

The Learning Network

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

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Equity Work: Personal, Public, and Political

Little else about the work of school design is as complex and often confounding as “equity work” in all its manifestations. It is at once intensely personal, public, and political. Each arena has its own confusions and uncertainties.

The personal aspects of confronting equity require us to confront our own inadequacies, uncertainties, biases, and, often, our ignorance—each area by itself enough to cause us to flee from such personal examination.

Because schooling is a public enterprise, much of equity work is necessarily public, work done initially with colleagues: understanding our data, thinking about the institution we’ve created, or been a part of, often for many years, sometimes for our entire careers.

To create and maintain public schools as this nation has over, now, parts of several centuries, is a profoundly political act. To shape schools as we have, to maintain or change them (or not) as we have, are political matters.

To confront the contemporary embodiment of our nation’s attitudes and beliefs about who *can* learn, who *may* learn, and who *decides* the answers to those questions, and what, if anything, we will do individually and collectively to make things right—that is, to make our schools equitable—is precisely the point where the personal, the public, and the political are joined. And it is where we find ourselves, willing or not.

Articles in this issue of *The Learning Network* touch on parts of the personal, the public, and the political aspects of equity work. They describe several approaches schools, teachers, and coaches are taking, and illustrate how the three arenas of equity work merge in our work as educators.

Without a doubt, we find ourselves at a place of enormous importance and opportunity.

Rick Lear, Director

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUITY

Data Spotlights Social Justice Issues at Foss

They call data “transformation information” at Henry Foss High School in Tacoma.

Last year, the school’s leaders, faculty, and even some students discovered the power of data to spotlight social justice and equity issues and to transform attitudes and practices.

“It started with the Achievers Scholars,” grant coordinator Dan Wolfrom explains. “Because these students weren’t your typical college-track kids, some teachers had concerns about their abilities at first.”

As a 30-year teacher himself, Dan could understand how teachers might feel that no matter how much effort a teacher put in, the Achievers Scholars wouldn’t make it into college anyway, and even if they did, they wouldn’t be successful there.

So Dan began collecting data about the Achievers Scholars, while Colleen Philbrook, the school’s community involvement officer who works with Achievers Scholars, began looking at transcripts to be sure students were taking the courses they needed.

“Most of our first cohort of Achievers Scholars wouldn’t have been inclined to even take the PSAT or SAT, much less apply to college, without taking a greater number of college prep courses,” says Colleen.

Staff encourages advanced course choice

As a first step, staff began encouraging students to take these courses. “Then, when Achievers Scholars began to take chemistry and foreign language, their friends started saying, ‘I want to do that, too,’” Colleen continues. As a result, the demand for higher-level courses has grown dramatically, almost doubling in some cases.

As anyone who reads Tacoma’s *News Tribune* knows, this change—as well as others—triggered community and staff conflict at Foss. Home to Tacoma’s International Baccalaureate



Foss students Teresa Reynolds and Julie Chase participate in the school’s “learn-in.”

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Program, Foss heard from parents and IB students worried that the program might be watered down to accommodate new students, as well as from students who began demanding their right to an equal education.

Again, an important step was to come back to the data.

In a presentation that he took to groups such as the school board, Foss Booster Club, and the Black Collective, Dan showed that not only

were Achiever Scholars being accepted to college—and increasingly to some of the state’s best four-year schools, they were staying enrolled at a higher rate than the general college population.

His presentation also highlighted the serious achievement gap between some ethnic groups at Foss in several WASL categories.

Teachers talk about social justice

In December, Dan made a Power Point presentation to the faculty, including the Achievers Scholars data and also highlighting performance discrepancies by ethnic groups, such as the attrition in pre-IB patterns and some disturbing WASL and grade distribution data.

“Teachers could draw their own conclusions from the data, but at that point, many of the academies began talking about social justice and taking a look at how beliefs about kids can influence where we place them and how we teach them,” Dan says. “Many saw using the data to refine their teaching strategies as one more way to participate in the transformation of our school.”

