

The Learning Network

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

FEBRUARY 2003 ISSUE 6, VOLUME 1

Nothing is Easy, and There's Never Enough Time in the Day But Serious Change is Underway

Next month marks the second anniversary of the first Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant awarded to an individual high school in Washington. District grants were awarded in the spring and summer of 2000, but only two high schools were seriously engaged in reinvention work in February 2001. The Small Schools Project was six months old, and the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative hadn't been formed.

Today, the Collaborative works with thirty-nine high schools in Washington, all of them with educators seriously engaged in efforts to make schooling more inclusive, more engaging, more challenging, more successful for more kids – *for each kid*, in fact, who enters their school. All together, almost 33,000 students!

And 1800 educators – counting paraprofessionals and secretarial, cafeteria and custodial staff, well over 2500 adults – are working to make their thirty-nine high schools much better places for kids to come together and learn. Along the way, they'll also make their schools better places for their colleagues and themselves to work.

Not all educators in these thirty-nine schools agree with the changes being contemplated or made. In many communities, parents and students don't know enough about what's happening, and that will likely make them angry at some point. Some schools aren't certain how to proceed, even after two years. Teacher expectations are still too low. Everyone's tired.

But most staffs are moving ahead with a hard-earned clarity of purpose. Most staffs have looked carefully at their own student data and found a new sense of purpose. Most staffs now understand that personalization is more than knowing kids and their parents. Most staffs are finding ways to collaborate. Teacher leaders are emerging in virtually every school.

At least twelve of the twenty-one "conversion" high schools will be well into structural implementation by September. Most of the eighteen "already-small" schools are in the midst of serious changes in teaching practice, and many of them have their parents and communities deeply engaged in helping their school improve. More kids are taking more challenging courses.

—continued on back page

TEACHING & LEARNING

Clover Park Teachers Look at Differentiated Instruction To Help All Students Reach High Standards

Teachers at Clover Park High School have begun to implement classroom-level changes that focus on helping all students reach high standards. The strategy they are learning about and trying out in their own classrooms is called **differentiated instruction** and it involves providing students with multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn. For the teachers at Clover Park, it also means recognizing that students come from varied backgrounds, skills, and knowledge and that they need varied opportunities to acquire mastery of skills and topics.

Carol Ann Tomlinson writes in the September 2000 *Educational Leadership* magazine that differentiated instruction "is a way of thinking about teaching and learning. It is a philosophy...based on a set of beliefs" such as "students who are the same age differ in their readiness to learn, their interests, their styles of learning, their experiences, and their life circumstances."

According to Carol Ann, teachers can differentiate three aspects of their curriculum:

1. Content – the skills, concepts, and principles,

2. Process — the activities that help students understand the ideas and skills that are being taught, and
3. Products — the culminating projects where students demonstrate what they have learned.
(ASCD *Curriculum Update*, Winter 2000)

Stevie Bravmann, a school coach and former education professor at Seattle University who has taught teachers about differentiated instruction, adds a fourth aspect – environment – which she says refers to the classroom or other learning sites and includes providing students with multiple settings, such as texts, learning centers, learning contracts, and group investigation with peers having similar abilities.

The impetus for Clover Park teachers to begin learning about differentiated instruction came this fall, when the school implemented 9th and 10th grade houses. One of the consequences was that they didn't have enough faculty in each house to teach both regular English and pre-AP English. They decided to blend the classes so that each English class would include regular, pre-AP, and inclusion students who didn't need self-contained classrooms.

continued

The Learning Network

Differentiation Instruction, continued

After the first couple of weeks, students and teachers in these blended classes were concerned that the classes weren't working as intended and Principal Paul Tytler realized that teachers and administrators alike needed a shared understanding of differentiation and an ongoing investment in professional development and the accompanying support mechanisms.

Clover Park's Instructional Facilitators Katie Taylor and Judi Orr, who consider themselves "guides" in the English faculty's exploration, developed a series of professional development sessions on differentiated instruction for their colleagues. During the first half-day session, Katie and Judi introduced the concept of differentiation, discussed the connection between personalization and differentiation and looked at examples of differentiation taken from Tomlinson's books.

