



Supporting Small Schools Based on Relationships, Rigor, and Relevance

September, 2005

Five years ago, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation began awarding grants to **selected high schools in Washington State that expressed an interest in changing the way “we’ve always done” school**. Some of those grants went to small rural or urban schools; more went to large comprehensive urban and suburban ones that committed to dividing into smaller schools. Some had scholarship money attached; some did not. All started down the reinvention road, at different speeds, in different ways.

Each school has its own story. Whether your school is just starting down the path of redesigning itself, or whether you’ve joined a school well on its way, you’ll want to know what’s happened and what you might expect.

The Small Schools Project opened its doors shortly after the first grants were awarded five years ago. Our charge—along with that of the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative, formed a year later—has been to **support the development of small schools**, and to help each grantee school accomplish what it set out to do. While our most important work has been face-to-face with those of you who work in schools, we’ve also produced a set of materials you might find helpful.

In this publication, most of the articles—which include editorials, news articles, and columns—are taken from *The Learning Network*, our monthly newsletter for educators in Washington State schools with Gates grants. A few come from *Focus*, our newsletter for board members. Some come from other SSP publications. **All are available in their entirety on our website, www.smallschoolsproject.org.**

Redesigning Our High Schools is not a how-to manual. It’s not an academic research report (although we do produce those, also available on our website). Nor is it, by any means, a complete historical record of the work of Washington State Gates grantee schools over the last few years. (In fact, because of the pace in change in most schools, some stories may read like “old” news, and staff we quote may have moved on.) Rather, it’s an attempt to give you an **easy-to-read overview of small schools topics and stories** from your schools.

We believe that the core of school redesign work falls into three broad areas: **school culture, teacher practice, and school structure**—so we’ve divided much of this publication’s material into those categories. We also believe that starting with one of these rather than another is probably naïve, so the order we’ve used is arbitrary—as is the way we’ve assigned topics to each category. To achieve significant gains in student achievement and build equitable schools requires complex changes that reveal almost immediately how deeply culture, structure, and practices are interwoven. Student placement decisions, for example, are at once an issue of structure, culture, and practice.

What is critical, in our view, is to begin with an understanding of why deep change is necessary and what a serious change effort is likely to entail. That’s why we start this publication with **the category of school change**, the challenge that engages us all.

Sincerely,

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Assistance is provided in several ways: through our website, professional development activities for educators and school board members, publications (generally available at no charge on our website), consultant services, and the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative. The Collaborative provides school coaches to schools that receive reinvention grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and is a partnership of SSP, CES Northwest, and the National School Reform Faculty.

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SCHOOL CHANGE

CHANGE IS ONE of those things people find very easy to talk about, but very difficult to do. For every organization that has substantially changed itself, we can find a hundred counterparts that have fallen by the wayside. The same is true for individuals; thousands more people have tried to lose weight than have actually succeeded.

At the same time, we know nothing stays the same. We might feel fine about gaining only two pounds a year until we realize that we'll be forty pounds heavier two decades from now.

It's true with schools as well. Our students are different every year, we have additions and losses to our staff, administrators come and go, textbooks change, the building deteriorates rapidly or receives a facelift, overheads are replaced with LCD projectors, and so on. In each of these instances, the changes almost always just seem to happen without deliberate effort or attention on our part. They are part of keeping school, as Ted Sizer would say.

Setting out to change your school deliberately—to alter its purpose, its expectations for kids and adults, its structures and routines, its very culture—is a different matter altogether. So too is changing one's teaching practice substantially, or rethinking how we lead and serve as administrators. Changes of this order are often more threatening than exciting, and more difficult than we had imagined.

Jan Reeder, who directs the Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest Center, has developed a simple formulation about change: People change when they see the need to change and when they know how to change. We use that as our starting point in work with schools. Helping folks change is often more challenging than understanding the need since change, at some point, is invariably personal.

While every school is unique, the process of change has a number of common components, and schools going through serious change must address many of the same issues. This section identifies many of those issues, including a brief introduction to the “why change” conversation that needs to precede any actual change.

People change when they see the need to change and when they know how to change.

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WHY CHANGE: THE UNVARNISHED FACTS

Conversion Clips, Fall 2003

With so much attention given to design and structure issues and to political compromise, it's easy to lose track of why schools have elected to undertake such fundamental change.

THIS SEPTEMBER, IN spite of crippling budget constraints, over 50 high schools in Washington State will take significant steps to redesign high school education in their communities. Such a step is unprecedented for our state.

A half dozen of these schools are new, free-standing small schools, begun to make use of current understandings of how adolescents learn best. Along with another 15 “already-small” schools, they are rethinking school design and size, recognizing that smallness brings many benefits not available to students and adults in large schools.

Another 15 to 30 schools are in earlier stages of rethinking the fate of their comprehensive high schools in ways that go well beyond the usual tinkering and modest changes.

The most visible schools are those 15 high schools featured here that are taking the next significant steps toward converting their large, comprehensive schools into small, focused schools. Located in 13 districts across the state, these schools serve over 21,000 students.

Washington's effort parallels similar work across the nation. Spurred by support from Federal and private dollars—and an honest look at their own discouraging data—increasing numbers of districts of all sizes are undertaking the redesign of a century-old institution. Our best estimate is that over 1,000 high schools are involved in this effort to convert large, often impersonal comprehensive high schools into small, highly personal, focused small schools.

With so much attention given to design and structure issues and to political compromise, it's easy to lose track of why schools have elected to undertake such fundamental change. The details vary from one school to another, but here are the unvarnished facts:

- **Large, comprehensive high schools serve only a few students very, very well:** 15 to 20 percent of the students in a school are highly successful in conventional terms. They have good scores on standardized tests, take most of the advanced courses offered by the school, and are often admitted to selective colleges and universities.
 - **These same schools fail many more students miserably.** In Washington State, about 30 percent of students who enter ninth grade don't graduate in four years—that's the average. In some districts, it's 50 percent or higher.
 - **Along with their diplomas, large numbers of students from these schools—usually 50 percent or so—receive an embarrassingly poor education.** If they enter the job market, they are typically qualified only for jobs requiring unskilled labor. If they go on to higher education, they are most likely to enroll in a community college. Many will be woefully unprepared and, before they begin to earn college credits, will need to take remedial courses to acquire skills and knowledge they didn't acquire in their high schools.
- In contrast, 30 years of research show that small schools have higher attendance rates, lower drop-out rates, fewer incidents of violence, and higher average achievement, especially for low-income and minority students. More than enough reasons for high schools to commit to the years of planning and difficult decision-making that major change requires. ■

In Washington State, about 30 percent of students who enter ninth grade don't graduate in four years – that's the average.

ONE SCHOOL BOARD'S JOURNEY

Focus, March 2003

Enumclaw school board members describe what convinced them that high school reinvention was necessary in their district.

Andy Wilmer: The clincher for me came several years ago when I realized that out of our top ten graduates, only three were going on to four-year schools. Plus, too many of our kids weren't even graduating. If you can't prepare 100 percent of your students to graduate and be ready for what's next, you can't consider yourself a success.

Mike Goodfellow: When I realized that we start every year with 400 plus freshmen but end with about 300 graduates, I started to think, "Well, maybe it is somewhat broke." Also, the experience

of my high school senior influenced me. He's a kid who, although he does well academically, works hard to stay "under the radar." He could do this successfully in a big school, but I think more personalization would have been good for him.

Nancy Merrill: Looking at the data—our dropout rate and the fact that many of our graduates can't attend four-year schools—influenced me, too. We are providing a good education for many, but not the best for the most. I knew we could do better. ■

WHY IS OUR SCHOOL DOING THIS?

