

Americans All® Takes Root in Wichita, Kansas

Dr. Leonard H. Wesley, Jr.
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My school district's involvement with the Americans All® program has its roots in the Supreme Court's historic 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which struck down school segregation. After the *Brown* ruling, officials in Wichita, Kansas, signed a consent decree with the federal government to desegregate their public schools. We've worked diligently during the past half-century to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Through the years, we have searched for programs that would help us develop a diversity-based approach to education. The students in Unified School District 259 today comprise a myriad of ethnic, racial, cultural and religious groups, and virtually every classroom reflects that diversity. Our challenge as educators is to develop programs that help children learn to appreciate the differences and similarities of various groups while ensuring equitable treatment for all.

The new faces in our student population are tremendous assets. Yet learning to teach these youngsters and finding ways to use their stories to teach their classmates require some innovative approaches to K-12 education.

In December 1990, while serving as an assistant superintendent in charge of desegregation and integration efforts, I joined a delegation of Wichita educators at a national desegregation conference in San Diego, California. During the conference, we visited the city's International Baccalaureate High School to assess whether programs being used there might be appropriate for Wichita. The high school was very impressive, and we later decided to bring the International baccalaureate program to Wichita.

Yet among all the fascinating work underway in San Diego, we were particularly intrigued by a unique history and civics program—Immigrants All, Americans All—sponsored by the Coordinating Committee for Ellis Island. All of us believed in the importance of history and civics, especially at a time when we faced a steady influx of minority and foreign-born students. If schoolchildren are ever to understand one another, they must learn not only the story of their nation, but also the stories of the immigrants who built the United States.

The changing face of our student population presented exciting opportunities. The new look, however, also meant unexpected challenges as educators grappled with ways to place the stories of all of the children in an American context. We worried that the challenges would be even greater as school budgets shrank or different problems became priorities.

That's what made Immigrants All, Americans All attractive. Here was a comprehensive program that had been specifically designed to address the need for children to learn about the United States' long history of diversity and what that has meant to its development. The program, we believed, would foster a better understanding of our nation's background, which would go a long way toward creating an atmosphere of tolerance in our community. Our delegation came away from the visit wondering whether the innovative program would work in Wichita.

Even before the trip to California, the delegation—a group of teachers, administrators and curriculum development specialists—had begun to review programs to help meet the needs of our diverse school population. After the San Diego visit, the delegation was expanded into a cadre that included community representatives and members of an advisory committee on desegregation and integration. In addition to studying ways of reinventing and restructuring curriculum and instruction, the cadre was asked to identify equity issues and assess the status of diversity-based education in the district. Most importantly, we hoped to analyze issues, demographics and social trends affecting the strategic planning for our schools and develop a comprehensive, long-range plan to address those factors throughout the district.

The review required an enormous amount of work, including analyses of readings, conference papers and research and survey data. At an organizational meeting in December 1992, I offered cadre members the opportunity to enroll in graduate courses at the district's expense. Working with Dr. Tonya Huber of Wichita State University and Ron Naso, the district's assistant superintendent for curriculum services, I announced workshops to facilitate the cadre's efforts.

In the next six months, the cadre held 13 meetings at Wichita High School East. A steering committee met before each session to consider topics and procedures. At the meetings, discussions focused on reviews and analyses of readings, videos, national models, conference papers and other related issues of concern to cadre members.

A workshop in May focusing on equity and multicultural issues firmly established the committee's primary goal. Dr. James Boyer, a Kansas State University education professor and the executive director of the National Association of Multicultural Education, had earlier met with senior board of education officials to explore diversity issues affecting education. Using Dr. Boyer's guidelines, we expanded the definition of "equity" in education to mean a fair, just and impartial education based on individual student needs.

The goal of equity education, the cadre concluded, is to provide appropriate curriculum, instruction, services and assessment so all students can reach their highest possible education level. A diversity-based education should prepare students to live, learn and work in a diverse world. With proper structure and planning, this process fosters respect, tolerance and appreciation for all people and helps students learn essential skills.

Equally important, the cadre realized, teachers and administrators must become actively involved in the process. Working with curriculum services and other district personnel, teachers must help students learn to appreciate different cultures and ethnic groups. The various activities have to be incorporated in an interdisciplinary manner within existing curriculum areas. Classroom activities and displays of instructional materials should represent groups that exist within the school as well as groups that are not represented within the school.

These were ambitious goals, and we set out to find programs that could help us achieve them. We studied programs such as We The People and Project Reach (Respecting Our Ethnic and Cultural Heritage), and MCRAT (Multicultural Reading and Thinking), creating study groups and offering additional training to help cadre members evaluate the various options. Other members, working with outside consultants, continued to refine the district's goals for diversity-based education and developed methods to assess the effectiveness of the system's efforts.

