

**PORTRAITS OF SECONDARY PARTNER SCHOOLS  
IN THE  
NATIONAL NETWORK FOR EDUCATIONAL RENEWAL  
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## DUMONT PORTRAIT:

### Portrait of a Partnership: Dumont High School and Montclair State University

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Twelve years ago, Montclair State College, now Montclair State University, began a collaboration with five area public school districts through what was called the Clinical Schools Network. The purpose of these partnerships was to further the understanding of higher order thinking in the local schools, utilizing the student teaching experience as the vehicle to assist practicing educators to better understand the concept. Research conducted during that time indicated the presence of a mutual learning effect that occurred between student teachers and cooperating teachers specifically as it applied to the ability to infuse higher order thinking in the classroom. It was this finding that led one of the administrators in a partner school to conclude that the student teaching experience and related activities could serve as a meaningful approach to staff development. Thus began a journey that culminated in the creation of the first secondary partner school in the state of New Jersey.

As conservative institutions, schools are resistant to change. Many efforts toward meaningful school reform have been superficial in nature. In contrast, the following partner school portrait is designed to allow the reader a glimpse of the journey undertaken by educators from Dumont High School and Montclair State University to significantly alter the approach to teaching and learning that routinely occurs in most American schools. The portrait also describes Dumont High School's efforts to join with neighboring Paramus High School to create a regional partner school.

Dumont High School is a small, suburban school in northeast New Jersey, located approximately twenty minutes from New York City. Paramus High School is slightly larger and only ten minutes away from Dumont. Both schools enjoy good reputations and have expressed a desire to work together by combining program elements and sharing resources. Each school is at a different developmental stage in its partnership with Montclair State University.

The simple premise for the creation of the Dumont Partner School was that improved schools necessitated better-prepared teachers. That can only be achieved through the active participation of school-based personnel. The design of this new entity was based upon the four points of practice most commonly associated with professional development schools: improvement of instruction, on-site research, the professional development of current staff members, and the preparation of future teachers. This partner school was to be jointly staffed by university and public school faculty who had the time, the freedom, and the places to plan and work together. The school's curriculum would reflect current thought and direction in the disciplines as well as overarching goals, such as higher order thinking. The creation of this partner school posed a number of unique challenges that will be discussed as this portrait unfolds.

The evolution of the partner school took place within the New Jersey Network for Educational Renewal, an entity that reflects the university's organizational framework for school-university partnerships. As the pooled human and material resources of the school and the university are invested in the

partner school, the partners are better able to contribute to the simultaneous renewal of schools and teacher education in New Jersey than they would working in isolation. Although the Dumont Partner School will become officially operational in the fall of 1997, many of the activities that are associated with such schools have gone forward a full year in advance of that date. At the very least, the school district, the university, and the Dumont Teachers' Association had addressed the kinds of preliminary issues upon which partner schools depend for their efficacy: a sense of mission, the establishment of parity and trust among the partners, and an exploration of the sources for the ongoing support of the school.

As a member of the NJNER, Dumont High School deepened its partnership with Montclair State University through a variety of Network activities. For example, through the student teaching experience, high school staff served as cooperating teachers as well as educational supervisors. Volunteer staff members gave their time to host MSU students during their initial field experiences. Among other activities, these teachers helped MSU students explore their reasons for entering the teaching profession. Dumont High School faculty also served on panels to offer expertise to preservice teachers as part of the culminating "Effective Teaching/Productive Learning" course taught at the school for three weeks by a professor from Montclair State. During the student teaching experience, bi-weekly seminars were conducted after school by high school staff to provide junior faculty members with the opportunity to discuss issues of pedagogy and classroom management. These seminars also have proven mutually beneficial to first- and second-year teachers who share many of the same questions and concerns as the junior faculty.

