The Learning Network

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

Grappling with Autonomy

This fall, seventeen conversion high schools across Washington took significant steps toward implementing autonomous small schools. Each of these large comprehensive high schools are at different stages in their transition, but one thing is consistent across all of the schools. Everyone is grappling with autonomy.

What is autonomy? Why is it important? How much should each small school have? Under what conditions? Who decides?

This is an issue that has no clear roadmap and no easy answers. According to researcher Mary Anne Raywid, "the greatest inhibitor to a small school's ability to realize its potential is lack of autonomy—constraints imposed by stringent regulations, bureaucratic regularities, and longstanding labor agreements and the need to mesh with policies and practices of the board of education and the school district—and the hesitation of some education personnel at all levels to make fundamental changes in the way they function."

At the Small Schools Project, we believe that successful small schools need autonomy in six key areas:

- Budget
- Schedule
- Staffing
- Curriculum
- Leadership and Governance
- Space

As Mary Anne suggests, providing small schools with autonomy in those six areas raises questions about almost all aspects of a school—or district's—operation.

The major challenge for conversions "is obtaining sufficient separateness and autonomy to permit staff members to generate a distinctive environment and to carry out their own vision of schooling," adds Mary Anne.

To help you and your colleagues learn more about autonomy, we have devoted this issue of *The Learning Network* to this topic. We describe each of the six autonomies and give examples of how they are taking shape in conversion schools across Washington.

Budget Autonomy

Many of us may remember as kids being given an allowance—our own money that we controlled. Sometimes we saved it; other times we spent it. The important thing was that it was ours and we controlled the purse strings.

The same could be said for budget autonomy. With budget autonomy, each small school controls how their financial resources are spent and managed. Each school also has the authority to decide how budget decisions are made.

According to Julie Hunter, the teacher leader for the Discovery Academy at Foster High School, "having budget autonomy allows us to decide what programs and activities are important to the philosophy of the academy. It allows the staff to understand the need to think about the best interests of the entire academy and what will move those interests forward. And it definitely supports the skill of prioritizing needs and keeping those priorities at the front of everything we do."

At Foster High School, five percent of each department's budget is pooled. The pool is then divided by three so that each of the three academies receives the same amount of money. Each academy also has its own line in the school budget, which includes grant money and the departmental funds. Each school is responsible for establishing their own process for deciding how to spend their money.

Budget autonomy enables each small school to direct the school's spending based on the priorities and focus of that school. Through budget autonomy, a small school can make the staffing and scheduling decisions necessary to carry out the staff's mission and vision of improving student learning.

> "Having budget autonomy allows us to decide what programs and activities are important to the philosophy of the academy."
>
> *-Julie Hunter, Discovery Academy*

The Discovery Academy uses their small schools funds primarily to support professional development for the entire academy staff. They bring in trainers and pay for subs so teachers can attend workshops. They also use their funds to pay for release time for teachers to work on academy activities, such as scheduling, advisory, and integrated curriculum planning. They have also set aside money for rewards and incentives for students—on birthdays they give students a disco ball key chain.

Julie says that anyone wanting to use the Discovery Academy funds for training, release time or anything else brings their request to the entire staff where it is discussed and then voted on using the fist to five method.

Schedule Autonomy

Schedule autonomy allows each small school to create their own schedule that supports the school's instructional focus. Many successful small schools use their schedule autonomy to create longer blocks of instructional time. Schedule autonomy also provides a school the flexibility to respond to student and teacher needs and concerns by changing the school's schedule—in the middle of the year or even the next day—if needed.

Cleveland High School opened four autonomous academies this fall, each with its own schedule. Principal Rick Harwood estimates that 95 percent of Cleveland students spend the entire day in their academy. He believes schedule autonomy is critical and worth all of the headaches.

"The biggest impact that small schools can have is the result of creating learning environments with the highest degree of personalization. It's worth the trade-off of fewer course offerings. Instead, through personalization, we can offer students more to help them succeed academically," Rick says.

The decision to have four autonomous academies at Cleveland was based on the school's experience of creating a school-within-a-school, the Info Tech Academy, two years prior to implementing the four autonomous academies.

