Fred Curtis

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Rick Strot
January 29, 2004
Dr. Curtis’s office at Baylor University

Strot
Okay, would you state your name please?

Curtis
K. Fred Curtis.

Strot
This is a test. (pause in recording) This is Rick Strot. I’m interviewing Dr. K. Fred Curtis in his office at Baylor University on January 29, 2004 at about 1:40 in the afternoon. Dr. Curtis, thank you for allowing us to interview you and as you know, the subject of our interview is the beginning vision for Hillcrest Professional Development School, and then how that then developed. So, I understand—just to set the scene here—at the time that this was going on, was your position—what was your position at that time?

Curtis
I was the associate dean of the School of Education.

Strot
Associate dean, and that was under Dean Lamkin at that time.

Curtis
At that time it was Lamkin, right.

Strot
Bill Lamkin. So now if you would please, tell me when you first—what your remembrance is as how the idea for creating a professional development school with Baylor and Waco ISD came about.

Curtis
Baylor was a part of the Holmes group starting almost at the inception
of Holmes group, which goes back into the eighties. I’m not sure of the date of the Holmes group. And it was probably in the late eighties or early nineties, 1990’s when we really started thinking of a professional development school at Baylor University.

Strot

Now, just to clarify, the Holmes group during this time was a group of top universities that had schools of education, and it was a group in which the deans and administrators—originally was the group that met to talk about education.

Curtis

That’s correct. Since it’s become Holmes partnership which has broadened the base and has changed somewhat.

Strot

And at this time that you’re talking about in the then early nineties was kind of a transition time for Holmes group, as I understand.

Curtis

It was beginning the transition. But one of the major emphases of the Holmes was the professional development school, and several of the faculty from the School of Education and people from the ISDs visited some of the professional development schools that already existed. I led a group of probably six as I recall, six people to view a professional development school in New Mexico, and we were impressed by it, what was going on there. And this must have been in the late eighties, 1980’s.

Strot

And was this in Albuquerque?

Curtis

Yes, this was in Albuquerque.
Okay. And at that time was the purpose of those visits as part of Holmes group to explore the possibility of doing this locally?

That’s correct. Yes, we had not thought of a school at that time. We were thinking of possibilities of a number of schools.

And at that time, in your mind, at just those very beginning stages, what was your idea of what a professional development school would do for Baylor, since you were coming at it from a Baylor viewpoint?

I don’t know that we had a view. We were looking at schools to decide what a professional development school—how we could work with a professional development school.

So at this point, it was just the idea that there would be some sort of collaboration.

That’s correct.

Okay. Thank you.

And I don’t remember how many teams went out. We probably had three or four teams that went to schools in, I guess in a five or six state region around us. I don’t know how far we went. The only one I remember is going to the one in New Mexico.

And do you remember who paid for those trips? Was that—

It was Baylor School of Education.

They paid for both the school district people—

(speaking at the same time) I believe they did. Yes, I believe they did.
Again that was all, it was infancy at that point. And so, do you want to go ahead and start talking about it?

Strot

Yeah. So, that kind of starts the stage for then the meeting in Houston.

Curtis

Right.

Strot

Okay.

Curtis

Well, the meeting in Houston, and I believe it was the meeting of the South Cent—I gave you that—

Strot

South Central regional Holmes. And that was in fall of ‘91.

Curtis

Right. We took several Waco ISD and Baylor faculty, and we used my—I had a conversion van at the time, the kind where you could turn the seats around and do all those things. So, we went to the meeting in Houston, and the only person that I can remember from Waco was Dr. Bonnie—

Strot

Lesley

Lesley. And she was the associate superintendent, I believe, at that time. And so, coming back from that meeting—and while we’re at the meeting we talked at length. We were in meetings concerning different kinds of professional development schools and so forth. And coming back from that meeting in the van—in my van—we turned the seats all around, and as I was driving, we were talking about what kinds of things we could do at Baylor and in Waco to stimulate the professional
development school. And I remember Dr. Lesley saying at the time, “Well, we have a 1950’s age school that’s no longer being used that we would like to renovate and bring into use again, and perhaps we could make it a professional development school.” So, that was the very first statement, the very first idea of Hillcrest being—coming to our peripheral thoughts (??)

