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The Wright Direction Partnership with NIU 'exceeds expectations' after one year

By Aracely Hernandez - Staff Writer

MALTA - It's a Friday afternoon at Paul T. Wright



Students in Nancy Brantners math class at Wright Elementary School work on their problem-solving skills during a session Friday afternoon. Chronicle photo HOLLY LUNDH

Elementary School. Third graders are roller-skating in the gym. First-graders are learning about measurements in math class. But not all students at the school are elementary students; Northern Illinois University education students also sit in their own classroom to learn about teaching.

Northern and the DeKalb School District are partnering to provide programming at the 275-student school, which opened in the fall of 2004. It is first of its kind in DeKalb County.

NIU officials have released its first report about the school and the partnership and said it is "exceeding expectations."

According to the report, which was presented to the school board last week, the goal is to have 100 percent of students meet standards in nine areas.

So far 88 percent of students met or exceeded standards in reading, math and science.

First-year Principal Gina Greenwald said working at the school has been a learning experience because she's had to learn to work with new staff and she wasn't familiar with the partnership aspect.

But she said everything has been working out well. Students from the university and students at school are getting the best education, she said.

"We're both benefiting," she said.

She also said staff members also are learning by getting more training through NIU-sponsored programs. Greenwald said the school's partners are always willing to help.

"Even if you just have a question there's always someone else to ask," she said. "We're both growing."

Kelley Schnieder is one of the students who is learning at the school through the partnership. The Sycamore woman is a junior in NIU's elementary education program.

The current semester started two weeks ago, and she hasn't been in a classroom with Wright students yet. But she expects to get a lot out of it when she does.

"It just gives us more of a feel of what to expect," she said. "I think it's a great idea."

NIU students learn about classroom management, by actually being in a classroom.

Greenwald said students like Schnieder will get more by taking part in a program such as the one at Wright.

"The student teachers have more teaching experience," she said. "It's always a nice way for them to determine if that's what they really want to do before they enter teaching."

Nancy Brantner's first-grade class is getting a different benefit from the partnership. Earlier that day the students in her class all used laptop computers to do a classroom exercise.

Technology and the arts are integrated in the classroom, and teachers are learning more about how to apply both. Recently, math teachers worked with an art teacher to teach geometry.

The school also has 28 Palm Pilots that are used in classrooms. Some students take spelling tests on them and when finished, send the answers to the teacher's Palm Pilot.

Another unique aspect of the school is its all-day kindergarten program. Last spring more than 100 families wanted their child in the program. There was only room for 46. All students at the school are selected through a lottery.

According to the report, Wright's innovations will later be passed on to other district schools. The school's demographics reflect the others in the district and officials think its success can be replicated at other schools.

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