The years following the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act have brought sweeping change to the American educational landscape. School districts that fail to meet their adequate yearly progress targets face a broad range of penalties, including the possible loss of much-needed Title I funds. A sea change in how funding is provided by state and federal governments has meant an end to business as usual in school districts across the country, and has had a profound impact on school-university relationships and collaborative project proposals.

In the past, school-university partnerships have been thought of in terms of mutual enrichment. Universities could use local school districts to place their student teachers, pilot innovative programs, conduct research, and write grants. The results often were mixed; some projects were successful while others disappeared without a trace when funding ran out.

Now the rules have changed as schools and school districts undergo a “results revolution.” In the past, university-sponsored innovations and programs might be piloted and implemented without supporting data. Today, a new generation of principals demands that all such activities have documented evidence of success. They insist that all school initiatives need to focus on student learning, particularly on those students who are not achieving at acceptable academic levels.

Changes in accountability mean that universities can no longer expect a red carpet from schools for every project they pitch. In the age of NCLB, with its focus on academic results, universities can no longer expect to escape accountability when working with school districts. They no longer can collect their grant and consulting money, run their programs, and walk away when a district needs to be supported, mentored, or restructured for low student performance. Districts want to see true partnerships in which both schools and universities work toward a shared set of goals that are focused on student achievement.

A Results-based Partnership
In Michigan’s Ypsilanti School District, the protocols of the Critical Friends Group, a professional learning community of educators committed to improving practice through collaborative learning, have been successful in bringing K-12 and higher education practitioners together to discuss common problems. The group’s format, in which group members share data, information, and leadership problems, helps both K-12 and higher education practitioners come together without the tensions and misunderstandings that sometimes arise. In 2007-2008, the district’s Critical Friends Group for principals, which included faculty from the Eastern Michigan University Department of Educational Leadership, gave the participants a common language for discussions of school change.

The availability and sharing of data has enabled the partnership to effectively address pressing problems. For example, when principals Dave Ingham and Darlene Scott asked for tutoring help for students failing in math, Melissa Berry, the Eastern Michigan University site coordinator for the federal Gaining Early Awareness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), was able to provide funding for weekly one-on-one tutoring for each failing student.

When principals Jan Sturdivent and Monica Merritt sought resources to help keep their middle school students on the path to graduation, Eastern Michigan University’s Kelli Hatfield focused resources on at-risk classes at their schools, bringing in university students and volunteers to make sure school students could successfully move on to the next grade level. At the same time, social work professor Marti Bombyk placed graduate students in the schools to provide additional support and enrichment for at-risk students.

The partnership also provided other benefits. When the seventh graders in principal Melvin Anglin’s school prepared to attend a class trip to Washington, D.C., Eastern Michigan University’s GEAR UP funding extended the trip by a day, at no extra
cost to the students, to make time for a visit to American University.

In every case, the clear focus was on student achievement. All of the university-sponsored programs had measurable outcomes and the students in them were tracked to see whether their classroom performance improved. Each program was on probation from the beginning; if it did not produce results, the plug would be pulled.

How Principals Can Help
How can principals help build and manage successful school-university partnerships?

First, they should insist on long-term relationships. The minimum length of a partnership between a school and university ought to reflect at least a five-year commitment to a plan of action that is mutually beneficial and desirable to each institutional partner. This allows for long-term planning and implementation. A longer time investment allows more opportunities for the organizational change and professional development necessary to boost student learning and achievement.

Next, principals must look beyond grant funding. Too many grant and funding opportunities are based on an unrealistically short time horizon, often one or two years. Lasting school-university partnerships should sustain programs, whether or not they have external funding. Such partnerships are much more likely to have a lasting impact.

Third, principals must have a comprehensive vision of partnerships. Rather than just creating programs for their schools, principals need to work with district administration to make sure partnerships address the needs of all district students.

Finally, principals must insist that partnerships be driven by results and not by egos, personal relationships, tradition, or politics. If school-university programs are not working to directly increase student achievement, they need to be redesigned or discontinued.

“Changes in accountability mean that universities can no longer expect a red carpet from schools for every project they pitch.”

Richard Weigel is assistant superintendent of the Ypsilanti Public School District in Michigan. His e-mail address is weigel@ypsd.org.

Wendy Burke is associate professor of teacher education at Eastern Michigan University. Her e-mail address is wendy.burke@emich.edu.

Russ Olwell is an associate professor at Eastern Michigan University. His e-mail address is rolwell@emich.edu.