

# The Learning Network

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

SEPTEMBER 2002 ISSUE 1, VOLUME 1

## From Rick Lear, Director

Welcome to the first issue of *The Learning Network*! Our job at the Small Schools Project, largely through the work of the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative, is to provide the technical assistance you need to be successful in your work. *The Learning Network* is designed to be part of that assistance.

We intend to provide you with news about several areas of interest to you in your work: school redesign and small schools, the best teaching and learning approaches, building strong adult learning communities, addressing issues of bias and equity, and developing distributed leadership that is both broad and deep. We'll also try to keep you informed about similar redesign efforts taking place elsewhere, so you'll see that the local and state work you're engaged in is part of a larger national effort.

Some schools are beginning their third year as a Gates grantee, while most are beginning the second year. A few schools have been at this work far longer, and the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation simply allows you to continue or

accelerate work that is already underway. In each case, you know how hard the task you're engaged in is, and realize that it probably won't be any easier in the coming months and years. Those of you just beginning this work are about to discover that.

While the particular work each school is doing this year is unique in its details, we know there is much overlap between and among schools, and many common issues. Sharing emerging knowledge and working together to address common issues can provide each school with support and resources it doesn't have or can't get on its own. Working together also provides its own momentum – something every serious change effort needs to succeed. We hope we can make it easier for you to work together this year.

One of the new clichés of school reform is “The wisdom is in the room.” We believe that's true. We also believe that the necessary knowledge and skills may not, in fact, be in the room. Much of school redesign is about adult learning. Our major

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## TEACHING & LEARNING

### Critical Friends Groups Focus on Adult Learning

Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) are small groups of eight to twelve teachers who commit to work together on a long-term basis toward better student learning by improving instructional practice. Some CFGs include administrators.

CFGs meet regularly and use protocols to examine student and teacher work with a constant focus on improving adult learning. Participants also observe each other in classrooms and provide feedback to their colleagues about their work.

Each CFG works with a coach who helps the group build trust, identity, and student learning goals and to reflect on their own practice. For four years, many Clover Park High staff members have been meeting in Critical Friends Groups. All CFGs meet regularly once to twice monthly, either after school on campus or in the evening at someone's home.

According to Katie Taylor, the school's full-time instructional facilitator, “A Critical Friends Group works against the ‘lonely classroom’ tradition and can be incredibly beneficial. It provides a forum where feedback can be structured, where teachers can reflect constructively about their practice, and where they can get a fresh perspective on how they are teaching.”

Brenda Adams, an English teacher at Monroe High School, attended a beginning CFG training this summer. She found

looking at a student work sample from one of her students to be the most valuable part of the workshop.

“I got feedback from a mixed group of teachers, that included math and science teachers and not just English teachers. The best feedback came from the math and science teachers who think and learn like many of my students. The time invested in the hour-long protocol saved me hours of thinking time.”

Adams and a group of her Monroe colleagues also participated in a two-day CFG training last year at their school where they learned to use protocols and look at student work. “The value of CFGs is that you get input that you normally wouldn't get from your colleagues during a regular day,” said Adams. The purpose of the training was to introduce people to the idea of CFGs, to gauge interest and to recruit CFG coaches who will each lead a group.

For more information about Critical Friends Groups, or upcoming trainings, check out: <http://www.cesnorthwest.org> or contact Jan Reeder, Director of the Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest at 253/879-3807 or [jreeder@ups.edu](mailto:jreeder@ups.edu).

For quotes from Clover Park High School teachers about CFG participation, please see back page.

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## UPDATE ON WASHINGTON SCHOOLS

### Washington High Schools Show Progress Toward Creating Small Schools

This fall, high schools across the state of Washington will be continuing their work to create small schools. At least nine large comprehensive schools have made significant progress toward redesigning into small schools.