Strot
That was the first, We have a site, a concrete—

Curtis
That’s correct.

Strot
Location we could put it. Now, theoretically, can you remember who was in the van from Baylor?

Curtis
I don’t remember.

Strot
Okay.

Curtis
You know, there’s been a lot of van trips since then.

Strot
That’s right, but it was a group mostly of Baylor and at least Bonnie Lesley from Waco were there.

Curtis
There were probably a couple of Waco ISD folks, but I just don’t remember.

Strot
Okay, so when that statement was made, “We have a school.” Then, what was the response to that? What did that generate then?

Curtis
A very interesting response because at the same time, she mentioned that there were funds I believe set aside to renovate that school. And so, that would have been—that certainly was the initiative to start the
serious interest in Hillcrest as being our PDS [Professional Development School].

Strot

Was there any talk at this time about going for some of—at that time there were state grants being given out to consortiums between universities and local school districts for professional development and technology. We eventually received one at Baylor, but I believe that was the first cycle of funding was around those years.

Curtis

Yes. I think there was talk about that, but it was so new that we were—it was just talk—generalities.

Strot

So, the original idea then as the talk evolved, the funding was pretty much already there for renovating the school.

Curtis

That’s correct.

Strot

Were there any other—so that was one obstacle taken care of.

Curtis

Right. Then, we started talking about how Baylor could contribute, what kinds of funds that Baylor would have to contribute to this, what kinds of faculty Baylor would have that could contribute to this, what kind of shared responsibilities for hiring faculties and so forth. That was the discussion at that point, again it was very new.

Strot

Very new, but some talk about then administration and shared responsibilities administering the school.

Curtis

That’s correct. And a lot of that came from our meetings that we had at that conference because they were talking about those kinds of
shared responsibilities as far as funding, as far as hiring faculty, and administering the program.

Strot

And at that time, as you listened—and I imagine took part in this conversation as well, you were driving as I understand.

Curtis

(speaks at same time) I was the bus driver.

Strot

What ideas stick in your mind today from that conversation and all the ideas being floated around as to what this school might look like?

Curtis

Well, I don’t recall. I just remember that there was so much interest and that it seemed like we went out and visited that school shortly after that to take a look at it, and of course we were very excited, especially with the idea of the different kinds of changes they were going to make to the school, the structure of the school and so forth.

Strot

From that initial conception of Hillcrest PDS, then as associate dean, how did that process then move forward? What was your role, and how did you see then the process unfolding?

Curtis

Well, as I remember we—the next steps—and I don’t remember if Dr. Lesley stayed with the district at that time or when she left the district. I don’t know what her involvement was in the actual initiation of the—her involvement was that she started the idea of Hillcrest.

Strot

Right. And at that time, was the superintendent Fred Zachary or in ’91 do you think it was—

Curtis

No, it was Henson—Hensley [Jim B. Hensley]
Henson, and he left to go to Austin in the '92 to '93 school year. So, that would have been his last year there.

It may have been her. I don’t know when she left.

I think she must have left the year after he left then, because when I—

(pause in recording) (unintelligible) was there and Roseanne Stripling was the associate—was the assistant superintendent.

I’m not really sure how—when the school actually, when did the school—

The school actually opened in '93-'94 school year, in July of that year.

So, between the inception in '91 then it was about two years then until the school opened in the fall of '93. That’s fairly quick for a university to move that fast. (laughs) Oh, no. I’m kind of joking around, but again, did you—how did—do you remember anything in the process? Was there a committee appointed? Was the school board approached first to see how they would go with the idea? What point did it kind of become formalized and some group to go through the responsibility?

I really can’t remember. I just remember that it seemed like it moved very quickly. That, at the time, it seemed like there was a quite an initiation from the school district because they were interested in getting a school opened, renovated and opened. So, they were moving anyway I think.

