

**PORTRAITS OF SECONDARY PARTNER SCHOOLS
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WAKEFIELD PORTRAIT:

Celebrating Our Place: A Portrait of Wakefield Community School and Wayne State College

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The Wayne State College/Wakefield Community School partnership began with a decision by Wayne State College to join the Nebraska Network for Educational Renewal (NeNER). It has been deepened by its subsequent involvement in the Arthur Vining Davis Secondary Partner School Project, a competitive grant initiative orchestrated by the Institute for Educational Inquiry for settings within the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER). We intend to describe the partnership via this “portrait.” In other words, through the stories that follow, we will give the reader a picture of this partnership—a picture of its beginning, of its present state, and of a future strongly suggested by developments to date.

There are a few preliminary remarks, however, that will help the reader grasp the sense of excitement that permeates the Wayne State-Wakefield partnership. Clearly, the agenda of the NNER has been the primary catalyst to the development of the partnership, but that agenda has been complemented, with very positive results, by our joint commitment to, and participation in, a smaller initiative called School at the Center. This is a Nebraska project funded in part by the Annenberg Rural Challenge, a nonprofit, grantmaking agency dedicated to the proliferation of “genuinely good, genuinely rural schools.”

School at the Center believes that curricular and instructional decision-making should be at least partially determined by the quality of the contribution it makes to the

vitality of the school’s community. This belief has been a source of powerfully impactful curricular units at Wakefield Community School. Annually, a week-long “Wakefield Institute” gives students an opportunity to share the significance and the depth of their learning with stakeholders from all segments of the Wakefield community. This commitment to the study of traditional school subjects through the lens of the immediate place, we believe, has added a great deal to individual academic achievement while simultaneously creating a bond between the community and its youth. The emerging community orientation to the way Wakefield does business—and a similar orientation taking root in teacher education programs at Wayne State College—was the impetus for us to call this portrait “Celebrating Our Place.”

Since place is important to us, we will provide a brief sketch of our place here. Wakefield is a town of 1,200 in northeast Nebraska, just ten miles east of the town of Wayne and Wayne State College. One of the nation’s largest egg processing plants is located in Wakefield, and recently it has attracted a large number of Hispanic employees. The school population of 229 in grades 7 through 12—is about 18 percent Hispanic. The influx of this population has not been smooth. A sizable portion of the white population in the community resents the Hispanic presence and especially the need for ESL teachers in the school budget. Still, circumstances are not nearly as bad as elsewhere, and the school board seems

genuinely committed to providing the best education possible for ALL students.

Wayne State College, formerly Nebraska Normal College, is a comprehensive, four-year residential campus with a long history of preparing teachers – especially rural teachers – for the state of Nebraska. About 4,000 students are currently enrolled, with almost 25 percent of that total seeking certification in either elementary, secondary, or special education. The town of Wayne is a regional hub in a largely rural, agriculturally dominated region of the state. At a mere 5,000 residents, the town of Wayne is one of the largest in northeastern Nebraska.

Many of the communities in this corner of the state have suffered severe strain due to state and national agricultural policy premised on maximizing production. Throughout the 1980s and again very recently, the state has lost large numbers of family farms. As the farmers leave the land, downtown businesses close, real estate values fall, and any chance of attracting industry becomes hopelessly remote. Almost as if they were working in tandem, educational policy has encouraged school consolidation (and community disintegration) with funding incentives that reward big schools.

While this bleak picture is rendered tolerable – sometimes even desirable – by shallow talk of a mysterious force called “progress,” or by blind faith in the ostensibly inherent goodness of global economics, the injustice in these circumstances has added fuel to the partnership by inserting purpose and resolve into the curriculum, both at Wayne State and at Wakefield.

What follows are three stories which, we believe, paint a picture of this partnership. Embedded in “A Principal’s Tale” is a way of thinking that has guided much of what has gone on at Wakefield Junior/Senior High School over the past five years, everything from professional development for staff to the assessment of student learning. There one will also find a deep commitment to school-based research designed to help the education professionals at Wakefield solve the problems that beset their school and their community.

Additionally, the reader will be able to piece together the historical developments that point to the future Wakefield and Wayne State College are determined to create.

