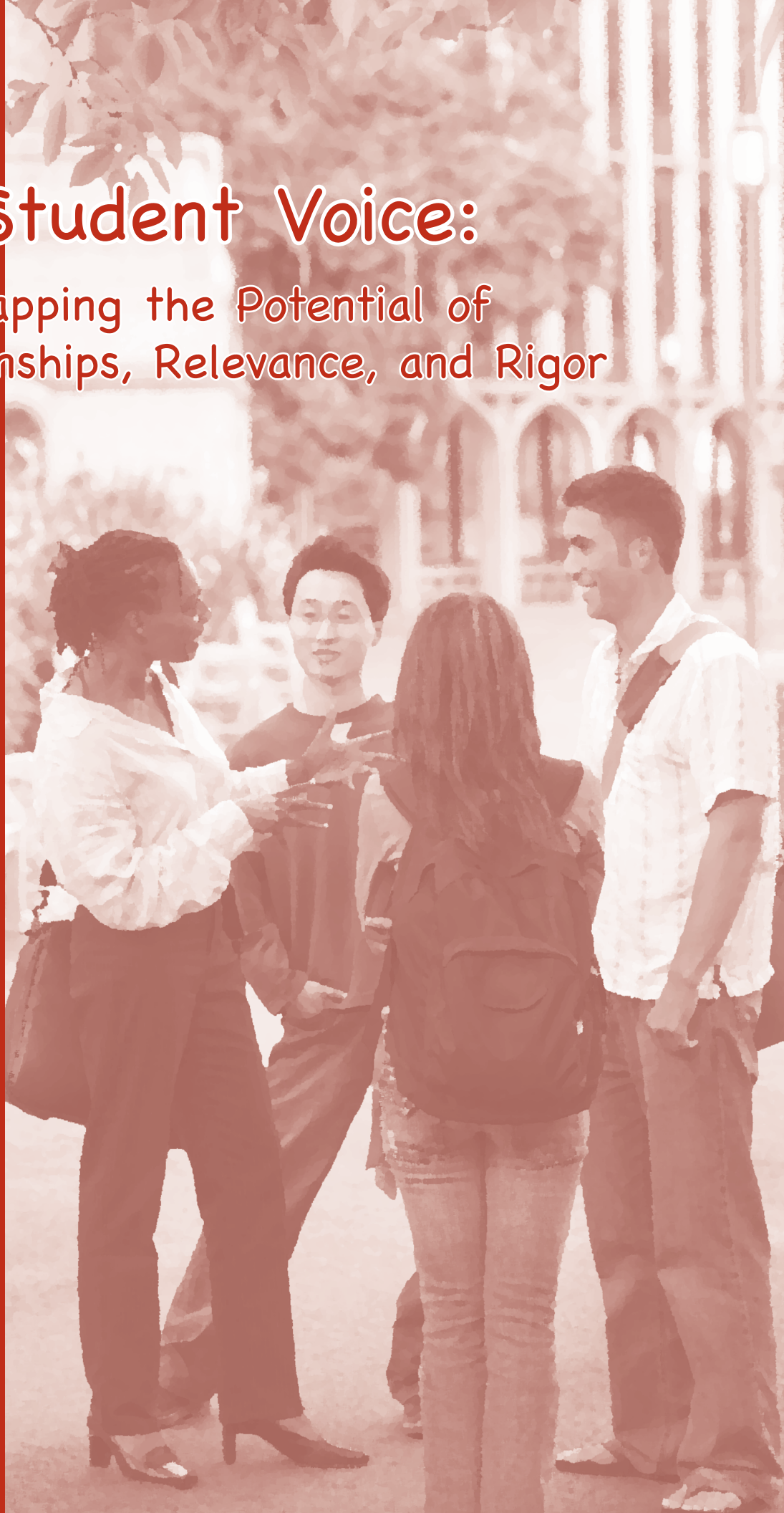# Student Voice:

Tapping the Potential of Relationships, Relevance, and Rigor

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

Spring 2006

By

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Small Schools PROJECT

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CONTENTS

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 seven small schools within these buildings 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, closer faculty collaboration on matters of teaching and learning, and 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.

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.

Introduction

Successful high schools take many forms but share an emphasis on principles that researchers and educational foundations now call the "new 3 Rs"—rigor, relevance, and relationships.[1] These principles provide a framework for structuring conversations and initiatives in instructional practice and highlight the small school redesign efforts in the Seven Small Schools Study. Each of these principles also interacts and builds on the others in ways that help us understand what is required to motivate students and help them master new skills.

[1] Wagner, 2002

NEW 3 Rs   We define the "new 3 Rs" as:
- Relationships with adults that help students succeed
- Relevant curriculum
- Rigorous instruction

In this report, we use the 3 Rs as a framework to examine student perspectives on what happens in their small schools and classrooms. We have reversed the order of the principles as presented here because our research has shown that in small school redesign efforts, relationship building among students and teachers lays the foundation for increasing relevance and rigor in student learning. In addition, we have added a fourth principle, student voice, which refers to the development of student participation and decision making in the structures and practices that shape their educational experience at both the classroom and small-school levels. Our interviews with students have led us to propose that involving students in decisions about their education leads to a more robust and deeper integration of relationships, relevance, and rigor in instructional practice and organizational structure.

Why is the issue of student voice important? For more than 100 years, America's educational system, and virtually every effort to reform education, has been premised on adults' notions of how education should be conceptualized and practiced. Ironically, the perspectives of those for whom most reforms are designed—the students—are not often heard. As Cook-Sauther[2] notes, "there is something fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire system without consulting at any point those it is ostensibly designed to serve." Beyond seeking the opinions of those who should ultimately benefit from school reforms, we argue that involving students in important decisions about their learning will bring about the very results in student achievement that reformers strive for—students being college-, work-, and citizenship-ready.[3] This report uses students' voices to tell the story of relationships, relevance, and rigor in the seven schools. But we also use the phrase "student voice" to refer to the concept of students' participation in several aspects of their school experience.

[2] Cook-Sauther, 2002

[3] See http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Education for further discussion and related information on this issue.

By our definition, personalization is about creating reciprocal relationships between teachers and students. Teachers must know students (and often families) well enough to develop a mutual trust so that students grant teachers "the moral authority to make greater demands on them as learners."[4] Without students' sense of being known by their teachers and equal participation in the relationship, the personalization equation does not compute. We wonder if this element of reciprocity might be just as important for the principles of relevance and rigor.

[4] Lambert & Lowry, 2004

A recent survey of high school dropouts[5] found that nearly half of the respondents named boring classes and a sense of disengagement as major factors for leaving. More than 80 percent thought schools should offer more opportunities for "real-world learning," and 71 percent said "their schools did not do enough

[5] Bridgeland et al., 2006

to make school interesting." Making school relevant to students' lives, by definition, requires student input. It follows that student voice, giving students an opportunity to partner with teachers in determining the direction and nature of their learning, increases student buy-in to the learning process.

The same survey found that 69 percent of respondents were not "motivated or inspired to work hard" and "two-thirds would have worked harder if more was demanded of them." But simply demanding more of the same is not what these students are looking for. In addition to being more relevant, rigorous learning involves curriculum and instruction that is complex, ambiguous, provocative, and emotionally or personally challenging to students.[6] In *Teaching What Matters Most*, Strong further describes rigor as being the curricular goal. While some students have the academic preparation and family support to meet the challenge of rigorous learning opportunities, others will rely on relationships with teachers in order to accept those opportunities. Without the qualities of reciprocity and building on relationships to create rigor, students interviewed for this report say they become frustrated and angry.

[6] Strong et al., 2001

When students are regarded as partners who have something to offer in the educational process, scholars have found that students' learning experiences are greatly enriched.[7] School researcher Marcia Prieto, for example, discovered that when the traditionally "hierarchical and rigid atmosphere" of high schools was significantly altered to include more flexible learning structures, students realized that "learning is a dialogic and interactive encounter that goes beyond a passive process controlled by adults."[8] Dana Mitra's (2004) research with two types of student leadership models found that "by assuming responsibilities [in student leadership positions and organizations] and enacting decisions that have consequences for themselves and others… participating students developed a broad set of competencies that helped them prepare for adulthood" (p. 675).

[7] Mitra, 2003, 2004; Prieto, 2001

[8] Prieto, 2001, p.89

In schools seeking to improve learning for all students, listening to student voice may serve as a means for adults in the school to "unravel the power relationship and convince students that they genuinely want to enter into dialogue with them about learning."[9] Creating opportunities to incorporate student voice into the reform process may, as Rudduck et al. (1996, p. 177) note, force a conversation about some of the "deep structures of schooling." In this sense, incorporating student voice in the context of reform requires an open and accepting stance toward criticism, and acknowledgement in some cases, that reforms may not be achieving the desired results. Jones & Yonezawa (2002) found that structured opportunities for students to engage in "critical talk" through inquiry groups organized within schools could offer keen insight about successful (and not so successful) teaching and learning and about the distribution of students across classrooms, which vary in rigor and relevance. Revelations such as these may push some adults in the seven small schools to rethink their approaches and the extent to which they have been able to improve the 3 Rs.

[9] Rudduck et al., 1996

Students spend hundreds of hours every year as informal observers in their classrooms. As both observers and recipients of the instructional process, their perspective is invaluable, and they have much to say. This report offers a glimpse of students' responses to the framing principles of relationships, relevance, rigor, and student voice in the small school redesign efforts underway at their schools.

Relationships

Tony dreaded moving mid-year as a sophomore to Arts and Tech High from a big suburban high school where he was just getting acquainted. Arts and Tech High, with just 300 students, was one of five small schools in what had been a large school like the one Tony left. Tony was apprehensive about this change. As a freshman in the old school he had found a small group of friends, and he didn't want to give them up. They had fun, joked around in class, and sometimes skipped school. They made a point of staying anonymous. That wasn't hard. Tony had had thirteen different teachers during that year; he wasn't sure any of them knew his name without referring to the seating chart. He didn't know any of them very well either and didn't really care about what they thought of him as long as they left him alone and didn't ask him to do anything that was going to make him look stupid.

On his first day at Arts and Tech, he waited in the small school office for a student guide who was scheduled to show him around and introduce him to his teachers. As he waited, he watched a teacher come in to check her messages. Several students followed the teacher in, chatting.

"Hey Ms. R, what did you think of the football game on Friday night?"

"Hey Yoshi, nice game. Was that play you did right after the second half the one you wrote about in your journal yesterday? The one that was complicated and hard to remember? It looked great!"

"Yeah, that was it. It came off real good. Coach was like, 'man you guys rock.'"

"You guys do rock. Hi Maria. I saw your parents at the game. They said you're going to look at colleges over spring break. Are you excited about that?"

