

Adult Learning: Turning the Corner to Instructional Change

Observations from
a three-year study
of small high schools
in Washington State

Fall 2006

By
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NOTES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Small Schools Project began in September 2000, and is funded by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The Project provides technical assistance to new small high schools and conversion schools, primarily in Washington State. Assistance is provided in several ways: through our website (<http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>), professional development activities for educators and school board members, publications (generally available at no charge on our website), and consultant services.

In the spring of 2006, the Small Schools Project was working with 94 high schools on an ongoing basis, 68 of which were part of 18 sites converting from large comprehensive high schools to small, focused schools.

From 2001 to 2006, these schools received technical assistance in the form of school coaches from the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative. The Collaborative was a partnership of the Small Schools Project, the Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest Center, and the National School Reform Faculty.

This report is based on observations from a three-year study of redesigned small high schools in Washington State. The statements and opinions of interviewees quoted in this report represent the general tenor of the comments heard by the researchers. We welcome comments and suggestions to this report; we are eager to learn from the experiences of other high schools and technical assistance providers engaged in similar work.

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The purpose of this three-year study is to understand aspects of the development of small schools and associated processes of change. The study focuses on seven Washington high schools that received reinvention grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In this study, we provide an account of the work in these seven small schools in Washington State gleaned from interviews, journals, surveys, and repeated observations on-site in the various schools (for more information about the research protocol, see Appendix A). To protect the privacy of the schools included in the study, we have assigned each one a pseudonym. Six of the schools (Alder, Birch, Chestnut, Cedar, Elm, and Hemlock) are located within recently converted large comprehensive schools—hereafter called “conversions”—that have been reconfigured as collections of small schools; one additional school (Fir) was “already-small” by our definition (under 400 students). Descriptions of the seven schools and the type of grant each received can be found in Appendix B.

This study has three primary goals: 1) studying and documenting the development of small schools within six conversions; 2) studying and documenting the development and changes in school leadership structures and responsibilities as small schools replace large, comprehensive schools; and 3) understanding and documenting the changes in already-small high schools that have received Gates Foundation grants.

Pursuit of these three research goals creates several avenues for potential contribution to the knowledge base on school redesign. First, the study seeks to understand whether theory and emerging empirical evidence about small schools are correct and if the conversion of large comprehensive high schools into collections of smaller schools will enable greater individual attention to students and closer faculty collaboration on matters of teaching and learning, as well as a stronger sense of community within each small school. Our previous reports discuss how personalization and professional community have been areas of significant growth in conversion schools.

Second, the study seeks to understand leadership in the context of the conversion process. Early evidence suggests that the creation of multiple small schools out of one existing large school may require new forms of leadership, more distributed in nature, featuring new roles for teacher-leadership focused on the continual improvement of teaching and learning. We have also written about the distributed leadership roles and structures being created in new small schools.

Finally, the study seeks to understand the experience of already-small high schools engaged in redesign projects in the Gates initiative. Smaller size is only one structural aspect of what is a broader and more comprehensive set of changes in teaching, learning, and the development of professional community. In concept, already-small high schools may have an edge in making progress on issues related to improving teaching and learning, given that they do not face the same structural challenges of their larger counterparts in creating new collections of small learning communities. So far, this has not been the reality for the one already-small school included in this study.

We hope these reports will provide schools, districts, other technical assistance providers, foundations, and researchers with information that will be useful for understanding what happens as schools redesign—including raised expectations for all students, changed teacher practice, and expanded leadership roles and structures.

Teresa, a mid-career high school social studies teacher, stood in line waiting to register for the national education conference she was attending that weekend. A tap on her shoulder had her turning to see her friend Sarah smiling behind her. She and Sarah worked in different high schools in the same district and had become friends after sitting in many of the same sessions at this conference the year before.

“Hey Teresa, great to see you. How have you been?”

“Sarah! Nice to see you too! I’ve been good, thanks, how about you?”

“Oh you know, same old same old. Glad the school year is over. It’ll be nice to have a month off before I go back to start everything over again. Thankfully we didn’t lose our principal this year, and we’ll be continuing with the same schedule as last year, so I don’t have to do any new preps. That will give me a lot more time to relax after this conference. It is just so nice not to have to worry about what I’m teaching, to have my systems in place and know what I’m doing. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah. I’m glad I’m not a new teacher, but to tell you the truth, these days it feels like I am because of all the changes going on at my school.”

“Oh yeah, I remember you said last year that you all were going to go to small schools. How is that going?”

“Well you know, it is a lot of work, and the thing is, what I didn’t expect, was that I was going to have to change the way I teach. That’s what I mean about feeling like a new teacher. I thought I was a good teacher, and I was pretty comfortable with the way I taught, and the students seemed to respond pretty well. Since we went to block scheduling though, and started sharing the same students and doing all this professional development around project-based learning, I’m just feeling slightly overwhelmed. Like even now, for this conference I have to take notes and develop a presentation for my team when I get back to school in August on what I learned here.”

“Wow, that seems like a lot of work. Are they paying you extra for it?”

“They are giving me a small stipend, and they paid for the conference, so yeah. But the big thing is that all of the faculty in our small school are working on the same thing, project-based learning, and so all of us are doing some kind of research on it this summer. Then in August we’ll have a couple of professional development days at school where we create a plan for how we’re going to integrate all this stuff into our classrooms and teaching for next year. So I guess I don’t feel like I’m out here by myself doing this just to get continuing education credits. I’m really contributing to improving the school.”

“I remember last year you were saying that you weren’t sure why they were changing to small schools, and you weren’t sure that it was going to make a difference. What do you think after this first year?”

“You know, I was pretty comfortable with what I was doing, but I have to say that once we started really looking at the data—test scores, attendance rates, graduation rates, all that stuff—we started to really see that a lot of kids weren’t succeeding at all. I mean, I thought we were doing pretty well, but we weren’t, especially when we broke out the numbers for minority and low-income kids. It was kind of an eye-opener. Then we got reorganized into cross-disciplinary teams and started having these team meetings where we read some of the literature and talked about student work, and I just really saw how important the change was. That got me on board.”

“But you said you had to change your teaching, why was that?”

“When we went to block scheduling I started realizing that I couldn’t just expand my same old prep, but that I had to start teaching differently. I had taught this unit on immigration that I thought was pretty good, you know, getting kids to know what the immigrant groups were and where they came from and then giving them a worksheet and a poster assignment and then a test at the end. But I brought up this lesson in a meeting one time when we presented lessons that worked, and I got a bunch of feedback from my team about how I could improve it. I started working with the English teacher to make it a project-based, cross-disciplinary unit. It was hard to rethink it, but you know, I really love teaching it now. I was getting bored

with it and now it's new every time because we start with questions, and the kids always come up with different perspectives. The kids do interviews, and we've built in a performance component, and it's really amazing what the kids can do. It made me realize, that is what I'm doing this for—for the kids. I had forgotten that, you know? Going to small schools woke me up, and even though it's more rigorous to teach there now, I feel like I'm part of a professional community, and I really like that. I'm focused, I know what our goals are, and I feel like I get a lot of support for what I'm trying to do. It's pretty great."

¹ Teresa and Sarah are fictitious teachers whose experiences in this vignette are based on observations of teachers.

"Sounds pretty great, Teresa.¹ You seem so much more excited about what you are doing than you did last year. I'm so glad it worked out. Makes me think maybe I should spend a little time this summer looking at my lessons."

Introduction

"The goal of this redesign work is substantially improved student accomplishment for virtually all students...the attainment of that goal rests on adult learning."

Rick Lear

"The call to change is also a call to learn."

Marge Scherer

This report is the culmination of three years of research about seven small schools' redesign efforts. The report revisits and builds on frameworks developed in our earlier publications concerning personalization, professional community, leadership, and student learning.

Each of the following reports can be downloaded for free from the Small Schools Project website, <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>:

- Knowing & Being Known
- Elevating the Conversation
- Distributing Leadership
- Student Voice
- Orienting for Sustainability
- Cultures in the Making

For the last three years, the Seven Small Schools Study has examined the structures and practices that small schools have put in place to move them toward the goal of improving achievement and college readiness for all students. Each of these efforts has been an important step toward creating a cultural shift—from a traditional top-down, hierarchical, relatively impersonal organization to a more democratic, learner-centered organization where personal relationships between and among teachers and students lead to mutual accountability for teaching and learning.

The structural changes that some schools put into place to capitalize on small school redesign efforts—such as block scheduling, advisories, distributed decision making, small-school-based budgeting and scheduling, and regular, ongoing common planning time for teachers—have challenged assumptions about how schooling must be organized. Along with structural changes, roles have changed, power has shifted, and some small schools find themselves in the midst of a paradigm shift that challenges the assumptions and beliefs they have had about teaching and learning, and the whole process of educating youth. This paradigm shift has provided the opportunity for even deeper and more profound changes as both students and adults (teachers, administrators, parents) adjust to new expectations of their role and their practice as a result of the new structures.

In this report, we look specifically at adult learning in relation to instruction and how these two elements of schooling have been affected by small school redesign efforts. We have found in our three years of documentation that for students to learn deeply, the adults who teach them must also learn and continue learning even while they are teaching. To adapt to changed structures and expectations, adults in redesigned schools must examine their beliefs and practices, making adult learning in schools a transformative experience—one which challenges or forever changes a person's beliefs and behavior.

As we have seen over the past three years, giving up entrenched assumptions and beliefs is a difficult process and requires first making these assumptions and beliefs explicit. In those small schools where instruction has changed the most, teachers challenge their own assumptions through their individual reflection on their practice and through collective reflection and discussion with colleagues in a professional learning community within the school. The balance between individual and collective learning, along with a commitment to improving student achievement for all of their students, leads to a sense of accountability that moves teachers in a developmental process toward changed beliefs and practices.

² Wagner, 2002

In our previous report on student voice, we stated that transformative learning for students occurs when students and teachers are co-participants in the learning and when both students and teachers are willing to take risks in their learning. We argued that the principles of the 3 Rs, relationships, relevance, and rigor,² form a framework for structuring conversations and initiatives in instructional practice. We believe the same framework can be applied to adult learning. Having a strong relationship with at least one teacher is important for students; having strong relationships with one's colleagues is equally significant for adults in a learning community. Just as students benefit from relevant curriculum and learning experi-

ences, teachers need professional learning opportunities that relate to their interests and needs. Building on teachers' prior knowledge creates a richer experience, and they have more years to draw on than do high school students. While many teachers strive to create rigorous classroom environments for their students, they can forget that they too need the high expectations and accountability that characterize a rigorous adult learning community.

THE 3 RS The 3 Rs of Adult Learning are:

- Relationships with other adults, in service of student learning
 - Relevant content
 - Rigorous practice
-

If teachers are learners, then their learning experiences should be just as rigorous, relevant, and relationship-driven as the experiences they are creating for their students. In this report we look at adult learning within the context of the 3 Rs and ask, "What makes the difference—what turns the corner—to instructional change?" Changes in school structure have paved the way for transformational adult learning and resulting instructional change. But, new structures alone have not always been sufficient. The data indicate that leadership, instructional focus, and professional community are key components in turning the corner to sustainable and collective instructional change within a small school.

In what follows, we look at what research says about adult learning and discuss what we think adult learning means within the context of small school redesign work. In the next section, titled "What We're Seeing," we examine our data from across the seven small schools in light of this definition and the 3 Rs. Next, we refine our analysis of adult learning and instructional change by focusing on three of the seven small schools that have shown the most promise in creating transformative learning experiences for their teachers and students. Within the context of these three schools, we examine the specific components that support adult learning and changing practice in small schools. We also examine how these three strong professional communities progress through the stages of reinforcement, collaboration, and interdependence. In the last section, "What We're Wondering About," we share the concerns of teachers and administrators about the sustainability of the changes in adult learning made over the past three years and about

whether the structures provided by the building and district will support small schools' efforts to turn the corner to instructional change.

What Research Says About Adult Learning

What is true for transformational student learning is true for transformational adult learning. Instruction must be personalized—honoring learners' interests, curiosity, strengths, and contributions, as well as eliciting and challenging students' preexisting understanding of the subject matter. Instruction must include frequent formative assessment, which helps make learners' thinking visible to themselves and their peers. And, instruction must take place within a community of learners, providing opportunities to build on one another's knowledge, offer feedback, and refine one's thinking.³ These qualities embody the 3 Rs structure.

³ Darling-Hammond, 1998; National Research Council, 2000; Wiggins & McTighe, 2006

Authors Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2006, p. 26) say, "A key goal of learning is fluent and flexible transfer—successfully using one's knowledge and skill on worthy tasks in important, realistic situations." However, according to the National Research Council, most professional development programs do not meet this goal. Professional development is not typically personalized or relevant—based on teacher-generated topics and presented with a context for why, when, where, and how the information might be valuable to teachers. Most professional development activities are not rigorous—providing opportunities to try out new techniques and receive feedback and "develop[ing] in teachers the capacity to judge successful transfer of the technique to the classroom or its effects on student achievement." Professional development activities rarely foster or build on relationships, which would provide opportunities for continued contact and support.⁴

⁴ National Research Council, 2000

Teachers' learning should be a collective good not an individual one, valued by what is contributed to an individual's capacity to improve the quality of instruction within the context of the school.⁵ But, "it's one thing to embrace a doctrine of instruction and quite another to weave it deeply into one's practice."⁶ "Deep" changes in practice imply second-order change. Whereas first-order change does not challenge foundational assumptions, second-order change "addresses the existing framework of perceptions and beliefs, or paradigms, as part of the change process."⁷ Second-order change leads teachers to work in ways that are fundamentally different from before. For example, a first-order change might be creating a process for teachers to look at their students' work together. The resulting second-order change might then be a teacher's modified beliefs about her students' capacity to learn, her strategy for teaching the subject, and long-term changes in her teaching practice.