During one activity, staff members looked at the different student learning profiles that were used at the fall high school meeting hosted by the Gates Foundation. "We learned that as a group, we all liked school, were eager to learn, and behaved as such. But, many of our students have different attitudes than we did about school," says English teacher Casey Curtis. "It forced me to think about how my students are different from me and to ask myself, what engages them? And, how can I engage them and meet their learning needs through my lessons?"

During the second half-day professional development session led by Katie and Judi, teachers brought lessons they had developed to share with their colleagues using a tuning protocol. The group discussed how the lessons were differentiated and ways in which greater differentiation could be provided. Katie and Judi facilitated the discussions and used prompts such as "What have you done with struggling learners that has been successful?"

The group also discussed how assessment could be a useful tool. "Assessment holds students to the same high standard, but with differentiation, how you get there can be different," explains Katie. For example, if a teacher wants to assess her students'

understanding of grammar and punctuation, some students may be able to demonstrate what they know in a paragraph, while others may need several paragraphs. The important thing is not the length of their assignment, but that each student demonstrates what she knows about grammar and punctuation.

The third and final professional development session will be an all-day session in mid-February and the focus will be on discussing the differences between tracking and differentiation.

What Differentiated Instruction Isn't

- It's not the same assignment with harder questions
- It's not harder grading
- It's not enrichment activities for those who finish assignments early
- It's not extension assignments
- It's not MOTS (More Of The Same) curriculum

"Differentiated instruction is not a form of tracking," says Tomlinson. "It is intended to be the exact opposite. Teachers must give every child access to the curriculum and ensure that every child makes progress." Clover Park teachers will also spend the third day embedding differentiation into

lesson and unit planning so that it is not perceived as an "add on," but an integral part of designing curriculum, assessment and instruction.

Although efforts to differentiate instruction at Clover Park are just beginning, Katie says the response from teachers and students has been positive.

"Teachers now understand that it's not about creating more work, but instead looking at students' different abilities and figuring out how to get everyone to the same high standard. The students like having choices and being able to demonstrate in different ways what they know."

English teacher Casey Curtis says her efforts to differentiate in her classroom have had a couple of unanticipated outcomes. "I realized that creating off-the-cuff lessons wouldn't work for every student. Differentiation pushes me to plan backwards and be very clear about what I want my students to know and then figure out how to get them there and how they will demonstrate it." Casey, who participates in a Critical Friends Group (CFG), says her efforts to differentiate have also benefited from the support and feedback she receives from her CFG colleagues.

Resources about Differentiated Instruction

Differentiating Instruction: Finding Manageable Ways to Meet Individual Needs, by Scott Willis and Larry Mann, ASCD *Curriculum Update*, Winter 2000.

The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners, by Carol Ann Tomlinson, ASCD, 1999.

How to Differentiate Instruction, *Educational Leadership*, September 2000.

How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms, by Carol Ann Tomlinson, ASCD, 1995.

<http://www.ascd.org>

Targeting Learning with Differentiated Instruction, *NW Teacher*, Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, Spring 2002

<http://www.nwrel.org/msec/images/nwteacher/spring2002/spring2002.pdf>

CONVERSION ISSUES

Truman Implements Performance-Based System with Support From State Board

Beginning this year, graduation requirements for students at the Harry S. Truman Center in Federal Way will take on a whole new meaning. Instead of using “seat-time” to determine whether a student is ready to graduate, the school will require students to demonstrate what they know and can do using a variety of performance assessments, including exhibitions.

A critical piece of the school’s reinvention work involves implementing an instruction and assessment system based on the premise that all students must meet high standards. The school adopted a standards-based assessment system that requires students to demonstrate proficiencies, as outlined by the state and district, but focuses on student interests that encourage meaningful, project-based work. This performance-based system will eventually replace letter grades, credits, and Carnegie units.

In order to implement this new system, the school received a waiver from the State Board of Education. According to Principal Pam Morris-Stendal, “the State Board was supportive and excited about our work. The process for seeking the waiver was straightforward (see box) and the State Board was highly receptive to our waiver request.”

