

**PORTRAITS OF SECONDARY PARTNER SCHOOLS
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MONROE PORTRAIT:

Monroe High School and Miami University: Balancing Reality and Reciprocity

Cathy Hamilton, Monroe High School

Monroe High School is one of two high schools serving the Middletown-Monroe City School District, an urban district in southwestern Ohio, almost equidistant between Cincinnati and Dayton. The district serves approximately ten thousand students, including one thousand in our high school. Our school facility is very old and has been the focus of much frustration in the community because it is costly to maintain. Forty percent of the district student body deals with poverty issues, with our specific building serving students from three federal housing developments and five mobile home parks. Many of our students come from homes where formal education has not been traditionally valued, with 53 percent of the parents not having a high school diploma. Our challenge is to create a learning environment that fosters critical thinking and to bring parents into viable partnerships with us as we attempt to better prepare their children for the global community. To achieve these lofty goals, we believe we must create a welcoming environment that reaches out to the diverse community that we serve.

With that challenge in mind, we sought partnership with Miami University (MU), located about forty miles from us. To us, a partnership with Miami University provides an opportunity for better student teacher preparation, an opportunity for continued staff development for their professors and our faculty, and an opportunity for our students to have fuller experiences. Originally, partnerships with Miami University brought a university professor to the partner schools on a regular basis, liaisons between the two. Unfortunately, by the time we arrived as

a partner school, professors were no longer taking on that role due to a lack of funding to compensate the professors who did this bridging. A couple of professors tentatively agreed to be liaisons but then backed out because of other career demands. The principal of Monroe High School, Cathy Hamilton, took on the liaison role herself. While this may not be the orthodox approach, it allowed the partnership to flourish. Randy Flora, partnership director at the Institute for Educational Renewal (IER) at Miami University, and his assistant Nancy Yoder were most encouraging of Monroe High's initiatives. Last spring, a number of professors, while not taking on any long-term roles, visited our school and were interested in our efforts to conduct a research-based high school.

As of this writing, Miami has expressed interest in Monroe High becoming an official development site. The diverse student population found at Monroe provides an excellent mentoring opportunity for student teachers and a great collaborative field for both the high school and university faculty members. Currently, half of Monroe's certificated staff has been trained in Pathwise, a mentoring program sanctioned by the state of Ohio and taught by Miami University to help prepare veteran teacher mentors who work with first-year teachers. In November, partnering with Miami University and Talawanda High School, Monroe High successfully wrote an Entry-Year Teacher Grant, sponsored by the Ohio State Department of Education. The four domains found in this document speak to organizing content knowledge for student learning,

creating an environment for student learning, teaching for student learning, and teacher professionalism. Right now, all eight of Monroe's new teachers are being mentored by a veteran teacher who has been trained at Miami University in the Pathwise mentorship program. In total, twenty-one members of our staff have completed the Pathwise Program. MU's training was free to us, as they shared another grant with area schools. Speaking a common language is making a real difference in our building and among our area partners, including the university.

The partnership between Monroe and Miami University began with a "slow courtship," in the words of Dr. Flora. Our principal has been part of an authoring team of a partnership between Miami and another school in a different district. She was well aware of the power of collaboration and believed that our school could only benefit from a relationship with the university. However, the IER was no longer seeking written proposals. Instead, the university sought action partnerships that would allow the two entities to work together, sizing up the effectiveness of the relationship in reality. If the various projects shared between the two proved productive, the process of formalizing a partnership would then begin.

We are in the third year of our partnership. Five years ago, Monroe High School invited, Alan Frager, a professor in the School of Education and Allied Professions, to come to our building to teach his Reading Methods class on site (fifteen collegiate students). Dr. Frager was provided a classroom for instructing his students, who came to our school from Oxford twice a week. He taught strategies for increasing reading levels. We assigned each of his students to one of our high school students whose reading level was below the appropriate level. Dr. Frager monitored his students' tutoring approach to our students' reading needs during the hour following his formal instruction; then, each of his students returned on a different day to tutor our students, individually, for another hour. This project was a wonderful concept in action—

university students were enhancing their own skills while helping our students to increase theirs. This project was a success from its inception and continues to this day. Alan partnered with us to the benefit of his students and ours.

It was Alan Frager who suggested to us that we establish a formal relationship with Miami University, even if the format for such a partnership appeared laborious to us. Our principal's earlier experience with a university partnership brought enthusiasm from her; she and another educator, Mary Jo Hyatt, attended an informational meeting hosted by Randy Flora and other Miami professors. From that meeting, the two joined several other public school educators in helping Miami's IER write a grant. The successful completion of the grant was our first official collaborative project.

From those beginnings, we participated in an absolutely wonderful year-long project. Six of Monroe's staff were official hosts to three committees, with our entire staff invited to attend at will. One committee dealt with integrated curriculum, another studied alternative scheduling, and a third spent a great deal of time studying the topic of democracy in the public school. Each of these committees was attended by our people, by educators from ten other partnership schools, and by representatives from the university. Two of the three committees presented their findings at an area "Linking Conference," sponsored by the university and several partnership schools. Monroe High School has representation at regular IER meetings and in the Associates' Program.

Our participation in the above activities has proved more than academic—it has helped instigate changes in our approach to how we deal with students.

