

MINUTES OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION K-12.

The meeting was called to order by Chairperson Kathe Decker at 9:00 a.m. on March 6, 2003 in Room 313-S of the Capitol.

All members were present except: Representative Barbieri-Lightner - Absent
Representative D. Williams - Excused Absence
Representative E. Johnson - Excused Absence
Representative Winn - Excused Absence

Committee staff present: Kathie Sparks, Legislative Research Department
Jill Wolters, Office of the Revisor of Statutes
Ann Deitcher, Committee Secretary

Conferees appearing before the committee: Dr. Ray Daniels, Supt. Kansas City, KS Schools
Walt Thompson, Principal, Wyandotte High School
Romona Robson, Teacher, Wyandotte High School
Helen Spearman, Wyandotte High School Parent

The Chair introduced Dr. Daniels who spoke to the committee on "First Things First" - Creating the conditions and capacity for community-wide reform in an urban school district. ([Attachment 1](#)).

Helen Spearman spoke of the Small Learning Communities (SLC) program and the effect it had on her two children who are students at Wyandotte High. ([Attachment 2](#)).

A power point presentation was given, after which Romona Robson spoke of the advantages of teaching in a school that offered the Small Learning Community Approach to High School. ([Attachment 3](#)).

Principal Walt Thompson offered a view of his role in this program and spoke of the vast improvement in the dropout numbers and those continuing on to higher education as well as students' attitudes toward school and their teachers.

A question and answer session followed.

Minutes of the Education Committee meetings for February 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 24 and 25 were distributed to the committee for their approval.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:45 a.m. The next meeting is scheduled for Monday, March 10, 2003.

Presentation to the House Education Committee

March 6, 2003

By

Ray Daniels, Superintendent of Kansas City, Kansas Unified School District 500

Chairwoman Decker and members of the House Education Committee, I am here today at your request to provide information regarding Wyandotte High School and its efforts in reforming a large, urban high school that is experiencing all of the challenges that face such schools across our country. I have with me today to make presentations about the school Ms. Ramona Robson, a teacher at Wyandotte, and Ms. Helen Spearman, a parent of a student attending the school. Also accompanying us today is Mr. Walter Thompson, Wyandotte's principal. Mr. Thompson is not scheduled to present to your committee this morning, but I thought it would be appropriate to have him present in case committee members have questions they would like to direct to him.

While we are here this morning to speak about Wyandotte, it is important that the committee understand the context in which the reform work is being undertaken at Wyandotte. Because of growing concerns, six years ago our Board of Education and administration did a very thorough study of how all the schools in our district were performing on several measures including state assessments. What we found was disturbing. While many students were having successful learning experiences in our schools and many were graduating and going on to successful college or work careers, far too many were not being successful. Also, other measures besides assessment results caused us great concern. Our attendance rates in our secondary schools were poor. While Sumner Academy had extremely high levels of performance, indicators in our four comprehensive high schools bordered on abysmal. Dropout rates were high, too many students were being suspended, and our graduation rates hovered around 50%. To the Board's credit, they did not rationalize away these concerns but decided that our district would face the reality head on and undertake bold actions to assure that every student in USD 500 had an opportunity for a quality education.

What came out of that decision by our Board of Education was the embracing by our district of a district wide reform effort called First Things First. Because of time constraints, I will not go into the many aspects of the First Things First initiative. Let me simply say that it has changed every school, every classroom and every instructional staff person in our district over the past five years. It has also touched parents and families as we have strived to make education of our students a shared responsibility of our entire community.

Six years ago when this study was done, Wyandotte High School was a school in crisis. The drop out rate was high, and the graduation rate was around 50%. Teachers locked their classroom doors during class time to keep out disruptions. Many staff members felt unsafe. The turnover rate among teachers was very high. The school was having hundreds of tardies every day. Many parents were requesting that their children be transferred to another school because of the conditions in the school. Wyandotte is a

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school that is known throughout the state and even the nation. Yet, six years ago district administrators were having serious discussions about closing the school, distributing the students to the other three comprehensive high schools, and using the school for central administrative offices and support services. Fortunately, that did not happen.

