

Mankato State University
College of Education

Presents...

Mankato Wilson
Campus School:
Remembered

Wilson Campus School: Remembered

The following video is a non-professional, low budget record of an exciting adventure in education.

Except for current pictures of former faculty, the material in this video was filmed fifteen or twenty years ago for purposes other than production. Our hope is that these experiences will serve as a bridge from the past to the present and into the future.

We dedicate this video to those viewers who are embarking on their own “educational Camelot.”

This script essentially follows the voices on the videotape, though occasionally the speakers deviate. The basic essence of Wilson is portrayed in both formats.

The video, completed in August, 1992, provides a picture of the Wilson program from 1968 to 1977, when laboratory schools were closed by the Minnesota Legislature.

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For Further Information, see:

Teacher Reflections on Individual School Restructuring: Alternatives in Public Education. 1992. Kathleen M. Long. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Oregon, Eugene

Plus

BOOKS AND ARTICLES BY DON GLINES, INCLUDING:

Educational Alternatives for Everyone. International Association for Learning Alternatives. St. Paul MN: 2002.

Creating Educational Futures: Continuous Mankato Wilson Alternatives. National Association for Year-Round Education. San Diego: 1995.

“Transitioning Toward Educational Futures,” with Kathleen Long, *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 1992.

“Can Schools of Today Survive Very Far into the 21st Century?” *NASSP Bulletin*, National Association of Secondary School Principals, February 1989.

Educational Futures III: Change and Reality. Anvil Press, Millville MN: 1978.

“Implementing a Humane School,” *Educational Leadership*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, November 1970.

INTRODUCTION TO WILSON CAMPUS SCHOOL TAPE

Minnesota State University

This is Don Glines, former director of the Wilson Campus School at then-named Mankato State University, (now Minnesota State University at Mankato), when it was often described as the most innovative, experimental year-round public alternatives program in America. We purposely did everything wrong – according to tradition – to prove that the rituals of schooling were not essential. Even more, our task was to create a new student-centered learning system which was nongraded, individualized, and personalized to meet the needs of each youth from all socio-economic, cultural, talent, and skill diversities – without tests, homework, or mandated classes.

The tape was prepared by former faculty members, with no budget – a volunteer effort of love for our Camelot. It begins slowly, with music and photos of students moving through parts of the building. Notice especially the mix of age levels, K-college, working together. Note, too, Ferdinand, our boa constrictor – and later our rabbits, and JoJo and Pepe, the monkeys – all going to class with the students, for they needed to learn also. Wilson had over 57 animals in its own zoo! As U.S. Senator David Durenberger (MN) later stated: The experience with Wilson is why in 1991 Minnesota became the first state in the nation to authorize charter schools.

Once the tape moves beyond the opening to the narrative, it becomes exciting. Listen carefully to the description and philosophy relating the creating of Wilson. The smooth voice that eventually emerges is that of John Biewan, a former Wilson student. Unfortunately, I was ill that day and my comments are strained. However, if you will stay with us for the entire 60 minutes, you will be rewarded with a clear picture of the most wonderful cradle-to-grave program under one roof in the nation – as described by the *Christian Science Monitor*.

In 2002, Minnesota State University was kind enough to turn the distribution of this tape over to the International Association for Learning Alternatives (IALA), with headquarters in St. Paul MN. It is an excellent companion to the 1995 book on Wilson, *Creating Educational Futures: Continuous Mankato Wilson Alternatives*, and the 2002 IALA book on choices and options, *Educational Alternatives for Everyone*.

Alternatives should be for everyone, not just the few. Wilson demonstrates this through a comprehensive school with football and dramatics, students graduating with two years of college credit during the K-12 years, students on probation with the police, students who are affluent, but many more with free lunch status – all successfully accomplished with no required classes or courses, K-12 and college teacher education programs, an infant and preschool, and bachelor and master degree programs with self-created experiential requirements.

