

**PORTRAITS OF SECONDARY PARTNER SCHOOLS  
IN THE  
NATIONAL NETWORK FOR EDUCATIONAL RENEWAL  
1996-1999**

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## ALTA PORTRAIT:

# Alta High School/Brigham Young University Partnership

Linda L. Sandstrom, Principal

### The School Setting

Alta High School is a large, suburban high school (2,530 students in grades 10 through 12) located on the outskirts of Salt Lake City, Utah. Alta serves a predominantly middle to upper-middle class population of professionals and semi-professionals. These parents have high expectations for their children and the school. They also have postsecondary plans for their offspring. Much emphasis has been given to academic and extracurricular excellence during the twenty years of the school's existence. The 121 members of the professional staff are dedicated and competent. Students, parents, and staff have been extremely successful in working together as witnessed by the following:

- Alta has been commended by The College Board for its Advanced Placement (AP) program, which is the largest in Utah and one of the largest in the United States. Over 800 AP tests are administered each year.
- Alta has implemented a comprehensive guidance program and has embraced the School-to-Careers movement. Students, parents, and counselors meet annually to develop and review Student Education & Occupation Plans. Sophomore students are enrolled in a nine-week *Life Choices* course, which provides instruction in drug and alcohol refusal skills, self-esteem, decision making, and career exploration. A career center has been opened and a student internship program is thriving. In 1998, Alta was named a School-to-Careers model

conesite, while a member of the counseling staff was named Utah State High School Counselor of the Year.

- Alta continues to cultivate applied technology programs. An effort has been made to merge "academic" and "applied" notions to make instruction relevant, approximating real-world applications. VICA and other career and technical organizations are flourishing. A Technology 2000 Lab was established in 1996. A Multi-Media Academy is also in operation.
- Alta supports exceptional programs in athletics, drama, dance, debate, and music.
- Alta boasts the largest concurrent enrollment program in the state, offering classes in conjunction with Salt Lake Community College. The courses are taught by Alta faculty on the school campus during the regular school day.
- Alta's literary magazine, *Euphony*, the Academic Decathlon team, and other curriculum-based student groups have all earned top honors.

Under the direction of a new principal, the school carried out strategic planning in 1994. A large committee of teachers, administrators, students, parents, counselors, and classified personnel undertook the tedious but productive procedure, which resulted in a meaningful mission statement and related objectives. A subsequent action plan called for the formation of a variety of

committees, which made recommendations/decisions and invited additional involvement of people both within and outside the school. Within two years, Alta earned a Utah Centennial Schools grant to explore and implement innovative programs.

In 1997, the strategic plan's objectives were reviewed and revamped to provide direction for the ensuing three years. This was accomplished by the Alta Action Committee, a newly formed, site-based, shared decision making body of twenty-four people, again comprised of school personnel, students, parents, and the director of the area's Chamber of Commerce. This body meets monthly or more often as needed.

### The Need

Rejecting the notion of reform, which implies requisite change as an antidote to prior dereliction (Alta is generally regarded as a very successful institution), and avoiding any pressure to change simply because it has become fashionable, the school community has been cautious. Opportunities for teachers to research, reflect, inquire, and collaborate, however, are significant needs.

One of the most noteworthy characteristics of Alta High School is its faculty, a group of seasoned individuals with a tremendous record of achievement. When a new school was opened a few years ago, the student population at Alta was decreased and the staff faced a proportionate reduction. District policy requires, generally, that the 'last ones in' are the 'first ones out,' and many new teachers were surplus. With this removal of fresh ideas and ideals from the school, additional attention was turned to educational renewal activities for an excellent and stable staff. It was felt that training teachers in new techniques and providing opportunities for them to gain new pedagogical insight would give an important boost to a stellar faculty and help the school achieve its goals. Ideas gleaned from John Goodlad's *Educational Renewal* (1994) provided a foundation for much of what has

been undertaken at the school in recent years.

Being an integral part of teacher preparation for the future and benefiting from the optimism and vitality that teacher candidates bring to the school campus have become motivating forces in the school's commitment to the partnership.

### Partnership Activities

#### 1994-95

The principal of Alta High, Linda Sandstrom, was invited to participate in Brigham Young University-Public School Partnership activities. She began attending workshop sessions that addressed a variety of topics including educational renewal, inquiry, and the moral dimensions of education.

#### 1995-96

Several Alta teachers attended a partnership conference on the BYU campus. The school continued to host student teachers from BYU. The number had increased in recent years. The principal had also mentored three administrative interns.