Dumont High School also began to conduct on-site research through the use of NJNER Renewal Grants in such areas as cultivating the self-directed learner, using scanners and the Internet to teach foreign languages and social studies, and creating

portfolio assessment. These grants allowed teachers, supervisors, and administrators to conduct research that will lead to the improvement of teaching and learning.

As the partnership with MSU evolved, it became apparent that Dumont High School had in place many of the elements of a partner school. The mutual benefits accruing to Dumont High School and MSU in the area of preservice and inservice staff development made the transition to a partner school seem very desirable. That goal, however, was not shared by everyone at the high school. Perhaps the principal's greatest challenge in that regard was to win the support of the local professional association, a critically important prospective stakeholder in the partner school. The NEA Teacher Education Initiative and the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) played a pivotal role, along with the Dumont Education Association (DEA), in the creation of the Dumont High Partner School.

In December 1995, the NJEA held a meeting of its Professional Development Committee. The principal of Dumont High School and the president of the Dumont Education Association were invited, as well as representatives of other NJNER schools and faculty and administrators from Montclair State University. The purpose of the meeting was to explore establishing a partner school in one of the Network schools where the NJEA was a majority representative. On that occasion, Nicholas Michelli, dean of the College of Education and Human Services at MSU, stressed the centrality of the partner school concept in the university's approach to educating future teachers. Dr. Michelli added that much of the university's work focused on the four dimensions of reform described in John Goodlad's work:

- (a) professional development to ensure equitable access to knowledge for all students;
- (b) stewardship or leadership by teachers in transforming schools and fostering

best practice;

- (c) pedagogical nurturance through the creation of a safe environment for students; and
- (d) enculturation of young people with the knowledge and skills needed for democratic citizenship.

The president of the Dumont Education Association, a teacher at the high school, had both professional and personal questions about the partner school. She voiced concern as to the direction that the partnership with MSU was taking. The “turf” issues as expressed by the president concerned three main issues:

- (a) Who has the final say in determining the high school curriculum?
- (b) Who will determine which teaching and evaluation strategies to use in the high school’s classrooms? and
- (c) Will university personnel have any input into the teacher observation and evaluation process?

These questions were among the many issues discussed at a March 1996 retreat attended by teachers, principals, superintendents, and board of education members from four schools in the NJNER who had expressed interest in the partner school concept. They were joined by faculty and administrators from Montclair State University and representatives from NJEA. Dumont and Paramus High School staffs were among the invited guests. Decisions were made at this retreat to attempt to establish an operational partner school and to form a steering committee to guide that work.

In many respects, this portrait focuses on the efforts of the principal of Dumont High School and the local association president to come to agreement on the conditions for establishing a partner school. In particular, it describes the experiences through which the

Association president came to lend her support to the effort. It also touches on the related issue of regionalization with Paramus High School and its teachers’ association.

If the president of the local teachers’ association were to become a proponent of the partner school, she needed to develop her own understanding of the concept. To that end, she attended a conference in Kennebunkport, Maine, in September 1996. The conference, sponsored by the Teacher Education Initiative of the NEA, encouraged educators to discuss, dissect, and investigate the concept of a partner school. Upon her return to Dumont, the president expressed a very positive disposition towards the idea and its possible benefits for the staff and students of Dumont High School.

The Association president and the high school principal agreed to the formation of a partner school committee that would represent teachers from all the curricular areas. This was done in order to communicate to their mutual “clientele” the benefits of participation in a partner school. Both the principal and the president thought that ongoing communication would be essential if the partner school concept were to move forward. By design, therefore, the partner school committee consisted both of active members of the DEA and other faculty members who had been active in the work of the NJNER.

As informal discussions between the principals of Dumont and Paramus High Schools continued, a need to convene a formal stakeholder’s meeting among the three potential partners became clear. Therefore, in October 1996, a one-day retreat involving personnel from Dumont and Paramus High Schools as well as administrators and faculty from MSU was conducted. The five principal areas of discussion were:

1. the context for the partner school project;
2. an operational definition of a partner school;

3. the needs, concerns, and questions raised in common by the participants with respect to the partner school concept;
4. the priorities which each stakeholder group identified with respect to the partner school concept;
5. the decisions which were collectively made by the participants with respect to subsequent activities.