Enjoy the tape. Hopefully it will help you understand why we need to eliminate the one-size-fits-all schooling in favor of providing self-selected alternatives for everyone all the time.

Mankato Wilson Campus School: Remembered

Thursday, September 3, 1968

I remember entering Wilson Campus School in Mankato Minnesota that morning with mixed emotions. A relaxing summer had left me anxious to return to my classroom and my thirty fifth

graders. Our building was a pleasant one-story facility with large classrooms and an office for each teacher. Built on the edge of the campus of Mankato State University, it served as a teaching laboratory for the College of Education as well as a school for 600 kindergarten through 12-grade neighborhood children. We had a good, conventional program serving conservative, satisfied parents. I wanted to put up my bulletin boards, but I had an appointment with our new principal. Some pretty wild stories were circulating about the red head. As I listened to him, I discovered the stories were all true. I was told that when school opened on Tuesday morning, I would be responsible for individualized mathematics for ninety middle school age children. No specific materials were available but I could feel free to prepare my own. And I was to head a team of three faculty to help these ninety children become acclimated to a non-graded, individualized program using a daily smorgasbord schedule with optional attendance. Well, we did pull it off. And, as you view and hear the black and white flashbacks throughout this video, the faculty became staunch advocates of the program. The final black and white flashbacks will show students and faculty marching to the local school district offices in a final plea to “Save Our School.”

Saturday, September 5, 1968

I remember meeting our new principal today and receiving my teaching schedule for senior high English. He said, “You don’t have any assigned English classes. Just go down to your teaching area and see who comes to you. Start talking with them and find out what they would like to study and how they would like to do it.” What if no one comes? And how are other faculty reacting to this fellow – after all, we are the same members who were here last fall. No one volunteered for this transformation.

I’m Don Glines, director of the Wilson pre-K through college program from 1968-1973, and the one just referred to as “that principal” who was hired to stimulate the change process.

The video you are about to see is an effort to historically preserve Wilson as one of the truly innovative laboratory schools of the twentieth century; but, more importantly, it is to serve as a catalyst for educators in the nineties to go beyond the concept of restructuring what exists, and instead create new learning systems for the future – to assist in the transition from schooling to learning, to reduce reinventing the wheel. Wilson did much of the needed research and development. The program was described in several journals as the most innovative public school in America from 1968-1977.

As you observe the picture, look especially for what you do not see – 30 desks in straight rows, textbook series, routine large group lectures, empty hallways, and the other signs of a conventional building. We began working on a philosophy, which said that “if schools are to be significantly better, they must be significantly different.” We wanted to look for ways to create learning systems that would be more appropriate for the 21st century. Willie Wonka put it very well when he said, “We need to create realities out of dreams and dreams out of realities. We are the dreamers of the dreams.”

Astronauts tell us that we can be on Mars in 2015 if we choose to put a real effort into it. That’s a one-year trip in a capsule. If the astronaut program can determine a way to arrive on Mars by 2015, then certainly in the next 20 years educators can determine how to eliminate such mistakes as 7th grade schooling, and eventually design a society without required 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. attendance.

Historical records document two previous great lab schools which affected change in education: The University of Chicago under and following John Dewey, and the Ohio State University School which was a part of the famous Eight-Year Study. The Wilson Campus School at Mankato State University has been acknowledged as the third of the three most important lab schools of the twentieth century. Its existence has been documented in a 1992 doctoral dissertation by Kathleen Long at the University of Oregon, titled Teacher Reflections on Individual School Restructuring.

In this video we are going to portray a few of the salient changes that we felt were particularly important in making Wilson successful. It is a composite of photos, slides, and movies taken at the time of the events pictured by students and faculty. A few current additions have been included. If you put them all together, I think you will see a significantly different learning system with an ungraded, continuous progress setting for 600 three-year-olds through eighteen-year-olds, and, in addition, pre-birth, and undergraduate teacher education and graduate experiential education programs in the same building. One could enter Wilson as a “pre-schooler” and exit with a master’s degree. Then one could return as a parent or resource volunteer for short or long periods of service, and finally, spend as much time as desired there as a senior citizen. All of these ages routinely helped each other learn through the Wilson program.

