner districts, and it provides them teaching positions at those districts upon graduation (tea.texas.gov). These grant recipients had opportunities to be involved in the coordination of SUPCE 2022 by assisting with program development and registration. They also had a much more intentional role as presenters at the conference showcasing their work in various sessions. Both of these partnership programs were intentionally highlighted as a part of the SUPCE conference because of their roles in recruiting and growing diverse university teacher candidates into teachers who become a part of the school communities in which they are placed, increasing their retention in the profession.

The conference is the collective work of the SUPCE planning committee, which features external members from the surrounding and regional independent school districts, university faculty, and community partners, and it is chaired by the conference founder, Dr. Tejada-Delgado. The SUPCE planning team adheres to the shared responsibility paradigm, which they believe can be accomplished through authentic and genuine partnerships, leading to conferences like SUPCE where collaborative work can be shared and disseminated and where networks are cultivated to help glean deeper understandings, applications, and connections not noticeable prior to the networking agency. SUPCE also provides a consistent and omnipresent goal of reciprocation of benefits, advantages, and a sense of valuing each partner’s contribution.

The Educator Preparation Program (EPP) at TAMUCC, which includes many of the participants in the SUPCE conference, has cultivated university, community, school district, and student resources to develop the strongest EPP program and operationalized clinical practice the university has had in its history, which is now reflected in the SUPCE conference. It is through this cultivation and sharing of resources, funds of knowledge, first, second, and third spaces, human capital, and the decision-making process that the team has been able to build and sustain a program rich in reciprocity and mutually beneficial partnerships.

The 2022 School and University Partnership Conference on Education

The 2022 conference drew 250 participants. They included future educators (clinical teachers, teacher candidates, and aspiring teachers within organizations such as Texas Association of Future Educators), plus K-12 educators, campus administrators, university faculty, and community members vested in P-16 educational issues. A breakdown of those attendees' backgrounds can be seen in Table 1.

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Roles of 2022 SUPCE Attendees

Category	Percentage
Clinical teacher	17%
Community member	4%
Cooperating teacher	4%
Field supervisor	3%
Higher education faculty or staff	7%
K-12 administrator	3%
K-12 teacher	30%
Teacher candidate	31%

Nearly half of conference attendees this past year were future teachers enrolled in the university, 37% were K-12 school employees, 10% were higher education employees, and 4% were community members. The decision for professors to incentivize students to attend has increased the student attendance each year, which has in turn led to a positive spiral. The first SUPCE participant list consisted of about 10% students, and now it consists of nearly 50% students. A combination of those attendance incentives plus the students sharing positive feedback with peers has boosted their participation. K-12 teacher participation has also increased each year due to the integration of Texas Education Agency required training for cooperating teachers who supervise teacher candidates and clinical teachers. Sessions in 2022 specifically geared toward K-12 cooperating teachers included information on our Islander Assessment Tool which is based on the Texas teacher evaluation system, coaching during pre and post conferences, having critical conversations, and providing actionable feedback. Asking the cooperating teachers to not only attend, but also lead these sessions has drawn more attendees each year from our partner districts who want to

be involved in mentoring future teachers. While the number of community attendees is small, their presence typically makes an important impact, such as attendees who are keynote speakers or representatives of sponsors or key partnership areas. This is an area for growth that will be addressed in preparation of the 2023 SUPCE conference.

The most recent conference highlighted one of the most pervasive issues in education today, teacher shortage (Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, & Advancement, 2022; Nguyen, et al., 2022). While the causes and solutions are complex, SUPCE sought to explore the myriad factors contributing to the evolution of teacher shortage, as well as identify ways that university and school partnerships might improve the preparation of teachers and enhance the profession of teaching.

Equally important, this collaborative conference aspired to proactively foster a climate of teaching and learning and nurture education students, partnerships, and communities within a caring and responsive platform promoting sustainability, sense of purpose, vision, equity, and love for all students. Research shows that collaboration

between stakeholders in the educational process can help change practice when working together toward a common goal (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; DuFour, 2005). Shannon and colleagues (2019) discussed the community-building and networking benefits of conferences, especially in specific content areas, where there is rapid growth in knowledge and technology. These collaborative opportunities for stakeholders encourage them to establish networks for sharing their practices, building relationships across schools, communities, and universities, and co-constructing knowledge together as a team (Achinstein, 2002; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Knapp, 2003). Research has also shown that through this opportunity to reflect on and refine their practice, as well as present a session themselves, educators gain a sense of professional pride, increase their self-efficacy, and feel empowered to share more when asked in the future (Borg, 2015; Motteram, 2016).

