

The Learning Network

A NEWSLETTER FOR WASHINGTON STATE HIGH SCHOOLS THAT RECEIVE GATES REINVENTION GRANTS

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A Metaphor for School Change

When we were looking at various layout possibilities for *The Learning Network*, the upward-pointing arrows that form part of this background reminded me of a conversation with a long-time General Motors executive. This executive had led the development of the Saturn automobile and received considerable attention for developing a highly collaborative working culture in a corporation that was noted for its hierarchical structure.

“We decided early on that we wanted to operate differently to take advantage of the very different sets of skills our people brought to the work. We knew they had good ideas about how to do things that had often been stifled by our organization’s culture. We settled on a simple metaphor: we didn’t have to do everything the same, but all our arrows had to point in the same direction.”

That same metaphor can work well for our efforts to serve every student well. The target for our arrows is small, highly personalized learning environments for our students. But each grantee begins from a different place and therefore a different

perspective. For some, the target is straight ahead, and close. Others are just as close, but the angle is different. For still others the distance is much greater, and there are trees or boulders in the way, requiring some movement to one side or another, or some climbing before we have a clear shot.

The metaphor certainly applies at a broad level: all the schools in Washington engaged in this work can learn from one another. We’ll do things somewhat differently because the landscape over which we travel is somewhat different.

More importantly, the metaphor applies within each building as well, particularly as large schools struggle with conversion issues. If we can manage to have our arrows pointing in the same direction, we can take advantage of the varied skills, talents, and work styles that will emerge in our new small schools, and celebrate the diverse ways we can get to the same target.

—Rick Lear, Director

CONVERSION

Being Clear About Autonomy

“Autonomous space was the key issue for us at the beginning,” said Louis Delgado, principal of Vanguard High School, as he spoke to teachers and administrators at Mariner High School on October 11. Delgado spent two days in the Mukilteo School District describing his experience as the leader of one of the six autonomous schools that share the Julia Richman Education Complex in New York City.

“When we moved in, twelve of our twenty classrooms were science labs. We had to change that because we couldn’t have kids who weren’t part of our school coming through our halls all day long. We also don’t have a bell schedule—bells would be ringing all day long because we all have separate schedules. We couldn’t run our schools like that ... and we cut that PA system off right away.”

At the Small Schools Project, we advocate for small school autonomy in six areas: curriculum, staffing, budget, space, leadership, and schedule. In a wide-ranging discussion, Delgado provided examples of the importance of autonomy in all of those six areas. But he returned repeatedly to one key point: autonomy is necessary to take advantage of what he calls “The Power of One.”

“The Power of One has enabled us to shape everything to fit our kids’ needs,” said Delgado. “When we know kids as individuals,

we can build a curriculum that is engaging without compromising standards ... In doing that, I’ve never felt like I’ve given up anything—in fact, I feel like I’ve gained because I know kids so well.”

As schools in Washington and elsewhere move from large, comprehensive schools to sets of small schools, virtually every one of them struggles with issues of autonomy. In most areas, autonomy will evolve over time. In some cases, autonomy needs to be addressed through changes in contracts (Delgado noted the key leadership role played by their teachers’ union in New York City). Some space autonomy issues will be delayed until funds become available.

More often than not, moving toward autonomy for small schools is not dependent on dollars or contracts. Many autonomies of space involve little or no cost. Redesigned leadership arrangements can be achieved at little or no additional cost, as can the continuing redesign of curriculum as teachers come to know students well and understand their needs more fully.

Small schools will have the most flexibility when they receive their own budgets directly from their district office; if a district can’t see its way clear to do that right now, schools within each building can agree to do that internally.

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IMPLEMENTATION

Enumclaw Partner Schools Open Doors

This fall, two small schools, Enumclaw Adventure School and E.C.H.O.E.S. (Enumclaw Cooperative Hands-On Experiential School) opened inside the walls of Enumclaw High. Called Partner Schools, each operates as a self-contained independent school, the Adventure School with 140 students, E.C.H.O.E.S. with 100.

In 2003, Enumclaw High's five interest-based schools, each with a population of 200 to 300 students, will open. Courses in math and the sciences, social studies, and languages will be built around a specific area of student interest (e.g., technology, arts, business, etc.). In addition, each school will have an emphasis on internships and community service, allowing students to see a connection between their learning and the world.

The Partner Schools had been in session less than a month at the time of this interview, but the increased level of student engagement in the Partner Schools' classrooms is already observable, according to Jill Burnes, Enumclaw's grant coordinator. Teachers are talking about it, and so are parents. Burnes says there's a positive buzz in the community, and she's even heard one parent commenting that a student who had never before considered college as an option is now doing so.

Although Enumclaw Adventure School and E.C.H.O.E.S. are structured differently, you will hear common themes coming from their teachers: harder work, yes, but also more deeply engaged students, more staff collegiality, and a renewed love for teaching.

This is what two of them have to say:

"I've never worked so hard in my entire life (this is my 30th year teaching), but I've also never been more excited about teaching—ever!! The difference in how I am interacting with other students and how students are interacting with each other and their teachers is like night and day.

"Right now, we're all putting in some long hard hours, but we're hoping that all the minute details will begin to sort themselves out soon. We love what we're doing!!"

*Diane Francini, Language Arts/Communication
E.C.H.O.E.S.*

"Creating and working with the Adventure School has been the most challenging and rewarding thing I have ever done in my professional career. **After teaching in a large comprehensive high school, I cannot imagine going back to that sort of environment.** The most rewarding aspect of our school has to be the personalization that we have fostered with our kids.

"It's amazing to meet with the five other teachers in our school and have a common conversation about every student in approximately one hour.

