

The Learning Network

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

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Values Guide Student Placement Decisions

This issue of *The Learning Network* is about student placement in conversion high schools that have developed “themed” or “focused” small schools—about half of the conversion schools the Small Schools Project works with. Here’s a brief overview of the major issues involved.

The student placement process a school develops most often depends on the answers to three key questions:

- *Are our small schools essentially alike to begin with, or are they “themed?”*
- *What is the weight we attach to making each small school look demographically like the current large school?*
- *What role does student/family choice play in student placement?*

At one end of the continuum, half the schools we work with have decided that getting students and staff into small schools that are, for now, essentially alike is of primary importance. In those

schools, student placement involves placing students in such a way that each small school is similar. Some make assignments “randomly,” then adjust to create more balanced demographics if needed; others are more prescriptive from the outset. One school placed its students based on grade point averages.

The other end—the “pure choice” option—is most closely represented by Foster High School. Their story, however, reveals the enormous and careful work that went into developing schools that have broad appeal—a major component of not creating “have” and “have-not” schools.

In between are schools that have developed various procedures for developing demographically similar schools and allowing for choice. The two schools highlighted here, Mariner and Mountlake Terrace, have somewhat different criteria for placement—criteria related both to their particular circumstances and to earlier decisions, such as whether or not schools could be different sizes, whether by design or because of student choice.

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CONVERSION

In Washington State, large Gates grantee high schools have chosen a number of ways to divide their students into smaller schools. At some, administrators are randomly assigning students—usually with the addition of one or more balancing criteria, including grade levels, GPAs, gender, etc. The article below features three schools that selected student choice as their placement method.

Foster Conducts Polling to Focus Student Choice

At Foster High School in the Tukwila School District, all students will be attending academies beginning next fall. But the discussions at the school level about how students would divide up have been going on for almost two years, with a focus on critical questions. For example, how much should be left to student choice? Would some sort of balancing criteria be used to ensure equity? Would it be acceptable to have four academies that didn’t look like each other in student composition?

In the end, says Grant Coordinator Scott Powers, “We decided to use a true lottery system and honor student choice. However, we did a lot of work beforehand to make sure our academies would be appealing to all—that we wouldn’t end up with a school that was primarily male, for example.”

During 2002 (in the spring, early fall, and December), Foster students completed three brief surveys that asked them which of

the four academies they would choose if they were choosing right then. “This frequent polling provided a feedback loop to us,” explains Scott, “helping us to put caps on size and allowing each academy to recraft its message if necessary in order to be attractive to more or different students. It also allayed our fears that the academies would be inequitable.”

According to Scott, the school’s Leadership Team also spent a good deal of time and thought on the application form itself. “All our academies are different, so did we want to create an application form that reflected those differences? And, did we want to include an essay question or an interview that would help us in the sorting process?” The Foster team answered “no” to both of these questions, deciding to stick with a simple application allowing students to list three choices.

When it came to the actual application sorting, Leadership Team members worked hard to develop a fair and transparent process. “As we thought about having safeguards in place to show that our sorting process wasn’t biased, we decided not to involve teachers but to ask our Small Schools coaches to do most of the work and to invite an outside representative from our site council in as an observer,” says Scott.

Sorters used a lottery process that was completed by grade level to ensure that each academy would have students from each

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grade. During the process, it became clear that even after the frequent polling and readjusting, one of the smaller academies would have fewer students than had been anticipated. Concerned that this academy would have a high percentage of students placed in their third choice, plus students who did not turn in applications, the Leadership Team made the difficult decision to dissolve it. Students and their families will be notified about their placement in one of the three remaining academies in mid-March.

Even with the major student placement process now completed, Scott says there are still questions to be answered. Foster High's population is highly transient with kids entering and leaving daily, so deciding how to assign new students fairly, while honoring the choices of existing students, will be a challenge.

For more information about Foster's student placement process, contact Scott Powers at Powersss@tukwila.wednet.edu.

