

The Learning Network

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

JANUARY 2003 ISSUE 5, VOLUME 1

Relationships the Key to Learning

My career didn't begin in the fall as it does for most young teachers. It began in late summer when football practice started, and I was the junior varsity coach in an urban school of about 1300 students. I felt lucky to be in a school that large, because I believed more kids meant more and better players.

Like many young men then, I had decided to become a teacher because I wanted to coach. I struggled far more as an English teacher those first couple years than I did as a coach, and it's quite possible that I remained a teacher so I could be a coach.

Both teaching and coaching were a challenge, but coaching was more "real" in important ways. Kids were there mostly out of passion, or at least interest. The work was hard, but we could see progress over time, and, as coaches, we could customize the work we asked kids to do to get better.

All of us had a common goal. The players' individual and collective commitment made them special, to us and to one another. Assessing a player's learning was part of the deal, but there was never any doubt that everyone's job was to help everyone else get better. Most of all, we had real performances, 8 or 10

of them a year, to help us understand how we were doing.

Coaching was wonderful, but it ended in November, and only a relatively few kids participated. But it was coaching that helped me believe that teaching could be different – better, in important ways – than I'd experienced it to date. It was the beginning of my understanding that relationships are central to learning.

I was lucky over my 35 years as an educator. I was able to work in a series of small schools. In each case, relationships formed the foundation of all that we did. While working in small schools, I learned that relationships are reciprocal: player to coach, kid to teacher, parent to teacher, colleague to colleague. Nothing worked very well without mutuality in relationships, or without a common purpose, however tenuous and provisional.

My hope for this work is that you will find the same opportunities that I have had over the years for deep connections with kids and colleagues, and that every student in your schools will have relationships with teachers that call forth the best that is in them. Those relationships will also call forth the best that is in you.

–Rick Lear, Director

PERSONALIZATION

At Stevenson High School in Skamania County, they call it their Advocacy Program. At West Valley High in Spokane, it's their Mentoring Program. Whatever you call it, however you structure it, personalization occurs when every student is known well by at least one involved, caring adult.

Stevenson High Teachers Go Back to School

"She is not being challenged academically. She has a very easy schedule."

"I can understand why kids get bored. I was bored for part of the day."

"It really made a difference in his attitude depending on what class he was in."

"She has two classes where she must struggle against the tide to learn."

Those were just a few of the comments from Stevenson High School teachers who spent a day shadowing students during October or November. The purpose of the exercise was to give teachers a student's perspective of high school, according to Jill Neyenhouse who teaches English and choir and was involved in designing Stevenson's advocacy program. "We are going through this redesign process to better serve our students," she explains,

"but if we don't know what their days are like, how can we help them?" Each teacher shadowed a student from his or her advocacy. (Stevenson has chosen to use the words "advocacy" and "advocate" because some people respond negatively to the idea of advisories while most understand the need to advocate on behalf of young people.) Advocates used different methods to select which student to shadow. Some picked a name out of a hat, some selected a student who had expressed interest in the process, and others picked someone they wanted to follow. Because no more than one or two teachers participated on any given day, the school could cover their class absences with a substitute.

The shadowing process not only gave teachers the chance to see what a student's school day was like, it also allowed them to sit in their colleagues' classrooms in a non-threatening way. One teacher commented, "It was interesting to watch how other teachers deal with their classes." As a result, Jill says, "teachers have engaged in more open discussion about what goes on in people's rooms."

For the most part, students were excited to have teachers spend a day "hanging out" with them, according to Jill. "They wanted to show the teachers what they were learning."

continued

The Learning Network

Personalization, continued

In fact, Jill's student taught her how to use a sander and a router in wood shop.

After the shadowing days, Stevenson scheduled advocacy conferences with every student. These conferences, which included the student, parents, and advocate, were held in the cafeteria on November 20 and 21 from 4:00 to 8:00 p.m. Parents and students checked in at a greeting desk and sampled some refreshments before being shown to the table where their advocate sat.

According to Jill, advocates prepared for the conferences by collecting grade reports with assignments from each class, test scores (WASL, ITED, MAP), attendance and discipline records, and quarter report cards that included the student evaluation portion of the progress report. Discussions focused on the student's goals and plans for high school and beyond, as well as progress in their individual classes. If the student was struggling in a class, ways to help them succeed were discussed. Also, parents had a chance to share their goals for their child and to bring up any general concerns or questions about the high school.