In “A Teacher’s Tale,” the reader can get a sense of the way the partnership has positively affected both K-12 students at Wakefield and future teachers at Wayne State. Further, this story provides a first-hand account of how the various initiatives undertaken at Wakefield touched the professional lives of many teachers. The commitment exhibited by this teacher suggests that there is a grassroots commitment to the Arthur Vining Davis initiative and the larger agendas of the NeNER and School at the Center.

“A Dean’s Tale” discloses the tight link between teacher education at Wayne State and the partnership activities undertaken at Wakefield. The interactivity between the two entities is symbiotic – it really does point to simultaneous renewal as something imminently possible – even in the face of potentially debilitating problems such as dramatic leadership turnover and a statewide effort to “standardize” the educational endeavor.

A Principal’s Tale

I accepted my first principalship five years ago. We took a leap of faith from our home of 25,000 to a small rural community of 1,200 in northeastern Nebraska. I was hired at 11:00 p.m. one night when the Wakefield Board of Education was taking a break from their monthly meeting. I will never forget that call. I could hear the excitement in the background when I said that I would drive up the next day and sign the contract. In the back of my mind, I thought this would be a place to get a few years of experience before I would move on to something “bigger and better.” The first semester was turbulent. It was quite apparent that I was going to need to withstand a hazing process. I quickly established my reputation as a “strict” administrator. During the first semester, I

had regular chat with my mentor, Kent Mann, the principal of a 1,200-student high school in central Nebraska. Kent was a person that I deeply admired during my teaching career, and I sought him out when I needed to do an administrative internship. I guess that I have a habit of taking leaps of faith.

I spent a year working with Kent on a weekly basis. I wanted to see how he interacted with teachers, kids, and parents. I also wanted to see how he managed the crises that were before him nearly every day in this large high school. I resigned my teaching position and signed up for the internship. I knew that being female in a male dominated occupation in a conservative state would be very difficult. My experience, I believe, gave me the preparation and stamina for the 'hazing' period at Wakefield and provided a foundation that I will undoubtedly draw upon for years to come.

Toward the end of the first semester of my second year, I had a telephone call from Diane Alexander, then dean of the School of Education at Wayne State College. She wanted to set up a time to visit with our soon-to-be-retired superintendent, Derwin Hartman, and myself. At our meeting, Dr. Alexander and Ms. Connie Funk, the director of partner schools, described a new development in Wayne State's teacher education program, one that required our participation. They called the program "Partners in Education," and it revolved around an additional twenty-five hours of preservice teacher time in the schools. Mr. Hartman was very concerned about my workload and was hesitant for me to take on another challenge. Diane and Connie assured us that they would do all of the administering of the program and that the students could be counted on to make valuable contributions to the classroom. This program proved to be a real asset to our students and to our staff. Having been a product of an internship, I supported it wholeheartedly. There were small challenges but many celebrations. We continued to develop our relationship with the preservice teachers and their instructors. The next fall, there was a visit from

representatives of the NNER. They asked administrators from the partner schools to attend a short meeting. Dick Clark and Phyllis Edmundson of the Institute for Educational Inquiry asked many questions about Wakefield's relationship with Wayne State College. I remember feeling inadequately prepared for this meeting. I did not realize what it meant to be a partner school. I began to see that a much larger picture existed and began reading more of the publications coming out of the IEL.

The next fall, I had a phone call from Dean James O'Hanlon of University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Dr. O'Hanlon asked me about my future in Nebraska, my level of education, and my interest in partner schools. I had been nominated by Carolyn Linster of Wayne State College to represent Nebraska in the Institute for Educational Inquiry's Leadership Associates' Program. I graciously accepted after convincing Mr. Hartman that the new superintendent would manage the school just fine during the few days that I would miss for the training.

The year-long professional development with the Institute of Educational Inquiry was overwhelming to me. I worked my heart out preparing for each session. I looked for every opportunity to read, even during basketball games when I was ostensibly supervising kids. I enjoyed my cohort a great deal, but the focus seemed very centered on higher education. The context was not familiar to me and the content was difficult to understand. At one point, I broke down in tears. I left the meetings and returned to my room to pull myself together.

