

The Learning Network

A Newsletter for Washington State High Schools that Receive Gates Reinvention Grants

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Making College Access Real

A frequent comment from educators and parents alike is that not everyone needs to, or should, go to college. That may be true, on several levels, but that choice is properly an individual and/or family choice, not the school's decision.

As Deborah Wilds of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation observes, "No student has a true choice until she's been accepted into a college."

Small schools that are clearest about college access include four key components in their approach: expectations, commitment, pervasiveness, and imagination. The first three are the direct responsibility of the adults in the school.

Expectations aren't simply about general descriptions ("We're a college prep school") or exhortations ("You can all do this"), though they play a part. Expectations have their roots in each adult's deep-seated belief in the possibility for each student we work with. It is behaving every day as if college enrollment is a *presumption* for every student, not a possibility.

It is translating "All kids can learn at high levels" to "You can learn this difficult topic, and you can succeed at this, even though you've never done anything this hard before"—and meaning it with every student.

Commitment means taking personal responsibility for helping kids learn. Adults who work in schools bear a special obligation to make learning engaging to students, and possibilities real. Those adults acquire, through their commitment to a student, the moral authority to ask for more and better from the student.

Commitment also buys time—four or five years, not six weeks, or the first few months of a school year. Good small schools are places where genuinely high expectations and deep personal commitment to the success of individual students are hallmarks of their environment.

Expectations and commitment must also translate into practical actions. Being certain that each student meets at least the

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SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Kittitas Eliminates Low-Level Classes

When Doug Maynard became principal at Kittitas High School four years ago, one of the first things he noticed were the twenty-six juniors and seniors—over half the school's 11th and 12th graders—taking business math. The students were taking the low-level math class as their second math class, a necessary requirement to graduate from Kittitas.

The Kittitas staff talked a lot that year about what changes they would need to make to prepare their students to pass the 10th grade math WASL, which strongly emphasizes algebra and geometry. "We realized that algebra had become the class to weed out those students who were going to college and those who weren't," says Doug.

That spring, Doug and his colleagues attended the first high school meeting hosted by the Gates Foundation where they heard Kati Haycock from The Education Trust. "She talked about how kids learn more by being challenged in higher-level classes and that they are more likely to succeed in college. We also learned that about 75 percent of all 8th graders in the nation said they planned to attend college."

The Kittitas staff surveyed their own 8th graders and learned, to their surprise, that 85 percent of their own students intended

to go to college. This information, coupled with their earlier discussions about math achievement in their school, led to meetings with key stakeholders in the community to discuss eliminating low-level classes.

While parents and other community leaders were also surprised at the strong interest in attending college that Kittitas students had expressed, they agreed with the school's staff that eliminating low-level courses made sense for their students.

"We decided if we were serious about graduating all kids so that they were prepared to go to college, if they wanted, that we had to eliminate our low-level classes," says Doug.

As Doug and the teachers began the process of eliminating low-level core classes, they also implemented other structural changes to support their efforts. They started by blocking English and history courses and eliminating basic English composition and business English. Two years ago, they eliminated low-level math classes and last year started teaching integrated math.

According to Doug, the staff is already seeing results from their hard work: students who would have been placed in the low-level classes are getting better grades; more students are taking a third year of math; and more students are choosing to attend four-year colleges over two-year institutions.

The Learning Network

COLLEGE ACCESS

Teacher and Student Attitude Changes Support College Readiness

Ensuring college readiness for all students has resulted in attitude changes on the part of both teachers and students, according to Candace Gratama, a researcher from Fouts & Associates who spoke at the October high school grantee meeting hosted by the Gates Foundation. Candace presented data from a recent study of Achiever high schools.

According to Candace, the schools are using the following strategies to prepare and encourage students to attend college:

- ◆ Using advisory or other forums to have discussions about college
- ◆ Requiring students to research and apply to colleges as part of their course requirements
- ◆ Eliminating lower-level courses
- ◆ Increasing the number of core courses required for high school graduation

The study included focus groups that asked teachers and students about their attitudes toward college readiness (see below) and also asked students what recommendations they would have to increase college attendance.

Changes in Teacher Attitudes about College

Fall 2001

“If every kid got a college education, the economy as we know it would collapse.”

“Students do not know how to make good decisions, and parents do not value college.”

Winter 2003

“My expectation is not that all students will go to college, but they will be eligible if they want to go.”

“We stress they can do it academically.”

Changes in Student Attitudes about College

Fall 2001

“Teachers, to be honest, don’t care if we go to college.”

“Students need to take responsibility; teachers aren’t going to give it.”

Winter 2003

“Teachers encourage us to talk about college.”

“This makes kids realize they need to do something to get into college.”

