

The Learning Network

A NEWSLETTER FOR WASHINGTON STATE HIGH SCHOOLS THAT RECEIVE GATES REINVENTION GRANTS

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A Matter of Choice

For most of the teachers, staff, and administrators the Small Schools Project works with, this month marks the end of two years of serious work at redesigning high schools. A few schools have been at it longer, some for less; for everyone, it seems longer than the calendar tells us.

In September, most every high school will open its doors looking substantially different in some way. Almost all large schools will take significant steps to implement small schools, and almost all of the “already small” schools will be much deeper into redesigning themselves to take advantage of being small. We hope every school will develop a deep focus on student learning and student success.

After two years of hard work, virtually every school has teachers who continue to resist the changes the school seeks to make. They are often friends and colleagues the reformers have worked beside for years. Those who believe deeply in the reform effort continue to work to engage those who might urge caution or reject the proposed changes altogether. In his book,

Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest (Berrett-Koehler, 1993), author Peter Block suggests another approach.

One of Block’s key messages is that we can’t persuade or barter with others for faith, responsibility, and commitment. He maintains that “each reform effort begins as an act of faith and gets built when responsibility and commitment are widely shared. Creating stewardship means we need to find a way to evoke faith and responsibility and commitment in those around us ...”

We cannot promise certainty and we cannot promise more freedom. We cannot promise privilege, and we cannot promise safety. “In place of persuasion and barter,” Block writes, “we need to believe that faith, responsibility, and commitment are a matter of personal choice.” We also need to understand that those committed to the changes underway share many of the doubts of those who are not on board.

“We can name other [changes] that have started and resulted in nothing of value. We can own the risks of the path we are

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TEACHING & LEARNING

SOTA Offers Hands-On Learning Through Internships

Chris Laughon’s face lights up when he describes his two-week internship experience as an aide in the Learning Resource Center at Grant Elementary. “I never woke up and looked forward to going to school until I had this internship. I’m now doing something good with my life,” explains the junior from Tacoma School of the Arts (SOTA).

Chris was one of 73 students, mostly juniors, from the school who participated in the new SOTA internship program this past March. Students could choose from over fifty different learning opportunities in the community with businesses, government, and non-profit organizations. The internships took place during the school’s mini-term, a two-week period between semesters when all SOTA students could choose from a variety of in-depth learning experiences that included mini-courses, in-house projects, as well as internships for the juniors.

“The purpose of the internships was to encourage students to begin to think about their post-high school plans and how to apply their skills and abilities, to learn how to network, and to build community,” said Kim Baldwin, who works in the school’s career center. “We wanted them to have real-life experiences and help them understand how they can apply what they are learning. For some students it will spark them to go beyond what they might have initially thought they could achieve.”

Students learned about the program’s goals in a SOTA town meeting, where they received a copy of the internship brochure, which described each internship, the qualifications, and other important information, like dress code or location. The school’s mentor (advisory) groups also spent time talking about students’ post high school plans and internship possibilities to help students narrow their choices. Students then completed an application where they listed their top three internship choices. Mentor teachers also weighed in to ensure that there was a good match between the student and the internship.

Chris, who helped Grant Elementary students make clay maps of the State of Washington, said he learned a lot during his internship. “One thing I learned was never to judge a book by its cover. You could make lots of judgments about kids in the LRC room because they have trouble with their behavior, but they were neat little kids.”

Melanie Grassi, who interned with Pierce County Superior Court Judge Kathryn Nelson, said she learned a lot about the law. “Before the judge ruled on a case, she would take me into her chambers and ask me what I thought about the case. Then after I told her, she would tell me what she was going to do and why. I learned a lot about the legal process and the vocabulary.”

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School of the Arts (continued)

"I learned about people's motivations," said Nari Corley-Wheeler, who interned with a lobbyist at the Pierce County Chamber of Commerce. "My supervisor would take me aside and explain what had gone on in the meetings; I guess you could call it political intrigue."

"This experience was SO different from what happens in class," added Melanie. "You can talk about something and read all about it, but there's nothing like being there and being hands-on to help you really understand it."

Sarah Stambaugh, who interned at a local retailer assisting with merchandising, marketing, and displays, adds, "in some ways, there was more stress, because you really understood that it wasn't just about grades. When you mess up in school, it's just about you, but in the store, you know if you don't do it right, it affects other people. You are more aware that you have to be responsible for other people."