Despite all of my frustration, I was beginning to learn a lot. It gradually became apparent to me that a strong relationship had existed for decades between Wayne State College and Wakefield Community. I decided to do my inquiry project on simultaneous renewal in a rural setting. John Goodlad encouraged me to contact Paul Theobald, a Leadership Associate from a previous cohort, to assist me. I had heard of his work through some of our involvement with the Nebraska School at the Center Project. I completed the

IEI Leadership Associates' Program. We met four times over the course of the year. I guess by the fourth time, I was more confident and understood the mission.

My inquiry project was very helpful to the school district. By studying simultaneous renewal in a rural setting, I was able to connect it to the innovative work we were trying to accomplish in rural education through the School at the Center Project. The big picture had finally become clear to me. Our school had begun to gel around a sense of mission and, further, it had begun to consciously guide itself toward it. This seemed to me to be very much what the concept of stewardship was all about: stewardship of our community, our students, and future teachers. We have the luxury of being small. Smallness creates an environment in which change can make a deep impact in a short amount of time.

During my third year as principal, Marilyn Hadley of University of Nebraska, Kearney, and I became the trailblazers for the Nebraska Network for Educational Inquiry. We worked together with Wilma Smith and Donna Hughes of the IEI to create the first and second leadership cohorts in the Nebraska Network. I learned much from having to assist with the teaching of these ideas. Most importantly, I became more closely acquainted with faculty at Wayne State College. I have found this relationship to be helpful in creating opportunities to work together. A relationship that began with increasing the numbers of hours that preservice teachers spend in the classroom blossomed into fulfilling some critical needs within the Wakefield district.

For example, this year, a potentially disastrous situation occurred in our school with the illness and eventual medical leave of our Industrial Technology teacher. We were left with a substitute who was a talented teacher but did not have the technological and curricular knowledge to handle the position. When I became aware of this challenge, I immediately enlisted the support of Greg Vander Weil, a teacher educator for Industrial Technology at Wayne State. Greg

was concerned and committed to helping us make a transition. Two years earlier, he had helped us write a grant to develop a modular technology lab. Knowing our circumstances, he was able to enlist his students to take over the curriculum development and lesson planning that we lacked. Greg and his group of methods students gave us advice to get "up and running" at the beginning of the semester. I was able to secure funding to hire some of his students as assistants to help the substitute. Each teacher assistant came with significant skills that we were able to utilize. Steve, a nontraditional student, was a former diesel mechanic. He related very well to the students who were renovating an old tractor and was able to motivate these students in other areas. The teacher assistants each "took charge" of a portion of the curriculum. Steve managed the VICA (Vocational Industrial Clubs of America) and the ITE 9 and ITE 10 classes, which currently consist of welding and CAD (computer aided drafting). Kora is a feminine, attractive young woman who has an associate's degree in Industrial Technology. Kora took charge of the modular technology lab. Jeff will lead our construction block, which takes the students out on job sites for authentic work. Each of these young people have brought a special talent to share with our students. The team is working well together. Greg Vander Weil, the substitute teacher, and I have plans to get the entire group together to discuss how the work is progressing.

Another critical need that has been addressed is assistance in responding to our Hispanic population. An alarming rate of young Hispanics drop out near the end of high school. We were fortunate to have a different group of students, guided by a Wayne State professor, conduct a qualitative research study for us. The study is now in progress and the early findings have helped us respond to the needs of our Hispanic student population.

The beginning of some significant work in in-service teacher development is taking place. I paired up two math and two science teachers with a professor who is a math/

science specialist for the purpose of moving these curricular areas into a constructivist philosophy. I have high hopes for this, as the professor will be able to personalize his work to the readiness and abilities of the teachers engaging in the work.

We are celebrating having student teachers who served as “partners” three years ago. While it has only been a few weeks, there is already a noticeable difference in these student teachers from our previous experience. The Wakefield students recognize them, the teachers have worked with them, and they were comfortable the first day of their student teaching. They know how the school operates, how to use the computer system and even the copy machine. Most important, they seem to know the culture of our school. They have spent time with our staff and understand how to interact professionally.

It is an exciting journey. Having more students in our building adds a richness to the environment and makes a significant positive impact on the students. One particular teacher was so honored by being asked to work with a student teacher that he felt he had taken a step up professionally. Now that he has her in his care, he is assisting her in creating experiences to help her succeed. He will take this job very seriously and she will no doubt become a very skilled teacher.

