

Case Study Seven  
Middle School Series

WADSWORTH MIDDLE SCHOOL:  
CROSS-DISCIPLINARY TEAM  
DEVELOPS STRONG ASIAN  
CURRICULUM

# INTRODUCTION TO CASE STUDIES

## INTRODUCTION

This school-based case study is one of 16 prepared by InSites, a nonprofit research organization. This case study is part of an evaluation of the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA) and offers you an opportunity to study educators engaged in the work of promoting Asia in classrooms and schools. Understanding their experiences, impressions, and methods in teaching about Asia can help you determine how to foster attention to Asia in the context of your unique educational setting.

## ABOUT THE NCTA EVALUATION

Launched in 1998, NCTA is funded by the Freeman Foundation whose major objective is to strengthen the bonds of friendship between the United States and the countries of East Asia through educational endeavors. NCTA deepens teachers' knowledge about the literature, cultures, history, and art of China, Japan, and Korea. Teachers are drawn to participate in NCTA by receiving resource materials, presentations by Asia experts, stipends, and opportunities to participate in study tours and other enrichment activities. Since 1998, more than 3,500 teachers in 42 states have participated in the seminars. For more information about NCTA, visit [www.nctasia.org](http://www.nctasia.org).

In 2002, NCTA and the Freeman Foundation asked InSites to evaluate its work. The case studies are one of several products in the evaluation. For more information about the evaluation, see [www.insites.org/ncta](http://www.insites.org/ncta).

## BASIS FOR CASE STUDIES

As part of the evaluation, InSites gathered information from teachers participating in NCTA seminars. This information was gathered in the spring of 2003 and serves as the foundation for the case studies. The schools represented vary in geographic region, type of school and community, number of NCTA teachers in the school, and teacher subject areas. To disguise

identities, InSites replaced the names of people, places, and schools with pseudonyms and altered some peripheral facts. In addition, InSites edited some quotations for clarity and length.

## USING THE CASE STUDIES

The case studies show teachers engaged in teaching about Asia and promoting the presence of Asian studies in their schools. Seminar leaders can use them to encourage NCTA participants to consider their role in fostering a sustained presence for Asian studies. However, even if you're an educator who hasn't been involved in NCTA, you can benefit from the case studies. Whether you're a teacher, an administrator, a professional development provider, or a policymaker interested in bringing knowledge of Asia to American students, the case studies can help you generate ideas for fostering a presence for Asian studies in classrooms and schools.

## STRUCTURE OF THE CASE STUDIES

Each case study begins with a vignette that introduces the central characters and focus of the case study. The case study then presents information about the school, district, and/or state, and a brief description of the NCTA seminar. Impact of the NCTA Seminar details how NCTA participants have used what they learned in their classrooms and schools. Next Steps presents multiple views about promoting a sustained presence for Asian studies at the school. Discussion Questions focuses on key points in the case study and helps you consider how these issues relate to your own educational setting.

## CROSS-CASE EXAMINATION

You can conduct a cross-site examination of features in these case studies by logging onto [www.insites.org/ncta](http://www.insites.org/ncta). Information is presented by school and organized into three categories: context, seminars, and NCTA teachers.

# WADSWORTH MIDDLE SCHOOL: CROSS-DISCIPLINARY TEAM DEVELOPS STRONG ASIAN CURRICULUM

## VIGNETTE

*How will the school respond to changes in the makeup of the humanities team and the loss of a dynamic, resourceful teacher and leader?*

**D**ORIS BOWMAN'S classroom in Wadsworth Middle School is awash in Asian themes. Asian calligraphy covers the windows. The computers that line the walls of the room have names such as Confucius and Lao Tzu. Binders and boxes of Asia-related resources — novels, picture books, videos, posters, and textbooks — fill one wall of the classroom. Far surpassing the resources available through the school's library, Doris's collection is where both teachers and students come when they need information about Asia.

When Doris came to Wadsworth Middle School as a first-year teacher to teach seventh-grade humanities, she had never taken an Asian studies class and didn't know that she was about to become an Asian specialist. During her first year of teaching, she joined a group of teachers working with **REBECCA ARMSTRONG**, the curriculum director for the district, to reinvigorate the Asian studies curriculum. Knowing that she would be teaching Asia the following year, Doris enrolled in a 30-hour seminar on Asia offered by the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA). It was taught by Rebecca.