Terrace Develops Educational Balancing Criteria

For the Mountlake Terrace Steering Committee, the student placement goal was to maintain educational balance among the six small schools. "We decided that student choice was important," says Steven Gering, assistant principal, "but we also wanted to have a plan to address equity issues. For us, a key question was, 'How can we ensure that the student body of each small school looks like Terrace as a whole?'"

To answer this question, the Committee developed educational balancing criteria in three areas: free and reduced lunch, gender, and special education. For example, each small school will be within plus or minus 10 percent of the average number of girls or boys calculated from the 8th grade. The free and reduced lunch criteria uses a plus or minus 5 percent of 8th grade numbers, and the special education criteria a plus or minus 3 percent of the minimum state requirement for funding.

Students in this year's grades 8 through 10 will be completing an application that asks them to select preferences in A, B, and C columns. They can select as many A's (first choices), B's, etc. as they wish. According to Steven, the Committee will work hard to place every student in one of his or her top two preferences. Applications are due on March 14th for incoming freshmen and April 9th for current students with the exception of this year's juniors; 2004 seniors won't be placed in small schools.

After these deadlines, the Steering Committee will use an eight-step student assignment process that begins by sorting for choice and then modifies for maximum enrollments and educational balancing. If a small learning community does not meet minimum enrollment, the staff of that school will meet to discuss options. Students and parents will be informed of placement results by April 21st.

For more information, contact Steven Gering at gerings@edmonds.wednet.edu.

Mariner High Uses Student Essays to Refine Choice

At Mariner High School in Mukilteo, next year's 9th through 12th grade students already know which of six small academies they will be attending in September. The placement process—which combined choice with some placement parameters—culminated on March 7th, when letters on academy letterhead went out to parents and students.

According to Grant Coordinator David Broadhead, "Our hope was that we could honor student choice and still end up with fairly equal distribution in terms of academy size." Now that the process is complete, roughly 85 percent of the students who completed applications got into their first choice academy, and all six academies are roughly the same size.

This didn't happen overnight, according to David. "We spent the better part of a year working on the process," he says. "It's important that every step be very intentional." An Applications and Transfer Committee developed a detailed application process and timeline, that included placement parameters (ELL and special education, grade levels, gender and ethnicity), a placement appeal process, and transfer process.

Student Placement Questions to Consider

for all conversion schools:

- How does the placement method we choose reflect our overall philosophy and values?
- Can we clearly articulate the rationale behind this placement method?
- Is it important to us that each of our small schools look like our larger school?
- If not, how much and what kinds of differences in terms of student demographics are we willing to accept in our small schools?
- How will we communicate student placement results to students and their parents?

for schools of choice:

- What are we doing to ensure that all of our small schools are attractive to students?
- If we are using balancing criteria, will some be more important than others?
- What do we want our application to include and why?
- Do we want to set maximum and minimum numbers for each small school? If so, what steps will we take if a small school doesn't receive a minimum number of applications? If a small school receives too many?
- What steps will we take for those students who don't complete an application?
- Who will be involved in the sorting process and why?
- Have we set up fair and transparent application and sorting processes that our administrators can clearly articulate and defend if an appeal occurs?

According to David, a lot of thought went into the application itself, which gave students a first, second, and third choice, and also asked students to write a brief response to the question: “I would like to be in (blank) academy because...” Advisors distributed a detailed Academy School Guide in their advisory sessions, along with a video and the applications, and let students know that the essays could make a difference.

“The involvement of counselors and teachers at the middle school level was also critical to the process,” David says. “They did a lot to help students focus on their interests and complete the applications.”

Once the applications were received, Mariner used technology for a first run at student placement. “We had great district tech support,” says David. “They helped us write a comprehensive software program that, after we entered data with the students’ first choices, gave us a printout of academy composition.”

