

The Learning Network

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

MAY/JUNE 2004 ISSUE 10, VOLUME 2

Transitioning: Hard Work That Is Well Begun

Our first *Learning Network* of the year contained a long article about conversions that Nancy Mohr and I wrote, entitled “Things You Can Count on Happening.” The first of those “things” we identified was this: It will be hard to remember that this is a structure in transition, and that your small school is new.

In retrospect, that statement was not quite right: most of you experienced daily the complexities of being part of a structure in transition, and the “labor” of giving birth has taken far longer than human beings are used to experiencing. We suggested then that it would be helpful to remind one another that:

This will take time. Most of you are three years into what will be a five-year effort to change the design of your schools. In almost every school, enough structural changes are in place to support changed teaching practices and cultures of collaboration and personalization. The “A-word”—autonomy—is no longer a forbidden word, and conversion schools are moving towards more small school autonomy while still sorting out the degree of interdependence they will ultimately find workable.

This will happen in stages. In most schools, the first “Why change?” stage is disappearing from the agenda, though revisits occasionally take place. Most schools are well into the second stage of putting the new design into place, though that stage will run another year or two. In most schools right now, it looks as though the third stage is about the daily life of the school. Looking forward, this stage promises to be the most substantive, and the stage that will lead to the deeper changes we need to serve each student well.

You need to anticipate transitions and think about what happens next. The transitions embedded in the “daily life” stage promise to be most transformative. For teachers, it’s moving from a culture of privacy to one of collaboration. For kids, it’s moving to a culture of high expectations and high care. For most teachers and students, it’s moving to classrooms characterized by authentic intellectual work, increased student engagement, and more complex relationships with one another. For teachers and administrators, it’s creating distributed leadership that is both

continued on back...

PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

Clover Park Teachers Provide Pre-Exhibition Performance Assessment in the Classroom

Winter is over! So is WASL testing. Students’ thoughts turn to finals, proms...and summer vacation. Teachers’ thoughts turn to finals, turning in grades...and summer vacation.

But first—at many schools—students will direct and present their own work in some form of exhibition.

While some of the impetus for the growing number of schools conducting exhibitions comes from the state’s new 2008 culminating project requirement, most educators recognize exhibitions as one form of authentic performance assessment. When organized well, exhibitions allow students to demonstrate their learning through a variety of skills.

Clover Park began incorporating freshmen exhibitions into the curriculum three years ago. Each year, the school has added another class, so this spring, freshmen, sophomores, and juniors are presenting on a range of topics to their peers, faculty, and panels of community members.

Teachers identifying skills

According to instructional facilitators Katie Taylor and Judi Orr, while Clover Park students are getting more comfortable with the

exhibition process, a lot of learning in these early years has taken place at the teacher level.

Katie says, “We’ve learned that you have to have a common vision of what an ‘exhibition’ really is. What’s changed for us is moving away from focusing on the theme and focusing more on the needed skills.”

Judi also sees teacher learning as essential to the process and describes how the faculty at one of Clover Park’s four houses (the small schools designation at Clover Park) spent summer planning time debriefing the exhibitions. After listing what worked and what didn’t work, the group suggested a variety of changes, including improving some of the rubrics and more practice on certain skills during the year.

“While we still don’t have across-the-board agreement about the required skills,” Judi says, “many teachers are more deliberate now about identifying skills that must be mastered, particularly for the research paper.”

Students practicing skills

Judi and Katie agree that students need to be practicing skills required for their exhibitions long before final presentations. In Travis Campbell’s integrated American studies class, juniors have this opportunity all year long.

continued...

Clover Park, *continued*

Travis explains, “For their final exhibitions, juniors will describe how the ideas of a prominent American (whom they have chosen) transformed America. Their exhibitions will include a research paper, a speech, and a product. This process isn’t new to them, because in every unit since September, we’ve been asking them to write, speak, and produce a product.”

For example, for a unit called “Colony to Country” that involved comparing and contrasting Virginia and Massachusetts, students had to write a paper, make a presentation and “create a school” that reflected the culture and values of the time and place.

The students work with basically the same rubrics over a year. Travis also provides them with an analytical template to help them break tasks into chunks. “It’s really important to have clear expectations for each chunk,” he says. “Kids need to see a map of what’s expected of them.”

A LOT OF LEARNING IN THESE EARLY YEARS
HAS TAKEN PLACE AT THE TEACHER LEVEL.