*Three schools have reassigned their staff and students into small schools and this fall will begin operating multiple small schools.*

#### Clover Park High School

Clover Park High School opened its doors this fall with all 9th and 10th grade students assigned to one of four houses. House teachers have been meeting to discuss their experiences with the 9th grade houses, which were implemented last year, and to welcome aboard the newly assigned cohort of teachers who will help expand the programs offered in each house.

New principal Paul Tytler is learning his way around "The Park." Fortunately, Tytler's previous role as assistant principal of Mountlake Terrace provided him with lots of experience around school reform and the conversion process.

House teachers planned their part of Frosh Camp, a two-day orientation process that has been a traditional part of freshman year at Clover Park. In addition, a cadre of student leaders was trained to help house teachers with planning activities for the house day orientation. On that day, teachers and students built a house identity which will be an important part of the school's personalization focus.

#### Enumclaw High School

Over the next two years, Enumclaw High School will transform into seven smaller learning communities. This fall, two Partner Schools, the Enumclaw Adventure School and E.C.H.O.E.S., opened with 75-150 students each. Partner Schools operate on the existing school campus as self-contained independent schools.

Students were selected using an application and lottery process. During fall 2003, the five interest-based schools, Discovery and Human Resources, Culture and Performing Arts, Innovation and Technology, Global Studies and Business, and Design and Production, will open with 200-300 students each.

#### Mount Tahoma High School

This fall, all of Mount Tahoma's 9th and 10th grade students have been assigned to one of four houses. The conversion

process started with 9th grade houses last year and is expanding to include all 10th grade students this year. House teachers who were designated to work with 9th and 10th graders were informed of their assignments in June and immediately began to meet to discuss how the next year would look. During the summer, Mount Tahoma staff continued to work on the conversion process, in order to establish two or three common goals for the entire school with an emphasis on teaching and learning.

Also on the front burner for Mount Tahoma is the construction of a new building which is designed to facilitate the success of small learning communities.

*Six high schools have created small schools, assigned staff to these schools, and will spend next year planning before opening their new schools in the fall of 2003.*

#### Foss High School

At Foss High School, the staff will spend the next year developing their five small schools, each housing 350-400 students. Last spring, each member of the staff was assigned to a new school by the retiring principal, Rob Lang, and the new principal, Sharon Schauss.

#### Foster High School

Five Small Personalized Learning Communities (SPLC) have been chosen at Foster, each with a unique emphasis. They include the English Language Learners Academy, Experience Academy, Choice Preparatory Academy, Discovery Academy, and the Arts Academy. This year, Foster will continue its focus on best teaching practices and classroom exhibitions of learning. The school's 2002-2003 focus will center on the achievement gap and addressing the disproportion of student outcomes.

The school will also continue its public engagement efforts and will hold focus groups during October, November and March. Topics will range from graduation competencies to specific SPLC courses and scheduling plans.

#### Mariner High School

Six small schools have been created at Mariner High School, each with a unique focus. This fall, teachers will devote time to developing the focus around new and expanded teaching practices and assessments.

Personalization is also a focus at Mariner. Students will participate in a weekly advisory, which teachers hope will be a way to involve them in the reform process. Work on personalized education plans will also begin.

#### Mountlake Terrace High School

Terrace staff finished last year with six small learning communities, ranging in size from 160-400 students, which were selected from a pool of fifteen teacher-generated proposals. In choosing the final designs, the Steering Team's primary concern was that

the proposed combination of small learning communities represented a continuum of academic approaches, from the current traditional model to the most innovative design. After the final group of small learning communities was chosen, teachers indicated their assignment preferences. At year's end, each teacher was assigned to either a first or second choice.

This year will be devoted to the second stage of design, which will include establishing the curriculum, schedule, leadership structure, advisories, etc. Each new small learning community staff elected a "conversion facilitator" to lead them through this process. Staff development will be a primary focus, as teachers will be charged with developing rigorous curricula that meets the needs of all students, as well as integrating instructional practice and assessment.