The Info Tech teachers experienced the difference it made to have their students for large blocks of time, as well as the frustration of having their students spend significant amounts of their time with other teachers outside of the academy. "Their voices really impacted our decision to have four autonomous academies," says Rick.

At Todd Beamer High School, Principal Carol Eberhart says the three academies don't have as much autonomy as they had hoped. "We are sharing kids because of electives and the schedule. But our next move is to reclaim our autonomy by having the same kids in core classes."

Two years ago, Enumclaw High School opened two "partner" schools—E.C.H.O.E.S. and the Adventure School—which are both fully autonomous small schools each with approximately 150 students and half a dozen staff.

"Because we are so small, we can do a lot of adapting at very short notice. We have worked out a schedule in which the Adventure kids share some 'rest' time with kids in the other small schools so that they can see their friends," says Brian Patrick, an Adventure School teacher.

Brian says another advantage to scheduling autonomy is the limited number of crossovers that the partner schools have. No one outside of the Adventure School comes in, but they do have some "outflow" (crossovers).

"For every six kids who take an outflow class, we have to take one more Adventure student so that we don't negatively impact other people's workload. We never had a high level of outflow, but we have even less than last year because kids don't want to leave—they want to stay in their school."

Manual High School: A Case Study on Schedule Autonomy

At Manual High School in Denver, during 2000-2001, we piloted "small schools" in the 9th grade. Each teaching team in the 9th grade "schools" was given 3/4 of their students in a 4x4 block and it was up to them to design a unique schedule. I would take their designs and schedule each 9th grade school "offline" using Excel. The 9th grade counselor would input that data into the large school's scheduling system (SASI) so that daily attendance, progress reports, etc. could be generated online.

In 2001-2002, Manual entered a year-long transition to small schools building-wide. We used one master schedule for all three schools but intentionally allowed sharing of electives across small schools and some sharing of 11th and 12th grade core classes.

Unfortunately, there were many scheduling problems related to the use of one master schedule and many students were improperly scheduled outside of their small school. Throughout that year we made our case to central administration that we be allowed to create three completely separate student databases with three completely separate master schedules.

For two years now, the three small schools at the Manual Educational Complex have functioned with completely separate scheduling systems and student databases. Most of the problems experienced in 2001-2002 are no longer a problem.

Of course, there are trade-offs when you create completely autonomous schedules, student databases and faculties. If students cannot take classes outside of their own school, then the number of course selections is reduced. Each small school then has to become very creative in making the limited teacher resources do exciting things for kids.

In 2001-2002, Manual was not ready to face that particular problem so instead they endured the scheduling problems that a master schedule gives you when trying to create space for multiple, small schools. In 2002-2003 they embraced the "problems" smallness brings. I suppose it could be said that the transition year at Manual (with all of its problems) helped to pave the way for the embrace of complete autonomy.

Editor's Note: These comments, from Santo Nicotera, a former staff member at Manual High School in Denver, originally appeared as part of an exchange about scheduling on the Small Schools Workshop listserv.

Staffing Autonomy

We all respond most positively when given a choice about who we get to work with. Staffing autonomy makes that a reality by giving small school staff members the ability to choose their colleagues.

At Todd Beamer, each academy makes their own hiring decisions. The hiring process includes the academy principal and a team of academy teachers.

Established successful small schools combine their budget and staffing autonomy to create staffing patterns that best meet their students' needs. It's not unusual for every adult in the building to teach and serve as an advisor. These schools are also able to use their autonomy to hire consultants, part-time staff, and paraprofessionals.

At Enumclaw's Adventure School, all of the staff have certification waivers, a necessary condition since there are only six staff members. Teacher Brian Patrick says, "Right now I'm teaching PE, precalc, college geology, senior seminar, a writing block, and a 9-10 integrated humanities block." That sounds like a full load (and it is), but for Brian, it's doable because of the benefits of teacher collaboration and because students take great responsibility for their own project-based learning.

At Beamer, each of the three academies has its own support team, which includes the academy principal (see more under Leadership and Governance), counselor, and ELL teacher.

Curriculum Autonomy

Curriculum autonomy is essential for a staff that is intent on creating its own small school culture. If teachers don't work together, says researcher Linda Darling-Hammond, "it is impossible to develop a collective perspective in the school."