At this same time First Things First was initiated at Wyandotte and the two middle schools and elementary schools that feed Wyandotte. Another important move that took place at this time was the replacement of the school leadership, and Walt Thompson was named principal. There was also in the building a core group of dedicated teachers who were not prepared to give up on the students and the school. Some of these teachers were veterans who had spent years at the school and others were fairly new. But when Walt Thompson challenged them by asking, "Would you want your own children to attend Wyandotte High School?" they answered the call. The staff, along with Mr. Thompson, crafted a plan around the First Things First initiative that has resulted in Wyandotte receiving national and state recognition for their efforts.

The district has also changed as we have moved forward to improve all of our schools. We have changed Central Office to a service and resource center to the schools, and we have provided schools more authority to make decisions regarding schedules, personnel, and finances. A large number of curriculum administrators were assigned to the schools as school improvement facilitators, and every school currently has at least one of these facilitators. Teacher leadership has been fostered at both the school and district levels. NEA has played a crucial and supportive role in improving instructional practices. Coaches have been employed in literacy and math to work daily in classes with teachers to improve teaching and learning. Staff development has played and continues to play a critical role in improving student achievement. We fully embrace the idea that all children can learn but we know that we, the adults in the district, must change and get smarter also so we can help our students. Everyone is a learner is KCK.

So it's important that the committee realize that Wyandotte is a part of a large effort in our district that has its only goal as that of improving student achievement for every student. Have our efforts made a difference? In a word, "Yes." While we are a long way from reaching our goal, we are seeing improvements. The work is difficult, challenging, frustrating much of the time but rewarding for what is being accomplished. Let me provide to the committee the demographics on the school based on September 20, 2002 information:

Enrollment—approximately 1300 in grades 9-12

Free or reduced lunch—82%

African-American—60%

Hispanic—27%

White—9%

Asian—4%

While assessment results for Wyandotte students are still far from where we want them to be, there are indicators that the school is on the right track. Teachers no longer have to lock their doors during class time. Staff members do not report feeling unsafe in the

school. The graduation rate is up. The dropout rate is down. More students are staying in school for their education. We get very few parents asking for transfers now and those that do request transfers cite other reasons than safety and quality for their requests. And the school is currently in the middle of a major renovation thanks to a \$120 million bond issue passed two years ago by the Kansas City, Kansas community. The building is being air conditioned, restrooms are being upgraded, and there will be new windows, doors, and lighting by next fall. The building itself is on the National Historic Register and is truly a work of art.

But as we all know, schools are not about buildings but about the people in the buildings. There are many, many wonderful students at Wyandotte who are working hard to achieve a good education and subsequently a productive life. And many are doing this while confronting poverty and in more and more instances language barriers and a new culture. Fortunately, they are being supported by a committed staff and, in most cases, parents who truly care for them and provide for them.

I want to thank the committee for giving me this opportunity to speak about our district and Wyandotte High School. I'm going to now give you the opportunity to listen to Ms. Robson and Ms. Spearman who can provide you insights into Wyandotte and the work being done there every day. But before turning the presentation over to them, I am willing to answer any questions about Wyandotte or our district's efforts.

