

The Learning Network

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

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More Personalization Calls for Improved Data

Mid-year in schools is a major checkpoint. How are we doing, and what do we need to examine and change for next year? One of the apparent contradictions in moving to small schools is this: as schools become smaller and more personalized, the need for reliable data—and a commitment to using it becomes more important.

In today's jargon, such a statement is "counter-intuitive." If we know our students well, why does data matter so much? Answers exist at several levels.

At one level, we want data to demonstrate that this change, which places enormous demands on everyone involved, makes a difference in student achievement and is leading to more equitable results. Such a reason is especially important in the earliest stages of this transition from large-school to small-school philosophy.

We are, all of us, aware of what we seem to be giving up, but often not yet clear about what we'll gain. We also know we won't see much broader levels of student accomplishment for several years—thus, the attention to "early indicators," such as better

attendance, declining discipline issues, lowered failure rates, and changes in course-taking patterns.

At another, perhaps more important level, good data helps to leaven what John Merrow has called our "irrational attachment" to our students. Teachers who experience the benefits of a deeper level of personalization typically become more protective of their students as they become more committed to them.

While we don't want teachers who are neutral about their students learning and success, we do need, more than ever, teachers who are *objective* about their students' learning. It is clarity about what students need as well as who they are that brings to bear the power of personalization and legitimizes the need for small school autonomies.

As schools move deeper into personalizing relationships, we hope each school also devises ways to gather, analyze, and use data in ways that serves the school and its students well.

Rick Lear, Director

PERSONALIZATION

Mariner's LEAP Academy Implements SOC Protocol

LEAP Academy staff recognized early on that when you're in the middle of a complex conversion process (and you still have to teach the same number of courses and students), you can't do everything.

"There's just so much going on, it feels overwhelming, so we decided to set three priorities for the year," explains Susan Songstad, LEAP teacher leader. "They include: building relationships with our kids, creating academy identity, and Pre and Post Mastery Scheduling."

In order to build relationships, focusing on students of concern was an idea the staff really wanted to implement, but the question was: how to do that effectively when they have little time together. That was when Karol Gadwa, Small Schools Coaches Collaborative coach, introduced a protocol called Students of Concern (SOC) that she had used in her previous experience as a teacher and principal.

The protocol, which Karol has now facilitated three times for LEAP staff, involves individual teachers identifying students they are concerned about. Then other teachers have the chance to add their concerns.

"Sometimes it's really comforting to know that you're not the only one with a concern about a particular student," says Susan. "And other times, we'll find that there's one teacher for whom that kid is doing well academically or behaviorally. Then we may be able to learn something helpful about what that teacher is doing that seems to be working."

The protocol, which needs a facilitator, moves on to action steps and doesn't allow the group to spend a whole period talking about one student and leave the others for a future session. By focusing on just the facts, 10 to 15 students can be covered in a 45 to 60 minute time period. The protocol also includes an FYI time when teachers can share something about a student that others need to know as well as a time for success stories.

Teachers sharing with each other is one thing, but Karol Gadwa stresses that confidentiality is critical, so one protocol norm is that nothing that is said during SOC leaves the room. Passages (advisory) teachers usually fill out SOC action plans about their students, but these forms are primarily just boxes to check.

"It's also really important for teachers to know when they need to pass their concerns on to someone else—a counselor or

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administrator, for example,” says Karol, adding that teachers should be careful not to carry on e-mail discussions about confidential student concerns.

Determining action steps—who will do what next—is an important part of the SOC discussion. Often the Passages teacher takes on responsibility, unless it’s an issue that needs to go to a counselor. However, actually taking those steps is the challenging part, according to Susan, primarily because of the time involved.

“Our hearts are in the right places—we all *want* to talk at length with that kid in our Passages class or to call their parents, but at

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our next SOC meeting, which always starts with follow-up, we often have to admit that we haven’t had the time,” she says. “We’re hoping to move to block scheduling in the future, which will give us fewer daily preps and more time to follow-up with these students.”

Even with this frustration, Susan values the opportunity to share student concerns with her colleagues. And she values what she learns from them. “Every so often you learn something huge about a kid from another teacher,” she says. “For example, a parent has died, or they have some other really hard circumstance in their life and you go, ‘Wow, no wonder...!’ Some behaviors you’ve noticed suddenly make sense.”

Foss’s Academy #1 Develops Personalization Strategies

Recently, Francey Joslin, a teacher in Henry Foss’s Academy #1, took time to sit down with a 9th grader and ask the simple question, “What’s going on?” She describes his response, “The fountain wouldn’t stop. He has a difficult family history.”

Francey’s conversation with the student resulted from a process that the Academy #1 teachers have developed to provide personalization. “Although we haven’t been able to implement advisories this year,” she explains, “we didn’t want to wait to advocate for our kids.”

