

# The Learning Network

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

## Using Data to Understand What Our Students Need

Years ago, a group of high school teachers and administrators met to discuss ways to design assessment systems for their schools. Our guest experts made the point that there are two kinds of assessment systems: those that are designed to “report on” student learning and the work of the school, and those designed to “look at” student learning and the work of the school.

None of us could have anticipated how unbalanced most of our assessment systems would become, or that virtually all public dialog would focus on the “reporting on,” or accountability, aspects of assessment. For most teachers, however, it’s the “looking at” assessments, and the data that comes from them, that is the most helpful in their daily work.

Teachers make hundreds of assessments in the course of a day: Luis has figured out how to describe his thinking, Angela knows how to do quadratic equations, Bobby is distracted and tired today, etc. These informal assessments—and the judgments made from them—are invaluable, and second nature to many teachers. They allow teachers to make the minute-by-minute adjustments that move a class forward and help make it successful.

September 2004 | Volume 3, Issue 2

Most of this issue focuses on another kind of “looking at” assessment: the deliberate collection and analysis of data that helps teachers look at their students and inform their instruction. Our coaches describe two approaches to doing this. In both instances, teachers use data to answer questions they have posed about their students’ learning and, by extension, their own practice.

In one description, a teacher generates her own data for analysis by using current work that students are doing. Occasionally, an assessment is able to serve as both a “reporting on” and “looking at” function, and, in our second example, another teacher uses WASL data (primarily a “reporting on” assessment) his district provided for him to “look at” his students to examine one aspect of his teaching.

In a time when we’re swamped with data discussions and demands for data-driven decisions, it’s often hard not to dig in our heels and resist the continuous clamor for data. Our hope is that all of us will remember that working with the right kinds of data can help us understand what our students need, and what we need to change to meet those needs.

*Rick Lear, Director*

## SMALL SCHOOLS: A NATIONAL REFORM STRATEGY

As a strategy for reforming secondary education, small schools have gotten big.

Large comprehensive high schools are breaking up, with experts estimating that up to 2,000 large schools are in some stage of the conversion process. And new small public high schools are being established at a furious rate.

Funding for these initiatives—over \$1 billion in the last five years—has come from the federal government and an array of private foundations. Fueled by concerns over dropout rates and the achievement gap, the Department of Education’s Smaller Learning Communities Program has doled out 542 grants worth nearly \$275 million to hundreds of districts since 2000. These grants are targeted to high schools with at least 1,000 students and come in one-year planning awards and three-year implementation awards.

A number of major foundations—including the Annenberg Foundation, KnowledgeWorks, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—have also pumped millions of dollars into small school start-ups and conversions. The Gates Foundation has spent nearly \$650 million in cities across the country on its small schools initiatives, helping to support the start-up of more than 740 new small high schools and the redesign of 460 existing large high schools.

### Urban districts downsizing schools

Most major urban districts—from Houston to Los Angeles, Oakland to Boston—are implementing some level of small schools reform, sometimes in selected schools, sometimes district-wide.

In New York City, where leaders of the 1.1 million-student district are pushing to open 200 new schools in three to five years, 42 small high schools made their debut last September; this fall, 41 more schools serving grades 9 through 12 are slated to open, as are another 15 serving grades 6 through 12. Each of the new small high schools is required to have at least one “community partner” that is involved in planning the school and providing continuing support and learning opportunities once it’s off the ground.

Chicago’s plan, called Renaissance 2010, would close up to 20 high schools, reopening them as small schools within six years. In St. Paul, Minnesota, four large city high schools are in the process of converting. In Milwaukee, a locally based group is supporting the redesign of seven large high schools and the development of about 40 additional small, autonomous ones. And in Ohio cities and suburbs, the Ohio High School Transformation Initiative will convert 20 large comprehensive high schools, in ten districts, into over 50 small schools.

*continued on back page...*

## Using WASL Strand Data to Examine Your Classroom Practice

By Christine Corbley, *Small Schools Coaches Collaborative*

Finding ways to use WASL data to improve classroom practice may seem futile and a waste of time. But here's how one teacher used it as a starting place for answering some of his questions.

Last year, Jim Norton, a now-retired English teacher in AOS (Achievement, Opportunity and Service School) at Mountlake Terrace, was curious about how successful his students were on the writing section of the WASL. Using the data on former students, he and I explored how his classroom practices supported or hindered the success of his students.