⁵ Elmore, 2002a
⁶ Elmore, 2002b, p. 19

⁷ Marzano, et al., 1995, p. 162

"The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else."

Roland Barth

⁸ Wiggins & McTighe, 2006

Teachers' capacity for second-order change requires an ability to reexamine their thinking, because insight commonly relies on refining old concepts. "Being willing and able to rethink requires a safe and supportive environment for questioning assumptions and habits."⁸ Strong professional community is one component that supports this capacity. In his career spent working in and around schools, Roland Barth (2006) found that "the nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else." When looking for evidence of collegiality in schools, Barth looks for educators who (1) talk with one another about

practice; (2) share their craft knowledge; (3) observe one another while they are engaged in practice; and (4) root for one another’s success.

Collaborative learning environments depend on strong professional community. For these communities to become centered on classroom practice, teachers need strategies and supports to engage in instructional improvement. Communities based on instructional practice move beyond collegiality to focus on the particular goal of improving student learning “through a structured investigation into teaching and its connection to the learning of students.”⁹ Researchers Jonathan Supovitz and Jolley Bruce Christman show that when professional community with an instructional focus is in place, better instruction and improved student learning result.

⁹ Supovitz & Christman, 2003

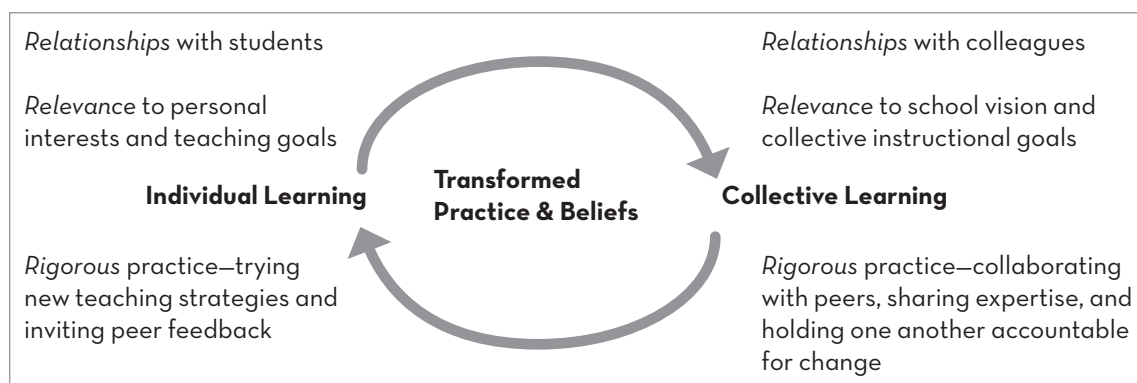
Our Definition of Adult Learning

In our view, effective adult learning serves improved student learning and requires a combination of individual and collective inquiry and practice. Many high schools have a long history of individual adults learning—superstar teachers who seek out learning opportunities on their own. But we are looking for evidence of collective learning within a small school staff. This means all teachers, counselors, and administrators included in the small school staff have opportunities to participate with, as well as accountability to, the group.

Individual learning is characterized by a teacher’s relationship with her students (for example, adjusting her practice according to student feedback and achievement), a personal interest in the learning topic, and a personal commitment to attempting new teaching strategies as well as an openness to inviting feedback. Collective learning is characterized by teachers’ relationships with one another (as part of a strong professional community¹⁰), a connection between the small school vision and the group’s instructional goals, and a group commitment to collaborate on aspects of their practice that matter for improving student learning. The adult learning process exists within the context of improving student learning; the process becomes transformative when teachers’ practices and beliefs are challenged or changed and student achievement increases.

¹⁰ See page 16 for a description and discussion of professional community.

Figure 1: Adult Learning in Service of Improved Student Learning



Interaction between the individual and the collective is iterative. Either one can introduce new ideas to the other; each impacts the other’s practice. The group may decide on common goals, the individual attempts new strategies in his classroom, members from the group provide feedback, and the individual incorporates

this new information into his practice. Perhaps the individual learns something that, in turn, affects the group's original goals. The process is active and multidimensional.

Creating and sustaining a small school culture, including changing instruction, requires a focus on both individual and collective classroom practice. While changes may begin with a small number of people, we expect that through regular and meaningful interaction with the collective, the group of learners will grow. As more people increasingly participate, the group will develop momentum strong enough to sustain the learning process, as well as the learning, over the long-term.

Mutual accountability between and among teachers to open their practice will strengthen the momentum generated by the individual and group learning experiences. In this process, teachers provide and receive feedback on instruction with the goal of transforming the practice and beliefs of the individuals and of the group. Transformative learning, therefore, requires collaboration, risk-taking, and individual as well as group commitment. These qualities rely on and help to define relationships, relevance, and rigor within the adult learning community.

Adult Learning in the Seven Small Schools

¹¹ Wagner, 2002

¹² This instructional framework can be found in Appendix F. It was developed by coaches from the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative and West Valley High School (Spokane, Washington) administrators to describe instructional indicators of the 3 Rs seen in classrooms.

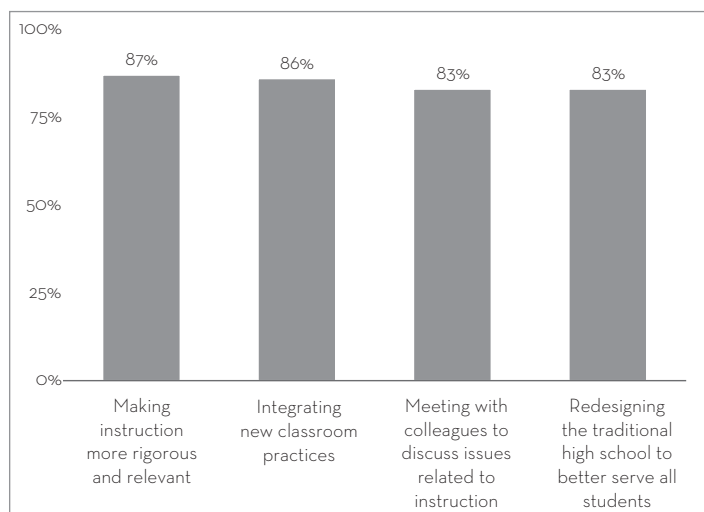
Current education reform practice suggests that the principles of relationships, relevance, and rigor (the new 3 Rs) provide a framework for structuring conversations and initiatives in instructional practice.¹¹ Typically, this framework is applied to student learning. In this section, we apply it to adult learning—using a tool developed at West Valley High School in Spokane, Washington¹²—to see what the 3 Rs reveal about teaching practice and professional development in the seven small schools. Although we discuss relationships, relevance, and rigor separately here, keep in mind that each of these principles interacts with and builds on the others. In the following sections, we highlight portions of the framework in order to clarify the ways in which relationships, relevance, and rigor relate to adult learning.

Based on our research over the last three years, we know that adult learning activities in all seven of the schools in our study exhibit some aspects of the 3 Rs. We have seen changes in adult learning practices in all of the schools in spite of barriers such as lack of funding, lack of time, unclear instructional focus, resistance behaviors, burn out, and misaligned district, building, and small school priorities. While changes in adult learning have not been sustained in all seven schools, the move to small schools forced teachers to examine their practice and profession to some degree and created an opportunity for redefining adult learning, which some teachers embraced and some did not. In what follows, we outline the ways adult learning has been redefined through the framework of the 3 Rs.

A survey of teachers in our study showed that over 80 percent ranked the four most important factors in their teaching practice as: 1) making instruction more rigorous and relevant; 2) integrating new classroom practices; 3) meeting with colleagues to discuss issues related to instruction; and 4) redesigning the traditional high school (see Figure 2). At the same time, fewer than half of the teachers (41 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that teachers in their small school make instructional change a priority. While two-thirds (63 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that teachers in their small school talk about making changes to classroom practice, only one-third (34 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that teachers actually act together to make those changes (see Figure 3).

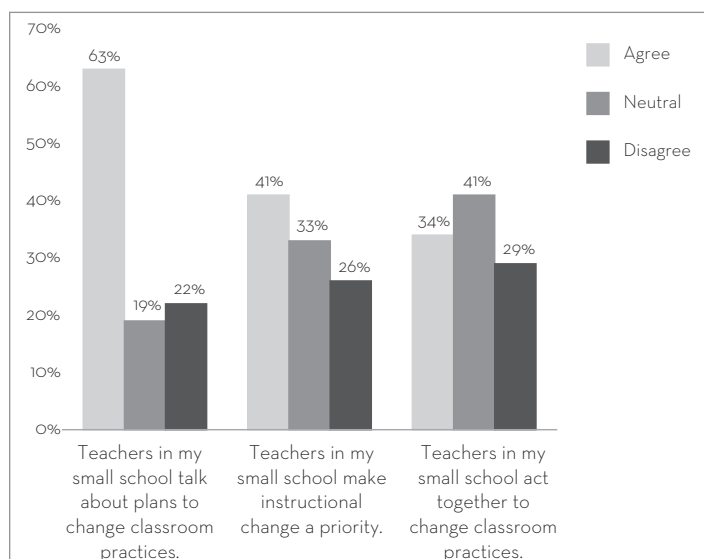
Our interview data corroborate the sentiment that most teachers want to change their classroom practice to be more relationship-based, relevant, and rigorous, but few of the seven small schools have achieved the kind of professional learning environ-

Figure 2: Most Important Factors in Teaching Practice



Twenty-nine respondents rated the importance of seven factors of their teaching practice. Respondents could choose from Not Important, Somewhat Important, Neutral, Important, Very Important and Don't Know. These statistics reflect the aggregated Important and Very Important responses for the top four categories.

Figure 3: Teachers' Beliefs About Colleagues



ment that enables this level of adult learning and instructional change to occur. Before taking a closer look at adult learning in three schools, we identify the qualities of relationships, relevance, and rigor that support adults in all seven small schools.

Relationships

“It’s not only about teachers and the staff knowing their students better; it’s also about the teachers knowing the other teachers better. ...One of the things the conversion process has done is not only created personalization between kids and teachers but also between teachers and teachers. We now trust one another.”

Teacher-leader at Cedar

Key Qualities of Relationships in Adult Learning

- Teachers know colleagues so well that learning opportunities can be tailored to the needs of each teacher.
- Teachers model integrity and open-mindedness for their colleagues.
- Teachers trust their colleagues so well that they grant them the moral authority to challenge them.
- Teachers are committed to their own success, as well as that of their peers.

See Appendix F for the complete framework.

High-quality adult learning opportunities honor learners’ interests, curiosity, strengths, and contributions, as well as elicit and challenge their preexisting understanding of the subject matter. Teachers need opportunities to give and receive formative assessment in order to make their thinking visible to themselves and their peers, which means learning as part of a community. Relationships are a key aspect of strong professional communities, enabling teachers to customize the learning agenda based on their interests, and to build on one another’s knowledge, provide feedback, and refine their thinking about instruction. Strong relationships create receptivity between and among members of the learning community to challenge one another to greater achievement, to model behavior for one another, and to root for

one another’s success. Teachers from Cedar and Elm discussed how their small school leaders helped create this environment.

[Our teacher-leaders] have exhibited the courage and skill to model a learning stance themselves.

[The assistant principal] has just come in and become part of the staff. We trust him to lead us. ... [He] came in being willing to learn from us... willing to see where we wanted to go and then be able to take us there.

In six of the study schools, the conversion to small schools created a smaller group of teachers (representing various disciplines) working with a smaller group of students. This structural change impacted relationships between and among teachers, who now often work in close proximity, creating more opportunities for informal conversation and encouraging peer-to-peer learning. An overwhelming majority (86 percent) of teachers in all seven schools reported having conversations with their colleagues about student issues. As more frequent interaction occurred and teachers’ relationships deepened, the conversation was increasingly directed towards teaching practice. Growing trust led to more frequent instances of collegiality and collaboration, as described by Fir’s principal and a Birch teacher:

Just like they are able to have conversations about teaching kids, I think [teachers] really crave [bouncing] ideas off of each other and work[ing] in a group.

I get to hear ideas from other teachers about things that they are doing or things they have done in the past... that kind of thing has been helpful.

While most schools showed evidence of teachers discussing students and curriculum, some went so far as to make instruction public. Cedar's teacher-leader and an Elm teacher explain:

You need to be delicate, especially because you're going from a culture in education... that your classroom is your little kingdom and nobody knows what's happening in there, to being completely transparent. I mean, that takes... lots of trust. And you have to create that. You can't expect it because it really is a mental change for teachers, for myself included. I used to hate having people come into my classroom, just really it would rattle me. And now I'm like "come on in, whatever."

The walk-throughs generated dialogue [among teachers who] said, "Wow, I'm going to try to open up like that," or, "I've never checked for understanding the way you just did there." ... I think it's becoming more open. People feel more accessible to each other because they're more exposed to each other.

Over two-thirds (68 percent) of the teachers surveyed said they trust the other teachers in their small school. Seventy-five percent feel personally accountable to their small school colleagues, versus to administrators alone. This seems to indicate that the majority of teachers feel they are working within a trusted professional community and that the reliance on hierarchy may be loosening in favor of unofficial leaders who offer expertise to the group.

Relevance

"My staff crave it.... Whenever we've had time to sit down in groups and talk about curriculum, instruction, learning, they love it. They love talking about those things—they don't want to talk about the clerical."