"Yeah, but I don't know. I don't know how it's going to work."

"Why don't you bring that up in advisory today, and we'll see what everyone else has to say? I think a bunch of people are in the same boat and maybe they've got some experiences to share."

Another student came into the office and introduced himself to Tony. "Hey are you Tony? How's it goin'? I'm Alfredo. Welcome to Arts and Tech High, man." Alfredo led the way to the wing of the building where most of the Arts and Tech classes met. "This is our part of the school," he explained. "We have all our core classes here and most of the teachers have their offices here too, so you don't have to go very far to find anyone or get to class." As they walked along, Alfredo and some of the students in the hall exchanged backslaps and high-fives. "I came to Arts and Tech in the middle of the year two years ago," Alfredo said. "I thought it was going to be a hassle because I didn't come in with the rest, but you know I think I knew everyone in the school by the end of the first term. When you see the same people in class every day and in the halls, you get to know them fast."

A teacher stopped Alfredo in the hallway. "Alfredo, Mr. G says you're a week late getting him that science lab report. You know you need that for your grade so come see me at lunch today, okay?" "Yeah, I have to talk to you about that Mr. P, I need some help," Alfredo answered and then introduced Tony. "Hi Tony, we're really glad to have you here. If you need help with anything or have any questions, I'm usually in my classroom at lunch, so just drop by if you want."

As they walked toward Tony's first class of the morning, Tony looked around at the art displays in the hallway. He noticed a picture board with what he supposed were photos of all 300 Arts and Tech students and their fifteen teachers. Alfredo explained that students were in charge of keeping the hall displays current. "By the end of the week, your picture will be up there." "Hey," Tony exclaimed, "if they know you that well, how do you skip out?" Alfredo smiled. "A lot of us used to do that, but now that the teachers know us and we know them, it doesn't happen that much anymore. I got kind of focused on getting into college man and that means I have to keep working. If I skip out on the teachers then I worry they'll skip out on me, and I need their help so I try to get along. They are pretty cool about giving me some space when I need it but still keeping on me about getting the work done." Alfredo pointed, "Here's your first class." He introduced Tony to the teacher. "Peace man, I'll catch you after class."

10 Lambert et al., 2004

The principle of *relationships* refers to the idea that students benefit from working with adults who know them well and who create an atmosphere of trust in which students grant teachers the moral authority to make greater demands on them as learners.[10] In small schools, relationships are fostered by greater personalization of education resulting from, among other things, smaller student loads for teachers, looping of schedules so that teachers have the same students in more than one class over the course of a year or more, and advisories where teachers take on a counseling role, and teachers and students have a chance to learn about each other outside of an academic framework.

Personalization

11 *Knowing and Being Known: Personalization as a Foundation for Improving Student Learning*, which can be downloaded from **http://www.smallschoolsproject.org** under "Small Schools in Action/What We Are Learning."

In a previous report,[11] we define personalization as making a difference when three conditions (shown in the sidebar) are met. Increasing personalization in schools has been the biggest success of the conversion effort so far. When we asked students about their experiences with personalization at school, they commonly identified aspects of being known by their teachers, feeling cared for, and feeling comfortable with a cohort of peers. These qualities are most easily attained when students take all their classes within one small school and have some of the same teachers more than once.

> Our teachers care about us. They make sure we're doing okay. If we're having a down day, they'll ask us if we're okay and everything. They come up to us and help us.

> **Interviewer**: How do you know teachers here care about you?

> **Students**: They show it… They tell us… They say, "I care about you." … The teachers know all of our names.

> [Teachers] get to know you and so they know how to connect with you in ways that you'll understand… they know what to expect… and then we know what to expect too.

> [A small school] gets you a smaller group to interact with in a lot of ways so that you know some students better and you create bonds in a way that allows you to talk more freely within that group.

> All our friends are [in this small school]. It's easier to have relationships with your friends because you have them every period.

PERSONALIZATION We define personalization as making a difference when these conditions occur:
- Adults in the school know kids (and often families) so well that instruction and learning opportunities can be tailored to individual students based on that knowledge.
- Students in small schools are known and have a sense of belonging that sustains mutual trust between the teacher and the student.
- Students trust teachers sufficiently to grant their teachers the moral authority to make greater demands on them as learners.

Students at all seven schools listed specific examples of how teachers know them better and are not only able to provide attention to individual students' needs but often combine this attention with a push for students to challenge themselves further. Having already built a relationship with a particular teacher or group of teachers over the course of a year, students say that they find it easier to get down to work because they know how teachers structure their classes and what they expect from students. Students feel that teachers have higher expectations for them as learners when teachers know them better.

> Basically when I have that teacher for more than one class or year, we find ways to work together, and I try harder because they expect a little more out of me.

Being in his class a second year went well because he knew exactly how to push me or motivate me to do my work, and we're so close that I wouldn't have any problems asking questions or getting to work.

I know she has high expectations for me because even when I have a good excuse for not doing my homework or something of that nature she still won't give me any slack. She's great. Maybe that's why I keep an A in her class.

She shows me every day just how much she cares by telling me that I am a good student and that she expects me to do better on every assignment I turn in. I believe that Ms. H wishes the best for me, and I try my hardest to make her proud because not many teachers these days look out for their students as much as she does.

One of their main focuses is making sure that you have the ability to get all of the credits you need to get into a four-year college…. It feels good and like people are looking out for you.

We can see in these cases that personalization has raised some students' expectations about their own abilities and has increased a sense of personal accountability among teachers and students. Some students, particularly those in Birch, did point out that they feel a sense of loss around having fewer teachers, seeing fewer of their peers, and being isolated in one part of the building as a result of the reorganization into small schools. However, even these students, when asked what they like about the small school, say that they appreciate the same group of teachers and students working together and getting to know each other better.

Survey data shown in Figure 1 highlight the extent to which students feel known in their small schools.[12]

[12] Survey data represent five of the seven schools in the study. Students from Birch and Fir did not respond.

Figure 1: How Well Are You Known?

In my small school:

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Don't Know
at least one teacher knows me well.	42%	13%	44%	2%
teachers communicate with my parents/guardians every six weeks.	41%	21%	28%	10%
teachers understand me and my life outside school.	41%	32%	22%	6%
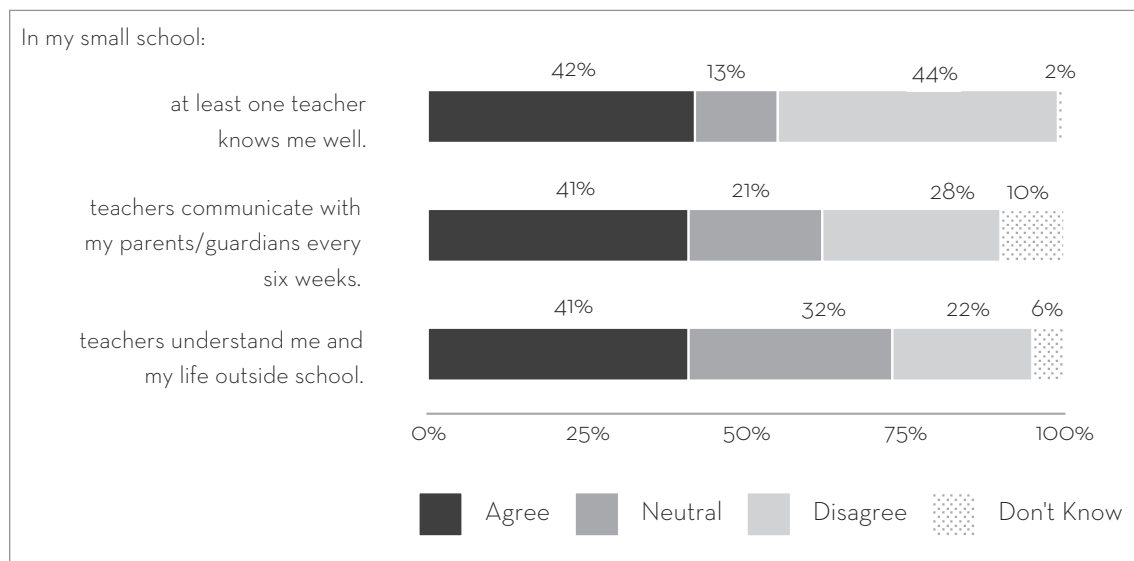
Advisory

Advisories are the one technique for creating personalization that all seven schools implemented. Ideally, advisors counsel students, advocate on their behalf, and guide them through their four years of high school. Advisory time is often used for academic planning and personal growth activities. Six schools established year-long routines for advisory, and at least one school includes days for tutoring and sustained silent reading.

Many students were not enthusiastic about advisories. The freshmen and juniors with whom we spoke perceived advisory as a waste of time. Students frequently "blew off" activities planned for that time, such as journaling.

> I think advisory is very much pointless unless like, you really need to go do work for some reason.

> If people really had the responsibility to go, then they would go… I feel a lot of people don't go because they don't want to read, just sit there and read.

> Right now it's kind of like a waste of half an hour, because you can't do anything… it's only once a week.

> It's not a class and should not be treated as one.

While the goal of advisory is to increase personalization, students from all seven schools said that the increased personalization they have experienced comes through getting to know teachers and students in class rather than during advisory. Other students, particularly those at Alder, Cedar, Fir, and Chestnut, suggested that when advisories are used to build relationships not necessarily related to academic issues, and when they are relevant to students' concerns, advisories are more worthwhile.

> [Advisories are] the first twenty minutes of school every day. I enjoy them. They could be amped up a little. It is nice not to just go straight to class in the morning.

> During advisory we don't just do boring things. We have fun and concentrate on things we have problems with in school.

> The teachers… have decided to have advisory groups where a student has a certain teacher, usually one that they have [for class], and you get together with them and talk about things such as scholarships and college. And if something is bugging you, your advisor is there to help you, to give you support within school to do your best at all times. I really appreciate the time teachers take out of their busy schedule just to make you feel more comfortable.

Part of the reason advisories are not universally successful may be that teachers fill them with curriculum asking students to reveal themselves. But the trust and community is not strong enough to allow it to happen. One student at Birch said that it would be interesting to see what advisories would be like if students were allowed to plan one for themselves. This speaks to the issue of relevance and student participation in decision making addressed in the following section.

The effort to transform comprehensive high schools into several small schools calls for building relationships between adults and students in service of making students' school experiences more relevant and rigorous. In many cases strong personal relationships between teachers and students have fostered students' sense of belonging and raised students' aspirations for themselves, as well as the expectations they have for their schools and teachers. While teachers believe they are beginning to leverage these relationships in order to increase relevance in the classroom, for the most part students report that their school experience still lacks these qualities.

