

# The Learning Network

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

OCTOBER 2003 ISSUE 3, VOLUME 2

## An Opportunity and a Call to Action

Those of us at the Small Schools Project and Coaches Collaborative lost a valued colleague last month. Nancy Mohr, a retired New York City small school principal who had worked with our coaches every month for the past two years, died unexpectedly of a cerebral hemorrhage on September 18.

Some of you will remember Nancy from summer institutes, or from her visits to your schools as she “shadowed” our coaches, or from her presence at last May’s high school meeting. Others may recall that Nancy co-authored the long article in the September issue of *The Learning Network*. Our sadness at Nancy’s death is all but inexpressible.

Personally, I mourn the loss of a close friend, as well as a colleague. Over more than a dozen years, Nancy and her husband Alan became deeply woven into the fabric of my wife’s and my lives, and we into theirs. School reform was the immediate connection for us, when Nancy was the principal of University Heights High School and Alan of Satellite Academy, both members of the Coalition of Essential Schools, and Pat and I were researchers at CES.

Over time, as happens with friendships, that work connection was but one part of a complex and fascinating history the four of us built together. Our friendship was filled with passion, much laughter, moments of exhilaration and of disappointment, of vacations together, birthdays, weddings, births, movies, shopping, food, cooking together, changing jobs, and, for Nancy, retirement as a principal and the beginning of a new career as a consultant. Because Nancy had overcome a battle with cancer, and had been in remission for some time, many who loved her had come to view her as invincible.

Whatever else we did over the years, talk always started or ended or circled back on our work. By chance, this issue of *TLN* begins what will be an ongoing discussion of equity, the deepest and most abiding of Nancy’s passions.

Like most of us, Nancy was sometimes confused about equity, and uncertain about how to proceed. But she thought deeply about equity and the particular responsibility schools play in

*continued on last page*

## TEACHING & LEARNING

### Strategies to Create Equity of Outcomes

The term “equity” means different things to different people. Many interpret the word to mean *providing an equal opportunity*.

At the Small Schools Project, when we talk about equity, we are interested in ensuring *equity of outcomes*, as well as *equity of access*. For us, teaching for equity means providing each student with what he or she needs individually to meet the standards the school has set for all students.

In a time when the expectations are that schools will serve all students well, not just some of them, we believe giving everyone the same treatment and resources is inadequate, as well as disrespectful. Instead, we are committed to serving the individual needs of *each student*, while ensuring that *all students* graduate from high school prepared for college.

Teachers in Washington schools have begun to talk about equity of outcomes, discuss what the phrase means at their school, and the implications for teaching and learning. Following are strategies that schools are using to achieve educational excellence and equitable outcomes for every student. Teachers caution that this list should not be viewed as a checklist. Instead, these strategies must be used consistently and collectively over time.

- **Examine Your School’s Data**  
You will need to disaggregate your school’s data by grade-level, gender, race, and ethnicity to illuminate possible equity issues and begin to develop a plan of action. Are there differences between and among groups? Is there an achievement gap? What does your data tell you about the graduation rates, suspensions, and failures of different groups of students? Who is enrolled in low-level or advanced courses? Can you think of other ways to identify and sort students by “neutral” characteristics, such as income (using free and reduced lunch or zip code)?
- **Conduct Text-Based Discussions**  
Teachers in adult learning communities, such as book groups and Critical Friends Groups, read books and articles together about racism, classism, culture, and equity. They discuss what they read, challenge and push their own (and each others’) thinking, and become aware of hidden biases and assumptions.

*continued on page 2*

# The Learning Network

Here are a few texts being discussed in Washington schools:

*Fires in the Bathroom*

by Kathleen Cushman

*Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*

by Lisa Delpit

*Culturally Responsive Teaching*

by Geneva Gay

*We Can't Teach What We Don't Know*

by Gary Howard

*White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*

by Peggy McIntosh

*The Light in Their Eyes*

by Sonia Nieto

- **Engage in Self-Reflection and Examine Practice**

Does your classroom interactions with students differ depending on the student? During Seattle Public Schools' "Courageous Conversations," teachers were encouraged to consider the following partial list of behaviors and reflect on their own classroom practice to discover hidden biases:

- Wait times
- Eye contact
- Physical proximity to students
- Late work acceptance
- Checking for understanding
- Students known and addressed by name
- Questioning strategies/who is called on

- **Listen to Students and Parents**

A good place to begin thinking about equity is by asking students, perhaps during advisory or student focus groups, how they feel about their school experiences. Are their differences or similarities in the students' stories? How does your school ensure that different student voices are heard?

How does your school establish trust and mutual understanding with families? When families are discussed at school or you start planning family involvement activities, what does the staff say? This month's "Building Family and Community Connections" provides some useful suggestions.