In order to reflect on their learning and share it with others, students kept a daily journal of their experience and also completed a culminating project, which included information about their internship experience, and a job description, which will be useful for students who are interested in interning next year. In addition, each supervisor completed a Work Site Learning Plan/Evaluation about the student's performance and shared it with her at the end of the internship.

Mara Fiksdal, the Youth Program Coordinator at the Pierce County YWCA, who supervised a SOTA student intern said "internships are a good opportunity for everyone—students and adults—especially if the employers don't usually spend a lot of time around young adults. There are a lot of stereotypes about high school students and internships provide a great opportunity for employers to see the maturity level, interests, and passions of someone that age."

All of the students interviewed agreed that their internships were worthwhile and would recommend other schools offer similar learning experiences. "When you are a high school student, it's easy to know what you think you want to do, but it's good to actually get a chance to do it," said Joseph Yohann, who interned at Ted Brown Music, where he assisted with merchandising and instrument repair.

"Yesterday, saying goodbye, was probably the saddest day of my life," added Chris Laughon. "If I could do this for the rest of my school career, I would."

What is the School of the Arts?

The School of the Arts is a new 10th-12th grade high school in Tacoma, which started two years ago. There are currently 245 sophomores and juniors and another hundred students will be added next fall. The school focuses on integrating arts into all areas of the curriculum, instilling high expectations for all students, and creating a sense of community amongst all members of the school. For more information, contact Kim Baldwin at 253/571-7921.

Tips for Getting Started

- **Be clear about why you're offering internships.** Whether the experience is called "service learning" or "academic internship," the focus should be on student learning. At SOTA, students kept a daily journal and completed a culminating project in order to reflect on and share their learning.
- **Identify one or two key staff people** who will have the main responsibility for overseeing the internship program. At SOTA, Kim Baldwin, who works in the career center, and Jon Ketler, the school's lead teacher, took most of the responsibility.
- **Start with school partnerships that already exist.** Some schools have voc-ed programs with advisory boards of businesses and employers. The School of the Arts had pre-existing partnerships with local cultural organizations, such as the Museum of Glass and Tacoma Art Museum, that agreed to have student interns.
- **Ask teachers, staff, and parents to brainstorm personal connections** they have with local businesses and employers who could be asked to host an intern.
- **Talk with the Rotary and other local community organizations.** Use this as an opportunity to share with them news about your small school and the goals of your internship program. "We found that so many people want to be involved with the school and support it, and this gives them an opportunity to do so," said SOTA's Kim Baldwin.

NATIONAL NEWS

West Clermont Principal Shares Lessons Learned

"Never doubt that a small group of dedicated people can change the world," said Mark Peters, paraphrasing the words of noted anthropologist Margaret Mead. As principal of the Amelia campus in Ohio's West Clermont School District, Mark is clearly dedicated to changing America's high schools, and his passion for the work came through in a recent presentation to Gates grantee superintendents, principals, and other school administrators.

A year ago, West Clermont's two large suburban high schools housed about 1,300 students each. Today, each campus holds five small theme-based schools. In his presentation, Mark described the district's three-year process of community engagement and high school reinvention. He also touched on lessons learned during the first year of implementation.

Mark credited Superintendent Michael Ward as the initial driver for change in the district, recounting how the superintendent first gathered district data of all kinds—test scores, attendance, graduation rates, etc. After the data showed that West Clermont

was “average,” Ward spent a year talking to every community group he could, always asking, “Are we content to be average? Is your son or daughter average? Don’t they deserve something better than average?” In the process, he built the community’s acceptance of and urgency around the need for change.

At the same time, the district’s high school teachers were also looking at the data and finding it unacceptable. Because there was no money for substitutes, some teachers agreed to accept higher class sizes to free up other teachers to study best practices and make school visits around the country.

“Eventually we decided that if we really wanted change at the high schools, we had to get small,” said Mark. He emphasized that West Clermont knew this before going to the Gates Foundation, saying, “If you want to do the work, it can’t be about the money.”

In the spring of 2001, teachers at the two high schools presented 17 proposals to the board. When only four were accepted, staff spent the summer revamping proposals, and eventually the board approved five small “schools of choice” at each of the two campuses. Each has 400 students or less and focuses on a few important goals.

According to Mark, the first year of implementation was complicated by master schedule difficulties. “Fortunately, thanks to all the community engagement we’d done, parents were willing to give us time to work things out,” he said.