She says, “When we looked at how we could use our time together, we decided we would talk about kids. In our meetings, we list and share our concerns about individual students, as well as their successes. We use what we now call the Student Staffing Worksheet but intend to tweak this to make it more useful. Then one of us may volunteer to follow-up with a particular student.”

“The volunteer is usually someone who already has a connection to the student,” she continues, explaining that she followed up with the student above because she had had a conversation with his guardian grandmother.

After listening to the student, Francey talked with him about topics on the worksheet, including his preferred learning style, academic performance, and outside interests. Then, after asking him how much he was willing to share with other teachers, she helped him set up a student-led conference with all his teachers.

“The whole experience was really empowering for the student,” she reports. “He showed me his last progress report, and he is now doing better in all his classes but one.”

Francey believes “lots of kids would love to do this” and that most teachers thrive on such success stories, but she sees time as a real obstacle to repeating it for every student. In the example above, she spent half an hour with the student originally, then called his grandmother and spent 45 minutes in the student-teacher conference.

Time is also an issue in student staffing discussions, Francey says. “We need to learn how to bring up something and not get

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sidetracked with our own stories.”

Because the Academy #1 staff includes more than 20 teachers and not all work with each student they need to talk about, the staff is considering breaking into smaller groups during their discussions.

While she and her colleagues struggle with the challenge of how to provide personalization to all students, Francey finds real value in student staffing discussion for a second reason. “It’s personalization for the staff. You get to see how your colleagues think and work, and you begin to understand them better,” she concludes.

For more information about either of the protocols mentioned in this article, please contact your Gates coach.

Teachers finding effective ways to talk together about students can translate into higher levels of accountability, as illustrated by these quotes:

Teacher: “It’s harder for kids to fall through the cracks. We observe problems and then we come together and talk about individual kids so we can figure out how to help them.”

Student: “[The teachers] really care about us. My teacher knows when I’m doing good or not.”

*Small Schools: Great Strides
A Study of New Small Schools in Chicago*

They say...

“Our parent participation increased dramatically, from 10 to 20 percent at the traditional open house to 75 to 80 percent at the student-led conferences.”

*Lowell Thomson, Teacher
Experience Academy*

“When students are well prepared over an extended period to tell the story of their own success (or lack thereof), they seem to experience a fundamental shift in their internal sense of responsibility for that success. The pride in accomplishment that students feel when they have a positive story to tell and tell it well can be immensely motivational. The sense of personal responsibility that they feel when anticipating what it will be like to face the music of having to tell their story of poor achievement can also drive them to productive work.”

*Rich Stiggins
Phi Delta Kappan, Nov. 1999*

“From a parent’s point of view, just listening to my boys talking about their goals was a good experience. I heard things I’d never heard before.”

*Patti Maltsberger, Parent
Experience Academy*

Foster’s Experience Academy Boosts Parent Participation with Student-Led Conferences

A number of Gates grantee high schools—including Foster’s Experience Academy—are implementing some form of student-led conferences. It’s a way to provide personalization to families as well as students. The Learning Network talked to Lowell Thomson, Experience Academy teacher leader, and parent Patti Maltsberger.

Lowell, why did Experience Academy make the move to student-led conferences?

We had several reasons. We wanted to change the somewhat negative way many of us (parents, teachers, and students) view student conferences. We hoped that the conferences would increase students’ responsibility for their performance. And we also hoped to increase parent participation.

Did you see those changes?

Certainly we were pleased with the increase in parent participation. We usually see about 10 to 20 percent of our parents at traditional open houses, and we estimate between 75 and 80 percent showed up for these conferences.

As far as the students go, results were mixed. Some initially resisted the process because it requires more work from them. But many of them really stepped up and did the work, and feedback we collected afterwards showed that the majority felt that it was worth it.

How did you prepare your students?

We did this through our advisories. We gave students a checklist of what they needed to include in their portfolios—things like grade sheets, goal setting worksheets, etc. We really wanted them to take a look at how they were doing academically—and why—because often students don’t do enough reflecting. We gave them time for this in advisories.

What did the conferences look like and do you plan to hold them again?

We set up times with parents over two days between 5 and 8 p.m. When they came in,

they sat with their student at individual tables in my room, and the student presented his or her portfolio while I moved around the room, stopping in conferences when needed.

We’re looking at another round of student-led conferences in the spring, and it’s possible we’ll do a little tweaking. We did ask parents for feedback and one of the things some mentioned was that they would like to have more time with the teacher. In these cases, we’ve made sure they have the opportunity to set up time with us.

Any other thoughts, Lowell?