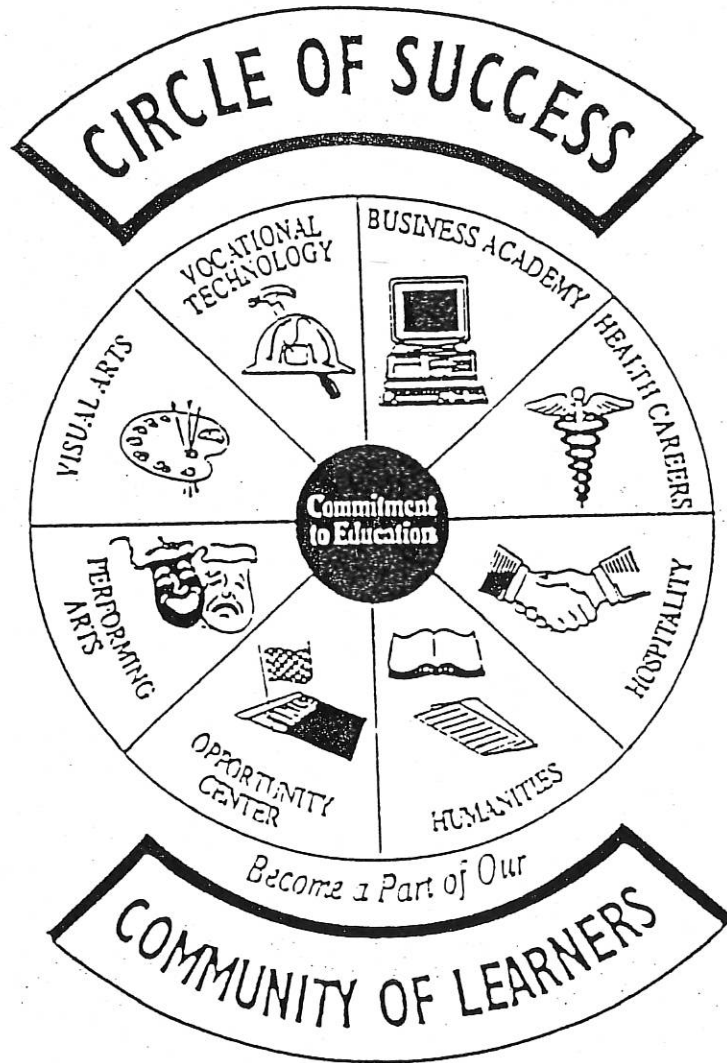
With the reorganization of Wyandotte High School divided into the Small Learning Communities (SLC) has really been a great experience. With the different communities the students have the opportunity to pick a community of interest to them. They have their core curriculum along with an elective lane format.

By the students being in the SLC all four years the student, teacher & parent develops a working relationship and knows what is expected from one another. In the SLC the students are involved in Project Based Learning. They also feel ownership in decision-making. This helps in developing greater self-esteem and to become successful.

As a parent I feel the SLC has prepared my child well for the future. My child is motivated & has a good interest in her studies. I have always involved myself in my child's education as well as extra activities. As a parent at Wyandotte High School I have found this program most effective.

In the future I would like to see more parent involvement. I feel when the students can see that parent participation and involvement it makes them work hard to be successful also.

A Small Learning Community Approach to High School



WYANDOTTE HIGH SCHOOL
Kansas City, Kansas

Wyandotte High School Small Learning Community Fact Sheet

SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Wyandotte has eight SLCs, each with a distinct theme and each preparing students for post-secondary education and/or high quality employment following high school:

Business Academy. The Academy provides educational opportunities for business students that will enable them to successfully compete in business following high school or succeed in post-secondary education.

Foundations in Applied Skills and Technology (FAST). The FAST Community prepares students for future specialization in technology-related industries or the trades. Math, science and literacy skills are developed through projects using technology- or trades-based applications.

Health Careers/Life Sciences. This SLC is committed to providing students with academic skills and knowledge specifically directed to areas such as medicine, research, biology and other life sciences. Students also learn to use the equipment and techniques necessary to be successful in these fields through internships and other practical experiences.

Hospitality. Students learn skills needed in hospitality careers such as hotel/motel management, travel and tourism, restaurant management, catering and child care. These skills and information needed to perform well in any of the hospitality areas are woven through the core curriculum.

Humanities. This community emphasizes a liberal arts education including a focus on journalism and foreign languages. In addition to the formal academic program, service learning is an integral part of the Humanities SLC experience.

Opportunity Center. The Opportunity Center provides educational opportunities for students who have previously been academically unsuccessful in a high school setting. The Center is a vehicle to accelerate students' performance and support them as they transition into the learning community of their choice.

