AN EARLY REPORT
ON
COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL CONVERSIONS

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Small Schools
PROJECT

The creation of small schools has received growing national attention over the past three years. In this time, it has grown into a movement, so that, as of January 2003, virtually all major urban districts in the nation are in the process of starting new small schools or "converting" large comprehensive high schools into small learning communities that share the same facility. Most medium-sized districts and many suburban and rural consolidations are engaged in or exploring small schools options as well.

The attention derives from several sources. The federal government's interest in small schools in the aftermath of the Columbine tragedy and the subsequent Federal Smaller Learning Communities grants have provided legitimacy as well as substantial funding. A new commitment to serving *all* students well has highlighted the failure of most comprehensive high schools to bring about significant improvement in student accomplishment over the past two decades. A closer examination of data shows that this failure includes many schools in smaller towns and suburban areas as well as the usual urban schools serving predominantly poor students of color. The commitment of massive philanthropic resources to the creation of small schools has called attention to a steadily accumulating body of research on the benefits of small schools for almost all students and has spurred districts into undertaking small school projects.

The interest in small schools is about far more than size. Reformers hope to realize the benefits that research suggests are likely to occur: safer, more personalized schools, increased student achievement for all students, higher college-going rates, and increased student, parent, and teacher satisfaction.

For practical reasons, many of the next generation of small schools will not be freestanding. Instead, several autonomous small schools, born of a traditional large high school, will exist within the same building.

While considerable research supports the efficacy of small schools, few examples currently exist of large high schools having converted successfully into several small schools. This paper examines the early steps taken by three such high schools in Washington State. All three benefit from receiving grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

**Attributes of
High Achievement Schools**
Common Focus
Time to Collaborate
High Expectations
Performance Based
Technology as a Tool
Personalized
Respect & Responsibility

**Components of
Powerful 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.

INTRODUCTION

Small School Grants

The 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, suburban, and exurban as well as urban areas.

The foundation identified "Attributes of High Achievement Schools" and "Components of Powerful Learning" from the body of school research (see previous page). All grantees are expected to use both the attributes and components to guide their school redesign work.

Model district grants were awarded to increase the capacity of ten 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 grants (awarded in Spring 2000) is to change district operations in ways that more clearly support school-level work.

Model school grants support high-achievement school designs that are better prepared to help all students achieve. Over fifty K-12 schools have received funding to create and implement new designs that have a common focus, create high expectations, make data-driven decisions, and provide time for teachers to work on shared challenges. The first school grant to a Washington high school was awarded in March 2001.

The Washington State Achievers Program works on school redesign with sixteen high schools serving large populations of low-income students. The grant's resources are focused on improving college access for low-income students, and combines 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 Achiever high schools for thirteen years by the Washington Education Foundation as a result of a $100M gift of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The sixteen Achiever high schools received their grants in April 2001.

Case Study Schools

The three high schools included in this report were selected for study because they represent somewhat different approaches to the conversion of a comprehensive high school into small schools, yet each has an effective leadership arrangement and sufficient staff ownership of its

efforts to move forward. Each has received a different grant, which changes their contexts somewhat. Each also receives technical assistance from the Small Schools Project and school coaches provided by the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative. (Because the focus of this report is on leadership and the change process within each school, we did not collect data on the role of school coaches.)

None of these high schools is a failing high school. On most measures, they are more or less typical, and serve their communities reasonably well – at least by the standards of the past half-century. Each of them, however, is determined to make significant changes with the intention of serving all their students well.

Eagle Ridge High School (1,849 students), which received a model school grant, is one of four high schools in its district, located in a south Puget Sound suburb. Hillcrest High School (1,603 students), the only high school in its district, received funding through one of the model district grants. Taft High School (763 students), also the only high school in its district, received an Achievers grant. Even though their grant conditions differ, each school has accepted the challenge of creating small schools of 400 or fewer students from its current comprehensive high school.

Eagle Ridge, Hillcrest, and Taft high schools have benefited from good leadership, a generally high degree of trust between and among the staff and administration, and several years of conversation about, or engagement in, school reform prior to receiving their "Gates grants," as they are commonly known in Washington. Yet, even in these supportive environments, the conversion process has proven to be complex and difficult, and success is not at all certain.

Washington State Context

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 serious work at school redesign. After a decade of uncoordinated efforts following the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983), Washington state reform took serious hold with the passage of House Bill 1209 in the Spring of 1993.

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, 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.

Over the past decade, the state has developed a set of standards known as Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) in reading, writing, communication, math, science, the arts, and health and fitness. Similar to standards in other states, the EALRs are now widely used, especially in elementary and middle schools.

1209 also created what is now known as the Washington Assessment of Student Learning, or WASL, a test that would be administered to virtually all students in grades four, seven, and ten, and would provide the state with a "snapshot" of how the state's schools were doing. For a variety of reasons having to do with the cost of creating the WASL, which is in part a performance-based test and therefore more expensive, the legislature soon turned the WASL into a high stakes test by declaring that students in the graduating class of 2008 would need to pass all components of the WASL to be graduated from high school.

The WASL has been phased in over the past several years, with the science test making its debut in the spring of 2003. While the WASL will not be "high stakes" until 2006, when the Class of 2008 takes the 10th grade test, results are already widely reported in the media, and, in some districts, principal evaluations are based in part on improving WASL scores. Without dramatic improvement, almost two-thirds of students will not graduate from Washington high schools in 2008.

The legislature has been unable, after several years of deliberation, to agree on any sanctions for schools or districts whose students are chronically unsuccessful, based on WASL scores. Nor has the legislature made good on its intention of providing substantial resources for professional development it believed would be necessary to move to a standards-based system. Washington is one of only eleven states without a charter school law.

The Washington State Board of Education is on record as believing that the current 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. One Gates grantee has requested an array of waivers, and they were granted without delay. To date, that is the only school in Washington to request waivers related to school reform.

The work of converting comprehensive high schools is in a relatively early stage. Whether conversions will be more than occasionally successful remains unclear, let alone whether it will become a "movement" that substantially changes the nature of high schools in this country. These are but three schools from among upwards of one thousand schools nationally engaged in, or at least investigating, the potential benefits of conversion. Even at this stage, however, we begin to see some early pointers from these schools that may benefit others who are at an earlier phase of the process.

Strong, engaged, and positive principal leadership makes a difference. Each site has benefited from strong leadership. The leadership styles vary among the three principals, in some ways quite dramatically. Yet each principal has worked carefully to improve staff sophistication about small schools through site visits, workshops, reading, and research review. Each principal has also maintained a strong vision for success. While each school still has some resistors and some uncertain staff, the prevailing ethos in the three schools is "we can take this on and succeed." Finally, each principal's personal integrity is unquestioned; each is viewed by the school's staff as undertaking the conversion process for the right reasons.

These principals have been engaged fully in the process from the beginning. They decided early on that the work was important – for some, a moral imperative – and that they had no real choice but to proceed, given their growing understanding of their own school's shortcomings. They have been thoughtful and inclusive, and they have been respectful of both the fears and legitimate concerns of their staff as they move forward. They have also been successful at transmitting their belief that the task could be done, and done well, by their staff. They have built the self-esteem of their staff through a mix of professional development, inclusion in the design process, shared decision-making, and moral argument.

In some other schools we work with, principals have chosen, for various reasons, to remain disengaged from this process. A few have viewed this effort as primarily a teacher-led initiative. Others are tired, or over-burdened with the daily demands of running a comprehensive high school. Some have personal reservations about the wisdom of dismantling their comprehensive high school – an environment they have been a part of for most or all their careers. Still others lack the organizational or leadership skills to take on this task.

Looking at data on student achievement helps to make the case for change and builds staff commitment to serving all students. In each of these more-or-less average schools, it has been difficult to acknowledge the unforgiving nature of the data regarding student achievement. Across the three schools, data analysis revealed discouraging information. The particular pieces of data vary, but the message does not: six out of ten 9th graders graduate in four years. Many who do graduate have few marketable skills, or any sense of what to do after high school. Many who go on to higher education must take remedial courses. Current students and recent graduates alike report a lack of challenge or engagement in their high school courses. Forty percent or more of 9th graders fail one or more courses. The first-year GPA of college-going students declines more than that of most other high school graduates who go to college from other Washington high schools.

In spite of general community satisfaction and particular pride in some aspects of the school – the music program in one school, the arts program in another, the jazz band in the third, the occasional student accepted into an Ivy League school – the data makes clear, many, many students do not make it to graduation who should, and many who do have not been well-served academically.

Data such as this does not change the thinking of all teachers. Some believe high schools ought to continue the sorting process that has been part of its role from the beginning. Others do not believe that all students can achieve at high levels. Some blame students and their families for the data, or the state or the district for inadequate funding or poor leadership, or both. Still others believe this reform effort, too, shall pass.

In each of these schools, however, a majority of staff members have come to accept that their charge is to serve all students well, not just some of them. By this standard, analysis of their own student data leads to only one conclusion: school as usual has become unacceptable.

Inclusion and transparency are key contributors to staff ownership. An approach to the conversion work that operates on the basis of no secrets and no surprises, and which welcomes everyone into the process appears to build forward momentum. Each proposal was written by relatively few people and, in one instance, the grant was awarded to the district, not the school.

Each of these principals worked quickly to involve others and to

provide multiple avenues for that involvement. They were also strategic and persistent about engaging hesitant but key staff members. Such broad inclusion took many forms: positions on leadership groups, data analysis, examining research on high school reform generally and small schools in particular, visiting established small schools and reporting back to the staff, participation in professional development activities, and regular opportunities to talk with colleagues.

- Each school created an inclusive process for staff involvement. While they varied, each process engaged teachers and other building staff early and substantially in the study and planning so that work could move forward. Two of the plans also provided sufficient checkpoints early on so parents and students were aware of changes being contemplated and had intermittent opportunities to comment. At the third school, students and parents have been involved in a more continuous manner from relatively early in the process. Each school took from six to eighteen months to move from discussions that focused primarily on "why change" to "how to change." In that time, most staff concerns were addressed (or at the least, acknowledged), and a process that led to broad consensus was developed and formed the basis for ongoing work.

- Each school developed a transparent decision-making process. These schools are notable among the conversion schools the Small Schools Project works with for the high degree of trust around decision-making in the school. Again, the processes themselves are different, but in each instance, they are known, understood, and accepted as reasonable by that particular staff. Acceptance of the process is due in no small part to the respect each staff holds for its principal.

- Each site has shared design authority among all staff members. In each building, staff members have been involved in designing their small schools. In one, where small schools will be differentiated from the beginning, the process has been lengthy, detailed, and characterized by high collaboration. When structural implementation begins in September 2003, it will take place over two years. At the other two sites, small schools, by design, have opened looking alike – "getting small" was the critical issue in these schools. The design process in both schools now moves in tandem with implementation, and will spread over four years, with differentiation occurring more gradually.

Not all staff members have chosen to be deeply involved in constructing the small school designs, but authority has been shared, and widely exercised by staff in all three schools.

A new, public commitment to equity sustains groups and individuals at difficult moments. A significant part of the "right reasons" for undertaking the conversion process in each school has been the recognition that their current comprehensive high school has served many students poorly and left many others unchallenged. At each site, that recognition has been painful, challenging both longstanding practice and personal philosophies.

The proof of this commitment to equity, of course, will not be known for some years. This commitment, which may contain a whiff of political correctness, stands in sharp contrast to often low expectations that many Washington teachers have for students (Fouts et al., 2003). Nonetheless, when key design questions have arisen, when staff assignments were determined, and when student placements were decided, the question of what decision would best promote equity has been the determining factor thus far.

Balancing teaching and learning issues with design and structure issues is critical. In most conversion schools, design and structure issues have seemed at times to be all-consuming. In some instances, it has led to frustration and confusion; in others, to ill-conceived solutions that are unsupportable or unimaginative, or both. (The observation, attributed to both Winston Churchill and Buckminster Fuller, that "first we shape our buildings, and then our buildings shape us" seems particularly appropriate to school conversions.)

Each of the three sites has tried to remain focused on increasing student accomplishment, even as they struggled with issues of design and structure. Two of these schools have taken explicit steps to place instructional issues at the forefront. One did so by "elevating" a curricular design process to the level of a design principle. The other, using the same approach to curriculum design, has used a high number of its weekly late start days to focus on instruction, and by insisting that the ongoing design and implementation process take account of current data on student achievement. The third school moved quickly to partial implementation to promote circumstances where the early implementers could begin to see the potential of high personalization and work to take advantage of that design element.

After watching schools struggle with priorities for most of a year, we were convinced schools had made a serious tactical error by focusing so strongly on design and structure – as had we at the Small Schools Project, in initially supporting the schools in that focus. From the vantage point of another year, our sense is that what the schools (and we) had believed to be a strategic choice between focusing on teaching/ learning on the one hand and design/structure on the other is in fact a dilemma. That is, the problem is not resolvable in favor of one or the other. Schools, like these three, that have worked to balance the focus have made the most steady, if uneven, progress precisely because they have recognized the two areas are deeply interdependent. Design is critical to school change precisely because it has a profound impact on the possibilities for teaching and learning it supports or confounds. At the same time, a change in design without a change in curriculum and pedagogical approach is unlikely to have the desired effect.