Colleen adds, “I think what the Achiever Scholars have accomplished has changed the building globally. These are underrepresented kids who—because they’ve been placed in college prep courses and because the Foss staff has had high expectations for them and given them lots of support—are succeeding in college. You can’t help but extrapolate from their success that other students who fit the same profile can also be successful.”

Students speak out

As the conflict at Foss heated up, underrepresented students began to speak out, most for the first time, concerned that the community and the district were hearing only the usual voices.

They wrote letters to the newspaper and organized a day called a “learn-in” that featured outside speakers coming into classes and talking about equity topics. And in the final issue

of the year, the student newspaper tackled racism and academic achievement concerns.

No one at Foss would say the past two years have been easy. The demand for additional higher-level courses is causing enormous staffing problems. Scheduling is more difficult, too.

The faculty is still divided.

Charts and graphs tell stories

Colleen worries, “So many kids are now aiming higher, but will they have the support they need?”

And Dan cautions, “Just because we offer more advanced courses doesn’t necessarily translate into more rigor. Now we need to focus on teaching and learning. We need to use our small schools structure to focus on all of our kids.”

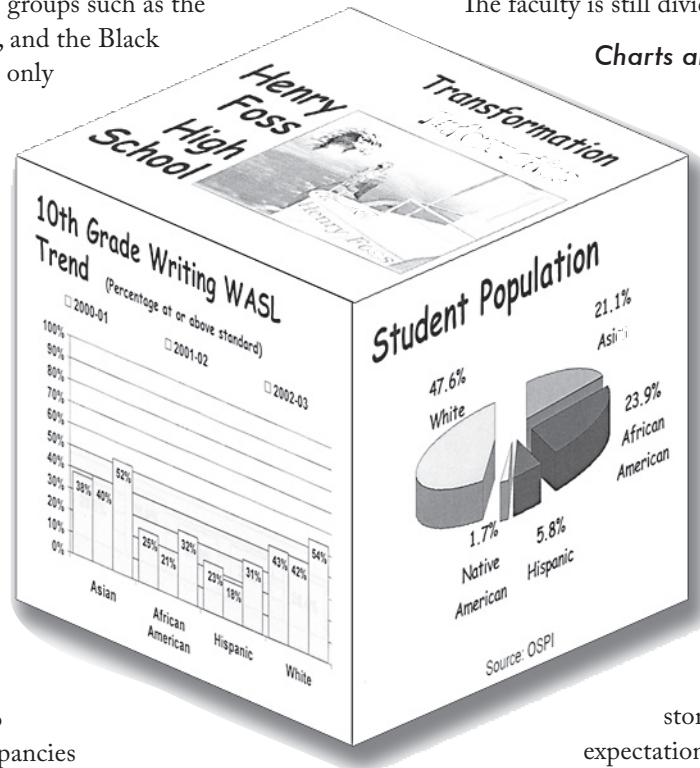
No matter how difficult the process has been, however, what’s happened at Foss is an example of how charts and graphs projected on a screen can tell stories—stories of

inequity and social injustice and

stories of kids who rise to meet high

expectations. Stories with the power to change

attitudes and practice.



Sorting...

Students in social studies teacher Ian McFeat’s class engaged in a “chalk talk” that led to the idea of organizing Foss’ learn-in last year. Here are just a few of their responses to a prompt about “sorting.”

- ✓ Sorting...hurts more people than you think.
- ✓ Sorting...means fewer choices. It is fewer choices because once you’ve been sorted, you pretty much think that is what you were meant to do, what you are trained and sorted for, so you really have no choice.
- ✓ Sorting...waters people down.
- ✓ Sorting...separates people from each other by putting people into categories.
- ✓ Sorting...is a class system that is good for people with money.
- ✓ Sorting...is unstoppable. No, it is stoppable.

COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

Talking About Equity and Social Justice

For many of us, engaging in conversations about equity issues is difficult.

