

The Learning Network

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

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Exploring Crossover Perspectives

I talk regularly with folks in other parts of the country who provide technical assistance to high schools engaged in the conversion process. Virtually everywhere, whether the schools have Gates grants, Federal Smaller Learning Communities grants, Carnegie grants, or are doing the conversion on their own, schools struggle with the issue of crossovers. This issue of *The Learning Network* focuses on crossovers almost exclusively: what the term means, why crossovers are so important, and what options seem to exist.

When we talk about “crossover,” we’re referring to the practice of enrolling students from one small school in one or more courses in another small school during the regular school day. That’s it. It doesn’t refer to what happens “beyond the bell”—in what some schools call “zero period” or after school, or on Saturdays. It doesn’t refer to other learning options that might be available to students in a particular small school, such as service learning activities, career internships, independent study contracts, tutorials, Running Start, distance learning, and so on.

Perspective—that is, where one is rooted by experience or values or hope—enormously influences one’s feelings about the issue. I worked in intentionally small schools for a long time, and have studied and know about dozens more. To me, it’s clear that crossovers are unnecessary, though possibly helpful during a brief transition. I also believe they are harmful to the long-term development of a good small school.

However, what I believe, or what the Small Schools Project recommends, doesn’t really matter in the end. We’re not doing the work—you are. And what may make the most sense generally may not be the best choice in the particular context of your specific school and community. What may be most important is that each school is very intentional about its decision—thinking through very carefully if, why, and under what circumstances it might offer crossovers.

What follows is an exploration of three crossover views, with far more attention paid to those that are most likely less familiar to folks who work in large schools.

—Rick Lear, Director

LOOKING AT CROSSOVERS: THREE VIEWS

To someone who has taught only in a comprehensive high school and values what it offers both students and teachers, it seems perfectly reasonable to preserve special courses and school-wide activities that require large numbers of students, and to work to preserve the feeling of “one big family.” For some school leaders, crossovers may seem, for a number of reasons, a reasonable short-term strategy for getting from large to small. However, those with small schools experience may believe crossovers are unnecessary.

Exploring crossovers from each of these perspectives may help to understand various aspects of the issue, as well as help move your schools toward a range of critical design decisions.

1 Crossovers are legitimate as long as small schools share a building. Providing students with significant access to a broad range of course offerings makes sense. It is, in fact, a way of providing the best of both worlds: some of the personalization of a small school and most of the choices of a large school. It also allows for continued teacher specialization, something that many teachers value. It keeps adults in a world they are largely familiar with. If crossovers are limited so that teachers commonly teach students for more than one year, teachers will also realize some of the benefits of knowing their students well.

2 Crossovers are a useful strategy in moving from large to small. School staffs may have several reasons for using crossovers during the one-to-three-year transition period most schools will take to move from large and comprehensive schools to smaller, more focused schools.

First, it may make sense in terms of teacher development to permit crossovers for a discrete period of time. Crossovers can ease teacher transition from highly specialized courses to more general courses that provide significant options to students within the structure of the courses. It may be difficult for some (or many) teachers to imagine what the shift will be like, and providing a more gradual transition may facilitate a more successful transition. That’s especially true if the school is also taking on several other new features as well, such as building a strong advisory and moving to heterogeneous grouping or multi-grade courses.

Second, crossovers may be necessary because of how a school decides to stage the transition to small schools. Opening with three or all four grades at once makes it more likely that some seniors and juniors will have courses they had planned on taking unavailable to them in smaller schools. Starting with only

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Crossovers: Three Views, continued

ninth graders means beginning with a small staff, so students may need to spend part of their day outside of their new school. Crossovers are one way to accommodate those needs, though they can be kept to a minimum with careful planning. Starting with two grades, and the larger staff that comes with more students, may eliminate the need for crossovers.