So, the district had the—since they were doing the construction and
had a schedule for that, they moved rather quickly on their end.

Curtis

Yes, they did, but they really wanted the involvement as I recall of Baylor and the Baylor faculty. So, as I recall, we had a steering committee developed from a combination of Waco ISD and Baylor University that was responsible for the initial design, but I don’t remember who chaired the committee or—

Strot

________________________(??) That’s why we’re doing the oral history now, and hopefully somebody will have—will recall those things. But that’s not what’s important, recalling those details like that, at this point.

When—now, another aspect of the new school for the school district was that it was a magnet school. So, was—in your recall of how it was started, was there also the idea from the school district and perhaps a push to open another magnet school to help with the desegregation plan that they were—not exactly a plan, but that the magnet schools were a way to help integrate the schools in Waco?

Curtis

I don’t recall that that was the reason for that.

Strot

So, originally it wasn’t even intended perhaps as a magnet school.

Curtis

Not as I recall.

Strot

Okay. Okay, good. Now, as Hillcrest then got organized, they hired a principal. All that was going on before it opened in ‘93-’94. At the same time, I believe, Baylor was going through a change of deans, is that correct?
Curtis: Let's see we had a new dean in '93. Yes.

Strot: So, Hillcrest opened the same year that Baylor had a new dean.

Curtis: Sounds like, yeah. Charles Schmitz came in.

Strot: So, there was a lot going on on the Baylor side, just in terms of administration.

Curtis: Right.

Strot: Where all the school was being formed. Okay. Do you recall—because I imagine you took part in those interviews with Dr. Schmitz and the other candidates, was the Holmes group and commitment to PDS an important consideration as you interviewed people?

Curtis: Well, I think it was. In fact, the Charles Schmitz was a—had a high involvement in the Holmes group prior coming to Baylor.

Strot: Okay.

Curtis: So, yes. That would have been—

Strot: So, when he was hired, one of the things that was attractive about him was that high involvement in the Holmes group?

Curtis: High in—I think so, yeah.

Strot: And people knew him through that group, was it the same region as—

Curtis: (speaks at same time) Yes, uh, yes.

Strot: Okay, good. Okay, then as you re—then as the new dean came on and Hillcrest opened, what's your recollection of that time at Baylor and how this new PDS program—what was new about it, and how was
that accommodated within the School of Education?

Curtis

Well, I think with any new concept there’s a level of excitement, and I believe that this level of excitement was experienced by the majority of the faculty. I think that everyone was interested in what this new type of school would be like, and there was a level of excitement that would have a unique teaching group, group of teachers, and that Baylor would be involved in hiring them, and interviewing them, and so forth. So, yeah, there was a lot I think—I guess I’d call it a level of professional excitement or something like that.

Strot

And those were all of the things you just listed about a high degree of collaboration, being involved in hiring a set of master teachers and so on. This all came out of the Holmes group principles and their publications dealing with restructuring education.

Curtis

(speaks at same time) Yes. That’s correct.

Strot

So, there was a lot of excitement about those new things being embodied. Now, when you think about those things that were exciting, you mentioned too one high degree of university involvement. Now, as that played out, what was the involvement then to your knowledge? Let me just clarify, because I think we need to on the tape. At that time, only a certain number of faculty were actually working with our students out at Hillcrest. There were many faculty—there were other faculty who were involved on the periphery, on
committees, and looking at other ways that we would have relationships. So, Hillcrest was a part of a larger picture that many people on the faculty saw at that time. So now, within that context then, as Hillcrest went forward and these ideas about doing new things and state grants and so on were being explored, what were—well let’s look at it this way first. What were some of the obstacles that you saw? Certainly you pointed—the way a university is structured and then the way a school district operates. Were there any major sticking points?

Curtis

I don’t know if there were any major problems. I think anytime we have two entities trying to meld into one, and share expense, and administering programs and so forth, there’s—as I look back, it was a fairly smooth activity. I don’t recall any animosity or any kinds of problems. I’m sure there were some. I just—and obviously as any activity like this, a few people would take it and run with it, and I think that’s what happened ultimately. We had two or three people, three or four people maybe that spent a good deal of their time from our faculty in the school. And continue to do so.