*Data courtesy of
Fouts & Associates*

Candace concluded her presentation, which can be found at www.smallschoolsproject.org, with the following questions for participants:

- ◆ What do teachers in your small school believe about college?
- ◆ Do students believe they can attend college?
- ◆ Have teacher and/or student beliefs changed over time? Why?
- ◆ What needs to happen to make more teachers believe college is a reality for their students?

Did you know...

Only 32 percent of all students leave high school with the minimum qualifications required to attend four-year colleges.

Manhattan Institute for Policy Research

Nearly half of all college students are required to take remedial courses during their first year.

The Education Trust

Minimum College Entrance Requirements for Washington’s Public Baccalaureate Institutions

Do your school’s graduation requirements align with the below admissions requirements? If not, how will you ensure that all students graduate college ready?

Below are the current minimum high school core requirements:

- ◆ Four years of English (three must include literature composition)
- ◆ Three years of math, including algebra, geometry, and advanced math
- ◆ Three years of social studies
- ◆ Two years of the same foreign language
- ◆ Two years of science, including one full year of lab science (Note: Beginning in 2010, students must have two years of lab science)
- ◆ One year of fine or performing arts, or electives from any of the other required courses

The Higher Education Coordinating Board is required by law to establish minimum requirements for admission to Washington’s public baccalaureate institutions.

They say...

“I see this as community-based learning where students are doing real and meaningful projects as community service. It is students as citizens of Coupeville.”

*Mark Gale, Teacher
Coupeville High*

“After 10 years of mentoring high school students, I still think there’s nothing more rewarding than these school projects. You get to make such cool inter-generational connections. And I think the kids on this project will find that the GIS mapping skills they are learning will be useful for the rest of their lives.”

*Rob Harbour, Manager
Ebey’s Landing National
Historical Reserve*

“A lot of what kids do at school doesn’t seem real to them. With our junior projects, we’re seeing some really excited students.”

*Rod Merrell, Teacher
Coupeville High*

“Even if what I’m doing [in this project] has nothing to do with the career I choose, this is a good experience because I’m learning new skills. And I know that colleges and scholarship people want to see you’ve had lots of different experiences.”

*Kathryn Meyer, Student
Coupeville High*

Coupeville Students Boost College Readiness While Supporting Community

Giving students the opportunity to do real work is part of Coupeville High’s integrated American history/literature block for juniors. The community benefits. The teachers help kids focus on important skills. And the students believe their participation will support both college acceptance and readiness.

English teacher Rod Merrell says, “Since seniors will be required to do a large project, we thought juniors should have some project experiences first.” History teacher Mark Gale continues, “We wanted projects that had historical and research components. Fortunately, we live in an historically significant community.” So Mark and Rod asked ten community groups or individuals to come pitch ideas to the approximately 50 students.

Community requests included one from Greenbank Farms which needed help researching archives and then creating exhibits and displays for its upcoming 100th anniversary. The new owner of San De Fuca School House, last used in the 1930’s, needed students to interview school alumni (now in their 70’s and 80’s) and prepare an oral history video. Park rangers at Fort Casey State Park needed help restoring a century-old gun battery. Other requests were equally interesting and “real.”

Then students ranked projects in terms of their interest, and most received either their first or second choice. They do their fieldwork on Tuesday mornings from 8 to 11 (the school has a modified block schedule), and also have portfolio requirements and journals to keep.

Learning New Skills

Two students chose to work with Rob Harbour, Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve Manager. “I needed a product—a CD that will include an aerial map of our reserve and then allow you to click in to pictures and text about the many historical homes and buildings. But we’re a small organization without a lot of staff.”

Kathryn Meyer is one of the two students working on Rob’s project. “We’ve learned how to use a GIS mapping software program,” she says. “We’re doing research and finding old pictures and will be taking new pictures, too.”

Kathryn finds it refreshing to get out of the classroom, especially when she knows she’s creating something that people will actually use. “It kind of refocuses you,” she explains.

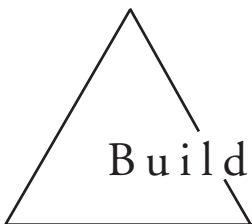
She also believes that project work in the community may help her in the future. She says, “Even if what I’m doing now has nothing to do with the career I eventually choose, this is a good experience because I’m learning new skills. And I know that colleges and scholarship people want to see that you’ve had lots of different experiences.”

Turning an Idea Into Reality

Student Zach Simonson-Bond agrees, although he did not choose one of the projects pitched by community members. Instead he proposed a new idea now called the Channel 10 project. His idea was accepted, and he and four other students are developing plans for a possible news class at Coupeville that would air a weekly news program on the area’s public access channel (Channel 10). The program would include high school news and announcements for parents and community members.

According to Zach, his team is now in the process of learning what it takes to turn an idea into reality—certainly a valuable life skill! They have visited another school district with a public access program and learned what equipment would be necessary. “But we still have to visit other stations, get help from the bank to write up budget estimates, learn how to write grants, and then eventually present our idea to the school board,” Zach explains.