By slow strides, we are developing a professional development school. Preservice teachers prepared in Wakefield become familiar with a pedagogy that celebrates community. They come to understand that our teachers try to build character in students by allowing them to bond and participate in their community. If students are engaged in developing and renewing their community, they will develop a sense of pride in their place, and from this they will develop a sense of self. Most important, they will decide that they could CREATE meaningful employment and a meaningful life in their place.

Our partnership with Wayne State College is embedded in our school improvement plan. Developing the next

generation of teachers is now a part of our way of doing business at Wakefield. Seventy percent of the teachers who graduate from Wayne State College will teach in rural communities. It is my hope that through our PDS we can impact their attitudes about rural education as well as the development of this pedagogical sophistication.

Rural schools do not have a significant voice in governmental policies or with many of our education leaders. Rural schools, as I thought when I began as principal at Wakefield, are places to start or places to stay and stagnate. In starting a PDS with a rural focus, my hope is that we change this. To some, rural communities represent a sort of nostalgic place to visit and remember. Our teachers have been led to believe that they are second rate. If they were really good teachers, they would not be teaching in a rural community – they would go to the city. The pay scales in Nebraska represent this mentality very well. In fact, a spending lid in Nebraska is forcing consolidation in many areas. No thought is given to the well being of the community or the impact that losing a community school will have. Part of what we are doing is exposing shallow policy driven by unexamined cultural assumptions, like “bigger is better.” The agenda is indeed large, but with the excellent working relationship Wakefield now enjoys with Wayne State College, we are hitting the agenda on every front.

A Teacher’s Tale

I began teaching special education eleven years ago, the fall after graduating from college. During my third year of teaching, I worked with a student teacher, and I admit that I was quite “inexperienced” and not fully aware of my role as a cooperating teacher. It was a definite learning experience for both of us. Because we had similar beliefs and teaching styles, it was a positive and rewarding experience. When I moved to Wakefield Community Schools, she was hired

to fill my vacancy.

At Wakefield, I was offered a wonderful course through Wayne State College to work with other cooperating teachers to develop objectives and activities for upcoming student teachers. We worked together for three weeks, where we were able to share ideas, read and discuss relevant material, and brainstorm ways to make student teaching a positive experience. It was such a refreshing and productive class; in the fall, when I worked with my student teacher, I was confident and ready for the challenge of making her experience rewarding and positive.

Since Wakefield is only ten miles from Wayne State College, we have the opportunity to work with many of the undergraduate education students at different levels in their schooling. As a former graduate of Wayne State College, I did not truly realize the importance of the College's partnerships with the surrounding schools until three years ago when our school, Wakefield, became a partner school with Wayne State College. I was then given the opportunity to serve on our partnership steering committee; we worked with Ms. Connie Funk, director of partner schools, to find ways to improve our partner program for first- and second-year education students.

A positive aspect preservice teachers are able to view from our small school is our belief in community involvement, which is firmly rooted in our school system. Our preservice teachers are able to experience the important roles of the community in educating our students and to learn ways to integrate the community into the curriculum.

Preservice teachers are welcomed with packets from the community inviting them to come downtown and browse. They are given a directory of Wakefield that contains both history and information about our town, as well as a listing of businesses and volunteers from the community. Through these materials, we desire to give preservice teachers a feeling of place and belonging in our school and community.

Each spring, we complete a K-12

integrated "Institute." A common theme is selected after extensive discussion. Teachers and preservice teachers across the curriculum work together to brainstorm and coordinate ideas to incorporate into the curriculum. As a special education teacher with the belief "all students can learn", this Institute demonstrates the truth in my belief. All students are included and actively involved in their learning; students are engaged in student-directed, rather than teacher-directed, activities.

This spring, preservice students will have the opportunity to help implement our Institute, "Nebraska: The Good Life." The curriculum these students will be involved in includes designing a heritage quilt, creating a community mural, building a scale model of downtown Wakefield (present day and in the early 1900s), and implementing a playground improvement project. The Institute culminates with two nights of student exhibitions for the community and parents. Preservice students are able to experience an integrated curriculum, use portfolios and alternative assessment, and understand the importance of community involvement.

