

The Learning Network

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

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Good Work, Well Worth Your Love and Labor

The end of June marks the end of the current grants for all the individual Gates Foundation school grantees in Washington State, although some schools may receive extensions for a couple years. The end of June is also the end of both the generous five-year contract with the Gates Foundation that has permitted us to provide school coaches to Gates grantee schools and the equally-generous grant that has supported the work of the Small Schools Project over the past six years.

That makes this quite possibly the final issue of *The Learning Network*, so writing this piece has been difficult. It may be our last chance to celebrate your progress and accomplishments, say thank you for your hard work, and reflect on our work together.

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At our high school meeting in mid-May, I listened to a teacher describe the assessment system she and her colleagues have been building over the last several years. Their system is based on their decision as a small school to graduate students on the basis

of competencies; that decision has rippled through virtually every aspect of the way they think about their school.

While the details are too complex to describe here, three aspects of that teacher's explanation stood out to me:

1. At the end of their first year's work, when their students couldn't do what their new system had asked of them, teachers didn't blame the kids. They looked instead at their own practice, and realized they hadn't taught their students the things they needed to know to succeed. So they set out to change what they do as teachers.
2. Four years later, their system is sophisticated and multi-layered, and it links their curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices in ways these teachers believe will make their students more powerful, independent learners. Their careful thought is evident, from the practices they use to the information they share with one another to the metaphors they use with students and each other. They are very

continued on next page...

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Three Small School Coaches Collaborative (SSCC) coaches reflect on their learning over the past five years.



Beyond Norms

By Joe Hall

A key learning from my coaching work in schools has been the realization of how lucky I've been to witness the organic development of new and different school cultures. These re-invented schools have reflection and meta-cognition at their core, and hold steadfast their commitment to the high academic achievement of every one of their students. These school cultures allow teachers to be true collaborators where they, as professionals, commit to each others' practice on a deep level—one that respects and honors their successes, promotes risk-taking shifts in instruction, and allows for/supports individual teachers who fail forward with their instructional decisions.

Sometimes in the coaching zeal to build capacity for leadership in schools, we have a tendency to over-facilitate—artificially creating time and space for teachers to undertake this type of collaboration. I've learned that a re-invented culture is truly authentic when it doesn't take an outsider to gently remind the group of the procedural commitments they've made to one another. I've learned that schools really get movin' when they've

created a powerful, palpable "way of being" that transcends district policy manuals, union contracts, and written group norms. It is this almost unconscious way of being that supports the best instruction, makes it easy to come to consensus around what's truly best for students, and embraces newcomers to the school with a reassuring sense of enduring solidity.



Lessons From Coaching

By Steffany Raynes

Teacher leadership is key. Teachers are used to being in charge of their classroom and not empowered to impact much of the rest of the school. A big part of school redesign (especially small school redesign) is about creating an integrated, personalized experience for students. For that to happen, teachers really have to be involved beyond just teaching in their own classroom.

As a coach, a big part of my work has been about helping teachers see the connections between what they are doing and what is happening in other teachers' classrooms, and then helping them see that working with others can make everything work better—for students and for them. Mentoring teachers to see how they can contribute to and even lead collaborative efforts has also been an important part of coaching.

...continued on page 3

near to having built a coherent system, based on a combination of their own best thinking about what their students need, their passions, and their understanding of best practice. Since they have very high expectations for their students and themselves, it's no surprise that their practice is neither packaged nor managed, but dynamic and evolving.

3. The teacher—in her sixth year of teaching—ended her presentation by saying, “It still feels rough and unfinished, but I know what I need to do next.”

In a few short minutes this teacher described what I believe is the heart of our work together over these five years. Teachers took responsibility for their students' learning, and understood that they, as professionals, needed to get better at their craft. They worked hard and built a system that makes sense to them and that both challenges and provides coherence for their students. And while their work is unfinished (as it surely is for all of us), they know what the next step is.

My example connects directly to a simple statement I'm much taken with right now. It's from James Carville, as he spoke to the Clinton campaign staff he led in the 1992 presidential campaign. At the end of their work together, he said: “There's a simple doctrine. Outside of a person's love, the most sacred thing someone can give is their labor. Somehow, along the way, we tend to forget that.”

I've thought about that statement often as I think about the work that many of you have done over the past five years. Carville goes on to say that whenever you are able to combine your love and your labor, you have an uncommon opportunity. I think that describes many of you. Through your labor and your love (and often with the help of your coaches), you've changed many of your schools in fundamental ways.