Third, crossovers may be a way to respond to the reservations of some parents who fear that learning options may be decreased for their students in the transition process. Permitting limited crossovers for two years, for instance, may ease understandable anxieties as well as permit the new small schools to develop new learning opportunities for their students that don't rely on crossovers.

3 Crossovers interfere with and limit the development of small schools. All good small schools require a high degree of personalization to be most effective. Intentionally small schools have a strong culture and many, by design or over time, develop a particular approach to teaching and learning. Crossovers almost always make each of these attributes harder to attain.

Crossovers limit the ability of a small school to control its schedule, one of the key autonomies a good small school needs. Schools almost always have some schedule constraints they can do little to change. Many schools are bound by bus schedules, athletics often control end-of-day times, or community education activities may limit evening uses. Additionally, many early-career teachers take graduate courses in the late afternoon, while teachers with young children of their own may have childcare needs affecting their availability at either end of the day. All of these practical matters tend to push most high schools into using six or seven hours out of the same eight-hour time period from roughly 7:30 to 3:30.

In September, West Clermont (OH) Public Schools opened their Glen Este and Amelia HS campuses with ten small schools. Each campus also has a “senior school” that will exist for only this school year.

Accommodating the needs of their juniors was not possible for most of the ten schools, so they are operating this year with extensive crossovers.

Two schools—both strategic in their staffing and their course offerings, and willing to say to students that they couldn't take some courses if they enrolled in their school—have managed to have very few crossovers this first year. Teacher leaders in all schools expect little need for crossovers in their second year.

Crossover courses make it still more difficult for a small school to control its own schedule. They almost always require that each school's schedule correspond to the others for at least a portion of the day. Once the principle of crossovers is established, it's also unlikely to offer crossovers only one period of the day—the demand from teachers to be able to keep courses they have developed over a period of years, and which they value deeply, will be strong. Once more than one period is given over to crossovers (and lunch periods are scheduled in), small school schedules are effectively locked.

When schedules are locked, several things happen that make it difficult for small schools to develop:

- Learning continues to be viewed in terms of courses available to students rather than options that might be available to them within a course.
- Students are likely to have more rather than fewer teachers, making them less well known.
- Teachers will have more rather than fewer individual students, making it less likely they will be able to customize learning experiences for students.
- Teachers are less likely to have the same student over a period of years, resulting in a loss of valuable instructional time, and less personalization.
- Advisors and teachers are less likely to share information about students, making personalization still more difficult.
- Student movement throughout the building will increase, diminishing the positive effects of relationships and increasing dependency on rules for control.
- Organization of time for special activities, such as a three week intercession or three-hour blocks for integrated activities every morning or afternoon, becomes virtually impossible. Field trips become less frequent.
- Small schools are more likely to use the same grading system and marking periods rather than designing ones that fit their own particular needs and philosophies.
- Small schools will be less likely to look outside the building for learning experiences such as internships, service-learning activities, independent contracts with community members, virtual web-based courses that a student can take on her own time, and so on.
- The set of focused, distinctive, small schools still looks suspiciously like a shopping mall.

This sounds a bit like Chicken Little warning about the sky falling, and that's not quite accurate. No one of these occurrences is devastating to the development of good small schools. It's the constellation of them that is problematic because the impact is cumulative. In the end, it is the accumulation of such "small" and often unnoticed occurrences that make it unlikely that any small school will be able to develop the strong culture it needs to thrive.

Enumclaw High School opened two small "partner" schools, E.C.H.O.E.S. and Adventure School, on its campus this fall. Juniors and seniors in both participate in some "outflow" (crossovers), but few freshmen and sophomores do. When a student requests outflow, a meeting is held with his or her advisor, parents and teachers to ensure that the requested course meets the goals of the student's individual learning plan.

Next fall the rest of the high school population will divide into five "interest-based" schools that will guarantee students the ability to crossover for at least two years. After two years, this practice will be reevaluated to decide whether to move toward a more distinctive small schools structure.

