

The Learning Network

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

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Community Engagement: Essential for Success

According to the Coalition of Essential Schools (*Horace*, 1993), involving the community in a change process may be the single most important element for success. For high schools, involving the community in reform efforts may also be the most overlooked element, the most difficult, or the most dreaded.

Educators often view parents and community members as a factor to “deal with” rather than as essential collaborators. Fortunately, effective schools are abandoning this attitude at the same time parents are abandoning the old hands-off one. New demands for accountability and improved student achievement require collaboration: there’s no payoff for retaining “outsider” and “insider” roles anymore.

We would hope that all high schools involved in reform efforts have years of community engagement traditions to sustain them, as well as reservoirs of trust and personal relationships with parents and community members. Historically, however, that’s often not been the case, partly because adults outside schools lack the time and confidence to do so and partly because high schools

(and their adolescent students) haven’t always been as welcoming as they might have been.

Having a history of healthy relationship habits (such as listening to each other frequently and respectfully, knowing how to disagree and then come together, etc.) will make your community engagement process easier. Involving all stakeholders from the beginning of your school reform effort ensures the best chance of success, just as presenting a detailed plan to your community as a “done deal” will probably spell failure.

But whatever your school’s community engagement history, it’s not too late to ask the following questions:

- What are we doing *now* to share information and decision-making?
- What more *could* we be doing?

Many Gates grantee high schools—including those featured in this issue—are working hard to answer these questions and are reaching out to their communities in new and creative ways.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Listening to Every Voice

It may not be rare to find parents, students, and community members gathered in a high school cafeteria for an after-school event, but usually they are attending student performances or exhibitions. On the evening of November 5, the audience in Davis High’s cafeteria was listening—and responding—to 11 design team representatives who presented small school proposals. Many audience members wore headsets allowing them to hear the presentations by simultaneous Spanish translation.

According to Principal Lee Maras, Yakima’s Davis High School has 1700 students; more than 500 are native Spanish speakers. To publicize the event to these parents, Superintendent Benjamin Soria (a native Spanish speaker himself) went on air at two local Spanish radio stations. At one, the host interviewed him for half an hour; at the other, he taped a special invitation.

Davis’ Engaging Parents and Community (EP&C) Committee, the event sponsor, also advertised with flyers sent home with students, e-mail message trees, phone trees, the school reader board, and media exposure through the local newspaper and a television station. In addition, a pre-recorded telephone message was available to parents (in their primary language) through Davis’ automatic telephone dialing system.

According to Martha Rice, parent and EP&C committee chair, “We are committed to providing a variety of opportunities for

parents, students, and community members to have a voice in this process, because we know it will only be successful if all stakeholders feel a sense of ownership.” She adds that while the Yakima School District has a clear policy about community engagement and the school board has clear expectations that it will happen, the participation process at Davis is also driven by the fact that “it’s the right thing to do.”

The evening began with a complimentary spaghetti dinner and was followed by a brief presentation by Principal Maras. He pointed out that although lots of good things happen at Davis, the school hopes to change one statistic: a ninth grade class that typically starts with around 500 students ends up four years later with roughly 250 graduates.

Grant coordinator Virginia Hays emceed the remainder of the tightly scheduled meeting. First, a representative from a proposed small school design team made a five-minute presentation. Then meeting attendees used a scantron bubble sheet to answer a series of questions (available in English and Spanish) about each presentation, questions such as: Does this school feel like it would be challenging and prepare your child to accomplish his/her goals after high school? Does this school have enough plans for student mentors, internships, and community and parent engagement?

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Listening to Every Voice, continued

Eleven presentations, eleven “marking” periods—a long evening following a long day of work for most people. But almost everyone in the audience stayed to listen (in the language of their choice) and to give their input.

According to Principal Maras, “Many of the attendees had not been to our previous forums, so they were curious about what we’re doing. Also, the fast pace of the presentations kept folks focused; it was clear that they really wanted to know about each proposal.”

Input from the bubble sheets will be tallied and shared with the Blue Ribbon Panel, a small group that will be looking at the proposals and recommending five or six for final selection.

So what’s next for the EP&C committee? Martha says, “After the selection process, our committee will meet to discuss what the next steps should be in involving parents and community members in the development and refinement of Davis’ small learning communities.”

Building a Communications Plan

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has made communications planning assistance available through the services of GMMB, a national public affairs firm with a branch office in Seattle. Recently, the leadership team at Lincoln High School in Tacoma took advantage of GMMB’s expertise.

GMMB staffers Susan Byrnes and Joe Turcotte took the team through a process in which people identified and prioritized Lincoln’s community engagement target populations—parents, students, community leaders, and others. According to Steve Schain, grant coordinator at Lincoln, “It helped that Susan and Joe were familiar with the intent and language of the grants. We didn’t have to explain everything.”

The next step was to help the team identify appropriate messages for each target population and to ask questions such as: Are there some messages that are common to all groups? Which messages should be tailored and how?

Steve says, “We will use these messages throughout our communications process, which currently includes a parent support group, community meetings, focus groups, and newsletters.”

While the GMMB team also offered to edit written communication, suggest layouts, and assist in other ways, Steve said they were clear that “their major role is to assist with planning, not to actually create products.”

For more information about GMMB assistance, contact Susan Byrnes at 206/352-8598.

Including Parents, Community Members, and Students on Your Design Teams

In May, Mountlake Terrace High School (MTHS) completed a selection process that resulted in six small schools being selected for implementation in the fall of 2003. Each of these small schools has a design team that includes at least two parents and two students. According to Steven Gering, MTHS assistant principal, these individuals began attending meetings with their design teams in August.