Travis believes that incorporating performance assessment has changed his beliefs and his practice. He says, “For me, one big ‘aha’ has been that assessment needs to occur on a continuum, not just at the end of the year. When a student doesn’t master something, I need to go back and work with that student.”

He continues, “This pushes me to use more small ongoing checks for learning and forces differentiation. Rather than having a standard bell curve, I’m working toward mastery for all my kids. I’m assessing the whole time.”

Assessment becoming more relevant

After recently completing a performance assessment that really engaged students in his algebra class, Clover Park math teacher Kyle Hagman is planning to design other hands-on assessments.

He explains, “The assessment for our ratios and proportions unit is usually a paper and pencil test. This time, the culminating assessment required students to rescale and enlarge a floor plan.”

Before the assessment, students learned the basics of ratios and proportions through examining the floor plan of an apartment and then measuring and converting wall and room sizes. For their culminating assessment, they became “architects” and chose one of twelve floor plans to remodel.

“Letting kids choose gave them some real ownership,” says Kyle. “We also spent quite a bit of time in class before the two-period assessment doing a practice assignment in class.”

Kyle rates the two assessment days as “probably the most productive days of the year. Kids were really engaged, instead of becoming helpless and saying ‘I can’t do this.’ It made me think we need to do much more of this kind of assessment.” It also gave

him hope that more ideas for authentic inclusion of math in exhibitions will surface.

Kyle graded the assessment on criteria such as accuracy of measurements, meeting the deadline, showing the work, and neatness and accuracy. While the grading is not yet finished, he says, “From what I’ve seen, most kids worked at or above level, and some kids who had low grades have done better than expected. It’s clear that kids just bought into it more.”

Students digging deeper

Clover Park’s seniors don’t participate in exhibitions, but humanities teacher Melinda Tsapatsaris wanted them to have a comparable experience, so she provided a powerful assessment opportunity for her senior English students. In a study of “Hamlet,” students “entered the text through performance,” selecting lines to analyze, translate into their own words, and perform.

According to student Amy Talley, “It helped us dig deeper into the text and allowed us to step out of our comfort zone. Even though it was kind of scary, it was also really fun and it didn’t feel like a test.”

Melinda says, “I feel passionate about performance assessment. It can make the learning important and relevant and allows the teacher to differentiate and personalize. For the Hamlet assignment, one student might do two lines, another a longer monologue, but both can learn the same skills.”

“PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT CAN BE MAGIC.
WHAT’S AMAZING IS HOW KIDS RISE UP.”

She says attendance shot up during the unit, which included self-evaluation and some peer evaluation. At the conclusion, students put on a “dramatic collage” for their parents and other students.

Although she says it can be more taxing for teachers, Melinda tries to include performance assessment in all her classes. For example, during a focus on Chile in her ninth grade world cultures class, each student had to “become” a notable Chilean figure and be taped answering questions in that role.

Planning for next year

According to Katie and Judi, more teachers across disciplines now use the oral presentation rubric and the writing rubric for speaking and writing assignments in the classroom. And they are hopeful that more teachers will begin planning backward from exhibitions to include the teaching of required skills.

“However,” Katie concludes, “because we can still learn to do it so much better, we are dedicating our building-wide professional development focus to performance assessment next year.”



The Journey That Changes Just About Everything You Do

by Pam Wise, *Small Schools Coaches Collaborative*

“I HAVE COME TO BELIEVE
THAT THE MOST SIGNIFICANT INTERVENTION
IN A TEACHER’S PRACTICE IS LEARNING ABOUT
(AND USING) PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT.”

We used to call them “tests,” and we thought of them as the way students showed us what they had learned at the end of a course of instruction.

Usually, we wrote them (if we didn’t use the packaged ones provided by the textbook publishers) at the end of the unit or the semester. We generally kept them secret (so as to prevent cheating); sometimes they were so secret that the students never even saw them after they took them. That wasn’t a problem because we did not see them as part of the learning process that could be used by students to improve their learning or by us to improve our teaching.

Changing my mind

Sometime during the third decade of my teaching career, I began to change my mind. I had always known that the only “test” that was appropriate for a writing class was requiring students to write. Answering multiple choice questions will never prove that a student can write an essay.

The only proof is the essay itself. The teacher’s role is to instruct (sometimes) and to coach (mostly). There is no need for secrecy because you present the learning targets up front. In fact, I learned that students wrote better papers when I showed them the rubric before they finished the paper. The process is necessarily recursive—drafting and finalizing, writing and rewriting—and there is no real end to it.