The following three case studies reflect works in progress. Though we have identified similarities between and among their approaches, each school has forged a path suited to its unique school context. The three schools exist – they are not composites of several schools. While their work to date has been thoughtful and their progress impressive, they are only in the early stages of what will be a five-year process simply to put their structural changes in place. We have therefore provided pseudonyms for the schools and individuals who work in them in the hope that they may continue their work without undue attention or distraction. Minor details have been changed for the same reason.

The chart on the following page illustrates the broad path these three schools are on in their work. More detailed charts are included in each case study and at the conclusion of this report.
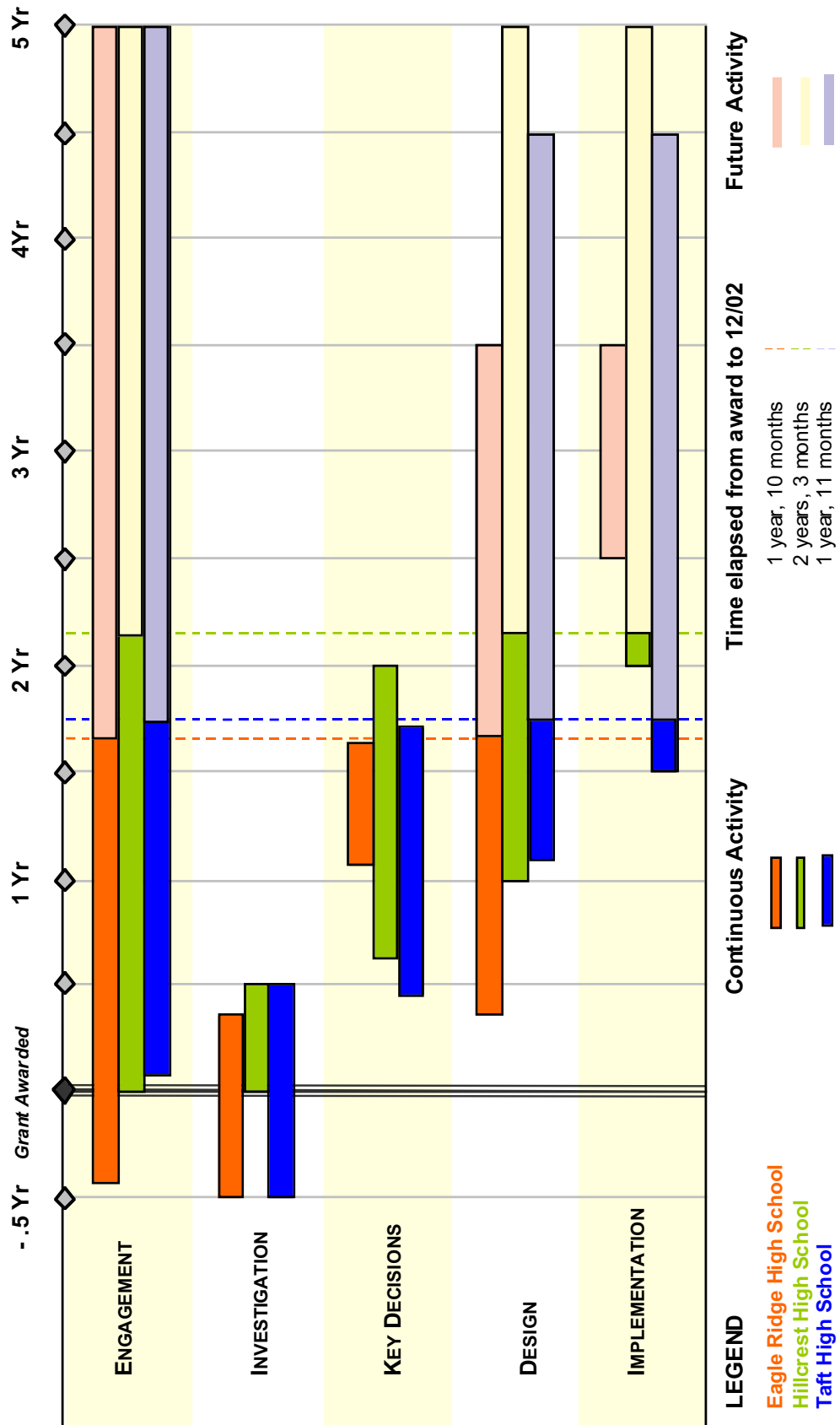
Eagle Ridge is one of four comprehensive high schools in its South Puget Sound suburban district. This traditional high school is breaking itself down into six autonomous, small learning communities over a four-year period. Eagle Ridge was an early recipient of a Gates individual school grant, though their change process actually began one year earlier, with funding from a U.S. Department of Education Smaller Learning Communities grant. These two grants reflect the Eagle Ridge staff's ongoing interest in innovation and reform over the years.

Currently, Eagle Ridge has the largest high school population in its district and is over-enrolled at 1,850 students. Eagle Ridge occupies a modern building, with amenities such as television and radio broadcast studios and a recently renovated greenhouse. But, until about 1990, which marked the beginning of reform efforts at the school, Eagle Ridge had a community reputation as the school to avoid. As recently as two years ago, a school administrator reported forthrightly, "We're not noted for our academics."

Like most large suburban high schools, Eagle Ridge offers a menu of academic options, consisting of approximately 230 course offerings taken in trimesters, 9th-12th grade. To accommodate the large student population, Eagle Ridge has two different start times and three lunch periods. Every classroom is used every period of every school day. No adult in the school knows all of the students and the 105 members of the teaching staff are often not familiar with each other.

In addition to size, certain school characteristics challenge good teaching and learning. In Eagle Ridge's trimester system, a student can take as many as eighteen different classes with eighteen different teachers each year, never really being known by any one of them. The effects are evident: Eagle Ridge's current four-year graduation rate is sixty-five percent. In other words, each graduating class is thirty-five percent smaller than it was four years earlier. Long-term data reveal that Eagle Ridge's cohort graduation rate shrinks as the size of the freshman class grows larger (see figure 1).

During the 2000-2001 school year, Eagle Ridge received a Smaller Learning Communities planning grant and formed a "Structure and Policy" Committee to explore the research on small schools. The group was comprised of teachers, administrators and one parent. Not yet committed to the idea of small schools, they began by envisioning an ideal school. They read a vast array of research on small schools, but their timeline became much shorter when the Bill & Melinda Gates

- .5 Yr   *Grant Awarded*   **1 Yr**   **2 Yr**   **3 Yr**   **4Yr**   **5 Yr**

ENGAGEMENT
Leadership team(s) formed and changed

Parents engaged in a meaningful way

Students engaged in a meaningful way

INVESTIGATION
Intensively research small schools

Analyze school data to make case for change

Teachers visit existing small schools

Discussion of "why change" becomes "how to change"

KEY DECISIONS
Number and nature of small schools determined

Teachers assigned to small schools and reaffirm choice

Student assignment procedure determined

DESIGN
Basic design

Detailed design

Teachers pilot new pedagogy or practice

IMPLEMENTATION
Small schools (structural) implementation begins / ends

LEGEND   Event or Milestone   Continuous Activity   Time elapsed from award to 12/02   Future Activity

Eagle Ridge High School

1 year, 10 months

Cohort Size and Graduation Data

Figure 1

Chart showing Number of Students in Cohort on the y-axis (0 to 600) for cohort years 86–96, with stacked bars for Non-grads (black) and Grads (gray). Graduation percentages: 15% (86), 24% (87), 16% (88), 26% (89), 35% (90), 46% (91), 49% (92), 42% (93), 37% (94), 36% (95), 36% (96).
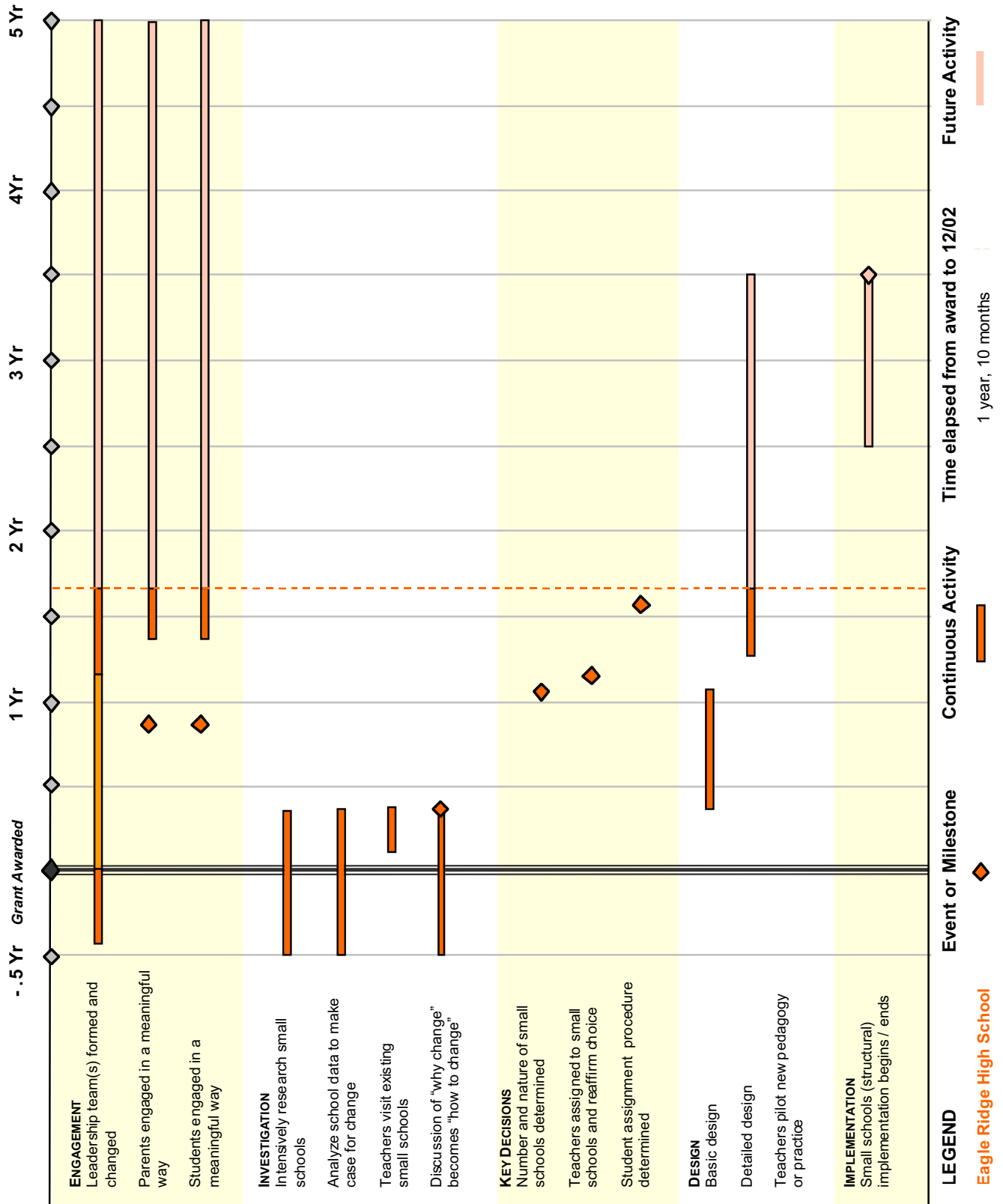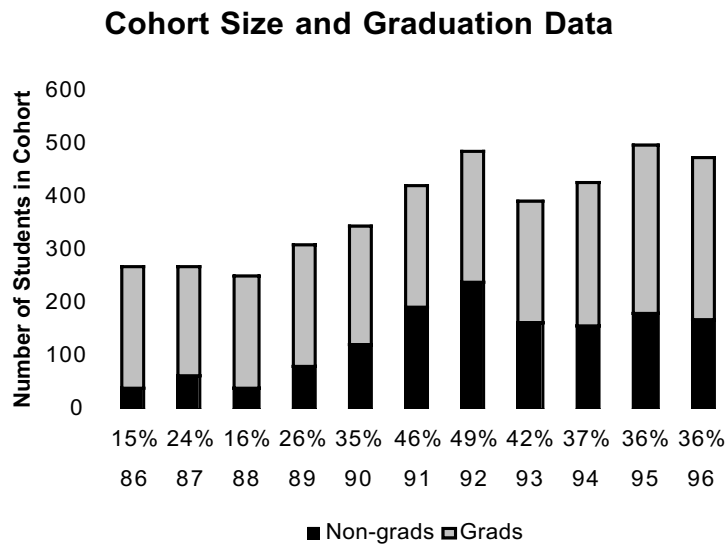
Foundation announced their Model Schools grant opportunity. The proposal required a small school design to be completed by January 2001.

