

FROM EAGLES TO TITANS: PEN PAL PARTNERS
Orchard Place Elementary School and Illinois Wesleyan University



The Partners

Orchard Place

Located in Des Plaines, Illinois, Orchard Place Elementary school serves approximately 300 students in grades Pre-K through 5th. The student body includes a range of socio-economically, linguistically, and ethnically diverse students: 68% are Hispanic, 62% are English language learners of varied ethnicities and first languages. Another 55% of students qualify for low-income services. Our partner class, fourth grade students taught by IWU alumnus Stephanie Hajdu ('06) reflects the student diversity in the school: of the 25 students, 11 are white, 11 are Hispanic, two are Asian/Pacific Islander, and two are African-American. About one-half of these students speak another language at home, 25% receive English Language Learner services, and eight percent have Individualized Education Plans.



Illinois Wesleyan University

Illinois Wesleyan University (IWU) is located in Bloomington, Illinois and enrolls 2,100 students in liberal arts and professional studies. More than 120 of these students are K-12 teacher certification candidates enrolled in the Educational Studies Department. The mission of the department is to develop teacher-scholars committed to social justice in their



classrooms and schools so that the democratic ideals of equity and opportunity are realized for all students. The Student Education Association

(SEA) is an affiliate of the National Education Association and is designed to foster educational leadership.

Partnership Mission

On their own, schools and families may not be able to support the academic success of every student¹ and in particular, language minority students, including immigrants and the U.S.-born children of immigrants.² When schools partner with other communities and organizations, support for students is enhanced. "Research indicates that students who are successful academically, in addition to support from parents and teachers, usually have sustained access to other knowledgeable and caring adults."³

As a prospective participant in the *No Excuses University* (NEU) which is part of the *Turn Around Schools Network* of K-8 schools, Orchard Place has pledged to "create a school that knows no limits to the academic success of each student."⁴ In particular, NEU member schools adopt the principles that (1) every child has the right to be prepared to attend college and (2) it is the responsibility of adults in the school to develop exceptional systems that make that dream a reality.⁵

Every one of the students at Orchard Place Elementary has the ability to learn and a bright college future ahead of them. All children, even those who live in poverty or who are learning English, can be academically successful and attend college. The primary goal of the partnership, then, is to develop a comprehensive plan to expose Orchard Place students to the sights, sounds, and ideals of college through the support of mentors from across IWU, through the auspices of the SEA and the Educational Studies Department.

¹ Kirst, M. (1991). Improving children's services. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 72, 615-618. Cited in Carolyn Temple Adger, (January 2000) School/Community Partnerships to Support Language Minority Student Success. Retrieved 16 September 2008 from <http://www.cal.org/crede/pubs/ResBrief5.htm>

² Adger, C. T. (January 2000). School/community partnerships to support language minority student success. Retrieved 16 September 2008 from <http://www.cal.org/crede/pubs/ResBrief5.htm>

³ Clarke, Reginald M. (1989). *The Role of Parents in Ensuring Education Success in School Restructuring Efforts*. Claremont, California: Council of Chief State School Officers. Cited in US Department of Education. (1998). *Yes, You Can: A Guide for Establishing Mentoring Programs to Prepare Youth for College*. Retrieved 16 September 2008 from <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/YesYouCan/sect1.html#why>.

⁴ <http://turnaroundschools.com/neu-network/>

⁵ <http://turnaroundschools.com/about-us/>

The Pen Pal Program

The Partnership was jumpstarted at the initiative of Ms. Hajdu with the support of IWU Director of Alumni Relations Ann Harding, who provided IWU memorabilia to Orchard Place fourth graders.⁶ The class has "adopted" IWU and will research and cheer for the university.⁷ The next step is for Orchard Place students to develop connections with IWU students across the university through a pen-pals program. Through these connections, Orchard Place students will learn from their college pen pals that they are worthy of their time and effort.⁸

IWU students' letters to Orchard Place students will provide information about college life and the importance of college to the achievement of their professional and personal goals and aspirations. Orchard Place students will write back with questions and news about themselves, their school and their classroom. Additional partnership goals include student field trips to the IWU campus and visits by IWU students to the Orchard Place classroom.

Through their knowledge, experience, and by example, IWU pen pals will provide Orchard Place students ways to expand their horizons and thereby increase the likelihood that they will achieve success. By drawing upon their own life experiences, IWU pen pals will provide a living example of the attainability and value of a college education.⁹

Program Benefits

Orchard Place students will

- Develop an awareness of the educational achievement and skills they will need for success in their own career paths, and do so just prior to the critical years of middle school.
- Learn about possible career choices they might not otherwise be able to explore.
- Develop relationships with adults who have been successful in their own student lives.
- Receive encouragement for their own goals and dreams from caring adults.
- Practice and improve their reading and writing skills, critical for success in school.
- Be connected to a world outside beyond their home and school borders.
- Develop confidence in their abilities and potential.
- Be inspired to achieve academically, and begin to see college as an achievable goal.

⁶See the article,

<http://www.titanpride.org/s/653/index.aspx?sid=653&gid=1&pgid=665&cid=1421&ecid=1421&crd=0&calpgid=61&calcid=1306>

⁷ If the number of IWU volunteers warrants, the partnership may grow to include additional Orchard Place classrooms, or provide for one-to-one matches, at the discretion of the Ms. Hajdu.

