

# The Learning Network

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

MAY 2003 ISSUE 9, VOLUME 1

## Just Pause...and Listen to the Students

A ten-year teacher was responding to questions about her portfolio presentation, the final step in completing her master's degree. She had spent most of the hour describing the changes in her practice. A professor asked if the profound changes she described were developmental.

"No, it wasn't developmental. I was exposed to good teaching and powerful ideas, and I fussed about them a lot. At some point, I understood that in your classroom, you must just pause... You must have the confidence to just pause. Then, you can hear your students."

She had also gathered up the courage and confidence to respond to what she heard. And she had noted earlier that she had benefited from being in a school where such teaching—responding to student interests and needs—was valued and respected.

This issue of the *Learning Network* provides vignettes from schools that have begun to listen to students. They describe how students are working at the "macro" level to help inform the adults who are making design decisions about their schools.

## STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

*During the past year, Washington high schools used a variety of ways to include students and student voices in their schools' redesign plans. Some invited students to join committees, others held student summits, and others surveyed current students and alumni to find out what students like about their school and what needs to change. The schools highlighted below provide three examples of how students are participating in their schools' transformation process.*

### Kittitas Students Gets Involved in Advisory Redesign

"When we initially implemented school changes around our Gates grant, we worked hard to involve parents and the community," says Kittitas High School Principal Doug Maynard. "We didn't take as much time to involve students. That's changing now."

One example of this change was the recent visit of three Kittitas students—a freshman, a sophomore, and a junior—to two Pacific Northwest schools. Along with Principal Maynard, the students visited Vancouver School of the Arts and Merlo Station (Beaverton, Oregon) to look at those schools' advisories.

Kittitas implemented advisories in the fall of 2002; each had twelve or thirteen kids to an advisor and met a half an hour per week. According to Doug, a major goal was to provide each student with a connection to an adult.

This teacher, however, had described listening at a different level—in her own classroom, and on a daily basis. She hadn't suggested listening as a panacea, or as a substitute for real skills.

Attending carefully to what you hear directly and obliquely from students doesn't necessarily make your work as a teacher easier—sometimes, it makes it more complex. Almost always it requires the careful exercise of judgment, and often it means adapting plans you've made.

Listening to students doesn't mean lowering expectations, or catering to student whims, or abandoning standards. It does mean recognizing that there are many paths to the same place. Listening to students can help point the way to a path that may be more inviting to them and more productive for you.

It's often more difficult to listen well as the school year ends, but the end is also a time when students will give valuable clues about what they need and what they hope for. That's not a bad way to end one year and prepare for the next. Good listening!

—Rick Lear, Director

"However, when we listened to the kids, we learned we weren't meeting that goal," says Doug. "In January, we gathered together two student representatives from each advisory and asked for their opinions. What we heard was that while advisories were useful for making connections to other students, they weren't helping kids make that connection with an adult."

Kittitas junior Michelle Krueger concurs. "Lots of kids didn't really enjoy going to advisories. It seemed too much like just another class."

That's when the idea of taking students to see successful advisories surfaced. Michelle, who was one of those students, prepared for the trip by looking at her own advisory and thinking about what she would like to see improved.

Before leaving Kittitas, Doug and the students put together a list of questions to use during the trip. They spent the first day at Vancouver School of the Arts, sitting in on advisories, interviewing students, and filling notebooks with observations. Michelle says, "Students seemed really relaxed with their advisors."

The next morning it was on to Merlo Station where they met with students who were passionate about the power of advisories. "I really, really liked what I saw there," says Michelle. "Students were totally open with their advisors and we heard a lot about how kids would go to them with their problems."

*continued*

## The Learning Network



*Kittitas and Mabton students and teachers visited schools to learn about advisories.*

I thought that one of the reasons it worked so well was because students spend so much time with their advisors.” (According to Doug, Merlo Station advisories meet for 100 minutes a day; the time is divided into two sections—75 minutes for connective and goal setting activities and 25 minutes for academic work.)

Summing up her experience, Michelle says, “It was valuable because I learned that advisories *can* work and that they can help build great relationships with teachers.” And she knows that her involvement did not end with the trip. She and her fellow travelers will be sharing their observations with the Kittitas faculty. One thing Michelle will tell them is that, in her opinion, “Our advisories need to meet more often.”

