

**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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TRAVELERS REST PORTRAIT:

Travelers Rest High School and Furman University: A Partnership on the Edge

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Twenty-two miles north of Travelers Rest High School (TR), just on the edge of Greenville County and less than a mile from the North Carolina state line, Larance's mother calls him at 4:15 a.m. He has to put feed out for his cows and then catch the school bus at 5:10 a.m. He won't be home until after dark.

Eight miles south of the school, just on the edge of downtown Greenville, South Carolina's third largest city, Sheneka plays with her baby and gives him a final spoonful of cereal before she joins her friends in raucous banter as they huddle in front of their project's recreation building and await their 7:15 a.m. school bus.

Two miles east of TR, just on the outer edge of the town's limits, in a modest, middle-class subdivision, Rebecca crawls into the car with her mom, a teacher at the high school, and they rush to make her 7:30 a.m. early bird class.

Three miles west of the school, just on the edge of a 300-acre horse farm whose green, rolling hills, completely surrounded by white wood fence, stretch toward the Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance, Jessica leaves her twenty-room mansion, a gift to Furman University for the president's family, and rushes to her car to make it to school before the 8:30 a.m. bell.

Travelers Rest High School is one of

fourteen high schools in Greenville County. In some ways, TR is a typical high school. Test scores have traditionally ranked near the middle of most data profiles presented by the district. The school's uniqueness and its source of pride stem from the diverse student population. The four vignettes above each represent approximately one quarter of the school's population: rural students, many of whom must ride long distances and who proudly claim to be "rednecks"; inner-city housing project students and other low income students, who are bused in; middle class, local students; and upper-middle-class, high-income, white-collar family students.

The socioeconomic diversity provides many challenges that have been accepted by both the faculty and students, producing an exciting school and a close-knit community. The diversity of the population and success in building a community makes Travelers Rest an excellent environment for preservice teachers.

Furman University is an independent, liberal arts college that is transforming itself into a "new liberal arts college." The university's vision is to ground its curriculum in the humanities and arts and sciences, and to become more professionally oriented by emphasizing engaged learning opportunities within and external to classes. Consistent with the university's new vision, the Education Department is dedicated to preparing teachers as reflective leaders and scholars in a democratic society. The Department offers courses and professional experiences that guide students through philosophical, sociological, and historical

discourse, as well as through current trends in teaching and learning. Community- and school-based internships are fully integrated into the academic instruction.

The Challenge

Furman University's teacher education program prides itself on the field experiences it provides for its teacher candidates. These field experiences are significant for any teacher candidate but are especially needed for the Furman students. Furman students who, for the most part, come either from upper-middle class backgrounds and elite, private secondary schools or from public secondary schools where they were socially isolated because of the tracking imposed by their high academic achievement, need early and frequent opportunities to get to know students from diverse backgrounds before their internships begin. Furman needs a site with quality instruction and a diverse student population to provide experiences with students who are significantly different from the teacher candidates and are more representative of who the preservice teachers will teach once they are certified.

In addition to providing teacher candidates with experiences in the real world, the Education Department seeks to keep faculty active in public schools. The university's strategic plan, "Furman 2001: A Community of Engaged Learning Committed to Developing the Whole Person," promotes learning that "requires professors who see teaching as a form of conversation and collaboration." In order to be most effective and authentic when preparing preservice teachers and to be able to engage students in conversations, all professors who teach preservice teachers must be involved in the schools and understand their needs. Faculty who are active in the schools will be better able to prepare the next generation of teachers.

Traveler's Rest faces many of the same dilemmas as other high schools. Three main challenges stand out and are being addressed.

First, the school's diversity and size of the community served by the school have created barriers to solidarity and vigorous support from the community. Second, standardized test scores consistently fall near the district average—sometimes slightly lower—and below national averages, and have kept the school from meeting standards during this first year of strict accountability imposed by the district.