In this vein, the call for SUPCE 2022 proposals focused on the year's conference theme, "Recruit, Retain, Love, and Sustain." The call resulted in 21 accepted 45-minute sessions. Of these presentations, approximately 71% broadly applied to all levels of education, while smaller numbers applied specifically to higher education (20%), early childhood and primary school (10%), middle school (10%), and high school (5%). Presenters included current university faculty, cooperating teachers, and university and school staff members. Some sessions offered hands-on learning, such as the session *Interactive and Multimedia Activities in Math/Science for Day-One Ready Teachers and Retaining Teachers*, presented by three graduate students in STEM education under the guidance of their professor. Other sessions seated attendees in a circle to encourage feedback, such as *Taking the Next Step*, a session for early-career teachers in which they reflected on successes and areas of improvement and learned about support systems.

A few sessions directly addressed problems and steps toward resolving them, such as *Increasing STEM Access and Engagement Through Student-led Community Involvement*, presented by a teacher education professor along with clinical teachers serving a residency in a local school district, and *Planning for Difficult Conversations: A Session for Cooperating Teachers*, presented by a clinical

teaching supervisor. Additionally, four presenters and teams provided roundtables, a format encouraging moderated discussion and the sharing of perspectives. The 2022 roundtable topics included building and sustaining successful relationships in clinical teaching, ensuring teachers feel cared for, fostering teacher appreciation and retention, and sharing traits of successful Latina superintendents. Attendees could also visit poster sessions during a block between concurrent sessions, a time during which snacks were served and there was an opportunity to win door prizes.

The half-day conference began with a breakfast keynote speaker, Kathryn Clark Childers, one of the first five female US Secret Service agents and author of *Scared Fearless: An Unlikely Agent in the US Secret Service* (Clark Childers & Perry, 2021). Mrs. Clark Childers originally began her career in education and connects to educators in an authentic way. Her speech, *Do it Scared*, set a tone for inspiration and empowerment when facing challenges bigger than oneself.

The conference ended with a panel discussion titled *Transformative Partnerships Take a Village to Achieve*. Experts from different areas of school leadership and higher education weighed in on questions from an experienced educator serving as the moderator. This panel was designed to spark thoughts, ideas, and conversation. During the 2022 panel discussion, each panelist articulated how they are supporting, loving, and sustaining their teachers. The panel discussion helped to serve as a testament to the hard work that is being conducted in the local community, and the laser focus the university, community, school districts, and other partnerships have on elevating the profession of teaching.

2022 SUPCE Attendee Feedback

Each year, at the conclusion of the conference, all attendees receive a survey to complete. The SUPCE planning committee uses the data collected from this survey to reflect on what went well and what can be enhanced, as well as what specific alterations may need to be made for the subsequent year's conference.

The SUPCE 2022 participants' general comments lifted from the survey confirm that the conference was beneficial. Participants used descriptors such as

“awesome,” “great,” and “interesting” to describe their conference experience, and several indicated that it was the “best conference” they had attended. They noted that they learned “information to take back to the classroom” from the sessions, and that the sessions “inspired” them and “renewed [their] passion” for teaching. Many participants commented that the keynote speaker’s message of overcoming obstacles in spite of fear was “outstanding,” “amazing,” and “inspiring.” One Interdisciplinary Studies major, who graduated in 2022 with a concentration in grades 4-8 mathematics, wrote, “I’m looking to build relationships and find new tools that I can add to my toolbox. I’d like to get access to a lot more resources and be introduced to more things that we can use in the classroom.”

Survey participants were pleased with the sessions, the knowledge of the presenters, and the “new ideas” shared. Survey-takers commented that the conference offered a variety of topics in several disciplines, so that most, if not all, attendees could find sessions of interest. “It is amazing to have this collaboration and to learn from diagnosticians, school counselors, administrators, and superintendents,” said one participant, a two-time TAMUCC alumna, who is now a doctoral student in the university’s counselor education program. “There are so many aspects and fields in education, and it’s great to be able to interact with potential colleagues whose ultimate focus is student growth, their development, and in helping them be successful in life.”

Other survey participants noted the variety of people who took part in SUPCE and how this added to the interdisciplinary nature of the conference. Because SUPCE focuses on partnerships, several comments on the survey included this aspect, noting that this focus was evident because of the representation of university faculty, local K-12 faculty, and university students.

Conference participants who responded to the survey also made suggestions for future SUPCE conferences. Several would like to see the conference extended to a full day so that they may attend more than two sessions, as they had difficulty selecting just two sessions from those offered. Also related to timing, participants thought that the mid-conference break time might need to be adjusted because some participants arrived late to the second round of sessions. Some also commented that the roundtable sessions should be offered during their own scheduled time so that they do not compete with the regular sessions. Regarding topics, participants suggested offering more sessions specific to the needs of clinical teachers. Survey respondents also suggested increasing preparation opportunities, such as providing panel questions beforehand, giving presenters more time to prepare presentations by notifying them earlier of session acceptance, and providing presenters with more specific information about who their audience will be.

