

The Learning Network

A Newsletter for Districts and High Schools Engaged in Redesign Work

March/April 2007 | Volume 5 Issue 3

SUMMER WORKSHOPS

Socratic Seminar

June 27-29

Why College-Ready for All?

July 30

Advisory

July 30-31

Beginning Critical Friends
Group Training

July 30-August 2

Continuing Critical Friends
Group Training

July 31-August 2

Graduating All Students
Ready for College

July 31-August 2 (LA/SS)

July 31-August 2 (MA/SC)

Teacher Leadership

July 31-August 2

Strategies for Differentiation

July 31-August 2

The Personalized Classroom

August 1-2

Culminating Projects and
Exhibitions

August 1-2

Socratic Seminar

August 6-8

Costs and registration information will be mailed soon!

Compelling Community Conversations

A half-century ago, “community engagement” for most school districts meant ensuring that parents were aware and supportive of what was happening in their children’s schools. Back then, about 75 percent of the adults in any community had either children or grandchildren enrolled in the local school system. Today, over 75 percent of adults in most communities do not have any direct family connection to the local school system.

That’s only one way the world has changed over the past half-century. But that change, more than any other, has driven a new agenda when it comes to figuring out how to talk effectively with communities. In that old world, districts often thought about “public relations” rather than community engagement.

While that’s occasionally still the case—some schools and districts don’t want “engagement” until they have all the answers to any possible questions that might be asked by their

community—most districts are moving toward a different relationship with their communities. At the core of that relationship is the understanding that communities must be partners—not simply cheerleaders or yes votes on levies and bonds—in addressing the complex challenges of serving each student well.

It is the other changes in the world we live in that make it imperative that schools and districts commit to serving each student well. That same half-century ago, about 60 percent of jobs required no more than a high school education; today, only 15 to 20 percent of jobs require no formal education beyond high school, and most of those jobs will not support a family above the poverty level.

When people have inadequate food, clothing, and shelter, they have little genuine chance to participate fully in our society. That diminishes all of us, economically and spiritually.

Very few of us would deliberately diminish possibilities for our own children—nor, we like to think, for other people’s children. But every day that we operate as if last century’s schools, last century’s practices, and last century’s beliefs about who needs to be educated and who does not are good enough in this century, we do just that. We diminish possibilities for our community’s children, and we diminish our community as well.

To ensure that such a tragedy does not happen requires that we engage with and educate our entire community in an ongoing discussion of what this new century will demand of its citizens. It means that we listen as well as talk, that we work to understand as well as tell, that we work to

build common agreements and common ground. We won’t agree about everything—we never have, and likely never will. But we can agree on core ideas and core values that address

“ [Community engagement] requires that we listen as well as talk, that we work to understand as well as tell, that we work to build common agreements and common ground.”

possibilities for our children, and our communities, in this century.

Engagement such as this takes many forms, as you will see from the stories in this issue. It is, certainly, about speaking at Rotary and Kiwanis meetings, but it is also about speaking—and listening—in less traditional gatherings, such as workplaces. Or in more traditional gatherings, such as churches. It’s about remembering that our students are important stakeholders and therefore including them in our conversations.

Today’s community engagement is also about each of us engaging one more person every day in a conversation about what our kids will need to live out their lives in ways that make us, and them, proud: our neighbor, the person ahead of us in the check-out line at the store, the person who services our car, delivers our mail, sits beside us in church, writes us a parking ticket, sells us our iPods, uses the same hiking trail. Everyone.

Rick Lear, Director

Mobilizing Community Energies Toward Success for Each Student

While there can be many definitions of community engagement, a sentence in “Strategic Community Engagement: A Resource Guide” (see page 5 in this issue) reads: “...it suggests intentional processes that mobilize the energy of every stakeholder around a common challenge of success for all students.”

Lee Lambert, Community Engagement Officer at the College Success Foundation (CSF) says it this way: “The goal of community engagement is that every adult—whether a parent, an educator, business person, or faith leader—who interacts with our students understands what it will take for all students to graduate from our schools prepared for college, career, and citizenship and is willing to be involved at some level.”