A subsequent luncheon meeting with DEA building representatives and their president revealed that the following questions still needed to be answered by the principal and university administrators.

- (a) How would any agreement between the school and the university affect the current teachers' contract?
- (b) How would individual teachers' rights be protected?
- (c) Will university staff be viewed by the high school administration as the "experts," thus minimizing teacher expertise?
- (d) What additional benefits will accrue to the faculty and students of the high school by becoming a partner school?

In order to answer these questions, the Association president decided to observe and become more actively involved in Network activities that were similar to those of a partner school. Her first opportunity came when she was invited to speak with a class of MSU students who were taking a course at the high school entitled "Effective Teaching/Productive Learning," a requirement before commencing their student teaching. Also involved in the dialogue were the superintendent of schools and the district's curriculum coordinator. The president became absorbed in these discussions with

the preservice teachers and left the class wondering if perhaps she too had learned something about teaching from the experience.

A second opportunity for the president to observe the benefits of a partner school occurred when she sat in on luncheon workshops being presented by a MSU professor. This particular series of workshops concerned ways to help staff adjust to the requirements of a new bell schedule which extended periods by ten minutes but provided fewer meeting dates. She listened as faculty members discussed and exchanged information relative to solutions to the problem. After the third meeting, she began to participate in the discussions and found herself analyzing her own teaching methods and strategies. She took from these workshops new critical thinking activities to help her students learn to categorize and analyze information in a foreign language context. Slowly, she began to realize that participating in such seminars had practical advantages for her and her students.

On another occasion, the site coordinator for the NJNER was hosting an Initial Field Experience seminar for seven sophomores from MSU. This course initiated these students into many aspects of the profession that a teacher encounters on a daily basis. The president was invited to this session to discuss the Dumont Teachers' Association and why it exists. To her surprise, these students were very interested in the school's efforts to become a partner school and what role the Association would play. She explained that the Association's function would be to provide an atmosphere conducive to teacher training, staff development, and the enhancement of student learning. The president left the meeting with a heightened sense that she was helping these students to develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be a teacher.

Later that year, the president sat in on a meeting of the science department, which was also attended by several professors from MSU. She listened as her colleagues and the

university faculty shared instructional strategies and other items of mutual interest. She observed her fellow teachers as they eagerly discussed opportunities being offered by the university professors, such as field trips to observe science labs at Montclair State, visits to the MSU computer lab to view curriculum-related software, and the use of MSU science equipment at the high school. Once again, the president left the department meeting considering if such school-university partnerships could enhance student learning.

In February 1997, the president was chosen to be part of a five-member team that traveled to Phoenix, Arizona, to attend a national team meeting for all high schools participating in the Arthur Vining Davis Secondary Partner School Project. The other team members were the high school principal, a professor from MSU's College of Education and Human Services, a faculty member from the arts and sciences, and the curriculum coordinator from Paramus. It quickly became obvious that other states represented at the conference did not have the strong involvement of their teachers' associations as did the team from New Jersey. The president's attendance at the conference was viewed by many as somewhat of a novelty. She was repeatedly questioned by her colleagues from around the country as to how and why the Dumont and Paramus Education Associations were given such prominent roles in their schools' efforts to become a partner school.

A new theme discussed at the conference was that of the complexities of the change process in an educational setting. A partner school, the president learned, was not really a structure but rather more of a journey of constant renewal, changing and shifting its direction to meet the needs of its partners at any given time. The president now viewed the professors from MSU as her colleagues, not people who considered themselves superior to her because of their status in the educational hierarchy. Her opinions and expertise mattered to them so her feelings of value to the partner school endeavor continued to grow.