Strot

Now, one of the things that was part of a vision for Hillcrest was having extensive field experiences out there, including a year long internship. Help me set the context for that because at that time, how much field experience was involved in the regular program that Baylor
students went to that this was to be—because the Holmes group was advocating more field experience—

We had limited field experiences. Pre-student teaching experiences, we had just a number of hours, not a high number of hours at that time. We probably had—I can’t even recall. Less than a hundred hours of pre-student teaching field experiences.

And those would be with a particular course like a reading course, and they would go out and spend the amount of time in the school working on reading. And then, had there been, to your knowledge, any programs before this time that had expanded the field experience or teaching—student-teaching experience in that senior year?

Not really.

So, this was a—really what is a new way of providing a senior level experience in these careers. And at that time, it was totally voluntary, people applied and were accepted. And how were faculty selected as to who was going to work with Hillcrest? Do you recall any conversation or did people just step up and say, “I’d like to do that” or—

I think people just made the decision or volunteered. I don’t know that anybody asked any of the faculty to participate in any kind of extensive degree.

Did it tend to be faculty who had senior level courses that could be
delivered out there, or who had previous field experiences that they now brought to Hillcrest and used with their senior level, or—

Of course at that time, our program was totally junior, senior level. We hadn’t hardly any freshman, sophomore involvement and so all of our faculty were teaching primarily junior, senior level courses.

So, anybody could have really qualified?

Sure. Yes.

And when you think about that time, what was the anticipation or expectations from Waco as to how many Baylor faculty would be involved? Was there any numbers that were handled—

I don’t think—I don’t recall anyone. There may have been some meetings. I don’t recall any particular requests or thoughts.

Was the idea of a sort of a critical mass—we had to have a certain number at least that were talked about?

I think we—when we started talking about the number of rooms, number of people involved, the number of students that we would have out there, then we started talking numbers. There was a limitation because of the size of the school and so forth.

Okay. Another thing that was unique about Hillcrest PDS when you think about both Baylor and the other universities working PDS’s is that it started as a brand new school.
That’s correct.

Now, did you have any thoughts about that at the time or in reflection about the wisdom of trying to start something brand-new as opposed to using an existing school?

Well, I heard we were one of the—as we visited other PDSs, most of them started as PDSs just from a school that was already going, and we could see some of the problems because not all of the faculties were PDS oriented, not all of the members of the faculty. And there is a certain philosophy I think you have to have to be a faculty person in a PDS school, and that is that you’ve got university students working with you in a more concentrated form than normal. And so—I lost my train of where I wanted to go with that—

Well in your mind then, was starting with a brand new school an advantage within a framework of how you should start a PDS?

(speaks at same time) Oh, yeah. Of course.

That would be—that was the sort of the ideal so that—

(speaks at same time) You’ll hire a faculty to be a faculty person in a PDS school, and you don’t—there’s no changing faculty mindsets and so forth, or I can throw this in. For example, I’m working with Cesar Chavez which is a new school this year in middle school. And it’s faculty is—was hired as a PDS faculty. And so, all of that faculty in that school know that there will be a significant number of university
students in the school, in varying capacities. So, yeah, I think it’s—obviously, it’s much easier to start in my opinion with a new faculty, all with the same PDS bent, if I can use that term.

I’d like to ask you another question that has to do with the university side of the picture. Now, as the PDS—as Hillcrest PDS started and even as it continued over the years and we thought about adding other professional development schools, what was your opinion as a faculty member of issues of compensation, of counting work at the PDS towards work load, scheduling differences that might’ve—were there things that came up that had to be dealt with in that way in terms of expectations of faculty of members who’ve worked at a PDS?

Well, I’m sure there were. At that time, Baylor had a different philosophy of what its faculty should be doing. Baylor at that time was a teaching university.

So, at that time there was—what you’re saying is there was no real concern about a research agenda for faculty at the PDS.

That’s correct. Right.

Okay.