Principal George Edwards saturated the staff with articles and research about small schools. As the Structure and Policy Committee moved toward the idea of creating small learning communities (SLCs), they led teachers in small group discussions on school in-service days to explore small school concepts, such as size, autonomy, student choice, a sense of belonging, and intellectual focus. Staff members also continued to debate structural issues, including houses versus academies, distinct schools versus multiples of the same school, and grade-level grouping.

Eagle Ridge began communicating with parents about small learning communities as soon as the school received the Department of Education planning grant. The administrative team made phone calls, hosted parent nights, and included information about small schools in the school newsletter. They targeted middle school students' families as well as those who attended Eagle Ridge.

In April 2001, the staff was not yet fully committed to the idea of small schools, but had to decide if they would accept a Gates Foundation grant. The entire staff met in teacher-led small groups, where people felt comfortable airing their fears and concerns about small schools. The administrative leadership observed and listened. At the end of the day, the full staff (including classified members) convened in the gym to vote by ballot. An assistant principal counted the ballots right then, on

the floor, in front of everyone. There was ninety percent approval to accept a grant.

When Eagle Ridge received the grant, the Structure and Policy Committee disbanded and the staff elected members of the Steering Team, comprised of teachers and the administrative leadership team. The staff also established the Steering Team's decision-making parameters at this time: if the Steering Committee reached consensus on a decision, the rest of the staff would support it.

Compared to any of Eagle Ridge's previous efforts, the school conversion process was far more complex. The staff knew they were embarking on deep change, but they could not have anticipated the magnitude and the complexity of the process, which required considerable comfort with ambiguity.

**Shared
Decision–Making**

Many teachers claimed that the administrative leadership team has been a significant part of the conversion process's success thus far. Having three supportive administrators who were closely aligned in their beliefs about teaching and learning was important for sustaining the change effort at Eagle Ridge. Throughout the conversion process, the principal and two assistant principals were committed to collaborative leadership, transparent decision-making, and consensus building. They educated themselves by reading the research literature and then educated the staff. While all three remained very involved, Principal Edwards freed up part of Assistant Principal Eric Frost's time to direct the effort by obtaining university interns funded by state grants. With this assistant principal free to focus on long-term planning, the school's Steering Team could effectively manage the change, taking time to plan and reflect.

The administration set a positive tone by showing their respect for the ideas of others. While some teachers felt threatened about their uncertain future in the school, they appreciated the way people listened to each other. The administration acknowledged peoples' fears and concerns, never making them seem stupid or unfounded. Staff members valued Frost's honesty and realism; he did not try to make everything sound like it was going to be perfect. In January 2001, Eagle Ridge hosted Valerie Lee, a noted small schools researcher and professor at the University of Michigan. Again, teachers appreciated her balanced presentation of information, including what is not known about school conversions.

The most tangible aspect of shared leadership was placing the responsibility for the conversion process with the Steering Team, which was comprised of seven elected teachers, including one teacher's union representative, and the administrative team. Principal Edwards left all major decisions to the Team and the school staff gave the Steering Team the authority to make decisions by consensus on their behalf.

According to members of the Steering Team, the administrative leadership did not impose its own agenda. They were up front about their ideas, helped create a working structure, and supported the Steering Team to take ownership of the process. The Steering Team led a change process that was thoughtful and deliberate. Typically, the administrative leadership team brainstormed ideas and brought them to the Steering Team for feedback. The Team would discuss, debate and revise the idea until they could reach consensus. If there was no consensus, the idea would go to the full staff for feedback or a vote. In this way, the Steering Team structure encouraged a combination of top-down and bottom-up influence and accountability. Information moved to the faculty level through written communication, e-mail, meetings and the school's web site. Informal communication between the faculty and Steering Team members was also an effective conduit. While the consensus-driven model was slow and process-oriented, it was one of Eagle Ridge's most successful change elements.

The Steering Team grappled with several difficult issues, which often were coupled with the question of whether to use its decision-making authority or to bring the complexity of the debate to the staff. Team members were frequently uncomfortable making decisions without further input from the general staff. The most salient issues included establishing the timeline, the request for proposal process, the small learning community selection process, the teacher selection process, and the conversion facilitation process.

Teacher–Led Change

Early on, Eagle Ridge High School's reform discussions had been about the logistics of breaking the school into several small learning communities and the specific structural changes. There was little understanding about changing practice in relation to teaching and learning. Frequently, teachers talked about smallness being the solution to all the school's problems when the leadership saw smallness as only the first, necessary step in school change.

By Spring 2001, the design and structure details of the conversion were

so significant they dominated the conversation. A distinction had to be made between the goal and the tools for obtaining that goal, with equal attention paid to both throughout the planning process. At Eagle Ridge, the goal was to "improve the rigor and standard of teaching and learning." The necessary tools included personalization through small learning communities, unifying focus, autonomy, time to collaborate, and involvement of the entire school community.

Frost began thinking about ways to shift the conversation toward the "tools" and away from the "goal." A teacher-led design process would empower the staff and could engage everyone. He brought his idea for a request for proposal process to the school's Steering Team in early August 2001, and the group decided to present it to the staff during their summer retreat.

The design process employed a technique outlined in the book *Understanding by Design* (Wiggens & McTighe, 1998) called "backwards by design." Design teams had first to establish "enduring understandings" about what students should know, understand and be able to do. Then, they designed a school to support them. This method forced each design to have curricular ideas with a unifying focus and enduring value beyond the school. Every teacher joined a design team, though they participated to varying degrees as the year went on.

Focusing on student outcomes rather than structural elements forced teachers to design the small school concepts before deciding how many small schools there would be. Engaging everyone and creating autonomy for each small school empowered teachers to create their dream schools. At the same time, it took power away from the "resisters" since no one person had veto power over others' ideas. The goal was to achieve autonomy for each individual school, not a consensus on the combination of final designs.

November marked the first occasion for teams to share their ideas formally. The thirteen design teams met in four different groups during a half-day in-service. Each group's teams were given a turn to present their design ideas and receive feedback from the other teams. This process followed a strict protocol, where presenters had ten uninterrupted minutes to share their work, and participants had five minutes to ask clarifying questions. Then, participants had twenty minutes to discuss the work, giving "warm" and "cool" feedback. Presenters had eight minutes to respond.

After the day of sharing, teachers were free to switch to another design team, though there was much less movement than expected. Over the next several months, teachers incorporated the feedback and further refined their design proposals. Teachers met during some in-service days, as well as after school and during planning periods. Each teacher was allotted 12.5 hours of additional paid time to work on a small learning community proposal. Teachers who did not use all of their planning hours were able to give them to someone else in their group.

The final design proposals were due by February so that the school could begin hosting focus groups and feedback forums for parents, students and other district teachers. To the Steering Team's surprise and delight, all thirteen design teams submitted a small learning community proposal. Two *ad hoc* teacher groups wrote two additional proposals, bringing the total to fifteen.

In April, the school hosted a group of six small schools "experts" from around the country for a two-day review panel. Participants represented former small school principals, teachers and university researchers who could judge the SLC proposals based on their experience and knowledge of small schools. Two district representatives joined the group, including Eagle Ridge's assistant superintendent and someone from the capital projects department, which oversees building remodels. Though participants received the full proposals ahead of time, the first day-and-a-half were devoted to twenty-minute presentations by each design team, with time for questions. During the second day, the review panel met to discuss and assign the proposed SLC designs into three categories —*the model is compelling and viable*; *the model might work with some changes*; and *the model is not compelling or viable.*

Utilizing the abundant feedback from parents, students, teachers, and the expert panel, the Steering Team began to construct "packages" of combined small learning communities that served multiple student and teacher interests, and whose combined enrollment levels served the entire Eagle Ridge student population. The goal was to have enough variety in the options that students and teachers would feel like there were at least two schools where they could be happy. The Steering Team proposed four possible combinations of small learning communities that could be created from the current Eagle Ridge High School. A primary concern was that the package should represent the continuum of academic approaches, from the current traditional model to the most innovative design.

Steering Team members presented the packages to all the certificated staff during a half-day in-service. After the large group presentation, teachers broke into three small groups in order to ask more detailed questions. Teachers had three days to vote for their preferred package. The ballots were counted at the next Steering Team meeting and resulted in a sixty percent majority vote for one of the packages.

The next steps included e-mailing the results (with sensitivity to the fact that not everyone would be happy) and providing copies of the eight SLC designs that comprised the package. At the end of the week (timed to coincide with another half-day in-service) staff attended an information fair with representatives from each of the small learning communities' design teams. That afternoon, there were four twenty-minute rotations where staff members could hear more detailed presentations about the small learning communities that interested them the most.

A week later, teachers received another ballot to rank their top three small learning community choices. Steering Team members had collected anonymous preference sheets earlier, in order to see where teacher interest lay. Remarkably, the teachers' preferences seemed evenly distributed across the eight small learning communities, though two were eventually eliminated. Indeed, when the Steering Team met to discuss the results of the teacher preference ballot, all but two teachers were placed in their first or second choice.

As one Steering Team member observed, the RFP process created a "quiet celebration of creativity." It was the first time some teachers had experienced a process that could bring about "deep order change." Another successful element of the process was that people held the belief that what existed could be better. The change effort brought a whole new level of conversation to the hallways and the lunchroom. Teachers engaged in dynamic debates about meaningful teaching and learning. The change process created energy in the building amongst a steadily growing core of school staff. The administrative leadership team set the tone for shared authority and led the charge on community engagement and district relations.

Each of the six new small learning community staffs elected a "conversion facilitator" to lead them through the 2002-2003 school year, which would be devoted to the second stage of SLC design. This included establishing the curriculum, schedule, leadership structure, advisories etc. Originally, the idea was to assign a teacher leader (who

would lead the school when it actually opens in September 2003) to each small learning community. But, the Steering Team felt that each small school staff should have the autonomy to decide if they wanted a teacher leader or would rather allocate the money for a different administrative position. The conversion facilitator was a compromise – an interim leader who might later be chosen by the staff to serve as its teacher leader.

The conversion facilitators from each SLC became the Steering Team. When the SLCs are implemented in 2003-2004, the Team will likely be comprised of each small learning community's teacher leader. However, some questions still remain. The SLCs will serve a different number of students, possibly ranging from as few as 40 to as many as 450. Should they have equal representation on the Steering Team? What will be the role of the building principal and other administrators and support staff? Will their positions continue to exist?

With the initial break-up into SLC staffs, the administrative leadership felt the mounting challenge of leading a cohesive change effort. SLC teams were meeting almost daily, making independent decisions, unaware of the repercussions to other teams. While it was exciting for the small schools to take on lives of their own, the building leadership was ultimately accountable and did not want to let go completely.

Principal Edwards explained, "At this stage, we've really been asking about the role of the principal. In our process, one that's seen proposals designed by staff and now six small school design teams, not only the principal but all administrators are feeling a bit left out of the process. And I don't think that's a good thing. I think our voices need to be heard more in the planning process, not to control things but to provide perspectives that teachers don't always consider. Curricular issues, assessment issues, personnel issues. Teachers in general aren't always 'big picture' people; they haven't kept up in many cases with research and thinking on best practices and so there are questions within their planning groups that don't get asked and conversations about teaching and learning that don't take place."

Parent, Student & Community Outreach

The administrative leadership team continued the parent and community outreach they had begun upon receiving the Federal SLC grant. The effort focused on parents of 7th-10th grade students, since those students would be the first generation to attend the new small schools. A major outreach component was making presentations to the

PTAs of the elementary and middle schools that were "feeders" to Eagle Ridge. These presentations focused on the need for school change and the small schools research, since many of the conversion details were still missing.

In fall 2001, Eagle Ridge began a series of "Dessert with the Principal" events in parents' homes, to pass out facts about the Gates grant and talk more about small schools. The administration also invited the feeder schools' PTA presidents, as well as all parents, to dinner at the school. It provided the opportunity for parents to have a sit-down conversation with Eagle Ridge's leadership.

The Eagle Ridge High School web site was updated to reflect the school's work around small schools. It made available a comprehensive list of small schools research, as well as information about the school's timeline and reform process. The web site also provided an easy way to solicit community members' feedback on the SLC designs and inform parents and students about registration options when the SLCs were ready to launch.

To engage more segments of the school community in discussing the proposed school designs, the administrative leadership team held a series of focus groups with students, parents and district personnel. Focus group participants read several one-page proposals and completed a rubric for each, which measured their opinion of the SLC's academic rigor, personalization, viability and comprehensiveness. Participants then discussed their impressions of each SLC proposal and whether or not they (or their child) were likely to choose it.

Additional student feedback was generated during the week of state standardized testing in Spring 2002. Teachers engaged 200 freshmen in reading school design proposals. They answered specific questions on a Scantron sheet, so the school could easily compile the response data. Also, Frost and the Gates Grant Coordinator cooked breakfast for juniors and seniors who volunteered to arrive early one morning. Students participated in small group conversations and used the feedback rubric from the focus groups. These opportunities provided enjoyable and simple ways to educate students, especially freshmen, on the small school designs during school time.

