Strot All right, this is Rick Strot. I’m interviewing Paula Hoover at Hillcrest Professional Development School in the Baylor classroom. It is February 18, 2004, at about 4:25. Thank you again, Paula, for agreeing to this interview. Now, we’re picking up. We did an interview earlier, and now we’re doing a second interview. And so, let’s start with the learning aspects of Hillcrest. So, first of all, if you would, describe to me what influenced decisions in curriculum and instruction at Hillcrest PDS in the early years.

Hoover I think initially most of the ideas of curriculum were guided by what newer research and suggested ideas from research about cutting edge ideas would be. I think at that time my perception was that multi-age, obviously not a new concept, but some new research had come out about multi-age classroom settings and so initially we went with that model because we felt like it would allow for individualized instruction of children and differentiation of their learning styles and abilities, basically to help them with their own pacing. So, I really—I can remember distinctly lots of talk about being on the cutting edge, trying
new things, and not for the sake of just because it was a new thing, but because there was research behind it that said that, and that it might not be what the full district was doing or what other people even in Texas were doing, but we wanted to give it a try and see if it would work in our settings.

In terms of your own position at Hillcrest at that time, being the music teacher, what would you say influenced your decisions for how to teach music at Hillcrest?

Hm. I had just a few years, I think about three years before Hillcrest opened, gone through Orff-Schulwerk training, the music methodology. And that had changed the way I taught school, or the way I was teaching school before. So when I came to Hillcrest, I really came with that being the strongest methodology that would lead my teaching. And at Hillcrest I was given the opportunity to get a fully-equipped room that allowed me to do a great deal of that, so not a new methodology at all at that time. It had been around for several years, was definitely sweeping through Texas pretty strong at that time, and so I would say that that’s what affected my decisions about learning and how learning would go on about. I also found that to be very friendly with the multi-age setting just because of multi-age classes, I found that I had children, first, second, and third graders all together. And when it comes to finding gross motor skills and what they can
and can’t do, the arrangements in Orff allows to find a place for everybody to contribute to the music. So it melded well with that idea.

Okay. You had mentioned earlier that in terms of the school, cutting-edge was a word that was frequently referred to, so would that word describe the Orff—what’s the second word?

Schulwerk. It stands for schoolwork.

The Orff-Schulwerk method in terms of Texas at that time: was that a cutting-edge thing to do?

Hm. I don’t know if it was cutting-edge. It was closer to the edge than other things, maybe. (laughs)

I wondered about that because you said it changed the way you taught in school previously.

It really did. It did. And I had been introduced to it in college just very briefly, but not really much more than a definition, and it really wasn’t until I experienced some of it that the picture really became focused for me about teaching and how to teach children.

I should mention, I noticed the same thing in Austin with our music teachers at that same time, and maybe a couple of years previous to when I came to Hillcrest, was that that was a word that you heard a lot.

Right.

Okay, describe characteristics of learning and teaching at Hillcrest PDS. If you were to characterize how it went here, what would you
I would characterize it as a “can-do” attitude. (laughs) You know, I still find myself often going back to the motto that we were given before we even came on, that idea of “a community of learners,” and that learning and teaching at the school was really about all of us learning at different levels and at different paces. And I really think teachers, some of us for the first time began learning again, and really opened up the idea that teaching wasn’t about being the knowledge person in the room. It was just about being the facilitator and helping everyone find knowledge. The idea that we still had lots to learn together, and I think we really took on an attitude of “all children can learn, and it is my job as the teacher to find the way in which they can learn.” For me, it was the first time I had worked with a group of people who I really felt like every single one of us believed that. Now, we might need someone to help us find a new way that we’ve never tried before, and many times we ask that question of one another, but there really was a sense in the building that all these children can learn, and how are we going to help them do that? And I’m going to learn how to learn. You know, that sort of thing. So, a real can-do attitude from all of us, and I think that spread to the children. I think early in those first years, particularly, we had children who had not been in successful situations. Either they had been told they couldn’t learn or
they hadn’t been challenged to learn new things. School was too easy for them. I think we had that mixture of children. And for the first time, we either challenged children to learn new things, or we showed children all of us can learn, and we’re going to find a way for you to do it.