First, the school district provided us an Excel file with the WASL data for all the students in AOS. I added a column to the database and coded his 106 students so we could do simple sorts by student and strand to see where his students did well and where they were weak. Simply finding the percentages passing in each category and looking at the number of students who scored at each level provided Jim with a great deal of data to begin to explore his own practices.

Second, we began to examine why more of Jim's students were passing the writing section of the WASL as compared to the general AOS population and the general Mountlake Terrace population. We began by examining what he and his students were doing and how that related to how students were scoring on the content/organization/style and grammar sections of the WASL.

By critically examining what Jim was doing, we were able to determine what he believed worked and what he might need to do differently if students are to be more successful on the WASL. For example, he believed that the immediate feedback he gave to students after they read their papers to the whole class was primarily responsible for their success. They not only heard feedback on their own work, they also heard the feedback he gave to others and had the opportunity to give feedback to each other.

As Jim retired shortly after this, we were not able to continue the process. However, some next steps for teachers might include:

- ◆ Revamping the focus of the curriculum, adding or subtracting elements in order to address students' strengths and weaknesses, and
- ◆ Looking at 7th grade WASL data for students currently in your classroom and determining their strengths and weaknesses, then focusing the 9th and 10th grade writing curriculum around these students' strengths and weaknesses. Looking at past students' successes and failures helps determine what instructional and curriculum practices have worked and those that do not, and looking at 7th grade performance allows us to personalize the focus of the curriculum and instruction for the new group of students.

When Jim's data was shared with new English teachers in the department, focusing on what we had learned, these teachers indicated an interest in following the same process—looking at their students' WASL data and using it to help their current students be more successful.

## Now's the Time to Think About Data

A longer version of this article appeared in *The Learning Network* last September. However, as the school year gets underway again, it's a good idea to review your data collection plans.

Here are some questions you should be answering:

- ◆ **Do you have a list of the students who are enrolled in your small school?**

For schools that allow students to crossover or easily switch to a different school, this may be difficult to compile in the first week or two. But it is an important first step.

- ◆ **What kind of data does your school district already collect and how often? Is this data disaggregated by small schools? Within each small school is it broken out by gender, ethnicity, grade level, etc?**

With the help of this data, you will be able to track your students' academic achievement, as well as attendance rates, discipline referrals, transfer rates, etc.

- ◆ **What other types of data would be compelling to your school board and community members?**

Surveys and focus groups of students and parents are two useful tools to help you collect this type of data (see [www.smallschoolsproject.org/tools/parents\\_tools.html](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/tools/parents_tools.html)). You might also consider testimonials from students who struggled last year, but are flourishing in their small school.

- ◆ **How can your school coach help?**

School coaches have a range of experience collecting and reporting data. They can also offer an extra set of hands and an outsider perspective.

### SSP Listserv Invites Subscribers

If you enjoy getting your news electronically, consider subscribing to the Small Schools Project's monthly listserv. The listserv generally includes links to our recent publications and to timely small schools articles from the national press. To subscribe, please email [info@smallschoolsproject.org](mailto:info@smallschoolsproject.org).

# DATA DATA DATA

*Most teachers support the idea of looking at their students' achievement data to improve classroom practice. But for many, tackling the strategy on their own—in isolation—seems intimidating. As you read the “how-to-get-started” article below, consider ways to work with colleagues. Could you bring a data-collecting or analyzing issue to your Critical Friends Group? If you team-teach an integrated curriculum course, could you work with your partner? Could you work with others in your small school? Could you ask your school coach to work with you? Sharing a task and learning together can be—for many—more energizing and productive than working alone.*

## Understanding and Analyzing Classroom Data Using an Inquiry Model

By Christine Corbley and Liz Marzolf, *Small Schools Coaches Collaborative*

Contrary to common perception, analyzing classroom and school data doesn't require knowledge of advanced statistics. In fact, all you really need is an inquiry question, a spreadsheet (although one could do this work by hand), knowledge of how to do averages, and a desire to better understand your practice and your students' learning.

Here are some steps to help you get started:

### 1. Identifying the data inquiry question

Start by reflecting on something in your classroom that you find puzzling. What about it is puzzling?

*For example, you may be puzzled that quite a few of your students did poorly on the research paper part of a social studies project where students were asked to research a social issue that impacts their local community, identify a stance, and put together a campaign plan for how this issue should be addressed by the city or county. You assess the research paper using a rubric you developed, which contains several subsections. Your question then becomes: how did my students do on the various subsections of the assignment that are designated on the rubric?*

### 2. Collecting the data

Once you've identified the question(s), determine what kind of data do you need to collect in order to answer the question(s).