Principal at Fir

Key Qualities of Relevant Adult Learning

- Instruction is inherently meaningful and engages teachers in multiple domains.
- The learning community values and embraces the diversity of each teacher in the life of the classroom and its community.
- Learning activities develop within each teacher the habits and curiosity associated with lifelong learning.
- Assessments are meaningful to teachers and offer them insights into their own learning.

See Appendix F for the complete framework.

Relevant adult learning incorporates teachers' interests within a context of why, when, where, and how new information might be valuable to them. It focuses on transferring new knowledge into actual classroom practice. By simply talking about their classroom practice, rather than their weekend plans, teachers are creating a relevant learning environment. Conversation about classroom practice becomes more relevant when there is a clear and widely articulated vision for the small school, anchoring the work in teachers' collective purpose. Several teachers at Chestnut talked about the common goal or focus. Said one, "We all have this common thing that we are trying to promote and consider and maintain." A common vision is the glue that holds collaboration together—keeping conversations focused on teachers'

collective vision and goals. Relevant adult learning communities also embrace the diversity of knowledge, skills, and opinions of their members. One Hemlock teacher explained:

We no longer teach in isolation... I've been able to broaden my teaching practices... and how I think about education because I talk to people outside my discipline. ... And that's a direct result of [small schools].

Looking at data together helps create relevance by clarifying problems to work on and creating measurable goals to work toward collectively. Birch teachers "look at where our students are on a reading level and writing level and then we take that research and... find some strategies" to address the issues. Chestnut teachers track

the number of classes freshman are failing and create individual strategies to support each student. Fir staff members split into teams according to the sections of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), “looked at the data and came up with a plan” to improve student achievement.

Students’ positive responses to teachers’ changing classroom practice make the work both exciting and relevant because teachers see progress toward their goal of increased student engagement and achievement. Student feedback also enables teachers to tap into their own interests, as two Cedar teachers describe:

I think that if [the curriculum is] relevant, [that’s the] hook. And if I can hook them, I get excited about it.

I’ve adopted a less-is-more kind of attitude and really worked on making what we’re learning in our French class really, truly not just about learning a language but learning about culture and learning about keeping our eyes wide open to difference And now I don’t have to do that in a vacuum, you know, everybody’s talking about that, and kids want to talk about that as well. I don’t have to ram it down their throats. They chose this [small school] for that reason.

After nurturing their professional relationships, teachers know and trust one another enough to incorporate relevance into their collective learning. Connecting teachers’ learning to individual and group interests, looking at classroom practice and data together, and making the link between teachers’ work and that of their students, creates a relevant adult learning environment.

Rigor

“You have to at some point try [new strategies]. We kind of almost schedule ourselves, force ourselves to take risks.”

Teacher-leader at Cedar

Key Qualities of Rigorous Adult Learning

- Instruction is grounded in content that is complex, ambiguous, provocative, and emotionally or personally challenging.
- Teachers are engaged in active participation, exploration, and research.
- Teachers set learning goals for themselves and monitor progress toward academic excellence.
- Teachers develop resilience, flexibility, and confidence by facing (academic) challenges and temporary classroom setbacks that are opportunities for deeper learning.

See Appendix F for the complete framework.

The first two principles, relationships and relevance, describe the context for adult learning. The third principle of rigor takes a deeper look at the expectations for learning, the learning process, and the outcomes of transformative adult learning. Rigorous adult learning provides teachers opportunities to discuss and try new teaching strategies, as well as to receive constructive feedback. It requires teachers to transfer what they are learning to the classroom and to judge the effect on student achievement, both as individual teachers and as a group. Characteristics of rigorous adult learning include personally challenging content and practice embedded within the context of collective learning goals, as well as measurement toward those goals by the group.

Teachers at Elm provide one example of how rigorous adult learning is occurring in the school:

We actually came up with six, seven, eight strategies . . . of how we can get teachers into other teachers’ classrooms for different purposes. . . . [And] for the first time in our school, every teacher is conducting an instructional action research project . . . every teacher is choosing a target that promotes student engagement . . . or higher-order thinking. . . . They’re going to . . . gather baseline data, implement that strategy over X number of class periods that they define in their project, and then measure the effect on student performance. . . . And then we all share our projects in the winter.

Alder's teachers read and discuss articles regarding teaching and learning issues. They also send representatives to attend professional development trainings and then share strategies with the rest of the staff. Cedar's teachers engage in walk-throughs to share classroom strategies. Several of the schools are trying to make their classrooms more project-based by conducting action research, reading a text together, or trying out inquiry-driven teaching strategies. These practices frequently call for protocols,¹³ which add formality to the learning process.

¹³ A protocol is a guided format that provides focus and structure to teachers' conversations about their classroom practice. The National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) offers a series of protocols on ways to get feedback on work in progress, examine student work as a means to refine curriculum, and discuss a dilemma. See <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org> under "Tools/Using Protocols."

Rigorous adult learning refers to more than just the activities teachers engage in for exploration and reflection on their practice. It also involves transformational learning—challenging or changing one's beliefs about teaching and learning. Because of their experience within their respective learning communities, teachers across all seven schools talked about understanding the context and urgency for changing instruction and the responsibility of both teachers and formal leaders in creating the learning environment.

I used to think that if I was very thorough in my lesson planning, stood up in front and lectured on one thing, and modeled how to do it... they could move through it and learn it on their own. I now think that that is not the most successful way because there are still kids that I have lost.

I think we're evolving now to where the reality is, [the teacher-leaders] can't carry this and keep it going forever.... That other people are going to have to step up and be included and get involved.

Relying on the strength of their learning communities, teachers were able to reflect on their individual and joint practice, make adjustments when necessary, and resolve to try again.

The first time you teach a lesson, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. Get rid of the ones that don't work, you know, and keep the ones that do, and find out why the ones didn't work.... To me, it's an exciting year for that reason.

We started [an advisory program] then things weren't going well, so we changed. ... [Now there's a renewed] commitment, and we've said that as a staff, we're going to stick with it; we're going to do this.

Learning has occurred, structure has changed as a result... it has taken us three years but we really feel confident now for the first time.

Through these processes, teachers realize the importance of risk-taking and practicing lifelong learning.

I was ready to just sail into retirement. I didn't want to try anything new. ... But it's exhilarating to be inspired to be better. ... No matter how well you've been teaching, you can improve on it.

COMPONENTS Three components that support adult learning and lead to instructional change:

- Distributed Leadership
 - Instructional Framework
 - Professional Community
-

The above teachers' comments identify several ways adult learning has occurred in the seven schools. But, the extent to which it is happening, and continues to happen, is mixed. Where relationship-driven, relevant, and rigorous adult learning has become part of the professional culture, additional elements are in place. Distributed leadership, an instructional framework, and a strong professional community are three components that make the 3 Rs more robust. Leaders model a learning stance and prod teachers to participate, ultimately driving mutual accountability for learning, which is indicative of a rigorous learning environment. A small-school-wide instructional focus provides the relevance that pushes the learning experience from the level of an individual teacher to the

collective. And, the strength of a school's professional community speaks to the state of relationships between and among teachers, and establishes a foundation on which to build a learning agenda. In the next section, we explore the qualities of leadership, instructional focus, and strong professional community at three of the seven small schools, in order to begin to understand what makes the difference—what turns the corner—to instructional change.

A Closer Look at Adult Learning in Three Small Schools

At the end of this three-year study of seven small schools in Washington State, all seven schools have exhibited elements of the 3 Rs in terms of adult learning. However, three of the schools—Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut—have shown the most promise in creating learning opportunities that are truly transformative. In varying degrees, these schools support and expect both individual and collective learning that transforms beliefs and practice and leads to strong instructional capacity and classroom practice. Although it is too soon to tell from our data, we anticipate that this change in adult behavior will lead to changes in student engagement and learning, the ultimate goal of the conversion work that these schools have undertaken during the past five years.

Components that Support Adult Learning and Lead to Instructional Change

In these three schools, we see a considerable range in the type of adult learning activities. Some of the activities involve learning from colleagues about specific instructional strategies, others involve co-planning lessons and units with small school colleagues, and others involve making public commitments to implement new classroom strategies and reporting back on progress made. However, all three of these schools exhibited a set of common components that the data indicate support adult learning—distributed leadership, an instructional framework, and professional community. In addition, the teachers and leaders in these small schools believe these elements must be centered at the small school, not the building level to impact student learning.

Distributed Leadership Over three years, the data show a new leadership structure emerging which moves away from a reliance on administrative hierarchies toward a network of shared and distributed leadership. We define distributed leadership as embodying the following qualities: 1) leadership is shared among people in different roles; 2) leadership is situational rather than hierarchical; and 3) authority is based upon expertise, rather than formal position.¹⁴ As a result, leadership must become the responsibility of everyone in the school.

As the leaders closest to the change, teacher-leaders epitomize this distribution of leadership and have been an integral part of the high school redesign process. They are facilitators and advocates for their small schools, driving the vision for change. At Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut, the teacher-leaders have grown beyond this role to direct their small school's mission and assume instructional leadership responsibilities. These teacher-leaders play a number of important roles in supporting adult learning in their small schools. These leaders and their colleagues identified four roles that teacher-leaders play: vision-keeper, instructional coach/facilitator, modeler, and prodder.

¹⁴ Wallach, et al., 2005

Teacher-leaders help their colleagues keep their collective vision of what their small school stands for—improving student achievement—front and center. According to one of the two Cedar teacher-leaders, “[as the teacher-leader] you keep the vision... I will be the one who fights the most for everything that is about our small school.” One of her teaching colleagues agreed, “we have a vision of what we want to do and our teacher-leaders really keep us on track.”

In all three schools, teacher-leaders discussed the importance of changing teachers’ instructional practice and their role in supporting their small school colleagues with implementing these changes. Two teacher-leaders, from Alder and Cedar respectively, describe their roles as instructional facilitators:

“...I see [the teacher-leader] as an important, ongoing, instructional coach...to get us from just being in small schools to having better teaching and learning...”

Teacher-leader at Alder

I used to think the role of the teacher-leader was going to be more of a temporary, midwife kind of role, just to help facilitate the transition from large, comprehensive high school to small schools. Now I see it more as an important, ongoing, instructional coach role in helping to facilitate second-order changes that are really essential to the next stage in that transition. To get us from just being in small schools to having better teaching and learning happening in small schools.

My role, more often than not, is to make up the [learning] tasks for the teachers to do. And maybe it sounds like I’m getting out of it, but it actually turns out to be the other way. I’ve always believed in the adage I never learned as much as the last class I taught. So if I have to set up something for my teachers to work at to get better at a certain idea, I usually have to have a pretty good command of the idea by the time I actually write out work-group problems for them.

The Chestnut teacher-leader also feels a sense of responsibility to model new instructional practices and strategies for her colleagues.

Now I know that if I’m preaching something, I’ve got to be doing it... It changes you as a person because now all the kids are my kids.... You feel that you’re more responsible to do it. [But] not because anybody imposed it on you.... When we go through training for *Understanding by Design*... I find that I have to understand it now because if I don’t do it, why should teachers feel that they should do it? So I feel a bigger obligation to model behavior for my peers and the students. But I like it.

One of the teacher-leaders at Cedar also recognizes that her role is not only to model new strategies and practices, but to model *learning*.

Modeling being a good learner as a teacher, to ask for people to come and observe me. Or, to ask someone for advice: “I’ve got this problem and I don’t know how to make this this way. What do you think?” And modeling that sort of modesty and willingness to open up. Because as a leader especially, you might be viewed as somebody who already is an expert, or even worse, you might be viewed as some sort of know-it-all or something like that. So you need to show that you want to improve, and you kind of create that environment by the way you conduct yourself... share mess-ups and share successes as well, any chance you get.

Her Cedar teaching colleagues, veteran and new, agree that their teacher-leaders serve as important role models—both for modeling new strategies and for modeling an openness to trying new things. “They are really truly leaders because they are the ones encouraging us to try new things...It isn’t just the status quo with them. It’s ‘what do you think of trying...?’ and they model it.” Adds a first-year teacher, “our teacher-leaders are, they’re on it. They really know what they want to do, and they’re very driven. That is a

“...I feel a bigger obligation to model behavior for my peers and the students. But I like it.”

Teacher-leader at Chestnut

great role model to have, especially for my first year. It’s really nice to look up to that level and want to attain it.”

Lastly, the teacher-leaders recognize their role as prodder or encourager for their small school colleagues. Sometimes this means acting as the supportive cheerleader, other times it means forcing teachers to think more deeply about their practice. The teacher-leaders from Cedar and Chestnut reported:

Somehow, in some way, you’ve got to force the teachers—and force is maybe not the best choice of words—prod or encourage them to try things and make an active understanding.

The biggest job that I’ve found... [is] to cheer the teachers up since the administration is not available to do it. I have to be the cheerleader now and tell them, “you’re doing a great job. Let’s give ourselves a round of applause.”

The principals for Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut also recognize the critical role that building leadership plays in supporting adult learning and instructional change in service of improving student achievement. The Cedar principal recognizes that this requires him to evaluate each professional learning opportunity based on how it will help improve student achievement.

We’re trying to... focus on how we’re teaching our kids. It’s all about student achievement. That’s all we’re focusing on. If anyone comes to me [and says] “I’ve got a great idea [for professional development],” [I ask] “how does that improve student achievement?” I know that sounds simple and so obvious, but you forget the obvious when you’re doing this incredible work.