“It means everyone is vested in the success of all kids,” adds David Garcia, also a Community Engagement Officer at CSF.

Under the leadership of Susan Pollack, Director of Advocacy and Marketing, CSF has partnered with The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to launch an “Are You Ready?” campaign for the purpose of engaging parents and communities in creating a sustainable culture of readiness for college and career for every high

school student. (For more information about the “Are You Ready?” campaign, see www.collegesuccessfoundation.org).

Susan, Lee, and David are also working in six Washington State districts to develop and support community engagement efforts.

The short vignettes that follow illustrate what some of these districts—and others—are doing to help their stakeholder groups engage in conversations around preparing all students for college, career, and citizenship. Ongoing authentic conversations are central in each effort.

Partnering with Faith Leaders

According to Community Engagement Officer Lee Lambert, it just makes sense for school districts to work closely with faith leaders, particularly since at-risk and immigrant groups often rely heavily on their churches to provide community.

Lee points to the Highline School District with its large immigrant populations as an example. “In one school, more than a quarter of the students belong to a particular ethnic group, and most of their families attend one neighborhood church,” he says. “So if the leaders in that church know how important it is for students to be prepared for the world after high school and know how to support that goal, they can be tremendously helpful.”

Lee envisions a culture in which schools and churches support each other to prepare their youth. “If a parent has a problem but isn’t comfortable going to the school, the faith leader can be an ombudsman. And the principal would be able to call a pastor and say ‘hey, we have this student who is having some troubles. Can you help?’”

He believes this kind of partnership begins with dialogue, and he’s hoping to convene a meeting of Highline-area faith leaders this summer for that purpose.

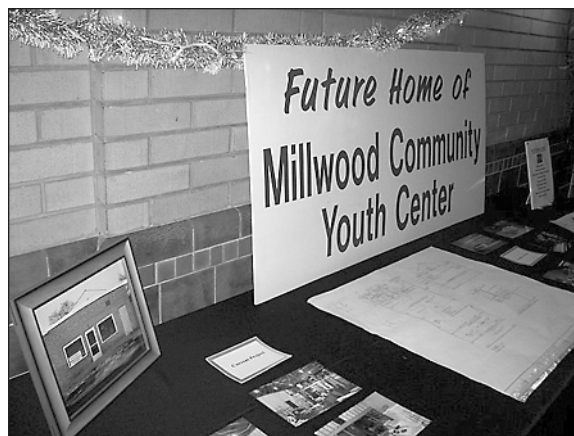
In West Valley (Spokane), Pastor Craig Goodwin of Millwood

Presbyterian Church speaks eloquently about the value of school/church/community partnerships. Six years ago, his church bought a group of rundown storefronts in the hope that someday that space would be used by area youth.

Then, last year, he was invited to join the West Valley School District’s Community Engagement Task Force. There he met new folks—including educators Tom Moore at City School and Cleve Penberthy at Contract Based Education as well as Dave Milikin, Program Director at Hutton Settlement group home—to add to the conversation about starting a youth center.

The latest news? The Millwood Community Youth Center will open on April 12 and be available for programs sponsored by the church, other faith organizations, the school district, the city of Millwood, social service agencies, and other businesses.

Pastor Craig Goodwin says, “The district, the church, and other organizations—each has its own primary focus and mission, but when we look up and see what the others are up to, we see that we have so much in common in seeking to create better futures for young people. I have appreciated the district’s willingness to call us together as partners and accept the leadership initiative of the community members, as well as providing leadership and initiative themselves.”



On April 12, the Millwood Community Youth Center will open its doors, with the help of church/school/service agency partnerships.

Making an Impact, One-On-One

While community engagement activities around college readiness sometimes involve large groups of people getting together, another activity requires just two people—one adult and one student in a mentoring relationship.



Although Clover Park Superintendent Doris McEwen formally mentors high school girls who have received Achievers scholarships, it's never too early to begin with little ones.