The third barrier relates to the faculty. The faculty and staff are much less diverse than the student population. Most are long-term employees and many are members of the community (25 of the 75 faculty and staff have had or will have a son or daughter who attends the school). Sixty percent will be able to retire in five years. It is not always easy to motivate faculty members to participate in renewal. For example, during an in-service day before the start of school in 1998, principal Harvey Choplin and the faculty in-service committee collected the entire faculty and thirteen Furman University teacher interns on two buses, and for more than two hours they toured all of the geographically diverse areas where TR students live: Larance's remote mountain farm, Sheneka's project apartments, Rebecca's middle class subdivision, and Jessica's mansion surroundings. For a number of faculty and for the student interns, the experience was a boost to their enthusiasm for knowing more about students as individuals. For some of the faculty, the experience was a boring chore, another one of those "ridiculous in-services designed to keep us from our real jobs." Here is the major professional difference among members of the Travelers Rest faculty: there are those who energetically seek new ways to know their students and community and find ways to improve learning, and those who insist that traditional ways are best.

Both institutions have challenges and needs that can be overcome through the partnership. At TR, by addressing the third barrier and making renewal an ongoing process that is accepted by the faculty, the first two barriers can be overcome. A strong, committed community and an excited,

capable faculty will be able to provide the curriculum to help the students achieve better test scores and be more successful in the world after graduation. Furman can help provide the professional development as well as provide models to spark the renewal. The partnership will allow Furman to provide teacher candidates with the range of experiences that will better equip them to be successful in their future classrooms. In addition, the involvement of faculty in the high school will keep the faculty in touch with the changing high school student population and the innovations of practicing teachers.

A Partnership Begins

Furman University's collaboration with the Greenville School District began in 1936 when the Education Department was formed. Six years ago, a small group of faculty and administrators attended a restructuring conference at Furman University. About the same time, Furman selected Travelers Rest High, its neighbor almost on the edge of its campus, as its secondary professional development school. These two events signaled the beginning of slow, sometimes painful, tedious, and haphazard progress toward productive change. Travelers Rest has made a commitment to teacher education at Furman, and Furman has made a commitment to work with Travelers Rest to improve the school as a setting for its faculty and students to observe, participate, and grow professionally. In this cooperative effort, the two institutions have combined resources in mutually beneficial activities. Examples of the cooperation thus far include the following:

- Faculty from both institutions have become more involved in the daily life of the other school.
- TR faculty members have participated as guest consultants in education classes, supervised teaching interns, and served on committees to advise the Education

Department.

- Furman arts and sciences faculty have taught AP classes at TR, taught professional development workshops, and served as guest speakers in classes.

- Furman teacher candidates have conducted observations at TR as part of an introductory foundations course, have engaged in weekly journal exchanges with TR students as part of the secondary methods course, interviewed and observed teachers at TR during secondary methods (which meets at TR), and often complete their teaching internships at TR.

- Furman and TR have participated in grant writing activities, including a \$10,000 GTE grant, a \$300,000 federal technology grant, and the Arthur Vining Davis Secondary Partner School Project.

- For five years, Travelers Rest has sponsored dinner meetings for Furman education faculty, student interns, cooperating teachers, administrators, and district personnel. During these events, participants have discussed trends and issues in the profession.

- Furman faculty and administration provided support of time, research, and advice during a particularly embittered struggle between the school, elements of the community, and the board of education when Travelers Rest decided to change to the four-by-four block scheduling model.

Throughout the six-year partnership, Furman and Travelers Rest have recognized that there are weaknesses that impede maximum benefit to both institutions. The largest obstacle has been a lack of sustained effort to develop a clear vision, mission, or goals. While both institutions have enjoyed singular, mutual successes, the overall purpose and focus of the partnership has not been developed and, therefore, is not apparent to all stakeholders. Without a clear vision, there is no clear evaluation of the partnership; therefore, no results have been available to influence decision making. Without data and a clear vision, two

difficulties have emerged.

The first difficulty involves released time. Released time for working on the partnership has been limited for Furman educators and has been nonexistent for Travelers Rest faculty; therefore, leadership in each of the three elements (Furman arts and sciences faculty, Furman education faculty, and Travelers Rest faculty) has been provided voluntarily. Much more time designated exclusively for the partnership must be made available.