*In the above example, although you've created a rubric for this research paper, the only grade you enter into your grade book is the overall score. However, there is a lot of data you're not entering into your grade book that may offer you insights regarding what has been puzzling you. Record the scores by rubric subsection for each student.*

### 3. Analyzing and Using the Data

Now it's time to analyze your data, a process that can be as easy as counting and computing averages.

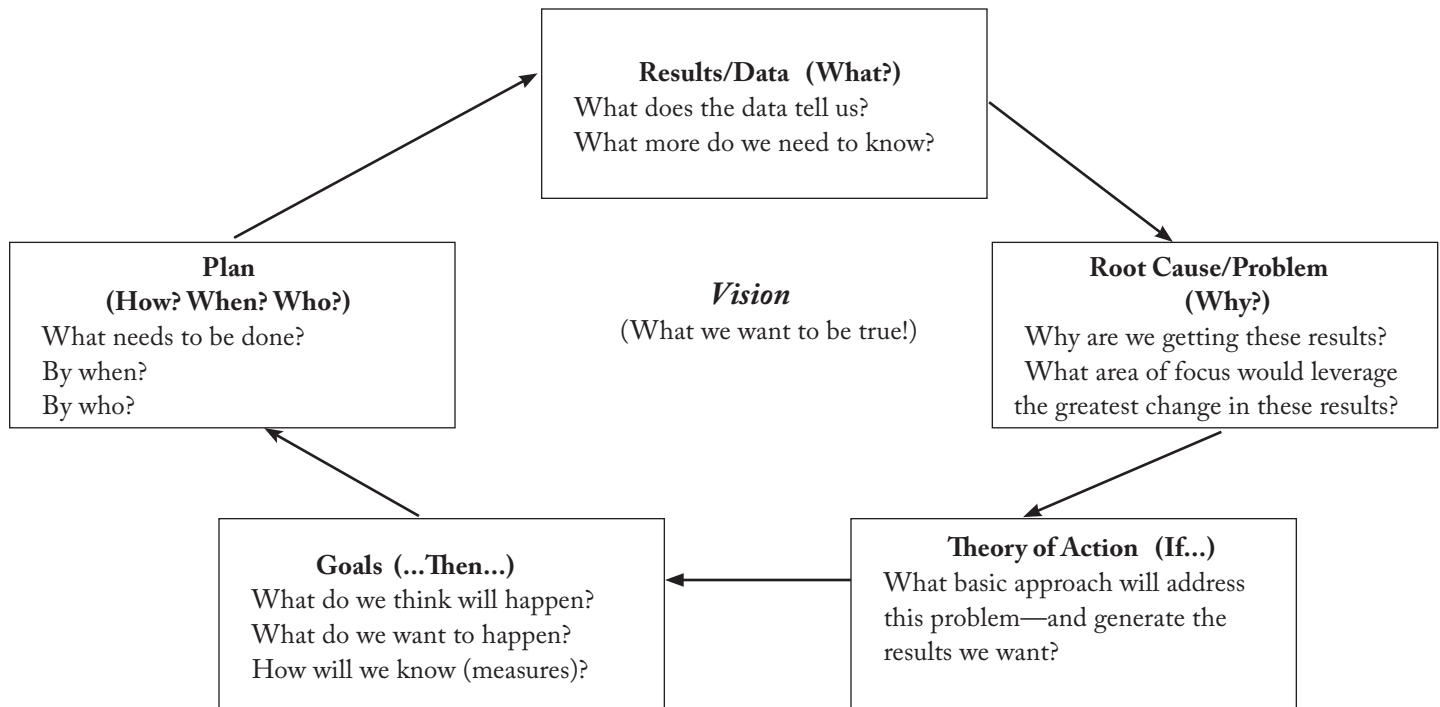
*To continue with the social studies research paper example, you compute the averages for each student by subsection. Now you know how your students did, in aggregate, on each subsection of the rubric. You discover that quite a few students scored quite poorly on the analysis and argument section of their research paper.*

### The Five Whys for Inquiry

This activity allows you to get at the foundational root of your question. It entails asking yourself “why is this a problem?” and then asking “why” again to each response, for a total of five times. To find the “Five Whys” activity, go to “other topics” in the Using Protocols (Tools) section of our website, [www.smallschoolsproject.org](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org).