Although the “new options” for all ages were literally limitless, the traditional competitive sports, music, and forensics programs were also continued. In fact, we missed the state basketball championship in 1977 by one point. Wilson students were routinely successful in sports, speech, theater, and music events at the local, regional, and state levels.

I remember the many hours we spent individually and as a faculty making continuous progress for every student a reality. Giving faculty and students the right to develop curriculum in an on-going manner following individual interests and capacities made it possible. Every teacher a learner and every learner a teacher gave us a viable delivery system. We really didn’t think that you taught things to students but rather that you helped them learn. They had to accept the responsibility for learning. They had to learn to become self-directing if they weren’t already, and so our task was to assist in the learning process, not to teach from the textbook. Students paced themselves; we had no ability groupings. The natural bridge into lifetime learning was exemplified by community service, work, and the enrolling in college courses both by students and faculty. Even elementary age youth could earn college credits by taking a mini course or a full quarter course. These were awarded when they graduated and attended a university. But more importantly, this helped to build self-esteem in many students. It also eliminated the college freshman jitters about competing at that level. Because Wilson was committed to year-round education, students could go as fast (or as slowly) toward their goals as they wished. Vacations became very flexible.

Carrying the philosophy of continuous progress even further led to the development of undergraduate teacher education programs and a master’s degree. The S.E.A. plan (Studies in Education Alternatives) became a Mankato State University recognized and State of Minnesota certified track for preparing elementary and secondary teachers. The program was built heavily on choice, fieldwork responsibility, individual planning and other elements of the Wilson philosophy. Outward Bound also figured in this option. The Experiential Education offering (again based on Wilson precepts) exists yet today at MSU as does a portion of the SEA program. When approved in 1971, a student could earn a master’s degree in Experiential Education at Wilson – forty-eight quarter hours, no requirements, work it out with your committee. The

candidate could teach most of the year and through seminars and assistance from the Wilson faculty could learn to teach by teaching. This was the first Experiential Education accredited degree approved by the North Central Accrediting Association.

The non-graded philosophy at Wilson allowed many types of “groupings.” Sometimes the group would be a few (or many) of the same age, but more often would contain a wide range of ages. Thus there was a focus on cross-age and peer tutoring. I remember a scene in the Environmental Center. The high school football team was taking a minicourse that they labeled Bachelor Survival and our star senior quarterback couldn’t thread his sewing machine, so Nancy (a “first grader”) climbed up on his lap and showed him how. I remember, too, the seven-year-old fascinated by African history – who joined a group which was predominantly 13, 14, and 15 year olds. No one could see him when he talked so he merely stood up on his chair when he contributed to the discussion.

Wilson did not use grades, class ranks, units or credits. These were considered discriminatory and labeling. We eliminated gifted and special Education programs and mainstreamed all the students. Although we did have special education support services to the other teachers and all faculty did work individually with the (traditionally designated) special ed students when we felt it was appropriate.

To me, the most important change we made at Wilson was in the area of human relations and shared responsibilities. Students and teachers were not assigned to each other. Rather, they chose to work together. We let all the students choose their own teachers and all the teachers chose their own students. In later reviews, we found there were six factors involved in the student’s choice of teachers. I remember they chose on the basis of personality, perception, age, gender, interests, and skills. Some teachers were chosen by many students, others by fewer. Some students, too, were forced to examine possible reasons why a teacher chose not to work with him or her. As a student and a teacher established rapport, they would identify areas of interests (or develop new ones) and the learning would begin. I remember that we set goals and shared those goals with advisors and parents. Carbonized “goal sheets” – always evolving – became a way to swiftly communicate among the student, teacher, parent, and advisor. And speaking of advisors, the advisor-advisee system operated in the same manner as the teacher-student relationship. Students selected their advisors; advisors selected students. If the match didn’t work, a change was made.