Two of the assistant principals, who oversee Alder and Cedar, recognize that their roles are also shifting as the teachers in their small schools increasingly focus on changing their classroom practice. The administrators describe how the responsibility for leading professional development sessions and other adult learning opportunities are being distributed to teacher-leaders and teachers. As a result, the assistant principals are able to spend more time in classrooms observing and supporting teachers.

I don’t worry about instruction so much that if I’m not totally hands-on in classrooms all the time... I feel like it’s going to fall apart. That’s testimony to the fact that... the teachers are talking to each other. I think in the Alder school that’s happening more and more. So I don’t feel like I’m the only one who has to constantly have conversations about what we’re doing and how we’re doing it in a way that’s aligning together, and what should be informing our work, and that sort of thing.

What I see as different from last year is... I have been able to be in the classroom more. I have done more observations earlier this year than I have ever been able to. Part of that is not only because the teachers are more focused on that, and we have had so much work around it, but there’s none of that, “there’s an administrator coming to my room; I’m going to freeze up.”

Instructional Framework In all three schools, Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut, teacher-leaders and teachers discussed their small school’s instructional framework, which they credit with helping to guide the staff’s collective practice as well as their own individual classroom practice.¹⁵

At Alder, teachers said their instructional framework involved making their teaching practice more hands-on, project-, and inquiry-based. “We’ve changed the way we’ve done a lot of the labs, where we’re turning them into more inquiry-based labs... tied to things that students will see in the real world.” Even the newest teachers, who joined the small school in its third

¹⁵ An instructional framework is a construct about teaching and learning that guides decisions inside and outside the classroom. It is foremost an overarching theory of teaching and learning that provides guidelines/key areas of focus for what is important and speaks to how an individual or group approaches learning. An instructional framework isn’t a teaching recipe; rather it is a guide for practice (Marzolf, 2006).

¹⁶ Essential Questions, a strategy developed by the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), are provocative and multilayered questions that reveal the richness and complexities of a subject or discipline.

year of implementation, are clear on this focus, which demonstrates its pervasiveness.

Researchers observed two Alder teachers' classes where Essential Questions were the strategy used to support the small school's instructional framework.¹⁶ For the humanities teacher, inquiry-based instruction using Essential Questions enabled him to facilitate relevant classroom discussions and projects based on current events. For his science colleague, Essential Questions were a way to organize his class, but also to tap into his students', and his own, curiosity about a subject. "What I really like most about Essential Questions as a pedagogical practice is that it's a way of being very intentional about reawakening that curiosity in students that they already have and getting them to think 'oh yeah, why is that?'"

It's something I've been doing more in my classes, framing a day's lesson or framing a unit around a couple really driving Essential Questions that get at the heart of the curriculum and that are engaging students, that engage their curiosity . . . I've got a whiteboard with the day's agenda, so usually I'll have a question as part of what we're doing today. I have another thing on the wall that has Essential Questions for the whole course, or the Essential Question that we're working on that week.

But there wasn't always such a clear instructional focus at Alder. The Alder assistant principal observed that during the second year of implementation, it "felt like we had two schools inside Alder, that we were this tech. ed. school and that we were this college-prep humanities school." Even though Alder's teachers "worked together, and they talked together . . . curriculum-wise there didn't seem to be a whole lot of overlap" between the two major content areas. Teachers were operating from a common focus on critical thinking and inquiry-based learning, but "they're using different definitions of what critical thinking is." This resulted in expanded experimentation with classroom practice on the one hand, and a disjointed curriculum on the other. Ultimately, teachers engaged in ongoing conversation and reflection about the common ideas that could be threaded "through all of the things that we're doing" and developed a shared understanding about their instructional focus.

At Cedar, the teachers chose the text *Teaching What Matters Most*¹⁷ as their school's instructional framework because the book's focus on thought, authenticity, rigor, and differentiation matched their needs and priorities. According to the teacher-leader:

Using the book *Teaching What Matters Most*, we've tried to, particularly this year, but over the last few years, we've tried to make our classroom instruction more project-based. We've tried to make it more rigorous. We've been trying to make it more student-centered. And, we've been trying to integrate. And so those [concepts] have been on our minds for the last few years, and we continue to have that work. . . . I think there's evidence of that in our classrooms, and if you look back five years ago, before we started talking to each other about small schools, you should [now] see evidence of more integration, more rigor, more project-based learning. There is a connectedness that wasn't there before.

At Chestnut, teachers engaged in joint work around Habits of Mind and Habits of Work¹⁸ that the staff developed and put on posters, which hang in each classroom. The goal is to use this common language to facilitate students and teachers making connections across the disciplines. A number of the staff discussed how they are incorporating the habits into their classroom.

¹⁷ *Teaching What Matters Most: Standards and Strategies for Raising Student Achievement* by Richard W. Strong, Harvey F. Silver, and Matthew J. Perini (2001), was given to all Gates grantee high schools in Washington.

¹⁸ "Habits of Mind" were first developed by Deborah Meier and her colleagues at Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) twenty years ago. The CPESS Habits of Mind have been widely circulated and used in the years since, particularly among schools associated with the Coalition of Essential Schools. Many schools adopt the CPESS habits as they were written, while others add to or create their own, as Chestnut has done.

I do understand the *Habits of Mind* and the *Habits of Work*... we have talked about ways to create a mindset that follows them. We are supposed to be referring to them and incorporating them into... practice.

The students are looking for how we're using those constantly in our daily lives... Having them up in my room is going to be a big reminder for me... I'll look up and [think] "Oh, right, I should be using that word," as opposed to using five different words for the same thing. If I keep referring back to the same word, then it kind of ingrains in their head, "Oh, we really are doing the same thing; we were doing this last week, and we're just applying it in a different way."

But not all of the teachers feel that the habits are serving their purpose of providing a common focus and language. According to one Chestnut teacher, "we originally decided to make posters and put them up. [The other teachers] could be making more reference, but because we don't talk about them, I don't see it happening."

In addition to a focus on the Habits of Mind and the Habits of Work, Chestnut teachers adopted two instructional strategies—*Understanding by Design*¹⁹ and project-based learning—that they plan to incorporate into their individual classrooms.

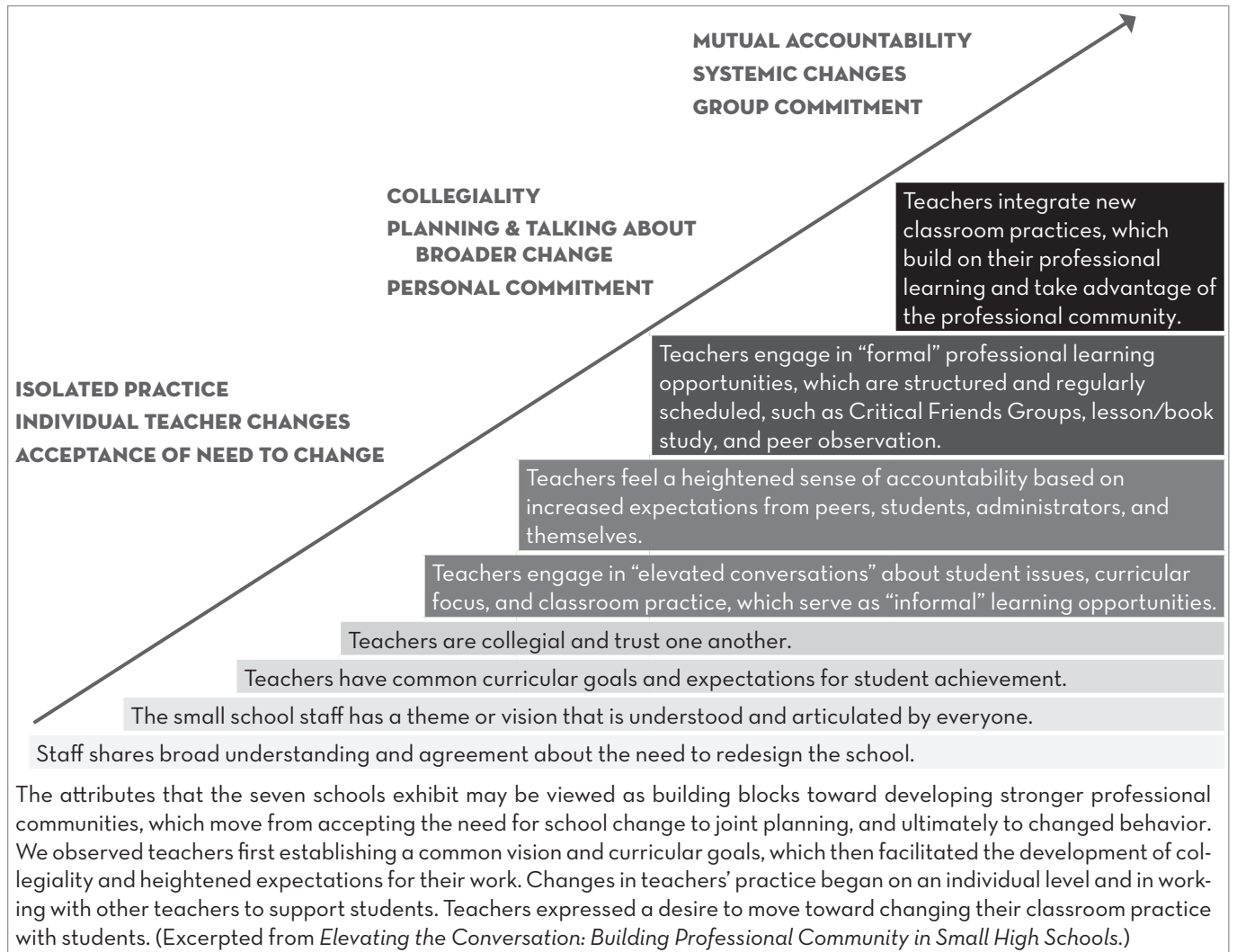
The staff looked at a lot of different [strategies] and when they wrote the original grant proposal, project-based learning was something they wanted to work on. Last year we revisited the issue to figure out what we wanted to work on. We decided we wanted to work on *Understanding by Design* and project-based learning and the conglomeration of the two.

Professional Community Professional community is the third component we identified that supports adult learning at Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut. We define professional communities as groups of teachers, teacher-leaders, and other professionals working together in redesigned small high schools who 1) work toward having a collective focus on student and adult learning; 2) share common norms, values, and goals that are evident in their work with one another and in their classroom practice; and 3) have sufficient time and structures available to build collaborative relationships and interdependence.²⁰ We anticipate that with these practices in place, teachers would learn from one another and use this knowledge to inform and improve their instructional practices in service of improved student achievement.

We identified a set of attributes that the schools exhibited while developing stronger professional communities. These attributes, which form a set of building blocks for creating strong professional community, move from accepting the need for school change to joint planning, and ultimately, to changes in teacher practices.

¹⁹ *Understanding by Design* by Jay McTighe & Grant Wiggins (1998), outlines a curriculum design process called "backwards by design," which guides teachers in designing their instruction based on desired student outcomes.

²⁰ Wallach & Gallucci, 2004

Figure 4: Developing Professional Community in Small Schools

As shown in Figure 4 above, we identified professional communities with a strong common focus, a clear vision, and shared language as the requisite first steps toward building collegiality. This foundation enabled teachers to work more closely together to create shared curricular goals or an instructional focus. We found that these elements helped establish a sense of trust among teachers in professional communities. When trust was established, teachers were more likely to engage in elevated conversation—they collaborated more, sought advice on student issues, and discussed classroom practice. Later data indicate that these practices held true during the third year of the study for Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut.

Below we explore the first three elements of the building blocks, which we believe are the foundational elements to building professional community and creating a supportive atmosphere for transformational adult learning. At the end of this three-year study, the majority of the professionals at Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut share a broad understanding and agreement about the need to redesign schools, according to the data. Therefore, we focus on the other foundational building blocks, which include teachers having a common theme or vision, shared curricular goals, and respect and trust. We will also

examine in much greater detail the elevated conversations and informal and formal learning opportunities happening at each of the three schools.

- **Common Theme or Vision** Teachers at Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut were clear during the first year of the study about their small school's theme and vision. This widely articulated vision and agreed-upon collective purpose at each of the small schools provided relevance for teachers' conversations about their classroom practice and helped anchor their own adult learning experiences. At Alder, for example, the school's name describes a theme focused on the introduction of new ideas or methods, and as a result, teachers design their classroom learning opportunities using strategies that emphasize inquiry, discovery, and hands-on learning.

In all three schools, a clarity of vision continued throughout the three years of our study, even amidst staff retirements and turnover.

We have a very clear vision, and we have a clear style, and we're all dedicated to that vision and style.

I feel like there is a focus and it's reflected in the name; [we] really seem to focus on leadership and achievement. I can see that we all have this common thing.

- **Shared Curricular Goals** During the first year of our study, we identified strong professional communities as having shared curricular goals. At Cedar, teachers developed small school Essential Questions, which guided the teachers' efforts to integrate central themes into their curriculum. Chestnut teachers expressed their curricular goals through their vision for students' success. We found a focus on shared curricular goals continued in Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut throughout the study.

We have a common goal, it's clearly stated and it's not just to the staff. It's clearly stated to the students so the students know that there's that expectation [for them] as well as the staff.

- **Teachers Respect and Trust One Another** During the first year of our study, teachers at Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut spoke about how their new professional communities were providing them, for the first time in their careers, the opportunity to move from isolated practice to collaborative work across disciplines. One Chestnut teacher said during the first year, "We are growing as a team, learning to trust each other and work together better." We found these practices of mutual respect and trust continued during the third year of our study.

"I didn't realize what teaching could be like until this work began."

Teacher at Cedar

I've felt the most connected; it's been the most collegial setting. I didn't realize what teaching could be like until this work began.

