

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

**Reflections on Practice Series no. 3
Center for Educational Renewal
University of Washington**

*Expanded and Updated
June 1999*

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FORT COLLINS PORTRAIT:

The Mountains We Climb Together: Fort Collins High School and Colorado State University Partnership

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The truth is that part of the essence of mountain climbing is to push oneself to one's limits. Inevitably this involves risk, otherwise they would not be one's limits. This is not to say that you deliberately try something you know you can't do. But you do deliberately try something which you are not sure you can do.

Woodrow Wilson Sayre: *Four Against Everest*. Quoted in *Gold Nuggets*, pg. 82.

This is a story of people learning and working together, of hiking up the steep slopes of educational challenges, of personal and institutional growth and change. It's the story of two institutions, both committed to educational excellence, and the mountains we have climbed together. It is, finally, the story of high school teachers and university faculty developing a vision of how to improve educational opportunities for all students.

The year that the faculty at Fort Collins High School voted to become a partner or professional development school (PDS) with the School of Education at Colorado State University—1995—was a year of dramatic change for both partners. It was the year the high school moved out of the “old Fort Collins High School,” out of the oldest high school in the city, a familiar brick hallmark in the center of town, into a state-of-the-art, modern structure on the eastern edge of the

city. It was also the year the Teacher Licensure Program underwent significant program change and preparation for a visit by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Two institutions in the midst of change, and out of this complex first semester emerged a partnership focused on improving education for all students.

Fort Collins High School

At the door of the “new” Fort Collins High School stands a 50-foot, modernistic tower representative of the traditional towers of the old FCHS building. The tower echoes the white peaks of the Rockies guarding our western vistas, the traditions of Fort Collins' oldest high school, expectations of success for students, and the message of community pride.

Its student population mirrors the urban population of the area, primarily educated, middle class university and professional families with smaller numbers of students from service industry or underemployed families. The cultural values of the school are deeply imbedded in the experienced and long-term high school faculty. Historically, the curriculum focus has been academic. Student test scores are consistently high, drop-out rates are exceptionally low (4.6 percent), and acceptance rates to further education include a large number (65 percent)

of graduating seniors.

These facts would seem to indicate that everyone at FCHS is happily trekking up the sides of educational mountains, that they are well equipped and in good physical and emotional condition. But are they? And does the mountain push their limits and challenge them to strive higher? Are students actively involved in their learning? Are students learning the skills and dispositions they will need to contribute to a productive and nurturing community in the future? Are we preparing thoughtful, competent, creative, and caring teachers? Are we preparing teachers who are ready for the challenges of the future? These are some of the questions the PDS Advisory Board strives to answer, some of the mountains that remain to be explored.

Climbing the Mountains

Living, as we do, in the shadow of the great Rocky Mountains, it makes sense to consider our educational endeavors through analogies of mountain climbing. For many, the mountain represents a goal, a peak to be climbed, a challenging adventure. Consider just the challenge of breathing at elevations above 10,000 feet. Or consider walking with a constant uphill tilt to your boots for hours, facing into strong mountain winds with snow or frozen rain beating down. The task can discourage the most motivated of us. What is surprising, then, is that so many of us not only attempt to climb the mountain, but that we do make it.

Getting to the top of the mountain can provide a startling surprise, for what we often find is people. People everywhere: perched on the rocks, tucked into crevasses, eating, drinking, swapping stories, picking out landmarks, remarking on the views, all celebrating a challenge met. Almost any time we climb, we encounter groups of hikers celebrating the glory of standing at the top, surveying the panoply of peaks and valleys, orienting themselves in an unfamiliar world, considering yet other mountains to climb and

other views to survey.

Education is much like mountain climbing. Our “trips” are often a series of educational challenges, uphill climbs littered with boulders, crevasses, and slippery slopes. The most successful of educators, like the most successful of mountain climbers, carries a pack of essentials and emergency rations. While on the hike, we frequently rummage around in our packs to pick out those items most appropriate for the situation. There are times when we do not have what we need to solve a particular problem – we are missing a resource: a tool, a skill, a map, or protective gear. Any good hiking guide will warn against hiking alone and remind us that those who climb with colleagues stand a better chance of accomplishing the goal because someone else often has what we are lacking. Sometimes this may take the form of a rescue; other times it is just an assist. But, whichever, it can make the difference between a trip enjoyed and a trip canceled. Just as in education, a team approach offers assurances that someone will have the skill or information needed to complete the task at hand.