As evidence, Pam points to a section of the *Washington Administrative Code* which states “in order to facilitate the transition and encourage local innovation, the State Board of Education finds that the current credit-based graduation requirements may be a limitation upon the ability of high schools and districts to make the transition with the least amount of difficulty. Therefore, the State Board will provide districts and high schools the opportunity to create and implement alternative graduation requirements.” (*WAC 180-055*)

For more information about how to obtain a waiver from time and credit-based graduation requirements, take a look at the State Board of Education website:
<http://www.sbe.wa.gov/policy/policy.htm>

The Small Schools Project website includes a primer that explains how schools can obtain waivers:
<http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>

DESIGN DAYS

Space Still Available for April 17 and May 5

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

Steps in the Waiver Process

- Read WAC about waiver processes.
- Get clear about why.
- Target a State Board meeting for your petition.
- Collaborate with district staff.
- Draft the waiver petition.
- Win support of local board members. Finalize petition.
- Present petition at local school board meeting.
- Present petition at State Board of Education meeting.
- Anticipate the next challenges.

A CONVERSATION WITH YOUR PEERS

Math Teachers Share Their School’s Redesign Plans

“This was the breath of fresh air I needed to go back into the fracas,” said Zachary Wolf, Davis High teacher. Zach was one of fifteen math teachers from seven high schools who participated in a daylong conversation designed to provide teachers with an opportunity to talk with their peers about their roles and experiences in their school’s redesign efforts.

According to Zach, who admitted early on that he had few expectations for the day, “I’d been noodling around with some ideas for a long time, but working with Frank Worster from Mountlake Terrace helped me put these together.” After Frank shared his skeleton idea of a math resource room, he and Zach—the smallest of three groups working on different ways to teach math in small schools—spent the afternoon filling a notebook with flow charts, lists, and designs.

Other math teachers worked in groups that focused on competency-based and thematic math teaching. They also spent time sharing their schools’ conversion process and at the end of the day, several teachers commented that it was good to hear that others were experiencing similar struggles, and it helped to sit down with people who knew what they were talking about.

Others commented on the value of working together. Monroe High teacher Sally Stapp said, “We don’t give ourselves enough time to come up with good ideas. To do this, I find I need someone else to talk to; there’s strength in collaboration.”

The day was the first in a series of job-alikes called *A Conversation With Your Peers* being held this spring for Gates grantee high school staff members. Others include days for science, special education (February 19), and ESL teachers (February 24) plus one for counselors (February 27). Additional sessions for other disciplines (arts, world languages, librarians, etc.) are being planned for March.

To learn more about these conversations or the new March sessions, check out the Small Schools Project website:
<http://www.smallschoolsproject.org> or call Craig Lucero at 206/616-0303.

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IN THIS ISSUE

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Nothing is Easy...(continued)

As the proposed changes become more specific, school boards are increasingly public about their support. Educators in every school can mark progress. Talented prospective teachers are beginning to seek out the thirty-nine schools *because* of what they're undertaking, not in spite of it. More and more parents like what they're hearing. Kids talk about what small school they'll choose. Schools and districts in other parts of the country are beginning to look at what's happening in Washington.

Nothing is easy, and there's never quite enough time in the day or week. But serious change is underway. In every school, every day, teachers and principals see some of the 33,000 reasons why they have accepted this challenge, and are a little less tired.

—Rick Lear, Director

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Check Out These Communication Tools

The Lincoln High School Achievers Project Information Line provides parents and community members with information about the school's redesign plans, who to contact with questions, and invites parents to join the school's parent committee. The message is recorded in five languages, including English, Spanish, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Korean. The number (for English) is 253/571-6687.

The Mountlake Terrace High School website offers information about the school's efforts to redesign into six small schools. The website provides answers to frequently asked questions, research about small schools, descriptions of the six new small schools, small school schedules, the timeline for the redesign efforts, and the school's newsletter for parents and community members.

<http://www.edmonds.wednet.edu/mths/SlcPage/default.htm>

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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