Strot

Well, I was going to ask you to describe the vision for student learning at Hillcrest, but I think you’ve just done that, unless there’s anything else you’d like to add.

Hoover

(Speaking at the same time) Yeah, exactly. No, I think that’s real accurate of where we were.

Strot

Good. Well, let me ask you some questions dealing with diversity and equity at Hillcrest in the early years. I know you did this a little bit in the first tape, but again describe the families who sent their children to Hillcrest during the first years of the school.

Hoover

Well, I think I kind of acknowledged that in that last one, too. We really, it seemed to me almost two camps, that we had a group of parents who maybe in some ways you would almost think of being one step away from private schools. They were people in public schools, most of them, though there were those who came from private schools as well, but obviously had a very strong participation in their children’s education, wanted more, they were looking to try something new for their children, very interested, a very integral part of that
learning. Many of them from financially pretty well-to-do families. I mean, not people that I would call strongly rich or anything, but they definitely had middle, higher income levels. At the same time, we had students of families maybe who either—probably two things. One was they cared a lot about their children, but socially it was maybe their first opportunity to do something outside of their neighborhood and to break out of that a little bit. And then, I think we had families whose schools had told them, you know, Your children can’t be successful, your children aren’t successful, this is your fault, and who maybe were frustrated and looking for an answer. And many of those came from lower socioeconomic situations. It made our PTA a real interesting place to be. (laughs) But, yeah, I think that two very extremes there, and the one thing tying everybody together seemed to be a real desire for something unique and unusual.

Okay. You touched on this a little bit just a minute ago. How were issues of equity dealt with at Hillcrest? Equal opportunity for resources, everybody being treated equally, and so on?

You know, student-wise, I really think we saw that—I feel like every child was given an opportunity to do everything they wanted to. We found a way to make that happen for all children. If the money wasn’t there, then we quickly found sources to help with that. You know, I’m thinking of there were children who when the first field trip was taken
to—their very first school trip was taken to Colorado—that there were definitely children on that trip who financially couldn’t afford that trip, but the school, through means of people sponsoring them or grants or something helped make sure that there was that. And we searched that out. We purposely tried to find that balance to make sure that the different socioeconomic as well as ethnicities were—done that. There was a lot of discussion when it came to ethnicity, particularly, about a balance. It was something that Dr. McIntyre(?) verbalized and really taught us about that. It was to constantly look for blendedness. If you were going to have a group of kids interviewed by the newspaper, he made us verbalize, articulate and think about making sure that all ethnicities were represented in an interview. When we took pictures as a staff, he would stop, turn around and look at the staff, and make sure that at as a staff we had blended. That there wasn’t a picture of Anglos on one side and African-Americans on the other side. There was a—I can remember when we were filling the Snickers master teacher position, we didn’t have it at that point, and we were just about ready to begin, and specifically saying, It really would be nice to have another African-American. And so we talked about it a lot, but in a very safe way, and it was a way to make us conscious, to raise our level of consciousness about it, and then to really, I think, in a lot of ways change a lot of our personal lives and a lot of our opinions about some
things. I mean, I really think it had an effect in who many of us are, and that we really opened our eyes to see people in a much different way. I never—to have thought I’d ever be at a school where you would stop and say, Uh, we’re not balanced here, you know, in other settings that would have made people uncomfortable, and we had to work through that and to realize we were doing that because we had to be direct about doing it, first to paint the right picture, and then knowing that if we made it—if we walked it, then eventually it would become a part of who you were. And I think that really took on among our faculty, I think it did among our children, and I think in many ways among our parents.

Strot That’s wonderful. You mentioned that it was Dr. McIntyre who was sort of the leader in making sure that everybody was aware of that at the beginning. So, I just want to probe this a little further. After Dr. McIntyre left the school after five years, and we—then another principal came on, describe how the staff continued or whatever happened with those feelings of equity. New principal and the staff had changed slightly, but there was still a good core of those original teachers.