Relevance

Marta sat in the waiting room outside the office where the college entrance interviews were being held. She was next. Although she was a little nervous, she knew she was prepared, and she was excited that she might have a chance to go to college. When she started high school, she sure didn't think she'd be sitting here waiting for a college interview. How did she get here? That is the topic she had chosen for her college essay and she wondered what the interviewer would say about that. The door opened and Marta was being called in. A nice man in a sport coat and jeans smiled at her and asked her to sit down.

"Hi Marta. How are you today?"

"I'm fine, thank you. A little nervous maybe."

"Well everyone usually gets nervous but don't worry. I just want to talk with you about your experience in high school and what your interests are. Okay?"

"Okay."

"I notice from your transcript that your grades weren't all that good your freshman year and then it seems like you turned yourself around in your sophomore year and now you're doing AP classes and getting As and Bs. How did that happen?"

Marta thought back to freshman year. All she wanted to do was hang out with her friends and get that guy Dan to notice her and ask her out. She liked the small school because she got to see her friends—and Dan—in almost all of her classes and in the hallways. But then teachers started calling her out and nagging her to do better. The teachers talked to each other and now they were all nagging her, reminding her of assignments, and asking her what she wanted to do and telling her she needed to work harder. They offered help but she thought, Why do I need to do any of this stuff? What good is it going to do me? I'm not going to college. My family can't afford it and besides, I hate school. It's boring. All you do is learn stupid useless stuff that no one cares about.

"Well I guess it started changing for me when we did a class project that made us look at what we wanted to do after high school. We had this discussion in English class where the teacher asked us what we wanted to do after high school, like what career we wanted or whatever. Well everyone said they wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer or whatever, they wanted to have big jobs that made a lot of money. Then the teacher passed out a list of all of these careers that had how much the average salary was for each one and then how much education you had to have to have that career."

"What did you think of that list?"

"I had never even heard of some of these careers so that got me started thinking. Also, it was pretty surprising how much school was required for some things, even things that didn't seem so hard like being a garbage man or a hairdresser."

"So what did you do?"

"Well after that, we did a research project in English where we picked a career that we were interested in, and then we had to find out a bunch of things about it like how much school, what kind of classes you have to take, what the job was like and stuff like that. We had to interview someone who was already in the career and find out what it was like and we had to write a paper and present our information to the class."

"What career did you pick?"

"It was hard to pick actually. I didn't know anything about them except what I saw on TV. I didn't know what I was good at or what jobs might match with what I was good at. So I had to think about what I liked to do in school and I figured out that I liked writing so I picked 'journalist.'"

"And how did all this change your grades?"

"Well after this project, we talked more about what we wanted to do and with our advisor we made a plan for what we needed to study, what classes we needed to take in high school in order to get ready for the career we were interested in. After that, I kind of had a goal that meant a lot to me, and even when classes were hard, I wanted to keep trying because I had a reason beyond just getting a good grade. And all of my teachers were really helpful and nice about it. They let me design some of my assignments so they applied to journalism, and they helped me find internships and contacts that I could talk to. They helped me with looking at colleges too, and scholarship information. School just made more sense to me after that."

"Well it sounds like your teachers really cared about you. Also, your essay was really nicely written. I can tell you put a lot of thought into it, that you've learned a lot about the writing process, about how to express yourself in different ways, and about ways to analyze current events. It would be good to have someone with your drive at our university. Let's talk some more about that process."

The principle of *relevance* refers to the idea that students more easily acquire knowledge and master skills when course work relates to and references their lives and experiences. When students and teachers can both answer questions like "what is the point of school?" and "why should I study this?" by relating what is being studied to questions about their future, current issues in their personal lives, or something they have been wondering about, they are addressing the principle of relevance. When classroom instruction engages students in multiple learning styles, uses the diversity and culture of each student to build effective learning experiences, and allows students to make decisions about their learning with their teachers and peers, such instruction becomes relevant. Relevance gains power when teachers and students discover relevance together, as opposed to teachers simply telling students why the learning is important.[13]

[13] Karschney & Squires, 2005

RELEVANCE When instruction is relevant, it:

• Engages students in multiple domains.
• Stimulates intellectual curiosity
• Includes learning activities that invite an emotional or internal commitment on the part of the student.
• Uses the diversity and culture of each student to build effective learning experiences.
• Allows students to make decisions about their learning with their teachers and peers.
• Offers value beyond the classroom.

Students we spoke with found relevance in their educational experience when there was a direct connection between class work and the theme of the small school, when there was a connection to future plans (including college readiness), and when students were given the opportunity to actively participate in learning activities.

Relevance in Course Work

Students recognize and appreciate relevance as a quality of learning that is "fun" and "important."

[In the] last few months… I've learned how to put on a news broadcast. I learned how to shoot a video, input the video into the computer, edit it, like, movie-wise, like cut this scene and put in transition where it swirls around and where it's movie-like, and put in, like, sound effects and music, export that video, put it into, ah… what do they call it? … screener—it's a big word… put it into that machine and then in the morning broadcast it to all the students in school.

Variables are what we deal with [in algebra class], but… creative ones. Like sometimes we're trying to find a rate for how fast bacteria are multiplying somewhere, or like, how fast horses multiply. … [The teacher] comes up with ways of showing us how every type of problem is important… he shows an example in a real-world situation.

In the computer classes I take I'm usually excited because when I grow up I want to do something with computers. … Most of the stuff I do is new to me, so I'm learning it for the first time. So I kind of like that part of it.

For students from small schools with a specific theme, such as Hemlock, Cedar, and Alder, the relationship of course work to the overall theme of the small school ties directly to students' perceptions of the relevance of their studies to their interests.

> Three things I like about [my small school] include: the wonderful art-oriented assemblies we have because personally I like many kinds of art. For example, we do poster projects, article projects and scenes, things of that nature. I like this because I enjoy making and doing art rather than doing something boring like reading and responding.

> All of our learning is mostly revolved around computers and technology. I like this because I used to be obsessed with anything there is to do about computers. And now that I get to use them so often, I'm not quite as obsessed with them, but I had such a longing to know so much about them, I kept my ears open and learned a whole bunch.

Many students look for connections between what they are studying and their plans for their future.

> "Relevance gains power when teachers and students discover relevance together, as opposed to teachers simply telling students why the learning is important."
>
> *Karschney & Squires*

> In many ways math describes my life outside of school. I am always looking for patterns and similarities in objects. Also, I am a bowler and can use geometry and physics to better my score. Math helps me pursue my goal to go to college and, soon after, become an engineer.

> Speeches we are working on help me to become a better speaker, which comes in handy when giving presentations at leadership events, in 4-H, and in school assemblies and activities.

> I am planning to be a nurse so math has some interaction with what I want to do. But math is also just universal. Math in the U.S. is the same as in Mexico and any other place in the world.

Students express disappointment when the course content does not seem to relate to their lives or their futures or when the instructional method does not involve student participation. One student believed that the important topics are, by nature, not exciting "because when they're important a teacher lectures about [it to you]. …it makes me want to go to sleep."

> History—I like to study it and I enjoy it—but the way the teachers teach it, it doesn't really fit very much with how I study it. They… touch… very shallow on the subject and then they move on to a different area. It kind of gives this feeling of a sort of not-so-useful class by having that happen where you're learning a small amount, but you're not learning certain things that could help you understand the culture…

> It just doesn't seem like you really need the stuff that they teach in this school or any other school.

> …Our school has not, in the time that we have had small schools, done a good job in applying the arts to the students. We have discussions every once in a while, but we really don't get to explore our education in an "artist" way like [I thought we would]. I think that there should be more of a direct line to the arts in our general studies and not just electives.

For many students, relevance means actively participating in their learning activities. Students are particularly enthusiastic about hands-on learning opportunities:

> Like the tech-showcase we had—we worked in groups and we discussed what to do and we made plans for it and it's better than doing a worksheet all day, or the teacher talking all period. We got to put something together and then go and set it up somewhere and tell people what we'd learned and then go and see what other schools and other classes learned.

Last year we did more hands-on [activities] and got to, like, build certain, like DNA structures, stuff like that…we did experiments. … [Projects] make you…understand it more. It makes you feel, like, more focused, and I guess you can pay attention more because it's right there in front of you.

We did cool projects, like we made rockets and stuff… He didn't just do one thing about airplanes. He taught us… [about] the aerodynamics of a car [and] how to build a hydraulic lift to open up the airplane.

We dismantled the computers and then [reassembled] them to make them work. I think that was probably the [best] learning experience I've ever done [sic] in my entire school.

Students' perceptions of relevance relate both to the content of the curriculum and to the way teachers deliver that content. While students appreciate teachers' initial efforts to create hands-on, relevant, and integrated learning opportunities, student comments, and the survey data in Figure 2, make it clear that work remains to be done to make classroom practice more relevant to students' interests. Adding the element of reciprocity to the principle of relevance, by creating an environment where teachers and students discover relevance together, is a key factor to more effectively engaging students in their own learning.

Figure 2: Does School Relate to Your World?
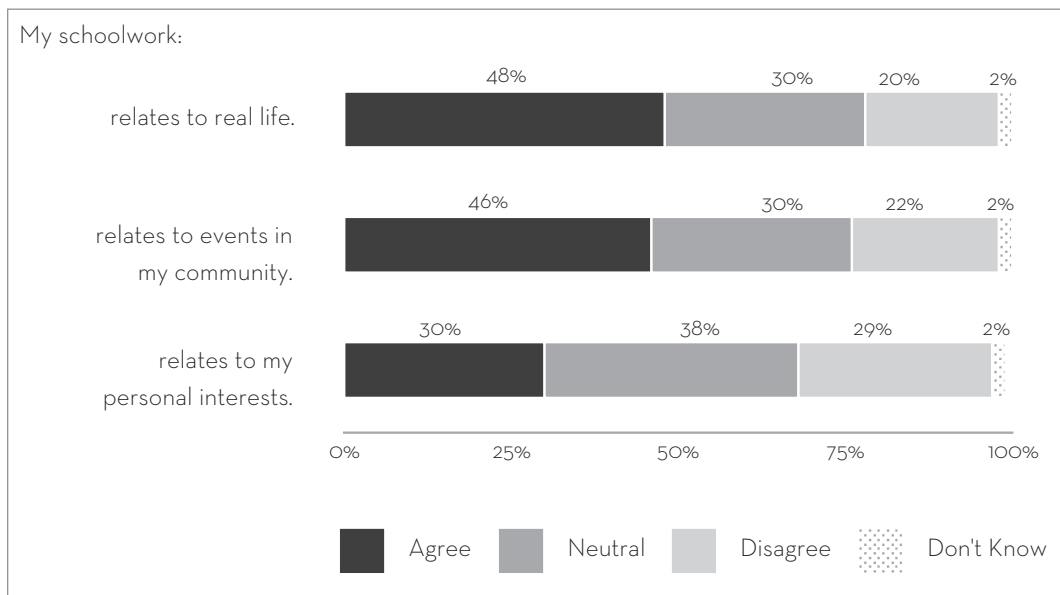
Relevance to Future Plans

A primary goal for each of the schools in this study is that all students graduate from high school with the skills they need to enter college and the work force and that they are able to succeed once they get there. This goal relates both to the instructional and organizational design of the schools as well as to the larger issue of equity of outcomes for all students. While not every student may choose to go to college, every student should have the choice about whether or not to go, and it is the school's responsibility to make sure that every student is prepared for the possibility. The goal of college readiness can act as a motivating factor for students. Tackling challenging course work and developing academic and social skills become more relevant to those who begin to see high school as preparation for college and work.