Related to the first difficulty has been the lack of school district support. The Greenville County School District has not actively supported the partnership with funds or personnel beyond one district office employee who has shown interest and attended some meetings.

Benefits, Goals, and Activities of the Partnership

The major goals of this partnership center on continuous renewal and the involvement of more TR and Furman faculty as well as teacher candidates and TR students. To help accomplish this goal, the project will focus on multiple intelligences and interdisciplinary teaching. This will provide the needed focus that has been lacking. Potential products include the development of a one-week, schoolwide interdisciplinary Learning Fair, the development of interdisciplinary units for existing courses, and the development of new interdisciplinary courses. The fair, units, and courses will provide more opportunities for university faculty to participate in the high school, center professional development at both institutions on the principles of multiple intelligences, encourage cooperation among the academic departments at the high school and university, offer more learning opportunities for both students, model effective instruction and curriculum design for teacher candidates, and design a model program that might be emulated by other schools in the district. Specific projects to be undertaken this calendar year include the

following:

- Furman faculty, teaching interns, and facilities have been and will be a vital part of the planning, development, and implementation of a one-week, interdisciplinary Learning Fair, with the theme "Travelers Rest: Who We Are and Where We're Going," to be held in the spring of 1999.

- A Furman Education Department professor is developing an astronomy course that will be taught at Travelers Rest High for Travelers Rest students in the fall of 1999. The course, integrating literature, mythology, and other sciences, will serve as a model for interdisciplinary instruction.

Conclusion

Exciting things are happening at Travelers Rest and Furman. Six years of partnership have made a difference. This process has brought the school to the threshold of a time when it has the opportunity to make extraordinary growth. In addition to the singular successes Furman and Travelers Rest have enjoyed during the six years of partnership, there have been overall, general results that have and will continue to mutually benefit the two institutions. Students from both schools have benefited from improved teaching methods and from engaging in dialogue with one another. Educators from both institutions have gotten to know each other much better professionally and, in many cases, personal relationships have developed. Much less do the high school teachers see university professors as far removed and professionally occupying some remote "ivory tower." They see that their colleagues in the university are similarly frustrated with most of the same issues that concern them: bureaucracy, excessive demands on their time, poorly motivated students, politics, and on and on. Likewise, the university personnel have had far more opportunities to see theory in practice, to learn first hand of the day-to-day,

noninstructional demands that frustrate teachers and impede successful teaching. In some cases, because of dialogue with Travelers Rest teachers, university professors have re-thought the curriculum in their courses and considered addressing issues that could provide more practical training for their soon-to-be teachers.

The Travelers Rest/Furman partnership stands on the edge of a new century and a new stage in its ongoing renewal process. With sustained efforts to sharpen and define its vision and goals, the partnership will soon enjoy quality attainment that clearly distinguishes it as far beyond the ordinary.

Jessica looks over the registration packet for next year that she received today. Astronomy! She had met that cool Furman professor who was coming to Travelers Rest to teach the course. She had already convinced three of her friends to take it with her.

Larance rides home in the late afternoon. His mind is on math class. Today he learned that an engineer from a major building project, not two miles from his home, has developed a web page of math problems just for his class. Two neat Furman students who have also worked on the project with his teacher will ride with his class to the project in a couple of weeks. They'll drive right by his house. This course is going to be okay.

Sheneka holds a small package in her hand as she rides the bus toward her project home. She doesn't trust it in her backpack, but she does show it to a few, close friends. Today her teacher gave it to her and told her that her Furman writing partner from last semester had sent it to her for her baby. "Sandy sure was nice," Sheneka thinks. "I wrote her some things I've never told anyone else."

Rebecca gets in the car with her mom after school and chatters away about her committee meeting for the spring Learning Fair. She's going to work in the community organizations booth with a Furman professor, who also serves as a volunteer fireman, and with a Furman student who works for a halfway house for mentally handicapped adults in Travelers Rest. "They're cool," she tells her mom.