SSP FAQ Sheet, 2004

An FAQ sheet that the Small Schools Project provides annually for new teachers outlines the rationale for effective small schools and how they will make a difference for kids.

Why is our school doing this?

Why are so many large high schools dividing into smaller schools and already small schools implementing strategies to take advantage of their smallness? Because high schools in almost every district are failing to educate all our kids. Too many students are dropping out, or—if they graduate—being inadequately prepared for college, work, and citizenship.

This shouldn't be a surprise. American high schools were never designed to work for everyone. In the past, every student didn't need a high school degree to make a living wage. But that's changed. The quality of life for those without high school diplomas—or now, even college diplomas—has declined dramatically over the years. Meanwhile, hard-working teachers continue to struggle on in a complex, outmoded system.

How will effective small schools make a difference?

The research base making the case for effective small schools is compelling. Student achievement goes up for virtually all students, but particularly for students from families with low income.

Currently, half the African American and Latino population is dropping out or being pushed out. The narrowing of the gap between these stu-

dents and their more affluent peers makes the development of small schools a social justice issue as well as an educational issue.

Higher achievement is the most compelling benefit, but good small schools provide other benefits as well. Discipline problems and dropout rates go down, while attendance goes up. College going rates increase, as do student, parent, and teacher satisfaction. The cost per graduate is lower in small schools compared to large comprehensive high schools.

Why do all these good things happen? Because smallness allows teachers to provide three interdependent elements essential to the success of most students.

- **Relationship:** Strong connections—intentionally built and fostered—with caring adults at school makes a huge difference for kids, allowing teachers to create learning opportunities that meet the needs of individual learners.
- **Rigor:** Rigor does not mean simply covering more academic content, but is a student's active, deep learning driven by a teacher's high expectations.
- **Relevance:** Learning becomes more relevant for students when teachers are able to connect the curriculum to the interests and the world

of a particular student through internships, job shadowing, and community-based learning opportunities.

Whether affluent students in small private

schools or low-income students in small inner-city public schools, kids in schools that provide these elements are more likely to stay in school and to be prepared for college, work, and citizenship. ■

UNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT SCHOOL CHANGE

Small Schools Project, 2001

SSP Director **Rick Lear** describes 15 hard-won understandings about school change.

WHEN A SCHOOL or community sets out to make significant changes in how it educates its children, there are no guarantees, no matter how desperately those involved may want them. What follows is a set of fifteen hard-won understandings to help schools and communities begin the task of rethinking their schools. The items represent understandings

about change, not a rigid sequence of steps to follow.

Following these understandings won't ensure success, but it will make it more likely

that genuine progress and ongoing improvement will become a reality.

For change to be successful, every key group needs to be involved from an early point.

1 Leadership is important, and must be nurtured.

A school, and the community that surrounds it, can't have too many leaders. It can have too many bosses, too many people telling others what to do and how, or too many people acting in unilateral and arbitrary ways. But not too many leaders are people with skill and judgment, energy and expertise, who are respected by others.

Leadership must be identified in and come from every part of the school community. Early on, it is especially important that the superintendent and school board demonstrate leadership that helps change to occur. Over the long run, many leaders will be needed at all levels, and active encouragement and support needs to be extended to all who demonstrate leadership in the change work.

In districts undergoing significant change, a deliberate decision to create "diffuse" or "distributed" leadership is particularly important so that the changes stand a better chance of succeeding when key "positional" leaders, such as superintendents or directors of instruction or principals, leave, as they surely will. For small schools, distributed leadership also plays a key role in promoting stability as the staff grows and changes over time. It also helps build and strengthen a culture of collaboration within the school.

2 Successful change needs to be both visionary and concrete.

Bold visions are necessary, both to inspire and to stretch everyone's thinking. At the same time, specific first steps are necessary to get things going and to provide early successes that will help build and sustain momentum among the groups and individuals involved. Successful new experiences provide powerful impetus for change.

3 Change needs to be both long term and systemic, and must involve all the key stakeholders from the start.

A new school is capable of significant change, and of being "different," over the short run. It's much harder to sustain a changed school over the long term. It requires a plan which covers several years, which is broadly inclusive, which provides adequate resources to support the individuals engaged in the change, and which recognizes the need for attention to the entire system of schooling. The "system" includes those with legal authority over the operation of schools—district administrators, school board members, the state department of education, for instance—and those who work in schools, such as teachers, principals, and support staff. It also includes groups such as local teacher unions and others in the community who have an interest in the schools. Most of all, it includes the parents and students the schools serve directly.

For change to be successful, every key group needs to be involved in the conversation. No one likes surprises, and no one likes to have big changes presented to them as a "done deal." Creating and sustaining small schools will require changes in policy, practice, procedure, and routine from virtually everyone, so everyone should have opportunities to be involved early in the discussion and planning.

4 Change must be driven by local processes.

While serious change requires both "bottom-up" and "top-down" support, the process must be locally driven, for at least two key reasons. Doing so is respectful of and builds on local uniqueness.

It also secures the consent of those involved locally and who, in the end, will do most of the work and be most affected by the changes.

5 *A plan, with specific first steps and clear benchmarks, provides necessary direction and valuable indicators of progress.*

The first steps need to be tied directly to the vision, small enough to be accomplished reasonably quickly, yet big enough to make a difference in the life of the school even though they are early steps.

Benchmarks are important because deep change takes a long time, and people need to be able to see the progress they are, in fact, making. A plan with locally developed benchmarks also helps to reduce uncertainty and tension along the way.

6 *Trust and teamwork are essential elements of change.*

Change is deeply personal and often difficult for those involved, and requires trusting relationships.

Serious change also requires collaboration, since virtually all aspects of a school community are affected. Creating a no-fault, problem-solving atmosphere will build trust; viewing every step the school takes as an opportunity for collaboration will build teamwork. Only when participants feel safe and free to acknowledge uncertainties and take risks can they move forward with confidence.

7 *Be inclusive and welcome newcomers.*

In any change effort, newcomers will join the early group. Some will learn of the work and want to join in, some will replace folks who leave, still others will be doubters or hesitant members of the staff or school community who decide to be a part of the effort. They should be welcomed eagerly, since they bring new energy, fresh perspectives, and new skills to the group. They also need to learn the specific components of the changes underway, a brief history of the work, and the norms of the working groups to which they belong. Planning for newcomers will make the process of change much smoother.

8 *Certain structural changes need to precede other changes.*

Structures and procedures which promote

broad-based dialogue and participation among key stakeholders must be in place and working effectively to sustain other efforts. Plans can be made, benchmarks identified, progress celebrated. Difficulties are certain to emerge in any change effort, and conflict is inevitable. When structures are in place which allow for broad participation, difficulties can be addressed and conflicts aired and managed.

9 *Providing multiple entry points for change makes good sense, both for schools and the people in them.*

Schools have entered the change process from a number of directions: assessment, curriculum, planning backwards, technological innovation, personalization, parent programs, and so on. Once structures and processes are in place to foster inclusion and communication, schools can start where high energy exists. Individuals, too, can enter the process from a variety of places. Some teachers, for instance, learn by trying out new techniques in their classroom. For others, changing what they do in the classroom will be the last thing that happens; they need other ways into the process—helping to create a schoolwide system of portfolios, developing an effective parent program, providing background reading for other staff—which respect their styles and needs as well as move the school forward.