Doris's experience with the NCTA seminar and her subsequent study tour to China sparked her interest in Asia. Doris was able to obtain a national grant that enabled her to plunge into curriculum redesign at Wadsworth and allowed her to spearhead a cross-disciplinary team of similarly focused seventh-grade humanities teachers. With Rebecca's support, the Wadsworth team developed a new humanities curriculum that included a focus on China and, to a lesser extent, Japan.

When Rebecca moved to a different district, her vision for Asian studies in the Wadsworth School District no longer had a district champion. But the core group at Wadsworth continued their curriculum development in Asian studies. Recently, the seventh-grade humanities team



## Wadsworth Middle School

Wadsworth Middle School, which is located in a prosperous residential suburb, serves about 850 students in grades six through eight. The students are predominately Caucasian. Asians comprise about 6 percent of the population. Wadsworth is technologically well-equipped. As a result of grants, classrooms have several computers available for student use, allowing for Internet access and links to useful Asia-related websites that have been bookmarked by the humanities staff.

has changed. For example, one NCTA teacher left the seventh-grade humanities team to teach eighth-grade classes at Wadsworth. While some of the remaining team members have grown in their commitment to Asian studies, especially those who have taken the NCTA seminar, some new members have neither a background nor professional development classes in Asian studies. Doris will leave at the end of this school year.

## WADSWORTH MIDDLE SCHOOL

Students in this fast-growing district earn high scores on standardized tests, making the district one of the highest achieving in the state. To build on its success, the Wadsworth School District has implemented a learning improvement calendar this year that supports collaborative planning and teamwork among teachers. The district starts school later on Wednesday mornings to give teachers the time for this development, although teachers are free to use the time as they wish.

The state standards require seventh-grade students to compare and contrast elements of culture (e.g., society, government, economy, technology, arts, ideas, and beliefs) within the contexts of ancient history and world history. The study of China falls within the ancient history domain, and Japan within the world history category. The state leaves it to each district to design the curriculum to meet the requirements. The Wadsworth School District devotes a semester to Asia at the seventh-grade level and allows each school to design its own seventh-grade curriculum. Within the social studies/language arts block at Wadsworth Middle School, Asia is taught over the full course of the semester. Teachers are required to incorporate writing and language exercises into the social studies materials. This cross-disciplinary block of topics is commonly called “humanities” within the school.



## NCTA Seminar

Five seventh-grade humanities teachers from Wadsworth have participated in NCTA — although not at the same time. Some teachers took the course in their first year of teaching and some took the course in their second year. Three NCTA teachers traveled to China with study tours and two teachers traveled to Japan. Participants say that the wealth of information and resources on Asia received through NCTA and the NCTA Resource Center is so vast that the teachers have a more difficult time deciding what content to exclude rather than to include in their classrooms.

## NATURE OF NCTA SEMINAR

The NCTA seminar leader, **REBECCA ARMSTRONG**, is a former librarian, teacher, and curriculum specialist. As such, she has a unique perspective about what teachers need in the classroom. At the time humanities teacher **DORIS BOWMAN** took the seminar, Rebecca served as curriculum director for the Wadsworth School District. She has since moved to a neighboring district as curriculum director.

Rebecca teaches her seminars with the philosophy of learning by doing. She relies upon the six themes of China and the six themes of Japan to integrate thematic instruction within a chronological framework. (See <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu> for details.) Rebecca begins the seminar by explaining each theme in a straightforward manner. She then asks the teachers to identify one of the themes in a variety of primary source documents. For every activity and every genre, she connects the new information to their understanding of these themes.

The seminar is scheduled in several sessions to provide teachers the opportunity to learn, to apply their knowledge in their classrooms, and then return to discuss what worked and didn't work with their NCTA colleagues. During the seminar, NCTA participants develop a student lesson to better bridge the NCTA and the classroom experiences.