I have some real-life proof of that to offer: Once the semester was over, students returned to me time after time for help as they met new writing challenges. So, though I didn’t know the vocabulary, my work as a writing teacher taught me my first important lessons about “performance assessment”—and I still think that a writing prompt that asks students to answer a challenging essential question or to solve a significant problem is as good a “performance task” as there is.

Creating little and big exhibitions

In the early 90s, I began to teach American Studies as a member of a team of English and history teachers at Gig Harbor High School, a school whose work was guided by the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools.

We made it our goal to measure our students’ work through the use of exhibitions (the CES term for performance assessments). Over the years, we built “little” exhibitions and “big” exhibitions.

One of my favorite “little” exhibitions centered on our study of American architecture and, in particular, Frank Lloyd Wright. The task was to design a house and do either a floor plan and drawings or a 3-dimensional model to illustrate their understanding of Wright’s theories. We held a design fair and invited teachers and other classes to look at the students’ work and hear them talk about how their houses exemplified the values of the famous architect.

“OVER THE YEARS,
WE BUILT ‘LITTLE’ EXHIBITIONS
AND ‘BIG’ EXHIBITIONS.”

We ended every year with a “big” Junior Exhibition designed to assess what students understood about American culture in the context of the basic skills of research, writing, and speaking while using higher order thinking skills. The task was to study a famous American who had made a positive contribution to American life.

Students wrote a scholarly paper that answered several guiding questions designed to elicit deep understanding and avoid simple recounting of biographical facts. One of the questions probed for their own personal reflection about their subjects’ lives.

Another part of the task was to design a memorial to honor their person. They made a formal presentation of their work to their classmates and invited parents to attend. Invariably, kids who believed at the beginning of the year that they would never be able to meet the 10-minute requirement found themselves talking for 15 minutes or more.

continued...

The Journey, continued

A great journey and significant intervention

It was a great journey and we learned a lot about planning backwards, about scaffolding, about coaching students to meet targets, and about building rubrics. The exhibition was always a work in progress that evolved as we did. A senior culminating exhibition grew out of our work and we helped to shape it and align the two. Eventually, ninth and tenth grade exhibitions became part of the school's curriculum. It was some of the most satisfying work I ever did.

Now that I work as a school coach helping teachers to meet the challenges of school reform, I have come to believe that the most significant intervention in a teacher's practice is learning about (and using) performance assessment. I think that's because as you come to understand it, you will, of necessity, change just about everything you do.

- * **First, you can't afford to be vague about just what you want students to get out of the class.**

The question always is "What do you want kids to know and be able to do when they are done?" The assessment is the proof you will accept that they know and can do what you want them to.

- * **Second, you create the assessment first.**

Thus, you must get very focused and intentional about what you are up to. The daily activities of the class are the necessary steps students must take to be able to succeed at the assessment. There's no time to spend a week cutting out magazine pictures for a nature collage unless the activity teaches or practices skills directly relevant to your target. Because you know that and the kids know that, there is a very strong air of clarity and coherence permeating everything, and that seems to me to provide a strong environment for learning.

- * **Third, you get so much valuable information when you develop and use the rubrics that measure student progress.**

Since you and the students always know exactly what you are looking for, rubrics become part of the teaching and learning process and assessment becomes ongoing. Both you and the students can make alterations as you go. That's exactly what researcher and educator Grant Wiggins means when he talks about "educative assessment." You learn; they learn.

If you are already using performance assessment—big and little exhibitions—in your classroom, you've embarked on a rewarding journey. If you haven't, we invite you to begin.

Performance Assessment: How to Get Started

- * Read an article or two to get you grounded in performance assessment theory. (You can read a book later.) Check out the Autumn 2003 *Planning Resources for Teachers in Small High Schools* on our website, www.smallschoolsproject.org, to find several helpful articles.
- * Take a class. Pam Wise will be presenting "Performance Assessment," July 7 through 9 at the University of Puget Sound. You will have the opportunity to examine real-life examples and practice creating rubrics and performance assessments. For registration information, see the "What's New?" section on our website.
- * Ask your school coach for assistance and ideas.
- * Look at all the examples of performance tasks/rubrics you can find. Try the rubric section of the Planning Resources guide mentioned above as well as <http://jonathan.mueller.faculty.noctrl.edu/toolbox/index.htm>.
- * Start small—create a performance assessment to replace a unit test. (Pick a short unit rather than a long one.)
- * Work with a partner who is teaching the same class. Collaboration really lightens the workload and creates automatic feedback.
- * Expect to refine and revise—you will learn so much the first time you deliver this that you will want to incorporate for the next time.
- * Finally, smile a little—the work you receive will be so much more exciting and interesting to look at than 30 multiple choice tests.