Every year, across Washington State, hundreds of adults serve as mentors to student recipients of Achievers scholarships from the College Success Foundation (funded by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation). In the Clover Park School District, Superintendent Doris McEwen is one of those adult mentors.

Doris serves as a mentor for Clover Park High students for two reasons. First, she says, “Every student needs to have someone who cares about them.” Second, she believes it’s important to set an example. “If I’m asking people in our community to do something—in this case, mentoring—I need to be willing to do it myself,” she explains.

Speaking affectionately of “her kids”—she’s mentored six young women now—Doris is especially proud that one will be graduating from college this year. She recalls that the young woman originally had her mind set on going to a two-year school, but after visiting several four-year campuses with Doris, chose Seattle Pacific. “Now she’s planning to be an English teacher and hoping to eventually come back to Clover Park High School, her alma mater,” Doris says.

Clearly committed to the concept that all students deserve to be fully prepared for the future, Doris finds mentoring rewarding because, she says, “I know a single person can make a difference in a young person’s life.”

BEING STRATEGIC

- The heart of any community engagement is conversation that leads to common ground, ideas, and futures. Options for these range from one-on-one, to small group conversations, to larger events that bring whole communities together and build momentum for change through the energy exhibited by a critical mass.

Strategic Community Engagement: A Resource Guide
Small Schools Project, 2006

In Yakima Valley, community volunteer Anne Newell agrees. She’s learned, she says, that “mentoring does have an impact, one person at a time.”

Two of the four Achievers scholarship girls Anne has mentored are now in college; she meets regularly with the other two on the Davis High School campus. “We talk about the pros and cons of various schools,” she explains. She also helps them with college applications, including the personal essays that many find challenging. “A big part is just listening,” she says, “and helping them draw out what their strengths are, what they care about.”

Anne has found that “students gain from having a supportive and nonjudgmental relationship with an adult who is not an authority figure, someone who can help them focus on goals and give them a glimpse of the world beyond high school.”

She enjoys sharing the excitement when a student is accepted into college and knows that she is part of “opening doors for students who might not otherwise have these opportunities.” And she has gained new insights about the obstacles many kids face today and a new appreciation for their determination to succeed.

Anne believes it’s important for people who have little contact with schools to have a deeper understanding of both the obstacles and the successes. She also notes that many community members are unaware of the high costs of college today as well as the competitive edge needed for college acceptance. Because of her experiences as a mentor and community member, Anne can help get these messages out.

Taking the Message to the People

Presenting college readiness information during lunch breaks at fruit-packing warehouses? After Sunday mass at a Catholic church?

Yes, says Davis High School Principal Lee Maras, if that’s what it takes to reach your students’ parents. This new outreach began in December after the Davis (Yakima School District) staff had participated in workshops about creating a family-friendly school.

“At that point, we realized that because so many of our Hispanic migrant and immigrant families here in the Yakima Valley aren’t comfortable coming into a large

American high school—no matter how friendly we made it—we needed to begin by going out to their places of employment,” Lee says. “For many of them, that means fruit-packing warehouses.”

So Lee and Davis’ Spanish-speaking migrant coordinators visited Yakima Valley’s largest warehouse, making short presentations at each of the day’s three short lunch breaks and reaching 60 parents. The presenters described the programs available at

Davis, talked about scholarship opportunities, and shared a variety of other information. Lee recalls that the parents listened eagerly, “asking questions about everything from how our American grading system works, to what courses students need to be college eligible.”

Shortly after, a large Catholic church invited Lee to make his presentation one Sunday. “Over 200 people stayed after mass to listen,” Lee says. Since then, he and his small team have visited two more warehouses and have also spoken, by invitation, at a gathering of Yakima Valley African Americans. And they’ve been invited back to the warehouses to share information about student attendance issues.

On April 9, Davis will be holding an information night for parents who speak Spanish, so they can have direct contact with the rest of the staff. “We hope they will feel more comfortable now that an initial contact has been made,” Lee says.

Providing Useful Tools

Most parents hope their children go to college. But there’s a lot for them—and their children—to learn about college eligibility and college preparedness. And they can’t wait until the first semester of a student’s senior year.