A Professional Development Center was established at the school. The football boosters provided funds for computers. The room was also equipped with televisions, VCRs, videos, books, magazines, pamphlets, etc.

#### 1996-97

Alta was included in the Arthur Vining Davis Secondary Partner School Project at the request of and funded by BYU. The school made a commitment to establish a theoretical and philosophical basis for inquiry. Pertinent issues that were explored included:

1. *The impact and nature of change.* The school continues to be involved in a variety of change processes that can be challenging or sometimes downright threatening for an experienced school staff.
2. *The possibilities for future interaction within the partnership.* As the school ventures

into interdisciplinary approaches to teaching, curriculum mapping, teaching on the block, etc., BYU and other public schools in the partnership are valuable resources and allies. The reservoir of excellent teachers at the school makes it a viable professional development site for BYU preservice candidates.

3. *The structure of preservice training at the university and coordination with the school.* BYU is restructuring its secondary education program. Input from practicing educators is invaluable. The possibility of expanded preservice experience on the high school campus is an attractive prospect for both the university and the school.

#### 1997-98

The principal and four teachers participated in an Associates' Group with Orem and Provo High School representatives, State Office of Education personnel, and educators from the BYU campus. Merrell Hansen and Nancy Wentworth from BYU were co-facilitators. Participants read eight books provided by the partnership and met monthly for discussion and reflection. During alternating months, the sessions were held as two-day retreats in a mountain setting. For the other months, one-day meetings were held at partner school sites. The benefits were enormous! The group not only became conversant in a common language based on the moral dimensions of education and the philosophy of the partnership but also developed important relationships of understanding and trust.

During this time, a program was launched at Alta to broaden the base of understanding concerning the moral dimensions and the partnership goals. Stipends of \$75 were offered to the first twenty-five teachers who responded to an invitation to read one book from a list of six, selected from those used in the Associates' Group, and who would then participate in a two-hour discussion with others who had read the same book. The response was overwhelming. Thirty-four

teachers read books. Many teachers participated for in-service credit rather than money. They loved the discussion groups, reporting that it was great to share ideas and feelings with their colleagues on significant educational issues. The project heightened awareness, encouraged practicing professionals to again explore current educational literature, and for many it revived the original passion that brought them to the teaching profession. Teachers wanted to know if they could do more of that "Book Club" thing.

The principal and two teachers, Rique Ochoa and Kathi Goodfellow, attended the Arthur Vining Davis Secondary Partner School conference in New Orleans, Louisiana.

#### 1998-99

- Alta became a full-fledged member of the Arthur Vining Davis Secondary Partner School Project.
- Another "Book Club" was organized. This time, over thirty teachers are reading books about the art and craft of teaching and about the preparation of new teachers. This is preparatory to, and in anticipation for, expanded preservice involvement with BYU.
- The principal participated in a presentation with others from the partnership at a partner school conference in Flagstaff, Arizona.
- The principal met regularly with others from the partner schools and BYU to share ideas and coordinate activities.
- Assistant Principal Marsha Morgan participated in an Associates' Group sponsored by the Jordan School District.
- Principal Linda Sandstrom and a teacher, Valerie Peterson, attended the Arthur Vining Davis Secondary Partner School conference in Bellevue, Washington, in February.

- Entry-level BYU students (276) were assigned to Alta for the first time. They visited classrooms over a three-week period to observe teachers and students.
- More than a dozen preservice candidates completed their student teaching at Alta. Some spent nearly an entire semester on the school campus.
- The principal and four teachers began serving as members of the BYU Secondary Education restructuring team. The principal and Valerie Peterson have been able to continue that endeavor.
- The moral dimensions have been discussed in an ongoing fashion during faculty meetings.
- Each department in the school conducted an action research project to evaluate implementation of the block schedule. In addition, the Alta Action Committee polled all parents, teachers, and students on the same topic and made recommendations for adjustments based on the findings.
- A school-designated mentoring supervisor may be needed.
- The university preservice program must be finalized and implemented.
- The foundational principles of the partnership – the moral dimensions, inquiry, renewal, etc. – will be modeled for the staff.

### **The Future**

- The principal will attend the *In Praise of Education* conference in Seattle in June 1999 with a delegation from the Jordan School District.
- Additional reading and discussion activities will be made available to the staff. If funding is available, an in-school Associates' Group will be held.
- A mentor training program must be established, with the assistance of BYU, in order to prepare teachers at the school to more effectively supervise student teachers.
- Appropriate ways to compensate teachers who mentor preservice university candidates must be established.