To start with, we probably don't all have the same definitions of "equity." Are we talking primarily about race? Socioeconomic status? Gender? All of the above? Or the myriad of other less visible differences that may in some way affect the way we teach kids? Social injustice can, and does, exist in schools where everybody's skin is the same color and there are no "poor" kids.

Whatever your definition of "equity," talking about it can bring up difficult feelings—guilt, frustration, lack of knowledge or experience, inadequacy—we'd rather avoid. Maybe we are uncomfortable about examining or uncovering our own possible

biases and prejudices. Or maybe past discussions have been unproductive—painful or angry.

So rather than repeat these experiences, we reframe equity issues (it's not class or race but "just kids these days"). Or we deny the issues, ignore them altogether, bring lots of other problems to the table, or become a silent observer when the topic comes up for discussion.

Most of us recognize these conversations are important; we just aren't sure how to have them. "The Learning Network" asked three school coaches, Lois Frank, Ron Jones, and Lynda Robinson, to respond to several familiar scenarios.

Our CFG would like to infuse equity conversations into its work. Are there specific protocols? Can we do this ourselves without an outside facilitator?

There are several possibilities:

- Use a text-based protocol with one or more of the articles in the box on page 4.
- Use the personal assessment tool in the Summer 2003 issue of *Planning Resources for Teachers in Small High Schools*. This tool is available in the "What's New?" section of our website, www.smallschoolsproject.org.

Can you have these discussions without an outside facilitator? Absolutely. But if you are asking the question, it may be that an experienced facilitator would be helpful initially. Ask your school coach for suggestions.

I'm a teacher-leader, and I know that I should be helping our team pay more attention to equity issues. But our meetings always have agendas packed with things my team wants to talk about. How can I balance being responsive to their needs and carving out some intentional time to talk about equity?

Every meeting agenda will always have more than enough items to eat up all the time. So creating intentional time to focus on equity can be difficult. This may be especially true if the group builds its own

agenda and hasn't expressed the desire or need to include equity discussions. Here are some possibilities:

- Schedule time to look collectively at quantitative data (student-disaggregated data such as WASL scores, advanced course placements, disciplinary actions, etc.) or qualitative data (student or parent focus groups or interviews about school, etc.). Then hold sustained conversations around this data, making a plan of action to attack issues that emerge.

When you look closely at data in any school (no matter the demographics), you will begin to identify social justice issues. Rather than blaming either the system or individuals, focus on the question, "What can we do right now to change things for our kids?"

- Encourage teachers to collect and analyze their own data, disaggregating it as necessary. This allows teachers to connect real faces to data and to see patterns. Ask your school coach for help with data collection strategies.
- Give every staff member a chance to tell the story of his or her own learning journey. Everybody has a story to tell, and most can share how they have been marginalized by an education system. This lets

people know it's also about them, not just "the other."

All the teachers in our small school are white and middle class. Can we even have these conversations when we don't have a person of color in our group?

Beverly Daniel Tatum, president of Spelman College and author of several critically acclaimed books, tells the story of dividing a large group up for conversations about race. One of the smaller groups was entirely white and its members claimed they could not have a productive conversation about race if they didn't have any people of color in their group.

Then, however, a white woman stood up and said, "We have all the information we need in this group to talk about racism. This is not to say there isn't something to be gained from hearing the perspectives of people of color, but we as white people have lots of experience with racism—observing it, practicing it—and it's important that we talk about it. While it would be great to have people of color in our group, we don't have to wait for their presence for us to begin this dialogue."

While not everyone in the audience agreed, Beverly says, "I think she was exactly right. There are many conversations that white people can have with each other about the ways that race and racism affect their lives that are in some ways easier to have without the presence

continued on next page...

of people of color. If we have a mixed group, that's great. If we don't, it doesn't mean we have to wait; we can still get started."

