

The Learning Network

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

SEPTEMBER 2003 ISSUE 2, VOLUME 2

Building Connections with Families and Communities

Our new school had been opened six days, and William, a sixth grader, was in my office at the end of the day, the alleged initiator of a pushing and shoving match with another sixth grade boy a couple blocks from school the day before. His mother and his advisor were present as well.

William had explained his version of events, and I had explained the competing version I had heard from other students. William, athletic and scholarly, looked anxiously at his mother and me as the silence stretched. Finally, William's mother spoke.

"I know my son," she said, looking directly at me. She turned to William as she continued, "In this case, I think William is telling us what he thinks we want to hear ..."

During that moment, and more so the years since that meeting, her "I know my son" has acquired considerable symbolic importance to me. In that simple statement, William's mother both accepted an offer and issued a challenge.

The offer was from us, made during our months of planning. We offered to forge a genuine partnership with families, one where their knowledge and perspectives were given real weight, and we accepted our common goal of seeing that the family's child—our student—emerged from adolescence whole and healthy, as well as educated.

The challenge was in the mother's look that accompanied the acceptance. This was going to be a two-way street.

As we learned at our school over the remainder of that year, her statement had substantial practical consequences. William's mom did indeed know her son. She knew when he was lying, and when he was telling the truth. She knew when he was confused. She knew when he was challenged and when he was bored. She knew when he needed help from us, and when he needed prodding. She knew when his learning needs were being met, and when they weren't.

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TEACHING & LEARNING

Forks Teachers See Benefits from CFGs

Forks High School teacher Val Giles has been an educator for over twenty years. During this time, he participated in many episodic, professional development activities. But beginning last year, Val and a group of his Forks colleagues began participating in Critical Friends Groups (CFGs), a professional development experience that he describes as unlike any other.

"This is the first time in my teaching career when the focus of the professional development is on teacher practice and student performance," says Val. "It is a professional development model that is long overdue."

"This is one of the best things I've ever done as far as improving my teaching skills," says English and Communications teacher Judy Fraker.

"In CFGs, you get to have layers of conversation about how to impact student achievement through changed teacher practice," adds librarian and English teacher Eve Datisman. "The focus of CFGs is on the profession of teaching and how we teach. There is real potential to change the climate in the building."

CFGs are small groups of teachers who commit to work together on a long-term basis toward higher student achievement by improving instructional practice. The groups meet regularly and use protocols to examine student and teacher work with a constant focus on improving student learning. Participants also observe each other in classrooms and provide feedback to colleagues about their work.

Eve and social studies teacher Val Giles attended two CFG trainings last year and returned to their school hopeful that there would be enough interest to create one group. "The response was overwhelming," says Eve. Out of twenty-five teachers, fifteen signed up to participate, so Eve and Val decided to create two CFGs and each took responsibility for facilitating one of the groups. The groups meet after school and the participants are paid the bus driver rate of pay for their time.

Eve says there were two reasons for the staff's strong interest. "We needed another venue in the school community that would allow us to talk with colleagues with whom we don't normally talk. We were also concerned that the rigor that we were asking students to achieve has declined dramatically during the past few years."

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“I joined the CFG after seeing a video where one of the teachers in a CFG explained he wanted to be ‘dazzled’ by his students. The members of the group were giving him good ideas and input. I thought about some of my classes and that I wasn’t being dazzled’ by students’ work and I wanted to be. I thought perhaps I would find the answers by listening to my colleagues in a CFG,” says Judy.

Although the Forks CFGs only began meeting last spring, participants reported that they have already been impacted as teachers and seen the results in their classrooms.

Val led a ninety minute Socratic Seminar in his history class, something he admits he wouldn’t have tried prior to joining a CFG. “Students who don’t usually talk in class were participating and asking questions. The class asked if we could hold another seminar the next day.”

Judy’s CFG formed last spring and met twice before the end of the year. During one of the sessions, the group examined a member’s lesson plan. “I was surprised how much I learned in helping another teacher evaluate his assignment. I came up with all kinds of ideas about how I could do things better in my classroom.”

“The CFG work has inspired me. I have a new outlook and I’m looking at creating new and interesting assignments with better assessments,” adds Judy.

Val adds that another benefit is that his CFG colleagues appear to be less isolated. Some of the teachers have started showing up in each other’s classrooms during prep periods in order to talk about the challenges they are facing or how to improve the performance of individual students.