“The work has been harder than any of us had imagined, and it's far from finished. But it's good work, well worth your love and your labor.”

Student test scores are rising. Failure rates are declining. Students are choosing more rigorous courses. In some of your schools, more students are graduating college ready. In the Achievers schools, more students are going on to college—and succeeding—than ever before.

Most importantly, perhaps, students know that they are surrounded by adults

who are fiercely committed to their success. As another teacher said at our recent high school convening, “I used to think that kids didn't go to college because they didn't want to go. Now I know all they need is to understand that we believe they can go, and they'll work hard, and they'll succeed.”

It's not that simple, of course. Some kids still feel unsupported, and too many kids still fail. We don't have the teaching all figured out or the relationships quite right, in many cases. We're not always on the same page with one another or with our district leaders. But we—you, really—are on the right track.

You've accepted the challenge of redesigning your schools so they serve all students well. You've accepted the declaration, made by one of you several years ago, that “sometimes, believing is seeing”—recognizing that your belief in each student is often the foundation that helps students achieve more than they had ever anticipated.

The work has been harder than any of us had imagined, and it's far from finished. But it's good work, well worth your love and your labor. We thank you for letting us into your schools, and into your lives. From the beginning, you had our respect as teachers and leaders. Over the years, you've earned our admiration as well.

We're at the end of our current relationship, and we're sorry to see it end. I know I speak for all our coaches and all of us at the Small Schools Project when I say we've felt privileged to work with you, and we've been enriched by the opportunity.

A little data

Schools Over the past five years, the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative (SSCC) has coached in **156** schools that received grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in Washington. Of those, **41** schools are elementary or middle schools. The remaining **115** are high schools. Some are what we call “already-small” schools, mostly rural. About **70** of them are the small schools that have been created in comprehensive high schools as a result of their grants. Still others are comprehensive high schools that haven't yet “converted” to small schools, plus a few more that don't plan to change their

current structure. And **eight** of them are new schools, started from scratch over the past five years.

The schools reach all four corners of our state and range in size from **barely a hundred** students to **over 2000**.

The students in these schools reflect the changing face of our state—still largely white, but with a rapidly changing racial composition, they possess an even greater diversity in terms of culture and language. Students in grantee schools come from families that earn well under the median income of Washington households.

The teachers and administrators in these schools don't represent the changing

face of Washington. Mostly white, mostly monolingual, and mostly in the last third of their careers, they are likely to see as their greatest challenge how to effectively serve students who are different from them in many ways.

Coaches The **48** SSCC coaches look mostly like their teaching counterparts in grantee schools, except that a substantial number are retirees who aren't really ready to retire. **Three** coaches have not been educators; the remaining **45** served as teachers or counselors, and **16** of them were also building administrators at some point in their careers.

Watching for serendipity and building on momentum. Getting to know adults and students and finding out what they are passionate about and then helping them envision a possibility for creating something exciting in the small school has been rewarding. Connecting them with each other has also been important.

Learning from successes. Increasing the tendency to reflect and learn from what has gone well (or nearly well) has been a place of great learning for me. People need to feel capable; building on successes creates a wonderful momentum that is empowering.

Sustainability requires attention. For the work to continue, increasing numbers of people need to be sharing it. Leaders and innovators need to really think about who they are passing on their roles/jobs to. As a coach, I have needed to think about passing on the role of participant or observer, for example.



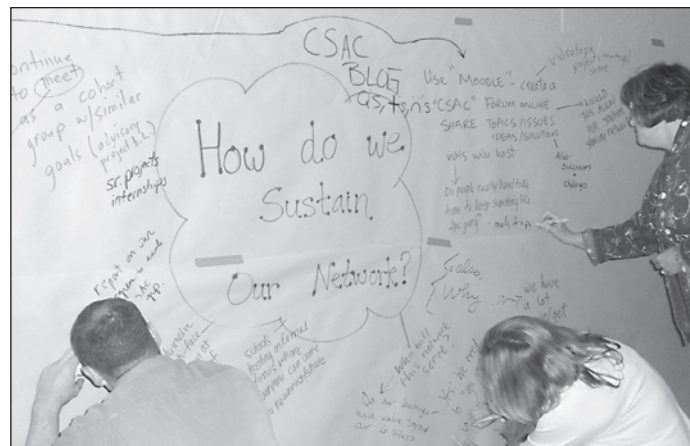
Commencement Time

By Susan Westlund

Just past the mint fields a mile or two outside of Toppenish, a magpie rises predictably, sweeps halfway across Highway 22, hovers just a moment, then curls backward and vanishes, marking a threshold—the beginning and end of which I’ve yet to identify—to a world of orchards, fields, and a school where I’ve served as a school coach nearly five years now. Big tractors kick up dust and farm workers dot the fields along the way. They plant in spring and harvest in autumn, a cycle that is reversed for us school folk. We reap our harvest in spring and though we call it commencement, it’s all about letting go and saying goodbye.