Parents and students joined the small school staffs in the fall of 2002. Typically, three to five participants attended the planning meetings, though parents and students were not invited to join the Steering Team.

School-wide parent information sessions also drew larger crowds in the fall, topping 150 attendees on one night. However, certain demographics remain under-represented at these meetings.

Conversion & Timeline

The Steering Team wanted to finalize the conversion process and timeline by the end of the 2001-2002 academic year to prepare for the following year's SLC planning. They decided to present the SLC phase-in options at a staff meeting. The previous year, staff members had narrowed their preferences to either phasing in the SLCs over two years, beginning with some combination of lower grades, or assigning all students to an SLC, but allowing each one to establish its own implementation schedule over a period of three years.

If the staff decided to phase in 9th-11th grade students first, then teachers who offered required courses for seniors would be excluded from participating in the small learning communities. While this option facilitated the seniors meeting all their graduation requirements in the midst of large-scale change, it disconnected the older students from being peer leaders. Some teachers suspected that their absence might be a good thing for promoting each SLC's unique, new culture because the seniors were unlikely to let go of Eagle Ridge's traditional culture with which they were familiar. By December 2002, it was decided that the following year's implementation of small schools would exclude seniors and allow them to take classes from any of the small schools. Subsequently, every small school would have the same start and end times.

The Steering Team generated a list of school functions that might remain in common to all the small learning communities. Some functions, such as custodial support, school-wide theatrical performances and school colors can easily remain the same, but other decisions imply significant compromises. Maintaining the varsity sports program means that SLCs must adopt a common end time. Each centralized position, including an activities coordinator and a school newspaper advisor, compromises the small schools' autonomy. Many final decisions will be made in fall 2003 when small learning community staffs can better debate the tradeoffs of decentralizing activities such as the yearbook, student government and secretarial support.

Another consideration for the conversion process was to determine the best allocation of teacher planning time over the next two years. Because student registration takes place in February, most of the SLC

details would have to be in place by then. August 2002 kicked off with a three-day workshop on *Understanding by Design* (Wiggens & McTighe, 1998) such that each SLC staff began formulating "essential questions." Groups proceeded at different paces, and with varying degrees of depth, discussing factors such as graduation requirements, schedules, multi-age grouping, and how the WASL will be reflected in classroom practice. Assistant Principal Frost designed a planning calendar, including deadlines for producing a four-year plan and sample schedule, and a brochure describing each small school by January 2003.

Serving Students Equitably

The small schools movement is driven, in part, by the desire to create more equitable educational opportunities for students in order to see more equitable outcomes. Eagle Ridge's Steering Team was concerned with creating an equitable change process as well as equitable small learning communities. When taken as a whole, SLCs in the final package should represent the various interests of both students and teachers. Individually, the demographics of each SLC's student body should reflect Eagle Ridge as a whole.

In creating the four potential packages of SLCs, the Steering Team wanted to make sure that enough "traditional" options were available, both for teachers to work in and for students to attend. Traditional models were ones that employed staff resources and approached coursework in a way that was similar to the current Eagle Ridge model. Though research shows that small schools cannot support the offerings of a traditional school, some Steering Team members believed that the traditional SLCs would eventually become more innovative as they learned to take advantage of smallness and let go of old traditions.

Another debate revolved around whether or not to include "magnet" schools in the packages. In this discussion, Steering Team members grappled with the question of when differences between small learning communities are an asset to equitable student outcomes and when they are barriers. While a school of performing arts may solve the problem of how to share the band among many small learning communities, it also means placing all music and theater teachers into one school, where they are inaccessible to other students. This type of theme school also forces students to make a choice between the arts and other themes, such as technology.

Among Eagle Ridge's small learning community proposals, only the performing arts and technology were represented in theme schools.

Consequently, students could not choose to focus on humanities or science with the same intensity. Teachers, students and parents worried that students do not want to commit to a four-year course of study in the 8th grade, when they register for high school. The Steering Team thought that equity issues might be assuaged if students were able to cross-register in the 11th and 12th grades. But this practice would compromise the autonomy of the small learning communities by requiring them all to share the same schedule. Ultimately, Eagle Ridge compromised by creating a six period schedule and a four period schedule (each small school chose which one to implement) that have points at which students can cross between them.

Meeting parents' expectations will remain a challenge in the early years of implementation. Though the administrative leaders felt pressure from the Gates Foundation to cut Advance Placement courses, they worried the move would anger parents and cause top students to leave. It was easy to say that the small learning communities would all have academic rigor, but the political reality of addressing parents' concerns about AP had been downplayed.

To assign students to the small learning communities, Eagle Ridge created a system of "structured choice," where students provide their top two preferences, plus one alternate, and are assigned such that the student body of each SLC represents the diversity of Eagle Ridge as a whole. The student body of each small school will have: 1) within three percent of the overall percentage of "learning support" students, 2) within five percent of the overall percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch, and 3) within ten percent of the overall percentage of each gender. One unresolved issue was what would happen if a small school were not selected by enough of one demographic to provide adequate representation.

The ESL department will be independent from the small schools, providing beginner ESL students with an intensive language immersion experience. Intermediate and advanced ESL students will join a small school, but attend an ESL class that pulls from all the schools at one time each day. The school leadership has not solved student assignment issues with regard to race because a recent lawsuit in Seattle questioned the legality of considering race or ethnicity in school assignment within Washington State.

Receiving the Gates grant as an individual school, rather than as a

district, caused Eagle Ridge to feel somewhat isolated within the district. Principal Edwards had to educate the district on small schools and Eagle Ridge's change process. The district was forced to consider how the conversion effort fit within the bigger district picture. While the superintendent indicated that he wanted to be supportive, he could not promise Eagle Ridge any additional district resources.

As the liaison between the school and the district, the assistant superintendent assigned to Eagle Ridge explained the depth of their conversion process to district personnel and relayed district-level concerns back to the school. The district administration worried about issues regarding the union and teacher placement. District leaders also wanted a guarantee that Eagle Ridge's new instructional models would fulfill student graduation requirements.

As the complexity of the conversion process became clearer, the Steering Team realized that the necessary resources to complete the work went beyond the school. There were no specific district policies prohibiting the SLCs and waivers would be easily obtained, but the lack of resources was an issue. Eagle Ridge anticipated requesting waivers for teacher certification and graduation requirements, such as seat time. However, the school needed district support to satisfy the need for additional space and transportation. The superintendent wanted to be supportive but had to weigh Eagle Ridge's needs against those of the other schools in the district.

Eagle Ridge High School was already oversubscribed. If, as expected, converting to small learning communities reduced the dropout rate, the school would have to move 600 students out of the building. Assistant Principal Frost feared that a lack of additional space could break the whole conversion effort. Housing all the students in the existing building was not an attractive option, and the district would not allow portables. Telling teachers that they have to be out of a certain room by a certain time because another group is coming in would extinguish the small learning communities' autonomy.

Eagle Ridge's staff also felt that SLC autonomy meant being able to set non-traditional start times. But, for Eagle Ridge students to start late meant that all the elementary schools in their district quadrant would have to change their schedules as well. Currently, buses dropped off high school students before beginning their elementary routes. The Eagle

Ridge community does not have a comprehensive public transit system and taking students away from traditional school buses might cause problems with the bus drivers' union.

In the fall of 2002, a new assistant superintendent was assigned to Eagle Ridge. The school administration was pleased with his level of support, specifically in helping to look for additional space. He was present at the school and did a lot to improve communication with the district office. He arranged for Eagle Ridge to speak to the superintendent's staff and make two presentations to the school board. The first, in October 2002, was a turning point in convincing skeptical board members that creating small schools was about academic rigor, not just personalization. The second presentation in December 2002 continued from that point, outlining the specific small school designs. While the board was more positive, members were still very hands-off.

Hillcrest is the sole high school in its rural eastern Washington community. The school serves 1,605 students and occupies a campus of individual buildings dating to 1953. Until recent changes relating to the reform effort, each building housed a different curricular department. This physical isolation represented teachers' social isolation; many staff members met for the first time because of their engagement in the reform work.

Hillcrest is a typical comprehensive high school that has above average WASL scores, as compared to other Washington schools. The school boasts forty-three extracurricular activities, including technical groups such as auto body, club cuisine, health occupations and electronics. The staff and students are particularly proud of the school's music department and award winning vocational programs.

Some teachers admit the school "graduate(s) students based on credits, not competency" and of the typical freshman class, thirty-three percent do not graduate. Twenty percent of graduating students go to a four-year college; twenty percent attend community or technical college. The remaining twenty-seven percent go straight into the workforce.

Hillcrest High School received funding as part of a district grant, which was awarded to increase achievement at all grade levels. Because the school itself had not applied for funding, the change effort started slowly and with plenty of skepticism among the staff.

When Hillcrest's district office first applied for the Gates Foundation grant, they invited teachers and administrators to provide input, but many remained unaware of this opportunity. District administrators wrote the proposal and when they received the grant, most parents and educators knew very little about it.

The grant was introduced to an overflow crowd at the first school board meeting of the 2000-2001 academic year. Personnel handed out small cards with the Attributes of High Achievement Schools printed on one side and the Attributes of High Achievement School Districts printed on the other. Until this point, most community members thought the grant meant getting new computers. Once they realized the work involved significant change, many people wanted to give the money back, questioning, "Why is the Gates Foundation telling us how to run our schools?"

Attitudes began to change as early as the first grantee meeting. Each district sent a team to hear presentations and panel discussions with schools from around the nation that were engaged in similar reforms. This experience made participants excited about the possibilities for their own schools. The idea that the school was doing "the wrong things very well" resonated with a lot of staff members, who sometimes referred to Hillcrest as "the factory model." The group discussed their experience with their colleagues, but it was not until people made their own school visits that they saw the possibilities.

Principal Celia Hatcher described the ensuing conversation. "What we are preparing students to do became a moral issue, not just an educational one. Teachers realized that there's a moral obligation to do something, a better job of teaching and learning for the kids we serve. Unless we believe it's our obligation, then the job won't get done."
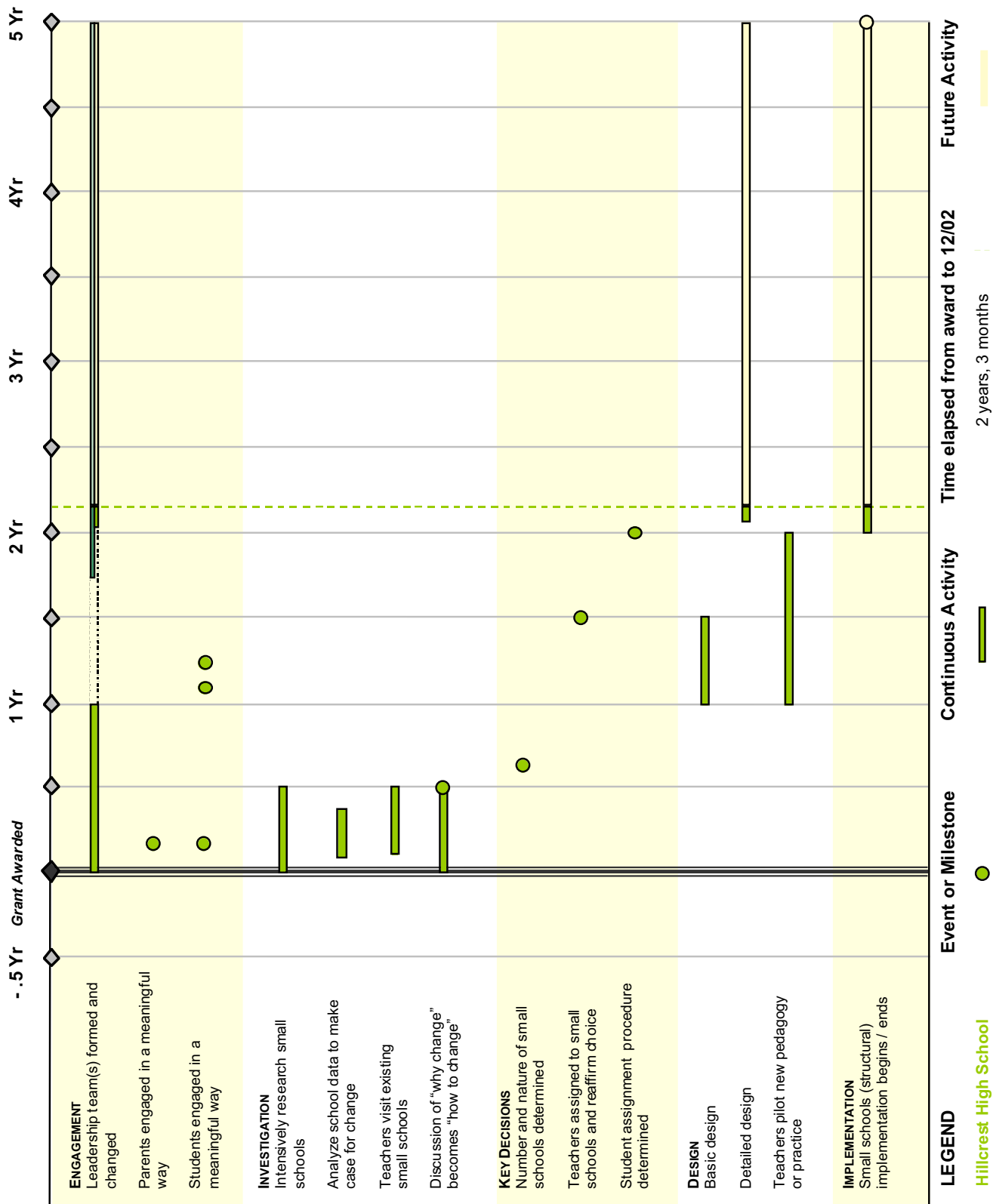
District Relations

The district created a grant advisory committee consisting of parents and teachers from every school in an effort to make the individual plans consistent with each other as well as with the Attributes of High Achievement Schools. Representatives presented their school's plan for review. The district wanted to design a K-12 model where the school experience at the lower levels supported those at the middle and high schools. The district's goal was to have common standards and expectations across grade levels and subject areas, which build from one grade to the next.

