

# The Learning Network

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

August 2004 | Volume 3, Issue 1

## A Moral Imperative; A Call to Action

For people who work in schools, August, not January, is the time we make our New Year's resolutions. At the very least, it's the time we think about our hopes for the year, and why we became, and remain, educators.

My hopes this year are deeply affected by a book I read this summer called *Mountains After Mountains* by Tracy Kidder, best known as the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Soul of a New Machine* and *Among Schoolchildren*. *Mountains* is the story of Paul Farmer, an American physician-medical anthropologist who has spent most of his adult life working to eradicate infectious diseases, primarily in Haiti, but increasingly in other parts of the world.

The book's title comes from a Haitian saying: "Beyond mountains, there are mountains," a Haitian way of acknowledging that we solve one problem only to face another problem and, after that, yet another problem. Not, at first blush, a saying that encourages optimism.

Yet Farmer's story is profoundly inspiring and paints a picture that lifts us and allows us to feel hopeful. It also reminds us that moral imperatives have a way of sustaining people in the face of the most daunting circumstances. For Farmer, the moral imperative is that every human being, even those living in the deepest poverty, is entitled to the best health care available in the world.

The book inevitably led me to wonder about the equivalent moral imperative for us as educators. I believe it is that every student is entitled to the best education available. In many ways, this sounds like a political cliché. Accepting it as a moral imperative, however, gives the statement a sense of undeniable urgency; it becomes a call to action, not a mission statement.

My hope is that we will all accept this moral imperative, and that it will sustain us in our work through the months and years to come.

*Rick Lear, Director*

## WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT THIS YEAR

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.

Most of those "things" will happen again, and you might want to re-read that issue (August 2003, publications section of [www.smallschoolsproject.org](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org)). 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.

### **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.*

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.

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**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.

**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 plan-

ning 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.

**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 their students need more time and attention on math. Another school will choose to employ

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## NEW TO YOUR HIGH SCHOOL?

If you are new to teaching (or perhaps you've taught for years, but this is your first year at your current location), you may have lots of questions about small schools and about your school's grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Here are a few facts to get you started.

### Q What is "small schools" reform?

**A** Small schools are big these days. You can hardly pick up an education magazine without reading something about the concept. Large comprehensive schools are breaking up into smaller units. Already-small schools are fighting consolidation. Is this just the latest fad? The introduction of some new jargon?

Actually, successful small schools have been around for years, with over 30 years of research describing their benefits. But the term "small schools" means different things to different people. At the Small Schools Project, we define it to be about more than just a school's size, as small doesn't automatically equal good. Rather, the term is an identifier for those schools that share a core set of characteristics (see back of this page).

If you have just joined a large comprehensive high school with a Gates grant, you may hear the term "conversion school." Across the nation, as many as 2,000 large high schools are converting or restructuring into small schools, spurred by support from federal and private dollars. Here in Washington State, the Small Schools Project has worked intensively with 17 conversion high schools in 13 districts over the past three years.

### Q Why is our school doing this?

**A** Why are so many large high schools breaking up 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 the future.

This isn't a surprising problem—American high schools were never designed to work for everyone. 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, hardworking teachers continue to struggle on in a complex, outmoded system.

## FAQs About Your School's Gates Grant

### Q How will effective small schools make a difference for students?

**A** 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. The narrowing of the gap between these students and their more affluent peers makes the development of small schools a social justice issue as well as an educational one.

Higher achievement is the most compelling benefit of personalization, 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.

- **Relationships:** Strong connections—intentionally built and fostered—to caring adults at school make a huge difference for kids, allowing teachers to create learning opportunities that meet the needs of individual learners.
- **Rigor:** Rigor is not simply covering more academic content, but a student's active, deep learning driven by a teacher's high expectations.
- **Relevance:** Learning becomes more relevant 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.

Kids in schools that provide these elements—whether they are affluent students in small private schools or low-income students in small inner-city public schools—are more likely to stay in school and to be prepared for college.

#### Want to know more?

Our website, [www.smallschoolsproject.org](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org), includes scores of articles about small schools, tools teachers can use, publications, and other resources. However, because you probably don't have a lot of time for browsing, we've created a special section just for you.

Just go to the website and click on "What's New?" to find the "New to Your School?" link that will lead you to a few introductory articles and resources.

## Q How do these changes impact teachers and their practice?

**A** Whether you are joining the faculty of a large comprehensive school that has been converting into smaller schools or the faculty of an already-small school trying to implement new teaching and learning strategies, you'll quickly learn that the work has been challenging and requires a lot of time from teachers. However, including staff members in the decision-making process—as time-consuming and sometimes frustrating as it can be—is one of the big benefits of effective small schools.

We also hope you notice that teachers in effective small schools work differently. They develop adult learning communities and—with their colleagues—plan integrated units, share information about their students, look at student work together, and examine classroom practices. While most teachers find this new way of working exciting and energizing, enhanced student achievement is the ultimate goal—and expected result.

## Q What is the Small Schools Project?

**A** The Small Schools Project provides support and assistance to about 100 K-12 schools in Washington State and nationally that have received reinvention grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Funded by the Foundation, the Project is part of the College of Education at the University of Washington.

You can read more about the services we provide to your school on our website, [www.smallschoolsproject.org](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org).

## Q What is the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative?

**A** The Small Schools Coaches Collaborative provides sustained support for schools with Gates grants, primarily in the form of school coaches, most of whom have been teachers or principals.