The Forks teachers plan to continue their CFG work this fall and hope to add a third group.

“We are smarter as a group than we are as individuals and together we have centuries of experience,” says Eve.

Trust Amongst Adults Is Key to Student Learning

CFGs provide teachers with a structure to offer and receive feedback in a “safe” setting where there is mutual trust and respect.

Researchers Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider report in *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2002) that in the schools they studied where there was a high level of trust, teachers were more likely to try out new practices in the classroom. As a result, these schools were also more likely to show gains in student learning.

How Do I Learn More About CFGs?

For more information about CFGs, check out <http://www.cesnorthwest.org> or contact Jan Reeder, Director of the Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest, at 253/879-3807 or jreeder@ups.edu.

STATE & DISTRICT SUPPORT

Quincy Receives Waivers From State Board

High Tech High Quincy is a new small high school that opened this fall. It is modeled after San Diego’s High Tech High and is based on the principles of personalization, academic rigor, and real-world immersion. The school is also one of six Connecting Schools and Communities grant recipients from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Last spring, the school requested and was granted two waivers from the State Board of Education concerning graduation credit requirements and staff hiring.

“Our school will adhere to the same graduation requirements as other Washington high schools. However, we will be meeting these requirements by requiring students to demonstrate competency instead of seat time. Because students have different learning needs and backgrounds, demonstrating competency allows students to show what they know at different rates and in different ways,” says Principal Erich Bolz.

The school also requested a waiver to be able to hire staff out of their endorsement area. “Since we are starting with only three staff members, we knew it would be highly unlikely that the people we hired would have every endorsement necessary to meet the state’s high school graduation requirements. In addition, finding secondary staff members willing to integrate curriculum and deliver it in a more personalized, elementary style would be difficult if only secondary endorsements were taken into consideration,” says Erich.

For more information about Quincy’s waivers or to learn how to obtain a waiver, check out the Small Schools Project website at http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/tools/policies_tools.html.

“People—in this case, the families you’re serving—are crying out for a relationship. You can provide the relationship. If you take care of the parents, they’ll get involved, volunteer, or do just about anything you request. They’ll take care of you.”

Bruce Davis
Principal and Author

“A caring attitude is the key because no one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.”

Teamwork Makes the Dream Work
California Parent Center

“When programs and initiatives focus on building respectful and trusting relationships among school staff, families and community members, they are effective in creating and sustaining family and connections with schools. What these studies told us was that relationships matter.”

A New Wave of Evidence
Annual Synthesis (2002)

“Teachers are the key agents for reaching out to parents.”

J. Epstein and S. Dauber
(1991)

What Might Family Connections Look Like in Our Reinvented High School?

You will be developing your own answers to that question, as you work with your families and community. Whatever your conclusions, however, two things are certain:

1. The connections you develop will be broader and deeper than most of us are used to. They’ll include more and different activities than our schools have traditionally engaged in—valuable as those may be. And like everything else in this work, building new connections will require changes in both the assumptions and practice of everyone involved. That will take time and patience and persistence.
2. With so much to do, you will be tempted to put off the business of building family connections until everyone is “ready.” But when you bring your families along with you, even in times of uncertainty, they are more likely to be with you in the end.

Each month *The Learning Network* will devote this page to the challenging process of building family and community connections.

Laying the Foundations: Relationships are Key

Joyce Hartnett, teacher/advisor at Federal Way’s Truman Center with 28 years of teaching experience at both large comprehensive schools and small schools, talks about developing family relationships.

What is the first thing you would say to teachers who are adding more family contact to their practice?

I think it’s important to begin by asking, “Who is the family?” We have to broaden our definitions. Students have deep relationships with people outside the traditional family—grandparents, aunts and uncles, sometimes even family friends. We need to connect with a variety of caring adults in our efforts to build a team of supporters for students.

Any ideas for good ways to get started?

It’s important to start with positive interactions at the beginning of the year. A phone call, for one thing, just introducing myself and letting the family know I’m glad to be working with their son or daughter. Then we have a potluck supper; food is a great medium for building relationships.

How have these deepening relationships helped you as a teacher?

Families have insight about their kids that no one else does. So I have this great feeling of having allies, of not having to do this

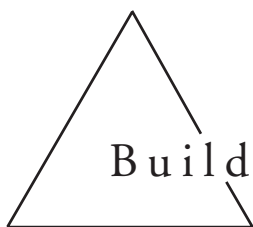
alone. Also, the more I get to know the families, the more willing they are to help. Sometimes I don’t even have to ask. And when you have a relationship with their families, something deepens in your relationships with kids.