For Dani Cole, parent of a Squalicum High School freshman, having a resource like the Bellingham School District’s 2007 *Ready Guide* has allowed her to plan—with her son—his high courses and to help him think about his future. (For more about how the *Ready Guide* was developed and what it includes, see the October 2006 issue of *The Learning Network*.)

“We started by looking at the pages in the back of the guide about what colleges require and then went back to the planning

BEING STRATEGIC

- ▶ With [any process]... follow-through is critical. Ultimately, communities will only stay engaged and truly committed to sustained improvement when they feel their voice is taken seriously and their time has been valued.

Strategic Community Engagement: A Resource Guide
Small Schools Project, 2006

pages. It was important for my son to see visually what he would need to take and what choices he would have,” Dani says. She also appreciates the *Ready Guide*’s information about the WASL, as she and her family are new to the public school system.

Dani likes that the guide puts a lot of information “in front of you, so you don’t have to go hunt for it.” Having this information helps parents and their kids take more responsibility for college readiness, she believes. “You can still take your plan to the school counselor and ask ‘how does this look?’” Dani explains, “but you and your child understand better what’s required. We’ll be using this for the next four years.”

Dani and her son are using the guide for one of its hoped-for purposes—course registration. To that end, it’s been distributed to all high school parents and guardians, as well as staff. But the district has also mailed the guide home to middle school parents/guardians and distributed it to middle school staff, according to Bellingham’s Director of School Information and Communications Tanya Rowe. “We also sent it home with students in grade 5 with a note previewing how course choices affect college eligibility,” she says.

The district also sponsors “Getting to Graduation & Beyond” workshops for middle and high school families at each high school during the year, understanding that it’s never too early to help parents understand how their students’ academic progress and course selection will affect future opportunities

You can download a copy of the 2007 *Ready Guide* from the district’s website at <http://www.bham.wednet.edu> under “Families.”

Including Students in the Conversation



West Valley School District educators Courtney Meador and Larry Bush listen intently to City School seventh grader Connor Johnson.

Students are critical stakeholders in our communities, especially when we’re talking about *their* education and *their* readiness for college, career, and citizenship.

In the West Valley (Spokane) School District, an active Community Engagement Task Force roster includes 43 people; nine are students. David Garcia, College Success Foundation’s Community Engagement officer who has helped facilitate task force meetings, says these middle and high school students add much to the group’s discussions. “The students are equal to anyone else in the room,” he notes.

Reflecting on the most recent task force meeting, Colby Jarman from Centennial Middle School says, “I really liked the fact that we were all talking as a group. It was a lot more productive than listening to someone talk and tell you what’s happening. [We were given] a chance to say what we had to say.”

Strategic Community Engagement: A Resource Guide

Much has been written for educators about community engagement. *Strategic Community Engagement: A Resource Guide*, a recent addition to this body of work, focuses on how to develop intentional community engagement processes that mobilize the energy of every stakeholder group around college, career, and citizenship readiness for all students. The guide proposes a framework of integrated and interacting components (see below) for strategic community engagement planning.

What follows is a short excerpt from one section of the guide.

Understanding and Urgency for Change

Many members of our communities do not understand the rapid social changes and concurrent challenges of the 21st century. Without an understanding of the world for which students are preparing and the world from which they come, it is difficult—if not impossible—to consider why change is necessary at all.

Recognition of “why change” is a fundamental requirement of any improvement effort and a critical first phase of community engagement. Indeed, why would any of us choose to do anything differently or invest energy into work that is admittedly so challenging without a deep understanding of the results needed for students to be successful (what they should know and be able to do) and where we are now related to that goal?

As noted earlier, the complex challenges represented by the rock and the hard place—all students, new skills—require fresh thinking, multiple perspectives, and new energy.

We suggest that you begin by engaging your leadership team around the guiding questions below oriented to the new reasons for community engagement:

Do our internal and external communities exhibit urgency and understanding around the need for reinvention?