We do collaborate a lot and everybody seems to respect the opinions that people have on different topics, and if you don't always agree, well, that's fine, you respect their opinion anyway.

People have remained in Cedar. People have asked to come into Cedar when other people have left. ... I think the teachers in Cedar are feeling so good about what is happening and positive that it is working, and they feel respected by other people. Some of the other [small schools] have knockdown-dragout fights where people get up and leave. It is ugly. But there is such a mutual respect that I think they are happy to be at Cedar.

When teachers developed relationships with one another, further trust was established. This growing sense of trust led to increased risk-taking among the teachers in these three small schools, as well as an increased sense of individual and group accountability.

We have really matured as a team. We really work very well together and have reached a point where we can speak openly

We're getting much more honest with each other. It's intriguing to watch the dynamics now. [In the beginning] we would try not to step on people's toes . . . so you might not say something. The next year, we might say something, but be really worried about how we'd say it. Now we're much more direct, we're not rude about it, but we can be much more direct, and we understand where it's coming from.

- **Elevated Conversation** The emergence of elevated conversation was another indicator of a strong professional community within a redesigned school. In *Elevating the Conversation: Building Professional Community in Small High Schools*, we found evidence of elevated conversation, which happens when “teachers collectively focus on issues related to individual students, classroom practice, and problem solving.” During the third year of our study, we found the professional communities at Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut engaging in elevated conversations, although to varying degrees. The following quotes are representative of the types of elevated conversations teachers are having:

I've been impressed that a lot of time is devoted to talking about teaching and learning and not just talking about . . . housekeeping stuff. . . . There is a lot of attention given to what happens in the classroom, what we are striving for . . . how we can be better teachers.

This year they've brought back department meetings But the difference is, when we meet as a math department, we have to talk about the important curriculum things, but not a single teacher in the room has the same students I do. . . . But when we meet as a [small school], all of my students' other teachers are in that same room, so the focus shifts from curriculum to kids . . . and that's our main topic. “Does anyone have so and so in their class? How are they doing?” Or, “what are you doing that is working for them?” . . . And I think that's an important shift. We need to do more than just deliver information.

At all three schools, teachers talk about “students of concern,” just as they did in the first year of the study. But two years later, teachers report that they now feel their individual concerns about students are shared more broadly by everyone in their professional community. As expressed by a teacher-leader,

“there is a sense of community with Cedar, that if I'm having trouble with a student, it's not just my problem, it's Cedar's problem.”

While Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut showed evidence of adult learning characterized by strong and distributed leadership, a clear instructional focus, and well-developed professional community, these three schools represent a range of progress toward implementing systemic changes that lead to transformational adult learning. The next section will describe in

greater detail each school's informal and formal adult learning opportunities and the teachers' efforts to integrate new instructional strategies and change their classroom practice.

“There is a lot of attention given to what happens in the classroom, what we are striving for . . . how we can be better teachers.”

Teacher at Alder

An In-Depth Look at Changing Practice in Three Small Schools

The staffs at Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut developed into strong professional communities during the first year of this study. The teachers established a common vision and curricular goals, which facilitated the development of collegiality and heightened expectations for their work. But while individual teachers were influenced to adopt new teaching techniques, elevated conversation and the emergence of a new professional culture did not lead to substantial changes in teachers' classroom practice. Instead, teachers mostly talked about changing their classroom practice in terms of planning and curricular integration for the coming year.

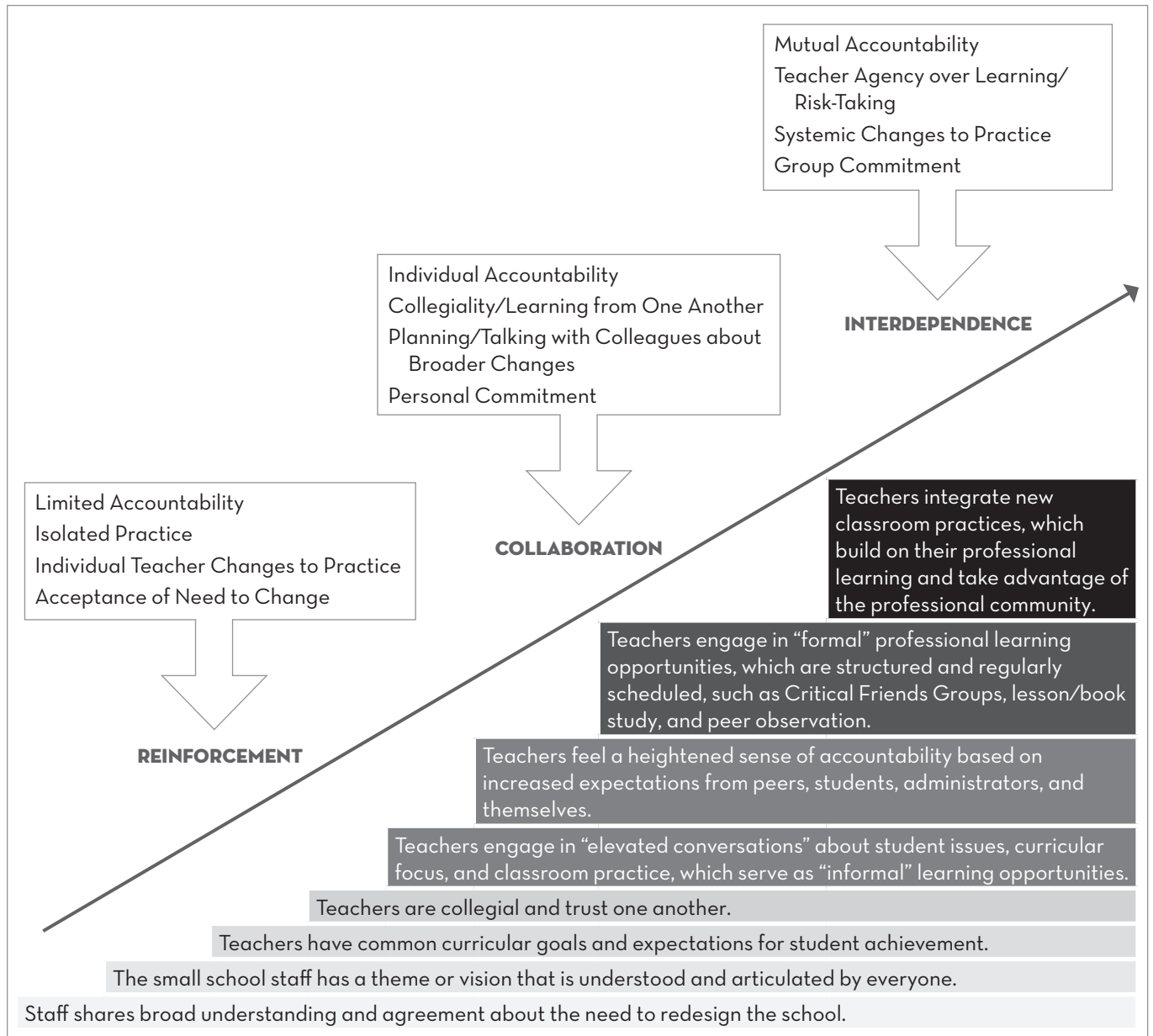
Two years later, teachers in all three schools appear to be moving from talk to action. During the third year of this study, teachers were observed working individually and collectively within their professional community on changing their classroom practice. We found there was a progression in this movement—from reinforcement of one another's practice to collaboration, and finally, interdependence. As teachers move from one stage to the next, the 3 Rs and adult learning (as we defined it in Figure 1 on page 5) become more robust.

At the reinforcement stage, teachers work to reinforce what is happening in one another's classrooms as a way to ensure coherence and connections for students. Individual teachers are making changes to their classroom practice but continue to work in isolation. At the collaboration stage, teachers work together to create coherence, plan interdisciplinary units, and strengthen their practice by learning from their colleagues. Many teachers have made individual commitments to change their practice and engage in learning activities. At the interdependence stage, teachers recognize that changing their practice is both an individual and a collective undertaking. These teachers have made a group commitment to change their instructional practice and participate in individual and collective learning. They engage in individual and joint risk-taking with their colleagues and assume responsibility for their own, as well as their colleagues', learning.

We found evidence that all three of the schools have professional communities where teachers reinforce one another's practice; teachers at two of the schools exhibited collaboration, and teachers at one of the schools demonstrated interdependence. Based on this data, Figure 5 represents a refined understanding from our first findings (Figure 4) of how professional communities progress and the resulting adult learning opportunities at each of the three schools.

What separates the work at these three schools is the degree to which the teachers in their respective professional communities have embraced the need to change their classroom practice, how they have gone about changing, and the extent to which they have held themselves and their colleagues accountable. For the remainder of this report, we will examine the individual and collective adult learning and professional community practices of the teachers at the three schools.

Figure 5: Professional Community Developmental Progress Toward Changing Classroom Practice



Reinforcement Collaboration Interdependence

We found evidence that teachers in all three professional communities are reinforcing one another’s practice as a way to ensure coherence and connections for their students. Typically, this involved teachers sharing with one another what they were planning on covering in their class and looking for connections that they could make to the curriculum in other subject areas. The goal, according to the Chestnut teacher-leader, is “to get the students to understand the relationships [between classes], instead of just moving from one class to the other and just doing random things.” The Cedar teacher-leader agreed, “kids see more connection than they did before and that’s due to our efforts to try to connect our work, so it isn’t just French class to math class to English class to science class.”

Chestnut teachers gave multiple examples of how they reinforce one another’s classroom practice:

Last year I shared a lesson that I do in photography, where I held up a picture... the kids had to write a story about “what’s that picture all about?” ... So we’re kind of reinforcing some things they do in their English classes when they write a paper.

In my earth science class... I’m going to ask them to write a paragraph stating their opinion about global warming... so I went to [the humanities teacher] and got the rubric for a paragraph and talked with her a bit.

I’ve got all the students who are taking Art I from Ms. S. Their projects are up on my wall. They are very, very mathematical constructions. The fact that I was able to say, “I know what’s going on in that class. Bring in your work from that class and we’ll talk about it in class. Then we’ll put it up on the wall.” They were able to see how they were using that in math class. And, it’s kind of a visual reminder that we are integrated and I am talking to their art teacher constantly and staying abreast of what they’re doing in that situation....

When I have... something in math like scientific notation, [the math teacher] does it two or three weeks later and [the students] say, “We got this in science!” No kidding.

Teachers at Cedar use two strategies—using the same syllabus format and curriculum mapping—to reinforce what is happening in one another’s classrooms.

This year, all the syllabi were in the same format. [The small schools] all had the same logo, the same set up. The overarching question was in every syllabus and how it would be addressed. [Teachers] keep a chart of who is teaching what, and when, so you can look to see who is doing what and how you could integrate what you are doing with that person.

We are trying to do the curriculum mapping so that if the social studies teacher is teaching about World War II and maybe the internment of Japanese Americans... in English class they read a book about a family who is going through that. Then instead of having this sort of fragmented day, where students have six separate classes, they’re getting integrated without... the classes being together, but the ideas are starting to merge.

At these schools individual teachers accept that they need to change their classroom practice and engage in a series of adult learning opportunities where they learn new teaching strategies, which they take responsibility for implementing in their classrooms. For teachers who are reinforcing one another’s practice, their adult learning opportunities are happening at the individual level as described in Figure 1 on page 5.

The Alder teacher-leader credits his opportunity to observe other high schools in the district with exposing him to a new strategy that he’s implemented in his classroom.

I can tell you, at least for my own classes, two things I’ve changed quite a bit this year; one of them is Essential Questions. [The change is] a result of doing a walk-through at two of the other high schools in the district, where I saw teachers really being very intentional school-wide about focusing curriculum on Essential Questions that are posted on the walls and made very explicit in the introduction of a lesson. I saw that as a really powerful thing.

At this level, the changes in practice are focused at the individual teacher level only, and as a result, teachers tend to still be working much more in isolation as described by two Chestnut teachers:

[*Understanding by Design*] is ingrained in my brain. I’m not quite sure how I would teach without it, because that’s all I’ve ever known. I don’t do them during my planning period. I do them on a Saturday. I’ll sit down for five hours and I’ll start with, “What do I want students to know?” By the end, “What have they learned?” ... Not every detail is planned out, but everything

that I want to do and the progression that I want to use is planned out in that one day.

It seems like we are all together with a common goal, but we each have our own rules, and maybe because we each have our own specialties, we don't feel like we have a right to comment on what each other is doing.

The teachers in each of the three schools clearly identify the need to change and are working to make individual changes in their classrooms. By reinforcing one another's practice as a way to make connections for students between classes and subjects, these teachers have also begun to take steps toward collaboration. The work that remains for Chestnut teachers is to move beyond isolated teacher changes in classroom practice; researchers found limited evidence of collaboration or a collective focus on adult learning. Instead, the efforts to change instructional practices can best be described as diffuse. According to one Chestnut teacher, "the idea of cross-discipline, cross-curricular themes, common themes, is also something that we're supposed to be doing, and I don't see that." However, as will be described in the next section, teachers at Alder and Cedar have taken steps toward collaboration by committing to broader changes beyond their classroom, learning from one another, and holding one another accountable.

Reinforcement Collaboration Interdependence

A sense of collegiality exists in the professional communities at Alder and Cedar; it is this cooperative relationship among teachers that moves adult learning from an individual activity to a collaborative one where teachers learn from one another as described in Figure 1 on page 5. Teachers are planning and talking together about broader change, beyond just what is happening in their own classrooms. There is also evidence of a personal commitment to learn and change, and a heightened sense of individual accountability based on increased expectations from peers, students, administrators, and themselves.