Teachers as advisors were friends and counselors of students. Often they were co-learners. They helped students with emotional problems as well as in the cognitive areas. As people examined our advertised “69 First Year Changes,” many felt that this choice of advisor by students was the most significant change. Truly meaningful choices changed the whole human relations equation. This adult became the lawyer, the defender, the counselor, the scolder, the person that the student in school most related to and with whom that student had a high degree of comfort. The significance of the teacher/advisors/student relationship process resulted in the elimination of all required courses. Over the years, when students evaluated teacher-advisors, students most prized the adult whom they viewed as thinking, “He/she felt I was a very important person.”

Wilson considered that growth in the affective domain was first and foremost more important than the psychomotor and cognitive. Our theory was that when students felt good about themselves, they could learn cognitively. Our commitment to this idea was evident not only in our advising system but also in the fact that a staff position was allotted to a full-time

“counseling” position. This person roamed the halls, however, and visited with students where the action was instead of sitting in her office. When students matured emotionally, they were not only able to tackle cognitive learning and very often move through that learning at a rapid pace but also they were allowed to move slowly without being put down for doing so. Therefore we had three-year-olds – in the pre-school program – who were reading at the traditional third and fourth grade levels, but we also had traditional third graders who were not able to read. These students were not put into remedial reading; they were allowed to begin reading at what was for them the “teachable moment.”

For some students, the psychomotor domain took top priority for varying lengths of time. This was especially true for five, six, and seven year olds. They were strongly encouraged to use the physical education, industrial arts, and home economics areas rather than giving strong attention to reading and math. As they developed their gross and fine motor skills, their cognitive and affective areas blossomed. Attendance at physical education classes and wearing special clothing were both eliminated as requirements – for all students. The importance of developing motor skills and wearing appropriate clothing were emphasized, however, and the resulting program and participation in it were evaluated by an MSU Education Specialist’s thesis as the best in the Mankato School System.

When students were functioning well in the affective, cognitive, and psychomotor areas, the focus was on creativity and personalized programming. Students learned in the areas of their interest, receiving personalized instruction according to their own learning styles and creative ability.

We also changed the physical environment of the school. We took down the walls and created suites instead of individual rooms, or we put in walls to make rooms smaller. We bought air walls to try to be more flexible. We painted the walls purple or blueberry, or whatever, to try to provide a little more color, to make them more friendly. We eliminated as many desks as possible; most of the big yellow high schools desks went to the basement. We got rid of textbooks as much as possible. Sure, we had books around for students to study, but no classroom sets of thirty. We put all of the traditional sets of readers in the basement; then we tried to tailor reading programs to students rather than students to reading programs. As a result we had approximately twenty traditional reading programs and numerous hybrid programs from which students could choose. Each child worked with the approach that generated success for that individual. We found ITA very effective for some students but not effective for others.

We didn’t encourage the learning of algebra; but if the student did want to study it, we had seven or eight different algebra books: Two or three of one set, one of another, four of yet another. We let students select the one they wanted and found that gifted math kids preferred the small print and very little explanation so they could breeze through it; the slower math students wanted big print, lots of diagrams, and lots of explanation so they could try to figure it out. We couldn’t buy textbooks that matched every student – and that’s why we didn’t have textbook sets. From 1968 to 1977, Wilson never purchased a class set of textbooks. One of the evaluations of Wilson stated that the school spent more money on transportation than on textbooks – and that was great! However, we didn’t spend the money on big yellow buses. Rather, we spent it on twelve passenger vans to take students into the community and to bring the community into the school.