Friday Harbor community members and students use color sticky dots to prioritize 164 community concerns.

Building a Student-Community Bridge in Friday Harbor

They say...

“Engaging with kids this way breaks down barriers in communications and brings new skills into our community. It gives me hope for the future.”

Liz Illg
Business owner

“While I’ve really had fun in this process [interviewing experts], I’ve also learned a huge amount about some important island issues, like how much poverty there is, and how expensive the water is.”

Eric Rothlisberger
Sophomore facilitator

“The process has been wonderful. The dialogue is helping us build a bridge to gather on.”

Anita Castle
Director, DVSAS

Teens and community leaders with strips of red, green, and yellow sticky dots in their hands crowded around sheets of butcher paper on the Friday Harbor High lunchroom wall.

Their assignment: to prioritize 164 “concerns” they had identified in a needs assessment process that began in January.

The end purpose of the process is to give direction to the Community Council, a newly formed group of students and community leaders, which will be distributing grant funds to selected community groups for student projects next year. (Friday Harbor High received a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Connecting Schools and Communities grant in 2002.)

However, according to community coordinator Larry Wight, and to others—both students and adults—the process has already created new connections between the school and community leaders.

Consulting firm owner Liz Illg explains, “I think in many ways the process *is* the product, because engaging with kids this way breaks down barriers in communications and brings new skills into our community.”

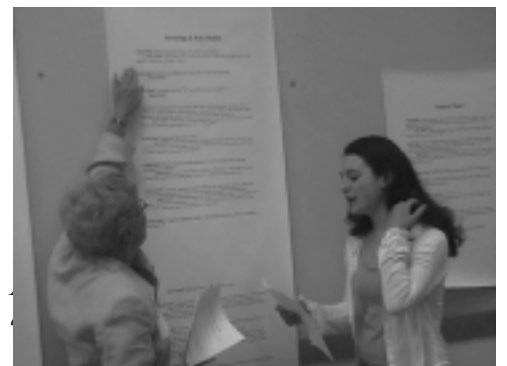
“It gives me hope for the future,” she adds.

Students interview adult “experts”

Early in the year, the Community Council, chaired by Friday Harbor High School junior Jake Heeren, identified 68 local “experts” with niche knowledge in one of twelve fields, such as arts, human services, economics, transportation, and others. Experts included directors of many local non-profits, business owners, and public officials, including Friday Harbor’s mayor and the Board of County Commissioners’ chair.

After identifying the experts, the Council recruited students and adults to serve as “facilitators” and in April, these facilitators attended a day-long Saturday training to learn interviewing skills, covering areas such as body language and voice tone. On the evening of April 21, using a five-question

continued...



Building Family and Community Connections

From “Us and Them” to “We”

Friday Harbor, *continued*

protocol, student/adult facilitator teams conducted individual interviews with each expert.

According to Larry Wight, the interview experience was electric for many of the adults. “Something changes in a room when students interview adults,” he explains. “If they went in with agendas, they set them aside. Many of them came out with such enthusiasm for the kids and such excitement over this new school-community connection.”

Curt VanHyning of Islands Convalescent Center agrees. “It was just so encouraging to see how capable and conscientious the kids were,” he says.

Students learn new skills, new facts

Having the opportunity to attend a facilitation training and then interview the experts taught the students a lot, too. Senior Danny Herbert says, “I learned some important communication skills, like how to really listen to someone who is talking about things I don’t know about.”

Freshman Sarah Heeren says, “I learned how to talk to people I don’t even know.” (Sarah’s adult team member Judie Ross adds, “I was just totally impressed by what Sarah—the youngest student interviewer—was able to do.”)

Along with interviewing skills, students gained new insights about their home, San Juan Island, as they talked to community leaders. Junior Eric Rothlisberger says, “While I’ve really had fun in this process, I’ve also learned a huge amount about some important island issues, like how much poverty there is, and how expensive the water is.”

Sophomore Zoie Guidotti agrees with both Danny and Eric. “The skills I learned, like talking with people I don’t have an obvious connection with, are life skills that I will carry with me forever,” she says. “And the interviewers themselves made me so much aware of the needs here. I learned ways to get involved in our community that I never knew were available.”