Hoover Yeah, I think even to this day, if we get ready to take our staff picture, there are still people among us who say, Wait a minute. We’re not blended. I really—and that’s why I think he—probably the first time
he said those things, we all kind of gasped. Oh my gosh, you don’t speak that out loud. I mean, that makes people, you know, notice they’re different. But I think he gave us permission to say that to one another, and so I think once we had that safety net, we didn’t need him anymore to do that. And I can remember right before he left one time, we went to a concert and some kids were going to be interviewed by the local TV station or something, and he said, “Pick me four kids who are to go up and talk.” Well, the first two I picked happened to be Anglo kids, and he looked at me, I can still see his face, and said, “Blendedness, you know that.” And I looked back at him and said, “I know. Give me just a minute.” I mean, my other two I was going to pick was going to be blendedness, but it was really funny. It was like, I’ve spent these years with you. I get this. I understand this. And I really think to this day that there are people like Jim Patton(?) who went through that with him that I am sure at his campus he does that same kind of thing still now. I think there are probably interns who were with us who on their campuses look for that. I know that I never choose kids for anything these days now without thinking that in my head.

Now, you mentioned—or just a minute ago, that you sort of gasped when it was first brought up, so that leads me to ask, why was this so unusual in Waco, which is an ethnically diverse city?
I don’t know.

Or, why was everybody kind of shocked that this would be brought up? You said, Well, it’s something you usually don’t mention.

You know, I really think it has to do with somehow that Waco still being very old. I mean, and I really think it amazes me that I teach with people who helped Waco become integrated. I mean, even to this day they’re still teaching. And that that didn’t happen years ago. I mean, I never knew school segregated. And I know some of that for me is the difference between growing up in the South and not growing up in the South, but we didn’t have two schools. I never knew that.

So, I was always shocked when I found people right here in this building who were some of the first people who went and taught at white schools being African-American themselves. So, I think that’s what it is. I mean, I really think Waco was—both on campuses and as a whole administration, still was doing a lot of old-school things. And the attitudes and about that was still very much, Yes, we’re all working on the same campus, but let’s not talk about how things used to be.

And he gave us permission to talk about that, talk about what was bad about it, talk about what was good about it, what should we reclaim, are there things that worked, and from any of those different eras. But he gave us permission to talk about sensitive issues like that in a safe environment, and because of the self-directedness of the school and
because of agreed upon rules or considerations that we agreed upon before we started, you could talk about sensitive issues, you could agree to disagree, you could get pretty angry and cry and raise your voice at one another, and then you always left a meeting realizing tomorrow we’re going to come back in, we’re going to work together, and we’re going to respect each other for our different and very unique views, but it doesn’t mean we can’t work alongside each other. Maybe because of the bottom core line being that we all do care about children, we believe that all children can learn, and we’re going to find a way to do it.

Strot

Okay. Thank you. Let’s go back and talk about the vision a little bit in this context. What part of that original vision for Hillcrest do you see as having remained the same, pretty much, now as Hillcrest has progressed over ten years?

Hoover

(sighs) I think the vision of the passion for students’ learning. That there is a way that all children can learn, and that we have to give everything we can and find every resource we can to see that each child can. And I think that’s probably the one piece that we’ve really strongly held on to. I think the other piece of the vision, that at times we’ve had to fight for, is that if educators are empowered in the school, they will be passionate about what they do. It won’t be just a job. And, if you give them that power they can do the work. But you
must give them the power. You must give them that respect, you must give them the power to do that, and you must let them be the ones who decide what they—how to go about doing it. It can’t be this filtered-down leadership. It’s got to be leadership from within.

Strot

Well, I think this might have been something you were getting at there, but what part of the vision has changed. (Hoover laughs) Is that the part you were describing as changed, or are there other things that you would think of as part of the vision that has changed over the years?