Other educators make the point that we *can't* wait. According to some experts, 40 percent of America's public school students will be children of color in ten years, while a much larger percent of their teachers will be white.

As Beverly Daniel Tatum reminds us, "The point is that we all have work to do, and we can begin where we are."

Lois Frank is a retired teacher and administrator who coaches at the School of Creative and Critical Thinking (Kent-Meridian High School, Kent) and SLC B (Marysville Jr. High, Marysville). She can be reached at lfrank.consulting@verizon.net.

Ron Jones taught and held various administrative positions in Edmonds, Bellevue, and Seattle school districts and now coaches at Jefferson Elementary (Tacoma) and Yelm Prairie Elementary (Yelm). He can be reached at RSJonesz@aol.com.

Lynda Robinson was a teacher and administrator in central California and also served as a consultant in multicultural education and teacher cultural competency for OSPI. She now coaches at the School for Global Studies (Cleveland High School, Seattle) and Foss Academy #4 (Henry Foss High School, Tacoma). She can be reached at layonti@msn.com.

Suggested Articles for Text-Based Protocols

Your CFG has probably already used one or more text-based protocols in its work. If not, you will find examples of three of these protocols on our website, www.smallschoolsproject.org in the Tools section.

The following articles are available in the "What's New?" section of our website. Your school or CFG coach may be able to provide others.

- "Whites in Multicultural Education: Rethinking Our Role" by Gary Howard.
- "Conversations About Race Need to be Fearless: An Interview with Gary Singleton" by Dennis Sparks
- "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" by Peggy McIntosh.
- "The Data Dialogue for Moving School Equity" by Laurie Olsen.
- "An Interview with Dr. James A. Banks on Multicultural Education."

DISTRICT MATTERS

What Would You Change If...

An admired coach-colleague began her joyful sabbatical as an elementary classroom teacher this fall. When her students arrived the first day, their classroom was empty—no desks, chairs, no posters, no class rules posted on blank walls. Nothing was left. Their first chore as members of the class was to invent their environment. They would decide, based on what they thought was most important, how their educational world would be structured. Nothing was assumed. Tradition was out the window. Everything in the room would serve an explicit value—a great year for each child.

What would you change if... you discovered one of your district's high schools without furniture—without the desks and chairs of the way it has always been?

What would you change in this now empty high school if the only thing that really mattered was, say, the actualization of social justice? What if nothing mattered but the high achievement of each and every student—not just "some," not even "most?" Or, what if nothing mattered but to eliminate the capacity to predict achievement based on race or socioeconomic status or gender?

Imagine every reform decision being driven by the commitment to ensure each student's success.

“What would you change if the only thing that really mattered was...social justice?”

If we accept that single imperative—each student's success, then some of our school design decisions will include:

- Making our small school(s) standards-based and performance-centered, because we know that students learn in different ways and at different rates
- Making our school(s) small and expecting them to act small. We will do so because the best research available suggests we will better support each student's learning needs using a small school design.
- Developing instructional strategies that are student-centered and that require students to make their thinking visible because only then will we be able to see day-to-day where each student is in terms of meeting standards.
- Using materials and practices that are culturally relevant because we know this engages students by acknowledging the relevance of their own experience to the learning at hand. Specifically, it helps provide the "hook" that cognitive psychologists say each person needs to connect new learning to what we already know.

We'll make many other decisions, of course, always asking if they meet that single imperative—each student's success.

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Recognizing Social Injustice: A Personal Journey

Recognizing inequity or social injustice is a personal journey that each of us travels at different speeds, in different ways. Beverly Daniel Tatum, author of “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” and Other Conversations About Race, believes we are all “works in process” and that “we can begin where we are.”

Last year, teachers at Henry Foss High School in Tacoma had the opportunity to view presentations of student achievement data, including some disturbing performance discrepancies by ethnic groups. “The Learning Network” talked to three of those teachers—Liz Dwyer, Ian McFeat, and Laurie Fisher Ruiz—about the impact of that data on their beliefs and practice.