In Enumclaw, the Adventure School's six staff members treasure their curriculum autonomy, according to teacher Brian Patrick. "Enumclaw is a standards-based school and we make sure our Adventure School kids meet those standards," he explains, "but we decide how to integrate our curriculum and what materials to use. For example, we don't use textbooks at all."

Small schools at Mountlake Terrace are making curriculum decisions that fit their individual goals and situations. For example, both the Discovery School and the Innovation School have blocked their 9th and 10th grade English and social studies courses into a humanities program. However, because Innovation's English and social studies teachers are dual certified, each is able to teach the entire block, while Discovery teachers have to switch kids back and forth.

Another example of curriculum autonomy at Mountlake Terrace High School can be seen in the way two of the schools— Achievement, Opportunity and Service Community (AOS) and Terrace Arts & Academics School (TAAS)— are providing 9th and 10th grade science courses. While the schools share the same goal—preparing their kids to take the science WASL, AOS starts their freshmen with an introduction to physics and chemistry and then offers biology to sophomores, while TAAS offers biology to freshmen and physical science to sophomores.

According to Diane Lashinsky, assistant principal for AOS and TAAS, teachers at TAAS have already decided that because of some scheduling bottlenecks, they'll open both their science classes to freshmen and sophomores. "As a staff, they talked about the problems and they could make this decision without going to anybody else," says Diane, illustrating one important benefit of autonomy.

At Clover Park High School, teachers in each house determine particular skills or essential questions they want to focus on. Then, using *Understanding by Design*, the backward planning lesson design strategy many of them have been trained in, groups of teachers collaborate on curriculum.

For example, says Judi Orr, Clover Park Instructional Specialist, the teachers in one house might decide to focus on Six-Trait Writing across the curriculum. The teachers might then agree that the focus at the 9th grade would be organization, at the 10th voice and tone, and so on. Or, they might all commit to narrative writing as a focus for a defined period of time, so that in each class—whether English or science or art—students would be writing narratives.

Leadership and Governance Autonomy

Small School leader Nancy Mohr once said, "Building a small school is too much trouble unless an integral part of its mission is creating new ways of working together and shifting power and authority." That's why effective small schools ensure that teachers—and often parents and students as well—have a voice in governance.

Bringing decision-making authority as close as possible to the classroom gives teachers a new sense of responsibility, according to Chris Ellinger, a teacher at Mountlake Terrace's Innovation School. He says, "Our staff has 15 people and we've had meetings where, on the spot, we've addressed problems, made decisions and then been able to go out and make it happen." He adds that although Steven Gering, the MTHS assistant principal with oversight for Innovation, is an important member of the small school's team, "he doesn't *have* to be there for us to make a decision."

At Mountlake Terrace, each of the five small schools has a teacher leader who receives a stipend and is responsible for planning and facilitating meetings and for staff professional development. While Steven admits that new governance structures have challenges—teacher leaders may need time and funding to develop their leadership skills, he says, "Smallness has a great impact on ownership because there's nowhere else to look. It forces everyone to be accountable."

Chris and his Innovation colleague, Jonathan Tong, agree that increased autonomy in the governance of their small school strengthens their sense of ownership. It's not so much about leadership, they say, as about collegiality and collaboration.

At Todd Beamer, with its three academies, three former assistant principals serve as academy principals—and are given the title, as well. Each academy also has a "distinguished teacher" who teaches half time and acts as an instructional coach half time. But as Principal Carol Eberhart likes to say, "Here at Todd Beamer, everybody is a coach and everybody has a coach—and that includes kids, teachers and administrators."

One of the complex discussions the Beamer staff does not have to grapple with is how to meld the role of department chairs into small schools operation. Several years ago, the Federal Way School District, in negotiations with the union, created a system in which each school applies for leadership money every year and then uses it as they choose. Beamer has chosen not to appoint department heads.

West Valley High School also does not have department heads and those stipends now fund teacher leaders. A Teacher Leadership Team, comprised of four teachers from each of the three academies, plus other representatives, meets twice a month to discuss nuts and bolts issues. In these meetings, teacher leaders speak up for their respective small schools and then report back to their small school faculties.