"Students cannot believe that I know everything about every one of their classes. I know when they are struggling in math. I know when they are doing great. I **know**...and that has had an incredible effect on the way kids perform.

"Probably the second most rewarding aspect is the support system that comes from working closely with five other professionals. **My teaching has improved ten-fold because of the input I receive from my colleagues. I love teaching at Adventure School.**

"The hardest part has been designing new elements of the school whenever a new challenge comes up. When you are doing something completely different in education, it seems that every new innovation requires five more innovations. This takes up a considerable amount of time to go along with just teaching. It has been a challenge to keep the energy level up at times, and yet it has been worth every minute!!"

*Doug Wolff, Social Studies, Carpentry, Construction,
Enumclaw Adventure School*

The Learning Network will be checking back with Diane and Doug in a few months to hear how their schools are progressing.

Truman Makes Major Changes

Ask Principal Pam Morris-Stendal how Federal Way's Truman Center is different this year and her enthusiasm bubbles over. "It took us a year to figure out who we were," she says.

Although Truman's division into two small schools—the South and the Forum—took place last year, this year's changes have been major. They include a move to internship learning, the substitution of levels for grades, more attention to developing leadership capacity, and a new focus on reducing staff burnout.

Last year the school was project-based; this year the centerpiece of each student's experience is an internship program called Learning Through Internships (LTI). After a series of informational interviews, kids will identify their "passions," do some job shadowing, and then find internships where they will spend two days a week.

That's why during the first week of school, advisors (Truman's 12 teachers are now called advisors) took their students on "walkabouts"—introducing kids to the public transportation system and helping them identify locations for possible internships. Currently, students have internships in locations as varied as an ESL classroom and a doctor's office.

Another important change is that this year there are no grade levels. Instead, students develop individualized learning plans for four student-based levels (101, 201, 301, and 401) and can



Advisors from Truman Center's Forum School meet frequently to discuss student work and internships.

move through these levels at their own pace. Each level includes a list of standards and activities for mastery.

Although Truman's focus on developing leadership capacity began last year, Morris-Stendal says that this work is deepening.

“Every advisor at Federal Way's Truman Center has to take on some sort of leadership role. That's what happens when you only have six faculty taking responsibility for a small school.”

For example, one advisor leads the small school's Critical Friends Group that meets every two weeks, another serves as point person for the school's book groups, and another as point person to work with the Big Picture Company, the Providence, R.I. organization that assists Truman with many of its changes.

Each advisor, part of a learning team with about 17 students, is expected to work not only with his or her students but also with parents and internship mentors. While proud of the fact that Truman experienced no faculty turnover this year, Morris-Stendal says, “Because our advisors will be getting so involved with the ‘whole life’ of a student, we are paying special attention to burnout this year.”

Advisors are taking some of the responsibility for this and recently decided to cut the number of weekly staff meetings from three to two. Also, as they talk together about student work and spend time planning together, they look for ways to use each other's knowledge and materials.

They even take time to relax together, according to Morris-Stendal. “Some of our advisors get together after school on Taco Tuesdays at Azteca—a nice way to take a break.” And Morris-Stendal is doing her part to combat burnout by looking for new ways to recognize staff and by planning an out-of-town staff retreat later this fall.

DESIGN DAYS

Save the Date!

Gates grantee schools have the opportunity to bring a team to one of the Design Day sessions listed below. Design Days provide teams the chance to have their emerging small school designs critiqued by staff from the Small Schools Project and Small Schools Coaches Collaborative.

To enroll in one of these free sessions, contact Craig Lucero at: clucero@u.washington.edu, or 206/616-0303. Space is limited, so sign up today!

November 14, December 19

February 20, March 20

April 17, May 15

TOOLS & RESOURCES TO USE

Open Listserv Invites Subscribers

No time to surf the web, but you'd like to hear about what's new on the Small Schools Project website? Our open listserv is designed for you. It features monthly updates to the site such as recent articles, publications, progress at local schools, and more.

If you'd like to be included on this e-mail list, you may sign up on our website:

<http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/about/listserv.html>

A QUESTION FOR YOUR COLLEAGUES

Gates Grantee High School Meeting

On October 22 and 23, some staff members from each high school will be attending the fall Gates Grantee High School Meeting. The focus will be on the relationship between personalization and powerful learning. We encourage those of you who don't attend to ask your colleagues who do what went on at the meeting and what they learned.

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Bells can be shut off, each school can have its own schedule, everyone can “cut the wires” of the PA system, and each small school can negotiate internally the right to a voice in its own leadership. None of those movements toward autonomy costs money. But they do require that adults remain clear about why they are seeking autonomy.

To really meet its students’ needs, Delgado says, “Each school ultimately has to stand on its own two feet.”

NOTES

Community Engagement Questions?

The next issue of *The Learning Network* will focus on the need for and challenges of engaging your parents and community members in high school reinvention. If you have specific questions or issues you would like us to cover, please send them via e-mail to: nancylun@u.washington.edu.

Keep Us Informed

We like to keep up-to-date about events at your high school. If you have a newsletter that goes out to parents and community members, we would love to be on the mailing list. Please use the Small Schools Project address above.

Also, if your school’s reform efforts are featured in your local press, please send the clippings to Nancy Lundsgaard, at the Small Schools Project.

The Learning Network is a monthly newsletter written and produced by the Small Schools Project, which is based at the University of Washington Center on Reinventing Public Education. Through the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative, the Project provides support to Washington State schools and districts that want to create small schools. The Project is supported by a gift from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. For more information, please visit <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>. To share information about your school’s redesign efforts or suggest topics for this publication, contact:

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