**In order to teach you, I must know you.**

-Unknown

*Other People's Children*, Lisa Delpit

Teaching for equity requires deliberate effort from teachers and the school community that extends beyond good intentions. It requires gaining knowledge of equity resources through personal and professional development, allocating time to address equity issues as a staff, creating and implementing a plan to build an equitable school, and creating relationships with students and parents to ensure their input is heard on how to build an equitable school.

## Resources on Equity

The second volume of the *Planning Resources for Teachers in Small Schools*, which was mailed to schools this summer, contains resources, tools, and readings about teaching for equity.

You can also download these resources from our website at <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org> under "What's New."

*Teaching Diverse Learners*, a Brown University website which is included in the *Planning Resources*, offers resources on teaching and learning strategies, assessments, and working with families and communities. Check it out at <http://www.alliance.brown.edu/tddl>

*Diversity Within Unity*, a publication by the UW Center for Multicultural Education, contains a useful school assessment tool for individual and group reflection.

## SCHOOLS IN THE NEWS

**Congratulations to the following Gates grantee schools that received Federal Small Learning Community implementation grants:**

Clover Park High School

Davis High School

Lincoln High School

Port Angeles High School

Seattle Public Schools (Franklin, Nathan Hale, Roosevelt, and West Seattle high schools)

## They Said...

“You have to start somewhere, even if you don’t know each other’s language very well. The parents are really supportive of any attempt to speak their native language; it makes them feel you actually care about them and their children. It’s not necessary to be fluent, but it is necessary to show respect for their culture and their language.”

*Tamara Steen*

*Mabton Senior High Teacher*

“We’re not as quick to use excuses like, ‘Well, they don’t have a phone’ or ‘They don’t speak English.’ We’ll do what it takes to make contact, whether it’s getting translating help or making home visits, or holding evening sessions. We can make it work.”

*Keith Morris*

*Mabton Senior High Principal*

## Tools to Use Now

The February 2004 *Planning Resources* will include a comprehensive section called “Family and Community Connections.”

However, you will find the following tool on the Small Schools Project’s website [www.smallschoolsproject.org](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org) under the “What’s New” Section.

**Guidelines for Family-Friendly Schools: A Self Assessment.** Has your school created a supportive environment for families and community members? Use this questionnaire as a springboard for staff discussions.

## Understanding and Trust: Keys to Family Relationships at Mabton Senior High

*Located in a rural area southeast of Yakima, the Mabton School District has experienced the same demographic trends as many districts in Eastern Washington. In 20 years, enrollment has grown (from 187 in grades 7 to 12 to 380). The class of 1984 was 40% white and 60% Hispanic; the class of 2003 was 12% white and 88% Hispanic. More than 50% of all families speak only Spanish.*

*Unsurprisingly, studies show that families that speak little or no English and those with lower levels of education and income often feel uncomfortable in our buildings. The American high school—with traditions and history familiar to most teachers—is an intimidating place to them.*

*On September 3, the staff at Mabton High School held a barbeque on campus for students and their families. About 200 attended. When Principal Keith Morris commented about how comfortable students’ families seemed to be with the staff, The Learning Network asked him and English/Art teacher Tamara Steen for more details.*

## Laying the Foundations: Relationships are Key

**First, what was the purpose of the barbeque?**

**Keith:** We implemented advisories this fall, and we wanted our families to have a chance to meet their students’ advisors. We sent out invitations in English and Spanish. Then, at the barbeque, we set up tables so that, in most cases, advisors could sit with their advisees and families.

**Keith, you mentioned that families seemed to be more comfortable with the staff— something that doesn’t happen overnight. Can you and Tamara talk about this?**

**Keith:** Last spring the district held a Town Meeting where we closed down school and invited families and the community in to be part of a goal-setting process. I think a lot of people felt listened to and cared about. We also changed our parent conferences to evenings, making it easier for families to attend. It was our way of saying, “We’ll try to fit your schedules rather than making you fit ours.” The result has been a real increase in attendance.

Those are two activities I can point to, but for me the key word is “understanding.” As we’ve listened, we’ve gotten a deeper understanding of our families and that results in deeper trust. For example, we understand that if parents don’t show up at

an event, it’s not because they’re not interested. They may have lots of reasons they can’t be there.

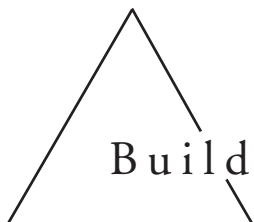
And we’re not as quick to use excuses like, “Well, they don’t have a phone” or “They don’t speak English.” We’ll do what it takes to make contact, whether it’s getting translating help or making home visits, or figuring out ways to hold evening sessions. We can make it work.