Space Autonomy

The ability to control, create, or change its own space allows a small school to develop an identity. Separate space makes it easier to respond quickly to "their" students' behavior, to spot strangers, and to build the desired climate. Conversely, when people share space, particularly when they already know each other, their inclination is to blur boundaries.

As researcher Mary Anne Raywid says, "If you want to get the benefit of small, then the kids have to affiliate with the unit—the small school. Unless teachers can create their own school climate, unless the kids can see some difference when they leave their own part of the building—then they are not going to identify with it."

In this work of breaking down large comprehensive schools, carving out individual spaces is easier said than done, as older schools weren't usually built to accommodate small units. However, even small schools housed in big aging complexes like Tacoma's Lincoln High School, which was built in 1912, are beginning the process of creating their own spaces.

Locating small school teachers next to or near each other has been a first step for Lincoln. For example, last year the dozen or so teachers at Lincoln's School of Human Experience were on different floors and in different wings. This year, they moved to classrooms that are near each other.

Eliminating or minimizing crossovers can create effective space autonomy for small schools, even when the space is not ideal, according to Brian Patrick, a teacher at Enumclaw's Adventure School. With an enrollment of 145, The Adventure School is housed in six classrooms: three adjacent rooms with connecting doors, two portables close by, and a science room in another wing.

"It works well," Brian explains, "because while we allow minimal 'outflow' of our kids, non-Adventure School students don't take classes in our rooms. So our students see these spaces as truly theirs."

The school has no dedicated space for its six staff members, but Brian doesn't see that as necessarily a bad thing. While a late arrival Wednesday gives the staff the opportunity to talk about individual kids, two other weekly staff meetings are held in a classroom where students may be working.

Brian says, "We try to be transparent as a staff, and sometimes when we're discussing a school issue, a student will hear something and pipe in with a helpful comment. It's good modeling for the kids to see how we work together."

Today, large high schools are frequently designed as multiplexes that—while retaining shared spaces for activities such as athletics and drama—can accommodate small schools. Brand-new Todd Beamer in Federal Way is a good example. Although it opened this fall with three academies, the building could hold anywhere from one to eight discrete schools.

At Beamer, there are six clusters, three up and three down. In addition, the current main office could house a small academy, as could the shared space that today includes a great hall, project rooms, a health club, and other facilities. Each cluster has six classrooms, three that are stationary and three with dividing walls that can be opened to provide meeting space for 100 students. Each cluster also includes several "transition areas" where table and chair groups invite students to gather.

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>
> *-Mary Anne Raywid, Researcher*

FROM THE DIRECTOR: BUILDING THE SCHOOLS WE'VE IMAGINED

"We haven't even been to Europe yet!" was the final comment from a student in a new small school—one of several such schools sharing the same building. The student was expressing his frustration with the slow pace of change. After two years of planning and struggling to get their building redesigned into small schools, it still didn't feel much different. Homework looked a lot like last year's homework, worksheets hadn't disappeared, students remained passive and unengaged, teachers talked through most of the class.

My own phrase for this student's feelings has been "Halloween nightmare." The fear that folks in these 71 new small schools—all launched but still fragile—would be, two months into the school year, feeling the burdens of undertaking a revolutionary task, but not yet feeling the benefits that come with revolution.

The fear that teachers, already tired from planning the transition, would look up and say,—"This is it? I have more preps than before, new courses, and still 150 kids a day…" The fear that teachers would look at what *didn't* happen—kids scheduled into their small schools as promised, "pure" classes in ninth grade, significant budget autonomy, very limited crossovers and only for upperclassmen—and wonder why they should keep faith in the face of another round of failed promises.

Perspective Helps

From the beginning, we've known this would probably take most of five years just to put in place; for most schools, November, 2003, isn't quite the halfway point. Knowing how far the journey is likely to be is crucial to pacing oneself, and our work together.

One of our coaches talks about "launch burn"—the fact that most space ships burn 90 percent of their fuel just getting off the ground. The big difference is that, for space ships, that's the plan—the mission is designed to work that way. Small schools need a different plan—a plan that allows for the ongoing transition of last century's schools to something new and takes into account the steady acquisition of new teaching skills as the transition takes place.

