

The Learning Network

A Newsletter for Washington State High Schools that Receive Gates Reinvention Grants

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A Time of Unprecedented Change and Untold Promise

This September, seventy small schools will replace fifteen comprehensive high schools in thirteen of Washington's school districts. Such a change, in any state, is unprecedented in the history of American education.

The seventy small schools will be in different stages of transition. Some will have only one grade, while others will include all students. Some will have a clear focus and theme, others will be defining themselves over the course of the next few years, and some will look like small comprehensive high schools. Some are just beginning the transition to small schools, while others took initial steps in previous years. Some will have student crossovers as part of their design, others will permit them out of necessity, while still others will have virtually none. Some of the small schools will serve barely 100 students, while others will enroll 400 students.

The schools have a variety of designs, and the schools themselves may feel (and actually be) fragile in their development.

The most important thing, right now, is to understand that these seventy schools actually exist, and hold untold promise for the students, families, and communities they serve. What happens in these schools over the next few months and years is of extraordinary importance.

This issue focuses on those new small schools, and what teachers and administrators can expect to happen this year. What follows is based on our experience starting three intentionally small schools, and having the privilege of working with other educators who have worked diligently to make their schools wonderful places for students.

*Rick Lear, Small Schools Project
Nancy Mohr, National School Reform Faculty*

THINGS YOU CAN COUNT ON HAPPENING

It will be hard to remember that this is a structure in transition, and that your small school is new.

We worked so hard on the schedule and now all we want to do is change it again. We had so many great ideas and now we seem to mostly make compromises. We keep adding things on instead of thinking of new ways of doing them. We don't have time to deal with problems. Classes aren't any smaller, and I have more preps than ever. Our test scores still have not gone up. It is very tempting to just want to go back to the ways things were.

The question seems to be: How long do you have to wait to see results, to feel that things are firmly in place? Probably the answer to this, as to all questions about time, is longer than anyone originally thought. It is helpful to remember that this is a "stage thing," not a cataclysmic event even though it can feel that way. Everyone can take leadership in reminding one another that:

- ◆ This will take time.
- ◆ This will happen in stages.
- ◆ We have to focus on what's important, not only on what's urgent.

- ◆ Learn to "think big" and "think small" at the same time.
- ◆ Curb your "large-school reflexes."
- ◆ It will help to anticipate transitions and think about what will happen next, e.g., "After the honeymoon is over (around October) there will be some inevitable conflicts—among and between adults and students." If you realize that this is not a bad sign, you will be more able to cope. What you need to do is think beforehand about what structures need to be in place to deal with the inevitable differences in point of view.
 - ✓ Will students be able to discuss behavior problems in an advisory group or some larger structure, or will there be automatic suspensions or other unilateral decisions made by adults?
 - ✓ Is there a comparable "advisory group" for adults? Is there training for all in negotiation and mediation?

- ✓ Are there times and places where feelings can be discussed, calmly, without the feeling that “we don’t have time for this?”
- ✓ Is there a time to slow down in order to “think out of the box” like we used to do?
- ✓ How can you maintain one another’s morale and confidence? Sometimes it’s helpful to go back to the research, just as a reminder that you are not doing this based on a whim.

There will be cross-school tensions.

Sharing space with other small schools is resulting in a lot of finger-pointing about what the “other” kids and teachers are doing. The other schools seem to have more money and better space than we do. How did they get smaller classes? Why are their kids always in our halls—don’t they discipline them?

Often, the relationships between and among small schools sharing the same building are not discussed until problems arise. And then, the adults and the students tend to project their disappointments and tensions onto the other schools. This does not have to happen, however. What is needed is partly prevention and partly ongoing attention.

- ◆ Anticipate that it will be hard to avoid blaming the other kids and teachers.
- ◆ Remember that your kids will occasionally misbehave too.
- ◆ Talk about norms for sharing the space early on.
- ◆ Remember that norms are different from rules; it is best to avoid setting up elaborate punishments and instead concentrate on making the norms work, habitually.
- ◆ Pay attention to the small things; do it respectfully.
- ◆ Set up structures that will help mitigate against and mediate problems.
 - ✓ Is there a structure for ongoing and regular conversations among teacher leaders about shared space? Does the building principal unilaterally resolve differences, or are they negotiated between and among small schools and/or all administrators? Is there someone who takes responsibility for building a shared sense of community?
 - ✓ Are advisory groups used to communicate to and with students about how to behave in common spaces and how to react if they think someone has been rude to either an adult or student?