At these schools, we found evidence of three different types of collaboration.

Collaboration for Coherence At Alder, the humanities teachers initially created a curriculum map of what was being taught at each grade level and discussed expectations for each grade, which was particularly helpful for the new ninth grade teacher so she knew what her colleagues were expecting students to know in later years. Recently, these teachers have been looking at student work together. One of the humanities teachers credits this collegial time as having a "five out of five" impact on his classroom practice because he feels simultaneously supported, but also pushed to try new strategies and expand his thinking about some of his content. He adds, "It's the work I do with my humanities staff that's the most rewarding and beneficial." The Alder teacher-leader sums up, "they're probably at the forefront of any of our staff in terms of working together collegially to focus on how to improve teaching and learning."

The Alder administrator further describes the humanities staff's collaborative efforts and their interest in learning not only from one another, but from other Alder teachers.

I think that there have been some real aha's on their part... When should they be teaching how to write a paragraph and when should they be thinking more [about] conventions in paragraph writing, or how putting voice in too soon might be confusing for kids... It was a little risky for them initially,

but they got to the point where they actually invited their other colleagues to come and sit with them and listen and then give them feedback on what they heard.

Collaboration for Interdisciplinary Purposes Teacher collaboration at Alder is also evident across disciplines.

There is an incredible amount of collaboration between all staff, between all the different departments. [We're] bouncing ideas off one another, sharing what's happening in the classrooms, talking about students and common problems....

In the very beginning of the year, [a colleague said] "I'm really worried about my kids' math level because what I need them to do in the Principles of Engineering is going to be [high level]." So we did a pretest in his class and then he came and talked to all the parents whose kids had problems with the pretest. We set up an [after school] lab for four weeks, and he and I worked together on the lab.

This sense of learning from one another extends beyond discipline-specific content, as described by an Alder teacher:

I share an office so I get to listen to other people calling parents.... One of the reasons why we wanted to have a common planning area [was so that we could discuss] how we deal with parents, how we deal with students, how we deal with student expectations, [and how we're] doing cooperative projects.

Collaboration to Improve Practice What is clear from the Alder staff is their commitment to learning from one another, which requires deprivatizing their practice, as described by two teachers.

I know that conversations among colleagues occur at all schools, but the kind of relationships we've developed allows us and encourages us to share our work much more openly. We can literally walk into each other's rooms and share a lesson, an idea, or just watch.

People seem really open to talking about what they're doing in their classes, whether it's going well or not.

Teachers state that the practice of opening up their classrooms to colleagues and trying new things stems from the trust they have built within their professional community as described by two Cedar teachers:

We now trust one another; we're liable to try things. I don't feel too bad if I walk into someone's classroom and sit down and watch. If someone criticizes my work and says "you could have done it better this way," I don't panic.

You have to build trust with the people you're working with first. So you have to get to know them, understand them, and then start working with them and seeing what they teach in their class [and thinking about] what do I teach in my class and how can we put those together?

Building trust among teachers is supported by teachers having time to meet and work together. For teachers at Alder and Cedar, finding time to collaborate with colleagues doesn't just happen because they want it to. While having an interest in and commitment to collaboration is important, teachers agreed that having time set aside just to meet together is key. At Alder, the humanities teachers eat lunch together every week. At Cedar, the teachers have collaboration time together twice a month.

I think without having the collaboration time that we have... over time, I might... [feel] like, I am tired; I don't really feel like doing any more. But that kind of keeps me in check, just going to those meetings. There's something about all of us being in a room together, talking about things... I feel like we have a little more vigor about it.

“...the kind of relationships we’ve developed allows us and encourages us to share our work much more openly. We can literally walk into each other’s rooms and share a lesson, an idea, or just watch.”

Teacher at Alder

While the time together is of critical importance, the final component at this stage of the building blocks is each teacher’s personal commitment and heightened sense of accountability, based on increased expectations from colleagues and students. This commitment includes a commitment to the students, a commitment to learning and risk-taking, and a commitment to small schools. The following comments from an Alder teacher-leader, administrator, and teacher illustrate these points.

We’ve got a lot of people who are really committed to kids, committed to learning, committed to trying things in a new and different way.

They’re a very young teaching group... not necessarily chronologically. ... Many of them are teaching as at least a second career choice. So they clearly thought about doing this in a way that’s different... from another teacher who might have one to five years’ teaching experience... Many of them were here since the conversion planning, and they’ve experienced that whole process, and they’ve remained committed to it.

[The pressure to make class more rigorous] isn’t necessarily from our administration. The rigor question comes from our accountability to our staff. Because we are a small school, because I know every one of these kids. I’ve had these particular kids for two years, so I’m in a way accountable for their WASL scores. So that’s where the drive really comes from. I know that next year, every single one of these kids is going to go to that room with my colleague. If they are all horrible writers or can’t read for a purpose or any of that, it reflects on me. That’s where the push comes from.

In the earlier report on professional community, teachers described the shift away from isolated practice as an inability to “hide,” which led them to feel an increased sense of accountability. Two years later, Alder teachers discussed this individual accountability and the resulting higher expectations for their work.

I think it would be really intense for somebody to come into our small schools and see how we teach, because we’re so close. We see each other’s teaching actions going on all the time and there’s high[er] expectations of each other, and the kids [also] have higher expectations.

The teachers at Alder and Cedar are committed to collaborating and learning from one another. Many of the teachers have made individual commitments to change their instructional practice and engage in learning activities. And, their feeling of accountability to themselves, their colleagues, and their students for these changes will lead to interdependence. What separates these two schools, however, is that while many Alder teachers are committed to collaboration, learning from one another, and being held accountable, not all Alder teachers share this behavior. Instead, researchers found examples of teachers not participating in collaborative learning opportunities and because of the respectful, collegial culture of the school, they were allowed to opt out. One elective teacher at Alder expressed frustration at the expectation that she would consistently give up her lunch to meet with colleagues because she thinks there haven’t been enough structures built into the school day to support the school’s redesign efforts.

I see myself as a crusty curmudgeon. I am a realist. I would like to change what I want to change and do it on my own program... I don’t want to be told that I have to change things or do things this way or come listen to the wonderful [new] way to teach.

As will be described in the next section, Cedar teachers have taken the next step toward making systemic changes, which emphasizes a group commitment to change and learn together, taking responsibility for joint learning, risk-taking, and mutual accountability.

Reinforcement Collaboration Interdependence

Teachers at Cedar have shown the most progress in their efforts to engage in and commit to learning opportunities. These teachers made a group commitment to change their instructional practice and engage in learning activities individually and collectively. They are committed to systemic changes beyond their own classroom. They assume responsibility for their own learning, as well as their colleagues' learning. Lastly, they take risks alone and together, and hold themselves and one another accountable by agreeing to implement new instructional strategies and opening up their classrooms to one another for observation and feedback. We describe this type of behavior and learning as interdependence—in order to improve, teachers depend not only on themselves, but on their colleagues as described in Figure 1 on page 5.

The teachers' collective commitment to learning demonstrates Cedar's interdependence and belief that adult learning is fundamental to their small school and students' success. Together, they are reading *Teaching What Matters Most*, and each quarter they study a different chapter, examining their individual and collective practice, and talking about how to improve. According to the teacher-leader:

We all went off campus and met together, and we reviewed what thought is and how it applies in our classrooms. We talked about infusing that into our instruction or taking a lesson and making it better. It's really been kind of a bible for us this year.

The teachers' commitment to learning is most evident when described by the school's only new teacher.

I guess what's really sort of been pounded into my head is you're never going to be, I'm never going to feel like, oh, I've made it, I feel secure and safe, this is great, I'm perfect at this job and I can't improve anymore. I think that there's just going to be a constant sort of evolution with my teaching... They're all teachers who have been teaching for 20-plus years, they still have a lot of passion, and they still want to strive to do better and evolve a little bit more.

The teachers' interdependence shows in their efforts to make systemic, second-order changes that involve changing instructional practices. An administrator assigned to Cedar notes, "what I see as different from last year is that we are so much more focused on instructional practices here and less on first-order change."

The agency teachers assume over their individual and collective learning also reveals Cedar's interdependence. According to the building principal, small school learning opportunities are developed internally. "We have our experts here. We haven't gone out for a couple of years to get people. We do the professional development ourselves." Adds a Cedar teacher-leader, "our staff development isn't about going to some speaker that the district hired, listening for two hours to mundane stuff. [Our learning has] really been what we wanted to get better at and having a small team to safely get feedback from one another."

Professional development conversations planned by the teacher-leaders have centered on methods for embedding Cedar's Essential Question into daily instruction. The goal, the teacher-leader described, is to introduce new strategies by offering teachers opportunities to practice the strategies with one another during their collaborative meeting time. Explains one teacher:

We're very reflective about looking at how we're teaching and how we can improve. We always do some sort of brainstorming session in small groups about what we're doing, different ways we can try out rigor and [authenticity] and different things in our classrooms.

Teachers' investment in their own learning also seems evident in the e-mail conversations that the teacher-leaders periodically initiate by e-mailing a question about instruction to Cedar teachers. All staff are welcome to offer their thoughts or ideas by replying to "all" with their answers. The life of any given e-mail conversation appears to last as long as the curiosity and attention span of the staff. Three Cedar e-mail conversations centered on the following questions:

- How are you incorporating rigor and authenticity into your first semester finals?
- How are you embedding rigor in your daily instruction?
- When we consider the Cedar vision, what are the things that we are making progress on? What are our successes?

As a result of these teacher-directed and -planned learning opportunities, Cedar teachers described being "inspired to be better" and "challenged to improve" and consequently are willing to try new things and take new risks.

Teachers are willing to change, willing to step out of the box and try new things. They are willing to fail and willing to try things that are different just to see how they work.

I always thought that I had things to offer kids. But the atmosphere of risk-taking, the atmosphere of self-reflection, the notion that "you're good now, but that doesn't mean you should stop, and don't you want to be better?" has really inspired me to make my teaching better.

Cedar's teacher-leaders create and support a culture of risk-taking by scheduling lessons as public demonstrations where teachers showcase new instructional strategies. The purpose of these "structured commitments" is to encourage teachers, by an agreed-upon date, to use pedagogical and instructional strategies they've learned during their Critical Friends Groups and small school meetings in their classroom instruction. Although the structured commitments are led and scheduled by the teacher-leaders, all the teachers in the Cedar professional learning community mutually agreed upon the process. A teacher-leader further describes the rationale behind the structured commitments:

"...the atmosphere of risk-taking, ...of self-reflection, the notion that 'you're good now, but...don't you want to be better?' has really inspired me to make my teaching better."

Teacher at Cedar

I think even if they're presented with an instructional strategy, and they might even show how some other teacher used that strategy, I still think the teachers really are only sort of having a passive understanding.... And I feel like if you do some things like [structured commitments] with teachers you get them a step closer to using them in their classroom.... That's been kind of my theme this year, has been how to turn passive understanding into active understanding for the teachers so that they try it in some way; it helps them get it into their classrooms someplace down the line.

These structured commitments are a way to deprivatize practice and make instruction public. They also serve as a mechanism for establishing mutual accountability—a way for teachers to hold themselves and their colleagues accountable, which teachers describe as a significant shift from previous expectations.

In terms of what's happening in the classroom, five years ago I didn't talk to any teachers about what I was teaching. Nobody ever knew. They might have heard things from kids, or sort of heard through the grapevine, but nobody really knew what we did in each other's classrooms. And there was really nothing that held me accountable either, frankly. There wasn't really a culture of improvement. We all knew we were working hard. But I wouldn't have even been able to identify how to improve.

I feel like I'm being pushed—in a good way—but I feel like I'm definitely being pushed all the time to be doing better and better.

[Without accountability measures] it's easy to abandon [academic goals] because they're not practiced things yet. And so we revert back to what we're familiar with.

Cedar teachers have made impressive progress toward turning the corner to instructional change through their commitment to adult learning in service of improved student learning. As the data describe, they made a group commitment to change their classroom practices and learn together by taking responsibility for their individual and collective professional development, and engaging in risk-taking and mutual accountability. As a professional community, these teachers are truly interdependent. However, as a small school, they are also interdependent with the other small schools in their building. This can at times pose challenges to each small school's ability to make autonomous decisions about their adult learning agenda. The next step for Cedar teachers will be to work with teachers from other small schools in their building to create systemic changes that will support professional community and adult learning in all of their small schools.

This report looks at how adult learning occurs in the seven redesigned small high schools in our study. As we assess the schools' progress, we are left with a few questions about developing a culture of adult learning and the structures to support it.

How do schools that don't have a focus on adult learning develop one?

In all seven schools, teachers found it easier to look at student data together than to reflect on their own practice. Some have been able to shift the focus inward, toward their own instructional practice, but others have not. As the literature about adult learning reveals, the first step to focusing on adult learning, in terms of instructional change, is opening up one's practice. However, this is not readily done without a trusting professional community and an instructional focus to guide their work. Administrators and teacher-leaders are also key to keeping teachers' individual and collective focus on instructional change and providing the tools, such as time and structures, to get the work done. Though some of the seven schools' building principals are driving the adult learning agenda, our data suggest that learning best occurs within the small school, where it takes advantage of the relationships, relevance, and rigor afforded by the small school's professional community.

How does interdependence among the small schools in a building inhibit adult learning?

The original design idea for conversion high schools called for the conversion of large comprehensive high schools into multiple autonomous small schools. But the design of many conversions in Washington State differs dramatically from this original notion. Whether it's a shared schedule, shared teachers and students, or shared professional development, small schools that share a building are being designed to be interdependent, not autonomous.