Looking at What *Is* Different Helps

In some small schools, students do spend virtually all of their day in their own school. Ninth graders look at small schools as the way high school is, and they like it. Students like having many of the same kids in their classes, in spite of fears that they wouldn't see their friends. Many teachers can say, after only two months, that they know all the students in their school by name. Other teachers, for the first time in their careers, are collaborating with their colleagues, and liking it. In school after

school, a new generation of teacher leaders is stepping forward. Some of these changes, another coach observes, are subtle ones, but represent early indicators that important change is, in fact, underway.

Getting Clear About What's Needed Helps

Clarity about which autonomies are necessary, which would be nice, and which can wait a while. Specificity about how many crossovers, for what reasons, and when in the day they can occur so that the rest of the small school isn't held hostage to them. What has to change in the schedule, and why. Why it's critical to have common planning time on a regular basis during the school day, not just once a month.

Why looping or multi-grade core courses are necessary to reduce the teacher load over several years.

Getting district personnel, or assistant principals who may have been on the sidelines until now, fully up to speed and involved. Amending the union contract so it supports teacher leadership, innovation, and initiative at the building level.

The number of additional sections of math and sciences courses you'll need as you make good on the commitment to graduate all kids college-ready, and what will have to go in the curriculum to make space for those sections.

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"Many teachers can say, after only two months, that they know all the students in their school by name."

"Each small school should be able to identify three to five structural or procedural matters that can be addressed at little or no financial cost between now and next fall."

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"Remaining clear—or reminding ourselves—about why this work matters is paramount."

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Understanding that pointing fingers, incidentally, doesn't help, is divisive, and expends energy needed elsewhere.

The specifics will vary, but each small school should be able to identify three to five structural or procedural matters that can be addressed at little or no financial cost between now and next September, and negotiate with whoever can make those things happen to ensure that they do happen.

Learning Helps

The goal of this redesign work is substantially improved student accomplishment for virtually all students. What we rarely say is that the attainability of that goal rests on adult learning.

It depends on parents and community members learning enough about the benefits of small schools to support the change. It also depends on district leaders and board members to reallocate resources and changes policies, procedures, and practices as needed in service of this redesign effort. Most of all, though, it depends on the learning of adults who work daily in each school.

What most needs learning? How to better teach real skills, first of all. How each adult, not simply specialists, can help adolescents learn to read well, and to write well. How, specifically, we promote critical thinking in classes. How we differentiate instruction in classes of diverse learners. How we make collaborative learning really work for students, and for ourselves. How we use performance assessments to show in a more genuine way what students are learning. How we learn to coach kids rather than lecture to them. How we help students to be reflective about their work. How we integrate science so that each science teacher doesn't need four endorsement areas.

How people in authority can push authority, as well as responsibility, out to other adults. How others can claim authority along with responsibility. How we make one another accountable. How to trust and rely on one another. And on and on…

A major side benefit of having schools that are places where adults learn is that students benefit from seeing adults engaged in, excited by, and struggling with, their own learning. What it means to be a learner is exactly what students need to see modeled by their teachers and administrators.

Remembering Why Helps

Remaining clear—or reminding ourselves—about why this work matters is paramount. Believing schools can do more for most kids than they have in the past provides the moral imperative required to make such difficult work worthwhile. If it's just another reform fad, it makes sense to simply ride it out.

Only when we see individual students and their learning, their hopes, and their possibilities at the core of this work can we draw strength from the work itself and remain confident that it is worth our very, very best.

- Rick Lear, Director

SUBTLE IMAGES: POWERFUL CHANGES

When we work to change a system, it's easy to notice the big things and miss the subtle ones. But it's often the subtle ones that tell us how we're doing.