One aspect of being a district grantee was that the district office created a feeder process for how schools would join the grant. In the first year, only the high school and one other had plans, so they were given the committee's full attention. The challenge since then has been to keep all the schools on the same page, working together. There was additional pressure on the only high school because the rest of the district planned to build upon its work, designing the system backward from the intended result.

After the first year in the grant cycle, a new superintendent came on board and inherited the Gates grant. He proved equally supportive of the grant goals as his predecessor. In an effort to demonstrate the extent to which Hillcrest staff was free to dream a new school, Principal Hatcher invited the executive director of the state board of education to explain that, aside from a few parameters (such as busing schedules),

ENGAGEMENT
Leadership team(s) formed and changed

Parents engaged in a meaningful way

Students engaged in a meaningful way

INVESTIGATION
Intensively research small schools

Analyze school data to make case for change

Teachers visit existing small schools

Discussion of "why change" becomes "how to change"

KEY DECISIONS
Number and nature of small schools determined

Teachers assigned to small schools and reaffirm choice

Student assignment procedure determined

DESIGN
Basic design

Detailed design

Teachers pilot new pedagogy or practice

IMPLEMENTATION
Small schools (structural) implementation begins / ends

Time axis: -.5 Yr | Grant Awarded | 1 Yr | 2 Yr | 3 Yr | 4Yr | 5 Yr

Time elapsed from award to 12/02
2 years, 3 months

LEGEND

Hillcrest High School

Event or Milestone

Continuous Activity

Future Activity

most everything was on the table. The state board of education was eager to support schools such as Hillcrest in its reform effort.

Leadership

Hillcrest High School was primed for change. The staff had talked about raising expectations and creating personalization for a long time, but they never had a critical mass of concern to do anything. The grant provided the necessary impetus and excuse to do something about it. Many teachers came to the conclusion that changes had to happen even if there were no grant money.

An important part of the school's preparation for embarking on this change was the principal's history. Many teachers agreed that this level of change would not have been possible without Celia Hatcher as principal. She has worked at Hillcrest high school for eighteen years. When she became principal in the first year of the grant, she was already a known quantity. Teachers say she has a genuine commitment to the reform effort and that her passion as an administrator makes an enormous difference. She has earned a great deal of trust with her staff.

Many structures were in place as well. The staff had met weekly during Wednesday morning late-starts for the previous eight years. The time had been used for special interest groups and committees. The Gates grant provided a new focus on teaching and learning practices. Wednesday morning meetings were open to the public and a core group of parents showed up each week. The department heads had daily meetings. This provided a ready-made steering team to take over the grant planning and leadership.

Principal Hatcher said she never interpreted the grant as a top-down mandate for change, but saw the reform effort as the high school's own plan, since it was being created as they went along. Hatcher assigned topics to the Wednesday morning meetings, using the department head meeting as a "sounding board." She commented on the complexity of this reform, never having juggled so many different groups of people with different agendas. The school's programs had always operated in isolation and now she was asking people to reflect on practice together, which required a whole different level of leadership. The amount of reading and learning that she needed to do as principal was also very different from what she had experienced in previous years; there was a high demand to stay current with research, to synthesize it all and to make it "actionable in the classroom."

Another significant event in placing the focus on improving teaching and learning practices was Hatcher's decision to teach an academic support class, along with one assistant principal. By tutoring students, she saw the lack of rigor in teacher assignments, as represented by a wide array of teachers. One curriculum in particular was so terrible that Hatcher gave the teachers two release days to put together a new one. This experience also raised the department chairs' awareness of the lack of consistency among teachers. Unfortunately, budget constraints led to the elimination of one administrative position and precluded the administrators from teaching this class the following year.

Principal Hatcher had a tight grip on leading the change effort, but was learning to let go. By halfway through the second year, staff members became aware of the problem inherent in one person, however respected, leading a complicated change effort. Hatcher made a concerted effort to decentralize the leadership in order to build self-sustaining, systemic change within the school. Each small learning community elected two leaders, and teachers began to direct initiatives, such as personalization and curriculum design.

In conjunction with the principal, three groups held the vision for the high school's change effort, the School Improvement Team (SIT), a modified department head group, and the Small Learning Community Council (SLCC). Principal Hatcher's challenge was to coordinate these groups' efforts and define each of their roles in the larger picture of the Gates grant.

School Improvement Team
The School Improvement Team had long provided a way for parents and students to help coordinate and monitor the school's learning improvement plan. Their work was influenced by the grant's arrival, but the group's focus remained essentially the same.

Department Head Group
In an effort to disseminate information quickly, Hatcher instituted daily steering team meetings in 2000. The group consisted of several department chairs, as well as a teacher who provided a vocational technology perspective. The group was originally created to look at WASL strategies, curriculum, and technology issues. Later, the Gates grant became the entire focus. The group planned and strategized how to present the need for change. They gave guidance and feedback to Hatcher and helped plan all staff meetings, parent outreach, and school

visitations. They posted daily meeting minutes and welcomed faculty members who dropped in, usually when the agenda included a personally relevant topic.

The group stopped meeting during the grant's second year because Hatcher was entirely focused on implementing freshman clusters, the first major reform. The meeting was reinstated in the third year, beginning in September 2002, but with fewer members due to scheduling and budget challenges.

Small Learning Community Council
The Small Learning Community Council was formed in June 2002, at the end of the second grant year, and after the staff had been divided into SLC teams. Each team elected two representatives to attend the weekly meetings. The Council planned to add student members as soon as students were placed in small schools.

The council was charged with helping the administration solve challenges around using common areas, such as the gymnasium, and common academic goals, such as literacy. Since some practices would be the same among all the SLCs, such as looking at student work and curriculum design, the SLCC could eventually provide a venue for teams to share ideas and learn best practices from each other.

Staff Engagement

The administrative leadership of Hillcrest High School was careful to begin the change process by identifying problems, rather than simply devising solutions. They discussed students' needs by engaging parents, students and teachers in conversations about their fundamental beliefs of what all kids need and deserve. Next, the staff looked at disaggregated student achievement data. These combined activities provided a view of the current school culture within the context of what skills a child needs to be successful in today's world. By examining the relationship between what the school provides and what students need, teachers could identify how the current system does and does not adequately prepare students. This was the first step in convincing people of the need for change.

The second step was to visit schools that exhibited "best practices." The school leadership developed a visitation protocol with specific questions for teachers to ask. All teachers were encouraged to visit schools and over half of them (47 of 82) did. While the principal took volunteers,

she also twisted some arms – in a positive way. The principal deliberately composed teams of teachers to represent various departments, skill levels and degrees of willingness to change. She was intentional about where she placed the school's power brokers and fed peoples' passions, such as sending a "techie" to San Diego's High Tech High. One teacher felt good about being able to suggest visiting a particular school that was once a failing vocational school. Other out-of-state school sites included New York's Urban Academy, Vanguard School and Central Park East, Glen Este High School in West Clermont (OH), and career academies in South Grand Prairie, Texas.

Each visiting team was expected to report back to the entire staff during February and March 2001. The school developed a protocol for how to interpret the data, framing teachers' observations in terms of the Attributes of High Achievement Schools. The school visits contributed to the staff's general understanding of the need to change and broadened peoples' understanding of what changes were possible. The accountability attached to attending conferences and visiting schools helped create a community of learners among the staff. Teachers not only had to present their findings, but show their passion for the material and create enthusiasm within others. At the same time, they were getting to know other teachers on their travel teams, which consisted of about five or six people.

Several teachers felt converted by the visitations. For many, earlier reform efforts seemed like they were "feeling their way in the dark" about what the school should look like. Once they visited other schools, teachers saw what things could be like and became dissatisfied with their current situation. Some came back feeling depressed about Hillcrest High School, not because it was bad but because they had realized its potential. They saw small class sizes, engaged students, personalization, and flexibility. One teacher was inspired by a school's ability to change the class schedule the very morning that an exciting opportunity arose. In many of the schools they visited, the principal knew every student. After their school visits, some teachers were ready to "blow up the school and start all over"– literally thinking that they should fire everyone and rehire.

The staff tried to distill which practices had merit for Hillcrest High School, knowing that it was unrealistic to import an entire model. One strong correlate they discovered was the existence of small learning communities (SLC) and teachers having time to collaborate. This

confirmed what they already suspected to be true and helped seal the staff's general commitment to developing small schools.

Teachers also became engaged in the reform effort by attending conferences and seeing Principal Hatcher act on their recommendations. Many teachers felt that their colleagues who did not take advantage of the conference and school visit opportunities were like "anchors weighing the process down." The administration built a resource library based on the Gates Foundation's reading list. However, the information was not always disseminated. The only people who checked it out were the ones already engaged in the process. Administrators did put articles in teachers' boxes (though not as often as some would like); of course, not everyone read them. Teachers noticed that they took more initiative as they became more involved and personally committed to the change process.

One teacher's initiative was greatly rewarded. Believing that the school should learn more about *Understanding by Design* (Wiggens & McTighe, 1998), she and another colleague secured funding from the principal to attend a conference. She returned excited about the framework and convinced Hatcher it was the right tool for Hillcrest. Everyone on staff now has the workbook and was introduced to the curriculum design model during the first September 2002 in-service day. This teacher also received a reduced class schedule in order to focus on breaking the process into smaller implementation steps. She will pass these on to the SLCC whose members will, in turn, share them with each of their SLC staffs.

At the same time, some teachers felt that the grant planning process was contrived. They had the sense that a hidden agenda laid beneath the process, since small schools were built into the grant and the Attributes of High Achievement Schools from the beginning. They preferred to be told up front that the school would convert to SLCs rather than experiencing what they interpreted as a "false discovery" executed to create buy-in.

Principal–Led Change

Principal Hatcher made a concerted effort to keep the staff focused on improving teaching and learning practices rather than getting bogged down in the details of conversion, "which obstructs the real work." She also minimized the amount of Wednesday late-start time dedicated to taking care of "SLC stuff," which she saw as a way for the staff to avoid

doing the real work. She explained, "some staff members would rather stay in the realm of establishing group norms than talk about the achievement gap."

Toward the end of the first year, Hatcher focused the conversation even more. Almost all of the teachers interviewed for this report remembered the March 2001 in-service day as a watershed moment. By this point, teachers had discussed the need to change, visited schools around the country, and read research making the case for small schools. The in-service day was a time to affirm what the staff knew and provide an opportunity for everyone to have a final say before the school moved forward with the change effort.

The department head group introduced the day to the staff by showing a video of Hillcrest High School's history, which demonstrated that not much had changed in 100 years. The biggest difference seemed to be the move from black boards to white boards! Principal Hatcher also invited a former student counselor to repeat an exercise he had done years before – standing on a table and dropping the many sheets of paper naming freshman students who had failed at least one class. This created a dramatic visual effect. Not only did it demonstrate the problem, it emphasized how little had been done to remedy the situation in all those years.

Next, Principal Hatcher "drew a line in the sand," saying that the staff would no longer revisit why they are engaged in this change effort, because it only served to sap the group's energy. The day's culminating activity was a talking stick circle where the entire staff had a chance to share their final thoughts on the subject. This activity proved to be a defining moment. Many seized the opportunity to get up with the stick and say, "We need to change." Some of the formerly outspoken critics of the reform opted to pass and not say anything.

After that, the staff made a commitment to speak about *what* and *how* they would change rather than *if* there would be change. When one group did try to revisit the *why* at the end of the second year, the team imploded. As a result, they were the only team to not kick-off the following year with a retreat.

While the first year of the grant was about looking at data and researching small schools, the second year focused on instructional strategies. This new focus was a necessary complement to organizational

changes, but was a difficult point of entry for many teachers who craved structural details. People needed to feel secure about where they would be working and with whom before they could move forward. This, along with other key events, prompted the principal to form small learning community teams.

The department head group had explored the idea of creating academies with a curricular focus the year before. They researched existing academies and generated ideas, such as assigning two people per department to a career-oriented SLC. They also conducted student surveys asking where students would choose to go based on themes. But, teachers cared more about whom they worked with than the theme of the school and students wanted to know who would be teaching their classes, not the focus of the curriculum.