What was your immediate reaction to the “transformation information” that grant coordinator Dan Wolfrom presented last December?

Liz: What struck me most powerfully about the data Dan presented was seeing the WASL scores broken down by race. Clearly, a large part of our Foss community was not having success.

Laurie: I had a strong reaction because I recognized that I had a role in the data I saw. Foss is my school, and I had taught some of the students who weren’t doing well.

Ian: Actually, the data Dan presented only confirmed my belief that we’re not educating all students.

How did you take what you learned into the classroom?

Liz: I felt I had to share what I’d learned with my classes to find out why this was happening and what we could do about it. My 11th and 12th grade integrated US History/Literature & World Problems class was as riveted by the data as I was, and so it became a class project. We asked, “How can we change our community so that Foss is a successful school for all of its students?”

Asking these questions gave us a real sense of purpose as we read research and texts. We also decided to collect some of our own data, touring the school and asking students in the halls why they were out of class. The data we collected mirrored the test scores and led us to further examine equity research and the history of education.

Ian: I decided to teach a unit on “schooling” in which students would look at the historical roots of public education. With the help of some great resources from Rethinking Schools (<http://www.rethinkingschools.org>), the kids did research, participated in role plays, and practiced having conversations about social justice.



Foss teacher Ian McFeat and student Alicia Nieves listen to a “learn-in” day speaker.

When one student said, “Everyone in this school should be studying this,” others started asking what we could do to make that possible. That’s when they came up with the idea of a day-long “learn-in.” The kids were involved in every aspect of planning the “learn-in,” which was held in May. They asked a lot of outside people to come in and hold sessions about equity issues, and teachers could decide whether or not to have an outside speaker in their classes.

Laurie: I’m a 40-year-old white woman with no idea what school is like for minority students. So I began asking questions and listening to the students’ answers. I also shared the data with my AVID classes and then began collecting similar kinds of data. Now I’m analyzing it to improve my practice.

How do you think your experiences will affect your teaching practice in the long run?

Laurie: While the data presentation was a turning point for me as a teacher, I see this as an ongoing process in my career. I’ll continue to talk frequently with students and other educators to learn everything I can about helping all our students be more successful in school. From now on, my microscope is focused on this issue.

Liz: Now I see how data can be analyzed all sorts of ways if questions are permitted in a safe environment. It was a powerful learning experience for me.

Ian: As a teacher, I constantly struggle with how to make learning “real”—something that kids can actively do. I think this experience felt very real to students, and I certainly got to see how energized they become when they believe they can actually change something.

For me, seeing the data and then finding a way to translate it into a learning experience for my students was very grounding. More strongly than ever, I believe that “you have to be the change you want to see.”

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IN THIS ISSUE:

Equity Work: Personal, Public, and Political
Data Spotlights Social Justice Issues at Foss
Talking About Equity and Social Justice
What Would You Change If...
Recognizing Social Injustice: A Personal Journey

...continued from page 4

Truth is, deep sustained school reinvention can only be accomplished by postcard-clarity of intention—and I believe, apropos to this month's TLN, that the single most compelling intention facing schools today is the imperative of social justice in American public schools. It's at the heart of the education reform supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Leading school reform from the central office is hard. You hear a lot from folks who want the old furniture back. Your willingness to communicate the simple wholeness of your reform initiative—your focus on the actualization of social justice—is important.

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TOOLS YOU CAN USE

Planning Resources for Teachers in Small High Schools, Summer 2003: Teaching for Equity

This section, available on the Small Schools Project website, www.smallschoolsproject.org, includes resources for culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching is not about defining students based on race or ethnicity, but about using strategies that have proven effective with all students, particularly those marginalized by the current educational system.

According to the resource guide, some elements of culturally responsive teaching include:

- Tapping into students' prior knowledge
- Creating democratic classrooms
- Having high expectations for all students
- Cultivating positive perspectives on parents and families

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