## Spread of Asian Studies to Eighth Grade

This year an NCTA member of the seventh-grade humanities team moved to the eighth grade where he teaches U.S. history. His goals in his new position include trying to recreate the same sort of team environment that he enjoyed at the seventh-grade level. To the degree possible, he wants to bring an Asian perspective to his U.S. history courses.

## IMPACT OF THE NCTA SEMINAR

The collaborative, energetic, and enthusiastic nature of the seventh-grade humanities team has been a significant factor in making the teaching of Asia a vital part of the seventh-grade curriculum. Team members collaboratively developed and revised the NCTA-inspired Asian curriculum, replacing a previous curriculum that had a limited depth and breadth of Asian content.

### CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

The social studies/language arts block at Wadsworth is weighted toward social sciences. This has facilitated a greater focus on Asia within the block. Largely inspired by **REBECCA ARMSTRONG'S** approach to teaching the NCTA seminar, the seventh-grade humanities team presents the study of Asian culture and society through a combination of reading materials and activities. **DORIS BOWMAN** states, "I teach Buddhism through picture books and I learned that through the NCTA class."

NCTA has also increased the team members' confidence about teaching Asian content. One NCTA teacher recalls coming to the NCTA seminar "feeling very insecure. There were a lot of people in the class who had previous knowledge, and I came in with an empty head." She said that she initially relied on notes to help her teach about the Cultural Revolution or Mao. "I would have a note sheet up there that I could peek at. Now I feel confident that I can explain things without referring to notes. I didn't have the confidence the first year."

Doris, the humanities team leader, periodically holds a family movie night devoted to Asian film so that students and their parents and siblings can share the experience students are exposed to in the classroom. Students get extra credit for answering film-related questions. She has also posted many of the school's Asian curriculum materials to her website, which is linked to the Wadsworth Middle School website.

One non-NCTA team member says that through the NCTA training, his NCTA colleagues have gained an ability to match their knowledge with the level of their students' understanding. Students from Doris's



## Asian Resources in Library

To serve the number of Asian American students who attend Wadsworth, the library has a representative sample of Asia-related fiction and biographies on hand. Although the librarian has not participated in NCTA and has little awareness of what might be available through NCTA, he is receptive to seeing book lists recommended by NCTA that might strengthen the library's Asian reference section. One social studies team member describes the library's selections as comparatively weak.

Advanced Social Studies/Language Arts class say that the course has given them a better understanding of Asia. Among the activities they like are writing letters to the administrators of the Three Gorges Dam and playing the game "Samurai Warlords." They say that the pictures Doris brought back from her study tours enlivened the material they were reading about in class.

### COLLABORATIVE TEAMWORK

The seventh-grade humanities team works collaboratively to draw together the resources most appropriate to a particular lesson. They share curriculum materials and tips on teaching the curriculum. The resource library created by Doris is available for both staff and student use. One NCTA participant credits the team's collaborative framework with helping her prepare to teach the Asian material. "Now I feel as new teachers come in, I can help them." A seventh-grade teacher who has not taken the NCTA seminar says that those who have participated have helped answer his questions. Without the seventh-grade humanities team, he said that he would feel overwhelmed by the amount of resources available.

Principal **MARY POLETTI** has done what she can to empower Doris and the seventh-grade humanities team: "Doris is a wonderful, inspiring teacher and leader, and when you have somebody like that on the staff, you do everything you can to empower them. **GREG DUNCAN** also has become a wonderful mentor to the other staff members."

Greg identifies Doris as the key to putting the Wadsworth Asian curriculum in place: "She lit a fire for all of us."

Noting that the seventh-grade humanities team is the "only true team in the building," Doris praises the principal's support and encouragement.

In working with the Asian curriculum without the experience of NCTA, one teacher says that he relies heavily on Doris and Greg: "I talk a lot with Doris and with Greg, and I know I try to stay on the same page as Greg. Sometimes I fall behind Doris. I meet with Greg quite regularly, and he'll come in and check on me. We'll sit down and share notes."