“This is the biggest project I’ve ever done, but I’ll have projects this big in college and life,” he says. He says that it’s requiring him to work on his research and writing skills. And like Kathryn, Zach hopes that school admissions officials will note his efforts.



Building Family and Community Connections

From “Us and Them” to “We”

They say...

“I share the concern of other community leaders and business people here that too many of our kids head off west. We want them to see that there are opportunities right here in Yakima, that they can start their own businesses and make a living here, even a very good living.”

Kevin Johnson, co-owner of a Yakima photography studio, taught several photography sessions during Focus Week.

“I’m here because Yakima is where I live, where I pay taxes, where I vote, and where I intend to retire, and I see Yakima’s future in these wonderful kids. They’ll be voting and paying taxes and making decisions about things that will impact our community—as well as me personally, so I want them to be as savvy and smart as they can be about the real world.”

Rosemary Rief works for Northwest Harvest and was a company advisor to an IBA “company.”

“I talked to a number of the community members—parents and business people—who participated in Focus Week, and I know that for some, it changed their perceptions of our kids. I heard that one person said that if schools did more of this, they wouldn’t have any trouble passing levies.”

Martha Rice, Yakima School board member and Davis parent, attended some Focus Week events.

Community Plays Essential Role in Focus Week at Davis High

“I’m here because Yakima is my home, and these wonderful kids are our future,” said a community member and business woman who gave an entire week of her time to Davis High School’s Focus Week recently.

According to Principal Lee Maras, the primary purpose of the week, which took place after exams, was to allow each of the school’s four academies to provide learning experiences that would capture kids’ imaginations and foster relationships. “We’re trying to make the curriculum come alive for kids, to create real learning experiences,” he said.

Community in the Schools

A secondary benefit of Focus Week was the large number of community members who visited the campus. For example, the International Business Academy (IBA) conducted a week-long business simulation that brought at least 120 business people to the school.

Students divided into 33 companies (16 or 17 students in each with one teacher and one community member/company advisor), learning first hand how businesses operate and then making decisions for their respective companies.

According to Tom Robinson, IBA business and marketing teacher, another 90 to 100 business people judged three competitions, including marketing presentations, stockholders meetings, and a trade show. “We’ve just been amazed at people’s generosity both in time and donations,” he said, citing the 13 companies that provided prizes for a top three finish in six award categories, and financial assistance or in-kind gifts from 20 other businesses.

At a debrief at the end of the week, a number of community members commented on how impressed they were with the students’ participation. In the eight simulated companies made up of ESL students, their bilingual community advisors noted a strong increase in student self esteem as the kids proved they could be successful at the complex tasks involved.

Community members also contributed their time and expertise to Davis’ other academies: POWER, Arts and Humanities and Sun Valley. Students in Arts and Humanities had the opportunity to take a variety of courses—some of which were taught by community volunteers—including Japanese brush painting, photography, and electric guitar.

Students in the Community

In some cases, students went out into the community. Four teams of Arts and Humanities students spent time at a local elementary school directing fifth grade students in short plays that were then performed for first graders. “You’re doing and you’re learning, but it’s not boring,” said Arts and Humanities junior Nick Jensen.

In other off-campus events, Sun Valley Academy took groups of students to Central Washington University’s Chimposium, the local glass kiln, and the airport. Back on campus, Sun Valley students built rockets and a topographical model of the Yakima Valley.

All of POWER Academy’s 360 plus students received CPR and First Aid training during the week, causing staff members to quip that “Davis is now the safest place in Yakima to have a heart attack.”

Focus Week required Davis staff to put in a lot of extra work, and they’ll be reviewing its value. In the short run, however, most are feeling good about a week that paired real world learning experiences for many students with the increased involvement of many community members.

“Most of the time in school, you’re just practicing to do things, but this is real work. And you know why you’re doing what you’re doing and you can see results.”

Aaron Lewis, Academy of Arts and Humanities junior, worked with a small team from his academy directing a play for elementary students.

DISTRICT MATTERS

Supporting Rigor

Henry Foss High School Principal Sharon Schauss encountered a welcomed problem as she worked on staffing and schedule building. The good news was that enrollment requests in college-readiness courses—those courses which colleges routinely expect their applicants to have taken—had spiked.

Enrollment in science classes required for colleges was up by 83 percent over the previous year. Enrollment in math classes beyond Algebra I was up 70 percent over the year before. World language enrollment was up 30 percent. More students were requesting these “tough” courses—something Sharon saw as the first flowers of the Achiever school’s restructuring, occurring even before the school was to begin its small school implementation.¹

However pleased she was with what she saw, she was also worried. How could she use the staff she had to accommodate these new, aspiring students? Where would she find the teachers to offer these extra “college-ready” courses?

