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## Wright Elementary provides students a unique experience with arts-technology foundation

Editor's Note: This is the first of Northern Illinois University Public Affairs associate Melissa Blake's two-part series examining Wright Elementary School's first year. Part Two will examine the school's impact on teachers and the school's future.

MALTA - Students came to Wright Elementary School dressed as Titanic passengers and crew members, carrying their luggage and the boarding passes necessary to board the "ship."

In art class, their portraits are shot in black and white.

During P.E., they play a game that would have been popular on the ship.

In music, they learn a song from the early 1900s.

They already know how ships sink, thanks to modern-day Internet research.

"The entire day is a trip back in time," said fourth-grade teacher Pam Bybee, "to the year 1912."

Innovation is common at Wright, where two of DeKalb's key institutions work hand-in-hand as the arts and technology form a foundation for learning and all-day kindergarten.

Teamwork and constant feedback is the backbone of the school's existence. Partners from Northern Illinois University and the DeKalb School District collaborate on a daily basis with visions of growth for teachers, students, parents and the community in the front of their minds.

"P-12 schools and universities have long known that they are interdependent entities," said Nina Dorsch, associate professor and chair of NIU's Teaching and Learning Department. "Universities rely on schools to prepare students for higher education and schools depend on universities to prepare the next generation of teachers."

Linell Lasswell, District 428 assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, shared similar sentiments.

"I think the biggest advantage is the partnership with NIU allows for professional growth for our staff, but also allows the university to be active in the real world," she said. "It is a win-win for both parties."

Of course, it's not all unique.

There are the typical elementary school staples, including cubbies for the children and their artwork adorning the walls.

A bustle of activity ushers in the day around 8:45 a.m. with morning announcements and the

Pledge of Allegiance, said Gina Greenwald, who became the principal last July. The makeup of the student body is similar to the rest of the district.

By all accounts, the first year was a time of growth for all - students, teachers and the community. And officials say things look promising for innovations to spread to all schools in the district.

"I believe that the community should know that we're in a very positive partnership with NIU that would benefit all our students and staff in the long run," said Paul Beilfuss, District 428 superintendent.

One year after the "grand opening" and with the release this month of the school's first annual report, NIU and school district officials now have an opportunity to look back on a year of firsts - for the district, NIU and the community.

"We want to make sure we're making progress in student achievement. We're wanting things to positively grow and move forward for everyone," said Sharon Smaldino, director of NIU's College of Education Partnership Office. "This is a five-year plan, and it would be impossible to suggest that we've achieved any goals yet."

Wright's inception came at the perfect time

Developing the framework for a new elementary school is no small task. More than 60 officials from NIU and the school district transformed the vision into a reality.

The school district owned Malta High School and had been renting it out after the Malta-DeKalb merger in 2000. As space issues throughout the district became a problem, school officials formed a leadership team to examine various ways to use the building.

After discussing options, including a magnet school or a childcare center, both the team and school board agreed that a partnership school was in the best interest of the district, Lasswell said.

NIU already operated a partnership office when the opportunity to pair with the school district presented itself.

Christine Sorensen, dean of the NIU College of Education, met with then-superintendent Brian Ali, who asked if NIU could lend assistance with some space problems the DeKalb schools were having; NIU had been thinking about professional development school opportunities. The timing was right.

"All the pieces fell into place at the same time and all fit," Sorensen said.

Simply the sheer number of people involved in Wright's existence is impressive and innovative, said Kristina Hesbol, District 428 assistant superintendent for human resources. It is significant to witness a planning meeting and see university officials sitting around a table with community members, all working together to see what is working and seeing if everyone's vision is aligning.

The partnership not only "means a new and innovative way to look at elementary education," but also a creative way to have a university and school district do exciting work in the realm of moving technology and the arts forward, said Andy Small, District 428 school board president.

Student success is the first priority at Wright

The baseline academic data collected thus far looks promising. The goal is to have 100 percent of Wright students meet state standards by 2009, a full five years before federal No Child Left Behind legislation requires.

Academic highlights for Wright's opening year include the following:

488 percent of students met or exceeded state standards in reading, math and science, placing Wright second in the district

497 percent of third-graders met standards on the state mathematics test

496 percent of kindergartners are on track for success in first grade

Lasswell said these scores reflect different teaching strategies used at Wright that allow students a variety of experiences that are beneficial in their academic, social and personal growth.

To facilitate social and personal growth, Wright provides a multitude of after-school programs, many highlighting academics and lifelong learning.

Greenwald said one project implemented last year, a character-building program called Solutions for Excellence, was dropped after faculty found it too programmatic.

In its place, Wright began a program focusing on expectations, including expectations for the playground, lunchroom and bus line. Most teachers also have a list of expectations visible in their classroom.

Wright's innovations keep it on the right track

So what exactly about Wright makes it innovative?

One innovation is that the school integrates the arts and technology into virtually every lesson. All-day kindergarten is another.

The arts and technology give students an opportunity to link different areas of the curriculum. The technology in particular is a "hands-on approach to learning," Bybee said. "Children are extremely motivated by the computer because it is an integral part of their world today."

Integrating the arts is something that almost every kindergarten teacher does each day.

"The children learn songs that are used to help teach reading and literacy skills, they use movement to help them learn, reinforce and remember new concepts and they view and create art to express their ideas about almost any topic," said kindergarten teacher Tracy Paszotta.

In the realm of technology, kindergartners used Palm Pilots for spelling games and sequencing activities.

Funds donated to the college's partnership office were used to purchase a set of 25 personal digital assistants with a cart and beaming device and digital cameras.

NIU pre-service teachers in their early clinical experience learned how to use the technology during their technology instruction.

District classroom teachers were provided with professional development opportunities to use the technology. Both classroom teachers and pre-service teachers worked collaboratively with NIU faculty to implement the technology in K-5 classrooms.

For example, in one kindergarten class, children practiced writing their alphabet letters on the PDA and "beamed" their work to their peers and to the teacher for review.

In a third-grade class, students created animated slide shows related to the topics they were studying and projected their work to the class.

First- and second-grade children used the digital cameras to take images to create books to share with their peers and parents.

In fifth grade, Chris Perkovich's students completed a geometry project that utilizes both technology and art.

Teams of students each were assigned a letter of the alphabet corresponding to a geometric term (for example, A is for Angle).

The students then had to locate an example of the term somewhere in the school and take a picture of it with a digital camera. To summarize the activity, students made a power point presentation of their picture and the correct mathematical definition of the term.

What truly makes difference at Wright, Greenwald said, is the all-day kindergarten.

In Wright's program, there is not so much pressure to get things done.

Teachers have more time to explore interests, and the all-day program gives the students added exposure to the school environment and academic areas, including more time to master skills and concepts.

Innovations proven effective at Wright already are transferring to other schools

Disseminating Wright's innovations to other schools is a prime goal of the partnership. Some dissemination work already is under way.

This year, Malta Elementary School received computer hardware to update its technology systems.

A technology liaison from NIU's College of Education is at Malta to make sure things run smoothly. In addition, language assessment techniques used at Wright are helping kindergartners and first-graders at Littlejohn. Professional development activities are going on there as well.

Wright is committed to sharing what has worked with other schools.

"It's picking the best little nuggets," Greenwald said, "and seeing how the innovations can fit into other schools' cultures."