The survey participants’ responses were overwhelmingly positive on the Likert scale portion of the SUPCE survey (See Table 1). The highest scores in all three areas (*I learned a lot from this session; I learned strategies I will use in my class; I would recommend that my colleagues see this presentation*) were noted for the “Other Topics” category, which included sessions on teaching with equity, working with therapy dogs, and curriculum alignment, among others. The scores from sessions pertaining to recruiting and retaining teachers, developing and sustaining school and community partnerships, and science and math pedagogy were the next highest reported, indicating that conference attendees learned useful strategies that they could transfer to their particular educational settings. The lowest scoring sessions, although still above a mean of 4.0, fell under the topic of digital learning, including sessions on coaching, Smart Notebooks, and developing rubrics in Google.

Table 2

Participant Survey Likert Scale Items

Topic	Item	Mean
Recruiting and Retaining Teachers		n=34
	I learned a lot from this session.	4.68
	I learned strategies I will use in my class.	4.70
	I would recommend that my colleagues see this presentation.	4.71
Partnerships		n=10
	I learned a lot from this session.	4.60
	I learned strategies I will use in my class.	4.56
	I would recommend that my colleagues see this presentation.	4.70
Science and Math		n=27
	I learned a lot from this session.	4.63
	I learned strategies I will use in my class.	4.56
	I would recommend that my colleagues see this presentation.	4.54
Digital Learning		n=35
	I learned a lot from this session.	4.4
	I learned strategies I will use in my class.	4.35
	I would recommend that my colleagues see this presentation.	4.33
Other Topics		n=28
	I learned a lot from this session.	4.82
	I learned strategies I will use in my class.	4.71
	I would recommend that my colleagues see this presentation.	4.75

Note. *5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Neutral, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree

Looking Ahead: Planning for the 2023 SUPCE Conference

As the profession and science of education continue to grow and evolve, so does the School and University Partnership Conference of Education (SUPCE), since its

purpose is to support, facilitate, foster, nurture, guide, and advocate for educators everywhere. Each year the conference plans its next conference based on feedback from the conference participants, community members, university faculty who prepare teachers, and current

teachers whose professional capacity includes working directly with P-16 students.

There are still many possibilities and hopes for the conference as it continues to grow. For example, much feedback and discussion has been devoted to extending SUPCE to a full day conference. While a half day has been able to serve the original mission, it is becoming clear that a full-day conference may be better equipped to accommodate the conference’s growth and the myriad of topics requested.

The Texas Association of Future Educators (TAFE) will be an integral part of SUPCE moving forward. The College of Education and Human Development at TAMUCC has recently designated a clinical professor to help provide students who our partnerships serve an opportunity to explore the profession of teaching. SUPCE will provide a venue for TAFE members to present the work and portfolios they have developed as well as their overall experiences with the profession while providing them feedback throughout the conference to help them make informed decisions about pursuing careers in education.

The Transformative Alliance for Student Success (TASS) is a newly developed alliance created by the College of Education and Human Development at TAMUCC. The inaugural meeting was held in the fall of 2022 with a group of university faculty, community members, members of other local Hispanic Serving Institutions, and leaders of school districts who came together to discuss ways to transform how we prepare, educate, and support students at all levels of their development. A select group of individuals were identified throughout the partnerships, broader communities, and university who will play a significant role in helping the

Alliance design and achieve its emerging mission and vision. SUPCE 2023 will include a session based on the work of the alliance which will help to increase community member attendance and involvement in the overall conference.

Organizers also hope to help current and future teachers identify a clearer picture of local education and how it fits into the larger societal climate. SUPCE should be a venue that helps educators identify some of the greatest challenges facing teachers today, as well as how they work toward overcoming these challenges in their respective educational settings. Therefore, organizers hope to devote greater attention toward not only including the community’s feedback, but also having SUPCE serve as a venue and platform to provide examples and ideas that can be adopted by educator preparation programs so that future teachers are prepared to meet the needs of the students and communities they will be serving. To view “parental support” more like “community partnerships” would be a step forward in this direction. This can be achieved when educators are willing to work closely with communities and initiate courageous conversations (Singleton, 2015).

Finally, it is the hope of the SUPCE planning committee that a variety of stakeholders will submit and present the type of work and research in which they are involved and demonstrate how that work connects to education, thereby supporting how each discipline is interrelated and intersects with social-emotional learning, physical health, and wellness.

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