If the "amazing turnout" was any indication, most parents seemed to be happy with the process. Tellingly, some parents reacted to the initial conference invitation phone call by asking if their child was in trouble. Says Jill, "Too often parents feel uncomfortable or unwelcome in our high schools—whether because of their own high school experiences or other reasons. The advocate conferences allowed them to visit our school in a non-threatening situation where they met with someone who is just as big a fan of the student as the parents."

Not surprisingly, some students were ambivalent about their parents meeting with teachers, but as Jill says, "In those cases, the meetings were probably a good thing!"

For Stevenson's advocates—and every staff member serves in this capacity—the conference process was time-consuming, but for most, the positive outcome made the extra work worthwhile. Another round of advocacy conferences is planned for the spring. Jill wholeheartedly recommends that other schools implement similar programs because, she says, "It's a safe environment for a staff member, parents, and student to focus together in a positive way on the needs of that student."

For more information about Stevenson's advocacy program, contact Principal Sergio Fossa at 509/427-5631.

"We are going through this redesign process to better serve our students, but if we don't know what their days are like, how can we help them?"

***Jill Neyenhouse, English and choir teacher
Stevenson High School***

West Valley Mentors Help Freshmen with High School Transition

At West Valley High School in Spokane, all students meet daily for 25 minutes with a teacher called a Mentor. Tenth through twelfth graders are mixed in their Mentor groups, but in the hopes of reducing freshman failure rates, West Valley chose to keep ninth graders in their own groups of about 16 students each.

While West Valley collects hard data to evaluate the effectiveness of its Mentor program (and *The Learning Network* will share that data as it becomes available), Small Schools coach Judith Gray recently interviewed a number of freshmen and their Mentor teachers to collect anecdotal evidence. Here are just a few student comments:

Brian: "I know my Mentor teacher very well. I have improved my grades and so have a lot of other kids in the Mentor group. As students we can help each other."

Rodney: "Our field trips allow us to get to know more people. The work is hands-on and we learn more. If I get to touch something, I learn more. My Mentor teacher takes time to explain things well."

Courtney: "It's cool that I see these people every day. I look forward to seeing them. It's like a community or family in here and we all know each other. If I didn't have mentoring, my grades wouldn't be as good. I know that I can come to my Mentor and get help at any time."

Most of Judith's student interviewees believe that their grades are better because of their Mentor group experience, and Mentor teachers agree. One ninth grade teacher says that the reason the number of F's in her core of 85 students has decreased from 16 to 9 is because of Mentor teachers' aggressive focus on these kids. According to Judith, "After first quarter grades went out, Mentor teachers followed up relentlessly with students who were struggling."

Another Mentor teacher suggests that the Mentoring program helps kids succeed "because it relieves the stress of the high school aspect for them. Kids usually make the adjustment to high school on their own. This way, they can focus more on academics."

A student's ability to focus more on academics is a primary goal of West Valley's Mentor program which is monitored by a group called Personalization on Point (POP) that includes administrators, teachers, students, and parents. This group, with lots of student participation, planned the program and is available if anyone has complaints. Judith notes, however, that to date, there's not been a single parent complaint.

Each week, Mentor group time includes two reading days and one "teacher access" day during which students can leave the group to seek out help from other teachers.

For more information about West Valley's Mentor program, contact Principal Cleve Penberthy at 509/922-5488.

DESIGN DAY

Design Day Benefits Mariner High's LEAP Academy

Three members of Mariner High's LEAP Academy attended the Design Day in November and left with some helpful critiques from other participants and from Small Schools coaches. (LEAP stands for Learners Engaged in Academic Pursuits, Projects, Productions.)

While the three—Ginny Shirk, Wendy MacDonald and Lyn Jackson—brought outlines and drafts of a number of documents, including a draft proposal, outcomes of a graduating student, a staffing model, and norms of operation for small schools, they chose to focus on their schedule ideas during the feedback session.