⁸ US Department of Education. (1998). *Yes, You Can: A Guide for Establishing Mentoring Programs to Prepare Youth for College*. Retrieved 16 September 2008 from <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/YesYouCan/sect1.html#why>.

⁹ US Department of Education. (1998). *Yes, You Can: A Guide for Establishing Mentoring Programs to Prepare Youth for College*. Retrieved 16 September 2008 from <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/YesYouCan/sect1.html#why>.

IWU students and teacher candidates will have the opportunity to

- Serve as role models and mentors for young students.
- Have a significant impact on the lives of young students.
- Strengthen leadership skills.
- Learn more about the literacy development and thinking of young students.
- Develop skills in communicating with and motivating young students.

The university will

- Demonstrate a commitment to service, social justice, and professional development by supporting the efforts of SEA volunteers and other participating university students from across campus.
- Enhance alumni relationships by partnership with an alumnus.
- Enhance teacher education by partnering with a public school with a diverse student body, and which is committed to social justice.
- Strengthen partnerships with K-12 schools to enhance the potential diversity of prospective student applicants.
- Strengthen partnerships with K-12 schools to enhance the academic achievement of potential prospective student applicants.

Partnership Coordinators

IWU alumnus and Orchard Place teacher Stephanie Hajdu ('06) (s.m.hajdu@gmail.com)

4th grade class, Orchard Place Elementary School, Community Consolidated School District 62 of Des Plaines, Illinois. <http://www.d62.org/orchardplace/home/index.html>

IWU Student Education Association (SEA) Service Committee, 2008-2009:

- Caitlyn Barnes (cbarnes@iwu.edu)
- Erin Bradley (eradley@iwu.edu)
- Emily Houk (ehouk@iwu.edu)
- Christine Szukalla (cszukall@iwu.edu)

Professor of Educational Studies and partnership advisor, Robin L. Leavitt (rleavitt@iwu.edu)

Responsibilities of Participants

Orchard Place will

- Secure any required parental consents for students' participation in the pen pal program, including the copying of student letters for program assessment, reporting, and publicity purposes.
- Supervise student letter writing and collect letters to send to IWU partnership advisor.
- Share letters from IWU volunteers with fourth grade class.
- Coordinate with IWU volunteers for classroom visits and field trips to the IWU campus.

Volunteers will:

- Agree to attend letter writing sessions coordinated by the SEA service committee coordinators.
- Handwrite letters (no typing, legible script okay) on Partnership letterhead provided by the IWU Educational Studies department.
- Agree to be a positive role model for Orchard Place students through the language and content of letters.
- Agree to allow copying of letters by faculty partnership advisor.
- Agree not to develop relationships with Orchard Place students outside of the partnership program.

SEA service committee coordinators will:

- Commit for a full academic year.
- Recruit volunteer participants, including occasional “guest” letter writers from various student constituencies across campus (for example, athletics, student government, theatre).
- Coordinate the writing of monthly letters from IWU students to Orchard Place students.
- Distribute university letterhead to volunteers.
- Host monthly letter writing sessions for volunteers, with refreshments. Replies from Orchard Place students will be shared at these sessions, beginning with the second session.
- Collect letters the first of each month and deliver them to faculty partnership advisor Robin Leavitt for copying and mailing.
- Share response letters from Orchard Place students with volunteers at monthly letter writing sessions.
- Solicit volunteers for campus and Orchard Place visits, collaborating directly with Ms. Hajdu and reporting to IWU faculty partnership advisor Robin Leavitt.

The Educational Studies Department will

- Provide letterhead, envelopes and postage.
- Provide support and faculty advising for volunteers.
- Maintain file of copies of outgoing and incoming letters (for program assessment, reporting, and publicity purposes).
- Provide mentoring resources to volunteers.
- Coordinate with other university departments as applicable.

Guidelines for Volunteers

- Write in ordinary language appropriate to fourth graders, without being condescending.
- Letters should not be longer than the front and back of one sheet of letterhead.
- Handwrite letters in legible print or script. Follow grammatical rules.
- The first letter should be an introduction: who you are, that you are a college student and what you are studying, that you are interested in learning more about each of the students in Ms. Hajdu's class. You might add a description of the college – the campus, what you like about college, what you are learning in college....
- Subsequent letters should provide more information about college life and learning, and *respond to specific questions and comments Orchard Place students write in their response letters.*
- Other ideas of what to write about:
 - What it is like to eat on campus (cafeteria, meal plan, Tommy's, Dugout, etc. – enclose photos).¹⁰
 - Some of the different buildings at IWU, where classes are (enclose photos).
 - what college classes are like (enclose photos).
 - what it is like to live in a residence hall and/or with a roommate (enclose photos).
- Refrain from moralizing, lecturing, and preaching, telling students what they should or ought not do.
- Refrain from idealizing college life; be realistic at the same time you inspire.

Vocabulary words to introduce to Orchard Place fourth graders throughout the semester:

major
application
professor
advisor
research
GPA
dormitory or dorm room (residence hall)
finals
bachelors' degree
scholarship
loan

¹⁰ The Educational Studies Department has a digital camera volunteers may borrow.