Next steps begun

After the interviews, the experts’ responses were summarized into 164 needs. At the May 18 evening meeting, community members and facilitators prioritized concerns with colored sticky dots. Results of the prioritization will be published and shared with the community, as part of what Larry calls “the most thorough needs assessment ever completed for San Juan Island.”

After the results are published, the Community Council will issue a Request for Proposals to community groups. Larry explains, “The Council will be looking to fund proposals that do two things: address the highest priority needs and provide challenging and relevant education for students.”

The Council will rank the proposals and then give them to the Center for Student Action, a 14-member student organization that will, with the assistance of faculty advisors, be responsible for recruiting students with the necessary skills and ambitions to address the projects.

According to Larry, the hope is that “student work will have outcomes in the real world.” Or, as language arts teacher Susie Hale puts it, “learning that works.”

New and strong connections forged

Although project work will not begin until the fall of 2004, Larry believes that new and strong connections have already been forged between the school and the community through mutual participation in the needs assessment process.

Clearly, a large group of community leaders believes likewise. Anita Castle, director of San Juan Islands Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Services, echoes others when she says, “The process has been wonderful. The dialogue is helping us build a bridge to gather on.”

For more information about Friday Harbor’s program, visit: www.sjisd.wednet.edu/communitygatesgrant.

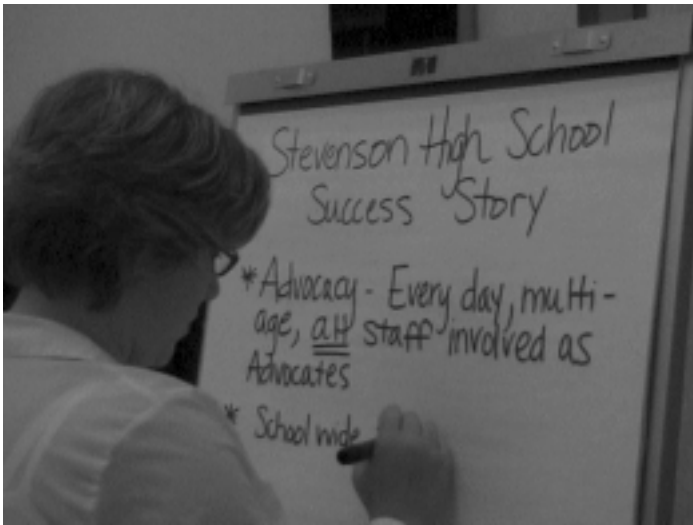
New Organizations Support Student Voice

Two new organizations now operate at Friday Harbor High, as a way to build student-community connections and to foster student voice. Principal Marilyn Luckman explains, “As the ‘locus of control’ changes, from adults and teachers to students, the students become empowered and confident. It’s a powerful and effective way to learn and serve.”

The Community Council, a team of students and adults, is responsible for surveying the community, ranking its needs, publishing a report, and ranking Request for Proposals. Also, the Council plans to repeat the needs assessment process every two years, well beyond the life of the Gates grant.

While council representatives include adults from city government, county commissioners, and business groups, high school students serve as chair and secretary and run the meetings.

The Center for Student Action is a 13-member student group that will, with faculty advisement, organize and support teams of students who take on community project work.



English and choir teacher Jill Neyenhouse, one of over 100 participants at the May 11 and 12 Gates high school meeting, lists successes seen at Stevenson High during the 2003-04 school year. After representatives from each school listed and posted successes, participants took time for a gallery walk.

PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

Portfolios Increase Student and Teacher Accountability at Seattle's Center School

When Seattle's Center School students present their portfolios to a panel of five (two community members, a teacher, a third adult of the student's choice, and another student), "it's really the school's work, in a sense, that's on display," according to science teacher Bethany Spinler.

While Bethany says that using portfolios to assess performance helps students take ownership of and responsibility for their learning, she also says it increases teacher accountability. "If, for example, one portfolio requirement is a good persuasive paper, we know we have to teach all the skills required to write one," she explains.

Juniors and seniors are required to present and defend portfolios in four areas: quantitative and scientific reasoning; community, cultures, and communication; career awareness and life skills; and art. Bethany says, "By asking students to reflect orally on their work, we get a good sense of what they've really learned."

Although they aren't yet required to make oral presentations, Center School freshmen and sophomores also develop portfolios for assessment. "At every level, we are saying to kids, 'you have to show me that you can do this,'" Bethany says.

"Using portfolios for performance assessment is a lot more work for teachers," Bethany admits, "especially when you are setting up requirements and rubrics. But it is totally worth it. Students expect more of themselves and more of us."