"We chose a tuning protocol to present our schedule to the other participants," says Lyn. The protocol allowed the LEAP team to make a brief presentation, respond to a few questions, and then receive warm and cool feedback in a non-threatening environment.

For example, warm feedback about the schedule included "advisory time long enough to be useful" and "scheduling is flexible enough to limit conflicts." Cool feedback included comments such as "common planning time is not clear" and "what is the mechanism for sharing concerns about individual students?"

Wendy says, "Other participants not only gave us valuable feedback, they also raised our confidence about our planning process. Plus we gained a true appreciation of how dedicated everyone is to these changes and the level of commitment it takes to succeed."

After the Design Day, Lyn wrote up a summary of the experience that the three women then presented to other LEAP teachers in their weekly academy meeting. This gave them all the opportunity to pat themselves on the back for warm feedback, to address cool feedback concerns, and to decide to take action on a few items—such as developing a document that would describe more clearly their small school's vision.

According to Ginny, Wendy and Lyn, the excitement of the Design Day participants about LEAP's proposed schedule plans continues to resurface in weekly meetings. "Our group refers back to the Design Day experience again and again as we move closer to our intended start date," Ginny says.

To enroll in one of the free Design Days, contact Craig Lucero at clucero@u.washington.edu or 206/616-0303. The following sessions are available:

February 20 / March 20 / April 17 / May 15

SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Lincoln Tech Academy East Creates Unique Partnership with Boys and Girls Club

One of the seven new small schools being developed at Lincoln High School in Tacoma is Lincoln Tech Academy East. This community-based school, which will open in the fall of 2003 and serve 100 students, is grounded in the belief that students' "passion and interests are the sparks that light the fire for learning."

The school is based on a design similar to The Met, a small public high school in Providence, Rhode Island, that integrates academic and applied learning, with the goal of educating "one student at a time."

At Lincoln Tech Academy East, a teacher-advisor and parent will guide each student in creating a unique and individualized educational experience and learning plan. Projects will link academic learning to a student's internship experiences in the community. The school's designers anticipate that internships will connect adults and students with shared interests, and students will get excited about learning. The internships will also provide students with an opportunity to explore their interests in the real world and recognize the connection between what they learn in school and life outside of school.

Like The Met and the Truman Center, a small school in Federal Way that is also based on the Met design, student learning will be assessed using a performance-based system of quarterly exhibitions. Instead of receiving credit based on seat time, students will earn credit by demonstrating mastery of their individual learning goals.

The plans call for Lincoln Tech Academy East to be located off-campus at the Eastside Boys and Girls Club. According to lead-teacher Michelle Guilmet, the school partnered with the Boys and Girls Club because it was a well-known community partner with a strong technology program. Students at Lincoln Tech Academy East will have access to the Club's renowned Building Opportunity Through Technology Lab, a technology-rich multimedia lab, and teachers plan to infuse technology throughout all of the school's teaching and learning experiences.

Although the school won't open until the fall of 2003, Michelle will co-teach an integrated English and Computer Application course at the Club this January for juniors and seniors.

For more information about Lincoln Tech Academy East, contact lead-teacher Michelle Guilmet at: mguilme@tacoma.k12.wa.us.

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The Small Schools Project will host a series of job-alikes in February for math, science, special ed, ESL teachers and counselors at conversion schools. These free meetings will provide teachers an opportunity to talk with their peers, share ideas, create action plans, clarify and redesign their roles in the new small schools, and identify how their specific expertise can enrich the small school experience for them and their students.

Below are the dates when each day-long meeting will take place. The meetings are free, but participants **MUST** sign up in advance. Contact Craig Lucero at clucero@u.washington.edu or 206/616-0303 to sign up.

February 5	For Math teachers
February 10	For Science teachers
February 19	For Special Ed teachers
February 24	For ESL teachers
February 27	For Counselors

TOOLS & RESOURCES TO USE

The Small Schools Project has developed a poster series on structural and conversion issues, including scheduling, school design, staging, and powerful learning. The purpose of the posters is to bring attention to these issues and encourage school staff members to think about and discuss with each other and members of their community, the many different ways to tackle these issues. The posters will be distributed to school teams at the January Gates high school meeting, as well as mailed to schools in late January. If you would like to receive additional copies of the posters, please e-mail 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 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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