To help you with the next steps, BayCES (Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools) provides a useful cycle of inquiry.

## The BayCES Cycle of Inquiry



◆ **Results/Data (What?)—Look for patterns that indicate a “priority challenge.”**

*To continue with the social studies research paper example, you have decided that you need to know more about what patterns, if any, exist in the analysis and argument section, so now you analyze the research papers of two or three of the students who did poorly.*

◆ **Root Cause/Problem (Why?)—Once a challenge has been determined, hone in on why the problem exists.**

*Now you will want to ask: “What did those two or three students struggle with in particular and why?” The “Five Whys” activity can assist you in determining the underlying problem.*

◆ **Theory of Action (If...)—Develop your theory of action by saying, “If I try this, then this might happen.”**

*This is your chance to brainstorm strategies you might use to address this problem. Getting input from others at this point will likely be helpful.*

◆ **Goals (...Then...)—Identify your student achievement and equity goals. These goals should be SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely).**

*You decide, for example, that the number of students receiving an A or B on the next research paper will increase from 50% to 75%. An equity goal may be: the number of ELL students receiving an A or B on the next research paper will go from 38% to 64%. An important piece of this step is to determine what data will be collected to evaluate the effectiveness of the chosen theory of action.*

◆ **Plan (How? When? Who?)—Will you work together or alone to reach your goals? What will you do? Who will do it? When will it be done by? What supports are needed?**

*You develop a plan that includes working with an English teacher who shares many of your students. Together you decide that you will develop some curriculum and activities on research paper analysis and arguments that you can use in both classes the following semester.*

The last step is to implement the plan, which will lead you to collecting new data and entering the cycle again, possibly working on the same problem from a different angle, possibly finding a new problem that needs to be addressed. You can find the BayCES cycle of inquiry in the “What’s New?” section of the Small Schools Project website, [www.smallschoolsproject.org](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org). To learn more about BayCES, please visit their website at [www.bayCES.org](http://www.bayCES.org).

## DISTRICT MATTERS

## Data and the Excellence Gap

By John McGean, *Small Schools Coaches Collaborative*

How did your schools' Hispanic students do this year on the WASL? Did your African American students show accelerated gains versus your white students? Measured by the WASL, have your schools diminished the achievement gap that exists among ethnic groups?

This month's *Learning Network's* focus on data is well-timed. It is WASL month—when school-wide WASL scores are made public, with celebrations and occasional lamentations.

A centerpiece of WASL analysis should be the ethnicity disaggregations. OSPI has even done the work for us all. A quick click on their performance report card <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/> can present the picture of each school's progress in narrowing the achievement gap. We can very easily learn of the progress of each ethnic group in each subtest.

What becomes all too evident is that most schools are not successful in narrowing the gaps between their Hispanic and African American students—and the much higher achieving Asian and white students. The gaps tend to be largest in math—and now science.

Are those gaps getting smaller in your district's schools?

However disheartening these ethnicity disaggregations may be, it is important that district leaders put them “up front” in all their WASL data analyses with their boards and school leaders. For districts committed to narrowing the achievement gap, these are important spotlights.

Another valuable piece of this social justice data genre is grade distribution patterns—sorted by grade level, within gender and ethnicity. Supported by a data-centered district leadership, Kennewick High School assistant principal Dennis Boatman monitors the incidence of failure of more tightly identified clusters of students. He knows, for instance, that course failure incidence is highest among his 9th graders—and within that group, 9th grade Hispanic males have the highest incidence of failure. It is no wonder that this is the same group that is most underachieving on the WASL. The target group for intervention is clearly identified for them.

We need to be aware of whom we are not serving well. Noted black educator Asa Hilliard rejects the notion of an achievement gap. For him, there are only “excellence gaps” that exist between each student and his or her own potential. What is necessary to narrow the excellence gap, he insists, is just a matter of will. “We have one and only one problem: Do we truly will to see each and every child in this nation develop to the peak of his or her capacities?”

*John McGean was a high school principal and an assistant superintendent before joining the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative. He can be reached at [jmcgean@comcast.net](mailto:jmcgean@comcast.net).*

## Performance Assessment Tasks for Your Teaching Toolbox

By Pam Wise, *Small Schools Coaches Collaborative*

Once you welcome performance assessment (also called “authentic assessment,” “alternative assessment,” and “performance-based assessment”) into your classroom as the foundation of your practice, what's next?