A group of teachers began to conspire about where they would go. Hatcher realized that she could not allow the highest achieving teachers to band together and create a school where the highest achieving students gravitated to them because "that would just move the data around!" The benefit of SLCs was really about being small, not a particular theme. Hatcher wanted to create teams of teachers whose commonality was the student, not the subject. The important thing was that everyone could be part of the process – the brand new teacher as well as the veteran. Hatcher decided that creating SLC teams would ensure equitable staff distribution.

During an October 2001 in-service, a group of teachers recreated an exercise they had experienced at a Stanford University conference. They divided the staff into fifteen different teams, each with representatives from a variety of curricular areas. Teams had seven hours to design their dream school, which had to address the Attributes of High Achievement Schools. The groups came back, shared their ideas and then staff voted on which small school they would choose to work in. Teachers were enthusiastic about the activity and, though the plans were not real, the day felt very productive. The message to Hatcher was that a group of teachers could design a school. Hatcher understood that teachers would have more buy-in to designs of their own creation.

Principal Hatcher initially divided the staff into five SLC groups. She based her decisions on staff expertise, interests, and theme preferences. She posted the results and people were unhappy. Teachers would rather be assigned to groups based on their colleagues than their expertise and curricular interests. So, Hatcher invited everyone to provide her with a

confidential list of whom they preferred to work with. Subsequent hires would be "drafted" onto teams at SLCC meetings.

The new lists came out in March 2002. Teachers understood the justification behind SLC assignments as a balance between teaching expertise and personal preferences. They trusted the selection process because it was transparent and minutes from every meeting were distributed to the staff. Unfortunately, one group fell apart early on due to poor communication and attrition. That group was dispersed to the others, resulting in four SLCs.

While most were satisfied with the SLC groups, some were frustrated by the seemingly random assignments. They felt as if there were not enough commonalities to center the group around, as teachers did not necessarily work with the same students during the day. In an effort to find something concrete to work on, some teachers preferred to deal with specific policies, like tardiness. "Understanding gaps" between teachers made it difficult for group members to move forward at the same pace. While some believed providing more academic support classes would remedy the achievement gap, others insisted that teachers must change their teaching practice.

Teachers outside of core subject areas had a particularly difficult time supporting SLCs. They worried that shifting to small learning communities would destroy their programs, thus denying students the opportunity to succeed and learn a skill in a non-core academic class. Some felt that the focus of the reform was too centered on academic core classes and missed the connections that electives provide. While successful programs, such as a music department, often garner a lot of public attention, the emphasis of data was on core academic classes. Teachers felt that the importance of electives was being de-emphasized.

Stemming from the elective class issues, the concept of "crossover" was a hot topic at Hillcrest High School. The staff did not want to give up any of their existing programs. Teachers argued that some programs could not exist without drawing from the entire student population. The big question was *how* autonomous the SLCs needed to be in order to be effective. Could a student cross over to another SLC in order to take third year machining or AP music theory? The student assignment conversation was affected by the crossover issue because the more crossovers are allowed, the more random assignments could be. Some proposed keeping the core academic classes as autonomous SLCs, but allowing crossover for all electives. They argued that elective classes tend

to be students' highest achievement classes. Would it matter if students lose some of the "smallness" in the very classes where they are going to be most successful anyway?

Year two saw other changes as well. The school visits stopped and the department head group no longer met. In hindsight, teachers and administrators say these decisions were both mistakes. The momentum and enthusiasm that people got from visiting the schools was lost and new staff members needed the same opportunity to be inspired. Because the organizing group stopped meeting, the second year was a "black hole" for teacher involvement. All of Principal Hatcher's focus was on implementing the first big reform.

While the staff made a commitment to create small learning communities, Principal Hatcher wanted to secure a jumping off point. She wanted the school to take a step that was far enough that they would not go back. After recognizing that the worst academic achievement data was for 9th grade students (more than half the failing grades at the end of first semester were given to freshmen), the administrative leadership decided to create small units called freshmen clusters.

Teacher–Led Initiatives

Five 9th grade clusters were launched in the 2001-2002 academic year. Each consisted of between seventy-five and eighty-five students and a staff of three core teachers, representing science, English and social studies. Class size was lowered from thirty to twenty-seven by slightly increasing the rest of the school's classes. The teachers had an extra common planning period to discuss student work. Once a week, each teacher met with an administrator or counselor to discuss lesson plans, student work and individual student issues.

Within a month of instituting the clusters, the school noticed a substantial drop in discipline problems. Teachers discussed personalization in terms of knowing the child and their family, as well as knowing students' learning styles. Parent communication was also stronger, though mostly in traditional ways, such as a phone call or letter home, and usually when a student was in trouble. By year's end, total discipline "events" had dropped more than thirty percent (see figure 2).
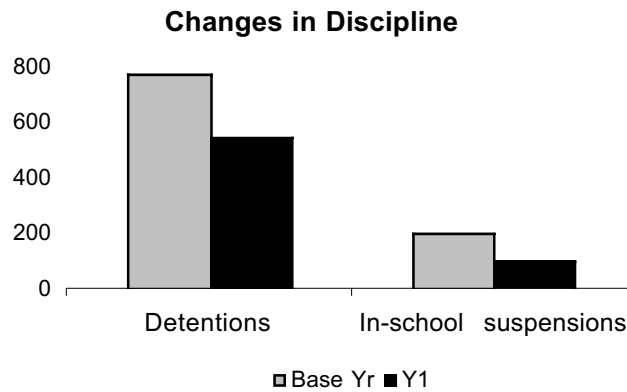
Changes in Discipline

Figure 2

The clusters were a success in terms of student accomplishment as well. In the first semester, thirteen percent fewer freshmen received one or more failing grades than the year before. Student achievement continued to improve in the second semester, when twenty percent fewer students received one or more failing grades compared to the previous year (see figure 3).

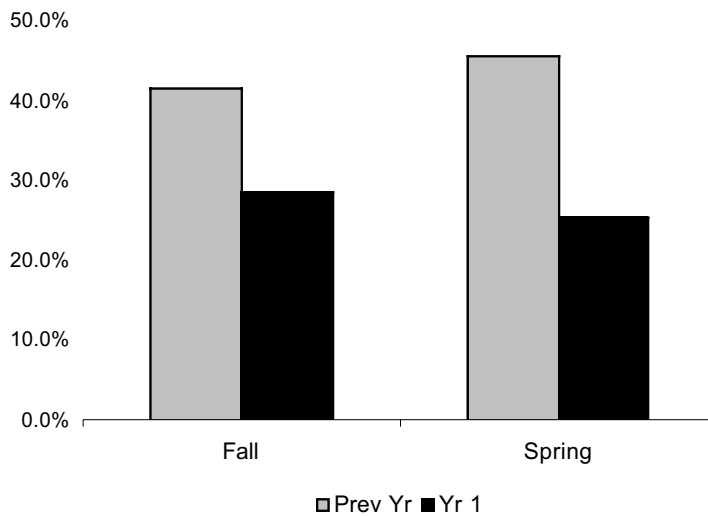**9th graders failing 1 or more classes**

Figure 3

The change also sparked some controversy. Teachers had to move classrooms, which physically broke up departments. This was especially difficult for the science department because they could no longer easily share pieces of equipment, which now had to be carted around campus.

Some teachers felt that creating the clusters was a risk, but Hatcher had a strong vision and the results were positive. Seeing the clusters work

gave the rest of the staff confidence to buy-in to SLCs. As one teacher said, the clusters' success "got a lot of people converted to seeing that we can change things for the better."

The administrative leadership was hoping that clusters would have an impact on overall student learning. In December, they introduced the idea of doing more integrated teaching by shifting the entire school to a block schedule. The revised schedule was supposed to last six weeks, but lack of communication and misunderstanding cut the trial short. Teachers interpreted the shift as simply being about scheduling and most did not take advantage of the longer class periods to try out new teaching approaches. The few good practices and incidents of active inquiry that did emerge were highlighted during the weekly late-starts.

At this point, midway through the second year of the grant, it was clear that the principal could not carry the small schools initiative by herself. She needed to work with teacher leaders who would pilot new classroom practices and lead the professional development of their small learning communities. The Small Learning Community Council would help make this happen.

The understanding of personalization and integrated teaching that the freshmen cluster teachers developed began to reach the SLC leaders by the beginning of year three, in the fall of 2002. Now, the challenge would be to move the conversation to the big picture. The previous year's 9th grade students joined the general school population as 10th graders and much of the knowledge about students' individual learning styles was lost. In the future, students will stay with the same teachers and classmates in at least forty percent of their classes through their freshman and sophomore years.

Department head group meetings began again in the third year, as would school visits. The staff was beginning to understand that creating small learning communities was necessary, but insufficient for creating real change. They still saw a need for greater personalization in their curricular approach and planned to integrate subjects as well as have regular, collaborative teacher meetings. Principal Hatcher believed that looking at student work was the most significant factor in understanding that the core of the change would be at the classroom and student levels.

Since implementing freshmen clusters, Hatcher has met weekly with each teaching team to look at student work. Hatcher reported that by

spending so much time (and therefore placing so much value) on the practice, teachers realized that they could do a better job in the classroom. At Hillcrest, the practice of looking at student work was not just about identifying good or bad student work, but being able to understand what makes the difference. Hatcher also included youth voices by enlisting students to observe classroom instruction.

To kick off year three of the grant, the staff examined a series of questions related to the achievement gap: If we have students' data, can we help them learn better? What is the achievement gap? What besides data do we need to know to close the achievement gap? Based on what we know, what can we do to close the achievement gap?

In November, Hatcher charged each SLC team with creating a plan to close the achievement gap, using their actual students' data. Each team will review the others' plans, which should include everything from school-level to classroom-level work. The exercise was left open-ended, causing some people to "clamor for more direction," but Hatcher wanted to give them room to think creatively. She liked the fact that plans were based on real students with a real deadline to meet real standards; sophomores must meet the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) standards by May 9, 2003. The plans will apply to all freshman students and a quarter of the sophomores. Even though sophomores were not yet in specific SLCs, students were "assigned" to the small school staff where most of their current teachers belong.

While teachers were creating plans to close the achievement gap, a parallel discussion was taking place within each department. Teachers were creating "enduring understandings" and creating standards within each discipline so that the school could strengthen its "content integrity" before converting to several small schools. The SLC groups will each have a similar conversation to create enduring understandings. The next step will be to make connections between what the departments and SLC groups each developed. In this way, working on the big picture problems and the small details of curriculum planning at the same time keeps all types of people engaged and satisfied with the change process.

Parent & Student Outreach

Early in the process, the school began hosting annual student summits to provide a venue for students to air concerns, as well as help answer questions that the staff was debating like, "what should a graduate be

able to do?" The student body completed a questionnaire as well, concerning their opinions of the school's academic rigor and level of personalization. In addition, four students (ASB officers) accompanied the Texas school visit group and did a good job of spreading the word about what they saw.

Focus groups provided opportunities for parent engagement. The administration also invited parents to the Wednesday morning meetings and to open house presentations regarding specific school changes. Administrators have even been on the local radio discussing the grant. But, many teachers felt that the general population still did not understand the reform effort and was not involved enough in creating the big picture.

The highest parent and student participation came at the start of the 2001-2002 academic year when the school implemented its first large change, freshmen clusters. The next year's parent night turnout was not as strong. Yet, parents of high achievers still expressed concern that, as the entire school shifts to SLCs, attention and courses will be steered away from their kids and as such, the lower achieving students will weigh down the high achievers. An additional source of resistance came from parents who simply wanted their children to attend a large, comprehensive school and had no choice, as Hillcrest was the only option in the district.

T aft is the only conventional high school in its district, which is located in a mid-sized western Washington city. As the smallest school in the area, Taft employs 61 teachers and serves 763 students. About one-third of the students qualifies for free or reduced price lunch.

Teachers offer a wide variety of classes in spite of the school's size, particularly in the area of science. In addition to the basic core curriculum, students may choose to take a variety of classes geared toward college preparation, vocational/technical skills, music and arts, foreign language, and computer skills. In partnership with the local university, college level classes are currently offered at Taft High School. The school also boasts eighteen athletic teams in addition to various clubs and extra-curricular activities.

Although the school occupies one large building and has a smaller population than most comprehensive high schools, teachers do not know each other and students remain anonymous.

Taft High School received an Achiever grant in March 2001, only months after they were invited to submit an application. The opportunity for student scholarships drew Principal Jon Thompson to apply in spite of the short timeline. He brought the idea to his department heads and together they decided it would be "political suicide" not to try. Thompson did most of the writing and brought it to the department heads for final approval.

Each staff member received a copy of the proposal, though many paid no attention until the grant was actually awarded. Coincidental to receiving the grant, the school was completing a self-study, done each decade to renew accreditation. As such, the staff had already been examining their practice and setting goals for the future. This work coalesced perfectly with the Gates grant.