You work with 17 students all year while many of the teachers reading this are still seeing 100 a semester. What would you say to them?

That’s tough. I guess I would say that teachers could start with the families of the kids in their advisories, if their schools have them. Hopefully, they don’t have more than 20 kids each and stay with them for more than a semester.

But no matter how many students we have, I think the most important place to start is with our assumptions and judgments. It’s really important to not be judgmental when, for example, a parent doesn’t show up for a conference. It can be hard for middle-class people, like most teachers, to appreciate how complex the lives of many families are, especially the working or non-working poor.

We need to always have faith in our families. Even when the way a family handles a situation disturbs me, what we have in common is that they want the best for their kids. They want help. They want allies. And as a teacher, I want that, too.



Building Family and Community Connections

From “Us and Them” to “We”

“A few days after our son’s acceptance into a small school, we came home to find a friendly message from one of the teachers on our answering machine. It was just such a great way to make us feel welcome.”

Deb Veach-White
Parent

“The value of school staff making positive phone calls early in the year to establish positive relationships with families cannot be overemphasized.”

Teamwork Makes the Dream Work
California Parent Center

“We have to recognize that everybody has a history with schools, and some of it hasn’t been good, so there may be some suspicion when you make that first phone call. But gradually you build trust because families want to hear good things about their kids. Over time, they get the idea that we’re not looking for failure, but ways to help kids be successful.”

Joyce Hartnett, Advisor
The Truman Center

“I’ll never forget the teacher who called me during the school year just to tell me that she enjoyed having my daughter in her class. Parents usually hear from teachers if there is a problem so Janet Westerlund’s call made a lasting impression on me. She was the only teacher who took the time to make a positive call during the 18 years my children were in school.”

Judy Janes
Edmonds School District

**For script examples, see the “What’s New” section on the Small Schools’ website at <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>*

Calling Families: Starting on a Positive Note

Some family engagement literature describes that positive phone call to a family as “a small step” that allows teachers to reach out on a personal level. For some of us, however, the thought of making phone calls to people we don’t know is *huge*—not a “small step” and not what we originally signed on for as secondary teachers.

The Learning Network asked Joyce Hartnett (Truman Center advisor), Deb Veach-White (parent and past volunteer coordinator at Vancouver School of Arts and Academics) and Karol Gadwa (small schools coach and former high school teacher and principal) to help compile a list of tips for successful phone calls.

Share your calling plans with your students first

Because many families have only experienced teacher contact when there are problems, some initial suspicion is understandable. Consider telling your advisees or students, “I plan to call your family next week, just to introduce myself and let them know I’m glad to have you in my advisory.” Students will be less likely to erase the message before their parents get home and in some cases, will tell their parents to expect your call.

Call at a “good” time and be prepared

There may be no such thing as a *good* time for either busy parents or tired teachers, but between 7 and 8 p.m. is probably best. And keep your introductory phone call short, no more than three minutes, even if parents want to talk longer.

Before you make the first call, write out a short script* and think about how you will handle contingencies, such as the following:

- ◆ *When you get an answering machine.* Do leave a message, but be sure to say more than “This is Jane Doe, John’s teacher.” as you don’t want to cause the family any anxiety. You may just want to read your short script.
- ◆ *When no one speaks English.* Say thank you and hang up. Then seek help from a colleague who may be familiar with the family and find out how communication has been established. There are usually translators who can help.
- ◆ *When a family member is curt or wants to “unload” a laundry list of complaints.* Be polite, but don’t allow yourself to get defensive or get sucked in.*
- ◆ *When a child answers and no adult is available.* Say you’ll call back but if the child knows you are from the school, make sure you say this is a “good” call.

Have a “reason” to call, beyond introducing yourself

If there’s an event happening in the next month, invite the parent and emphasize how much you look forward to meeting them. You might ask about the best time to get in touch with them by phone or if they would prefer to be contacted by email. Also let them know how and when to reach you.

Keep records

Log every call, attempted call and message sent home. Schools may develop a standard log sheet with date, time, name of student, person reached, nature of contact, etc. Or teachers may prefer to create their own logs, spreadsheets, or journals (sometimes one for each advisee) and may develop their own coding or shorthand.