Survey data in Figure 3 highlight student perceptions of how much college is emphasized in their schools. While these numbers are very positive, we contextualize them further by looking at *how* schools are emphasizing college and what this emphasis can tell us about reciprocity and the 3 Rs.

Figure 3: Do Teachers Emphasize College?
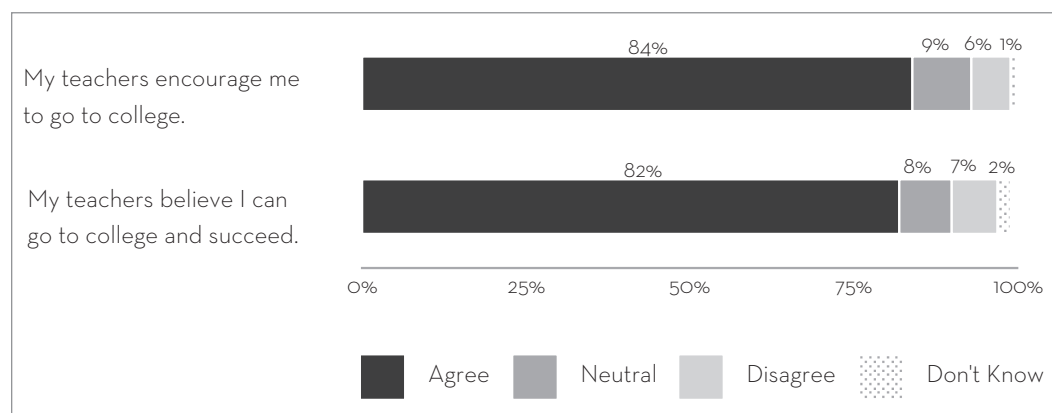
When we asked students to tell us how their schools were preparing them for college, most of them described the ways that their schools helped them understand the process of applying for schools, taught them personal skills (time management, study skills, persistence), and provided information and encouragement.

> [My school] and my teachers have done a good job preparing me to be successful in college because they actually… believe in me! [My school] is also bringing me a step closer to college by allowing me to be a part of… a college prep class for minorities with many different scholarships and application help available.

> We do have advisory meetings where my teacher [gives] us information on where to find scholarships and just to help make the process seem a little easier.

> I feel that because they push us it does prepare us for college. Teachers, and especially our counselor, bring college and the requirements of college to our attention pretty regularly. Our teachers really would like each student to do well and succeed, and I feel this helps kids want to go to college and pushes them to do their best in school to get into a good college. We have…a class called Junior Projects [that] kind of prepares us for the requirements not only for our senior year but for years after high school also.

> "One teacher took the time to tell me that as long as I wanted to go to college, I COULD. That made a major difference in my life and my future plans."
> *Student at Chestnut*

> Teachers… have instilled in many of the students (including myself) good study habits, positive attitudes toward anything difficult so that we continue to try and conquer it, and they have also instilled in me personally the motivation to push forward no matter what. The teachers…work hard to help their students believe in themselves. They… constantly encourage us to do our best. This has helped me greatly in my choice to continue to college. If I had not been told that it doesn't matter that I'm not a straight-A student, I probably wouldn't have even thought about college, let alone actually succeeding. But one teacher took the time to tell me that as long as I wanted to go to college, I COULD. That made a major difference in my life and my future plans.

These comments describe how relationships influence many other aspects of students' experience in their schools. Ongoing encouragement from teachers and dissemination of information about college help students think about the relevance of schooling to their future and the steps they need to take to get there. Our survey data further highlight the effect of relationships on relevance.

Students who feel known by one or more teachers report in higher numbers than those who do not that school relates to their lives and interests.

We compared how students who "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that they were well known by one or more of the teachers felt about issues of school relevance to students who "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that they were well known by one or more of the teachers.[14] The results are shown in Figure 4. Students who felt well known also felt to a much stronger degree that their course work related more to real life and their personal interests, that they were supported in doing challenging work, that they were encouraged to go to college, and that their teachers believed they would succeed in college. The gap between the responses of these two groups of students to the questions of relevance powerfully supports the notion that relationship building among students and teachers lays the foundation for increasing relevance in student learning. While we did not specifically ask students about the small school or classroom structures that increase personalization and relevance, we identified such structures and practices in our previous report, *Knowing and Being Known: Personalization as a Foundation for Student Learning.*

Figure 4: Relationships and Relevance
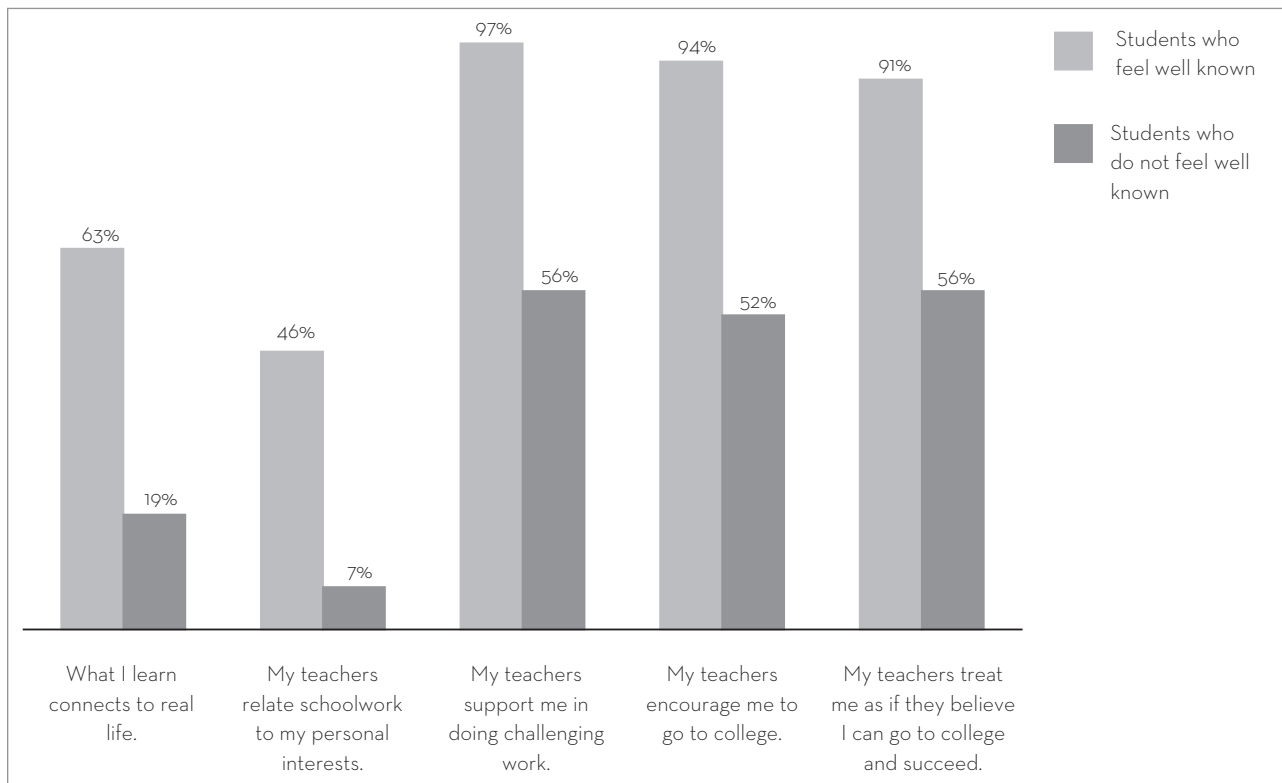
It is important to note, however, that very few students mentioned rigorous college-level course work as a way that they are being prepared for college. Students at some schools (Cedar, Fir, Hemlock) did not feel as prepared for college academically and wanted more and varied course work added to their schedules, such as AP courses. While encouraging students to believe in themselves and their own potential is an important component of becoming college ready, teachers need to use the foundation of relationships and relevance as a springboard to offer all students more rigorous, college-preparatory course work as well.

Rigor

Bill and Simone are both juniors at the Explorer School, one of four small schools in what had been a large comprehensive high school. Both love science and hope to go into careers in science after they finish school. Until this year, they have been in the same science classes in Explorer over the course of their high school years. Bill decided to take AP Biology, which is offered to students across all four of the small schools in the building and taught by a science teacher from one of the other small schools. Simone decided to stay within Explorer and take Biology 3 taught by the same science teacher she had last year. Bill and Simone are good friends. Today Bill is studying for the AP exam coming up next week, and Simone is finishing up a report on a yearlong project her class has been working on.

"So Bill, how do you think you'll do on the AP exam?"

"I think I'll do okay. I've been doing all the labs and homework and passing all the tests so there shouldn't be any surprises. The teacher makes up her tests just like the AP exam so we get lots of practice with that format."

"So if you pass the test, you get college credit? You won't have to take bio in college?"

"I'm not sure. I think so. Even if I don't get credit, it looks good on a transcript and it will help me in college courses I think. Why didn't you take AP, Simone? You totally could have done it."

"I know but I like Explorer, and I really like Mr. R and didn't want to have to get used to a new teacher. Besides, I think what we did this year was really awesome and I feel like I'm really well prepared for college work."

"Really? What did you do?"

"Man, it was a lot of work, and at first we were so scared that we'd never get it all done. But in the end it was so interesting that we didn't want to stop. And Mr. R really helped us out a lot. We did a yearlong project on the environment. It was like a whole research project. Do you remember that survey that went around at the beginning of the school year, asking everyone what kinds of environmental problems they thought happened here at the school? That was from our class. We got all these responses and picked a problem that a lot of people thought was an issue, which was that nasty pond behind the school that has turned into a dumping ground for people's trash and where people go to smoke and everything."

"Oh yeah, that place is gross. What did you do, tell the principal?"