A couple of schools were over or under projected size, so an essay reading session was conducted; readers included a representative from each academy. “We ended up reading every essay—some as short as two sentences, others a typed page long,” says David, “and although the process was time consuming, it was worth every minute.” It gave readers a good feel for what kids were thinking and it also increased their sense of commitment to Mariner’s reinvention. “Classroom teachers aren’t often given this kind of responsibility,” explains David, “and they took it very seriously.”

Throughout the long day of sorting, the group kept a running list of what could be done differently the next time. For example, the application will be simplified, as data on gender and ethnicity is already available from the district. More importantly, changes will be made to the Academy Guide Book and to the presentations given about each academy. According to David, just reading the essays let the committee know why kids were choosing certain academies and where the guide and the presentations need to be clearer to attract more applications.

For more information or to take a look at Mariner’s application and/or application process/timeline, contact David Broadhead at BroadheadDD@mukilteo.wednet.edu.

DESIGN DAYS

Space Still Available for April 17 and May 15

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 free sessions, contact Craig Lucero at 206/616-0303 or clucero@u.washington.edu.



Junior Rosa Aviles translates community-generated action steps from Spanish into English at a Town Hall Meeting in Mabton. The two-day event was attended by 250 stakeholders—students, parents, teachers, and community members. The goal was “to work out a plan that will help every single kid graduate with the skills to do well, not just get by.”

BOOK TALK

Simply...What Matters Most

Teaching What Matters Most: Standards and Strategies for Raising Student Achievement, by Richard W. Strong, Harvey F. Silver, and Matthew J. Perrini, ASCD Press, 2001.

It’s nice to see a slender and simple book like this sidled up so favorably beside the volumes of district and state standards and benchmarks. This winter’s book gift to grantee high schools from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is a reminder of a truth we know in our hearts: *each* child deserves to come each day to a classroom focused on four cleanly defined standards:

- “**Rigor**: helping students to develop the capacity to understand content that is complex, ambiguous, provocative, and personally or emotionally challenging.”
- “**Thought**: the pursuit of purpose under conditions of uncertainty.”
- “**Diversity**: to support students in the use of their own resources and to challenge them to acquire and understand the resources of others.”
- “**Authenticity**: to acquire real world skills and knowledge by developing their ability to read, write, and solve problems and apply concepts in a manner that prepares them for their lives beyond school.”

Following a chapter-long discussion of each standard, the authors offer practical classroom strategies. Although most examples are drawn from elementary and middle schools, their application to high schools is clear.

Educators creating small learning communities commit to providing a personal, content-rich environment for *each* student—not just for those inhabiting the upper tracks of traditional systems. They seek ways every student can engage in rich and complex content and wrestle with meaningful issues. In clean, practical language, this book shows one way to do it.

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Promising Curricular Resources Are Coming

Values Guide Student Placement Decisions (continued)

We know there are certainly “wrong” ways to place students—ways that will help to perpetuate the inequities we find in most comprehensive high schools today. What we’re just now beginning to see at the other end are several “right” ways to get to the commonly desired end. Context matters, prior decisions matter, clarity about goals matter.

The three schools we describe here probably don’t have it quite “right” yet—they’re presented as examples, not models. But they have directly faced a set of key issues and been thoughtful in their approach, as we know others are and will be. Perhaps most importantly, we can see how the solutions to technical problems—and student placement is surely that—are affected in profound ways by our values.

—Rick Lear, Director

TOOLS YOU CAN USE

Promising Curricular Resources to be Sent to Schools

Beginning this April, the Small Schools Project will publish quarterly collections of promising curricular resources and pedagogical practices that promote powerful teaching and learning in small schools. This year-long project, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, will help high schools move their focus from designing small schools to re-thinking teaching and learning practices.

Four areas have been identified for the first report: *high school literacy*, *advisories*, *college-access* and *project-based learning*. Small schools coaches are distributing teacher surveys to collect feedback on the content areas for subsequent reports. For more information or to request a copy of the report, contact info@smallschoolsproject.org.

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