Upon her return home, the president drafted a document of assurance that the contractual rights and working conditions of every member of the Association would be protected and that their voices would be heard on any governance structure of the partner school. She then secured the approval of the NJEA field representative for the document and presented it to her Association building representatives. This Statement of Assurance was just the type of guarantee they were seeking in order to recommend the partner school concept to their constituents. Convinced that they could now "sell" the partnership to their colleagues, it was decided to put the issue to a formal vote in the spring.

The New Jersey State Department of Education, coincidentally, had been proposing new legislation that would require all public school teachers in the state to renew their teaching certificates every five years. Partner schools, referred to as professional development schools, were mentioned by name as a possible vehicle for satisfying such a requirement. With this information now available, the prospects of selling the partner school concept to the staff seemed better than ever.

In April 1997, the president was invited by the NEA to attend a meeting at Association headquarters in Washington, D.C. The purpose of the meeting was to meet with presidents and Association field representatives from other states to share experiences, benefits, and problems related to partner schools. The issues and situations varied from state to state, but everyone agreed that partner schools gave the profession and the union an opportunity to put everyone in a better light with the public while advancing the profession. The NEA restated its support for any local association's efforts to form such a partnership.

At Dumont, before the faculty vote, a final meeting was scheduled to clarify last-minute issues between the Association representatives, partner school committee members, and university personnel. A significant outcome of this meeting was a

request from the university to have the Association formulate a portrait of a University-Association-School Liaison. This portrait was written with input from all segments of the faculty. The portrait is one of an inclusive nature which could require more than one person to fit the description. It deals with such characteristics as a willingness to engage in dialogue on all issues; a respect for the equality, professionalism, and autonomy of all partners; and the acceptance of the need to continually evaluate the effectiveness of the project. This portrait is an obvious effort to encourage participation by a number of individuals in the partner school project. It met with the approval of university representatives. Thus, with all of the preliminary work completed, it was time for the faculty of Dumont High School to vote on its future.

A faculty meeting was held in May 1997, to which the dean of the College of Education and Human Services was invited as well as the Association's field representative. Both individuals addressed the faculty and restated their support for the partner school concept. Association building representatives then spoke about the possible benefits to be accrued through partnership with Montclair State University. They addressed issues such as the sanctity of the existing contract, the availability of graduate courses on site, and the creation of inservice workshops which could be helpful with the pending recertification initiative. With the endorsement of the Association, the membership voted 48-1 to become a partner school.

As the 1996-97 school year drew to a close, plans were made to celebrate Dumont High School's new status as a partner school the following fall. It was decided to conduct a formal signing ceremony involving representatives from the high school, district central office, university, and the Association. All faculty members of the high school would be invited as well as the press and NJEA staff.

All partners anticipate that those PDS activities in place before the signing ceremony will continue after the agreement

has been formalized. A graduate course, "Innovations in Teaching," will be taught in the fall of 1997 by a university professor at Paramus High School. This course will be available to teachers from Paramus and Dumont as part of the PDS program. It is hoped that in time such courses can be team-taught with university and high school staff. Plans have also been discussed to link the three schools electronically to facilitate communication and provide more opportunities for staff development. The four dimensions of reform, as stated earlier, will continue to guide the work of the PDS.

Plans are under way to revise the process by which student teachers are placed at Dumont High School by Montclair State University. It is anticipated that Dumont will be given the first selection of all student teachers in the pool of available students in a given semester. The partner schools have discussed the creation of several cohorts of university students, ranging from initial field students to student teachers, who will study both curriculum and methods courses at the high schools.

An early challenge for this new partner school will be to decide on a governance structure that will give all the concerned parties an equal voice. In turn, the ability of this group to communicate its decisions to its constituents in their respective institutions will significantly bear upon its success or failure. It is anticipated that the Dumont High School principal, Association president, and Site Coordinator, along with the MSU Liaison, will serve on the Governance Committee. When Paramus High School has officially become a PDS, a Regional Governance Committee will be created to include representatives from both high schools and Montclair State University. This group will decide, with input from their staffs, the nature of future PDS activities and the focus of staff development offerings.