And so, we could—you could count the amount of time you spent at the PDS in terms of course load and so forth which—at the current time, we will probably have a different bent, with a different philosophy than we have now.
And so, to clarify that those who were teaching at—who worked with the Baylor students at Hillcrest had those students enrolled in a course.

Right.

So, they counted that as their course load.

Course credit.

And their time at Hillcrest was part of that course credit. And at that time—

And at that time, there was less responsibility as far as faculty was concerned on research and those kinds of—

Well, research was encouraged and keeping abreast and presenting and so forth was valued, but it was not the total weight by the way you were evaluated. Now—okay. The normal course load at that time was what for somebody teaching at the undergraduate—

Four courses a semester.

Four courses, twelve semester hours. Okay. Well, the last—there are two other things I would like to—to have you address. And one is—and this kid—I was kind of asking that about faculty equity and faculty loads and so on, how that was dealt with. What about questions of diversity, because those were questions with which Waco district has struggled over the years. Was there anything in the discussions that was very explicit about we want to have, you know, a balanced student body in terms of ethnicity. We want to try to attract teachers from all
different—

Curtis

We talked a long—a lot about those process—and the process they had for admitting students into the school, I think was a lottery system as I recall.

Strot

I see.

Curtis

In fact, I think they still use that.

Strot

They do.

Curtis

Yes, and that was how we initiated the process, and I think they wanted to make sure that there would be a variety of students, ethnically divided and so forth.

Strot

And did this concern for the cultural diversity and an ethnic balance in the school—did this come from, just from—I know Waco was concerned about those things—but was this also part of what Holmes group was—

Curtis

I believe so. I think—

Strot

(unintelligible)—a priority, I guess.

Curtis

Yeah. I think Holmes was—has always been—at least in the development, early, of the professional development school concept, interested in ethnic diversity and so forth, making sure that all areas of the population were served, and had equal opportunities.

Strot

And at that time, ’91 to ’93, Waco was certainly a mixed city, had about equal balances I think of Hispanic, African American, and Anglo. But,
back in that time in ’91, ’92, ’93, were there—when this was being talked about in terms of it being multicultural and ethnically balanced, was there concern about being able to attract faculty to that school that would be the best faculty around and still be ethnically balanced and culturally diverse?

Curtis

There was concern. I don’t think there was any—they felt a problem. They wanted to make sure that they had an ethnically balanced faculty as well as student—

Side 1 ends; side 2 begins.

Strot

Okay, this is side two of the interview on January 29, 2004 with Dr. Curtis. All right, we were just kind of wrapping up, and we had talked about ethnic—the concern that was there for equity and diversity in setting up Hillcrest. When you think back to the original vision for a professional development school and Hillcrest became the first one, and what has then played out through the years? What do you think has changed, and what has remained the same about the vision for what a professional development school should do and be?

Curtis

Well, I think what hasn’t changed is the number of students that Baylor has placed out there in the activities and so forth that they had the opportunity to complete. I think it’s gotten better. It’s gotten more technological. Back in those days, technology was something in the minds of people, but not very much in use. But, now if you—as you
look at pro—at the school it’s very technological, and it’s state-of-the-art almost. And so, technologically it’s advanced considerably.

And let’s explore that for just a minute. Was that conceived as part of the vision, that somehow technology would—the ease of communication would help this to be a PDS, to be a part of the forefront of—

Oh, yeah, I think so. Yeah, I think that we wanted the school to be state-of-the-art, and to be state-of-the-art it had to be high level technologically, and it has.

And part—that was part of the vision of what a good school should be. Technology was a concern, there was grant money available for it. That was—so that was certainly part of the vision and continues to be.

What other things do you think haven’t changed about it?