### **Port Angeles High School**

Last year, the 9th graders at Port Angeles High School were divided into five "pods" of roughly 85 students each as a way to personalize and begin integrating curriculum. The results were quite positive. Discipline problems decreased, parent contact increased, and one of the pods implemented exhibitions for students to demonstrate what they learned to teachers, peers, and community members.

As the next step in the school's work, during the spring, Principal Michelle Reid assigned each member of the staff into one of four small learning communities (SLCs), with each 9th grade pod becoming part of an SLC.

This year, the 9th grade pods will continue and staff will work in their assigned SLC to plan for implementation in the fall of 2003. The staff will use *Understanding by Design* by Grant Wiggins as a tool to help plan backwards and develop their curricular focus. In addition, two teachers from each SLC will receive additional compensation to serve as members of a building council, which will meet once a week to discuss and plan staff development, community outreach, and issues around building usage.

### **West Valley High School**

West Valley High is implementing a variety of structural changes, as well as those focused on teaching and learning. Last year, the administrators assigned, with staff input, all staff to one of three small learning communities.

Comprised of parents, students, and teachers, each SLC will decide on a focus and structure. Each will also develop a teacher professional community by participating in Critical Friends Group training and establishing CFGs. The school has created a new governance structure, which includes the Democratic Council, consisting of leaders from each SLC, students and parents. This group is charged with figuring out the larger building issues.

Beginning this fall, the school day looks different for West Valley students. Ninth-grade students attend a daily half-day block

integrating computer literacy, English, social studies and wellness. Students in all grades participate in mentor groups or advisories.

### **DESIGN DAYS**

Building on the popularity of the two Design Days that were held last spring, the Small Schools Project will again offer Design Days. High school teams will have the opportunity for their individual school designs to be critiqued by the Small Schools Project staff, coaches from the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative, and others in a series of consultancies and charrettes.

Space is limited, so if you are interested in participating, contact Craig Lucero at [clucero@u.washington.edu](mailto:clucero@u.washington.edu) or 206/616-0303.

Oct. 17 | Nov. 14 | Dec. 19 | Feb. 20 | Mar. 20 | Apr. 17 | May 15

### **TOOLS & RESOURCES TO USE**

#### **A New Section on the Small Schools Project Website**

We've launched a new section on our website called "What's Happening in Washington" which highlights recent efforts by Washington high schools that are in the process of creating small schools.

#### **TOPICS INCLUDE:**

- Building Adult Learning Communities
- Creating Personalized Learning Environments
- Developing District Policies and Structures that Support Small Schools
- Engaging Students, the Community, and District
- Finding Time to Collaborate
- Implementing Conversion Plans
- Supporting Distributed Leadership
- Using Data to Make Decisions

Check it out at: <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>

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*From the Director, continued*

responsibility is to help you, individually and collectively, acquire and create the knowledge and develop the skills you'll need to choose wisely on behalf of the students and families you serve. We're excited about working with you this year, and wish you the very best as you embark on what we expect will be a hard, productive, and satisfying year.

## SAVE THE DATE

The fall high school meeting hosted by the Gates Foundation will take place October 22 and 23. More information will be available soon on our website.

### **Clover Park High Teachers Talk About CFGs**

"I FEEL LIKE I AM SUPPORTED; I HAVE A PLACE TO TAKE ISSUES AND LESSONS FOR HELP. IT HAS MADE ME A STRONGER TEACHER."

"I WANT TO BE ABLE TO POINT TO A CLEAR OBJECTIVE AND MEASURE WHETHER OR NOT I HAVE REACHED IT AND IF KIDS HAVE IMPROVED. MY CFG CAN HELP ME DO THIS AND GIVE ME FEEDBACK ON WHETHER OR NOT I MET MY GOAL."

"IT HAS MADE ME MORE EXCITED TO TRY NEW THINGS LIKE INTEGRATION AND TEAMING."

"IT HAS TAKEN ME OUTSIDE OF THE SMALL WORLD OF MY CLASSROOM. I NOW REALIZE THAT THERE ARE OTHER PEOPLE TO HELP ME AND THAT I CAN HELP THEM."

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

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