Who Decides What, and Why?

Most often, discussions have centered on whether or not to offer crossovers. That question hides a large range of other questions. Among the first are the "number-and-nature" questions: How many crossovers? What kinds of courses—any or only some courses? Only advanced courses? Only electives? How often are they offered—one period or several? When are they offered: Start of day? Middle? Last period? All periods?

There are also the "who-and-under-what-circumstances" questions? Which students may take crossovers? Only 11th and 12th graders? Only when a course isn't available within the student's small school? To take a popular teacher's course? How many crossovers can a student take at one time: One per year? One per semester? Two? 25%? Any number?

Perhaps most importantly, who decides to have or not have crossovers? So far, that's been viewed primarily as a building-wide decision, in part because it needs to be made, at least conceptually, fairly early—sometimes before small school staffs have been identified, and often before small school staffs have developed a decision-making process.

The operating assumption also seems to be that the decisions apply to all small schools. But it's also easy to imagine a design wherein some small schools in a building permit crossovers and others do not. Or, where some schools permit them on a limited basis and some on a more widespread basis.

It's also possible to conceive of a building where the decision is left to the small schools themselves to make the determination based on each school's philosophy and needs. If this were the case, each school could also address the other sets of questions from the same perspective: what best meets their school's philosophy and approach to learning as well as their students' needs.

AUTONOMY

Why It Matters

Discussing autonomy and small schools makes people nervous. How much? Under what conditions? Why? Who decides?

The Small Schools Project suggests that good small schools need autonomy in six areas: staffing, budget, curriculum, leadership/governance, schedule, and space. Providing small schools with autonomy in those six areas raises questions about almost all aspects of a school's—or district's—operation. Some constraints are obvious: schools will share the gym, auditorium, and probably the library and cafeteria. Science labs are likely to be shared as well in the short run.

Some of the issues raised are matters of district policy or procedure, while some are contractual. Still others touch on long-standing practice in the district or school. Many districts have a January deadline for submission of courses to be included in the course catalog, for instance, while many intentionally small schools don't need course offerings decided until summer. Small schools need to provide enough information about themselves for students and families to make informed decisions about enrolling, but course descriptions are an ineffective way to do that.

The reality is that no one knows right now how gaining these autonomies will play out in different schools and districts, or just how much autonomy is sufficient. Tom Gregory, a long-time small schools researcher from Indiana University, uses the term "functional autonomy" rather than a list to describe what small schools need. Small schools, he says, need enough autonomy to control their own destiny.

Developing common agreements about why small schools need functional autonomy may be the most critical element of the question, at least for now. Just how much autonomy that is will become clear only as schools and districts "invent" what is really a system of small schools.

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Date Change for January High School Meeting

Note. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has changed the dates for the January 2003 high school meeting. Please mark your calendars with the new dates: **January 15 and 16.**

Sign Up for 2003 Design Days

Design Days provide high school teams the chance to have their emerging designs critiqued by staff from the Small Schools Project and Small Schools Coaches Collaborative. To enroll in one of the following free sessions, contact Craig Lucero at: clucero@u.washington.edu or 206/616-0303.

February 20 / March 20 / April 17 / May 15

WASHINGTON UPDATE

Five Communities Receive “High Tech High” Grants

The Learning Network congratulates five rural Washington school districts—Dayton, Ferndale, Quilcene, Quincy, and San Juan Island—on their recent selection as Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grantees.

The districts have been awarded grants to create high schools modeled on San Diego’s High Tech High, based on principles of personalization, academic rigor, and real-world immersion. Three districts—Quilcene, Dayton, and San Juan Island—will convert existing high schools. Two—Ferndale and Quincy—will start new schools. All will be technology-rich with opportunities for mentorship and customized learning plans.

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 or to print a copy of this newsletter, please visit: <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>. To share information about your school’s redesign efforts or suggest topics for this publication, contact:

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