As the discussions continued, some of us who had attended the San Diego meeting a few years earlier began asking the cadre to consider the Immigrants All, Americans All program. By now the program had been renamed Americans All®, and its sponsor, now called the People of America Foundation, was working with the publisher Houghton Mifflin to distribute program materials nationwide. The publisher's local textbook representative told us that Americans All® had scheduled a meeting in Kansas City, Missouri, to introduce the program to educators from Kansas and Missouri, and we assembled a team of teachers, administrators and curriculum officials to attend the conference in March 1993.

We came away from the Kansas City sessions even more impressed with Americans All®. The program seemed well suited to our needs. Americans All® teaches the principles of democracy through the experiences of different ethnic and cultural groups. The program stresses the need for self-appreciation as well as sensitivity to others, and it aims to keep students in school and help them develop skills for functioning in a diverse cultural setting. Parts of the curriculum focus on the kind of critical thinking that young people need to compete in an increasingly interdependent global economy. The program's co-founder, Dr. Gail Christopher, emphasized that classroom materials and teacher-training tools were already developed and available to school districts at a reasonable cost.

What was most striking, perhaps, is that Americans All® tells the stories of the groups—Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, European Americans, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans—that increasingly comprised the population of the Wichita public school system. These are groups that had a significant impact on the birth and growth of the United States. Dr. Christopher explained that teachers, using the stories of these groups, would be able to show their students how immigrants and their cultures helped shape the United States.

Dr. Christopher, it seemed to many of us, got to the heart of the matter by asking two very important questions. First, is it possible to teach the history of our nation by illustrating the contributions of all its people? Second, is there a way to diversify the content of classroom resources to promote appreciation of the various cultures that comprise America?

Americans All®, Dr. Christopher said, brings both goals within reach. She pointed out that the San Diego pilot project, which was funded by grants from the Hitachi Foundation and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, had been extremely successful. Two dozen schools in the San Diego Unified School District, the nation's eighth largest district, had participated, and both teachers and students were impressed with the results.

"You learn about other people—where they're from and what their background's about," one student told a local newspaper. Another stated the program taught him what immigrants "went through and what countries they came from and why they wanted to come to America." "If I know a lot about my past," one boy said, "then I know where I'm headed in the future."

And San Diego wasn't alone. Teachers in other parts of the United States were also offering ringing endorsements of the program. One teacher in New York City said the work her students produced through the Americans All® program was "the best research project my students have completed in 25-plus years of teaching."

That type of experience was what we wanted in Wichita. Bringing together the various ethnic and cultural groups has been a priority for the Wichita Public Schools since the *Brown* decision. Under our consent decree with the federal government, we were expected to take steps to desegregate our school system, which was then roughly 80 percent Caucasian and 20 percent African American. Our initial effort was an annual lottery in which white children whose birth dates were drawn at random were reassigned to predominately African American schools. In addition, African American children were moved to certain districts to create feeder patterns that would ensure more integrated schools through high school.

The effort was largely successful, but other minority children were not part of that lottery process. As our school population grew increasingly diverse, we realized we needed new initiatives to address the needs of the new population.

Americans All® met those needs. We were even more convinced of the value of Americans All® after Dr. Huber at Wichita State University compared the objectives of our history and civics curriculum with the objectives of Americans All® and found an almost perfect match. So we went to work creating an Americans All® pilot program in 10 schools in Wichita.

We were able to get full funding from the board of education through the general budget and federal grants designed to create a curriculum that reflected the demographics of the district. With the money in place, we asked teachers and administrators in the pilot schools as a first step to form teams that would be trained to work with Americans All® to help import the program. As incentives, participants were offered stipends, or three graduate credit hours per session or professional growth development points (both to be used for renewal of their state teacher's certificate). The program also met district requirements for diversity training.

We presented an overview of Americans All® at several district-wide staff meetings. In the end, about 40 teachers from the pilot schools agreed to work on the program. The program came together rather quickly. Dr. Christopher led our first training session in August 1993, and she and other Americans All® representatives continued to work with our staff as the program took shape.

The initial training sessions lasted two full days, a total of 12 hours of workshops with trainers and facilitators. Substitute teachers took over the classrooms of program participants; frequently other support staff, such as librarians, also took part. Participants received Americans All® kits—slides, a music program, photographs and timelines that charted key events in the history of the world at large, the Americas and the program's six ethnic and cultural focus groups. They were asked to incorporate the materials in their class plans and share them with other teachers.