Most teachers knew about the Attributes of High Achievement Schools, on some level, before the school received the grant. They knew that the grant meant student scholarships and positive school change. But, while most teachers agreed that not all students were being served in the current system, many teachers did not understand the grant's true concept of reform. In addition, many teachers who saw the other grantees as "broken, inner city schools," did not see the need for Taft to convert to several small schools. One teacher articulated their challenge

as "meet(ing) the needs of lower achieving kids without losing the valuable courses offered for upper end kids."

Leadership

Principal Thompson tried to ensure that everyone felt his or her job was secure in the change process. He believed that school reform was about relationships and people would change their practice if they felt a safety net. He felt comfortable not asking teachers to make huge leaps, letting them take small steps, so long as they were moving forward. In this environment, teachers felt listened to, both in open forums and behind closed doors.

Thompson had earned the trust of his staff during his nine years at the school. He had personally hired about seventy-five percent of the current teachers. Informal relationships were also key in gaining trust within the district office. Though Thompson and the superintendent had different work styles, they maintained good communication about changes at the school. Thompson believed that no district policies inhibited reform, but he remained aware of state policies, such as the WASL, and graduation requirements like pathways, portfolios and projects. There were other factors to consider as well, such as the SAT, ACT and additional college entry requirements.
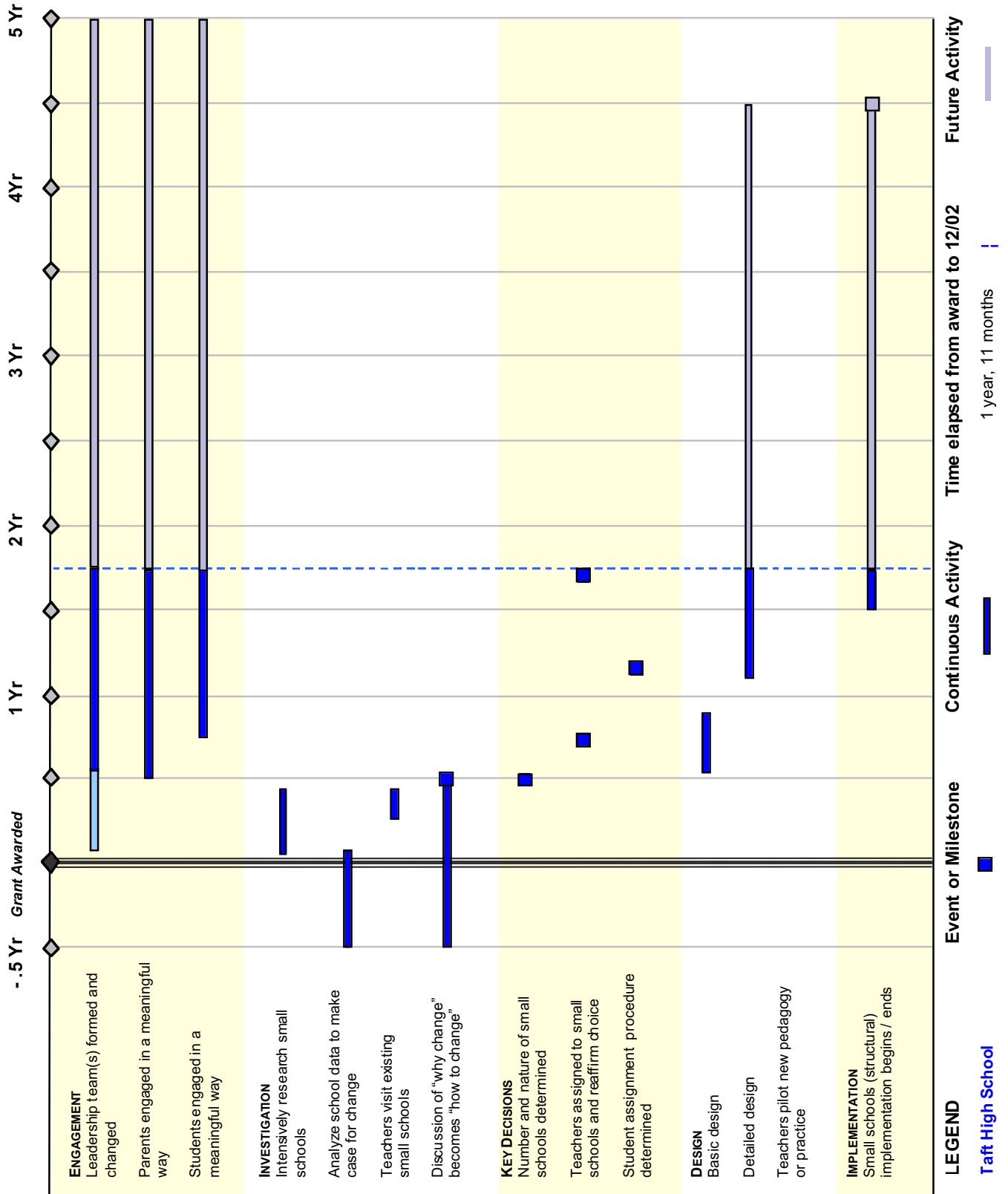
Staff Engagement

The spring after receiving the grant was spent organizing the first two cohorts of scholar applications. That was the easy part of the grant requirement. The difficult part was to "reinvent the smallest school in the city." Principal Thompson had worked at a Coalition of Essential Schools school and had even started a new school. But, converting from one comprehensive high school to several small schools posed a new challenge.

The change effort was process-oriented, including staff discussions every step of the way. Initially the school formed a Research and Development Team, which consisted of representatives from each academic department as well as classified staff, parents and administrators. Thompson invited the entire staff to submit a letter of interest to be on the committee. Each member received a binder of articles about school restructuring and spent the summer reading and researching.

The staff attended a summer retreat, mapping out the school community's belief about what all students need and cataloging what

-.5 Yr   *Grant Awarded*   5 Yr   4 Yr   3 Yr   2 Yr   1 Yr

ENGAGEMENT
Leadership team(s) formed and changed

Parents engaged in a meaningful way

Students engaged in a meaningful way

INVESTIGATION
Intensively research small schools

Analyze school data to make case for change

Teachers visit existing small schools

Discussion of "why change" becomes "how to change"

KEY DECISIONS
Number and nature of small schools determined

Teachers assigned to small schools and reaffirm choice

Student assignment procedure determined

DESIGN
Basic design

Detailed design

Teachers pilot new pedagogy or practice

IMPLEMENTATION
Small schools (structural) implementation begins / ends

LEGEND

Taft High School

Event or Milestone

Continuous Activity

Time elapsed from award to 12/02

1 year, 11 months

Future Activity

March 2003 • 45

the school already did. Participation was voluntary and teachers were paid. They created a document about aligning their beliefs and practice that was accepted by the rest of the staff as the foundation for the school's efforts around changing teaching and learning. However, the nature of the conversion process led to pushing the document aside repeatedly as the staff eagerly focused on the logistics of converting to small learning communities.

Research and Development Team members visited the alternative junior high feeder school in their district. Students were moving from an open-structure, integrated school to the traditional high school and the group wanted to create a more fluid transition. Faculty members made several other school visits around the country. At the end of the summer, the Research and Development Team debated converting into two versus three small schools. Two seemed too competitive and three would offer more possibilities. They also considered creating schools of different sizes, which represented both more traditional and less traditional pedagogy. Ultimately, the principal decided that forming three schools of equal size would be the most equitable option.

Research and Development Team members engaged in community outreach, set up school visits, and provided a sounding board for the principal when making key decisions, such as whether or not to pursue an internal request for proposal (RFP) process to decide the focus of the small schools. There was little response when the group proposed an RFP to the staff in the fall; a few designs came forward but the majority of teachers felt they had too little information to create a good proposal. The ideas that were presented to the committee came mostly from people on the committee.

The conversation soon turned to issues of equity and the Research and Development Team decided that theme-based schools established a culture of "haves and have-nots." They did not want to create a perception of good and bad schools. These issues of choice, equity and excellence moved them to decide on creating similar small learning communities that could develop unique identities as time went on.

After months of meetings with no real outcomes, the superintendent attended one of the school's planning days and told the staff they needed to stop philosophizing. It was a pivotal event in the conversion process and forced the staff to develop something concrete, at least on paper.

The school started by creating three small learning community groups. From there, teachers configured themselves into three "core" work groups in order to plan a growth path for students, beginning with a freshman core. Thompson divided the staff, then granted these groups the autonomy to design the curriculum, schedule, assessment and governance of their future small learning community.

Teacher placement was based upon information gathered through teacher questionnaires and one-on-one conversations with the principal. Staff participated in a workshop to define individual leadership styles and had the opportunity to say privately whom they preferred to work with. The administration divided teachers equitably based on gender, expertise, compatibility and preference. There were very few shifts after the initial list came out. People accepted the results and trusted the process because it was "thorough and transparent."

Creating the SLC teams brought discussion about whether to join teachers who already worked well together or to distribute teachers in an effort to create equity. Some thought that the way teachers were distributed into groups representing multiple working styles held back progress; those who were concerned with bell schedules and extra minutes, for instance, silenced others who preferred to talk about the big picture.

In May 2002, incoming students were randomly assigned to the freshman cores. The counselors then balanced the groups based on gender, past academic achievement, interest in an honors program, special education, ESL, and qualification for free or reduced price lunch. Older students were also randomly assigned to a small school, though the only tangible change was joining a mentor group. Exceptions were made so student representatives could be in the school they helped plan. Random assignment has worked so far because the small schools do not yet have strong identities. Because this may change in the future, the school created a process for students to petition for transfers.

Each small school will keep the same daily schedule, though the teams are becoming somewhat autonomous. They began setting up their own professional development trainings and creating their own curricula. The planning process so far has been driven by teachers' beliefs about about what qualities graduates should have, such as a community

orientation, responsible citizenship, and the ability to demonstrate knowledge through a final exhibition. The pace of implementing the grade levels may vary across the schools.

Each SLC team divided themselves into three core groups in an effort to split the SLC planning work among three groups of teachers. One group began to implement a new 9th grade curriculum in fall 2002; another group planned for the 10th grade curriculum that would be implemented in 2003; and the last group prepared the 11th and 12th grade academies for 2004.

At the time the staff divided into three SLC teams, the Research and Development Team had grown from eight members to twenty-five, including parents and students. It had become too large for effective decision-making. In addition, some people were very protective of particular programs. In January 2002, the Research and Development Team disbanded. A new Coordinating Council was formed by the administrative leadership consisting of elected representatives from each SLC team, including two teachers, one parent and one student.

This kind of representation lent credibility to the change process. The meeting minutes were posted and the decision-making process was purposefully transparent so that everyone knew the reasons behind each step. Several other groups – the department heads, the Coordinating Council, parents and ASB students – would later come together as the Democratic Council.

Thompson created some parameters on the Coordinating Council's membership. He wanted someone from each department to participate; teachers felt represented so long as their department was. At the same time, the school was trying to convert from a department chair structure to a different kind of leadership. The staff wanted to do less "administrivia" and more planning, integrating and working collaboratively across disciplines. Thompson wanted to decentralize power and authority.

Teacher–Led Initiatives

By Spring 2002, teachers met with their department, their SLC team and their core group. Fortunately, the school had scheduled collaboration time years earlier, twice monthly from 7:00 to 7:45am. This at least provided regular time for SLC teams to meet, once as a whole and once in their core groups. But, additional freshman core

meetings, twice per week before school, took valuable time away fromcourse planning and offering students extra help. Teachers worried that having so much less school time, including the five minutes taken per class to create the mentor group period, was decreasing the amount of course material they could cover.

In the first year of implementing smaller learning communities (2002-2003), 9th graders had a half-day block schedule devoted to integrated subjects. The 10th-12th grade curriculum remained mostly the same, though all students participated in "mentor groups." Each SLC team also planned to institute two Critical Friends Groups this year; a quarter of the staff would be trained as coaches.

On the second day of school, the entire population participated in a small learning community kickoff event. The freshmen broke into their core groups and went off campus to do various team-building activities. Representatives from the California-based LINK Crew led the rest of the staff and students in team-building activities on campus. Some students were very engaged, while others were offended by activities that dealt with the topics of race and gender. The experience stretched peoples' comfort levels and Thompson received calls from parents. Some positive outcomes were that mentor groups bonded and students came away with a good sense of what the SLC groups were about.

Freshman cores integrated wellness and information services with English and social studies. Teachers had three-hour blocks to use any way they saw fit. For example, teachers plan to end each quarter with a large, integrated project. Nothing regularly conflicted with the core schedule, though the rest of the school kept a different one. Sometimes assemblies were right in middle of a freshman core class, bells rang and students were noisy in the hall. But, those problems were being worked out.

Math and science teachers were more reticent about the change. Science teachers felt that teaching in the core, would limit the number of other course offerings, especially the more advanced or specialized courses. They also did not support the fact that, to cover these areas, some teachers would be required to teach outside their expertise. Math teachers were concerned that including math in the core would water down the subject matter, because so many levels would have to be represented within one class. This also meant not "getting through as much" subject matter.