**Tamara:** My experience at the barbeque, as I met new families, was that some felt comfortable being there and some felt like strangers. I think comfort comes from multiple exposures. The more times you’re around someone, especially in informal ways, the more comfortable you feel, the more you begin to feel, “Oh, I know her.”

In my 20 years at Mabton, I’ve been the faculty adviser for a number of small clubs, so I’ve mentored lots of students over the years. As I’ve done this, I’ve gotten to know their families. I show up at their kids’ events, their kids talk about me at home, and over time, parents naturally feel more at ease with me.

The difference now, with our advisories, is that no student will go through high school without a teacher who offers this kind of support. And I’d say that before advisories, many of our students weren’t involved with an adult at school in any meaningful way.

*continued*



# Building Family and Community Connections

From “Us and Them” to “We”

## One Parent's Perspective

*A Boeing software engineer and parent of a junior at Cleveland High School, Sandra Jeffcoat shares thoughts on parent involvement.*

“Some people have decided that parents who don't come to things at the school don't care, but I don't buy that. Although I'm fortunate to be able to combine my job with volunteering, most parents can't for a variety of reasons.

So some of us at Cleveland have been thinking about ways to involve parents that don't require them to come to the school on weekdays, or maybe not at all. For example, parents could offer their homes as 'study halls' for one evening a week. They could serve on calling committees or as mentors to kids. We could develop parent clusters for the different languages so that people could share information that way.

Another thing we need to do more of is to take time to learn each others' cultures. At Cleveland, about 98% of the students are children of color. We need to reach out to one another and find ways to break down walls between us. It's nice to have some of these formal things like open houses, but you get to know people by talking to them.

When teachers and parents start talking and developing relationships, kids realize that they can't play the teachers and parents against each other. We become partners.”

*Once a teacher herself, Sandra recommends that teachers read Gary Howard's book, “You Can't Teach What You Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools,” as it addresses the importance of learning from historically disenfranchised student and family populations.*

## Understanding and Trust, *continued*

In my advisory, we sit around tables like a family. In fact, the kids already call themselves a family. I will do many of the same things with them that I do with my club kids—go to events with them, have them over to my house, etc.

Every kid needs a safe harbor, and as our advisories provide that, parents are going to hear about it, and feel that their kids are safe with us and that we are partners.

### **Tamara, we have to ask—how do you manage to communicate with your non-English-speaking families?**

**Tamara:** I've managed to learn a little Spanish (and some of my kids' families are trying to teach me more). Some families know a little English, and sometimes the student helps in translating.

The thing is, you have to start somewhere, even if you don't know each other's

language very well. The parents are really supportive of any attempt to speak their native language; it makes them feel you actually care about them and their children. It's not necessary to be fluent, but it is necessary to show respect for their culture and their language.

### **Keith, any final words?**

**Keith:** Something that was really neat about our barbeque was that our teachers brought their spouses and families. One teacher got to bring his new bride and introduce her. Others had their kids running around. People got to talk to each other about non-school topics. So while we didn't plan it this way, it was another touch that helped families see us in a different light, I think. When people get to see each other in a more relaxed setting, it builds that deeper trust and understanding I mentioned earlier.

## Reflecting on Our Assumptions: A Self-Assessment Activity

Actions and behaviors spring from beliefs—beliefs arise from our culture, upbringing and experiences. Reflective teachers examine their beliefs and assumptions honestly, thoughtfully, and frequently.

Here are a few questions from an activity called “Personal Reflection on Assumptions,” designed to help educators learn more about their personal assumptions and to reflect on the assumptions they feel are held by others. It is a private activity—to be completed individually.

- ◆ When families are discussed at our school, what do I say or think? What do others say? Do people comment that “those families” don't care about their children or their education?
- ◆ When we start planning family involvement/partnership activities, what do I say or think? What does the staff say? Do we hear more complaints (e.g., they don't come to conferences, don't check homework, etc.)? Or more compliments (e.g., they can always be counted on)?
- ◆ When a student has a problem, what is the assumed cause? Is it attributed to a family situation? To a school situation?
- ◆ When working with a student who has a problem, where and how are solutions sought? Do we assume that certain families will be easy or difficult to work with?

**To access the complete activity which includes additional questions and a Personal Action Steps/Statements section, check the “What's New” section of the website, [www.smallschoolsproject.org](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org).**

## STATE & DISTRICT SUPPORT

### District Matters

The success of school reform depends upon steadfast, deep support by district leaders. It is certainly not the only factor, but without district support, meaningful and permanent school restructuring won't happen. Individual schools—no matter how expertly piloted by visionary leadership, no matter how energetically developed by dedicated teachers—are ill equipped to sail solo the treacherous seas of being different and unfamiliar.