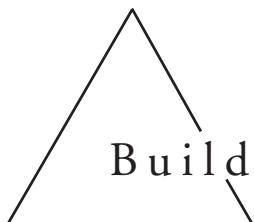
Student-led conferences can mean a lot of extra work, especially the first time, when it’s new to everyone—teachers, students, and parents. But I think it will be easier this next time. We won’t have to do as much coaching, as students know what to expect.

Patti, you have two sons in the Experience Academy. What did you think about the student-led conferences?

I wasn’t sure what to expect, at first. But it was a good experience for me as a parent. When we came in, we got a handout that told us to listen to the students’ presentations before we started asking questions. That was a good suggestion, because I heard things I’d never heard before.

How was the experience for your boys?

At first, they weren’t sure what to think either, because it was extra work. But I think it helped them to take ownership for their academic performance and focus on what they needed to do. And I can say that one has definitely worked harder on his studies since the conference.



Building Family and Community Connections

From “Us and Them” to “We”

They say...

Mariner High School (Mukilteo) has reorganized into six small schools called academies. The following quotes about academy life and personalization are reprinted from the school newsletter, The Compass, Winter 2004.

“It’s totally awesome. We get to know each other better, and we understand each other better. The academies put a bunch of people together who might not have been together before, because they have common interests. I believe I’m getting a better education. I come to school more because I *want* to come to school. It’s a lot calmer here. It’s not as hectic as my old high school.”

*Krystal, Sophomore
LEAP Academy*

“I see teachers working together more than I’ve ever seen before to improve their lessons, but also to help students. They will talk about a particular student—asking one another, ‘What can I do to help him?’ I think that’s a sign of how teachers are connecting more to students.

And teachers and students don’t just talk about lessons. They talk on a much more personal level. I see much stronger relationships.”

*Janet Wheeler, French Teacher
ICAT Academy*

“You could never get to know everyone in the whole school, but you really get to know a lot of people in your academy. Your teachers have a real interest in you—they don’t look at you as being just ‘one more student.’”

*Karina, Sophomore
ICAT Academy*

Coaches Share Personalization Stories

Many of the Gates grantee coaches used to teach in small schools. The Learning Network asked several of them to recall what personalization meant to them. Because they had so much to say, we had to edit their remarks, but clearly, knowing kids and being known was what they loved most about teaching.

A Journey of Exploration

When I was talking with students I was advising, I would typically meet with the student with her/his folder in front of us, and it became initiating “content” for our conversations. But what the interchange was really about was where the conversation went from there. That requires looking the person in the eye and going on a journey of exploration into their life and what makes them tick.

It was my authentic interest in who that person was, and what their deeper drivers were, that allowed me to get closer to knowing them. The more conversations I had, the better I learned how to do it.

My sense is that it takes a minimum of three years before a classroom teacher can really “learn” how to become a good advisor. The students were my teachers.

Chuck Estin

The Glue of Life-Long Learning

In our small school, our advisories were called “families,” and every adult in the building was in one, including all the classified staff. We learned that classified folks, who teamed with teachers and were considered equals in our families, often saw kids in a different light and could be their strongest advocates.

As the principal, I was in a family, too, and found it to be an invaluable experience for several reasons. One, it gave me a chance to get to know kids—and their families—in depth, without being in that authoritative, discipline-related position. And two, it helped me to understand the teachers’ concerns with their family classes. When an issue came up, I would know what they were talking about because I was probably struggling with it, too.

In my experience, personalization is the glue for long-term and life-long learning, and this always happened best for me during fieldwork trips and when I would camp out with students. Nature is a great equalizer! When you’re weary from fending off giant mosquito attacks, titles and degrees are meaningless. I learned more in three days from and about these students than I could have in four years in a traditional academic setting.

Karol Gadwa

Leaders Going First

When I was a teacher, I found it really important to let kids know who I was. After all, I was the leader, and leaders go first. If we want kids to do something, we need to go first. Of course, it’s not about unloading our stuff on kids. We’re the adults and we need to be intentional and explicit in the way we share our lives.

What happens is that when we respect kids enough to share appropriately with them, they are more likely to share with us.

Whether a school has advisories or not, I believe we should attend to personalization in everything we do. In our small school, one of the ways we learned about kids was through enrollment interviews, but even in the regular classroom, there are lots of ways to gather information about your students—through the curriculum, surveys, activities, etc.

Who you are is always more important than what you do—and if we’re going on this learning journey together, we have to get to know each other first.

Susan Westlund

DISTRICT MATTERS

A Rationale for Personalizing

Aleta Konkol, academy principal of the Arts & Humanities Academy at Todd Beamer High School, worked with her faculty to prepare each of their students for the first round of student-led conferences, where students use their best work to explain to their parents (and faculty advisor) their progress in achieving their learning goals. Participating in this Federal Way district-wide innovation required the new academy to make decisions about the work to be included in the student portfolios, the body of evidence for these inaugural student-led student-parent-teacher conversations.