Webster defines *partnership* as 'a relationship, frequently between two people or entities, in which each has equal status and a certain independence but also implicit or formal obligations to the other or others'. Our partnership with Wayne State College lives up to this definition and continues to be a mutually positive learning experience for Wakefield Community School and Wayne State College. Personally, this relationship has enhanced my teaching and encourages me to reflect on new practices that are introduced to me through the College. In return, I am able to share my experiences and knowledge with preservice teachers, as well as benefit from their fresh ideas and enthusiasm.

A Dean's Tale

I took over as dean of education at Wayne State College on July 1, 1998. My arrival on

campus was due, in large part, to persistent recruiting by Wakefield High School principal Jeanne Surface. We had been acquainted for some time as graduates of the IEI's Leadership Associates' Program. I was a part of the second cohort; Jeanne was a part of the fifth. Through this association, Jeanne discovered that I was disillusioned with the administration at my place of employment in Wisconsin. When the deanship opened up at Wayne State, Jeanne prodded me to apply. I was hesitant at first, but I gradually gave in to her compelling argument.

The gist of that argument was this: Wayne State was a member site within the NNER, and taking this position would put me back squarely into the NNER agenda. Second, Wayne State professed a commitment to the rural communities of northeastern Nebraska, a commitment that resonated well with me, as she well knew. Third, Wayne State had participated in several School at the Center projects, and through earlier work I had developed a strong relationship with the leaders of this initiative. I became convinced that the move made sense. I applied and was offered the job.

From my first day on the job, I was in almost daily contact with Jeanne Surface and her third superintendent at Wakefield, Mike Moody. Mike began his new duties at Wakefield just as I took up the reins at Wayne State. The three of us hit it off well and almost immediately began to brainstorm about different ways to deepen the Wayne State/Wakefield partnership.

These conversations led to grant proposals, research projects, joint presentations, and several other significant, mutually beneficial activities. Four Wakefield teachers, for example, are currently employed by Wayne State to orchestrate field experiences for teacher education students. No fewer than five Wayne State faculty members have been very involved in fine-tuning our partnership projects and participate directly in faculty development activities at Wakefield. This will increase if the latest grant proposal is funded.

While all of this is enviable, it is even

more remarkable when one considers the odds against it. As has been noted, there have been several short-term superintendents at Wakefield. Dr. Diane Alexander resigned as dean at Wayne State in March 1998 after three-and-a-half years on the job. There has been plenty of opportunity for "naysayers" and "blockers" to get the upper hand – to prevail by stalling reform activities. But this never happened. New leaders were found, including myself, who understood the agenda and the potential power of simultaneous renewal, and were committed to moving forward.

While much of this is a tribute to the tireless recruiting efforts and unfailing commitment of Jeanne Surface, what is now in place is broad-based, widely supported, and unlikely to be turned back by the departure of any of the current leaders.

Wakefield's efforts to rejuvenate itself while it educates its youth has added a new dimension to teacher preparation at Wayne State. Faculty members in teacher education, and to some degree, arts and sciences, have begun to discuss matters of purpose with regard to education as well as the moral dimensions of the enterprise. Five Wayne State faculty members took part in NeNER's second leadership cohort, giving them the opportunity to interact with folks like Donna Hughes, Wilma Smith, Bob Hoffert, and Cal Frazier.

Given our commitment to rejuvenating community life through place-based instructional and curricular decision-making, we are troubled by the current fetish with "standards" and standardizing something as complex and context-laden as public education. Nevertheless, we are taking the Nebraska state standards and deliberating about different methods that might be used to embed the "contextless" state standards in our context-rich locality. While we are very optimistic about the prospects of successfully working through this challenge, we are still pessimistic about the seemingly insatiable demand created by corporate America for the numerical differentiation of one student from the next. The standards-based educational

environment begs for the simplicity of norm-referenced tests despite the fact that our nation's educational history screams loudly about the futility of such a reform trajectory.

Still, Wayne State professors are committed to working side by side with Wakefield teachers to develop assessments that will reflect the attainment of the state standards in ways that promote academic achievement and, as well, add a sense of vitality to the community.

Conclusion

It is difficult to overestimate the sense of excitement and the "feel" of unrealized potential that surrounds the Wayne State/Wakefield partnership. While it would be useless to deny the fact that very real problems continue to plague both houses, so to speak, it is nevertheless true that the milieu of both places is upbeat, positive, and excited about a future that promises to be better than the past and present.