"No. We did a bunch of research about how the pond came to be there and what was the matter with it now. We had to do water testing for different things and soil testing and all kinds of stuff that we'd never done before. We had to go to the historical archives and look up old maps and stuff. I hate that kind of stuff but Mr. R was great, helping us with resources and asking us questions when we got stuck. He showed us how to do the testing and write up the results and then analyze them. Then we figured out an idea about what we wanted to do with it all. We thought it would be good to turn it into an outdoor environmental classroom kind of thing where we could do hands-on learning outside."

"That would be pretty sweet."

RIGOR   In rigorous instruction:
- Instructional content is complex, ambiguous, provocative, and emotionally or personally challenging.
- Students are engaged in active participation, exploration, and research.
- The focus is on competence rather than coverage of material.
- Students develop resilience, flexibility, and confidence by facing academic challenges and temporary classroom setbacks that are opportunities for deeper learning.
- Learning involves problem solving, creativity, reflection, and transformation.
- Value beyond the classroom is added

(Strong et al., 2001; Karschney & Squires, 2005)

"Yeah. So now we're writing up this proposal to the school board and the community council to see if we can get them to say yes and give us some money to do that. We have a plan to put students on the advisory board and have students maintain some of the land and have it be kind of a school-community thing. It's kind of scary to be doing all of this stuff that is so real, you know? Like, not just schoolwork but having to talk to city council people and real scientists and all that? I really have worked so much harder this year, but I feel like I totally get how it works now, how science helps in the real world. Another cool thing is that the community college said if we write this all up, they would give us college credit for it. We're pretty fired up about that."

"Well that's good. It would be awful to do all that work and not get college credit."

"Maybe, but actually that isn't what feels so cool about this. I almost don't care about the college credit. I just feel so good about the chance to clean up the pond and about doing all this stuff I never did before. Also about working together with the other kids in Explorer and all these people in the community. I think I might go into environmental science because now I really get what it's all about and I'm pretty sure I can do it."

Dictionaries define the term "rigor" as "strictness" or "severity," often synonymous with "hardship," "difficulty," or "rigidity." School personnel and students often describe *rigor* as workload, highlighting the demand to cover more academic content and focus more specifically on discipline and deep mastery of fundamental skills. This notion persists in education because rigor defined as more content coverage is easily measured and predicted. However, profound changes in our society over the last three decades and a shift from an industrial economy to a "knowledge economy" are challenging educators' notion of what rigor is and what it looks like in the classroom.[15] Students must be prepared for a world that requires skills in reasoning, communication, problem solving, and collaboration that are not often taught in high school classrooms. Some teachers, to move toward teaching these kinds of skills, are developing new conceptions of rigor. One teacher, from a small school not participating in this study, describes rigor like this:

[15] Wagner, 2002

> Educators must transform the popular conception of the term rigor. To accomplish this task, I return to the roots of learning: *creativity, curiosity, reflection,* and ultimately, *transformation.* Science requires curiosity. History demands reflection. Math and English beg equally for creativity. …Without transformation, creativity is a poster tacked on a wall somewhere. …The difference then, between projects and assignments that are just projects and assignments, and projects that are rigorous is *transformation.* Students must be prodded to the extent that they, at some point, worry they won't make it.[16]

[16] Searle, 2006

Although students' transformation is key, rigor speaks to teachers' transformation as well. Through a collaborative learning process, both students and teachers influence the direction of class dialogue and the direction of the work. When students see that teachers are learning along with them, relationships, relevance, and rigor are enhanced.

In this section we look at students' perceptions of classroom practice and what they consider to be rigorous or challenging assignments. We highlight here the need for connections that must be made to the principles of relevance and relationships if students are to 1) grant teachers the moral authority to demand more of them as learners, and 2) be motivated to take the risk to transform themselves through rigorous curriculum and pedagogy. Attention to student voice and to building students' competencies further enables such a transformation, as students participate in authentic decision making in their classrooms and schools.

Classroom Practice

Ideally, a small school creates conditions for teachers to focus on improving teaching and learning practices and moving toward more rigorous instruction. Knowing students better, having more opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, and spending more time reflecting on instruction all contribute to strong teaching that embodies rigor and relevance.

Students were quick to identify what they consider good teaching. They acknowledged teachers who make the work interesting and help them succeed.

> She encourages you to voice your opinion about it no matter what it is you're studying.…When she's excited, we get excited.

> [My English teacher will] assign us books… and he'll analyze with us and he'll, like, help us find the hidden meanings so when we read on our own, we can do that.…That way, you know, later on when you're reading on your own or you get to college, you'll understand what they're doing.

While there is evidence of some change toward increasing rigor in instructional practice on the part of some teachers, student survey data shown in Figures 5 and 6 and descriptions of classroom practice from journals and interviews with students across all seven of the schools reflect a fairly traditional picture of classrooms. Lectures, worksheets, answering questions out of textbooks, and going over homework in class are still the norm, and there is little evidence that these methods engender the creativity, curiosity, reflection, and transformation that creates rigorous learning situations.

Figure 5: What Do You Do in Class?

In my small school:

teachers assign student worksheets. — 18% Daily, 45% Several times a week, 20% Once a week, 11% Every couple of weeks, 2% About once a month, 4% Rarely or never

teachers lecture during class. — 21%, 33%, 18%, 14%, 7%, 6%

students work individually on projects. — 14%, 22%, 23%, 14%, 8%, 19%

students work together on projects. — 7%, 22%, 19%, 29%, 18%, 5%

teachers work with me during class time. — 5%, 15%, 17%, 30%, 19%, 14%

Legend: Daily | Several times a week | Once a week | Every couple of weeks | About once a month | Rarely or never

Figure 6: How Do You Show What You Learn?

In my small school, students show what they have learned:

	Daily	Several times a week	Once a week	Every couple of weeks	About once a month	Rarely or never
by answering questions out of the textbook.	11%	31%	20%	21%	11%	6%
by doing paper and pencil tests.	6%	11%	31%	34%	14%	5%
through presentations to class.	5%	5%	12%	39%	31%	9%
through artistic performances, concerts, and recitals.	4%	3%	9%	17%	23%	44%
through exhibitions to parents and community members.	2%	3%	10%	10%	21%	54%

Students' suggestions for improving classroom practice all reflect a desire for more involvement and participation in the process of learning.

> To make this class more interesting my teacher could let us do group projects, [give] more study time for important tests, and just a weekly outline of what should be getting accomplished throughout the week.

> If we had more projects [in math] it would make things a little more interesting.

> Class would be more interesting if we reenacted history or put it in a play so that we could learn and have fun.

> Going on field trips will show us a new way of learning and make learning fun and unique.

What Is Challenge?

We wanted to understand more clearly what students mean when they use the word "challenging" and how that applies to the principle of rigor. We asked students to define what the word "challenge" means to them and to describe some of the challenges they face in the classroom. Students across all seven schools defined "challenge" as something that was difficult to accomplish and made them have to work and/or think harder, reflecting in some cases the idea of challenge as a transformative experience.

> "A challenge can tear down or raise up a person, but it never leaves them the same."
>
> *Student at Hemlock*

> To me a challenge is something that you go through that forces you to better yourself and reach deep down inside to pull out a new layer of yourself. A challenge can tear down or raise up a person, but it never leaves them the same.

> [A challenge is] something that makes me think about what I am doing and challenges me to be at my best to be able to complete it.

Challenge means to have to think harder or in different ways, to do things faster and push yourself, or to have an obstacle set in front of yourself.

[A] challenge … is something that will put everything you've learned into solving a problem or situation.

[A challenge is] something that is hard and something that might be confusing at first and really difficult to overcome.

Challenge means that I don't have to breeze through on a certain idea or action, but I have to think and put in some in-depth thought to get the outcome.

In describing some of the challenges they face in the classroom more specifically, students among all seven schools reflected two differing conceptions of rigor. Comments from students at three of the schools are representative of the more traditional conception of rigor. These comments mentioned teachers who pushed them to work harder and gave them extra or more difficult work to challenge them, reflecting the idea of rigor as more content coverage, and the challenge that produces.

Some of my teachers, when I get finished early, they will, like, give me extra work to do or… harder work, to challenge me more.

[My English teacher is] so hard on us. … He explains stuff a lot more… so you understand… and if we don't get it, he makes us do it again. If we read a book and we didn't understand it, we read it again.

It's so hard that we're always pushing forward and sometimes I wish I could just slow down and go over it a little bit more, but there's so much stuff we need to cover.

Comments from students at three other schools are representative of an expanded conceptualization of rigor. These comments mentioned teachers who asked them to find their own answers to problems, echoing the idea of rigor as creativity, curiosity, reflection, and risk taking.

[My math teacher] comes up with these problems that challenge you to think outside of the normal rules. He challenges you to find the irregular answers where you might not think to look. He also teaches the curriculum very thoroughly and so you have a pretty good understanding… like mixing in old problems as well as new just to introduce new material.

Like… every time… he tries to help me out, he like, lets me struggle with things. And he doesn't tell you what to do, but he lets me sit there and think about it. So he, like, just gives you time and you'll eventually figure it out if you just think about it. So he lets you think on your own.

They're trying to… make us think outside the box….We got like five pieces of paper, for one thing, and we had to try to make as big a tower as we could out of these five pieces of paper. And really, if you look at it like, it wouldn't seem that hard, you just stack them on top of each other. But you had to think of ways to cut them and get them to stick together and get them as tall as you could.

Students across all schools also talked about what rigorous and challenging instruction required of them with regard to study habits, study skills, perseverance, and managing course loads. In situations they find most challenging, they are asked to 1) absorb new material rapidly, 2) develop personal skills to deal with being overwhelmed and challenged by the new material and/or instructional strategy, and 3) apply their new learning in different situations.

A challenge I faced was this book report I had to do for physics. What I had to do was read this book in a week and write a paper effectively describing three main points of the book. This was hard for me because that material

was so dense and hard to understand all the terms, so I had to read it and read it again. Then writing the paper was hard because I had to clearly put in layman's terms how to do things and what it was that the physicists were trying to explain.

I have always struggled a little in math and dislike it greatly. However, I work hard and am fully capable of getting an A in math. The reason math is the most challenging for me is because certain formulas and calculations are very confusing to me. I often wonder Who ever made this up? or When am I ever going to use this again? I guess my brain does not always think mathematically. I do work hard at it, and it pays off. I know math is very important in life and especially in many careers.

Writing songs or poetry are not my best qualities. So in one of my classes when we had to write a political song it stressed me out completely. This got to me so much because I was worried my grade might slip from this project, and I realized how much I don't like [not being] able to do something.