Now, they are beginning a more important conversation—deciding what student work will be included in each senior’s final portfolio to be presented and defended in their last student-led conference before graduating. Currently a grades 9 through 11 start-up school, the academy’s first graduation ceremonies are set for June 2005.

By engaging in this conversation, they are recognizing two important things. They understand their new academy’s success will be judged by the capabilities of their graduates, evidenced by the work they do. They also understand that these noteworthy capabilities must be achieved by each and every graduate. Not just the top students; each and every one. It’s lofty visioning.

And it is right on target with the vision of educational reform described in WAC 180-51-001, the only piece of current law that makes my short list of most-inspirational, bedside reads.

This WAC (180-51-001) asserts, “**The state is shifting from a time and credit-based system of education to a standards and performance-based education system.**” It goes on to say “Certain ways of thinking about time must shift in order to support the on-going implementation of school reform,” and then offers a vision of a hoped-for state school system, one that understands:

- “No references to grade levels or linking a student’s educational progress to a particular age. Instead, learning is viewed in terms of developmental progress.
- While the curriculum may be sequential the student moves through it at her or his developmental pace, regardless of age.
- A student’s grade point average and performance on the Washington assessment of student learning do not provide a complete picture of the student’s abilities and accomplishments.
- Education and learning are about connected learning experiences, which can and do occur inside and outside the physical boundaries of a school building.
- Students do not all learn in the same way (there are multiple learning styles), that teachers do not all instruct in the same way (there are multiple teaching styles and

“The state is shifting from a time and credit-based system of education to a standards and performance-based education system. Certain ways of thinking about time must shift in order to support the on-going implementation of school reform.”

WAC 180-51-001

strategies), and these facts suggest that it should be possible to assess students’ performance and achievement in multiple ways *while maintaining common, high expectations and standards for learning.*”

Underpinning the vision is an insistence that our expectations for student learning must be higher than ever before *and* they must be met by *each student*. From a traditional perspective, this makes no sense. Time centered schooling emphasizes a taught-curriculum and results in stratified student achievement—nearly universally predictable by race and affluence.

But the state vision of educational reform resolves the paradox—and offers a rationale for personalizing learning. If students’ learning, illuminated by the work they do, is at the center of things, then it is crucial that *the learning environment is overtly focused on the mind of each learner.*

Teachers need to know each of their kids well enough to know what’s on their minds—and in their minds. They need to talk with the other teachers the student has, to find better ways to make rich learning happen. Students need to know the performance targets and where they are in relationship to them. They need to be taught to understand their own thinking patterns and to communicate their learning to others.

As they develop the defining performances of their graduates, Aleta and her faculty will have a common understanding of the required capabilities of an Arts & Humanities Academy graduate. They will be clear about the target. And they have created a personal learning environment to assure each student hits it.

They are small enough to sit in a circle, talk about their kids, and plan programs for them. They will continue to engage their kids in learning experiences that produce products illuminating their capabilities—shared in the biannual student-led conferences. They have extended blocks of time to watch their students learn, and time to meet regularly with their advisees.

A school like this stands a very good chance of realizing the vision of high achievement for each kid. And it’s worth noting that much of the impetus for its performance-based learning model rose from student-led conferences—a district-mandated and supported innovation.

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TOOLS YOU CAN USE

Two New Websites Invite Browsing

The Small Schools Project and Architects of Achievement recently launched new websites to support you in your efforts to create personalized, rigorous small schools.

Small Schools Project (www.smallschoolsproject.org). Our new site is loaded with relevant research about the benefits of small schools, tools to help you get started, and recent findings from our study of conversion high schools in Washington State.

As you begin to explore our new site, we'd suggest you start with the *Tailored Guides*, which can be accessed from the home page. We've created four guides—each designed especially for principals, teacher leaders, teachers, and parents and community members—to help you navigate our site and find resources just for you.

Other points of interest include:

Tools – This section includes tips and guidelines to help you facilitate meetings, protocols to use when you look at student work, and community members.

This section also includes classroom resources from the quarterly *Planning Resources for Teachers in Small High Schools* that are sent to principals, grant coordinators, and teacher leaders.

Small Schools in Action – This section highlights what is happening with small schools in Washington State and nationally. It includes excerpts from recent Small Schools Project newsletters about the progress being made by Washington's high schools (from Dayton to Clover Park) to create small schools.

Architects of Achievement (www.archachieve.org). If you are planning to build or remodel schools, you will want to check out this site. It showcases a number of principles, strategies, and design considerations for “right-sizing” schools as well as real-world examples of well-designed school spaces.

Architects of Achievement is a Seattle-based group that provides facilities design expertise and educational program planning services to school districts. Its goal is to create bridges between curriculum design and architecture, resulting in schools that produce measurably better outcomes for all.

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