Know that it will get easier

It’s not hard to call people we have positive relationships with. So a side benefit of staying with students or advisees over time is that you won’t need to make many cold calls. And you *will* have those family relationships, or as Joyce Hartnett says, those “powerful allies.”

SCHOOLS IN THE NEWS

Small Schools, Big News

A number of schools we work with have been in the news recently. Cleveland, Mountlake Terrace, and Yelm were the focus of back to school stories that highlighted their efforts to restructure into multiple small schools.

Stevenson High School's launch of an interdisciplinary project-based course, The Lewis and Clark Expedition, was featured in the summer edition of *NW Education*, the quarterly magazine of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

To learn more about the work of your small school colleagues across the state and nationally, take a look at the fall edition of *The Case for Small Schools*. This quarterly compilation of articles is sent to each school and can also be found on the Project's website at <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/articles/case.html>

If your school has received media coverage that you would like to see included in the winter edition of *The Case*, please contact us at info@smallschoolsproject.org.

DATA DATA DATA

Now's the Time to Think about Data

We anticipate that conversion schools will begin to see improved student data early next year. The same holds true for "already small" schools that are implementing significant changes in teaching practice or school structure.

So now's the time to figure out what data you want to collect in your small school. You will also need to put the systems in place to easily collect the data and share it with your community.

Here are some questions to help you get started:

- ✓ *Do you have a list of the students who are enrolled in your small school?*

For some schools that allow students to crossover for classes or easily switch to a different school, this may be difficult to compile in the first week or two. But it is the important first step.

- ✓ *What kind of data does your school or district already collect and how often? Is this data disaggregated by small schools, and within each small school is it broken out by gender, ethnicity, grade level, etc.?*

Attendance rates, discipline referrals, failure rates, and transfer rates are areas where you are likely to see early improvement.

- ✓ *What other types of data would be compelling to your school board and community members?*

Surveys and focus groups of students and parents are two useful tools to help you collect this type of data. You might also consider testimonials from students who struggled last year, but are flourishing in their small school. The Small Schools Project website at http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/tools/parents_tools.html provides information about surveys and focus groups.

- ✓ *How can your school coach help?*

School coaches have a range of experience collecting and reporting data. They can also offer an extra set of hands and an outsider perspective.

TOOLS YOU CAN USE

Useful Curricular Resources & Pedagogical Practices

We are pleased to hear how schools are using the *Planning Resources for Teachers in Small High Schools*. Teachers report using the guide to help them adapt their lesson plans for a small school setting. Others used it with their colleagues to create integrated units. If you haven't received a copy of the guide and would like one, it can be downloaded from the Small Schools project website at <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/new.html>.

You can also purchase bound copies by contacting Craig Lucero at clucero@u.washington.edu or 206/616-0303.

Resources for Family and Community Involvement

Beginning this month, *The Learning Network* will include an insert titled "Building Family and Community Connections." We hope the topics it covers will be helpful to you. However, one page does not allow room for much in the way of helpful tools. These will appear monthly on our website.

For sample scripts and additional tips on effective phone calling, see the "What's New" section of the Small Schools' website at <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>.

Also, watch for the *Planning Resources* collection that will be published in October; a section on family and community connections will be included.

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SCHOOLS IN THE NEWS

Small Schools, Big News

Building Connections with Families and Communities *continued*

William's mother was a powerful advocate for him and a strong supporter of the school with her son when she believed William was screwing up or simply wrong. We did some things differently because of our relationship, and so did William's mother, almost always to her son's benefit.

She was also a powerful advocate for the school in the face of the controversies that inevitably accompany a new school's birth. She advocated for us even when she disagreed with us—something that happened more than once—because she saw in William's teachers (and the rest of us) a deep commitment to ensuring that William learned and grew in ways that made sense to all of us.

We hope that many of you will be entering into new relationships with parents this year. More sustained, deeper, more intense, more frustrating at times, but more certain and rewarding in the long run. To support your work with families, this month's issue of *The Learning Network* contains the first of monthly inserts that will focus on some aspect of building connections with families and communities. We hope you find it useful.

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:

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Upcoming High School Meetings

Below are the dates for the 2003-2004 high school meetings hosted by the Gates Foundation. Additional information about the meetings will be sent to principals.

October 21-22, 2003

December 5-6, 2003 (*CSAC schools only*)

January 13-14, 2004

April 23-24, 2004 (*CSAC schools only*)

May 11-12, 2004