10 *Focus and integration are keys to achieving deep change.*

Schools are in some ways drowning in initiatives; it's not unusual for even a modest-size elementary school to have twenty to thirty initiatives underway at a time. The challenge is to determine, out of the universe of things it might do to improve student accomplishment, what the school will do, even when that means letting go of some other worthy endeavors. Many reforms have died because they have been too splintered or tried for too brief a time. While change is not linear, and while a number of change activities can and must go on simultaneously, providing sufficient long-

Benchmarks are important because deep change takes a long time, and people need to be able to see the progress they are, in fact, making.

term focus and choosing activities which complement one another in a direct way are essential to sustaining the effort. Recent research by the Chicago Consortium for School Research entitled *School Instructional Program Coherence: Benefits and Challenges* provides data to support the common-sense notion that instructional coherence pays off in improved student learning.

11 *Change is resource hungry.*

Everyone involved must understand that change will require substantial human and capital resources, specifically time, support, expertise, dollars, and energy. On the one hand, schools and districts may never have quite enough resources to support change efforts fully. At the same time, it is unfair to expect that those most directly involved,

particularly teachers, can or should carry forward the reform largely on their own time. Resource needs must be identified and commitments made to provide those resources at the beginning of the effort.

In many instances, substantial existing resources can and must be reallocated; often, additional resources must also be secured. In either case, the “cost” of not doing so, in terms of lost opportunity and, increasingly, lost children, is far greater.

12 *Follow-up support is critical for changes in practice to take root.*

Behavior change—whether it is changing a teaching method, a way of interacting with other teachers or parents, of working in meetings, of assessing student work—requires time and opportunities for practice, feedback, and analysis. One-time events with no follow-up are rarely useful in supporting change. Those in positions to support the change need to stay in close touch with everyone involved and provide resources as they are requested whenever possible.

13 *Schools must take the lead in conducting action research, setting standards, and documenting performance.*

Participating in action research makes it more likely that the school will remain in charge of its

own destiny. It also promotes habits of inquiry, reflection, and caring among the staff, who in turn serve as models for students. At the same time, the school has a responsibility to make clear its standards for student accomplishment and what it intends to do to help students meet those standards. Sharing the standards widely, and documenting carefully the school’s efforts to help students meet the standards, will serve the school well in the long run.

Throughout the nation, states have established standards for student performance. Many of the most successful new schools have used the school’s own language rather than the state’s to describe what they expect of students—and what they are committed to ensure that students will accomplish. This act of “reframing” the standards seems to have a powerful effect on a school’s commitment (rather than compliance) to the standards it holds for students.

14 *Unexpected events can help a school move forward more quickly.*

Things won’t go according to plan. Sometimes, a real setback will occur, and plans will have to be adjusted. Just as often, an unexpected opportunity will present itself: a new superintendent, a change in regulations, a new staff member with some particular skills, an invitation to participate in a project with another school. School communities that both recognize the opportunity for what it is and have the courage to take advantage of it can make unanticipated leaps forward. Being able to recognize such opportunities is directly related to how clear a school is about its vision and what it needs to do to get there.

15 *Embracing change as a central part of school life increases the likelihood of success.*

One way of looking at change is as an event that occurs from time to time, something that a school “gears up” for every few years. Such a view is sometimes described as an “unfreeze—change—refreeze” procedure. Change is more usefully described as a continuing process that operates at many levels on an ongoing basis. This view recognizes change as a part of the school’s culture, and as providing opportunities for continued growth. Thinking about, planning for, implementing, ana-

Change is more usefully described as a continuing process that operates at many levels on an ongoing basis.

lyzing, and revising changes that lead to improved student accomplishment then become a central

part of the school's responsibilities to students and parents. ■

NEW SCHOOLS, CONVERSIONS, AND SCHOOL CHANGE

Small Schools Project, 2001

These three ways of thinking about school change may be helpful to those who are starting new schools—whether free-standing ones or those in conversion buildings.

OUR COMMON SENSE suggests to us that “school change” is something that people in new schools need not think about. We, after all, are starting afresh—indeed, the opportunity to begin with a clean slate is part of what draws so many educators to the difficult work of beginning new schools. This is one of those instances when common sense is wrong, and can lead to big trouble.

Here are three different ways of thinking about new schools and school change that might be helpful.

A new school is new only briefly.

The realities of daily life in a school and its breakneck pace may make school founders, who design the school in a more leisurely way than the school is lived, rethink some parts of the design almost immediately. Other exigencies—a technology system the school will depend on but isn't ready, for instance—affect what is possible immediately. By the time the technology is in place, the school has a set of procedures and relationships that allowed it to operate without technology. Much or all of it must be changed or undone.

Manifestations of the newness itself—kids' difficulty adapting to a school that is intentionally different, parental uneasiness with the details of a design they agree with in the abstract but perhaps not in the concrete, teachers without the skill to sustain high levels of collaboration, for example—can and do lead staff to think about what needs to be changed sooner rather than later. In such circumstances, expediency or crisis management rather than reflection and long-term considerations usually rule the day.

A new school is new for a long, long time.

Few schools are born full-blown. Most start with only one or two grades and grow the school as these first students move toward graduation. Consequently, the school actually grows in size—

both students and adults—for several years. The growth in numbers and the adjustments it demands, plus the ongoing addition of adults as well as students to the school, can infuse a sense of newness into a school for many years, along with the excitement and instability that comes with it.

Perhaps most importantly, it almost always takes several years to develop all the key elements of the school's design. Successful new schools realize that they may put in place most or even all the important design elements in the school's first few months, but only a few can receive immediate and deep attention. Others emerge more slowly, depending on developments of other aspects of the school, the maturity of students, the addition of more adults to the school, a community's acceptance of the school, and so on.

Many new schools think of themselves as new until its first class graduates. A more realistic marker might be the year the first set of students goes entirely through a fully-developed school—the ninth grade class that enters the school the same academic year the first class graduates.

A new school is never new.

Everyone—students, parents, secretaries, teachers, administrators, custodians, boosters—brings their own school history with them to the new school. Often, that history drives the design of a new school, especially as adults imagine a better, healthier way to educate students. Sometimes, both adults and students explicitly include something from their old school(s) they particularly value. Frequently, however, that history works to undermine design aspects of a new school.

Even in the best of circumstances, a new small school will find itself in the midst of significant change for many years.

Exhausted teachers dig out worksheets because they didn't have time to prepare. Administrators make important decisions unilaterally in spite of their agreement to share decision making with staff. Kids challenge a culture based on respect and relationship rather than authority and compliance; disappointed and frustrated, adults react repressively. Parents come to meetings with advisors and want to discuss grades, not their child's intellectual life.

For a host of reasons, it is both useful and wise for those beginning new schools to pay attention to literature about change. It is particularly important when they are part of a conversion school; that

is, one of several smaller schools created in place of a larger comprehensive high school. Such schools are often created in a profoundly charged political atmosphere. In spite of sufficient political will (or desperation) to proceed with such a change, these new schools often have substantial numbers of staff from the "old" school and many of the same students and families. Not all of them will agree with the change, and find themselves unwilling participants.

Even in the best of circumstances—talented staff, willing parents and students, a supportive and capable district office, benign political circumstances—a new small school will find itself in the midst of significant change for many years. ■

CHANGE MAKES MOST OF US UNCOMFORTABLE: THE "YES, BUT..." SERIES *Focus, February 2002, March 2002, April 2002, June 2002, September 2004*

Originally written for board members, this series addresses specific objections to school redesign.

CHANGE MAKES MOST of us uncomfortable. We need to question and resist and question some more before we move forward. As we move closer to accepting a new idea (the need for smaller high schools, for example), we are likely to have lots of questions which we phrase as "Yes, it sounds like a good idea, but..." In this monthly feature, we'll respond to some of the common "yes, but..." concerns you might hear. "Yes, but won't it cost us more?" "Yes, but what about the football team or the marching band?" And so on.