We offered exploration in many foreign languages, but there was an immersion program in Spanish. In addition to being allowed to spend as much time as they wanted in the Spanish laboratory, many students participated in an exchange program with schools in Mexico. Wilson

students exchanged homes with Mexican students. They lived for a month with a Mexican brother or sister, attended the Mexican school, and went on many field trips in Mexico – all the time being immersed not only in Spanish language but also Mexican culture. The Mexican students came to Wilson each spring and lived with Mankato families. They tasted American “apple pie,” Midwest lifestyles, and the Minnesota Twins, as well as Wilson classes. This program was successful to the extent that many Wilson students became near-fluent in Spanish and the Mexicans much more fluent in English. Spanish language and Mexican culture “brushed off” onto many older Wilson students. We even had elementary youth taking classes from Mexican high school students and from other Wilsonites who participated in the exchange program. Lifelong friendships were formed and visits back and forth continue to this day.

I remember our exchanges/visitations with several native American groups in Minnesota and other states. The most extensive was with the Choctaw tribe in Mississippi. Wilson kids lived with them for several days and a group came to Mankato to live with Wilson students for a short period.

While the Choctaw were at Wilson we had a beautiful example of how K-12 students, and youths from two cultures, can work together. We had a three-week introductory course on Choctaw, because we figured some of the older kids who were going to Mississippi should at least learn “hello” and “goodbye” in Choctaw. It turned out that some of our kindergarten, first, second and third grade kids were also enrolled. They wanted to learn a new language too. And when the Choctaws left, who were the best students in learning Choctaw – certainly! The youngest children. And they had been taught by high school age students from another culture.

In looking back, I guess we could say that we had a five-phase organization for learning – one-to-one, open lab, independent study, small group, and large group.

One-to-one was used very much. Sometimes it was a counseling-exploring situation; another time it might have been an instructing session (often with a child teaching an adult or another child); at still other times evaluation was the focus.

Open lab tended to be more active learning that could be done without a teacher. A teacher might be working with a group while individuals or other small groups did an art project, a science investigation, or a reading investigation.

Independent study tended to be more passive and often totally student initiated – reading a book, listening to a tape, practicing an instrument.

Small group was used as a learning organization with great frequency. I think many people had the impression that Wilson was a series of logs with a teacher at one end and a student at the other. Or, perhaps, rows of carrels with a student in each one. But Wilson staff knew that children enjoy purposeful groups and that learning independently was no fun unless the discoveries could be shared. So ad hoc small groups constantly formed to explore a new topic, to share findings, or to work with a teacher. Small groups were sometimes formed at a teacher’s request (we need to clarify how to shift decimal points when multiplying) and/or at student request (what makes popcorn pop?). Small groups might meet daily for an hour over a month or once a week for twenty minutes for a quarter or for any other variation that served the purpose of the groups. They varied in size from five to fifteen, but the typical group was seven or eight.

Large group meetings as a learning organization were seldom used. Notice would be posted that a speaker would be in a certain place at a certain time – come if it interests you. Occasionally fifteen or more people were interested in the same topic for a period of time and they would meet together – as long as the group served their purpose. Of course, during the first

year or two, there were those famous “assemblies” where the new director explained how the school was “supposed to be” functioning.

I thought it was neat that both students and teachers were allowed optional attendance. Teachers could attend conferences,, meet their doctor, dentist, or keep other appointments. Or they could simply take a day “off” by just arranging with his/her team to cover – no explanations, no forms to fill out, just go. They could also “catch up” with planning, reports, and material selection in the building, but not meet with students for a day or a portion of a day. Everyone remembers the note left on the director’s desk by a staff member:

“I’m staying home tomorrow. This day has been HELL.”

And I also remember the staff member who stayed home one day in anger. She decided to scrub her kitchen floor. The director’s face kept appearing as a reflection and she scrubbed harder and harder to rub him out – in retaliation for what he had said. Wilson was a beautiful, human, caring school; but, as in most loving families, there were times of stress and frustration.

Since students had so many choices, their long and short range plans had a great amount of flexibility. Students could goo-off one day and work sixteen hours the next. They could work on a mixture of many subjects or all day on one subject. With this came responsibility and courtesy – Wilson’s KEY words. I remember we felt that responsibility is learned by success and failure. But making a wrong education choice at ten years old is less costly than at twenty-five – and you learn from the error. What better way to learn to accept responsibility, commitment, and courtesy than in gradual increments with guidance at school and at home? “After graduation” one does not suddenly learn to be self-directing.