## Key Points

- ❖ NCTA seminar leader focused on application in the classroom and modeled effective teaching about Asia for NCTA participants.
- ❖ Seminar leader encouraged teachers to infiltrate their curriculum departments to expand the concentration on Asia.
- ❖ Seventh-grade social studies team developed NCTA-inspired curriculum about Asia.
- ❖ Makeup of Social Studies team has changed.
- ❖ Team leader who served as the catalyst for developing the Asian curriculum and building the resource collection will leave school at the end of the year.

The principal notes some tension between the humanities team that derives from Doris's prominent role: "... (Doris) has been the impetus, and she's had lots and lots of recognition around this. With that brings some hard feelings. So she's in an awkward position right now just because of who she is and how she does things and the notoriety that she's had. That's a tough one to balance, and she's got such high standards."

## NEXT STEPS

The strength of the Wadsworth team has been their common vision and goals over the past few years, as well as their boundless energy and enthusiasm. The heavy social sciences concentration in the social studies/language arts block is at times a concern to **MARY POLETTI**, the principal: "While we call it an integrated curriculum, there are times that it seems a little out of balance. So that's a bit of a concern, but certainly the benefits are there."

The district curriculum coordinator sees the state learning requirements as the primary driver for including Asian studies in the seventh-grade curriculum. Compared to all the curricula in social studies in the district, she says that Asian studies is the most thoroughly developed. She notes that some parents from Wadsworth express concern about the amount of work required of students in Asian studies. Taking into consideration the demands of students' other subjects, these parents feel that the curriculum poses too great a challenge for students. On the other hand, the wealth of Asian-related displays in the school creates excitement among the students, particularly in sixth-graders who anticipate their Asian studies in seventh grade.

Mary says, "There's an expectation that the variety of activities that go on around the Asian studies is becoming institutionalized." Yet seminar leader **REBECCA ARMSTRONG** believes that it is difficult to sustain an ongoing presence for Asia in schools because of the mobility of teachers. NCTA teachers do not necessarily remain in their positions for any length of time, so there is a constant challenge to maintain the critical



“I said I was only going to assign a grade based on the average point earned in the class (rather than individual grades). Of course, they freaked out because it’s grades... Then, eventually, through the course of the discussion, somebody says, ‘This is what happened during the [Cultural Revolution].’ And I said, ‘Bingo! You got it!’ ” — *social studies/language arts teacher*

mass of teachers with knowledge of Asian studies that is necessary for success within a school or within a district. **DORIS BOWMAN** suggests that buy-in to Asian studies is necessary to ensure that new teachers can maintain the momentum. She equates buy-in with being involved in the development of materials and participating in discussions around curriculum development.

The team at Wadsworth is changing. Doris, the leader of the seventh-grade humanities team, is leaving Wadsworth Middle School next year. Although it may not be due to her departure, the humanities team seems to be losing some of the cohesion it has enjoyed in the past. As the principal, Mary, observes, “It’s really difficult to bring a new person into the seventh grade because the team has been a work in progress for a long time, and it’s like hopping on in the middle of a project.” Some members of the seventh-grade humanities team have not taken the professional development courses offered through NCTA or elsewhere.

The teachers cite the amount of work that has been done already in developing the Asian curriculum as a strong indicator that Asian studies will have an ongoing presence at Wadsworth. According to Doris, “It is no longer a burden to teach it.”

NCTA participant **GREG DUNCAN** concurs: “Everything is on autopilot.” A first-year teacher at Wadsworth who hopes to participate in the NCTA seminar and has applied for a study tour to China describes the teaching of Asian studies at Wadsworth as a top priority. When new people come, they “always jump right into the same curriculum as it has been done for years. It just keeps getting enriched every year.... I can’t see it going away because it is so good. We have an award-winning standard that the district looks to.”



For more information about other seminars and participants, see [www.insites.org/ncta](http://www.insites.org/ncta).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Supporting Information

Two reports from the NCTA evaluation provide helpful information for addressing the discussion questions.

***Teaching about Asia in American Schools: Keys to Success*** presents findings about the impact of NCTA seminars on teachers, classrooms, and schools. It also describes factors that affect the sustained presence of Asia in schools and classrooms.