- ✓ Is there district office or coaching help available when and if there are stand-offs?

There will be ambivalence about leadership.

We thought this would be a chance for everyone to be a part of leading the school and yet all we feel is confused. Sometimes I wish someone would just give us the answers. We all want to be a part of decision-making but none of us has the time. We want kids to have a voice but we’re also afraid they’ll go too far.

As exciting as it is to anticipate being a part of the leadership of a small school, when it actually starts playing out, it can be much more confusing and anxiety-ridden than it is fun. The reality of leading a new small school is that it is filled with daily mini-crises, such as dealing with people who are feeling anxiety and need soothing (both inside and outside the school), figuring out what happened to the delivery, the lunch, the first-period teacher, and wondering when will things finally be under control. And yet many members of the school community anticipate being part of the action. But when the “action” means taking on a piece of the work, it becomes clearer that teaching is a full-time job, as is leading. Yet this is not hopeless.

The really important leading is the setting out of the vision and then the daily work of making it a reality. And this is the work that everyone can and should take on. You don’t have to be sitting around a table making decisions as much as having to be in the halls not pretending you don’t notice when a student is rude or a teacher is late. You can be building those habits and norms which are the real “stuff” of leadership by:

- ◆ Giving respectful reminders about expectations.
- ◆ Pitching in when it is clear that someone is overwhelmed.
- ◆ Demonstrating confidence in the new school at every turn (without being dishonest).
- ◆ Remembering the goals that brought everyone together in the first place.
- ◆ Not being self-indulgent, even when it is very tempting.
 - ✓ Leadership is a way of acting and being as opposed to the right to make decisions; are there structures in place that encourage hearing everyone’s voice so they don’t feel left out?
 - ✓ Leadership is relentless about taking care of small things before they become big things; are there ways of doing this which do not involve taking up collective time on petty issues?

- ✓ Leadership is not about giving answers, however tempting and ego-gratifying. True leaders only give answers to very easy questions. Is everyone encouraged to think critically and use good judgment? Because that's the only way we'll teach kids how to do it, too.
- ✓ Leadership makes sure everyone is okay taking risks, making mistakes, being wrong—and starts with oneself.

“What we want for our children...we should want for their teachers; that schools be places of learning for both of them, and that such learning be suffused with excitement, engagement, passion, challenge, creativity, and joy.”

– *Andy Hargreaves,*
Director and Professor at the International
Centre for Educational Change,
University of Ontario

Relationships will be closer and therefore more problematic.

I'm not sure we have the right staff. I'm not used to working closely with people from other departments. Teaming is stressful. As an advisor, part of my job is to advocate for my advisees with my colleagues, and that makes me uncomfortable—it doesn't feel like teachers have a “united front” in dealing with students.

We've never tried before to agree on such fundamental issues: How do we deal with conflict between and among adults? Do we squash conflict among students or surface it and help them work it through? Do we allow students to re-do shoddy work and retake tests? Do we all need to agree? When is it important to do something the same way, and when does it make more sense to accept or encourage individual variations? Is it okay to do lecture classes? If so, how often? What's our collective responsibility if a colleague is failing forty percent of her students?

It's rare for a teacher to work in a school that's small by design and then choose to go back to a large, comprehensive high school. A primary reason for teacher loyalty to small schools is the relationships they build with their colleagues. Building those relationships will take time and commitment, so the reasons for doing so need to be clear:

- ◆ You'll serve your students better, but only if you remember that's the primary goal.
- ◆ You'll learn from and with your colleagues; the learning will be enhanced by actively sharing rather than observing from a distance.

- ◆ You'll have support when you need it, and you'll have opportunities to support your colleagues in new ways.
- ◆ What you build collectively will almost certainly be better than what any of you can build alone.

The “right staff” issue is tricky. Every school needs to have strong staff in core teaching areas, so you might need to make some changes as you grow, especially if you didn't originally staff your school on the basis of what your students will need to learn well in key areas. And, occasionally, there's a bad fit, and it's necessary to make a change. Often, though, when folks talk about having the “right staff,” they're referring to personal qualities and habits, and, often, they're referring to having more people like them. That's limiting and often unhealthy for most schools.