Hoover

I think we’ve—I mean, part of the vision that’s changed is how you go about doing the dual mission of training teachers and teaching students all at the same time. I think we’ve had to find a way to do that. I think we initially kind of threw out the baby with the bathwater on teaching teachers, and we had to kind of back up a little bit and say the old model of student teaching isn’t all bad. There are parts of that that work. And then I think because of leadership within the administration for Waco particularly, the empowerment of the staff has become less—

Strot

Are you talking about changes at the central office level or principal or both?

Hoover

I think both. I think definitely it’s central office. I just don’t think the current administration truly believes in site-based management the way others have that we’ve gone through since then. And then I think
principals, too. I think that for whatever reason—and maybe it’s because of that central administration, but I don’t think that since Mack we’ve had a principal who would lay down a budget on the table and walk out of the room and say, “Y’all figure it out.” It just hasn’t been there—and to trust us enough to do that. And for whatever reason, be it fear of central administration, be it non-belief that that’s our job, whatever, but for some reason I think that has changed as well.

Strot
Okay. Well, let me just say—first of all, is there anything else you’d like to add about Hillcrest that we haven’t covered in the categories we’ve talked about?

Hoover
Nothing comes to mind. I feel like I’ve talked about it all.

Strot
Good. What—you mentioned the Everywhere School earlier, and just say a few more words about that in terms of an example of something that was done in the early years that was pretty unusual for an elementary school, and what was the reasoning behind that, and so on. From your point of view, how did it evolve? (coughs) Excuse me.

Hoover
Well, I think the idea of Everywhere School, of taking children to learn any place we go, and take them out of the walls of the school came early on, and we did that with small groups, or people did that with small groups; I was never a part of any of that. And I think taking small groups to Colorado and to Louisiana gave permission for what
for me has become the ultimate Everywhere School experience. And that’s our experience with our Showtime group, where if somebody hadn’t taken twelve or fifteen kids to Colorado, and successfully have done that with the principal, and it seems to me you guys had as many adults as you did children in those first couple of trips, then nobody would have given us the permission to say, sure take forty—take eighty-eight kids and go over to the Davis Mountains ten hours away. And I don’t know—that’s one of those questions I don’t know about Mack(?). I don’t know if Mack ever really truly envisioned us taking the Everywhere School program where we did. But the fact that we can take children on a trip like that and go out of state and take three and four day trips without parents along and make that an educational, very tight, strong curriculum that it is, was only because of the vision of people who said, Let’s take kids on a trip while we’re out of school on these four-week breaks. Let’s learn through a different experience. And so from that the Everywhere School has evolved into a very big event with the Showtime thing for our fourth and fifth graders, but I think it also gave permission to second and third graders and first graders to, instead of just taking the typical zoo trip here in Waco in the spring, to say let’s take first and second graders to San Antonio, to Sea World. Let’s take them to Fort Worth. And has widened up that idea, to begin those kinds of things. And so, I think—you know, and
then even in the smaller realm, to say we’ve had ones who have taken
the city bus and gone just here in Waco, but to take a field trip on a
city bus, that seems like a weird thing, but to say learning isn’t about
sitting in a room talking about it, it’s about getting up and getting out
and doing some things and giving them that experience. And I think
taking those fifteen kids to go pick apples was the beginning of all that.

I have one last question for you. When you think, now, of the ten
years that you’ve been at Hillcrest—well, going on eleven now—how
has Hillcrest PDS influenced the two collaborators, Baylor University
and Waco ISD [Independent School District]?

Well, the Baylor one’s easy. I mean, I think it’s changed the way
Baylor does education for their students. I think because this was
overall a success, it said this can be done in other places. It can be
done here in Waco for all of our students to do this. I think it also
motivated some people who Hillcrest didn’t turn out the way they
wanted it to, to want to try field education a different way. And I
think that’s good, too. I mean, but I think it gave Baylor the
permission and the excitement to turn a total degree into a field-based
degree. So I think it’s changed that.

And has Hillcrest had an influence on the Waco district?