Yes, but... I went to a big high school and I did just fine. My kids did (or are doing) fine, too.

Many of your most involved parents may tell you this. They got good grades and participated in extracurricular activities. It's likely that they (and their children after them) were members of one of

the "small schools" that exist within all large high schools. According to Debbie Meier, founder and director of several small New York

City schools, "Kids create these for survival's sake." These small subgroups might include the academic stars or the student leaders or the star athletes or the drama students. Faculty members tend to

know the subgroups' students by name and support them.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of kids—probably 70 to 80 percent, according to Meier—belong to groups that include no grown-ups. A few loners belong nowhere.

In the 50s and 60s, most of this latter group dropped out to go to work. Trouble is, today there are few jobs that don't require at least a high school diploma.

So students stay with us—at least officially—although many are disconnected and anonymous. No doubt many of our students will do well in any high school they attend—large or small. But every student—including those who make up "that other 70 percent"—deserves to receive a rigorous, personalized education in a learning environment that engages them.

Yes, but... what about the cost?

What about "economy of scale?" Isn't it cheaper to operate one large school (lights, heating, staff, etc.) rather than two (or more) smaller ones? To build one large facility (one cafeteria, one gym, one library, etc.) rather than two?

In the 50s and 60s, this economy of scale argument was part of the impetus for a massive consolidation effort which led to the construction of many of our largest schools. (Interestingly, today's average public school was built 42 years ago.) The

An increasing body of research refutes the "smaller is cheaper" idea.

thinking was that there would be more dollar resources per student (and more extracurricular opportunities and curricular diversity) in large schools.

This makes sense intuitively. However, a 1996 study by Valerie Lee and Julie Smith reports that large schools are actually more expensive because their sheer size requires more administrative support. (Beyond cost issues, a larger bureaucracy is less efficient and flexible than a small staff.) A year later, a study of New York City schools showed that while smaller schools had higher per pupil costs, “their much higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates produce among the lowest cost per graduate in the entire New York City system.” Taxpayers expect districts to use their dollars efficiently and effectively.

If the goal of “efficient and effective education” is to graduate academically achieving seniors, not just to warehouse teenagers for a few years, it appears that smaller schools make sense financially as well as educationally.

Yes, but... what about academic rigor?

As we begin to talk about smaller learning communities, community members may be asking you about the football team or the band, about how much it will cost to make facilities changes, about whether their children can move from one academy to another. These are all important questions to deal with. However, as school board members, accountable for the education of your district’s children, you will be asking an even more important question: how will any changes we make affect student learning?

Smaller schools provide personalization, and we know that’s good for kids. Not good enough, though. Michelle Fine, a professor of psychology at the City University of New York, says, “(Smallness) will produce a sense of belonging almost immediately but hugging is not the same as algebra. Rigor and care must be braided together.”

In his book, *Making the Grade*, Tony Wagner talks about the importance of “rigor and respect.” He says a caring environment is a necessary first step, but it must be coupled with an intellectually challenging curriculum taught in ways that engage students. That’s why principals and teachers in Gates grantee high schools aren’t only spending time determining how smaller learning com-

munities will be structured; they’re also looking at how the new structure will support more effective teaching and learning. Each high school has a “coach” (usually an experienced teacher or principal) who works with staff members to design effective teaching and learning strategies based on the following three components:

- 1) **Active inquiry:** You know you are seeing active inquiry when you see students engaged in active participation, exploration and research; when the activities they are engaged in draw out perceptions and develop understanding; when students are encouraged to make decisions about their learning; and when teachers use the diverse experiences of students to build learning experiences.
- 2) **In-depth learning:** The focus is competence, not coverage. Students struggle with complex problems, explore core concepts to develop deep understanding, and apply knowledge in real world contexts.
- 3) **Performance assessment:** Clear expectations define what students should know and be able to do; students produce quality products and present to real audiences; student work shows evidence of understanding, not just recall; assessment allows students to exhibit higher-order thinking; and teachers and students set learning goals and monitor progress.

Yes, but... what about extracurricular activities?

Given what we know about the value of students participating in extracurricular activities, it’s not surprising that parents may be concerned about the fate of these programs if our larger high schools break into smaller units. What about our sports teams? Our award-winning band? Our drama program?

Here’s the good news. Research from numerous studies shows that levels of extracurricular participation are significantly higher in small schools than in large ones. In large schools, there tends to be a small group of active students at one end of

Research findings about [extracurricular] participation are most applicable to minority and low-SES students—those most impacted by the achievement gap.

the continuum—those amazing kids who do everything. At the other end, there's a much larger group of students who don't actively participate, although they may fill the bleachers at pep rallies.

The greater and more varied participation in extracurricular activities by students in small schools is the single best-supported finding in school size research. You can get a picture of extracurricular activities in small schools by talking to board members from our state's smaller districts where almost every student plays a sport or two and where community participation in pep rallies will knock your socks off!

So as our high schools create small personalized learning communities, what about the football team or the award-winning band? One solution might be to decide that including a larger percentage of kids in extracurricular activities is

more important than winning trophies. Easy to say, if your kid isn't playing football or editing a prize-winning yearbook!

A more palatable solution for many communities will be to continue traditional "beyond the bell" activities. For example, one of New York's most successful small school models, the Julia Richman complex

(five small schools in one large building) sponsors a cross-school basketball team.

Dealing with issues as near and dear to our hearts (and to our community as football teams and jazz bands) won't be easy. However, in this data-driven society, sharing new knowledge about the conditions that best support student success becomes a "key work" of effective school boards.

Yes, but... we've tried it and it's not working.

Are you hearing something like this from any of those impacted by the small schools work at your school? Teachers? Students? Parents?

It's part of a board's job to listen respectfully and with an open mind to all of these groups. While board members understand that the views

of the most vocal don't always represent the majority, it's still hard to listen to dissatisfaction.

Your responses will come from your understanding of, beliefs about, and commitment to the work your school is doing, of course, but here are some examples of concerns you might be hearing and some ways to frame your thinking:

- **It's not working.**

Whether your district has a large school that is breaking into small schools or an already-small school that is planning some innovative reforms, whether it's had its grant for two years or three years, your school has probably just completed year one of implementation. In fact, some schools are "staging" their implementation—phasing in the changes.

Most change experts say you should consider three to five years to implement structural changes, many more for cultural and teaching changes—the ones that most directly impact student achievement—to take root. So you could make the case that one year is not "trying it." Although your teachers may have been struggling with issues and decisions for three years now, the first year of implementation is a better place to mark as "the beginning" than when the school received its grant.

Change takes time. It's like one of those awful kitchen remodels that we think we may not survive. First, everything gets ripped up and we live with chaos for what seems like forever. Teachers, students, and parents may be feeling that way now. Test scores haven't improved, and you may not even be seeing a rise in attendance nor a decline in discipline referrals.

Back to the kitchen analogy. In the midst of the disruption, we don't say, "Put everything back the way it was. This is too hard." We have a dream—a picture in our minds—of that new kitchen. So we stick with the process.

Changing a high school will take much longer than the worst of all kitchen remodels. However, we've already tried the old way for more than 50 years, and it's not working for many kids. Trying some new ways deserves much more than one year.

Change takes time. It's like one of those awful kitchen remodels that we think we may not survive. First, everything gets ripped up and we live with chaos for what seems like forever. But we don't say, "Put everything back the way it was. This is too hard." We have a picture in our minds of that new kitchen. So we stick with the process.