As a result, even though a number of small schools have been created in Washington State, their success and sustainability is closely linked to the success and sustainability of the other small schools in their buildings. A downside of this circumstance is the impact it has on teachers' sense of agency in being able to do what they think is best instructionally for their students—one of the goals of personalization. For example, a recent decision by the staff of the building that houses Alder changed the small school's schedule, so Alder teachers had to give up their common planning time during lunch, as well as the school's daily advisory.

When the building leadership drives learning activities, instead of the small school, it is a form of interdependence that inhibits adult learning. At another school in the study, Elm, the adult learning is a building-driven activity. The learning opportunities are relevant and rigorous and happening at the individual teacher and collective level. But, because they are happening at the building level rather than the small school level, teachers are missing out on the opportunities afforded by small schools to leverage relationships, relevance, and rigor in service of improved student learning.

How will districts and buildings support adult learning in small schools?

Districts, buildings, and small schools represent distinct levels of influence on adult learning in small schools. Teachers' comments about barriers to adult learning and instructional change revealed two primary concerns: autonomy and time.

Relationship-driven and relevant adult learning relies on teacher input. When professional development is driven from outside the small school, adult learning content and opportunities cannot be tailored to each small school's individual instructional focus and teachers' interests. Furthermore, when curriculum is building- or district-wide, teachers lack flexibility to integrate courses and team with their small school colleagues. One district in this study is moving toward aligning the curriculum so tightly that teachers are expected to synchronize across high schools. Teachers want the autonomy to make their own decisions about how to teach and how to learn with one another.

Rigorous adult learning requires time—a scarce commodity. Teachers regularly report not having enough time and express concern about burning out. They note the difficulty in accomplishing and sustaining their work without adequate time to collaborate. Teachers also say their time is not honored and too often their collaborative work takes place after the paid work day. One impression is that districts do not allocate more time to teacher professional learning because teachers are not trusted to use the time wisely. Whatever the reason for the lack of allocated meeting time, districts and buildings need to shift priorities away from general staff meetings and large-scale professional development and give teachers in small schools the time and autonomy to craft their own adult learning agenda.

As the culminating report in a three-year study of seven small schools in Washington State, this paper examines adult learning in the context of small school redesign work and highlights three small schools where teachers capitalize on adult learning opportunities to turn the corner to instructional change. Drawing on previous research, we define effective adult learning as serving improved student learning and requiring a combination of individual and collective practice. Adult learning, like student learning, must be grounded in the 3 Rs—relationships, relevance, and rigor—in order to transform teachers’ practice and beliefs.

Based on our research, we know that adult learning activities in all seven of the schools in our study exhibit some aspects of the 3 Rs. But the extent to which learning is happening and continues to happen is mixed. Where relationship-driven, relevant, and rigorous adult learning has become part of the professional culture of the small school, additional elements also occur. In three schools, Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut, we identified a set of common components that make the 3 Rs more robust and support adult learning—distributed leadership, an instructional framework, and strong professional community.

The data also indicate that teachers in strong professional communities appear to be moving from talking to acting. We found a progression in their movement—from reinforcing what happens in one another’s classrooms (as a way to ensure coherence and connections for students) to collaboration, and finally interdependence. As teachers move from one stage to the next, the 3 Rs in relation to adult learning become more robust. We found evidence that all three of the schools have professional communities where teachers reinforce one another’s practice; in two of the schools teachers exhibited collaboration, and at one of the schools we saw examples of teachers’ interdependence with regard to their adult learning and instructional changes.

Between fall 2003 and spring 2006, the Small Schools Project research team conducted on-site observations, interviews, focus groups, and document reviews using the following methods:

Student Journals

- Thirty-one students from all seven schools responded to a series of four open-ended question prompts via e-mail. Students were given a week to respond to each question.

Electronic Surveys

- Five surveys were sent out to administrators, teachers, and students at the seven small schools over the course of the three-year study. Survey topics included: leadership, personalization and teacher practice, professional community and student perspectives. Only five schools participated in the student perspectives survey.

Focus Groups

- Freshman student focus groups in each school captured impressions of students who are new to the small school
- Junior student focus groups in each small school captured impressions of students who straddle the school restructuring work

Interviews

- Superintendent or district administrator from each district
- Building principal
- Assistant principal or administrator assigned to each small school
- Teacher-leader from each small school
- Six to eight teachers from each small school, representing approximately 50 percent of the staff and including teachers from the core academic areas, electives, vocational, special education, and counselors

Observations and Document Review

- Observations of teacher work groups, and curriculum and program planning
- Review of small school documents, policies, procedures, schedules, professional development plans, etc.

Small School Grants

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation promotes the development of new small schools in Washington State through three major strategies: district grants, school grants, and the Achievers Program. Unlike its national grants, which go to technical assistance providers or other outside agencies, grants in Washington are awarded directly to schools or districts, and go to rural, exurban, suburban, as well as urban areas.

The Foundation identified Attributes of High Achievement Schools and Essential Components of Teaching and Learning from the body of school research (see Appendix C). All grantees are expected to use both the attributes and components to guide their school redesign work. Graduating all students “college-ready” is another central tenet of the redesign work. High schools have long performed a sorting function and this criterion of the Gates grants means increasing expectations for those students whom American high schools have historically underserved.

One of the schools in this study is part of a model district grant. These grants were awarded to increase the capacity of eleven school districts and all their schools to improve academic achievement, infuse technology into the learning environment, increase professional development opportunities, and strengthen home and community partnerships. A major focus of these five-year grants, which were awarded in spring 2000, is to change district operations in ways that more clearly support school-level work. District grant guidelines were not explicit about the Foundation’s expectations for small schools or conversions.

One of the schools in this study received a model school grant. These grants support high achievement schools—which have a common focus, high expectations, data-driven decisions, and time for teachers to collaborate—that are better prepared to help all students achieve. Over fifty elementary, middle, and high schools have received three-year grants to create and implement new designs. The first school grant to a Washington high school was awarded in March 2001.

Five of the study schools received Achievers five-year grants. The Washington State Achievers Program works on school redesign within 16 high schools serving large populations of low-income students. The program’s resources are focused on improving college access for low-income students and combine academic readiness with scholarship opportunities. Students from low-income families are eligible to apply for one of 500 Achievers scholarships given annually to graduates of Achievers high schools.²¹ The 16 Achievers high schools received their five-year grants in April 2001.

The seven small schools included in this report were selected for study because of their innovative design and likelihood for success. Each also receives technical assistance from the Small Schools Project and school coaches provided by the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative. We did not collect data specific to the role of school coaches, since our focus was on the work of the schools.

²¹ This thirteen-year scholarship program is administered by the Washington Education Foundation as a result of a \$100 million gift from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Case Study Schools

The following school descriptions provide a snapshot of the building demographics and the history of each school’s redesign process. Five of the small schools have completed their third year of implementation. Birch is the exception (having

BY THE NUMBERS

Elm's Building

- **Enrollment** 1,650 students
- **Number of small schools** 6
- **WASL scores** About 46% passed reading, writing, and math in 2005.
- **Reduced-price lunch** Almost 13% qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

BY THE NUMBERS

Alder's Building

- **Enrollment** 1,700 students
- **Number of small schools** 5
- **WASL scores** About 40% passed reading, writing, and math in 2005.
- **Reduced-price lunch** 20% qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

completed its second year of implementation) and Fir is an already-small school. All of the schools have either finished or are in the final year of their grant. This information is summarized in Figure A on page 39. For a discussion on the context of school reform in Washington State, see Appendix D.

Elm is one of six small schools in a rural high school that was part of a district-wide grant that expired in June 2005. The building houses 1,650 students, almost all Caucasian. It is the only high school in the district. About 46 percent of the student body passed three sections (reading, writing, and math) of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) standardized test in 2005 and 12.9 percent qualified for free or reduced-price meals.

Soon after the district received the Gates grant, high school teachers and administrators formed research teams to investigate and develop standards related to specific areas of personalization, technology, performance accountability, individual student transition plans, instruction, and job-embedded staff development. This type of staff development allowed teachers to use the newly devised standards to move forward and design seven small schools with specific student-interest-based themes. Students were engaged as members of committees and design teams.

Elm serves approximately 315 students and has a staff of 14 teachers, including two teacher-leaders. The student population is over 75 percent male, possibly due to a strong focus on hands-on projects involving technology, math, and science.

The school and district administrative leadership has remained constant since the grant was awarded. The school board has been supportive of the building's work throughout the restructuring effort. At the end of the 2004–2005 school year, Elm's building decided to consolidate two of the small schools in order to accommodate staffing and scheduling needs that have stifled personalization and small school autonomy. With this change, the principal was able to schedule all freshmen and sophomores into their "home" small school for the core subjects.

Alder is one of five small schools in a building that received a model school grant that expired in June 2005. The building has the largest population of the four comprehensive high schools in this suburban district with 94 teachers and 1,700 students. The majority of students are Caucasian. Approximately 40 percent of the students passed three sections of the WASL in 2005 and 20 percent qualified for free or reduced-price meals.

Teachers at this comprehensive high school began researching small schools one year before being awarded the Gates grant. They held small group discussions during school in-service days to explore concepts such as size, autonomy, student choice, a sense of belonging, and intellectual focus. Because of this prior work, teachers had the opportunity to discuss and then vote as a staff to accept the Gates grant. A leadership committee comprised of elected teachers and the administrative leadership team directed the restructuring work, but the small schools were designed by teachers and decided upon through a "request for proposal" (RFP) process and several rounds of focus group feedback. The staff was assigned to small schools based on preference, experience, and expertise; teachers then had an additional year to plan for implementation. Students were involved in focus groups to critique the original small school proposals and participated with the subsequent design teams.

Alder has approximately 320 students and 15 teachers, including all three industrial technology teachers in the building. Because of this focus and the school's vocational image, the student population was primarily male in the first year of implementation. Recruitment efforts by the female teachers evened out the student body in year two.

The district has been fairly hands-off throughout the conversion work, which continues with the new superintendent who arrived before the second year of implementation. The building principal who launched the conversion effort retired in July 2004. Both of his assistant principals accepted positions in other districts. The new principal chose this position because of his interest in the conversion work.

BY THE NUMBERS

Fir

- **Enrollment** 150 students
- **Fir is an already-small school**
- **WASL scores** About 40% passed reading, writing, and math in 2005.
- **Reduced-price lunch** Over 25% qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

Fir is a rural already-small school, serving grades 6–12, that received an Achievers grant. The school has 150 high school students, with a majority of Caucasians and a growing population of Hispanic students. About 40 percent of the students passed three sections of the WASL in 2005 and over one-quarter qualified for free or reduced-price meals.

Receiving the Gates grant coincided with a desire to redesign this small, rural school using a block schedule in an effort to “go deeper” with instructional practice. During their initial grant year, staff formed a site council, de-tracked their math curriculum, and researched block schedule options. The second year of the grant saw some modifications to these original changes; Fir no longer has a leadership council, and the schedule has changed each year. Advisory was reintroduced with great success after a yearlong hiatus. Students were very involved in planning the advisory program.

The superintendent has been hands-off with the high school's reform work, and some of the small school design considerations that directed the design of a new building (scheduled to open in the fall of 2007) were dropped due to budget cuts. The school principal who launched the conversion effort left in the spring of 2004 to pursue a different job opportunity. The new principal is a longtime member of this small community, having graduated from Fir himself.

BY THE NUMBERS

Chestnut's Building

- **Enrollment** 1,560 students
- **Number of small schools** 6
- **WASL scores** About 16% passed reading, writing, and math in 2005.
- **Reduced-price lunch** About 66% qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

Chestnut is one of six small schools in an Achievers high school. The building houses 1,560 students, more than half of whom represent minority populations. Approximately 16 percent of the student body passed three sections of the WASL in 2005 and about two-thirds qualified for free or reduced-price meals.

A small group of teachers worked on the initial grant proposal. Teachers formed a leadership team to research small schools and developed an RFP process. Students helped craft and critique the small school proposals.

The small schools served grades 9–10 in the first year of implementation, except for Chestnut, which was allowed to implement 9–12 after a student survey showed they would have enough juniors and seniors sign up. Other juniors and seniors maintained their existing high school experience in a separate small school that was phased out after both classes graduated. In the first year of implementation, one of the small schools dissolved due to lack of cohesion, but another opened in the subsequent academic year. Chestnut serves approximately 250 students with 11 teachers. Student representatives help plan advisory and other activities, such as student recognition and field trips, through a student council.

The building principal who launched the conversion effort retired in July 2004, and the new principal chose the position because of his interest in the conversion work. During the first year of implementation, the school administrators worked in a comprehensive high school context. In the second year, each small school had a contact administrator. Counselors have been slow to adapt to the small schools structure, though in the second year of implementation they divided students by small school rather than alphabetically.

BY THE NUMBERS

Cedar's Building

- **Enrollment** 2,100 students
- **Number of small schools** 6
- **WASL scores** About 33% passed reading, writing, and math in 2005.
- **Reduced-price lunch** 50% qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

Cedar is one of six small schools at an Achievers high school in a smaller suburban district. The building is one of two comprehensive high schools in the district and serves a working-class neighborhood consisting of 2,100 students, two-thirds of whom are Caucasian. Approximately 33 percent of the student body passed three sections of the WASL in 2005 and 50 percent qualified for free or reduced-price meals.

