

# The Learning Network

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

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## In The Middle Stretches of a Marathon Task

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.

*Rick Lear, Director*

## THE MIDDLE OF THE MARATHON

### Things to Keep on Remembering

#### **1 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.

- **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

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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 authority 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.

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 initiatives, 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.

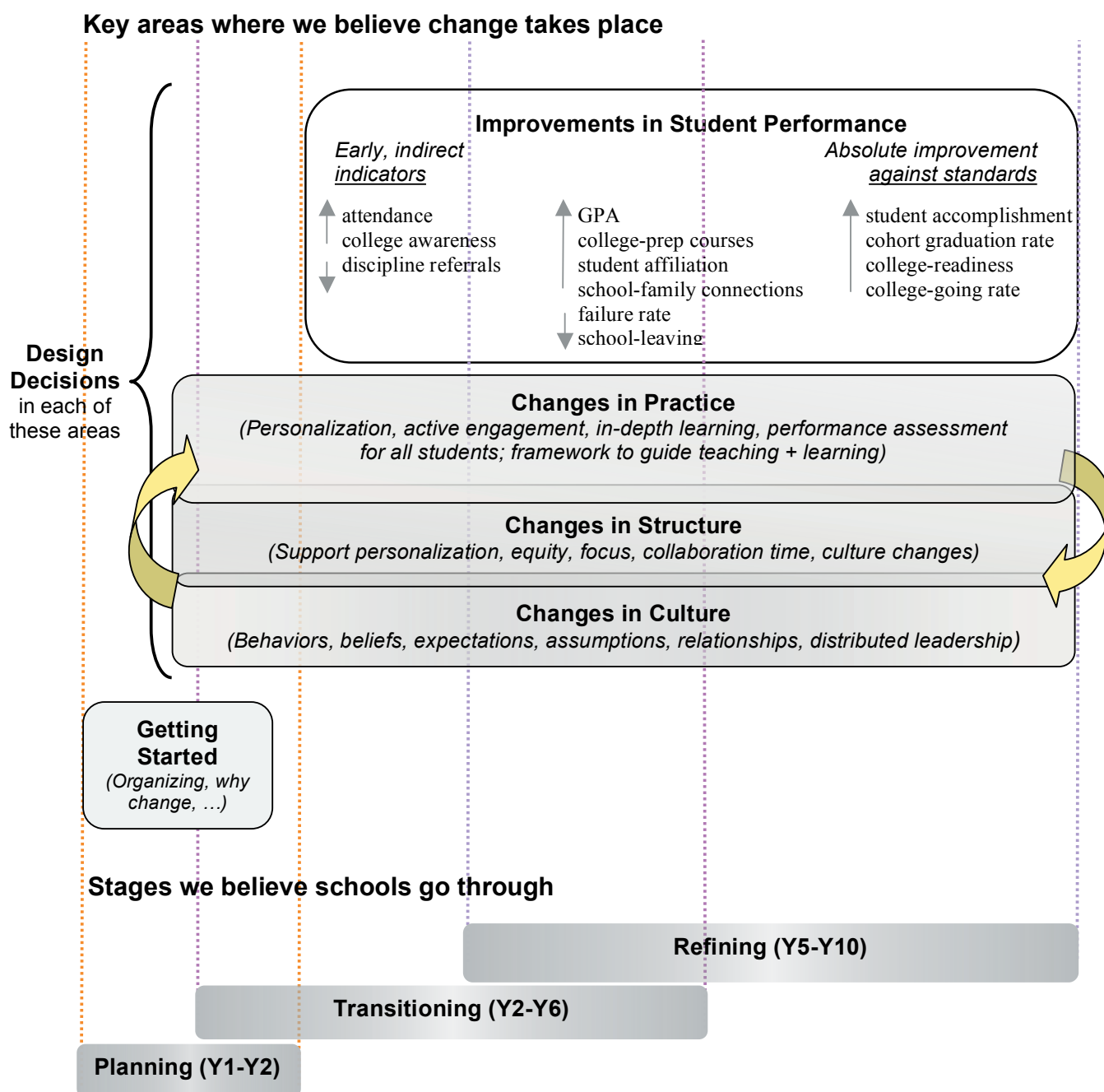
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## 7 Embracing change as a central part of school life increases the likelihood of success.

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 opportunities 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.*



\* Our experience leads us to believe that a fourth area, community engagement, is equally important, and that community engagement is an area where school districts can most effectively play the lead role.

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## NEW RESOURCES FROM SSP

### *New Video Series Designed to Answer the Question, "What Does It Look Like?"*

By the end of September, school coaches will have delivered multiple copies of three new videos—the first in the new *Picturing the Possibilities* series—to your schools. The three videos, *Projects in Action: Real Work, Real World*; *Integrated Curriculum: Connecting and Collaborating*; and *Knowing Students Well Through Advisories*—are packaged with professional development support materials.

Each video tells the stories of teachers who have made a shift in their practice and found success for students through the use of a specific strategy. The hope is that the videos will answer the question "But what does it look like?" and provide images that you will find helpful as you expand your thinking about what can work in your classroom.

After the videos are released, you will be able to order additional copies for cost and to download the support materials free of charge from our website.

### *New Leadership Report from the Seven Small Schools Study Available Now*

The third report in SSP's research series, the Seven Small Schools Study, is now available. *Distributing Leadership: Moving from High School Hierarchy to Shared Responsibility* looks at the changing nature of leadership in seven redesigned small schools in Washington State.

According to the report, nearly every position in the conversion schools looks different from the advent of teacher-leaders to the changing roles of administrators and teachers. New structures are being developed—both for distributing decision making and for building leadership capacity.

Your principal and teacher-leader will receive copies of this report in September. You may also download additional copies for free from our website or purchase hard copies at cost.

*The Learning Network* is a monthly newsletter written and produced by the Small Schools Project, which is a part of the Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest Center. 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:

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