Efforts to create a Regional Partner School with Paramus High School were dealt a setback in the fall of 1996 with the resignation of the Paramus principal. Although the momentum of the project slowed somewhat,

the staff of Paramus High School has maintained its interest and its developmental work with MSU. When the Paramus staff is further along in the partner school process, regionalization talks will continue.

### **Lessons Learned**

As a result of the events that will lead to the signing of an agreement between Montclair State University, the Dumont Education Association, and Dumont High School to create a partner school, several key lessons concerning the nature of educational change have evolved.

1. In states such as New Jersey with a strong collective bargaining history, the involvement of the local education association in any partnership for renewal is essential. Bringing it into the process at its inception has helped to limit the number of concerns regarding teachers' rights as protected by their contract. The support of Montclair State University for Dumont Education Association involvement has also been strong and constant. Treating the Association as an equal partner in the creation and governance of the partner school has elevated the DEA's commitment to staff development and encouraged more teachers to become involved in the effort.

2. Teachers must be convinced of the benefits for themselves and their students if they are to willingly participate in partner school activities. Several months ago, the New Jersey Department of Education began to campaign for new regulations that would require all public school teachers in the state to renew their professional certificates every five years. In one of NJDOE's written statements, the concept of a partner school was discussed as a possible vehicle by which staff development requirements could be met. This exciting possibility gave impetus to Dumont's efforts and provided staff with a tangible reason to actively participate in staff development activities provided under the

partner school umbrella.

3. The majority of teachers who supported the partner school concept did not necessarily do so initially to support the philosophy of simultaneous renewal. Their decision was based on more pragmatic issues such as recertification. The appeal of the Association to enlightened self-interest proved to be the most expeditious approach to securing the overwhelming support of the staff. It is hoped that, in time, all teachers will develop more of an appreciation for the benefits to their profession and students from partnership with the university.

4. As with most change efforts, the ability to communicate can only enhance a project's chances of success. Early in the process, those who supported the basic rationale for such a partnership were in a minority. They were perceived by some on the staff as elitists who were only interested in furthering their own careers and displaying little respect for their colleagues' professional opinions and skills. This misconception was due in part to a lack of communication between the education association and the NJNER. After several years of misunderstandings and failures to communicate, both parties realized that it was in their mutual interests to share information and provide honest, timely feedback to each other about what was being discussed by the faculty concerning the partner school and other NJNER activities.

5. An individual school's efforts to become a partner school cannot be successful without the tangible and visible support of the central office. Having a superintendent of schools who allows the building principal the freedom to pursue his vision and provides the resources to create it is critical to any such endeavor. Having stability in both leadership positions has proven to be an asset in the evolution of the partner school concept. Conversely, the change in leadership at Paramus High School has delayed the adoption of the partner school concept in that

building.

6. Efforts toward renewal can be adversely affected by clashes in personality, no matter how well intentioned the individuals involved may be. If the disagreements cannot be resolved, difficult decisions must be made so that the partner school project can move forward.

7. Creating a spirit of inquiry throughout the school can have a reinvigorating effect on teachers who have become conditioned to more traditional instructional strategies. It is possible to rekindle in these teachers the sense of moral purpose that brought them to education, provided they are given the time and resources to do so. This spirit of inquiry is contagious and can quickly transform the culture of a school.

8. Meaningful change within an educational setting takes time. If such reforms are to take hold and flourish, individuals must develop their own reasons for participating in those efforts and become change agents who actively support the concept and encourage others to join them. This process is best measured in years, not months.

9. Participants in a change project should not view the inevitable problems that occur when attempting to redefine the mission of a school as a negative or undesirable outcome. Such problems can lead to the forging of new and more productive relationships. An example of this lesson is the improved quality of the relationship that now exists between the high school principal and the president of the teachers' association.