This “good problem” is happening in all the Achiever school systems. Following through on their grant commitments, Achiever middle schools have been developing college-mindedness among their students—getting each to chart a path leading to an Achiever scholarship. Even before setting foot on the high school campuses, many of these middle-schoolers visit college campuses—at least online, and often in person. They come to the high school with newly developed hopefulness that college is in the picture for them if they work hard—and take all the right classes.

The bad news part of it is serious: how *do* the Achiever schools adjust their teacher resources to accommodate these new needs? And—apropos of this column—how can central leadership support these schools and these aspiring kids?

There is, for sure, no silver bullet. What is required by way of central support is a willingness to work with principals to identify new staffing needs early and make the necessary personnel changes to assure that there are a sufficient number of teachers with the proper endorsements to offer the numbers of sections required for the growing population of college-minded students.

Often this will require courageous support of decisions to eliminate costly course offerings that are under-requested. We are learning that for many years comprehensive high schools have been structured in two tiers—offering a first-tier of courses for the college-bound students in their community and second for students for whom college is not in their plans.

¹ Washington’s sixteen Achiever high schools, funded by the Gates Foundation, have agreed as part of their restructuring work that all students will graduate college-ready.

It is in that second tier, which has for many years accommodated a less ambitious curriculum, where the difficulties lie. We hired teachers and created courses to meet the needs of what appeared to be a predictable number of non-college-bound kids. Those teachers—and the sections they teach—are a part of the schools’ staffing allocation. If personnel limitations require these courses to remain in the schools’ schedules, then students will be scheduled into them—in spite of their aspirations.

So, if it’s a good problem to have—this new demand for tough coursework—it is indeed a big problem, a tipping point for Achiever schools, and an opportunity for district leaders to support students profiting from the Achiever program by helping principals find ways to reallocate human resources to offer the courses kids need if they are to have the option to attend college.

Phasing out the traditional system of courses designed for the non-college bound will take time, and must, no doubt, be done in phases. Many teachers trained in the non-college-bound curriculum have a strong background in hands-on, project-based learning that they can bring to a new teaching assignment. Some might meet a need in another district high school. A small investment in additional staffing in an Achiever school might provide short-term support for the increasing number of college bound students while normal staff attrition occurs.

Solutions will occur one by one. It’s another critical time to remind yourself and those with whom you interact that this work is all about social justice—about giving *each* kid an opportunity to choose college. What’s critical is to not short change this new group of ambitious students.

John McGean was a high school principal and an assistant superintendent before joining the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative. He can be reached at jmcgean@comcast.net.

RESOURCES YOU CAN USE

Planning Resources for Teachers in Small High Schools: A Focus on College Access

College access is different from college-readiness in that it refers to more than just the students’ preparedness to attend college in terms of high school coursework. College access encompasses the multiple dimensions of support that should be in place between and among the school, the family, and the community to prepare students for the college experience.

Planning Resources for Teachers in Small High Schools includes practical tools, school profiles, sample classroom activities, and critical readings. Copies of the *Planning Resources*, which focus on college access, were distributed to schools last spring. It is also available to download for free from our website at www.smallschoolsproject.org. You can also purchase additional bound copies by contacting Craig Lucero at clucero@u.washington.edu or 206/616-0303.

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7900 East Greenlake Drive North, Suite 212
Seattle, WA 98103
www.smallschoolsproject.org

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Making College Access Real, *continued*

minimum core requirements that your state colleges and universities require for admission. Not permitting students to take no math after tenth grade, when you know such a decision will almost certainly mean taking a remedial course if they go to college.

Pervasiveness simply means that universal and particular expectations and commitment are everywhere in the school. College access isn't only the responsibility of the college counselor. The responsibility rests with every adult. Each adult is responsible for each student's learning.

The power of *imagination* rests primarily with each student. Students—especially students who are known as “first generation college-goers”—need to be able to imagine themselves as college students, to look at and talk with college students and say, “That could be me.” They need opportunities to visit college campuses and say, “I could come here” or better yet, say, with justifiable self-confidence, “I belong here.”

Adults play a key role by working to ensure that students have enough real opportunities to draw on their imaginations to raise their personal aspirations and expectations. It means building in visits to college campuses, inviting college students into the school as guest speakers, arranging for students to take college courses and then encouraging every student to do that while they're in high school.

In the end, however, the most important component is the individual and collective decision to make college access central to a school's mission, and the individual and collective commitment to follow through on that decision.

Rick Lear, Director

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Mary Beth Lambert, Editor Phone: 206/685-5236 E-Mail: mlambert@u.washington.edu
Craig Lucero, Editorial Assistant Phone: 206/616-0303 E-Mail: clucero@u.washington.edu
Chris Florez, Design/Layout Phone: 206/543-8362 E-Mail: cflorez@u.washington.edu