The painful reality is that this critical central support can be difficult for central leaders to offer in a “steadfast, deep” way. District leaders, however sympathetic to the work of individual restructuring schools in their care, are often forced (for various economies) to centralize district operations and create systems that promote uniformity.

After fourteen years as a school administrator—many of them spent championing reform initiatives, I had the opportunity to view schools from the district leader perspective—and came to an appreciation of how hard it is to support individual change while managing district systems. I recall my participation in a painful decision to create a uniform bus schedule for the district. As a district, we saved a chunk of change—\$500,000.

But as a result, four restructuring schools in the district (and I had been principal of one of them) were forced to dilute their established whole faculty study groups—the cornerstone of their restructuring implementation. The good of the whole took precedence over the needs of the few—and the restructuring schools lost out. The path of school reform is littered with the wreckage of hopeful plans that were successively compromised—and then abandoned for failing to deliver.

District leaders experience many other challenges in supporting their reforming schools. The adoption of text-based scope and sequence curriculum, for instance, and the central professional development to train all teachers to use it, diminish a school's capacity to chart its own curricular course. Pressure from parent groups to retain a broad menu of advanced courses for their students hog-ties significant restructuring. All these are daily pressures for district leaders.

So, what can be done?

First, it's critical for district leaders to be able to clearly articulate the reason why their schools are restructuring. Provide compelling evidence that schools as they are don't work for all kids. Beyond publishing annual school-wide WASL results, you can track—and publicize—WASL data disaggregated by ethnicity. Similarly, track data about the incidence of course failures, school dropouts, and participation in advanced coursework—all sorted by ethnicity.

Next, be clear about your commitment to the rigorous achievement of each student. If the sorting mechanisms that leave too many students behind are inextricably knotted into the fabric of

traditional schools, then be able to explain how your restructured schools offer the capacity for each student to succeed. Your fluency in the rationale of your schools' restructuring makes your support of it more understandable to others.

And, as you know, that is just a start.

This column will provide examples of district leadership in the case of school restructuring. We'll look at specific ways other districts have created policies and publicized their rationale for change. I invite your perspective and, of course, any tips you can relay to your fellow district leaders.

*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](mailto:jmcgean@comcast.net).*

## TOOLS YOU CAN USE

### Promising Curricular Resources and Pedagogical Practices Available

The third collection of *Planning Resources for Teachers in Small High Schools* addresses Performance Assessment: foundations, portfolios, rubrics, exhibitions; and Online Learning. Resources include practical tools, school profiles, sample classroom activities, and critical readings on these topics. Copies for the principal, grant coordinator and each teacher leader will be delivered to your school by your school coach(es) in late October.

All three collections of Planning Resources are available to download for free from our website under “What's New” at <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>. You can also purchase additional bound copies by contacting Craig Lucero at [clucero@u.washington.edu](mailto:clucero@u.washington.edu) or 206/ 616-0303.

#### Spring 2003

Advisories  
Project-Based Learning  
Literacy  
College Access

#### Summer 2003

Adapting Classroom Practice  
Teaching for Equity  
Integrating Curriculum

#### Autumn 2003

Performance Assessment  
Online Learning

### Planning Resources Presentation

*Small Schools Project* researchers, Cathy Wallach and Erin Thomas, are available to present the collections of *Planning Resources* and lead school staff members through activities to discover new tools to support their work. If you are interested in allocating a couple hours between October 27 and November 25 to learn more about resources for improving classroom practice, please contact your school coach.



7900 East Greenlake Drive North, Suite 212  
Seattle, WA 98103

[www.smallschoolsproject.org](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org)  
206/616-0303

## IN THIS ISSUE

### TEACHING & LEARNING

**Strategies to Create Equity of Outcomes**

### STATE & DISTRICT SUPPORT

**District Matters**

#### **An Opportunity and a Call to Action, *continued***

bringing about an equitable society—the “America as good as its promise” that the late Congresswoman Barbara Jordan spoke of so eloquently.

Nancy read about equity and wrote about it, she asked others about it, she struggled to turn abstract ideas into concrete practice that made a difference in the lives of both kids and adults. She was convinced that one more voice at the table was always a good thing. She changed her mind about strategies, was confounded at times about equity, as we all are, but found ways to be hopeful when many others of us were discouraged.

What Nancy never did, in the years I knew her, was lose faith. She believed in the deepest part of her that an equitable world, for all its complexity, would enrich and ennoble each of us. That such a world does not yet exist was, for Nancy, an opportunity—and a call to action. In the end, that is Nancy Mohr’s most enduring gift to us.

*Rick Lear, Director*

*The Learning Network* is a monthly newsletter written and produced by the Small Schools Project, which is based at the University of Washington College of 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)