In some schools this fall, changes like new schedules or new spaces were obvious to everyone, so at The Discovery School, one of Mountlake Terrace's new small schools, coach Liz Marzolf began to document smaller, more subtle ones. Here are just a few in a long list of observations she generated only four weeks after school opened:

- A teacher inviting another teacher into her classroom to model facilitating a classroom meeting, something she had never done but he had.
- Each school having its name displayed over the door to its own wing.
- Students commenting that when they walk down "their" hallway, they notice many of the teachers know their names.
- Teachers expressing excitement after a small school staff meeting because they feel like they really made a break through for this one kid.
- Students commenting that they know their teachers a lot better this year.
- Teachers (math and 9/10 humanities) working together to address issues in their joint curriculum.
- Teachers sharing information about students that goes well beyond knowing how well that student is doing in his or her class.
- The copy center changing its forms from asking what department the requestor represents to what school he or she represents.
- Students being assigned to an advisor who will hand that student his or her diploma.
- Staff committing to set aside a time to meet regularly as a whole small school staff.
- Teachers sharing ideas and having those ideas openly, respectfully, yet critically discussed.

Liz's list continues, but you get the idea. Subtle images perhaps, but powerful changes.

DISTRICT MATTERS

Supporting Autonomy

As a district leader, you have become clear about the rationale driving the small schools initiatives in your schools. You know the work is about social justice and eliminating disproportionality of achievement too clearly tied to race or poverty. You know the work is about bringing each student to high levels of performance—so that each is qualified to pursue a four year education. And you are clear that the responsive environment of a small school allows teachers the authority, flexibility, and autonomy to do whatever it takes to engage each kid.

How can you use your district leader position to support these burgeoning small schools? As I described in last month's *District Matters*, new small schools face what Todd Beamer High School Principal Carol Eberhart calls "gravity," the many forces pulling "unfamiliar" school designs back to the large Earth and "the way things have always been."

One powerful way of supporting your small schools is by working with your school board to write policies that clearly and unequivocally support autonomous small schools. More important than just being a mandate—school reform doesn't occur by board declaration—these policies establish a sense of institutional belief in autonomous small schools that bolsters them in their earliest development.

They become a touchstone of affirmation that signal, to those whose special interests are perceived to be threatened by small schools, that the resolve to push ahead is district-wide. They assist in the belief-building that must occur in the implementing schools and nurture a mentality that "We are moving forward."

Central office leaders in the Tukwila School District defined their expectations for the converting Foster High School. Tukwila Board of Directors Board Policy 6133, approved February 12, 2002, is available online at the Small Schools Project website at *www.smallschoolsproject.org/tools/files/tukwila.pdf*. It outlines the rationale for their commitment to small schools—"a learning environment where every student thrives," identifies the grant's parameters and commits to their implementation. It affirms the Ten Common Principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools adopted by the school and pairs them with the Gates Foundation's Attributes of High Achieving Schools.

> "How can you use your district leader position to support these burgeoning small schools? One powerful way of supporting your small schools is by working with your school board to write policies that clearly and unequivocally support autonomous small schools."

And the policy affirms the importance of small school autonomy, defining a framework in which autonomous schools can work side by side:

> ". . . Each SPLC [Small Personalized Learning Community] will be autonomous within Foster. Autonomous is defined as the freedom to act within limits of existing Washington State laws, Tukwila School District policies and guidelines, and Foster School guidelines. Each SPLC will operate as a school unit within Foster High School and will be supervised by the Foster Principal. Each SPLC will have shared responsibility for school operations . . . The Foster High School budget will be allocated according to district formulas and will be distributed to each of the SPLCs."

Perhaps the strongest, most complete district policy supporting the development of new autonomous small schools comes from the Oakland Unified School District, available at: *www.smallschoolsproject.org/tools/policies/oaklandpolicy.pdf*. It includes the rationale for change and the research base for committing to autonomous small schools—supporting a definition of autonomy highly conducive to successful implementation:

> "Autonomous means that the school has control over curriculum, instruction and assessment decisions consistent with California State and District Standards. It also controls its own budget and can reallocate funds to increase staffing if it chooses. Autonomy includes hiring and evaluation of teachers and staff, consistent with labor contracts. If a school shares a site with other programs, the school does not have to seek permission of the site's cohabitants in order to change its programs though it may have to negotiate site usage issues."

This up-front clear board policy minimizes future confusion, signals clear support for reform—and becomes a valuable "anti-gravity" prop during implementation.

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Small Schools PROJECT

IN THIS ISSUE

This fall, Dayton High School held its first presentations and exhibitions of student learning. Parents and community members were invited to attend the event. Above, tenth grader Elisabeth Franklin discusses her religious wars project with a visitor.