- **We can't keep experimenting with our kids.**

Truth is, small schools are not an experiment. The 30-year research base about their effectiveness is compelling. Says educator-researcher Mary Anne Raywid, "The relationship between size and positive educational outcomes has been confirmed with a clarity and at a level of confidence rare in the annals of education research."

Citing data probably won't change a dissatisfied person's mind. Most people understand how much the world has changed since the 1950s, however. They may be more ready to understand that as the world has changed, so have the rules. Our high schools have done just what they were designed to do decades ago—sort kids and make sure that the top third could go on to college. But the needs of today's work force—coupled with higher standards and the accountability movement—demand that we educate all kids. As a result, the old way of "doing high school" is obsolete.

- **Our more supportive parents are pulling their kids out.**

Now that's hard to hear! Districts value parents who get involved in school organizations, who monitor their children's progress, who support teachers. It hurts when you lose even one family like this.

A high school principal who's tired of fighting with affluent parents over changes he believes will benefit all kids says, "Let them go. Then we can focus our energies on the business of educating the rest of the kids." Easy for him to say, perhaps. As a board member elected by the public, you probably won't take that stance.

By explaining the goals of your school, you can encourage parents to stay, but if they leave anyway, take comfort in this: if your school has the time and support it needs to put relationships, rigor,

and relevance in place (elements present in prestigious private schools), those families will come back. The kids they pulled out may have already graduated, but you'll get the younger siblings. And other families, too.

Can you collect data about students who are leaving, rather than relying on anecdotal reports of people pulling their kids out? That data should include students who drop out (a de facto pullout). How do the numbers match up? Is there more concern for those students whose parents pull them out than for those who drop out?

- **This whole process has hurt teacher morale.**

You may hear disapproval and dissatisfaction from teachers—including some who are well-liked by parents and students. Again, collect the data. Does what you hear represent the views of most or a vocal minority?

Find out why staff members are unhappy. Is it because they are being asked to change? To work harder? To hold higher expectations? To teach all kids? Is it because they think "this, too, shall pass"? Or is it because they don't know how to do what they are being asked to do?

If you expect them to do the work, ask them what kind of support they need. Maybe they just need to know you stand with them. Or they may need additional collaboration time or some other form of support.

Your role is essential. Studies about lasting reforms point to a district's willingness to articulate the vision, provide appropriate levels of flexibility and incentives to stay the course, and remove barriers to change. ■

Nostalgic thinking for "what was" exerts a gravitational pull back to the familiar.

RESISTING THE PULL OF NOSTALGIC GRAVITY

Focus, October 2003

Nostalgic gravity is the human tendency to slide back into "the way we've always done things" when the going gets rough.

SCHOOLS ARE OPEN, kids are back in the classroom. Most of your schools with Gates grants are in some stage of implementation. In some, the structure looks quite different,

in others changes are less startling. Advisories are getting off the ground, Critical Friends Groups are forming.

But... deep changes in teaching and learn-

ing—active inquiry, in-depth learning, authentic performance assessment—are not likely to be showing up in every classroom yet. The kinds of lasting changes that are at the heart of high school reform: increased rigor, relevance, and relationship.

Until changes show up in the classroom, we need to be on guard for what an educator friend of mine calls “nostalgic gravity.” She’s talking about

the human tendency to slide back into “the way we’ve always done things” when one of two things happens: unforeseen obstacles come up or we don’t get the results we’re looking for fast enough.

School reform is likely to succumb to nostalgic gravity if district level structures or systems remain the same. Examining district systems and policy will be essential in combating that gravity. ■

THINGS YOU CAN COUNT ON HAPPENING

The Learning Network, August 2003

What to expect the first year students attend your new small school.

1 *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.

2 *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.

Article Series

■
This series by SSP director **Rick Lear** focuses on what teachers and administrators can expect to happen in their new small schools over time.

1 of 4

It will help to anticipate transitions and think about what will happen next.

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.*

Leadership is a way of acting and being as opposed to the right to make decisions.

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 anxious 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.

Begin to think about leadership in the following ways:

- ✦ 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 no one don't feels left out?
- ✦ Leadership is relentless about taking care of small things before they become big things; are there ways to do 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? 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.

4 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 fun-

damental 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 collegial 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 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 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.

5 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

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.

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 Planning Resources for Teachers in Small High Schools* 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.

Understand that you can't make all the decisions at once, and many of the decisions you do make are provisional.

6 *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.

Why you are not starting from scratch:

- ✦ 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?

Before you begin to work with parents and families, it's helpful to think about these things:

- ✦ 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 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.

7 *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 are 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.*

BUILDING THE SCHOOLS WE'VE IMAGINED

The Learning Network, November 2003

Two months into the schools, folks in new small schools may feel the burdens of undertaking a revolutionary task but not the benefits that come with revolution.

Article Series



This series by SSP director **Rick Lear** focuses on what teachers and administrators can expect to happen in their new small schools over time.

2 of 4

“WE HAVEN'T EVEN been to Europe yet!” was the final comment from a student in a new small school—one of several such schools sharing the same building. The student was expressing his frustration with the slow pace of change. After two years of planning and struggling to get their building redesigned into small schools, it still didn't feel much different. Homework looked a lot like last year's homework, worksheets hadn't disappeared, students remained passive and unengaged, teachers talked through most of the class.

My own phrase for this student's feelings has been “Halloween nightmare.” It's the fear that folks in these 71 new small schools—all launched but still fragile—would be, two months into the school year, feeling the burdens of undertaking a revolutionary task, but not yet feeling the benefits that come with revolution.

The fear that teachers, already tired from planning the transition, would look up and say,—“This is it? I have more preps than before, new courses, and still 150 kids a day...”

The fear that teachers would look at what didn't happen—kids scheduled into their small schools as promised, “pure” classes in ninth grade, significant budget autonomy, very limited crossovers and only for upperclassmen—and wonder why they should keep faith in the face of another round of failed promises.

What does help when the daylight gets shorter each day, yet each day seems to get longer? What will get us to June? What will help us build the schools we imagined?

1 *Perspective helps.*

From the beginning, we've known this would probably take most of five years just to put in place; for most schools, November, 2003, isn't quite the halfway point. Knowing how far the journey is likely to be is crucial to pacing oneself, and our work together.

One of our coaches talks about “launch burn”—the fact that most space ships burn 90 percent of their fuel just getting off the ground. The big difference is that, for space ships, that's the plan—the mission is designed to work that way. Small schools need a different plan—a plan that allows for the ongoing transition of last century's schools to something new and takes into account the steady acquisition of new teaching skills as the transition takes place.

2 *Looking at what is different helps.*

In some small schools, students do spend virtually all of their day in their own school. Ninth graders look at small schools as the way high school is, and they like it. Students like having many of the same kids in their classes, in spite of fears that they wouldn't see their friends. Many teachers can say, after only two months, that they know all the students in their school by name. Other teachers, for the first time in their careers, are collaborating with their colleagues, and liking it. In school after school, a new generation of teacher-leaders is stepping forward. Some of these changes, another coach observes, are subtle ones, but represent early indicators that important change is, in fact, underway.

3 *Getting clear about what's needed helps.*

Here are some issues to get clear about:

- Which autonomies are necessary, which would be nice, and which can wait a while. Specificity about how many crossovers, for what reasons, and when in the day they can occur so that the rest of the small school isn't held hostage to them. What has to change in the schedule, and why. Why it's critical to have common planning time on a regular basis during the school day, not just once a month.
- Why looping or multi-grade core courses are necessary to reduce the teacher load over several years.
- Getting district personnel, or assistant principals who may have been on the sidelines until now, fully up to speed and involved. Amending

Knowing how far the journey is likely to be is crucial to pacing oneself, and our work together.

the union contract so it supports teacher leadership, innovation, and initiative at the building level.