Consider these things as you build your school's community of practice:

- ◆ Most issues are better dealt with by norms than by rules.
- ◆ Over time, a culture of hard work becomes normative in a small school.
- ◆ Diversity is healthy. (Star Trek fans will remember that Spock once said: “I am pleased to see so much diversity in our group. It will make for a much more interesting journey.”)
- ◆ Conflict will occur. Consider it a chance to learn, both individually and collectively.
- ◆ Develop a means of addressing conflict that is respectful of people, and develop or adopt a process before you're immersed in conflict. For starters, you might agree to:
 - ✓ Speak directly to people when you're in conflict.
 - ✓ When someone begins to talk about someone else, remind her to speak directly to the other person, and offer to accompany the person if she needs or wants support.
 - ✓ Speak for yourself, not for others—that denies them the chance to be empowered.
 - ✓ Try to be clear about what you need, not simply what you don't like.
 - ✓ Understand that hearing others fully is as important to addressing conflict as speaking your truth.

- ◆ The kids *are* watching. How adults around them deal with tension and conflict does more than anything else to help kids learn appropriate ways to deal with their own tensions and conflicts.

Teaching and learning issues will keep moving down on the agenda.

We swore it wouldn't happen and yet we keep on dealing with the "urgent" rather than the "important." We're still trying to figure out what it means to operate a small school, and we spend all our staff meeting time talking about those things. We don't even have time to talk about the students we share.

It's hard to shift the conversation to teaching and learning, in part because it's not part of the culture of most high schools (except sometimes in department meetings). To the degree that the conversation is also about our own teaching practice, it's probably threatening as well. The first thing to know is that teaching and learning won't move up the agenda by itself—you will need to push it near the top. Here are some things other new schools have done to help make teaching and learning the focus of adult time together, sometimes as a whole staff, other times in small teams or groups:

- ◆ Set a separate time for talking about pedagogy and learning, and stick to it. Or, address pedagogy first, "business" last.
- ◆ Look at student work produced by your students, and do it regularly.
- ◆ Build a theme-based unit that most or all of the staff plans *and teaches* collaboratively—even if it's a two-day unit.
- ◆ Hold Socratic Seminars at least quarterly for the whole school.
- ◆ Start a Critical Friends Group (CFG), a whole faculty study group, or a lesson study group (see the summer 2003 issue of *Planning Resources* at your school or online at the Small Schools Project website at: www.smallschoolsproject.org).
- ◆ Visit one another's classrooms regularly. If you agree to invite a colleague into your classroom one period a month, and visit another teacher's classroom once a month, you will have 18-20 visits over a year's time. You'll have plenty to talk about. If you're uncomfortable with an observer, ask someone to co-teach a class with you.

"When you are at the cutting edge of your art, it's always a privilege; don't squander your heritage."

– August Wilson,
noted American playwright,
at The Center School Dedication,
September, 2002

We will all feel less effective than before.

I used to think I knew what I was doing, now I only see more things to be learned. I'm learning new teaching and assessment practices, and I'm uncertain about much of it. I find myself using lots more of my "old stuff" than I'd anticipated. Kids say this isn't any different than last year, and I mostly agree with them. The kids are pretty frank about what they like and don't like. I had an established reputation in the large school, but now it feels like I'm starting over. I'm teaching things I've never taught, or haven't taught for 20 years. As a leader, I am feeling I should be clearer about when to be collaborative and when to be decisive, but truthfully, this is all new to me, too. I haven't worked closely with parents before, and don't know how to do that.

Starting out, or starting over, is difficult, and often leads to doubts about competency. But you and your colleagues have real skills and deep knowledge, and you're not starting from scratch, even though it may feel like it at times.

- ◆ Most of what you know about kids and learning and relationships still applies, and is transferable.
- ◆ A major reason for converting to small schools is to make it more possible to enact your deepest beliefs about teaching and to work in ways you may have wanted to do for years.
- ◆ Much of your old curriculum can be adapted.
- ◆ Once you decide to change parts of your teaching practice, accept that it will take time because it will probably involve some unlearning. Start with bite-size chunks rather than thinking about the whole year. Think about what you'll need for support over a period of several years as you make changes: readings, visits to other schools, participating in workshops, working closely with a colleague, and so on. Then make a three-year plan.
- ◆ Leading in small schools *is* tricky and requires somehow holding onto an air of confidence while at the same time retaining an honest amount of humility.