These students' comments reflect the importance of relevance and relationship as foundations for rigor. It is clear that some of these students are willing to take risks and try new skills or persevere even when they dislike the subject because they see an inherent value in what they are doing, either in terms of personal growth or in keeping up their grades, presumably with the future in mind. However, for some students, the push toward rigorous and challenging academic work leads to frustration and resistance. Students at one school described being frustrated when teachers piled on the assignments. Students from several schools said that while teachers have high expectations, students do not always feel motivated or prepared to handle the rigorous level of work.

I find it challenging to keep everything on task for every single class. Assignments keep coming in and it takes continuous effort to complete them. Each class assignment consumes time and it gets pretty hard when every class assignment requires a great amount of attention.

[In my math class] if I don't understand something, when I get home I can't get the work done. Then the same thing keeps happening until a lot of work piles up. Also, my math teacher is a very busy person and if I need help on something it has to be at a time when she is available. We also get homework every night.

[It feels like] a bunch of weight falling on you. I don't know. It's frustrating… In the long run it's going to turn out well, but at that time it's not worth it. I'm tired. I want to go home and sleep and play a video game… It's like they're trying to punch it into you. Like, "Read this book! Give me 10-hundred pages!"

I think [this year] it's because the teachers know you and they, like, want to work with you. They want to force you. I'm being told that all the time… work harder… because they know you're capable of that.

Interviewer: How does it make you feel then when somebody says, "I know you're capable of doing this work"?

> "They know your name, they know what you look like, but they don't know you — like the type of things that you would like to do in the classroom."
>
> *Student*

Students: I get very angry… They don't know that you can do the work. That makes you even more frustrated when they're saying, "Oh, I know you can do it. Oh, come on, you can do it, you can do it" when you know you can't do it. Because they didn't either explain it good enough or they didn't tell you how to do it.

They think they know you, but they don't. They think you want to do work, but you don't. …They know your name, they know what you look like, but they don't know you — like the type of things that you would like to do in the classroom.

These students' concerns speak to the need for both pressure and support as their teachers' expectations increase. Students who feel authentically known and understood by their teachers are, on the whole, more willing to accept the challenge of rigorous work because they know their teachers will support them in it. This is not the case for other students. Student frustrations suggest that they must be taught the skills needed for taking responsibility for their own learning and given opportunities to practice these skills through authentic decision making. Without the quality of reciprocity and the presence of student voice, students are unlikely to take risks in the pursuit of transformative learning.

Whether students are encouraged, frustrated, or indifferent to rigorous instruction, they know when they are not being challenged, and they are critical when rigor is missing. For example, students at two schools reported teachers using the extra time in the block period for students to work on their homework assignments in class. Other students felt they could get by with little demand for effort.

> I think that [some of] the teachers are very lenient. And when they give us a deadline [and] half of the class shows up without [the assignment], they'll keep extending it until everyone's done.

> Some teachers, if you don't do it or you say you don't get it, even if you do and you just don't do it, like, they'll walk you through it and give you the answers. Well, some teachers… help you start it and then that's it.

> They just go through the work… like usually I know what it is already, so I don't even need to, like, study or look up answers… it's not pushing me to learn anything else. Like there's that little bit, you know, but I usually catch on pretty quickly and then it's not really that interesting anymore.

> Like here they don't really push you because they'll give you an assignment, tell you how to do it, and then just let you do it yourself. And then if you have questions, then you can go ask them. But that's basically it.

Survey data in Figure 7 show that only half (53 percent) of students find their classes challenging. But, the majority of students feels supported to do their best work and is willing to work hard in class. These results suggest that most students have granted teachers the moral authority to push them toward more challenging course work and that teachers have created supportive classroom environments. Teachers now need to leverage this environment toward creating more rigorous classes.

Figure 7: Is Your School Challenging?

My classes are challenging. — 53% Agree, 28% Neutral, 19% Disagree

At least one teacher expects me to do my best work. — 89% Agree, 6% Neutral, 3% Disagree, 2% Don't Know

Teachers support my learning. — 84% Agree, 10% Neutral, 4% Disagree, 2% Don't Know

I am willing to work very hard in my class. — 79% Agree, 16% Neutral, 4% Disagree, 1% Don't Know

I really want to learn. — 77% Agree, 15% Neutral, 7% Disagree, 1% Don't Know

My teacher expects the best for every student. — 77% Agree, 11% Neutral, 8% Disagree, 4% Don't Know

Legend: Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Don't Know

The Impact of Student Voice on the 3 Rs

W*hen Sam walked into his sixth period sophomore English class, he was surprised to see Darunee, a senior, sitting at one of the desks.*

"Hey Darunee, what are you doing here?" asked Sam.

"I'm observing Mr. F's class this period for the Best Practices Club."

"What's that?"

"It's a club where students give their opinions about how different teachers are in their classrooms, you know like how they teach, if students are understanding, if the classes are hard or easy, stuff like that."

"Wow, I didn't even know we had something like that here. How does it work?"

"Well, teachers volunteer to have students observe their classes. We get some training in what to look for and try to highlight positive stuff. We have a classroom observation report form that we fill out. A bunch of us students designed it with help from some of the teachers and the principal. We observe about eight teachers per semester and then we attend a student-teacher discussion on teaching methods at the end of the semester. We have to prepare a presentation that summarizes our observations and answer questions from the teachers. It's extra work but it's really interesting because it's so real, you know? And important."

"Man. And they really listen to you?"

"It was scary the first few times but when the teachers found out that we could be serious, that we paid attention, that we had good things to say, and that we had suggestions for changes that could help us learn, they relaxed a little. What ends up happening is that after we make our presentation, the teachers start talking to each other about how to improve their teaching and they get all excited, and it ends up being pretty positive. It's not a place to complain or tell teachers you don't like them. You have to be willing to participate and to try to see their point of view as well as tell them about yours."

Mr. F began class and Darunee observed carefully, making notes on the observation form in front of her. After class, Sam caught up with Darunee in the hall.

"Hey, I checked out your website for international students. It's so cool. What gave you the idea to do that?"

STUDENT VOICE Student voice is the development of student participation and decision making in the structures and practices that shape their educational experience at the classroom and small school levels. When students are regarded as partners:

- students' learning experiences are greatly enriched;
- learning is a dialogic and interactive encounter that goes beyond a passive process controlled by adults; and
- students develop a broad set of competencies that help them prepare for adulthood.

(Mitra, 2003, 2004; Prieto, 2001)

"It was for my senior project. You know, you choose a topic to work on throughout the year and then present a project at the big exhibition assembly in the spring. We just had our exhibition last week."

"Yeah I've heard people talking about the senior project but I wasn't sure what it was all about. How does the project work?"

"Well, you come up with the idea for the project yourself, but you get teachers to help you with it. Like, I didn't really know exactly what I wanted to do at first. I knew I wanted to work with Ms. Q because she has been my art teacher for four years and she knows me really well. I knew I could talk to her and that she would help me think through my ideas and challenge me to do my best work. I went to her with this idea of helping out other international students. At first, I thought about creating a club or maybe a mural in one of the hallways or something like that."

"How did you get the idea for the website?"

"You have to do a lot of research for the senior project. Ms. Q suggested that I look at some websites from other places and, as I was looking at them, I realized how helpful the pages themselves were. I did a survey of international students to see what kinds of things they would want on a website and how they would use it and analyzed the information. The principal said she had never thought of asking international students about what they needed and that my survey gave her some ideas for making other changes in the school and asking students about other things."

"So how did you get graded on it?"

"Well first of all, students design the grading system, a rubric I think it's called, with our senior project advisor. So we all agree on what an "A" project looks like, a "B" project looks like and all that. Then when we are getting ready for the exhibition, each student picks a panel of three judges who watch our presentation and grade us. I picked my senior project advisor, my English teacher, and the international student advisor from the district. They watched my presentation last week and I'm supposed to be getting their feedback soon. I get written comments and a grade."

"You are really involved with this school. Doesn't it take up a lot of your time?"

"Yeah it does, but I feel really good about it. I feel like I belong and like what I do is important. I feel like I'm part of things, you know? Not just in class but for the whole school. It feels good, and I'm learning a lot about how things work, and like how to talk to adults and be respected for my ideas and how to represent students. I think it's really good practice for when I get out of school. There is a lot I want to change about the world, and I'm getting an idea of how I can make a difference by doing what I'm doing here."

Small schools afford new opportunities for distributed leadership and decision making between and among adults and students. Research has shown that when students are regarded as partners in the educational process, their learning experiences are greatly enriched, and they are able to build a broad set of complex skills and competencies that prepare them well for life after high school. In addition, we have seen (albeit in glimpses only) that when students are involved in making decisions about their learning, the "new 3 Rs" are made substantially more robust. Relationships deepen as teachers and students become partners in learning. Relevance increases as students speak out about what interests them and what they need to prepare themselves for their future. Instruction becomes more rigorous as teachers and students develop higher expectations for one another's abilities and develop a learning atmosphere conducive to creativity, curiosity, and risk taking on both sides.

Student voice adds a powerful effect to the 3 Rs. Students' participation in decision making creates the essential elements of reciprocity and student buy-in that make the principles of relationships, relevance, and rigor more robust. Figure 8 depicts how student voice enhances the cumulative effect of the 3 Rs to support students' and teachers' willingness to risk, ultimately leading to the kind of transformative learning discussed in the previous section.

Figure 8: Impact of Student Voice on the 3 Rs
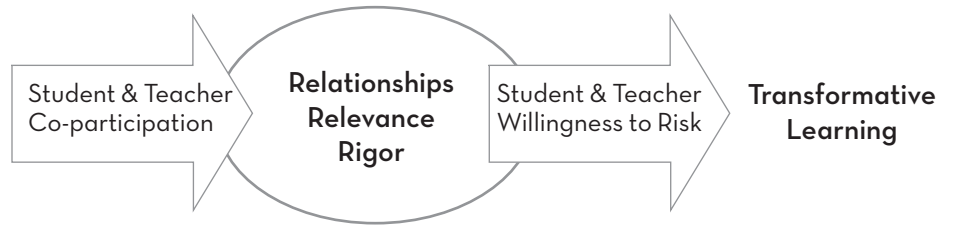
Despite the importance of student voice in educational decision making at all levels, what we have seen in this study is that while teachers' leadership has increased significantly in the seven schools, few new leadership and decision-making opportunities have reached students. We propose that a dearth of student participation inhibits teachers' ability to strengthen and capitalize on the 3 Rs in their classrooms and inhibits transformative learning.

Student Voice in Classroom and Instructional Decisions

Students seem to have the most influence and voice in the classroom and in their own studies. In small schools, teachers know students better and understand their individual needs. Because of this, teachers have greater opportunity to include students in designing their own instructional programs, both individually and in groups. Our data show that when students are included in making decisions, school becomes more relevant to their personal interests and to the real world. The following quotes reveal some of the instances when students could recall this type of participation:

> Some of the teachers at the beginning of the trimester, like, they give you a worksheet, and they ask you what you'd like to learn that year or something… So like, if you put something down, they'll consider it. And most of the teachers in this school are like, they listen to you.