Exactly what a coach does at each school is decided in consultation with school staff and can be adjusted as needs and circumstances change. However, here are just a few examples of ways in which coaches are helping their schools:

- Consulting about teaching and learning practices
- Helping to address issues of bias and equity
- Assisting with data analysis
- Providing an outside perspective

Co-directed by Rick Lear and Jan Reeder, the Collaborative is a partnership of the Small Schools Project, the Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest Center, and the National School Reform Faculty.

The coach in your school is looking forward to meeting and working with you.

## Core Characteristics of Effective Small Schools

- **They are small.** Few effective small schools serve more than 400 students, and many serve no more than 200 students.
- **They are autonomous.** The school community—whether it shares a building, administrator, or some co-curricular activities with other schools—retains primary authority to make decisions affecting the important aspects of the school, including budget, curriculum, and scheduling.
- **They are distinctive and focused** rather than comprehensive. They do not try to be all things to all people.
- **They are personal.** Every student is known by more than one adult, and every student has an advisor/advocate who works closely with her and her family to plan a personalized program. Student-family-advisor relationships are sustained over several years.
- **They are committed to equity** by eliminating achievement gaps between groups of students while increasing the achievement levels of virtually all students.
- **They use multiple forms of assessment** to report on student accomplishment and to guide their efforts to improve their own school.
- **They view parents and the community** as critical allies and find significant ways to include them in the life of the school community.
- **They are schools of choice** for both students and teachers, except in some rural areas, and are open, without bias, to any students in a community.

“It [changing to small] can't be because it's a fad. It can't be because there's money. It can't be because there [are] less kids to get to know in a small school. It must be to significantly change how people interact and how learning takes place.”

BILL KLANN, HUMANITIES TEACHER

VANGUARD HIGH SCHOOL (340 STUDENTS)

NEW YORK CITY

## SCHOOL SPOTLIGHTS

### Aviation High School Attracts Kids with Passion for Flight and Space

“Your Aviation High School has landed!”

Those words were shouted by the master of ceremonies over the roar of a dozen small airplanes that taxied to a stop in front of a crowd of cheering students, parents, and dignitaries at Boeing Field.

Out of the planes clambered 32 soon-to-be ninth graders chosen by lottery for the ride. They joined their classmates on the tarmac for the photo session that kicked off Aviation High School’s July 1 opening ceremonies.

Although the doors of the brand-new school will not open for classes until September, excitement already runs high among the approximately 100 students who have been accepted into Aviation’s inaugural ninth-grade class. Student Dawn Keehnel spoke for many when she said, “I’ve always been interested in space and flight, so this is an amazing opportunity for me.”

Parents also expressed enthusiasm. Samuel Jackson, parent of Henry Jackson, said, “How wonderful for my fourteen year old to be able to combine his interest in building things with his academic studies! And because this is a brand-new school, parents can really be involved in building it.”

#### Heading for new frontiers

Created and run by the Highline School District, Aviation High is the result of a partnership that includes the Port of Seattle, King County, Seattle Community College, Alaska Airlines, Boeing, and other business and government entities. The school will be financially supported by a \$6.5 million donation from the Port of Seattle to be spread over 10 years, and a \$600,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

During the opening ceremonies, King County Executive Ron Sims challenged the class of 2008 to “take us to new frontiers.” Other speakers included Superintendent of Public Instruction Terry Bergeson, Highline Superintendent Joe McGeehan, and Erik Lindbergh, Charles Lindbergh’s grandson.

Then two student speakers wowed the crowd of several hundred. A recent immigrant from Liberia, Morris Frazier told of seeing planes flying high overhead when he was a little boy and vowing that someday he would learn to fly so he could bring food and medicine back to his poor country. “This is a first step toward my dream,” he said.

Elysia Totten described her passion for aviation and her dream of being a commercial pilot and concluded with a message to the Alaska Airlines executive who had just spoken. “You’ll be seeing me again,” she said.

#### Tapping into students’ interests

Housed on an interim basis in a South Seattle Community College annex near Boeing Field, Aviation High plans to add 100 more freshmen each year until the school reaches capacity (400



Students welcome parents and dignitaries to their new school’s opening ceremonies.

students) in the 2007-08 school year. The mission of the school is “to prepare students for college, work, and citizenship through a personalized, rigorous, and relevant learning experience that is facilitated in the context of aviation and aerospace.”

Aviation is a school of choice with an application process. For more information, see [www.aviationhs.org](http://www.aviationhs.org).

### Tacoma’s School of the Arts Selected as a “Great Theme-Based” School

Congratulations to Tacoma School of the Arts, which is included in a recent Gates Foundation publication as one of several “great theme-based” schools. The publication, *Creating a Portfolio of Great High Schools*, describes three types of schools—traditional, theme-based, and student-centered—and lists five or six exemplars for each.

To read the entire publication, please visit the Foundation’s website at [www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org).

## TOOLS & RESOURCES

### Guide Explores Legal Issues that Impact Small Schools

The University of Washington’s Center on Reinventing Public Education has developed a guide called *Legal Issues and Small High Schools: Strategies to Support Innovation in Washington State*.

The guide provides information on how to work within the current legal and regulatory system to create successful and innovative small schools in Washington State, and provides greater clarity about potential legal and policy impediments and includes “how-to” advice.

Schools with Gates grants have received a hard copy, but you may download all or part of the guide free of charge from the Small Schools Project website at [www.smallschoolsproject.org](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org).

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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.*

Over the next couple years, small schools will become more clear about the appropriate roles for teacher leaders, and administrators 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 places of both joy and learning.

*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 to suggest topics for this publication, please contact:

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