The consumption of food was always something of a controversial issue among teachers and parents at Wilson. Students could eat any time. Our cafeteria served food all day long – from early morning until late afternoon. But, to allow our cooks to develop some semblance of a schedule, hot lunch was served between eleven and one. The rest of the day sandwiches, carrot sticks, apples, and our famous symbol (doughnuts) were available. Students knew they had a choice among eating or studying or going to a group meeting – just as the adults had the same choices.

Wilson students were a fascinating cross-section. Because we had the only one-story high school building in the city we tried to be especially aware of programs for the handicapped. We tried to be more accepting of young pregnant girls and they tended to gravitate toward our school. We accepted transfer students on probation and worked with them. Many of our students were exceptionally talented and graduated from colleges with honors. For those having difficulty with the law, we accepted the recommendations of the probation officers. If they felt the student would benefit from a chance to attend Wilson, we tried to provide for that need. We wanted to illustrate that Wilson could work for all social, economic, and academic levels. We had successes and failures, but we discovered that students from all types of backgrounds often functioned better in a less restrictive environment.

Initially at Wilson we built a new master schedule based on teacher and student requests for every student and every teacher every day (daily smorgasbord scheduling). Although frustrating at first, this system eventually led us to become a non-scheduled school. Once the curriculum was completely personalized and individualized, there was no need for an organized schedule. One-on-ones were arranged by teacher and student, teachers announced special open invitation presentations and events, labs were always open and small groups were scheduled by the members. Posters were an effective means to communicate offerings to students.

Our continuous learning program, year-round philosophy and flexibility of schedule and attendance facilitated our students' involvement in the community. They could become very much involved in projects and social service experiences and were assisted in finding ways to help others. All students were encouraged to choose either from an extensive menu of opportunities or to devise their own plan to help in a significant way. Examples of their choices were entertaining at nursing homes, helping disabled children at the YMCA pool, shoveling walks for an elderly neighbor, getting to know and assisting a nursing home resident, taking on environmental concerns, helping in a campaign, tutoring other students, reading to the early childhood participants, interning at the state mental hospital, and serving as candy strippers at the local hospital.

Most students stayed in school until the traditional 17 or 18 years old, but in some cases it made more sense to finish early if the parents and faculty approved. One example I can think of was a student who wanted to become a nurse and had done a pretty good job at Wilson preparing. She left Wilson in March for a nursing program which began in April in order to complete it a whole year earlier than the traditional June graduation would have permitted.

We tried to interrelate the curriculum. Of course there were rooms that were more home ec oriented, more science oriented, more math oriented, more typing/computer oriented, because of the facilities needed; but we tried to have the teachers work as teams across traditional subject lines by creating, for example, things like a Center for Environmental Studies. Topics like household chemistry and drug chemistry brought the chemistry and home ec teachers together. The home ec teacher could make the pancakes and the chemistry teacher couldn't, but the home ec teacher didn't know why the bubbles rose in the pancakes while the chemistry teacher could explain the process. To encourage people to work together, we asked all the faculty to teach in their non-fields. For example, Gail, who usually specialized in math, spent time in industrial arts helping the students with the math needed in that area. And the students then became teachers to help Gail learn how to operate the equipment and use the goggles. They saw her in a whole different light. She was no longer only their math teacher making them do fractions; she was a learner and they were the teachers. We did whatever we could to help the students and teachers to integrate the learning process rather than to consider curriculum as separate subjects.

Another Wilson change was to expand kindergarten by implementing a full day program in 1968. A few years later the program was further expanded to include an early childhood component for 3 and 4 year olds. Because of parent interest we eventually opened a parent operated part-time 2 year old program. These Beginning Life Centers were more self-contained than the rest of Wilson. Again the emphasis was on individual needs and abilities. Children advanced as they matured. "Field trips" around the building prepared them for future independence. Older students learned baby-sitting skills.