We have analyzed our actions in terms of the moral dimensions of teaching. Knowing that common sense is not always common, we have, nonetheless, looked to the common sense that a quality school truly internalizes the concepts of stewardship of schools, access to knowledge, nurturing pedagogy, and a caring staff. To bring these ideas into

practice, we have worked to offer our faculty opportunities to network with others and among themselves. These are no longer “new” concepts, but rather are common practices among our staff.

We have taken observable steps to become a community of learners. Collectively, we have studied the writings of Goodlad, Sizer, Schlecty, Canady, and Fullan, among others. We successfully petitioned our district to allow us site-based status. While the central office has had difficulty in truly moving from a top-down paradigm, our staff is totally committed to seeking more effective instruction through collaboration among themselves and sister schools. A steering committee has created next year’s master schedule that incorporates block scheduling as an alternative to traditional scheduling. This initiative is a direct result of a study done with the partnership consortium. Our students engage in four 90-minute blocks of instruction daily. Studied over time, both by our own staff internally and in collaboration with staff from the university and the four partner schools, block scheduling reduces student loads for our teachers, which fosters better teacher-student relationships and allows for greater partnering with parents and guardians in our district. The schedule also allows students to focus on the selected courses, thus enabling their learning. We utilized our partnership with Miami to network with other schools who were involved in the block and to co-write grants that would provide for increased staff development for faculty.

Professor Yoder secured a mini-grant to facilitate a journal workshop for several teachers as they moved from traditional approaches to block scheduling. Her encouragement has been powerful for the staff. Though we were already experimenting with our approach to special education students, the year-long discussion about who should be served by public schools led us to truly “get out of the box” about how we approach students who have such obstacles to learning. We began inclusion with our own faculty, taking the labels off our special

education staff and allowing them to become team teachers in the curriculum. Our team-taught dyad of math and science spurred success for students who would not have ventured near algebra in the traditional format. The integration of these two subjects, along with the use of computers and an outdoor science lab, has led these courses to win first place twice in the last three years in the Technology Fair hosted by the Miami University-Middletown campus. The teams did include special education students, not identified as such but simply as one more component of a skilled team that was “up to the challenge.”

Our approach to meeting the needs of students who are not at “grade level,” for whatever reason, has led our teachers to be acknowledged by the State Department of Special Education as groundbreakers. Our program has become a visitation site for area schools, and some members of our staff have conducted seminars on the concept of inclusion for northern universities and the local Special Education Regional Resource Center (SERRC). We hope that Miami University’s Special Education Department will take a closer look at the approach. This fall, after a long hiatus, Miami University placed a special education student teacher with our school. Wright State University, on the other hand, sent us a number of special education student teachers prior to our moving to the inclusion approach, but we have not had one from Wright State since our adoption of this change.

The inclusion approach is a matter of attitude, first of all: all students should take part in the creation of the school community. That community does not form in pull-out scenarios or in segregated classrooms. Our program has led to measurable improvement in academic work, reduced disciplinary referrals, and greater involvement for previously excluded students. (This past year, the student body selected a special education student as vice president of the junior class. Another special education student trained to be a very effective peer mediator. These opportunities and others like

them would not have happened had these students not been a true part of the student population and become known to their peers.) We come closer to democratic attitudes in education when we practice equality of opportunity in the classroom. Miami University has had several professors in our building to observe this concept. We have approached the math and science departments of Miami about hooking up with our inclusion math/science program via the Internet. Miami students could practice lesson design for our students; Monroe students could conduct the experiments at pond sites, transmitting their findings to the MU campus, fine-tuning their technical skills while learning integrated math and science. Miami is interested.

Miami has placed math, English, science, and social studies student teachers in our building. These young professionals bring energy and enthusiasm to the building as they join a "veteran" staff in conducting action research and integrating it into our action. These college students learn about alternative scheduling, as we did. They attend staff meetings with us. They work in the inclusion setting that has garnered a great deal of respect. They attend parent meetings and participate in intervention assistance teams.

While some professors still cling primarily to a traditional student teaching approach, we argue, with at least partial success, that student teachers would be better served in a team environment rather than in the isolation model that generally accompanies secondary classrooms. Our teachers were asked to begin the student teaching experience as "lead teachers," gradually turning over control to the student teachers but still continuing as a collaborative partner. We believe our student teachers gain greater confidence and skill through this collaboration. The principal also meets with the student teachers periodically, giving an opportunity for them to voice questions, concerns, and suggestions.

Our school has been most willing to partner with Miami. The willingness shows

in the above shared commitments and in various grantwriting initiatives. The Arthur Vining Davis Secondary Partner School Award from the Institute for Educational Inquiry gave Monroe High School some funding for staff development but, more importantly, it increased our networking opportunities. Traveling to New Orleans for the Secondary Partner School Project Team meeting (in February 1998) was wonderful for several reasons. We had begun our educational renewal officially seven years before with the beginning of our study of effective schools and the entry of proficiency exams in Ohio. A year later, a formal study group read Sizer's *Horace's School* and Goodlad's *A Place Called School*. Four-and-a-half years later, hearing John Goodlad personally advocate these dreams for today's schools was balm to our spirit. We know "we have not controlled the weather, but we certainly directed the sail," and our staff and students are better for it. We think Miami University is, too.

We at Monroe High School are committed to continuing collaboration with area high schools and universities. Isolation breeds too much "wrong thinking." Together we can be more effective in assisting both of our learning communities.