- The number of additional sections of math and sciences courses you'll need as you make good on the commitment to graduate all kids college-ready, and what will have to go in the curriculum to make space for those sections.
- Understanding that pointing fingers, incidentally, doesn't help, is divisive, and expends energy needed elsewhere.

The specifics will vary, but each small school should be able to identify three to five structural or procedural matters that can be addressed at little or no financial cost between now and next September, and negotiate with whomever can make those things happen to ensure that they do happen.

4 Learning helps.

The goal of this redesign work is substantially improved student accomplishment for virtually all students. What we rarely say is that the attainability of that goal rests on adult learning.

It depends on parents and community members learning enough about the benefits of small schools to support the change. It also depends on district leaders and board members to reallocate resources and changes policies, procedures, and practices as needed in service of this redesign effort. Most of all, though, it depends on the learning of adults who work daily in each school.

What most needs learning? How to better teach real skills, first of all. How each adult, not simply specialists, can help adolescents learn to read well, and to write well. How, specifically, we promote critical thinking in classes. How we differentiate instruction in classes of diverse learners. How we make collaborative learning really work

for students, and for ourselves. How we use performance assessments to show in a more genuine way what students are learning. How we learn to coach kids rather than lecture to them. How we help students to be reflective about their work. How we integrate science so that each science teacher doesn't need four endorsement areas.

How people in authority can push authority, as well as responsibility, out to other adults. How others can claim authority along with responsibility. How we make one another accountable. How to trust and rely on one another. And on and on...

A major side benefit of having schools that are places where adults learn is that students benefit from seeing adults engaged in, excited by, and struggling with, their own learning. What it means to be a learner is exactly what students need to see modeled by their teachers and administrators.

Remembering why helps.

Remaining clear—or reminding ourselves—about why this work matters is paramount. Believing schools can do more for most kids than they have in the past provides the moral imperative required to make such difficult work worthwhile. If it's just another reform fad, it makes sense to simply ride it out.

Only when we see individual students and their learning, their hopes, and their possibilities at the core of this work can we draw strength from the work itself and remain confident that it is worth our very, very best. ■

The goal of this redesign work is substantially improved student learning for all students. What we rarely say is that the attainability of that goal rests on adult learning.

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT THIS YEAR

The Learning Network, August 2004

After a year of valuable experience, some “mountains” still remain.

Article Series

This series by SSP director **Rick Lear** focuses on what teachers and administrators can expect to happen in their new small schools over time.

3 of 4

A YEAR AGO, THE August issue of *The Learning Network* ran an article entitled, “Things You Can Count on Happening”—a description of what we anticipated might take place in large comprehensive high schools converting to smaller ones. We addressed seven areas:

1. It will be hard to remember that this is a structure in transition, and that your small school is new.
2. There will be cross-school tensions.
3. There will be ambivalence about leadership.
4. Relationships will be closer and therefore more problematic.
5. Teaching and learning issues will keep moving down on the agenda.
6. We will all feel less effective than before.
7. There will be a feeling that the school is really vulnerable.

You’ve had another year of valuable experience since then, and you’ve begun to address many of those issues. But other “mountains” remain. Here are some of the most important.

1 **Some folks will say this isn’t working, and we should go back to what we were doing before.**

This claim is predictable, and even understandable. It’s also premature, and it’s important to understand why.

■ *The changes schools are undertaking are complex, and most schools are still transitioning from one design to another; in many schools, the major structural changes will take another year.*

The rules have changed, and the goal is to create and operate schools that serve all kids well.

While the structural transitions are underway, and for several years after that, teachers will work to change their teaching practice to take advantage of smaller, more personalized schools.

■ *It doesn’t make sense to draw conclusions about something new until it’s fully in place and given time to work.*

For something as complex as the school redesigns most of you have undertaken, a reasonable time period is close to a decade—say June 2010, at the earliest.

■ *“What we were doing before” didn’t and won’t work.*

The rules have changed, and the goal is to create and operate schools that serve all kids well. Last century’s schools weren’t designed to do that, and no amount of tinkering can make it so.

Looking carefully at your school’s data from the last five to ten years will be useful in remembering this and in explaining it to others.

2 **Graduating all students “college-ready”—which means increasing expectations for virtually all students—will become more of an issue in many schools and communities and will need to be addressed on many levels.**

■ *The belief that high schools should perform a sorting function runs deep, and it will require continued effort to help people understand why that goal is obsolete.*

Looking carefully at the changing nature of jobs in our country over the past forty years will help people understand the economic forces at work. Incomes of workers with only high school diplomas have actually declined over the past forty years. Most jobs now require some training beyond high school.

This is part of the “why change?” discussion most of you had in your schools two or three years ago. If you didn’t have the discussion with your community, especially your parents and school board, you’ll need to do it now. Or, perhaps, you’ll need to do it again. And every year, you will need to have the “why change?” conversation with new staff and parents.

■ *The majority of students graduating from our high schools today haven’t taken the courses necessary to be admitted to one of Washington’s public universities.*

One part of “college-ready” means changing graduation requirements at most high schools. Over time, that means some re-staffing will take place, and that’s always hard. Most high schools will need to hire more math, science, and language teachers. As students take more courses required for admission to four-year colleges and universities, they will have less time for elective courses. The re-staffing you’ll need to do is predictable, and you can plan for it, not simply react after the fact.

- *A second part of “college-ready” means graduating students with sufficient skills that they don’t need to take remedial courses when they go to college.*

Currently, almost half of those students who do go on to either community or four-year colleges are forced to take remedial courses. That means the entire faculty will need to understand what skill levels colleges—community and four-year colleges alike—require of incoming students. In almost all instances, it will mean raising expectations.

3 Teaching and learning will receive more focused attention, and will drive the remaining structural changes that need to be made.

- *Because teachers will know students better, they will be better able to think about how they might change their teaching to support their students’ learning.*

It will still take substantial effort to focus precious planning time on teaching and learning rather than structural matters, but teachers will see the increasing value of doing so. Collaborative time for planning will become even more important for teachers.

- *Many small school staffs will decide on a common focus for improving their practice.*

This focus might be project-based learning, building inquiry skills, performance-based assessment, reading across the curriculum, or any one of a number of other possibilities. Doing so, if taken seriously and supported, will increase sharing and collaboration between and among teachers, and will make students’ experiences more coherent.

- *Teachers will see the benefits of looping, integrated courses, and a multi-grade rotational curriculum.*

These will allow teachers and students to work together for more than one year, and sharply reduce the overall student load of most teachers. Understanding this will lead to revisions in design so teachers can work with 75 to 150 students over two, three, or four years rather than 300 to 600 students.

- *As teachers know students better, they will be better able to design ways to provide for student choice within courses.*

Doing that successfully will reduce the demand for offering such a broad range of courses.

4 Responsibility for the heart of schooling will reside increasingly in the small schools.

- *Increasingly, teachers in small schools will take primary responsibility for the learning of their students.*

They will become clearer about the particular needs of individual students and will want both the responsibility and authority to act on behalf of their students. As a result, differentiation between and among schools in a building will increase. That will be a good thing.

- *Schedules will become more varied.*

Schedules will become more varied within a building as small school staffs devise different approaches to meeting their students’ learning needs and of implementing their pedagogical philosophies.