Several schools formed teams, including teachers from the primary, middle and upper grades and the principal and librarian, that later trained other teachers on the program. This enabled us to quickly expand the scope of the program. In some cases, a full set of Americans All® materials was placed in the library or media center, where it could be used by other staff members and reviewed by parents and members of the community interested in the district's programs.

The entire training process was subjected to regular evaluations. Participants were asked their opinions of the program and whether it met their classroom needs and the district's objectives. Americans All® received high marks from the outset. Our teachers swiftly grasped the meaning of the materials and had no difficulties integrating these resources into our history and civics curriculum.

After a decade of experience, we are convinced Americans All® has been a boon to the whole education program in Wichita. We know that new realities in education will place once unforeseen pressures on our program. School officials in Wichita, like their counterparts across the nation, are juggling resources to meet conflicting demands. Under the federal **No Child Left Behind** mandates, for example, some funds used for Americans All® are being diverted to programs aimed at meeting more rigorous math and reading standards.

Money woes have also made it difficult to expand training and seek follow-up reports from teachers who have participated in the program. Yet one of the strengths of Americans All® is a constant peer review, which enables teachers to share thoughts on how to make the program work successfully. In addition, the district has discussed the possibility of convening a conference of all Americans All® staff for a comprehensive review of the program after 10 years.

During the past decade, we have made a point of providing regular updates on the program's progress to the board of education, which has been very supportive of the effort. In October 2002, after a presentation by Mark Evans, assistant superintendent in charge of curriculum, Dr. Delbert Johnson, coordinator of social studies, and myself, the board adopted a resolution praising Americans All®.

Americans All® is a cultural diversity program [that] has functioned as an addendum to the social studies curriculum for 10 years. The program has provided extensive training and materials for K-12 teachers. In 1993, the district was afforded an opportunity to become a part of the fledgling program called Americans All®. At that time, Americans All® was funded through Chapter 2 as a part of the diversity program. Under the local guidance of Dr. Leonard H. Wesley, Jr., Americans All® became a fixture in this district as it provided knowledge about principles of democracy as expressed through the experiences of diverse groups, created higher levels of student awareness, and provided critical- and creative-thinking capacity needed for success in today's workplace and an interdependent global society. Using our common heritage of diversity and democracy, Americans All® collectively responds to today's demographic imperatives by focusing on factors that unite rather than divide the American people.

Our involvement with Americans All® has underscored our belief that the history and civics curriculum is essential to the development of young people with the skills to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. Our experience has shown us that a program such as Americans All® helps students from all backgrounds live and work together and prosper in a diverse, democratic society.

The school system is now grappling with revenue shortfalls at the state level that are resulting in cuts in basic operations. We will continue to work with whatever means we have to keep the program moving along.

Leonard H. Wesley, Jr.

Leonard H. Wesley, Jr., has served in several capacities during his 37 years with the Wichita Public Schools, including elementary teacher, assistant principal, assistant director of Head Start, elementary principal, supervising principal of elementary education, director of elementary programs, division director of elementary education, division director of compensatory and accountability service, and assistant superintendent of schools.

Most recently, Dr. Wesley was assistant superintendent for desegregation/integration and federal projects, responsible for implementing, supervising and maintaining the Wichita Public School District's desegregation/integration plan. The 32-year-old plan has been recognized as one of the most effective in the nation.

Dr. Wesley is involved in numerous community endeavors, including the Sedgwick County/City Special Task Force on Crime and Substance Abuse; the Task Force on Students At Risk; the Statewide Advisory Board on Black and Other Minority Infant Health and Mortality; the Youth Development Adult Advisory Board; the board of directors for Cities In Schools; the board of directors for Credit Union of America; the board of directors for the African American Male Academy; the Urban League of Wichita, Inc.; the National Committee on School Desegregation/Integration; the Multicultural/Multi-ethnic and Diversity Task Force Cadre for United School District 259; the National Association for Multicultural Education–Kansas; and the Adult Advisory Council for Big Brothers/Big Sisters. He is a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and also maintains membership in several professional organizations, including the Wichita Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the Kansas Association of Elementary School Principals and Phi Delta Kappa.

Dr. Wesley has received many awards and recognitions. He is most proud of being named The Bishop's Outstanding Layman for the Third Episcopal District of the Christian Methodist Church. He also takes great pride in the Golden Eagle Award, for outstanding service and contributions to his city and the nation, given by Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., of Wichita, and the H. Councill Trenholm Award, for his work on eliminating racial inequities, presented by the National Education Association.

In addition to his bachelor's degree in education from Pittsburg State University, Kansas, Dr. Wesley holds a master's degree in school administration and supervision from Wichita State University. He earned his doctorate in public school administration, supervision and higher education from the University of Kansas.