One issue that surprised the staff was senior dissatisfaction. “Originally seniors were happy with our decision to have a senior school, but they soon felt left out,” he explained. “We met with them to find ways to improve their senior experience, but if we had it to do over again, we would find more ways to include them early on.”

One of the most successful programs was the 26-day intersession. Teachers offered classes in subjects they and the kids were passionate about. “During these weeks, nine buses took kids places to have real life educational experiences—some visited college campuses for the first time in their families’ lives—and they came back with light in their eyes.”

Mark noted that almost every decision was difficult to make – primarily because of political ramifications. If West Clermont could do it over again, Mark’s recommendation would include disallowing or limiting the number of crossovers, starting the small schools with the 9th grade and phasing in the rest, and eliminating the department head position. However, he concluded, “Our kids are still better off than they were last year and next year will be better.”

After the workshop, participant Grant Hosford, principal at Lincoln High School in Tacoma, said he appreciated hearing practical information from a principal engaged in similar work, adding, “I walked away more determined than ever to improve how we educate students. It’s plain hard work, but it’s worth it!”

SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Experience Academy: Real Learning for Real Life

Next fall, students at Foster High School in Tukwila will begin attending one of three new 9-12 academies. The Experience Academy will offer approximately 140 students a personalized learning environment that is hands-on, experiential, and connected to the real world.

“Because many people understand best when learning is hands-on, students will experience what they are studying,” says Jeff Heiman, Experience Academy’s teacher representative to the building’s Leadership Council. For example, students in the robotics class will create robots, not simply study them. “We see the community as a classroom and resource. Academics will be connected to real life. Students will be involved in service learning, internships, job shadows, and fieldwork,” he adds.

The Academy’s coursework will require students to think critically, problem solve, and apply what they learn to real life. Students will begin by preparing for the WASL and future Academy classes by completing foundation courses, which include *Literacy*, *Research Process*, *Math*, and *Beginning Spanish*. Students can take foundation courses more than once if needed to achieve competency. Once a student demonstrates mastery in foundation courses, she will take higher-level courses that are integrated and theme-based around a topic rather than a subject, such as *The Puget Sound*, *The Media and You*, *Culinary Arts*, and *The Power of Poetry*.

All Academy classes will be focused around essential questions and students will be required to synthesize what they have learned in each course with a culminating project where they will demonstrate proficiency through exhibitions, portfolios, and performances. Students will also be required to complete a senior project, which may take many forms, but will be an in-depth look at a topic of the student’s choice. The project will include a research paper and public exhibition of the student’s work to a panel of staff, students, parents, community members, and experts in the field.

For more information about the Experience Academy, contact Jeff Heiman at heimanj@tukwila.wednet.edu.

SAVE THE DATE

Teacher Leader 2003 Summer Institute

This summer, the Small Schools Project will offer a teacher leader institute for high school educators who will hold formal positions as teacher leaders in small schools next fall. This non-residential learning opportunity will take place July 7-11, from noon on Monday to noon on Friday, with three follow-up sessions during the 2003-2004 school year. More details, including the cost, will be sent to schools soon, as well as posted on our website, www.smallschoolsproject.org.

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choosing... We acknowledge their feelings of powerlessness and their wish that people in power will not disappoint them. We have the same desire and the same doubt... We support their desire for more data and more proof that the story has been written elsewhere and that we will have a happy ending. We too have searched for reassurance and wanted more.”

In the end, change is a matter of personal responsibility, not a response to the expectations of others. All we can do is affirm our choice and invite others to join us in making the same choice. Those of us who work alongside you – and respect the progress you’ve made – hope you will continue to make the choice for faith, responsibility, and commitment, and that your colleagues will make that same choice.

–Rick Lear, Director

TOOLS YOU CAN USE

Promising Curricular Resources and Pedagogical Practices Available

The Small Schools Project is pleased to announce that the spring collection of *Planning Resources for Teachers in Small High Schools* is now available. This collection of promising curricular resources and pedagogical practices is being distributed to schools by coaches. The resources can also be found in the *What’s New* section of our website, www.smallschoolsproject.org.

This collection, the first in a series of four, contains practical tools, program overviews and approaches, school profiles, field notes, and critical readings on each of the four topics – *advisories*, *project-based learning*, *literacy*, and *college access*. Suggestions for future topics can be sent to info@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 Center on Reinventing Public 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: www.smallschoolsproject.org. To share information about your school’s redesign efforts or suggest topics for this publication, contact:

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