Physically the school has changed considerably. They’ve added a lot of unique things, parks, play areas, and so forth. I think we probably involved a higher quality of our student out there now because of our own program. So, I think it’s—we’ve gone through a couple of administrative changes out there too. It’s changed the school somewhat. First administrator was probably one of the most unique administrators of all. And they—since then, they’ve had good administrators, different administrators, but—so it’s been kind of an interesting operation to observe.
Strot

What about the—in terms of getting started—it was alluded to in what you said, but there were a lot of existing relationships to draw on in terms of setting up this partnership and when you said, “Things have changed and some things have remained the same.” What about the importance of those partnerships that exist before you start a professional development school collaboration because now that Baylor has opened up others, we’ve had that process go on somewhat. Well, what is it that’s important about that, and then how long does that original partnership have to continue to keep things going?

Curtis

I think we need to prepare very much to enter into a partnership and that all sides need to know what the expectations are, and that we must constantly continue to develop those, and be sure that we don’t let them down because they won’t just automatically continue. They have to be massaged and enhanced and so forth. So, first of all we need to prepare for the partnership, and then when we get into the partnership, we need to make sure that everybody that’s involved keeps it going well, and does their part too to do this.

Strot

What you’re saying sounds exactly like what became embodied in the standards for PDS when _____________(??) begin a PDS and what’s recommended. When it comes to helping people understand what a professional development school is outside of the school itself and the professional staff of the school and Baylor being involved, how do you
see the community’s awareness of a PDS growing? How has that played out? Has there been a lot of publicity? When you talk to people about a PDS, do they seem to have some sense of what it is? Probably not enough. I think that obviously Hillcrest has been—has had a lot of press. It’s been well-recognized around the city, state, and nation. I think many people in Waco and the area know about Hillcrest Professional Development School. They may not know what it is, but they’ve heard of it. And I think if we keep stressing professional development, the PD and the PDS concept, that that will help them understand what’s going on in a professional development school. We’re developing professionals starting from the university level and continuing on through their first years into the profession. So, the more PDS schools that we have in the area, the more people are going to be aware.

Now, as the years went on, you were not teaching students directly at Hillcrest.

No.

But you had students go there who you taught, I know that. But, you were involved with some of the other PDS startups, and you mentioned now Cesar Chavez here recently. Were you involved at the secondary level at all with what the Center for Professional Development Technology did?
Curtis: No, not at secondary.

Strot: Okay, did you do anything at the elementary level with them they?

Curtis: There was like a one year time—there was like a one year period where we had some other places where we put year-long interns and I was trying to figure out what faculty were involved with those groups.

Curtis: I had no particular involvement with those.

Strot: I think that was not until ’97-’98. Something like that. Now, last question, and that has to do with the Holmes group. Because you had mentioned that the Holmes group had become now the Holmes partnership.

Curtis: That’s correct.

Strot: And so, what role do you see Baylor, the Baylor-Waco collaboration now playing within the Holmes partnership?

Curtis: Well, obviously we have the president of Holmes partnership, and the dean is the president. So, we have—

Strot: That’s our dean, Bob Yinger.

Curtis: We have quite an involvement here. We have faculty presenting results of research and so forth at the various Holmes meetings, and so we have a very high—not just our faculty, but members of the school of district as well are participating in the Holmes meetings in presentations of papers, and those kinds of things, looking at the research that we’re undertaking at our schools. So, we have a high
involvement. I think we’re a bright spot as far as Holmes partnership is concerned.

Strot

Do you feel that—would you characterize what’s going on now as a similar level of excitement as that original conception of what a professional develop—as you see new ones being set?

Curtis

Probably not as much because it isn’t as new.

Strot

Right.

Curtis

I think their—yeah—one thing, we have many more faculty involved in—since we have many more schools. Nearly all of our faculty in the school of education are involved in some way in the development of the new professional development schools.

Strot

So, twelve years after that original vision, things are—things are proliferating in terms of professional development school.

Curtis

(speaks at same time) Pretty much.

Strot

All right. Now, is there—are there any other comments, or things that you think about, when you think about those original days, that I may not have touched on or asked about?

Curtis

It seems like it was just yesterday we started that. (both laugh)

Strot

It does, doesn’t it?

Curtis

I can’t think of anything.

Strot

Okay. Well, I appreciate your time and the interview. Thank you Dr. Curtis.

Curtis

Okay. Thank you.

end of interview