Whether or not Michelle’s ideas are adopted, she believes it’s important for Kittitas students to have a voice. “We are being included,” she concludes, “and that will help a lot.”

### **Cleveland Students Speak Up**

“If you don’t ask us how we feel, we won’t care about these new schools,” Cleveland High School sophomore Nate Jeffcoat says, when asked what role students should have in Cleveland’s transformation plans. Fortunately, Cleveland *has* been asking and has included students in several planning activities.

Earlier this year, seven students were part of the review panel—which also included parents and educators—that evaluated small schools proposals. Junior Arlene Chavez believes that her involvement in choosing the final proposals was important because—“next year the small schools are going to be for the students.” And she and a number of other students are speaking up and encouraging other students to do so as well.

In early April, Arlene was one of three Cleveland students who attended an Oakland, California conference entitled “Parents, Students, Community Roles in Transforming High Schools.” Freshman Malcolm Proctor says, “We learned a lot about how to get involved in changing your school, and we came back

wanting to introduce other students to what we learned.”

Since returning from the conference, the students have made brief small schools presentations in a number of classes. Arlene says, “So far, lots of students don’t really see the benefits [in small schools], and while we can’t answer all their questions, at least we can talk about what we’ve learned and tell them where to get more answers.”

Nate agrees, adding, “I feel like my voice is being heard, but not everybody’s is, so we have to tell other kids why it’s important to say what you think.”

### **West Valley Students Weigh-in Through Focus Groups**

To build on last year’s efforts to include student voice in their redesign decisions, West Valley High School’s Coordinating Council and administration established student focus groups.

The focus groups, comprised of ninth through twelfth grade students, meet weekly and are facilitated by two of the school’s coaches. The groups discuss current issues that the Coordinating Council is grappling with, such as the structure of the mentor (advisory) groups, whether to move from one to two lunch periods, and how to build community within the school.

Freshman Rocky Rutter said he got involved in the focus groups because he wanted to help shape what was happening at the school. “Instead of letting school happen to me, I thought it would be better to get involved and make a difference. I can take what I’ve been hearing from other students and provide a voice for those who can’t participate in the focus groups.”

Rocky and two other focus group participants were recently invited by the Coordinating Council to share a summary of the groups’ conversations and recommendations. The Council appreciated hearing the students’ perspectives and invited them to return for a future meeting.

### **Involving Students in Governance and Decision-Making**

At Avalon School, a new small college prep high school in St. Paul, Minnesota, students are involved in the school’s governance and decision-making.

As part of a seminar where they learned about the Constitution of the United States, students developed a school constitution that describes how students can participate in the Avalon Congress. The Congress is open to all students and during weekly meetings, members of the Congress brainstorm solutions to school problems. Members of the Congress also run the all-school weekly meetings and attend committee meetings to assist in the management of the school. Two members of the Congress also sit on the school board as non-voting members.

For more information, check out Avalon’s website:  
<http://www.avalonschool.org/index.htm>.

School coach Kathy Squires said she was surprised that the students wanted to continue to participate in the focus groups week after week. "When we asked them why, they told us they liked the cookies and the opportunities to have real conversations where they felt heard."

"Having adults guess at what students want and care about isn't very efficient," adds junior Chase Butler, who also presented to the Council.

Plans for next year are still being worked out, but one possibility is that the focus groups will be expanded to include administrators so that they can hear first-hand ideas from students about West Valley's restructuring. Another idea is that the focus groups will help rethink the school's decision-making structures in order to provide students with a more active role.

"Schools exist for student learning. Who better to know how students learn best than students? To not listen to students is illogical. Besides, students have a lot to say," says Rocky.

#### A New Resource on Student Voice

*"We're often thinking things and keeping them to ourselves. Maybe if we spoke up a little more, things would get better."*

- Bronx student

*The Schools We Need: Creating Small High Schools That Work For Us* is a new publication by What Kids Can Do that includes interviews with Bronx high schools students who talk about their experiences planning and attending small schools and restructuring large high schools into multiple small schools.

"Outnumbered by the adults on the design team, they [students] do not come to planning meetings with advanced degrees in education or experience in managing organizations. But they have something even more important—the reality of being a young person in high school in America today.