Performing Arts. Students in this SLC pursue and develop expertise in dance, music or drama. Students may perform, produce or focus on the technical aspects of production. As with all SLCs at Wyandotte High School, these skills are learned and applied during core instructional time.

Visual Arts and Technology. This community provides the opportunity for students to explore and learn about the Fine Arts and Graphic Arts. Students experiment with a variety of equipment, materials and techniques through courses that include painting, design, pottery, photography and computer arts. The skills learned are applied within the core curriculum as well as in the elective courses.

1 **A Small Learning Community Approach to High School Reform**

Presented by
Mrs. Romona Robson
Teacher
Wyandotte High School

and
Mrs. Helen Spearman
Parent of Wyandotte Student

2 **Wyandotte High School**

- Located in Kansas City, Kansas
- Elaborate and beautiful historical building constructed by the WPA in the late 1930's with marble pillars, grand fireplaces and crystal chandeliers
- Rich history as both the top and bottom performing school in the state

3 **Wyandotte High School Bulldogs**

- Serves 1300 students
- 60% African American,
26% Hispanic,
10% Caucasian,
4% Asian and other
- 85 Certified staff
- 77 Classroom teachers

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6 **First Things First**

The Big Picture:

- Transform relationships
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning
- Focus all resources on doing these two things

7 **7 Critical Features of First Things First**

1. Lower student/adult ratios by half during core classes
2. Provide continuity of care
3. Set high, clear, and fair academic and behavior standards
4. Provide enriched and diverse opportunities to learn, to perform, and to be recognized
5. Assure collective responsibility for teaching teams
6. Provide instructional autonomy and support to the team of teachers
7. Allow for flexible allocation of available resources-including *people, facilities, time, and funds*

8 **At Wyandotte High School,
First Things First is...**

- an authentic approach to school improvement
- NOT a "one size fits all" program
- a continuous effort to ask the tough questions
- a process of changing the culture to result in improved student performance
- personal and professional change

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11 **Our Eight Small Learning Communities**

12 **A Small Learning Community –
Our Definition**

- Small - 200 students or less
- Heterogeneous
- Theme-based... Student Choice
- Multi-Year
- Collectively Responsible for Students
- Empowered --Flexible Schedule, Flexible Resources
- Collaborative -- On-going, Meaningful Planning and Professional Development
- It's about Family

13 **Each Small Learning Community...**

- includes students from grades 9, 10, 11, and 12.
- is staffed with a math, science, social studies, English, special education, and elective teachers to support the SLC theme.
- has their own budget.
- develops their own schedule.
- has flexibility to adjust their instructional schedule to better meet the academic needs of students. (no bells).
- is collectively responsible for the academic performance of the students in their SLC.

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16 **Evidence of Improvement**

- Attendance increased
- Suspensions decreased
- 9th Grade Persistence increased
- Graduating students increased
(all populations)
- Standardized Test Scores are beginning
to show gains

17 **Additional Evidence of Improvement**

- More cooperative school climate
- Increased student respect for the school
- Reading interventions across the curriculum
- Increased use of Project Based Learning
- Focus on student work
- Deeper relationship student/student, student/teacher, teacher/teacher

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20 **Work in Progress**

- Reading Enhancement

- Family Advocacy System
- Increase Instructional Repertoire
- Enhance Collaboration and Interdisciplinary Instruction
- Strengthen school and work-based partnerships
- Continue to ask the tough questions and to be open to questioning
- Continue to focus on relationships
- Take care of each other

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23 **What the students say about SLCs**

- "I like SLC at Wyandotte because our classes are in the same place; we know where we are going each year; you can make good friends within the community; we form separate peer groups within the school; it helps the students with grades; students help each other with their problems,"
says Adreana Jones.

- "I think SLCs are cool and they give you a chance to explore and get more interested in a career", *says Shavon Beamon.*

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- "All the people help each other", *says Jorge Fuentes.*

- "Teachers get to know the students better so they understand us on our good and bad days", *says Tamera Davis.*

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27 *From W.E.B. DuBois*

Education must not simply teach work...

...it must teach life.

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