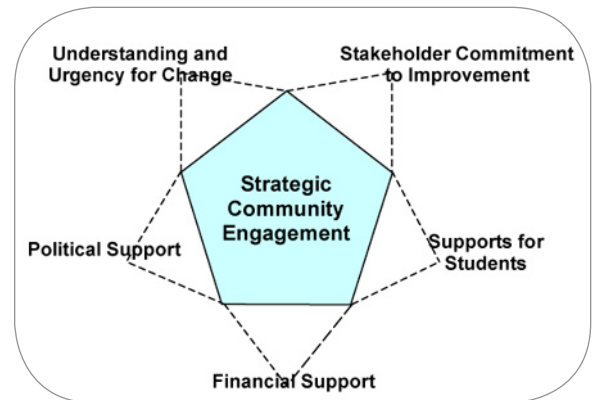
- Is there a shared understanding of the problem in relation to our local, national, and global context? How do we know?
- Do our internal and external communities understand the importance of graduating all students ready for college, work, and citizenship? How do we know?
- Do current perceptions support our work improving instruction and success for all students? How do we know?

If the answer is no to these questions, consider:

- What assumptions guide our internal and external communities’ view of our current reality?

ABOUT THE GUIDE

- Compiled by SSP staff Jude Garnier and Harriette Thurber Rasmussen with significant input from key contributors Tony Wagner and Juan Fernandez, this 31-page guide explores the new challenges educators face as they prepare students for a knowledge society. It also outlines a conceptual framework and includes guiding questions, suggested tools, and resources intended to help school and district leaders think more purposefully about strategic community engagement. Originally prepared for Washington State district grantees of The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the resource guide is available free of charge from www.smallschools.project.org; look under “Tools” and “Build Family & Community Connections.”



Framework for Community Engagement

- Where do we see gaps in understanding about the importance of a vision of graduating all students ready for college, work, and citizenship?
- What do various stakeholder groups need in order to develop this understanding and urgency?
- How will we know when that understanding and urgency has reached a critical mass?
- How do we ensure that we develop urgency in a way that does not lead to blame but rather leads to a shared responsibility?
- What data or experiences will have the highest impact?
- How might conversations between our internal community and external community enhance understanding and urgency around a common problem and shared vision?

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TLN



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Setting the Context

Setting the Context

For a thoughtful analysis of how two districts handled community involvement around high school reinvention, check out “Setting the Context: Informed Community Involvement is Key to Meaningful Change” by Patricia McNeil.

Published by *Headfirst: The Magazine of Enterprising Ideas for Education*, the article contrasts the community engagement processes during the Manual High School (Denver) redesign efforts with those at Tyee High School (Highline) as both schools attempted to break into smaller schools.

One interesting finding from the Tyee research was that asking parents and community members outcome-based questions like “What part of high school are you happy with? What part of high school should we get rid of? What do you want for your children and your neighbor’s children?” rather than “What do you want in your high school?” elicited more productive responses and allowed the community to develop consensus around objectives. Then school leaders could engage the com-

munity in talking about the structure and learning options that would support the outcomes they had identified.

The author concludes that a clearly articulated vision and a set of parameters for redesign, developed collaboratively with the schools and the community, are essential for meaningful change.

A U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education in the Clinton Administration, Patricia McNeil served as executive director of the Denver Commission on Secondary School Reform in 2004–2005. In 2005–2006, she conducted extensive research in Highline as a Small Schools Project staff member. She is now an educational consultant specializing in high school reform.

You can find this article at www.headfirstcolorado.org in the “Articles” section.

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

The Project was created in 2000 to promote the understanding and development of small schools committed to providing rigorous, relevant learning experiences for all students, based on powerful relationships that support this learning. We provide support and assistance to high schools and districts committed to high school redesign and graduating all students college- and work-ready.

The Project offers a range of services, including school and district coaching and professional development activities for educators and administrators. We publish a variety of publications about small schools and produce hands-on tools to use in the classroom, school, district, and community.

For more information about the Project, to subscribe to this newsletter or print a copy, please visit <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>.

To share information about your district or school’s redesign efforts, or to suggest topics for this newsletter, please contact:

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