> In one of my computer classes, we [had] an option between which projects we wanted to do. That kind of made it more interesting.

> [In] elective classes, more teachers care [that] the kids are having fun… other teachers want to teach what they want to teach… [but] in the required classes it's more like they have to teach it, it's not really like you get a choice.

> In my math class, we have a project right now and [my teacher]… told us that… we would, as a class, determine what the due date was. She's never done this project before, and she wanted us to not be pressured into having all this work to do and stuff.

> In our math class, we got to decide on how to study the WASL [Washington Assessment of Student Learning]… how we wanted to work on it… how we wanted to learn about it [and what areas] we wanted to study.

"We [had] an option between which projects we wanted to do. That kind of made it more interesting."

Student at Alder

One student wanted more say about how and what students learn. His complaint reveals that students require more coaching on the skills they need to make such decisions:

> There are times when you have a whole bunch of opinions about the choice and [students] can't decide. And so generally, the teacher has to make the decision for the students and that gets rather irritating sometimes.

Another student said that assignments would not be as boring if students were able to choose what they wanted study:

I think it will tie to us more, like we'll be more focused. Some people are better in some areas than other areas.

At the very least, students want to know the reasons behind decisions that affect their learning:

Students are usually rebelling if they weren't informed for the reasons [behind a decision, or] why it wasn't discussed.

Students want to participate more in classroom decisions and when they do, classes become more relevant to "real life" and their personal interests. Our survey data reveal this positive effect of student voice on relevance. We compared views about relevance between students who frequently make decisions about their learning and their school (every couple of weeks or more) to those who infrequently make those decisions (once per month or less).[17] Figure 9 shows that students who frequently participate in decision making connect school to real life almost twice as often. Those same students report their teachers relate schoolwork to their personal interests almost four times as often. Clearly, student voice has an enormous effect on creating a relevant school experience.

[17] See Figure 10 for data regarding student voice and decision making.

Student Voice in Small School Decisions

Four of the conversion buildings had student members on the original school design teams, conducted student surveys, and solicited students' feedback on small school designs through focus groups. One school even included students on a cross-country visit to a model small school as part of the planning process and included students on the building leadership team.

Since the implementation of small schools began, opportunities for student involvement appear to have dwindled. Students did identify a few examples from the first two years: Hemlock's building-wide leadership council included student participants. Alder's advisories each sent a student representative to meet with the teacher-leader to plan small-school-wide activities. Chestnut students had a logo contest where they submitted designs and voted for one. "[The teachers] kind of made sure that everybody voted. They kind of wanted to because they wanted everyone to have a say in it."

None of the seven schools has a formal process for widespread student participation in building-wide or small school governance. Students in most of the schools felt that teachers informally solicit their input on decisions, but they did not feel that their opinions were always considered in the final analysis.
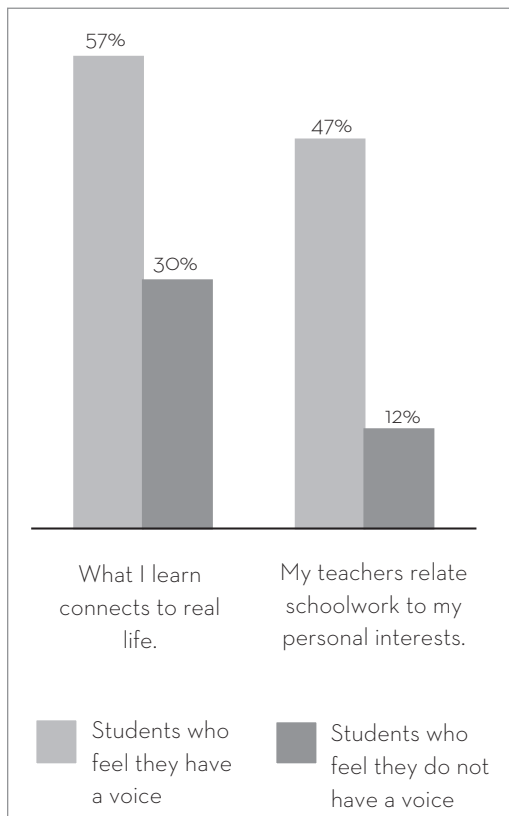
We have influence…. We have input on what goes on…. You can just talk to a teacher, say like, "hey, I don't like this, let's rap"… We talk to our [advisors] about what's going on in the school—that's one of our main things they talk to us about.

I think that they should let students have more of a voice. … They listen, but they don't take what we say into what they're thinking about, into the problem.

They ask for input, but not much of it actually gets back to them or anything.

Students are mostly left out of the changes. There might be a little bit of minor consulting on things like a new elective, but mostly the teachers are the ones deciding things. There are a few students on the schedule-

Figure 9: Student Voice and Relevance

57%

47%

30%

12%

What I learn connects to real life.

My teachers relate schoolwork to my personal interests.

Students who feel they have a voice

Students who feel they do not have a voice

forming board, which they are making for next year. …I would like to see a student (if not more) be present at the staff meeting when they are deciding things.

[One of the things] that I don't like about the [small school] is that we have our classes changed at [the] semester and we have no say in if we want that or not. And we can't get them switched.

Students' understanding of how their small school is governed varied widely, and they uniformly appear to have little, if any, involvement in that governance. Students reported that they are seldom consulted on building-wide decisions, although there were exceptions. Fir students had input on desks and lunch tables for the new school building but not the new schedule (the sixth in six years). And, "when they were looking for a new principal to interview, they had some students go in." A teacher at Chestnut explained to students in his class about the building-wide debate concerning three different possible block schedules. Students reported that they "got to vote [on] which one we wanted."

This mixed finding on student voice, that on the whole students are not involved in governance decisions but are asked for input and ideas by adults on certain topics, is reflected in the survey data in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Do Students Have a Voice?
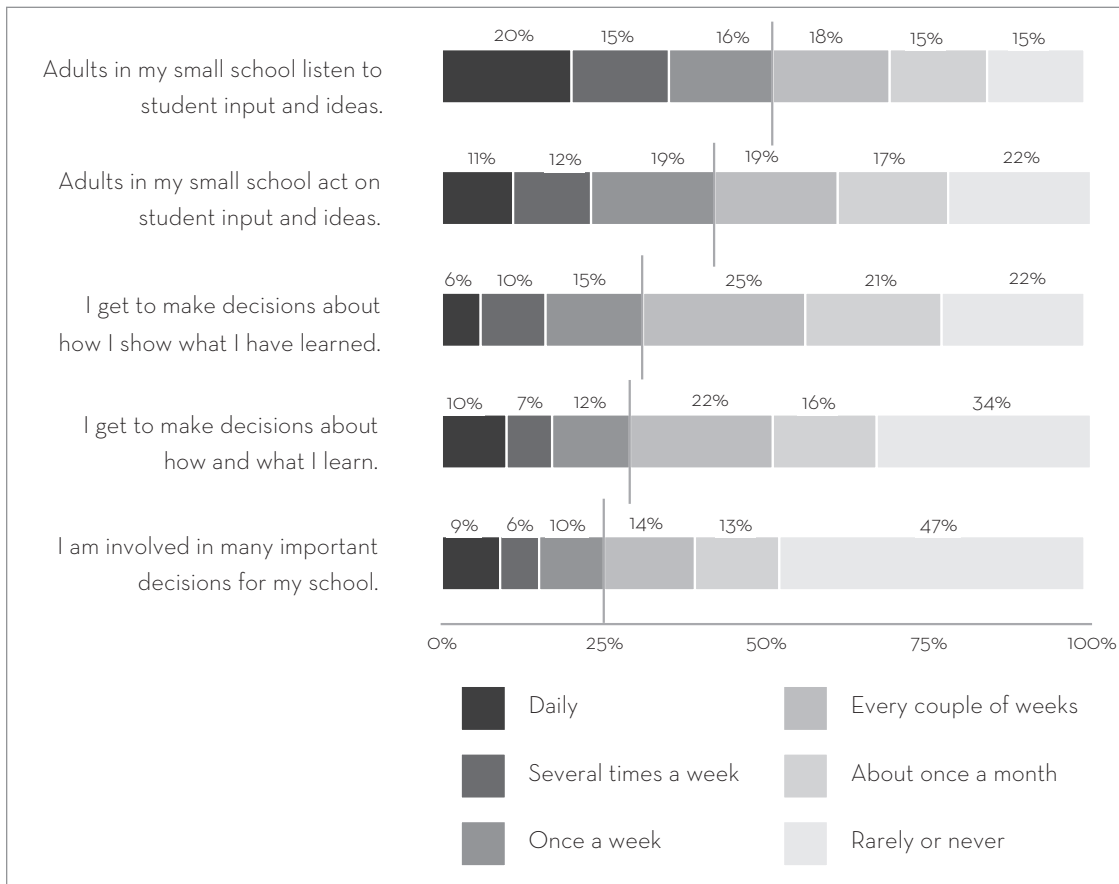
Students' comments regarding student voice, leadership, and decision making in small schools reveal isolated instances of teachers seeking student input through choice in assignments and opportunities to help design projects. Taken as a whole, however, student participation has been limited, with adults not yet supporting students to be more accountable for their learning or reaching beyond

the classroom to include authentic participation in small school governance. The data do not indicate that student voice is a strong part of the culture in any of the seven small schools. This finding has important implications for the ability of schools to incorporate and sustain the principles of relationships, relevance, and rigor in instructional and organizational practice in ways that lead to transformative learning for both students and teachers.

Data from the first three years of the study reveal that students have a good deal to say about the small schools they are attending, but only occasionally do they feel heard. Moreover, they are seldom invited to participate in school governance or in decisions about classroom instruction. This report documents students' response to the instructional and structural changes made over the last three years as their schools converted to small schools. This report also documents the few cases of students being included in school decision making and describes how a handful of teachers involve students in planning and designing their own learning. As we assess the overall picture, we are left wondering about how important listening to and incorporating students' voices will become to the small schools, and whether student voice will become part of the small schools' attempts to deepen instruction through the principles of relationship, relevance, and rigor as they continue to evolve.

How does student involvement in leadership and decision making factor into schools' long-term theory of action in the small schools conversion, if at all?

[18] See *Knowing and Being Known: Personalization as a Foundation for Improving Student Learning*, which can be downloaded from **http://www.smallschoolsproject.org** under "Small Schools in Action/What We Are Learning."