***Teaching about Asia in American Schools: Tips for Seminar Leaders*** provides information about how seminar leaders design seminars to both increase teachers' content knowledge and help them foster a sustained presence for Asia.

Both reports are available at [www.nctasia.org](http://www.nctasia.org) and [www.insites.org/ncta](http://www.insites.org/ncta).

1. What evidence do you see that NCTA teachers at this school are getting serious content about Asia into their classrooms? How satisfied are you with the level of serious content about Asia that they are getting into their classrooms? What factors challenge their ability to infuse Asia into their classroom curriculum? What factors support it?
2. How are NCTA teachers sharing what they know about Asia with colleagues? What other formal and informal strategies would you encourage these NCTA teachers to use to bring greater attention to Asia in their school curriculum?
3. One of the goals of NCTA is fostering a sustained presence or permanent place for Asia in schools and classrooms. How successful have NCTA seminar participants been in reaching that goal in this school? (See **KEYS TO SUCCESS** — [www.insites.org/ncta](http://www.insites.org/ncta) — for more information on factors that are necessary or make a contribution toward reaching this goal.)
4. What strategies for recruiting additional teachers for future NCTA seminars could be used in this school or area to help ensure a sustained presence for Asian studies? (See **TIPS FOR SEMINAR LEADERS** — [www.insites.org/ncta](http://www.insites.org/ncta) — for some practical information relating to seminar activities, including recruitment.)
5. Consider the conditions for supporting a sustained presence for Asia in the curriculum of schools described in **KEYS TO SUCCESS** and this discussion of Wadsworth. To what extent do you think there is a sustained presence for Asia in your school?
6. What Asia-related initiatives and interests in your own community might enhance the teaching of Asian content in your school? (For example, is there a consulate, museum, business, university, community college, or organization of native Asians that could be engaged?)
7. What practical and feasible actions might you and your colleagues undertake to foster a greater long-term presence for Asia in your school and its curriculum?

## Acknowledgments

InSites wishes to thank the national coordinators, seminar leaders, seminar participants, and their colleagues who contributed to this report. Their responsiveness and insights were invaluable. We would also like to thank the Freeman Foundation for financial support of this work.

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Schoolhouse Communications provided editorial support. KSA-Plus Communications was consulted on the design of this report.

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# Case Study Seven – Middle School Series Wadsworth Middle School: Cross-Disciplinary Team Develops Strong Asian Curriculum

## About the Case Studies Series

This case study is one in a series of 16. The full set of case studies is listed below. You can access them at [www.insites.org/ncta](http://www.insites.org/ncta).

### Middle School Case Studies

1. Baker Middle School: Media Specialist Promotes Asian Studies Schoolwide
2. Clemens Middle School: Seminars and Study Tours Help Foster Asian Studies
3. Emery Middle School: Team Plans to Use Asian Studies to Reform Curriculum at Low-Performing School
4. Hardin Middle School: Teachers Infuse Asia in Art, Geography, and History Classes
5. Hay Edwards Middle School: Teachers Bring Asian Studies to Rural School in Transition
6. Kaiser Middle School: Lone Teacher Mobilizes Interest in Asia
7. Wadsworth Middle School: Cross-Disciplinary Team Develops Strong Asian Curriculum

### High School Case Studies

1. Alternative School: Teachers Organize School Year Around Asian Theme
2. Beye High School: Teachers Fit Asia into Standards-Driven Curriculum
3. Evans High School: China Exchange Program Stems from NCTA Seminar
4. Jefferson High School: On-Site Seminar Enriches Asian Content in High-Performing School
5. Lincoln High School: Interconnected Initiatives Expand Presence of Asia
6. Meridian High School: Teachers Implement Asian Studies in Multiple Disciplines
7. Montview High School: Teachers Include Asia in Revised English and Social Studies Curriculum
8. Saunders High School: Critical Mass of Teachers Increases Asian Studies at Private School
9. South Lake District High School: District Collaboration Magnifies NCTA's Presence

For further information about the NCTA evaluation, see [www.insites.org/ncta](http://www.insites.org/ncta).

For information about the NCTA program and the five national coordinating sites, see [www.nctasia.org](http://www.nctasia.org).