In education, the goal reached, like the peak attained, is often difficult to define clearly. What appeared to be a peak from below may only be the shoulder of still another, higher peak beyond. There are many times when educators reach an anticipated goal only to find that there is more to be done. It seems that there is always more to be done. At that point, there is a need to reassess the situation, to look around, to gather more data, to decide whether it is wise to continue or whether it is best to stop and celebrate the current accomplishment. In some cases, we may feel the exhilaration of a job well done, and in others we may see only the dark side, the clouds and rain of educational progress. What we make of the view – how we assess our accomplishment – often depends on factors more personal than environmental. Such personal assessment takes into account our original intent, our energy level, our accessible resources, and even our partners. Climbing the peaks of

educational change is not a simple task, but like many of us who live in proximity to the mighty Rocky Mountains, we see, and we seek to climb.

Whatever the results of the hike, we will have learned something that may be useful next time. And we will be stronger!

Fort Collins as a PDS

Since becoming a professional development school in partnership with Colorado State University, faculty and administration members from both schools have taken many hikes together. We have negotiated the slippery slopes, encountered immovable objects, backtracked, reconnoitered, reassembled, and reached the tops of many high peaks. At times, we have taken the trail well traveled; at other times, we have plotted our own paths. At times we have traveled secure along the stream bed, and at others we have walked exposed above timberline.

Our first high peak was the year Fort Collins High School decided to become a partner school. It began simply, with the teaching and integration of the Teacher Licensure general methods and practicum courses on site. For this, our small group of hikers needed to recruit faculty to work with teacher candidates as match-up teachers and to join class sessions as guest presenters. We started with a very small group of interested high school faculty and one highly committed administrator; we ended the year standing on the peak with a somewhat larger group of interested faculty. At the end of that first year, we celebrated with dinner and focus group discussions to gather data on how the PDS was doing. Our view from this first peak was encouraging. The responses from faculty and teacher candidates were positive, the suggestions fruitful, the camaraderie supportive.

Year Two found us better equipped and ready for yet another ascent. In Year Two, we added professional development for Fort Collins High School teachers to our agenda

and, building on assessment information from the year before, offered reading- and writing-across-the-curriculum workshops to the entire high school staff. The workshops, aligned with one of the school goals, were led by in-house faculty and supported by the administration and grant money. Faculty continued to be involved in working with teacher candidates and in the general methods class. Each semester, a general methods class of twenty students was taught on site. Each teacher candidate was matched with a classroom teacher for two periods a day, on Tuesdays and Thursdays. A number of faculty volunteered to be presenters in the methods class, bringing the faculty involvement in PDS activities during the year to better than 60 percent. Our end-of-the-year dinner and focus groups provided opportunities for high school faculty, university faculty, and teacher candidates to reflect on the year's accomplishments and offer suggestions for improvement.

During the third year, we added a number of new peaks to climb: the additional challenge of inquiry, program assessment, increased communication, and expanded professional development. Inquiry was expanded beyond the focus groups of the past as we participated in a PDS Evaluation Project with the Colorado Partnership for Educational Renewal, surveying students, teacher candidates, student teachers, and high school and university faculty. A rocky crag we had been trying to climb for two years, called "communication," was finally scaled when one faculty member assumed the task of writing monthly newsletters containing interviews of faculty from each of the departments within the school. The university coordinator also published a newsletter on PDS activities, workshops, grant activities, and general "goings on."

Professional development attained two major peaks during this year. One was the involvement of a large number of teachers in readings and monthly professional conversations on "Schooling in a Democracy" led by the assistant principal. Another was a group of Collins faculty who investigated

their own roles in supporting the growth and learning of teacher candidates and student teachers in a mentoring class offered by the university coordinator. The university coordinator worked with the media center faculty and librarian to expand the use of web-based technology for teacher candidates and their match-up teachers. We ended the year once again by toasting our active partner teachers (about 75 percent of the Collins faculty), celebrating our accomplishments, proposing suggestions for improvement, and making plans for the coming year.

Year Four began with major alterations to the hiking team and new vistas to consider. For the first time since being a PDS, there was a significant change in the leadership of the high school, with three of the four administrators coming in new. However, the strength that existed on our Advisory Board along with the momentum of partnership activities throughout the school has sustained the program. The first task for the year was to help the new administrators become familiar with the partnership: what it was, how pervasive it had become at Fort Collins High School, and why that had happened. The education of future teachers through the methods class and practicum experiences and student teaching semester was the most visible of our accomplishments. The strength of our program completers was already well known by the new administrators, documented through the successes of new teachers hired from the program. The university coordinator and Collins art teacher developed a HyperStudio presentation for faculty on What is a PDS. Professional development activities for Collins teachers were developed during the first semester. Advisory Board members volunteered to lead faculty professional conversations based on scholarly readings on the topic of meeting the needs of all students. The major focus this fourth year is to consider carefully the confusing slopes of the truly democratic school—that is, how do we ensure an equitable education for all our students?

Education for ALL Students: Problems and Solutions

There is one major peak looming over our partner campuses at the present time; its name is diversity.