We have not found evidence of schools planning decision-making processes that emphasize or even include substantial student input. In an earlier report regarding personalization in the redesigned schools,[18] we concluded that teachers favor a personalized learning environment and that they are strongly committed to personalizing their teaching to take individual student needs into account. However, getting to know individual students well is different than asking for their contributions to both the context and substance of their learning. The implications for student involvement reach beyond the students themselves to transformed teacher practice and school culture. Without the kind of intentional planning and focus that has gone into other aspects of small school design, the situation is not likely to change.

Who in the school is concerned about the issue of student voice?

Student voice did not emerge as a theme in interviews with administrators or teachers. Even though the small schools are open to the idea of student participation, and indeed often included students in the early planning, processes and plans to incorporate and benefit from the inclusion of student voice in the newly formed small schools have not yet been widely discussed. We wonder where the impetus to include student voice in school decision making will come from.

How much student voice is appropriate?

We do not advocate students taking over school leadership or teachers throwing out all established curriculum in favor of artifacts relating to current pop culture, for example. Rather, we are talking about students participating alongside teachers and administrators in making decisions relevant to students' own learning. It remains unclear how much student participation in school governance makes sense as small schools struggle to establish themselves within volatile building and district contexts. But, we do know that engaging students in making important decisions establishes a sense of belonging and fosters lifelong skills.

How will the small schools build leadership capacity among students?

Students must be taught the skills to participate effectively in classroom decisions and school governance. Students haven't had the time or experience to know how to respond to challenging issues with reflection. Our data reveal that students' common first reaction to school change is resistance—a symptom of the fact that they had little or no participation in planning the changes. But merely soliciting student input falls short of fostering student voice. Adults in schools need to build the leadership capacity among students, structures to facilitate their participation, and a safe, trusting environment.

How will adults in the schools learn to engage students as partners in their own learning and in governance?

Like students, adults need to learn how to engage in joint leadership. Teachers and administrators require new skills to participate in cooperative analysis with students, so that students are authentically involved in the analysis and decision-making stages, not merely providing input. Adults and students represent multiple generations with distinct cultures and languages. Dialogue should focus on sharing ideas rather than the mere pursuit of answers and solutions. To this end, teachers and administrators must recognize and address the power imbalance, suppress the tendency to take charge, and overcome fear of conflict. They must recognize students as resources for ideas, wisdom, and creativity—regardless of academic ability.[19] The goal is genuine student engagement in decision making, rather than students merely providing input.

[19] Read more from *Effective Intergenerational Dialogue*, an article by Kathryn Squires and Katy Karschney, on **http://www.smallschoolsproject.org** in the "School Culture" section of the Winter 2004 *Planning Resources for Teachers in Small High Schools*.

What resources are available to support the significant inclusion of student voice?

Enlisting students as leaders and decision makers requires intensive planning, structures for implementation, and ongoing analytic evaluation. Because teachers and administrators are already heavily burdened with other aspects of reinvention, we wonder how additional resources can be tapped to support more student involvement. We wonder also what can be learned from the successes of other intentionally small schools that have incorporated student voice into their school structures and practice.

This report documents what students are saying about their experience in the small school conversion effort and provides a starting place for schools that want to move ahead toward including more student voice in their instruction and governance. In the early years of the redesign work, some school leaders solicited student input. But the emphasis on student voice has diminished considerably since the implementation of small schools three years ago.

In response to a survey question asking students to list the top three things that would help them do better in school (see Figure 11), students ranked hands-on learning opportunities, learning opportunities connected to the real world, and more participation in decision making about their school and education as first, second, and third, respectively. It seems clear that students are asking for just what small schools are designed to give them: relationships, relevance, rigor, and voice. While great strides have been made toward some of these goals, particularly in the areas of personalization, more work needs to be done.

Figure 11: What Would You Change (Top Three)?
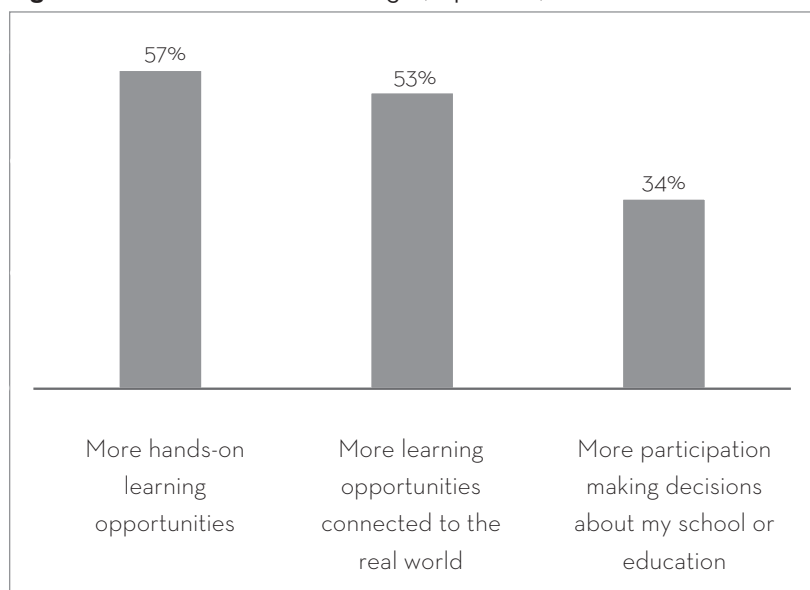
In most of the seven small schools in this study, students and teachers understand the benefits of personalization, and have laid a foundation that must now be leveraged to increase student achievement through increasing attention to rigor and relevance in instruction and through including students more widely and regularly in decision-making processes. Students do not generally feel like they are participants in building-wide, small school, or classroom leadership and decision making. A few students identified ways in which teachers invited them to participate in crafting their own learning opportunities, but these were individual events rather than routine occurrences. A few students identified ways in which they were challenged in classroom activities, but these occurrences varied greatly, and the students point to a level of frustration when they lack support and preparation for challenging schoolwork. Fostering student voice and reciprocity will multiply the effect of strong adult-student relationships, relevant course work, and rigorous learning opportunities.

Between fall 2003 and spring 2006, the Small Schools Project research team has been conducting 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 were held in each school to capture impressions of students who are new to the small school
- Junior student focus groups were held in each small school to capture 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.[20] 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.

[20] 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 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 36. 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

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.

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 291 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.

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.

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 the small school proposals and participated in focus groups to critique other 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

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.

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.

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 227 students with 10 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.

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 second year of the grant. 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 included significantly in the original planning.

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.

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.

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.

The leadership committee chose the small schools and assigned staff based on teacher preferences. Hemlock has 394 students and 17 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 third year of the grant 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 fifth year of the grant, a new building principal and assistant principal were hired.

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.

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.

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%)	291 (17%)	150 (100%)	227 (15%)	394 (20%)	394 (52%)	200 (10%)
Number of teacher FTE	11.6	12.5	18.5	8	16	14.8	20
Number of teachers	14	15	19	10	17	17	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
Does the building have a leadership council?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Does the building leadership council have student members?	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Do students have a regularly scheduled advisory?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Does the small school have student-led conferences with parents and teachers?	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Do some teachers see the same students on a regular basis (via looping, teaching multiple subjects)?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Do students "crossover" between schools?	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.[21]

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 also 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 is 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.[22]

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.[23] 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.

The WASL became "high stakes" in 2006, meaning the class of 2008 must pass the tenth grade test. Previous year's test 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.[24] Without dramatic improvement, nearly six out of ten students will not graduate from Washington high schools in 2008.

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 primarily to serve 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.[25]

[25] McBride, Jason (2006) Alternatives to WASL Passed, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, p. B2

I f you are interested in learning more about student voice and how to create more opportunities for increased student involvement in your school, we encourage you to review the following resources:

The Best Practices Club

http://www.bestpracticeslex.org

The Best Practices (BP) club is a student-run club at Lexington High School (LHS), a large suburban high school outside Boston, which works with teachers to improve teaching and learning. Students go into classrooms not to learn what is being taught, but to look at how it is being taught, and to create a dialogue between students and teachers about good classroom practice.

BP members have used several methods to promote dialogue and improve teaching at LHS, including (1) creating an observation tool, used by student observers, that includes open response questions on a few subjects (like Atmosphere, Teaching for Understanding, etc.); (2) facilitating student-teacher meetings and workshops on best teaching practices used in the classroom; and (3) facilitating faculty-wide workshops on best teaching practices used in the classroom.

Education|Evolving

http://www.educationevolving.org/

Education|Evolving (E|E) is a Minnesota-based project committed to helping K–12 schools evolve and meet the challenges, demands, and opportunities of the 21st Century. E|E created a virtual space for students to communicate and discuss their opinions on a variety of "hot topics" in education policy development, which can be found at http://www.educationevolving.org/studentvoices/. E|E plans to integrate these discussions into its work, and encourages others to do so as well. The website includes student message boards, student submissions, and a clearinghouse of links that directly report student opinions on education topics.

The Education Revolution

http://www.educationrevolution.org/index.html

This is the website for the Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO), a nonprofit organization seeking to advance learner-centered approaches to education. In addition to other resources, this site posts a list of (self-identified) democratic schools. These schools are based on the premise that students ought to be deeply involved in the decision-making processes of the school, and many of the schools give students a role equal to staff in making decisions (one person, one vote). Since learning and curriculum is a major facet of schooling, these schools also give students a major voice in directing their own lives and learning at the school. There are currently 177 schools listed in 32 countries, and 74 schools in 24 U.S. states & Puerto Rico (as of February, 2006).

SoundOut

http://www.soundout.org

SoundOut is an education program at CommonAction, a nonprofit organization in Olympia, Washington. SoundOut works with schools, government agencies,

and education organizations across the United States to promote student voice in schools through school-based programs, professional development for educators, training for students, publications, and consultative services to organizations.

Student 2 Student, Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

http://www.k12.wa.us/s2s/

The Student 2 Student (S2S) project aims to help ninth grade students understand what they need to do in order to graduate from high school and to help them connect these graduation requirements to their own lives. Using the S2S toolkit, older students at participating schools (1) teach younger students about the new state and local graduation requirements; (2) encourage them to relate the requirements to how they define success and then determine the strengths they have to help them reach success now and in the future; and (3) help them begin to set academic goals and create personal plans. The primary goal throughout this project is to help students make school more meaningful.

What Kids Can Do, Inc.

http://www.whatkidscando.org

What Kids Can Do (WKCD) is a national not-for-profit organization founded in 2001 for the purpose of making public the voices and views of adolescents. WKCD also collaborates with students around the country on books, curricula, and research to expand current views of what constitutes challenging learning and achievement. Most recently, WKCD has started a new publishing imprint, Next Generation Press. The voices of youth resound throughout all Next Generation Press titles, making public their views on adolescents' lives, learning, and work, with a particular focus on youth without privilege.

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