It’s a bittersweet moment, watching all those smiling faces in caps and gowns—the ones who were successful all along, those who struggled, and those we just couldn’t figure out, but who touched our hearts all the same. The big questions they asked as toddlers entering our system—“Who is the teacher?” and “What is a school?”—spin around and face us once again as we wonder who learned the most on this journey—them or us? At that juncture we know it’s time to release them and move on.

Driven by such persistent and often annoying questions, it’s probably no coincidence that we school coaches find ourselves itinerants, spread out across the state joining in on the lives of our



This spring saw the final meetings of several grantee groups. **Above:** Educators from Connecting Schools And Communities schools participate in a chalk talk about ways to sustain their connections. **Below:** Attendees at the May high school convening develop work plans in a breakout session.



schools. This spring brings a more unusual commencement for many of us, however, as we reluctantly leave those schools we’ve served.

We know them well—the ones that’ve been successful all along, those that struggled, and those we just couldn’t figure out, but who touched our hearts and stretched our understanding in ways difficult to fathom let alone articulate. A bevy of questions arise: How we will know if they—or we—are successful? Is there really a beginning and an end to this work? Will our paths cross down the road a piece? Will there be passes to cross on the next leg of our journey? Who has a map? And as the sun burns the morning mist off the fields of rural Washington, will a magpie herald our arrival?

NEW RESOURCES

Student Voice: Tapping the Potential of Relationships, Relevance, and Rigor

Thanks to all of you who responded to our recent on-line surveys. You mentioned that you’d like more ideas about increasing student voice. This report (see insert) may get you started.

These and other resources can be downloaded from the Small Schools Project’s website, <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>

Project-Based Learning: Engaging Students in Science

The author, Karen Lippy, describes how the North Mason High School’s science department, in Washington State, created an integrated set of courses which foster project-based learning and tap into the community’s unique context.

Answering the Demands of Our Future: Integrating Mathematics and Science Curriculum

Written by two teachers—Alyssa Howell and Marianne Zemanek—from Quest High School in Humble, Texas, this paper describes their efforts to integrate the school’s math and science curriculum into a natural sciences department.

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IN THIS ISSUE:

Good Work, Well Worth Your Love and Labor

Coaches Reflect: Beyond Norms; Lessons From Coaching; and Commencement Time

New Resources

Authors Among Us

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You can read both of the following articles on our website, <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>, in the Publications section.

Transformational Leadership: One Hero's Journey

Susan Westlund, SSCC school coach. Published in Leadership Information (School Information and Research Services), Spring 2006.

The "hero" in this article is Keith Morris, principal at Mabton Junior/Senior High School, a small rural school in Eastern Washington. Susan describes how Keith's leadership assumptions and practice have changed—how he's grown over the past five years from a good manager to what some of his staff call their "Lead Learner." Using data she's collected as a coach, Susan details the dramatic rise in student achievement and college attendance at Mabton, despite its high poverty, high minority population. The article also includes Keith's advice to "transformational principals" in the form of "Ten Traps and Tips."

At the recent National Association of Secondary School Principals conference, Mabton was one of four high schools in the nation to receive a prestigious award of excellence for its school reforms and its students' improvement on standard-

ized tests. Mabton is one of the nation's 21 Breakthrough High Schools, a special designation from a program that identifies schools that serve high minority, high poverty populations and are increasing students' academic achievement.



Effective School Reform Through Personalization

Brent Kline, principal at Mariner High School. Published in The Principal News (Association of Washington School Principals), Winter 2006.

In this article, Brent describes Mariner's process of reorganizing into six academies with the goals of personalizing education and student achievement. He talks about how the structural changes have supported what's really important: transforming teaching and learning. And he explains how listening to students' voices, creating "academy pure" classes, and the growing trust between students and teachers have led to higher expectations and improved student achievement.

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:

<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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