- *Staffing decisions will increasingly be made at the small school level, and will be driven by the school’s need to serve their students.*

One school, for instance, will choose to have two full-time math teachers when the numbers indicate they need only 1.6 because they know

Collaborative time for planning will become even more important for teachers.

their students need more time and attention on math. Another school will choose to employ only teachers with dual certification so everyone's student load can be reduced. Some schools will have advisories daily for 45 minutes; others, with different aims, will meet twice a week for an hour. Curriculum decisions will be based increasingly on student needs, not adult preference.

- *Leadership will become more distributed as teachers and administrators better understand the unique leadership opportunities presented in small schools.*

Small schools will become more clear about the appropriate roles for teacher-leaders, and admin-

istrators will better understand ways to support their teacher-leaders.

- *As relationships between teachers and students deepen and students understand they can trust their teachers, students will grant teachers the moral authority to insist that they do better and more challenging work.*

- *Teachers, for their part, will relish the complexity that comes with accepting the individual and collective responsibility for ensuring that each of their students learns well.*

They will become better and better teachers, mentors, and leaders. Their schools will become

IN THE MIDDLE STRETCHES OF A MARATHON TASK

The Learning Network, August 2005

To help provide some perspective, here are some things to remember during the middle stretches of school redesign.

Article Series

■
This series by SSP director **Rick Lear** focuses on what teachers and administrators can expect to happen in their new small schools over time.

4 of 4

MARATHON RUNNERS TALK about how different parts of a race are easier than others. For almost every runner, the start is exhilarating, with all the excitement and attention a start receives. Other than the beginning, though, runners disagree about which parts of a marathon are easier and which are more difficult.

For some runners, the middle stretch is the most difficult: the adrenaline rush of the start is long-gone, the crowd (if there is one) is also usually much thinner in the middle part of the race, so fewer spectators are shouting encouragement, even the slightest incline seems too steep, and the end is nowhere in sight. Other runners find the middle almost enjoyable. They are in a groove, flowing along, their bodies in tune, often running companionably with others keeping the same pace,

trusting their preparation, and confident that they can finish the run.

Most of you who began the work of redesigning your schools four or five years ago are in the middle

stretches of that effort and are experiencing some of the same feelings as marathoners. To help provide some perspective, this issue of TLN reviews

some key points, both from earlier writing from the Small Schools Project called "Understandings About Change," and what seems most current in our minds as we watch the development of schools we're working with.

We've also provided you with a graphic image of the stages we believe most of your schools are going through, to remind you that you are, in fact, in the middle of things, as well as to help you think about what lies ahead. Most of you have come a long way, individually and collectively, but a good portion of the run lies ahead.

While some runners drop out in the middle stages of a marathon, most runners say that the final stage brings fresh confidence, the crowds grow and the shouting increases, and the will to finish what they started provides the energy and courage to see what they began through to the end.

When you are in the middle of the marathon, here are some things to keep on remembering:

Leadership matters a lot, and needs nurturing.

Because leadership is, in fact, probably the most powerful variable in moving from large schools to small ones, or in improving a school in any substantial way, it's essential to pay attention to several factors.

Most of you have come a long way, individually and culturally, but a good portion of the run lies ahead.

Understand what leadership is.

While a school engaged in important work can't have too many leaders, it's important to remember that leadership is a way of acting and being every bit as much as having the right to make decisions. Its truest expression is often found in the daily acts of thoughtfulness and care that enable a school to run.

Understand how leadership roles are changing.

Leadership is made more complicated when roles change as a part of the process. In most schools, teacher-leader roles are wholly new, so expectations and boundaries are uncertain, compounding the challenges for people in those positions.

Principals, too, are faced with a changing role, especially as responsibility and authority move to the small school level; some principals see that their role may, in fact, become obsolete. Assistant principals are likely to find themselves involved in deeper ways with teaching and learning issues, and to have a broader role in the small school than they were accustomed to in the large one.

Develop new ways to nurture leadership and provide needed stability.

Leaders do change in the life of any school or district, and the stress and complexity of serious change often accelerates the rate of change—certainly true in many of the schools we work with. Understanding this increases the importance of fostering distributed leadership, which not only draws on the expertise of many people, but also lightens the burden for all, and helps to ensure continuity when leadership changes do occur.

However, leadership stability should still be a goal, as over the long haul, this will play a key role in the success of the redesign work you're engaged in. Many schools haven't done a good job nurturing leaders, either principals or teacher-leaders, over the past few years, and that's shortsighted. Finding ways to support these folks should be a priority.

Nurturing leaders doesn't mean letting them off the hook if they're not doing their jobs. It does mean, insofar as possible, creating conditions and expectations that provide a reasonable chance of success and don't require superhuman effort. It means stepping in to lend a hand from time to

time and sharing your own leadership skills when you see people overwhelmed. And it means supporting leaders in their work rather than waiting for them to stumble and fall.

2 Successful change needs to be both visionary and concrete.

Vision inspires people and provides a destination; concrete images ground us in the real world. Visioning isn't just a warm-up exercise, but something we need to hold in front of us through the entire journey, refining and embellishing as we go. Concrete steps, to be helpful, need to be tied directly to the vision, and lead, over time, to the embodiment of the vision.

Being clear about our vision is most important when people are tired. Vince Lombardi tells us that "fatigue makes cowards of us all." That old football dictum reminds us of how hard it is to keep going when we're tired; we think of the corner we can cut without others noticing, of how it's easy to go home early after three days of meetings, of how comfortable the old way of doing things was... and maybe it wasn't so bad after all.

When we're tempted to fall into that way of thinking, our visions keep us going. They are uplifting and energizing. But part of being both visionary and concrete is having a plan that people can see, feel, and touch. They need to see themselves in the plan, and they need to see markers of progress along the way. Make your plans public, and celebrate every successful step at the same time you remind people of the ultimate goal.

3 Change needs to be both long term and systemic, and must involve all the key stakeholders.

Part of a school, sometimes an entire school, is capable of significant change over the short run. It's much harder to sustain a changed school over the long term. It requires a plan that covers several years, is broadly inclusive, provides adequate resources to support the individuals engaged in the change, and recognizes the need for attention to the entire system of schooling.

The "system" includes those with legal author-

Part of being both visionary and concrete is having a plan that people can see, feel, and touch.

ity over the operation of schools—district administrators, school board members, for starters—as well as those who work in schools, such as teachers, principals, and support staff. It also includes local teacher unions and others in the community who have an interest in the schools. Most of all, it includes the parents and students the schools serve directly. For change to be successful, every key group needs to be involved from an early point in the conversation.

For most of our schools, this is the biggest “coulda-woulda-shoulda” of all. Few schools have done well at involving others beyond the school. It’s not too late to involve key stakeholders, and it’s vital if the changes underway are to be sustained beyond the end of the school’s grant. Understanding why a substantial change in the way high schools operate is needed is more important than the details of how to change a particular school, which is something people will always fuss about.

The challenge is to determine, out of the universe of things it might do to improve student accomplishment, what the school *will* do.

People—especially new board members, staff, and parents—need to understand the urgency of this change as well if they are to support it, and if the

deep-seated allegiance to the comprehensive high school felt by so many adults is to be overcome.

4 *Support is critical for changes in practice to take root, and takes time.*

The ultimate goal of this high school redesign work—improved student learning—depends on adult learning. Behavior change—whether it is changing a teaching method, a way of interacting with other teachers or parents, of working in meetings, of assessing student work—requires time and opportunities for practice, feedback, and analysis. One-time events with no follow-up are rarely useful in supporting change. Those in positions to support the change need to stay in close touch with everyone involved and provide resources as they are requested whenever possible.