DISTRICT MATTERS

by John McGean, Small Schools Coaches Collaborative

Putting Real Student Work Up Front

The WASL results expose the gap between our realities and our aspirations. In 1999, only a third of our state's tenth graders met proficiency in mathematics—and fewer than 10 percent of our African American 10th graders. Sadly, after five years of WASLing we've managed to move our proficiency level in math up only 6 percentage points, with even slighter gains among African American students (from 9.5 percent to 14.2 percent). In 2003, only 30 percent of the state's tenth graders achieved proficiency in all three subjects—only 10 percent of our state's Hispanic students.

If trends hold, in another five years, 2008, maybe 60 percent of our students will be proficient in math (maybe 25 percent of African American and Hispanic students) and eligible for a diploma.

More troubling, these trends expose our incapacity to change school practice—necessary to change results.

Why has the WASL thus far failed to change our high school classrooms? I don't think it's the degree of rigor (it *is* rigorous) nor its alignment to the frameworks (it's aligned)—but to its separation as an assessment from daily learning itself. The test is boxed up and sent away to be assessed in private. The student and the student's teacher get the results (not the student work) three months after the work was done. It is assessed far away from the teacher, the learner, and the learning.

The 2008 culminating exhibition graduation requirement may prove to be the better spark we need to change high schools. It requires the students to create, present, and defend their work in front of a high stakes audience. The power of this performance assessment design over the "box and ship" WASL is that the assessments are created over time within the context of the classroom curriculum. And they are public—the work itself (not just the scores) is public, out there for all to examine—an authentic artifact of the school's capacity to teach and the student's to learn.

Schools that extend the culminating exhibition design into lower grades—as many of yours do, and teachers who build performance assessment experiences into their classes—as those featured in this issue do—set the stage for dramatic growth in achievement of their students that could never have been facilitated just by WASL. District leaders who support this work by policy, publicity, and presence increase the likelihood of that achievement growth.

John McGean was a high school principal and an assistant superintendent before joining the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative. He can be reached at jmcgean@comcast.net.

The Learning Network

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



7900 East Greenlake Drive North, Suite 212
Seattle, WA 98103
www.smallschoolsproject.org
www.smallschoolsproject.org
206/616-0303

IN THIS ISSUE

Performance Assessment in Clover Park Classrooms
A School Coach's Performance Assessment Journey
Putting Real Student Work Up Front
Portfolios at Seattle's Center School
Student-Community Connections at Friday Harbor High

Transitioning, *continued*

broad and deep. For families and teachers, it's building genuine and ongoing relationships that welcome families into high schools.

Even though the transition is nowhere near complete, it is clear that most conversion schools have fulfilled the "Go-far-enough-fast-enough-that-you-can't-go-back" rule from our early conversations. We see more buildings disaggregating data by small school, revamping course offerings and schedules to reduce crossovers, and allocating budgets to small schools rather than the entire building, or by departments. Coaches report that many of their small school staffs have begun to focus on specific changes in teaching practice that they will make together.

At a recent gathering of principals, the most frequent positive statements were about the emergence of teacher leaders. Principals see new roles emerging and becoming more clearly defined, and they see teachers gaining confidence as they assume those roles.

Conversion principals also report having many, many candidates hoping to teach in their new small schools.

Clearly, the hard work isn't done, but it's well begun. While summer beckons, we hope each of you will take a moment, individually, and collectively, to acknowledge the hard work well done and the significant progress your schools have made this year.

- Rick Lear, Director

DATES TO REMEMBER

Teacher Leadership Summer Institute

It's not too late to sign up for the Teacher Leadership Summer Institute, July 19 through 23, at the University of Puget Sound. The registration form for this (and other summer institutes) are on our website, www.smallschoolsproject.org, in the "What's New?" section.

The Learning Network will not be published in July but will resume in August. Have a great summer.

The Learning Network is a monthly newsletter written and produced by the Small Schools Project, which is based at the University of Washington College of 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, to subscribe, or to print a copy of this newsletter, please visit: <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>. To share information about your school's redesign efforts or suggest topics for this publication, contact:

Nancy Lundsgaard, Editor
Mary Beth Lambert, Contributing Editor
Craig Lucero, Editorial Assistant/Design & Layout

Phone: 206/543-7242
Phone: 206/685-5236
Phone: 206/616-0303

E-Mail: nancylun@u.washington.edu
E-Mail: mlambert@u.washington.edu
E-Mail: clucero@u.washington.edu