We also learned that "daddies" were terribly important at the early childhood level. I remember that we made sure we had male staff members working in the program because we didn't want just "mommies" with the younger children. The kindergarten kids also left their home base to participate in physical education, industrial arts and other areas with male staff members. Our kids had anywhere from five or six to ten or fifteen adults that they worked with during the day, many of them male.

One and two-child families were becoming more common in the seventies. Our wide cross-section of ages gave those children experience (and counseling) as they inter-related. We found

that problems diminished with a mixture of ages. Acceptable behavior was valued. In the 21st century the need for parenting skills (or being a responsible sibling) will be even more vital.

I have always found that comments made by students and parents about Wilson were interesting and enlightening. Typical were the following:

“I like Wilson teachers better – the teachers here – you can teach them, too.”

“I don’t even look forward to the weekends anymore.”

“I surprise myself that I’m not afraid now to talk – to speak up in groups with grown-ups – any more.”

“I have more self-confidence now because I found out that I can work under this system. I do have self-motivation and it’s not just teachers hanging over my head. That’s kind of nice to know – that you’re able to do something on your own.”

“It’s kind of different to be able to do something on your own.”

“It’s kind of different to be able to talk in a class and say just what you feel about everything – right out of your heart.”

“When my son was a first grader attending Wilson, my brother and his family were here for a holiday. He asked my son the typical question, ‘How’s school?’”

“‘Oh, it’s really fine, really fine,’ said this little six-year-old, ‘but you know, I’ve decided that I’m going to drop typing because I’m going to take computer. I can pick up typing later, but I really want to get on that computer!’”

That boy was making meaningful decisions that some senior high school students are not allowed to make in most schools.

There were no graduation requirements. We told the students that what was on their transcripts didn’t matter – as long as there was something. We started with no transcripts at all in the traditional sense, but later we developed one that listed their studies under traditional subject headings so that people who were unfamiliar with the school could understand the student’s program. We would take a topic like dream reality and list it under whatever heading would most closely fit the individual student’s focus. One student might study dream reality through poetry, and it would become an English class; other students might study the scientific aspect of dreams, or the influence of dreams on society, as, for example, in the sociological effect of Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream,” or as art, depicting the dream process on canvas. We did have, especially in the later years, graduation review committees, selected by each student who was considering graduation, so that suggestions about any apparent gaps in the overall program could be made. But usually the decision was fairly clear cut because the students had been working with their advisors and teachers all along.

One question was always asked by visitors: “How can we let new students sign up for advisors and teachers when they don’t really know them?” Well, we simply encouraged “window-shopping.” We gave kids a temporary advisor; then we said go out and shop around the school like a supermarket. Find those areas where you would like to study and the adults in those areas with whom you would like to work. Find an advisor to whom you feel you can relate, and then change to that person when you are ready. And so the window-shopping concept was born!

At Wilson we attempted what we called differentiated staffing and team teaching. We tried as much as possible to have teachers work in teams and try different learning designs. For

example, in the second year, learning teams were created and told: “Here’s all the money we have; spend your share as best you can for whatever your team needs.” This prohibited the administrator from hoarding the money in the office and then deciding what projects he would support. Wilson was pretty much staffed like a hospital. We had some doctors, some nurses, nurses aides, lab technicians, and candy strippers. We didn’t try to have everyone equally prepared. They were equal in terms of being persons, but in the realities of their training and skill level, there were obviously some doctor kinds of people in the school, as well as lab technicians, volunteers, and nurses aide equivalents. Wilson staff or learning teams included student teachers, graduate interns, university staff, practicum students, and volunteers.

Speaking of evaluation, we at Wilson did not believe in group comparisons. When we used standardized achievement and/or intelligence tests, the results were analyzed to help the individual student – not to compare one student to another. The exception to this philosophy was the occasional research project which required comparative data. Wilson students scored well.