5 *Focus and integration are keys to achieving deep change.*

Schools are in some ways drowning in initia-

tives, and new ideas, packages, or programs are thrust at leaders almost daily. The challenge is to determine, out of the universe of things it might do to improve student accomplishment, what the school will do, even when that means letting go of some other worthy endeavors.

Remaining focused is particularly critical when schools are quite literally in the middle of things. Initial moves have produced some shifts in relationships and practice, but the big breakthroughs people hope for and expect haven’t occurred yet. So, it’s natural to look for one more thing to add to what you’re doing that might move the school forward. Resist that temptation.

Many reforms have died because they have been too splintered or tried for too brief a time. While change is not linear, and while a number of change activities can and must go on simultaneously, providing sufficient long-term focus and choosing activities which complement one another in a direct way are essential to sustaining the effort.

6 *Change is resource hungry.*

Everyone involved understands that change requires substantial human and capital resources, specifically time, support, expertise, dollars, and energy. On the one hand, schools may never have quite enough resources to support change efforts fully. At the same time, it is unfair to expect that those most directly involved, particularly teachers, can or should carry forward the reform largely on their own time.

As many grants from the Gates Foundation and the federal government enter their final year, anxiety about finding resources to continue the work now underway heightens sharply. Additional outside funding may be a possibility. In many instances, substantial existing resources can be reallocated, and schools and districts should explore this area thoroughly. In either case, the “cost” of not doing so, in terms of lost opportunity and, increasingly, lost children, is far greater.

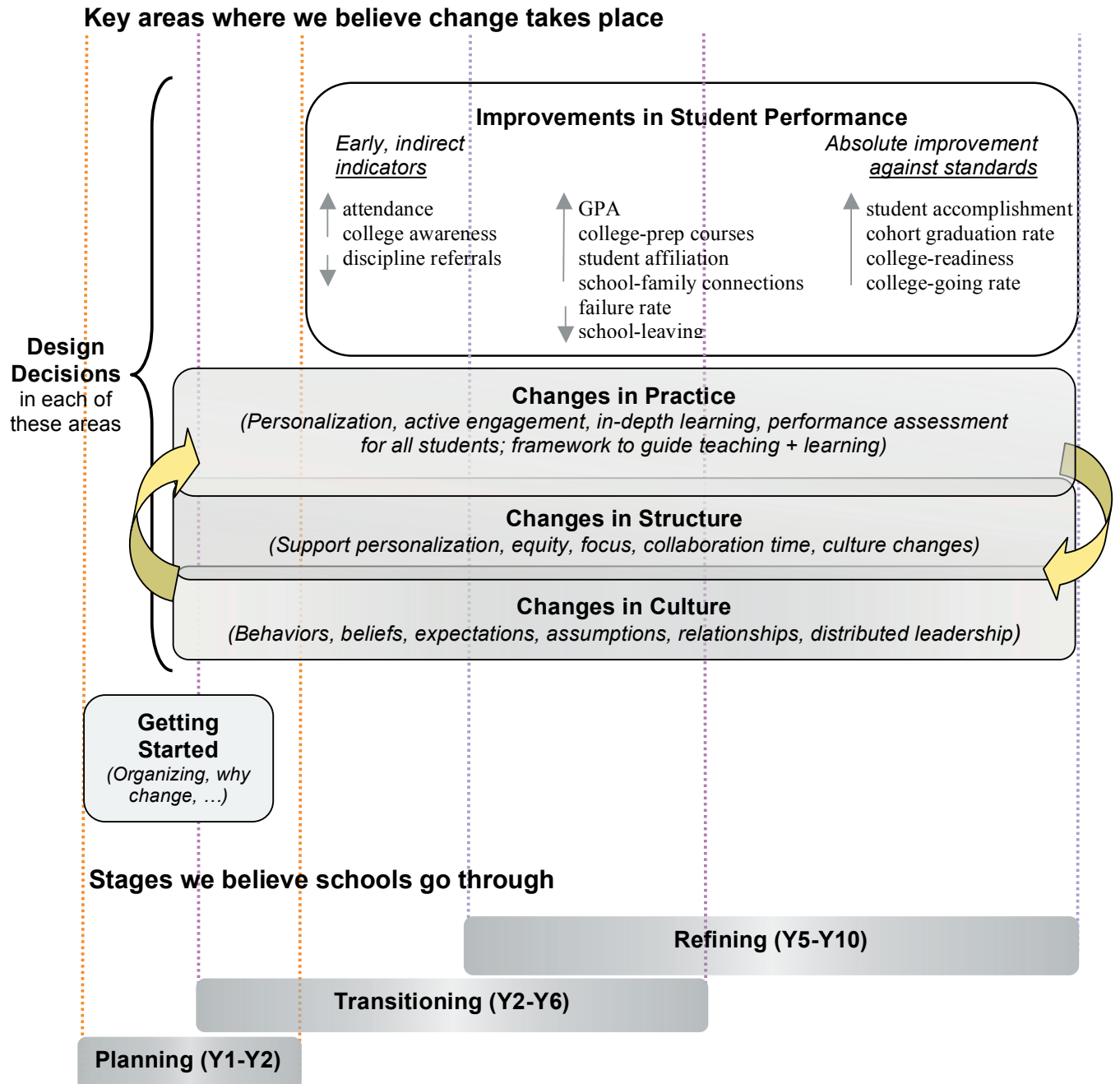
7 *Embracing change as a central part of school life increases the likelihood of success.*

One way of looking at change is as an event that occurs from time to time, something that a school gears up for every few years; such a view is sometimes described as an “unfreeze—change—

refreeze” procedure.

Change is more usefully described as a continuing process that operates at many levels on an ongoing basis. This view recognizes change as a part of the school’s culture, and as providing opportuni-

ties for continued growth. Thinking about, planning for, implementing, analyzing, and revising changes that lead to improved student accomplishment then becomes a central part of the school’s responsibilities to students and parents. ■



The Small Schools Coaches Collaborative believes that the core of school redesign work falls into three broad areas: school culture, school structure, and teacher practice, as the diagram below illustrates. We believe schools need to address all three areas* in depth if they are to create schools that are both high performing and sustainable.

SUBTLE IMAGES: POWERFUL CHANGES

The Learning Network, November 2003

Small Schools Coaches Collaborative coach Liz Marzolf documents subtle but powerful changes.

WHEN WE WORK to change a system, it's easy to notice the big things and miss the subtle ones. But it's often the subtle ones that tell us how we're doing.

In some schools this fall, changes like new schedules or new spaces were obvious to everyone, so at The Discovery School, one of Mountlake Terrace's new small schools, coach Liz Marzolf began to document smaller, more subtle ones. Here are just a few in a long list of observations she generated only four weeks after school opened:

- ♦ A teacher inviting another teacher into her classroom to model facilitating a classroom meeting, something she had never done but he had.
 - ♦ Each school having its name displayed over the door to its own wing.
 - ♦ Students commenting that when they walk down "their" hallway, they notice many of the teachers know their names.
 - ♦ Teachers expressing excitement after a small school staff meeting because they feel like they really made a breakthrough for this one kid.
 - ♦ Teachers (math and 9/10 humanities) working together to address issues in their joint curriculum.
 - ♦ Teachers sharing information about students that goes well beyond knowing how well that student is doing in his or her class.
 - ♦ The copy center changing its forms from asking what department the requestor represents to what school he or she represents.
 - ♦ Students being assigned to an advisor who will hand that student his or her diploma.
 - ♦ Staff committing to set aside a time to meet regularly as a whole small school staff.
 - Teachers sharing ideas and having those ideas openly, respectfully, yet critically discussed.
- Liz's list continues, but you get the idea. Subtle images perhaps, but powerful changes. ■