- ◆ Consider students as allies and valuable sources of information. Ask them, what would make this school more engaging? How do you think you learn best? What are the best ways for me to understand what you're learning?

It's helpful to think about these things before you begin to work with parents and families:

- ◆ Parents are allies, not adversaries.
- ◆ For the most part, parents' deepest interests for their children parallel yours.
- ◆ You can be straightforward with parents about the newness of this role for you:
 - ✓ You're going to be working with their child for several years.
 - ✓ You believe everyone involved—student, parents and other family members, and you—will benefit from building a set of trusting relationships.
 - ✓ Those relationships should be based on the common goal of helping the student learn powerfully and well and be graduated from high school with a set of real choices about her future.
- ◆ Most importantly, understand—and be certain that parents know you understand—that they are a great resource; they know their child in ways you can never know her, and they can help you think about their child's learning in ways that go far beyond finding a quiet place to study at home.

There will be a feeling that the school is really vulnerable.

We always knew what to do when problems came up before; we had clear lines of authority and procedures to handle everything. Now, we're always figuring it out. Every decision seems more important, and we're faced with lots more of them now. The kids feel ownership, but then they talk about walking out! I don't know how to answer parents when they ask, "Is this really better than the old way?"

New schools *are* vulnerable in many ways. But that's normal and part of creating anything new. Understand that you can't make all the decisions at once, and many of the decisions you do make are provisional. You'll revisit them as you grow and develop. You will spend more time in the years you are "growing" your school developing procedures and ways of working than you will later on. Be patient.

Remember also that the known and familiar is almost always more appealing when you're in new situations. And new situations are almost always stressful, even when they are also exciting and full of promise.

Remember, and remind others, that there are good and powerful reasons for making the important changes you've undertaken. You're building a school that:

- ◆ Serves all kids well.
- ◆ Acknowledges and honors diversity.
- ◆ Is more challenging and more personal.
- ◆ Makes better use of what we know about how people learn.
- ◆ Welcomes and works with parents.
- ◆ Presumes all students will succeed, and teachers "own" that presumption.

The answer to the parent question is, "Yes. Absolutely!" Then describe what you see that's better, or soon will be.

Celebrating progress and accomplishments is always important, and even more so when you're starting out. Inside and outside the school, it reminds everyone that you're making progress, that you're on the right path, that kids are learning. Remember that there is plenty to celebrate without bragging or over-promising. Be easy to please and hard to satisfy! This is hard work and your school will take years to be fully developed, but there is much that is better for kids even in the first year.

Despite it all, there will be so much joy and ownership in the new endeavor that folks will not want to go home at night. Nor will they want to turn back.

Nobody told me how much happiness this would bring to us all—I can't wait until we have stories to pass down. Even though we are exhausted and work too hard, we are feeling the satisfaction that comes from knowing we are really grappling and dealing with something that is very important. And that works for me.

"You have to do the work; you have to do the work; you have to do the work. There's no sense just standing around."

– August Wilson

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IN THIS ISSUE

THINGS YOU CAN COUNT ON HAPPENING
Expectations for New Small Schools

Promising Curricular Resources & Pedagogical Practices

The Small Schools Project is pleased to announce that the summer collection of *Planning Resources for Teachers in Small High Schools* is now available. This collection of promising curricular resources and pedagogical practices is already at your school! It was sent to teacher leaders, principals, and grant coordinators in late July.

Both the spring and summer collections of *Planning Resources* contain practical tools, program overviews and approaches, school profiles, field notes, and critical readings on the topics listed below. The collections are available to download free from our website, www.smallschoolsproject.org under *What's New*. You can also purchase additional bound copies by contacting Craig Lucero at clucero@u.washington.edu or 206/616-0303.

Spring 2003

Advisories
Project-Based Learning
Literacy
College Access

Summer 2003

Adapting Classroom Practice
Teaching for Equity
Integrating Curriculum

Planning Resources Presentation

Small Schools Project researchers, Cathy Wallach and Erin Thomas, are available to present the collections of *Planning Resources* and lead school staff members through activities to discover new tools to support their work. If you are interested in allocating a couple hours between October 27 and November 25 to learn more about resources for improving classroom practice, please contact your school coach.

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