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## Wright innovations impact faculty, NIU pre-service teachers, future partnerships

Editor's note: This is the second of NIU Public Affairs associate Melissa Blake's two-part series looking at Wright's opening year. Part One examined the unique student experience through arts and technology.

MALTA - The elementary school years are traditionally a time for students to grow and thrive in the learning environment, a time when everything is new and life is different every day.

At Wright Elementary, the District 428/Northern Illinois University partnership school, both teachers and future teachers have themselves grown during the school's opening year and are ever the learners. This consistent progress also has enabled the school to examine its challenges last year to plan for the future and beyond, according to the school's recently released annual report.

### Wright teachers learned right along with students

Students in partnership schools have the benefit of working with teachers who are getting "the very best" professional development opportunities, said Mary Beth Henning, assistant professor in NIU's teaching and learning department.

At Wright, all faculty meetings involve some sort of professional development activity, such as using technology in the classroom and integrating fine arts into the classroom, said Linell Lasswell, District 428 assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

Also, NIU faculty members provide formal and informal professional development throughout the year.

"NIU faculty and district teachers attended several professional development opportunities and worked collaboratively on scholarship, curriculum design and assessment for the K-12 classrooms," said Chris Sorensen, dean of the NIU College of Education.

"For example, a team of six, including two NIU faculty, a district principal and elementary classroom teachers, went to Yale University to learn about traichic instruction, a model of curriculum design and implementation focused on creative, practical and analytic thinking," Sorensen adds. "On their return, the team shared their new knowledge with colleagues, worked to create new lesson plans and assessments and implemented them in the K-5 classrooms. Another team attended a two-day workshop sponsored by a national organization to learn about integrating arts in the teaching of reading."

### Future teachers found a home at Wright

Typically, future teachers have three clinical experiences before they begin their student teaching.

Margaret Bridge, NIU clinical coordinator of elementary education, said her office is responsible for identifying, placing and overseeing teacher candidates. Each semester, the office places about 400 elementary candidates into clinical or student teaching positions.

Having students in the classrooms forces the veteran teachers to reflect on their own teaching methods and gives them an opportunity to share "knowledge, experience and expertise" with tomorrow's teachers. But Bridge believes the biggest benefit is to NIU students: a chance for them to pull their noses out of textbooks and experience the day-to-day workings of a classroom.

Wright's unique arrangement gives future teachers in their first clinical block early exposure to the world of education, and provides Wright students with additional individual attention where it matters most - in the classroom. About 32 NIU students were at Wright for nine weeks last year as opposed to the traditional three-week clinical cycle.

Susan L'Allier, NIU assistant professor in literacy education and faculty liaison for Wright, said officials felt that being in the same school for an extended period of time would allow clinical students to see how things such as literacy progress over time and see how Wright students blossom as a whole.

The clinical students do not just observe in the classroom for a couple hours and then leave; instead, they are involved in the entire school experience, L'Allier said.

They participate in evening activities, such as open house, and sit in on parent-teacher conferences. During the day, NIU students work in reading and language arts classes in the mornings. For three hours in the afternoon, they attend their own NIU classes in a special room at Wright for the entire semester.

Dana Schmidt, an NIU student in teaching and learning, worked in fourth-grade teacher Pam Bybee's class this semester. Schmidt has always enjoyed working with children and would like to make a difference in their lives.

"I feel that being around them will help keep me young at heart," she said.

During the semester, Schmidt developed relationships with the students and staff. Meanwhile, being at Wright every day for her NIU classes helped "because we (NIU students) were always showing our faces in the hallways," she said.

For Karen Graden, who worked in Marion Beguin's kindergarten class, being a teacher will allow her to experience the best of both worlds: working with children and still having plenty of time to spend with her own children.

Graden loved the experience at Wright.

She got to know her students on a personal level, especially after the first couple weeks of being in the classroom, when Graden said students stopped acting differently because a new person was in the room. Before long, she became another teacher to them.

"I really got a better understanding of what teaching will be like," she said. "I had a great cooperating teacher who let me teach and participate every day."

Future changes in NIU's teacher preparation programs may be on the horizon as a result of experiences at Wright.

After just one year of implementation, L'Allier said that experiences at Wright are likely to affect the NIU elementary education teacher-prep program as a whole. Both she and technology liaison Lara Luetkehans reported adjusting course content to accommodate students' responses to classroom activity at Wright. One of the goals of a partnership school is to improve teacher-preparation programs.

However, she said, "after the first year at Wright, teacher and student input led to some changes in the program at Wright School, such as having special clinical-related seminars for the Wright School interns right at Wright School, rather than having them attend the seminars with all of the other interns."

Wright keeps its eyes on the future

Staff members needed time to bond because they came from all over the district, Lasswell said.

The first staff meeting was held in July 2004 and, before long, all had a shared vision for Wright and the coming year. The fact that many of them had helped to plan Wright School, along with a 50-member team from District 428 and NIU, accelerated the process of coming together.

With regard to the technology and arts integration, L'Allier said Wright had a "full plate," and sometimes it was a bit hard to focus on all of them.

"The challenge is to get all of those pieces put together so they work together," she said.

The key is to realize that Wright does not need any more goals at this time, L'Allier said. It is more important to focus on the goals already in place and further work to fulfill those.

The future of Wright looks bright. Of the 264 students enrolled in the 2004-05 school year, the majority of students returned for this year, with the exception being those students who moved out of the district.

The number of applications received also increased for the 2005-06 school year as 152 applications were submitted for 46 open spots. To ensure fairness, students are chosen through a lottery, and NIU statisticians help to ensure the fairness of this lottery. Current enrollment figures rest at about 278 students, with more than 100 families on the Wright waiting list.

Greenwald said further integration of technology, the arts and the model from Yale is a given over the next five years.

"I just want to see that most of our students are doing their best and we're able to meet their needs as learners," she said.

But officials agree the experience has been wonderful for all - not just Wright students.

"Wright is an exciting project," said Christine Sorensen, NIU's College of Education dean. "We're looking for ways to take lessons we've learned and expand them to other schools in the district and to our teacher-preparation programs at the university."

Anne Kaplan, NIU vice president of administration and university outreach, had similar thoughts.

"Our end goal," she said, "is to improve the quality of education for all students in the district."

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