The beginning of the building's conversion process coincided with a district initiative to study school reform. The staff met to identify ways to increase student achievement and concluded that small schools were a viable option. A small leadership committee, which included the principal and several interested teachers, put together the grant proposal and met weekly to create small schools focused on career-based themes. Teachers were assigned to schools according to their preference and eventually redesigned the schools to reflect curriculum-based themes. Students helped design the small schools and participated in the weekly meetings.

Cedar has international, global studies, communications, and technology themes, and serves 394 students with 17 full- or part-time teachers. Teachers have spent a year planning a major curricular program that will direct instruction for the ninth and tenth grades. It continues a program from one of the district's middle schools, whose students Cedar would like to recruit.

The building principal and superintendent accepted positions in other districts during the grant's second year. The new principal was an assistant principal at the school and came to his position with a deep commitment to the small school conversion process, even though he was not involved significantly in the original planning.

BY THE NUMBERS

Hemlock's Building

- **Enrollment** 750 students
- **Number of small schools** 3
- **WASL scores** About 27% passed reading, writing, and math in 2005.
- **Reduced-price lunch** Over 50% qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

Hemlock is one of three small schools at an Achievers high school—the only high school in an urban fringe district with a highly transient immigrant population. The building houses 750 ethnically diverse students. Approximately 27 percent of the student body passed three sections of the WASL in 2005 and over half of the students qualified for free or reduced-price meals. The school has been a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools since 2000.

Prior to receiving the grant, the school had established a leadership committee to guide the staff in looking at building-level data and creating a common vision for the future. Teachers developed small school designs through an RFP process. The leadership committee chose the small schools and assigned staff based on teacher preferences. Hemlock has 320 students and 16 staff, including all of the building's visual and performing arts teachers. The staffing is a reflection of the school's intended arts focus.

The longtime and supportive superintendent left the district early in the grant’s third year and was replaced with an interim. A new superintendent, serving in his first superintendency, was hired at the end of the third year. At the beginning of the grant’s fifth year, a new building principal and assistant principal were hired.

BY THE NUMBERS

Birch’s Building

- **Enrollment** 1,900 students
- **Number of small schools** 5
- **WASL scores** About 31% passed reading, writing, and math in 2005.
- **Reduced-price lunch** Over 50% qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

Birch is one of five small schools at an Achievers high school located in a large urban fringe district. The building has a diverse student population and is one of four comprehensive high schools in the district, serving almost 1,900 students in grades 9–12. This represents a significant growth in recent years due to an influx of 1,200 new students and 36 new teachers in the fall of 2004 when the ninth grade joined the high school. Approximately 31 percent of the student body passed three sections of the WASL in 2005 and over half of the students qualified for free or reduced-price meals.

A core group of teachers at Birch planned the conversion process for three years. They concentrated on developing a common focus and responding to district goals related to the conversion process. Birch opened in the fall of 2004 with about 200 ninth and tenth graders (all of whom were new to the high school) and 20 teachers (at least two-thirds of whom were new to the high school).

The superintendent aims to treat all schools in the district equally and not allow one school to move ahead of others in terms of school reform. The expectation is that all high schools in the district will have small learning communities for ninth and tenth grades.

During spring 2006, the end of the grant’s fifth year, the building principal announced he was leaving.

Figure A: An Overview of Redesigned Small Schools 2005–2006

	Elm	Alder	Fir	Chestnut	Cedar	Hemlock	Birch
Grade levels served in 2005–2006	9–12	9–11	9–12	9–12	9–12	9–12	9–10
Number of students & percent of building enrollment	315 (19%)	320 (19%)	150 (100%)	250 (15%)	394 (20%)	320 (52%)	200 (10%)
Number of teacher FTE	11.6	12.5	18.5	8	16	14.8	20
Number of teachers	14	15	19	11	17	16	20
Does the teacher-leader have release time or compensation?	Stipend	.5 FTE Release	*	Stipend	Stipend	Stipend	Stipend
Is an administrator assigned to the small school?	Yes	Yes	*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

* Fir is an already-small school

Gates Foundation Seven Attributes of High Achievement Schools

- Common Focus
- Time to Collaborate
- High Expectations
- Performance Based
- Technology as a Tool
- Personalized
- Respect & Responsibility

Gates Foundation Essential Components of Teaching and Learning

- **Active Inquiry** Students are engaged in active participation, exploration, and research; activities draw out perceptions and develop understanding; students are encouraged to make decisions about their learning; and teachers utilize the diverse experiences of students to build effective learning experiences.
- **In-Depth Learning** The focus is competence, not coverage. Students struggle with complex problems, explore core concepts to develop deep understanding; and apply knowledge in real-world contexts.
- **Performance Assessment** Clear expectations define what students should know and be able to do; students produce quality work products and present to real audiences; student work shows evidence of understanding, not just recall; assessment tasks allow students to exhibit higher-order thinking; and teachers and students set learning goals and monitor progress.

Washington's public schools, like those in most other states, are embedded in an ongoing statewide effort to reform and improve student achievement. In Washington, the reform effort both supports and constrains the serious work of school redesign. After a decade of uncoordinated efforts following the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, Washington State reform took serious hold with the passage of House Bill 1209 in the Spring of 1993.²²

²² U.S. Department of Education, 1983

The state reform effort is known informally as “1209”—as in “1209 requires us to...”—and is notable for its intention to move the state to a standards- and performance-based system of K–12 education. When passed, House Bill 1209 contained provisions for substantial professional development to accompany the move to a standards-based system, charged the superintendent of public instruction (an elected position) with developing a system of assessment that would provide the state's citizens with evidence that schools and districts were indeed educating students well, and required the state's institutions of higher education to admit students on the basis of competencies, as well as credits.

As required by House Bill 1209, the state developed, over the past decade, a set of standards known as Essential Academic Learning Requirements (informally called “EALRs”) in reading, writing, communication, math, science, social studies, the arts, and health and fitness. Similar to standards in other states, the EALRs are now widely used, especially in elementary and middle schools. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) also recently created K–10 Grade Level Expectations (GLEs) which were used to create new reading and math assessments for grades three through eight and ten in 2006, as required by the federal No Child Left Behind legislation.

House Bill 1209 also created what is now known as the Washington Assessment of Student Learning, or WASL, a test that would be administered to virtually all students in grades four, seven, and ten, and provides the state with a “snapshot” of how the state's schools are doing. The WASL has been phased in over the past several years, with the science test making its debut in the spring of 2003.²³

²³ The science WASL is administered in grades five, eight, and ten.

During the 2003 legislative session, the Washington State legislature approved the requirements for the Certificate of Academic Achievement (formerly the Certificate of Mastery), which requires the class of 2008 to pass the WASL in reading, writing, and math in order to graduate.²⁴ Students in the class of 2010 will also have to pass the science WASL. Students who do not pass the WASL the first time around will have up to four opportunities to retake it.

²⁴ In addition to earning the Certificate of Academic Achievement, students must also complete a culminating project, craft a high school and beyond plan, and meet credit requirements in order to graduate.

The WASL became “high stakes” in 2006, meaning the class of 2008 must pass the tenth grade test. Previous years' results were widely reported in the media, and, in some districts, principal evaluations are based in part on improving WASL scores. The 2004–2005 WASL results show that 73 percent of students met the standard in reading, 65 percent met the standard in writing, and 48 percent in math. However, only 42.3 percent of the students passed all three sections of the test.²⁵ Without dramatic improvement, nearly six out of ten students will not graduate from Washington high schools in 2008.

²⁵ Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction website, <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us>; look under “State Results”

The Washington State Board of Education is on record as saying that the current high school graduation system, based on seat time and credits, acts as an impediment to standards-based reform. The board has repeatedly and publicly indicated that it will be pleased to entertain requests for waivers from schools, particularly

high schools, engaged in substantial reform. Two Gates grantees requested an array of waivers and they were granted without delay. To date, these two schools, plus a school that does not have grant support from the Gates Foundation, are the only schools in Washington to request waivers related to school reform.

In the spring of 2004, the Washington legislature passed—and Governor Gary Locke signed—legislation to allow for the creation of 45 new public charter schools to serve primarily educationally disadvantaged students during the following six years. Following the law’s passage, the Washington Education Association led a signature drive to create Referendum 55, a statewide initiative that put the issue before the voters during the 2004 elections. In the November 2004 elections, R-55 was overwhelmingly voted down—the third time Washington voters have rejected charter schools.

During the 2006 session, the Washington legislature approved alternative assessment for students unable to successfully pass the WASL, but who still want to earn the Certificate of Academic Achievement. Alternative assessment options are available only to those who do not pass the WASL and include: a comparison of grades to fellow students who passed the WASL, using some college entrance exams (such as the ACT or SAT) in place of the WASL, work samples provided by students and approved by the state-appointed Board of Education for credit, or submission of structured portfolios, also subject to approval by the Board of Education.²⁶

²⁶ McBride, J. (2006). Alternatives to WASL Passed, Seattle Post-Intelligencer, p. B2

Change Leadership Group (CLG)

<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/clg>

Housed at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and co-directed by Tony Wagner and Robert Kegan, the Change Leadership Group is a knowledge-development and capacity-building organization focused on effective strategies for school and district improvement. CLG collaborates directly with leadership teams of school districts to address systemic obstacles to student performance. Publications available through the CLG include:

Wagner, T. (2006). *Change leadership: A practical guide to transforming our schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Wagner, T. (2000). *How schools change*. NY: Routledge Farmer.

Connecticut Center for School Change

<http://www.ctschoolchange.org>

Located in Hartford, Connecticut, the Connecticut Center for School Change consults with school districts to improve student outcomes through a systemic, integrated approach to improving instructional practice and building leadership across all levels of a school system. The Center supports comprehensive reform through a combination of grants, technical assistance, leadership development programs, conferences/seminars, research, and application of best practices.

National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching (NCREST)

<http://www.tc.edu/ncrest/>

NCREST is a research and development organization at Teachers College, Columbia University and is affiliated with the Teachers College Department of Curriculum and Teaching. NCREST conducts research in critical areas of school reform such as assessment, accountability, standards, restructuring schools, small schools, big school conversions, school leadership, professional development, and teacher education. NCREST brings together a variety of stakeholders in education reform in multiple forums including conferences, seminars, meetings, and work groups and creates opportunities for them to collaborate.

National Staff Development Council (NSDC)

<http://www.nsd.org>

The NSDC is the largest nonprofit professional association committed to ensuring success for all students through staff development and school improvement. The Council views high quality staff development programs as essential to creating schools in which all students and staff members are learners who continually improve their performance. NSDC supports its members through conferences, seminars, academies, awards, and publications which include:

<http://www.nsd.org/standards/learningcommunities.cfm>

<http://www.nsd.org/standards/collaborationskills.cfm>

APPENDIX F - WEST VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL INSTRUCTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Developed in collaboration with the West Valley High School staff and school coaches Kathryn Karschney and Kathryn Squires, 2005.

	Indicators	Reflections
Rigor	<p>Instructional Content Instruction is grounded in content that is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complex • Ambiguous • Provocative • Emotionally or personally challenging 	
	<p>Instructional Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are engaged in active participation, exploration, and research. • The focus is on competence, not coverage. Student work shows evidence of understanding, not just recall. • Clear expectations define what students should know and be able to do. • Teachers and students set learning goals and monitor progress toward academic excellence. • Activities draw out perceptions and develop understanding. • Students develop resilience, flexibility, and confidence by facing academic challenges and the temporary classroom setbacks that are opportunities for deeper learning. 	
	<p>Instructional Assessment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment tasks often extend beyond the traditional “paper and pencil” tests and allow students to exhibit higher-order thinking. • Students are engaged in substantive conversations. 	
Relevance	<p>Instructional Content Instruction:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is inherently meaningful • Engages students in multiple domains • Stimulates intellectual curiosity • Offers value beyond the classroom 	
	<p>Instructional Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The teacher utilizes the diversity and culture of each student to build effective learning experiences. • The learning community values and embraces the diversity of each student in the life of the classroom and its community. • Learning activities represent issues that require a personal frame of reference for the students. (In other words, learning activities invite an emotional or internal commitment on the part of the student, in addition to a cognitive interest.) • Students make decisions about their learning with their teachers and peers. • Learning activities develop within each student the habits and curiosity associated with lifelong learning. 	
	<p>Instructional Assessment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessments are not strictly evaluative: they are an opportunity for teachers to reflect on instruction and modify teaching to meet the changing needs of their students. • Students have voice in the design and type of assessments. • Assessments are <i>meaningful</i> to students and offer students insights into their own learning. • Assessment tasks sometimes ask students to communicate their knowledge, present a product or performance, or take some action for an audience beyond the teacher, classroom, and school building. 	

Relationships	<p><i>Teacher-Student Relationships</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers know students (and often families) so well that instructional and learning opportunities can be tailored to the needs of each student. • Teachers model integrity and open-mindedness for their students. • Teachers are intentional in creating safe, nurturing, democratic classrooms so that self-esteem and trust develop in students. • Students trust their teachers so well they grant teachers the authority to challenge them and expect academic excellence. 	
	<p><i>Student-Student Relationships</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The community of learners is strong so students are committed to their own success as well as the success of their peers. • Students embrace a sense of ownership in their learning community because their voice impacts the direction of classroom activity. 	
	<p><i>Student-Community Relationships</i> Teachers and students embrace a broader definition of the learning community. This means that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students often communicate and collaborate with people beyond their classroom (i.e., community members, other students, experts, and other staff members). • Learning activities develop within each student a sense of belonging and responsibility to the local and global community. Students see themselves as active and conscientious citizens. 	
	<p><i>Teacher-Teacher Relationships</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers are actively engaged with their colleagues in professional development. • Teachers together feel committed to the growth and success of each student and teacher in the learning community. 	

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