Ken Cain, a parent volunteer, is enthusiastic about serving on the School of Global Inquiry’s design team for at least two reasons. First, he has an eighth grader who will be attending MTHS next year, and second, he hopes to bring a fresh perspective to the team.

“I can help our discussions stay grounded in the reality of the world outside school—which includes the importance of preparing students for the ‘next level’ without regard as to whether or not the curriculum is too tough,” Ken says, adding that he appreciates the way the teachers on his team ask for his opinion and then listen respectfully. He’s sold on the philosophy behind small schools—even a little envious that he won’t be able to attend one—and now feels able to answer other parents’ questions.

Involving Your School Board Early and Often

In a presentation titled “Ten Commandments of Public Engagement,” Tony Wagner suggests that you start with your school board and your teachers (Wagner, 2000). Most Gates grantee schools have spent many hours on teacher development; working with your board may be less comfortable, depending on your district culture.

School board members walk a fine line. They want to be kept informed, but most don’t want to be seen as micro-managers. Consider the following ways to keep them in the loop.

If possible, report your school’s progress to the board on a regular basis. For over a year now, Mariner High Principal Tracy VanWinkle (sometimes joined by Grant Coordinator David Broadhead) has made a brief monthly presentation to the Mukilteo School Board. According to David, these presentations are kept short with time allowed for questions. “Because the board hears from us frequently,” David says, “they can ask informed questions and then be better prepared to answer community concerns.”

Another suggestion: board members like to hear from parents, students and community members, so if your steering committee or planning/design teams include representatives from any of these groups, ask them to be presenters, too.

Some schools—in Tacoma and Yelm, for example—have already invited board members on site visits. It’s difficult to describe what personalized education really looks like which is why schools have been encouraged to take teachers to visit small

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TOOLS & RESOURCES

Architects of Achievement Offers Assistance

Is your district thinking about reconfiguring an existing school to support small learning communities? Or about building a new school with a design that incorporates what we know about personalization?

Architects of Achievement, a team of professionals committed to educational reform and housed in the Small Schools Project's offices, is ready to help educators, architects, and community leaders craft innovative school designs. Specializing in integrating the work of facility design into school reform, the firm's principals are equipped to assist with programming and occupancy issues associated with:

- **Bond Projects and Major Renovations.** Designing new schools and conducting major renovation projects with capital bond funds.
- **Retrofits.** Breaking schools into smaller learning communities, developing new schools using existing school facilities, and reconfiguring and optimizing existing space with limited funds.
- **Community Schools.** Procuring and adapting community facilities for educational use.

Just as coaches push athletes to levels of achievement they would not have been able to achieve on their own, Architects of Achievement helps school leaders craft design solutions that facilitate achievement for all students. They work to build capacity throughout the system, not just in the top levels of the organization, and help build bridges between big ideas about education and actual practice.

According to Director Victoria Bergsagel, "While facilities planning processes can and should be leveraged to enhance school reform, the building is not the change. Buildings allow for change. Buildings can even encourage change. Yet even the most enlightened new school building will not result in better instruction if the members of its community don't cultivate new skills, understandings and commitments."

The strategic advisors at Architects of Achievement have many years of public school experience. Their team offers educational programming and facilities excellence all in one package, with strong expertise in education, facilities planning and architecture. For more information, contact Victoria Bergsagel at 206/616-4950 or designingschools@attbi.com.

The building is not the change...

The building allows the change.



High school teachers share lesson plans during two-day October meeting.

TEACHING & LEARNING

Teachers Share Work in Collaborative Process

Last month, representatives from many Gates grantee high schools attended a two-day meeting at the Sea-Tac Hilton. The primary activity at the meeting was looking at teacher work in a collaborative setting. About 20 brave teachers brought work to share at small worktables, and *The Learning Network* asked one of them to comment on her experience.

Clover Park art teacher Linda Meo shared a lesson from her introductory-level art class. The lesson revolves around a still-life project that is based on the Mexican Day of the Dead. "I was hoping that the group would give me ideas about how to integrate the lesson beyond art," Linda explains, "and they certainly did."

After discussing her lesson with participants who teach other disciplines, Linda can now see a variety of integration possibilities. For example, because her lesson includes contour-line drawing (a right-brain technique), students might also have a science lesson on brain hemispheres and how they process information. Other teachers gave Linda ideas for integrating her lesson with social studies and foreign language.

While Linda did leave the meeting with her original question answered, she says the most important thing she learned through the collaborative process at her table was how to use her assessment rubric more productively.

"I give all my students copies of the rubric, but they should know it as well as I do," she says. "I need to call their attention back to it often as they are working on the project."

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Involving Your School Board, continued

schools around the country. Board members, many of whom may have attended traditional high schools, will benefit from this experience, too.

Explore other ways to involve your board members, as appropriate to your district size and culture. In Stevenson-Carson, a board member facilitated several of the school's focus groups. In Yelm, a board member sits as a non-voting member on the high school's planning committee.

When you have community meetings, consider sending special invitations to board members. Make sure they see the results of your focus groups. In other words, treat them as critical stakeholders in the community engagement process.

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, 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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Design Days Still Open

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.

December 19, February 20, March 20
April 17, May 15

New Publication Addresses Small Schools Cost

Are small schools cost effective? A research team addresses this question in a newly published 32-page booklet titled "Dollars & Sense: The Cost Effectiveness of Small Schools," jointly sponsored by Concordia, KnowledgeWorks Foundation, and the Rural School and Community Trust. To order a free copy, log on to www.kwfdn.org.