Unless school planners listen carefully to the ideas of high school students...this bold small school initiative will fall short of its potential. Equally important, other students must hear opinions about small schools directly from their peers, who know their worries about what the new system might bring." (*The Schools We Need*, May 2003)

This report can be downloaded from the What Kids Can Do website: <http://www.whatkidscando.org/PDFlibrary.html>.

## TEACHING & LEARNING

### Partner School Teachers Assess First Year

Last October, two teachers from Enumclaw High School shared their excitement about opening the high school's two Partner Schools (five additional small schools will open in the fall). Now they've spent almost a full school year working with students in a whole new way. *The Learning Network* checked back with them recently, asking, "What's been different for you as a teacher and what do you perceive as being different for your students?"

*Diane Franchini teaches English and Photography at E.C.H.O.E.S. (Enumclaw Cooperative Hands-On Experiential School); 100 students*

What's most different for me is how well I know the students. I have 14 kids (grades 9 through 12) in my advisory, and although I could retire right now, I know that I want to stick with these 9<sup>th</sup> graders until they graduate.

Another difference is that, even though I've been teaching for thirty years, I find it both challenging and exciting to really integrate content and curriculum with other teachers. Sometimes you feel like you are "giving up" favorite pieces of curriculum, but then you realize that giving up often means getting more.

As far as the students go, I think they started out feeling like they had all this freedom. Then they discovered it isn't all that easy! Students may have to do an assignment or project over and over again in order to meet the standards and that took some getting used to. Also, students were used to having things pretty structured so they had trouble with change and ambiguity. I see more flexibility in them now.

My advice to teachers facing small schools implementation in the fall? Enter into this change with enthusiasm and accept that "different" can mean "better." For me, even with the challenges, the experience has been the most exciting of my career.

*Doug Wolff teaches English and History at The Adventure School; 146 students*

Teaching is so much more enjoyable to me now. I know my students really well, and they are willing to share their lives—not just academic stuff—with me. I know my colleagues better, too. It's not just getting their input and working with them, but we're together so much, we actually have time to have fun.

I think that being in the Adventure School has improved my teaching practices. I get to watch how others teach, plus I share integrated blocks with other teachers so I learn how different subject areas relate. And because we are standards based, I find I'm more responsible about giving students clear criteria before an assignment or project and useful feedback afterwards.

As far as the kids are concerned, I've seen a real shift in their culture as they figured out they have to be responsible for their own learning. They have to be self-directed and practice self-management skills.

*continued*

# The Learning Network

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

## IN THIS ISSUE

### STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

**Kittitas Students Get Involved In Advisory Redesign**  
**Cleveland Students Speak Up**  
**West Valley Students Weigh-in Through Focus Groups**

### TEACHING & LEARNING

**Partner School Teachers Assess First Year**

#### **Partner School Teachers Assess First Year (continued)**

We've had plenty of challenges so there a number of areas we are working to improve. We're trying to figure out a better way to integrate math and foreign language into our whole program.

We're trying to get kids out of the classroom more, but that has raised budget and transportation issues that we need to work through. And even though most of us would say we've done more work around building parent relationships than ever before—for example, meeting with individual parents on a routine basis and involving them in student presentations—we plan to involve them even more next year.

Personally, I think I've gotten better at keeping a balance between home and work. We worked terribly hard last summer before our school opened, but we won't need to spend as much time this summer, and I expect next year to be much less overwhelming.

For me, the most rewarding thing has been the response of the kids. When the application process opened this spring, we had ninety applications for thirty-five spots.

## SAVE THE DATE

### **Teacher Leader 2003 Summer Institute**

The Small Schools Project will offer a summer 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, at the University of Puget Sound. There will also be three follow-up sessions during the 2003-2004 school year. The cost is \$300 a person. Further information can be found on our website: <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>.

### **Summer Vacation**

*The Learning Network* will not be published during June and July, but will resume in August. Have a great summer!

*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: <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>. To share information about your school's redesign efforts or suggest topics for this publication, contact:

Mary Beth Lambert, Editor Phone: 206/685-5236 E-Mail: [mlambert@u.washington.edu](mailto:mlambert@u.washington.edu)