In comparing Wilson students with other entering freshmen and MSU, Wilson graduates scored higher in every category except writing skills. Because we encouraged a very verbal environment, those results were not surprising. We did not react by suddenly requiring special writing classes, but we became more alert to the needs of certain students and encouraged them to do more writing in ways appropriate to their interests and learning styles. Evaluation then, was never to determine if a student was above or below some non-existent “grade level norm.” It was, rather, to determine what an individual knew or might need to know.

I’m often asked, “If Wilson was so successful why did it close after only nine years of innovative programs?”

The demise of Mankato Wilson Campus School did not result from its program, its philosophy, its results, or even its costs. The budget was based on the same ADA as all schools in Mankato and was below the Minnesota average. Care was taken to ensure that the program could be replicated throughout the north central states. Further, the legislative committee visiting Wilson had nothing but the highest praises for the program; they clearly stated that Minnesota needed such efforts. When the North Central Accrediting team visited the MSU College of Education, they spent a day at Wilson. Their final report said that the “most exciting program on the campus” was the one at Wilson, and that it was time for the entire college to “consider adopting the lab school practices.” Later a professor from the University of Michigan was hired to evaluate the program at Wilson; he basically said the same thing. He stated that it would be a real loss to the university, the state, and to the profession of education if the legislature were to close the school. Visitors, worldwide, were overwhelmingly complementary of the program and envious of those students, teachers, and parents who could participate in it. Dr. J. Lloyd Trump and other such nationally recognized leaders in education who visited Wilson applauded our efforts. Even one of the proponents of “de-schooling society” stated that “if you must go to school, Wilson was the best he had seen.”

However, as the state was faced with the need for funds for new buildings, and as Mankato State needed to merge two campuses into one, the legislature decided that all Minnesota laboratory schools should close so as to provide more buildings for the universities at no expense to the state building fund. In closing them, however, they stated that the local school districts should develop their own “lab schools” to continue the work of Wilson. In Mankato, tremendous efforts were made to move the Wilson program to one of the local district schools. Students even marched from the campus to the local district offices to try to preserve the philosophy. Unfortunately, political, space, and financial considerations led to a four to three

Board of Education decision not to retain the program en masse, but “to disseminate its good ideas throughout the district.”

So, in the late 1970s, after changes of leadership at the levels of college president, lab school director, local superintendent, and Mankato Board of Education, Mankato Wilson Campus School became history. The lessons learned though, are of such great value for schools creating new approaches for the late 90’s that this videotape is but one effort to disseminate knowledge that will assist in the transformation of education. The program was beautifully successful for those families, students, faculty and visiting educators who chose to benefit from the opportunities provided through a personalized philosophy.

Wilson was planned as a transition model toward the 21st Century, when schools and schooling will one day be phased out and replaced by community-based life-long learning systems. Staff was involved with the early efforts of the World Future Society to address the 64 global dilemmas. Buckminster Fuller, Ron Barnes, Robert Theobald, Willis Harman and other noted futurists were household names. Wilson also worked with the planning for the proposed Minnesota Experimental City – the MXC – a city designed for 250,000 people with no schools. Everyone was to be a learner; everyone a teacher. The city was to be the living/learning laboratory. Life-long learning was no longer to be a cliché but a reality.

The Wright Brothers, two bicycle shop proprietors without a high school diploma, changed transportation and revolutionized the world. Wilson staff wanted to do the same for learning – to be the astronauts – the space center for education – to find a way, as Lucy and Charlie Brown one day discussed, to finally learn how to get the educational desk chairs unfolded. For one brief shining moment, Wilson did create their Camelot.

Wilson Campus School – the joy of learning from one’s peers, one’s friends – of all ages (even “teachers”).

Wilson Campus School – interacting, exploring, questioning.

Wilson Campus School – where sixty-nine proven innovations were made simultaneously.

Wilson Campus School – a place where mistakes were allowed and accepted, and where support for correcting them was always available.

Mankato Wilson Campus School – remembered.