Oh, I think it’s raised the bar. I think for two reasons. I think because
we have fed interns who’ve gone through this program into some of
our schools. Not as many as probably Waco would like, but we do have some out there. I think the other way is almost a way to spite us. That we can have scores as high enough and have happy enough kids and kids who learn just as well without it being a professional development school. Because we’ve kind of been the thorn in a lot of people’s side. So I think in some ways they worked harder to prove that, and I think we raised the bar early on, and I think many, many, many schools in this district have met that challenge in their own way, and I think that’s exciting, and I think it’s made administration people look at teachers differently. I know that we are respected in a much different way than teachers at schools were when I came here ten years ago. And I think it’s given teachers in this district permission to question administration the way we do. And I think it’s empowered teachers in this district just from hearing about things we do and from sitting in workshops with us, and for us sitting there going—saying to people, Show me the research behind that. That doesn’t work. And to have the permission to, I’m an educator. I want you to listen to what I have to say, too. I don’t have to just sit here and do what you tell me to do. And so I think it’s empowered teachers, and I think it’s raised the success of schools in this district.

Okay. I know I said that was the last question, but I realized I had one more thing to ask you, because you have had two children go through
this school, both of whom are still in the school here, so they started, I
guess, after—about the fourth or fifth year that the school was in
session. And I know it’s not unusual for teachers to have their
children at the same school they are at for various reasons, but say a
little about as a parent watching your children go through Hillcrest,
how that influenced you in your outlook on school and your outlook
on Hillcrest once you became a parent role as well as a teacher role.

Uh, hm. I think the passion that I feel as their co-workers daily, I have
felt through my children. My two children who are here right now are
both very different learners, for very different reasons. And I think
both of them have gotten out of school what I would want my
children to have out of school, and that’s to feel very loved and very
accepted and very challenged. And I don’t think my children have
gotten that because they’re my children. I really think that’s what all
children get at this school, or have the opportunity to. And that’s the
kind of atmosphere and surroundings I would want my children to
have for school. You know, given a good safe place to learn, most
children, if have the support from home, can do that, and that’s what
my children have been—and nobody has ever told them they couldn’t
do, and no one has ever said to them, That’s all you can do, don’t try
for any more. They have always been challenged. That’s great, but I
know you can do better. But they’ve always been loved and accepted
for what they do, and it’s given them permission to be who they are.
And I, you know, as a parent I’ve found that it’s not a perfect place. I
mean, you know, we’re all humans, (laughs) and we do some things
that aren’t perfect and aren’t right and some days—

Hang on. I’m going to turn—
That’s okay.

Side 1, tape 1 ends; side 2 begins.

Okay, we’re—I just turned the tape over, and we’re continuing again,
so continue that thought.

Yeah, but just, you know, that this isn’t—nobody here is perfect. They
make the same kind of mistakes that average and bad schools make
some days, but they’re willing to talk about it with you, work it through
with you, and grow together. And so, as a parent I found that out, that
it’s not perfect. It’s not a—there is no perfection, but there are people
who are willing to work together and be a team with you to help find
what’s best for your child. And I can’t imagine my children anyplace
else. And I’ve never had to face that. That’s been an interesting thing.
I’ve never had my children someplace else, but just trying to envision
them—I mean, somebody asked me the other day what my home
campus was, and I couldn’t tell you by where I live. It was like, uh, I’m
not sure. And I’ve listened to parent after parent after parent, as their
kid gets into that fifth grade year say, Oh, I wish y’all had sixth grade
here, and, Oh, they can’t leave here. And I’ve always rolled my eyes at those people and just said, “Oh, please go on. Grow up. They’ll be fine.” And now that I find myself at the beginning of that door, I have those same emotions. I want to say the same thing, and I understand that. And it’s not just about middle school, though that’s much of it. Middle school’s a scary time for any of us to send our kids to anyway, but you suddenly realize what a wonderful cocoon this has been and that you may not get this just everywhere else, but that it’s a perfect place that’s filled with imperfect people, but they’re all working. And I guess that’s it. I mean, it’s not perfect, but boy there are days when it really feels like it.

Strot

Sounds great. Well, unless you have anything else to add, we’ll conclude the interview at this point, and I really do appreciate you doing this.

Hoover

Absolutely, I enjoyed doing it.

End of interview.