CSU has a mission to prepare teachers for a diverse world. Not all of the schools that hire our teacher candidates will have the same characteristics as Fort Collins High School. Not all schools have such a low drop-out rate (4.6 percent in 1997-98) or such a large number of students going on to further education or training. Not all schools have such an ethnically homogeneous population (94 percent white) or strong academic curriculum tradition. In *Educational Renewal*, John Goodlad proposes nineteen guiding principles (postulates) for professional development schools. Postulate 13 states: *Programs for the education of educators must be infused with understanding of and commitment to the moral obligation of teachers to ensure equitable access to and engagement in the best possible K-12 education for all children and youths* (Goodlad, 1994). FCHS, then, presents a challenge for university faculty trying to prepare teacher candidates for a diverse world of schools and students. How can we provide our teacher candidates with experiences working with diverse populations? How do we provide opportunities for them to develop the skills needed to work with different learners, different motivational levels, different needs, and different cultures? How do we do this in an exceptional, but significantly middle-class, white, suburban high school?

In an example of true partnership, these questions generated conversations and ideas from both partner institutions that have resulted in benefits to both.

The FCHS PDS Advisory Board identified a need to study and provide additional resources for the at-risk population. Although not large, the at-risk population is becoming more of an issue as a result of the changing demographics in the district. Faculty are concerned about the impact that being a high school dropout or unmotivated

low achiever has on both the student's future and on the community as a whole. A large number of FCHS students remain in this community, a community offering few employment opportunities for poorly educated young adults. FCHS teachers know they have an important role to play in both the current and the future scenarios of all students. The intersection of these concerns is the beginning of another partnership initiative and an example of how partnerships can benefit both parties while advancing educational opportunities for all students. For example, university faculty assisted FCHS teachers in the writing of the Arthur Vining Davis grant proposal, which provided some of the funding for a pilot program to offer support for disengaged and returning drop-out students. This program is called Graduation Realized for At-Risk Diploma Seekers (GRADS). The program provides one hour per day of in-school support and evening sessions for GRADS and their adult advocates.

In addition, opportunities for CSU preservice teachers to work with disengaged ("at-risk") students have been provided as part of their Educational Psychology field work. Last semester, for example, thirty-two preservice teachers spent twenty hours each working individually as tutors at FCHS. The high school students benefited not only from the academic tutoring but also from the personal relationships and support that developed. Preservice teachers benefited by learning how to connect with reluctant learners, nonmotivated students, and students at risk for dropping out. They also learned from observing the professional teaching strategies used by the classroom teacher.

John Goodlad and his colleagues have, at various times, proposed strategies and beliefs appropriate to assist preservice teachers in meeting the needs of all students: valuing cooperative, heterogeneous grouping and peer tutoring; assisting children to assume responsibility for their own learning as well as that of their peers; adjusting teaching strategies to the learning needs of students;

and providing classrooms with high expectations for all students' learning. (See Goodlad, 1994b, pp. 9-10.) To this end, experienced FCHS teachers work directly with teacher candidates in the general methods class. The experienced teachers help teacher candidates build deeper understandings of the differences between learners and of the strategies and dispositions that lead to student success. Teacher candidates work with high school student populations that include disadvantaged (Orland, 1994), disengaged, drop-out, and "at-risk" students—challenging the preservice teachers to think, plan, and teach beyond their own learning preferences.

The basis for our work with the preservice teachers is the work of Howard Gardner (1993) and the concept of multiple intelligences. Teacher candidates investigate their own intelligences using the MI scale. They then explore various strategies appropriate for different intelligences and apply them to their own lesson planning assignments and teaching. High school teachers will also provide workshops on specific strategies for working with disengaged students. In return, teacher candidates will provide tutorial assistance and personal support to high school students.

Conclusion

Two institutional partners are like two hikers, where one carries the tent poles and the other carries the tent; each has something to contribute and each benefits from the other. Fort Collins High School benefits from the presence of preservice teachers in the building who provide assistance and personal attention to students. It is enriched by the additional ideas and energies, the interest, support, and enthusiasm of preservice teachers and university faculty. The Colorado State University Teacher Licensure Program benefits from the expertise of practitioners, from opportunities for field experiences, and from the enrichment that comes from practical experiences with the dilemmas of

real-life teaching. The Fort Collins High School and Colorado State University partnership has grown rapidly to become a rich resource for both institutions. As agendas change, as we climb higher into the mountains and take on new challenges, the partnership offers support never before available to either.

Our professional development school is a partner school that develops professionally to better serve its clients and its internal and external communities. It is not a laboratory for the school of education, not just an “interesting” place to study, not merely a site for university field experiences. It is a viable and important source of knowledge and a significant resource in educational renewal. Four years of partnership history have demonstrated the value of a strong, working partnership that enhances the lives of all it touches and enriches the education provided to high school students and preservice teachers alike. We celebrate the successes of this partnership and look forward to the next rewarding mountain hike together.

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