First, you can expect everything you do to begin to change. I would even go so far as to say that if everything you do does not change, you are not doing it right. These changes are a good thing—in fact, they are profoundly good and will take you a long way on the journey of improving your teaching practice.

Next (and the reason for this new column), you will want to begin the work of creating the performance assessment tasks that will measure what kids know and are able to do. Once an assessment is created, the day-by-day of learning in your room will flow from that.

It is helpful to study good examples of assessment tasks to inform your own work, but they're not that easy to find. (Actually, it is also instructive to study not-so-good examples so you can think about how they can be improved.)

I've been collecting examples for a while now to use in working with teachers. I especially like finding “real” examples teachers are using in their classrooms as opposed to those created by textbook editors and website promoters. For that reason, I invite you, dear readers, to send examples that you'd like to share.

My email address is [wisepam47@earthlink.net](mailto:wisepam47@earthlink.net), my snail mail address is:

**Pam Wise**  
**Small Schools Project**  
**7900 East Green Lake Drive North, Suite 212**  
**Seattle, WA 98103**

So, in coming issues of *The Learning Network*, I will put forward examples of tasks and will perhaps add a comment or two. I will also make a rubric accessible electronically on the Small Schools Project website, as I really think that you cannot fully understand an assessment unless you can see a rubric.

My hope is that this column will help you add to your teaching toolbox.

*Pam Wise was a high school English teacher for 32 years before coaching for the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative and the Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest. She can be reached at [wisepam47@earthlink.net](mailto:wisepam47@earthlink.net).*

# The Learning Network

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

# TLN



7900 E. Green Lake Drive North, Suite 212  
Seattle, WA 98103  
[www.smallschoolsproject.org](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org)

## IN THIS ISSUE:

Using Data to Understand What Our Students Need  
Small Schools: A National Reform Strategy  
Using WASL Data to Examine Your Practice  
Understanding and Analyzing Classroom Data  
Data and the Excellence Gap

...continued from front page

### Suburban and rural schools going small, too

Small schools work (and funding) isn't just happening in big cities. In Maine, 10 to 12 model small high schools are being planned for rural and urban communities. Mid-sized Lancaster, Pennsylvania is creating a number of new 6 through 12 schools. Suburban districts such as Coventry—on the edge of Providence, Rhode Island—are also initiating high school reform.

As the pace of change picks up across the nation, educators and small schools veterans are debating the best ways to implement small schools strategies. Is it better to concentrate on breaking up big schools or on opening new ones? Are people jumping on the small schools bandwagon for the wrong reasons?

Most agree, however, that small is not a panacea, but rather a platform that helps educators and parents do what needs to be done to help kids succeed academically. And they agree that while changing an institution like the American high school is enormously difficult, continuing to do “business as usual”—with its resultant loss or inadequate preparation of students—is unacceptable.

## TOOLS YOU CAN USE

### Need More Teacher Collaboration Time?

Teacher collaboration is a huge shift for a profession that for years was almost completely private. But teachers in schools everywhere now are recognizing that building a true professional learning community is one of the surest ways to improve student achievement.

If you are considering requesting collaboration time from your school board, you'll find helpful hints in an article, “Asking Your School Board for Teacher Collaboration Time,” in the “What's New?” section of our website, [www.smallschoolsproject.org](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org).

### Capitalizing on the “Power of Small”

Just because your school is already small doesn't mean there's not a lot left to do to improve teaching and learning. So say 17 principals of small high schools with Gates grants in a summer 2004 publication, *The Power of Small*. While each school is working on a variety of improvement strategies, all are trying to capitalize on their smallness. You can find *The Power of Small* in the “What's New?” section of our website, [www.smallschoolsproject.org](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org).

*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:

**Nancy Lundsgaard**, Editor

206/543-7242

[nancylun@u.washington.edu](mailto:nancylun@u.washington.edu)

**Mary Beth Lambert**, Contributing Editor

206/685-5236

[mlambert@u.washington.edu](mailto:mlambert@u.washington.edu)

**Craig Lucero**, Editorial Assistant/Layout

206/616-0303

[clucero@u.washington.edu](mailto:clucero@u.washington.edu)

**Scott Bush**, Designer

206/543-8362

[sbush@u.washington.edu](mailto:sbush@u.washington.edu)