This issue of limiting class offerings and access through "coring" was a main tension point at Taft. The way 9th grade students were cored, "personalization" did not always mean smaller class sizes. Students were assigned to cores based on the electives they chose, including music, art and foreign languages. One core had its electives in the morning, with classes getting as small as fifteen students. But, the other two cores took electives in the afternoon and the multi-grade classes grew as large as thirty-five students. Depending on the master schedule, it could happen that only students from cores A or B could take art class. If this continued for 10th grade, it would be twice as limiting for students.

The art teacher purposefully found ways to engage with the cores, for fear that she would be relegated to the sideline, waiting for students who could take her class. She stayed up to date on what core teachers were planning, making it her job to find ways to fit in. For example, the cores' first integrated project was a trip to Mt. Spokane. The art teacher built on that theme by teaching students a drawing lesson, so they could sketch the flora and fauna. She also utilized vocabulary, such as "positive and negative space," that the classes had used to create maps in geography.

Several other tension points existed in the conversion process. One was between the strength of a coordinated curriculum across all freshman cores, so that electives teachers could coordinate their curriculum, and the benefits of autonomy for each of the freshman cores. Another revolved around the debate between keeping teachers in their strong, expert subject and assuming that good teachers could teach anything. A third was reducing class size without losing any existing staff positions; the superintendent required the school to staff at a 25:1 ratio.

SLC staffs continued to focus on creating personalized learning environments and integrating curricula. By October 2002, teachers were anticipating the need to begin planning the sophomore curriculum. Looping was still an option, with the freshman core teachers moving up with their students, as was passing them on to a new team of 10th grade teachers. This debate revolved as much around wanting to preserve the teacher-student relationship as the fact that some teachers preferred to walk in the footprints of the previous year's 9th grade core teachers rather than start a new 10th grade curriculum.

Some teachers felt that most of the high-energy staff members were already working in the 9th grade cores. Creating that program was so

much work that many of them did not want to do it again for 10th grade. But, their choice seemed to be either hand over their hard earned curriculum to teachers who may not be as passionate about it as they were, or pass on their students, with whom they have built relationships.

The rest of the SLC teams have made progress, but not as quickly as many would like. Teachers reported conversations bogged down with minute details or plans that turned out to be beyond the purview of the grant. Certain constraints existed, such as the bell schedule, which created the impression that the SLCs were not as autonomous as they thought. Some teachers wanted the principal to explicitly state the design boundaries up front. Their frustration came from the fact that so much was being decided as they went along.

Having the administration choose the groups also decreased the natural motivation from teachers who already liked to work together. Until they were able to break off into their freshman core groups, action-oriented teachers felt like they had to suffer through lots of nitpicking and dealing with people who were resistant to change.

Teachers said that the key to a successful freshman core team was to have trust, similar work ethic, and equally divided work. The reality, however, was that blending different work styles sometimes caused one person to carry the load. This variation in work styles was great for discussing things, but was a real handicap in getting work done.

In December 2002, Principal Thompson invited teachers to change SLC teams, predicting that allowing teachers to choose their affiliations would create a stronger momentum to move forward with the work. The changes were made by secret ballot, where everyone had to turn in a selection, even if it meant staying put. Only four people moved, apparently out of frustration from their teams' reticence, and teams were stronger for having been forced to reaffirm their ideologies.

Teams were charged with articulating the vision for their small school by February 2003. They had to address the 9th and 10th grade curriculum, assessment, personalization, schedule, theme, etc. The process of examining their assets led two teams to discover that though they did not have equal numbers of math and science teachers to some of the other teams, they could still offer a rigorous curriculum based on their collective endorsements. This was a major breakthrough for some skeptics.

Results from the first semester of freshman core were positive. The percentage of students receiving a failing grade in one or more classes was at a five-year low, and almost thirty-five percent lower than the year before (see figure 4). The average days absent per student dropped by twenty-five percent by the end of the first semester (see figure 5).

Figure 4

9th Grade: Fall Semester Failures

□ Base Yr ■ Yr 1
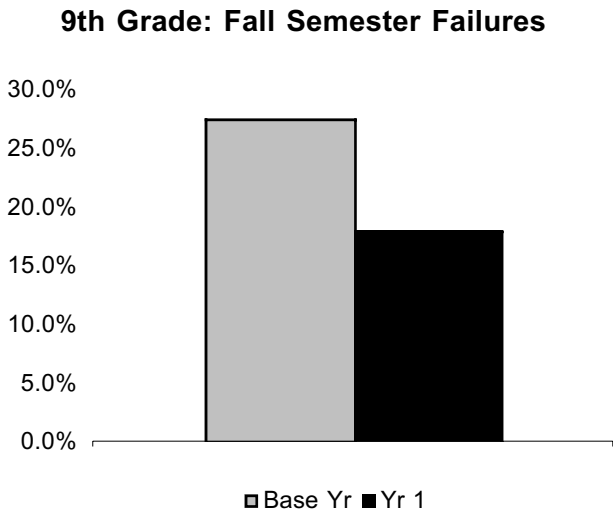
Thompson predicted that as this 9th grade cohort moves on to 10th grade, with the WASL on the horizon, people will think that the changes thus far have been merely surface organizational changes. As they become frustrated with the fact that the system is still not working for all students, they will be inspired to alter teaching practice and improve understanding about student learning. Some teachers will even rebel

Figure 5

Average Days Absent: Fall Semester

□ Base Yr ■ Yr 1
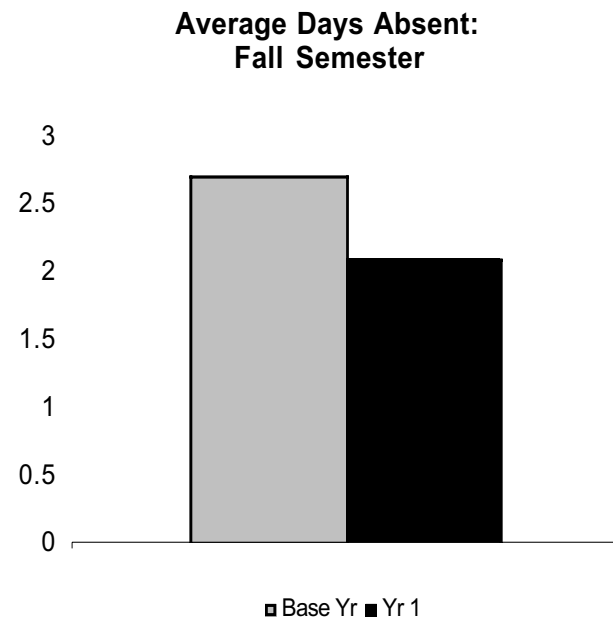
against the system and want to completely re-shuffle themselves. This might result in an RFP to create junior and senior year experiences.

Personalization

Teachers agreed that the strongest aspect of the SLC initiative was personalization. This was evident in the freshman core, where teachers integrated coursework and had ongoing, meaningful conversations about their students. In forming mentor groups, the staff debated randomly placing students versus creating affinity groups. They decided on the former, reasoning that students who are drawn to a specific interest or skill are already connected!

The mentor group assignments were not completely random; freshmen were kept separate because they experience issues unique to the high school transition. Some teachers thought all mentor groups should be grade-specific, so they could explore relevant issues like the 10th grade WASL, 11th grade SATs, and 12th grade college applications.

Every teacher and administrator had a mentor group. Mentor groups met daily for twenty-five minutes and followed a basic schedule. Monday was reserved for "administrivia," including announcements, passing out detention notices, homecoming fundraisers, prom announcements, etc. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, groups engaged in silent reading. Wednesdays were "teacher access" days when students could get extra help from their teachers or finish/make-up work. Fridays were open for groups to do whatever they wanted; teachers received a binder full of activity ideas.

As the first year progressed, each SLC team formed a committee to focus on creating personalization in each grade. Having researched other districts' and schools' approaches to mentoring, they met with Taft students over the summer to develop themes and activities for every month of the school year. They did not intend to prescribe mentor group activities, instead wanting to allow them to grow organically. At the same time, they wanted all students to have similar experiences, in an effort to be fair.

Themes included:
- Team Building
- Communication
- Community Service
- Performance Assessment
- Future Planning
- The Real World (life skills)
- Leadership
- Character (integrity, accountability)

Most teachers liked having students in a less structured environment and enjoyed being an advocate for a student, which is not always the case in the classroom. One teacher captivated her students by sharing personal experiences. She knew many of them from classes in years past and worked hard to build a trusting relationship with each of them. When students held themselves apart from the group, she tried to find out their interests and purposefully raised topics to draw them out.

Freshmen gave positive feedback about the mentor groups on an initial survey early in the 2002-2003 school year and other students reported that they enjoyed the extra time to get organized, read or get homework help. They reported a reduced stress level and liked getting to know a new group of people, including their teachers. One student said that students are nicer to each other now, as a result of getting to know a more diverse group of people, and do not pick on each other as much as the previous year. Others said that mentor groups were boring and took too much time. Other resistance to mentor groups came from teachers who felt they caused more work.

One teacher reported that the concept of mentor groups was not popular with his students. They already got along and did not want to do group activities, preferring to get extra help on homework. They took a vote and turned their mentor group into a study hall for three days per week. Tuesday and Thursday were still designated for reading. When asked how a study hall promotes personalization, this teacher noted that students build relationships while they provide extra help to one another.

Parent & Student Outreach

Taft High School successfully informed parents and students about the small schools reform and found meaningful ways to engage them with the change process.

Parents
Beginning in October 2001, the district paid three parents to head their community engagement efforts. The parents were very active, making reports to the board, presenting to the community and mobilizing resources. They utilized every opportunity to communicate with parents and teachers about the small school conversion effort. Some outreach examples included making presentations at middle school parent meetings, attaching meeting announcements to teachers' pay stubs, writing articles for school newsletters and posting information on Taft's web site.

But, as the work became more complex, the parents had a more difficult time digesting the fast paced changes. By December 2002, the Coordinating Council's parent representatives were having trouble creating coherent messages from the conversion's complex issues. The community was frustrated by the lack of clear information and consistent communication. The superintendent hired a consultant to discuss effective vehicles for communication and to craft an initial message. Beginning in 2003, a new half-time point person will debrief with the coaches and parents after each Coordinating Council meeting in preparation for informing the community. The school also planned to begin focus groups to re-engage parents and students whose participation had dwindled.

Traditional outreach efforts typically reached the parents of high achieving students, so connecting with other parents required different strategies. The school's social worker led the effort to contact parents of incoming freshmen who qualified for free or reduced price lunch and sent an invitation for a family-night dinner at the school in May 2002. In that setting, teachers and school board members were able to speak with parents about the Achiever Scholarships and the importance of higher education, then link this opportunity to a discussion about the school conversion work.

Taft's principal had particular success dealing with angry parents, who were often protective of the traditional school structure, such as Advanced Placement classes. He first shared his excitement about the grant money and the potential to improve Taft. He then calmed their fears about change by explaining that the school is taking baby steps, which will not affect their students' education too much, too quickly. This strategy relied on the belief that once students were in a more personalized and project-based learning environment, their parents would prefer the new small learning communities to the traditional high school model.

Students
The principal distributed a writing prompt in January 2002 to all 9th and 10th grade students similar to, "*Paul gets low grades, often winds up in trouble and is bored in school. On his own time, Paul is tirelessly committed to skateboarding and works late into the night fixing them up, riding and learning new tricks. Why doesn't Paul work as hard in school as he does on his skateboards? Taft wants to be a school where Paul would want to attend, are you willing to help create it?*"

Over 100 students expressed interest in being involved with the school change effort. The principal held a lunch meeting where he explained further about small schools and high school conversion. About thirty students stayed on with weekly meetings, which ultimately reduced to eighteen committed participants. Although the final student group was a fraction of its original size, the process educated much of the freshmen class about the small schools reform movement. Students from this group helped design the mentor groups, participated on the three school design teams and conducted a student survey with 9th and 10th graders.

T he three schools described in these snapshots, and many others with whom we work, have made significant progress moving toward conversions, even though it has taken longer than most of them had imagined. While unanticipated problems, by definition, cannot be foreseen, a handful of critical issues are clearly in play at this point that threaten the ultimate success of conversion efforts.

Schools are embedded in districts, and districts will need to change in significant ways to support small schools. Two of these three schools are individual grantees, and are "outliers" in their district. The third school, a district grantee, is the only school in its district to undertake substantial change halfway through the district's grant period. These and other districts in Washington are faced with difficult budget cuts, the looming implementation of high stakes tests, the onset of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, and a range of other projects and change efforts, many of them inconsistent with the move to small, focused high schools. In only one of the dozen districts where the Small Schools Project works with high schools is it clear that the conversion effort is the district's educational priority.

Policies, procedures, and practices that have developed over the years to serve district purposes are likely to pose problems for small schools. Most districts with multiple high schools, for instance, "behave" as if each high school operates the same program – indeed, in some districts that is the goal – and has therefore the same needs. Few districts at this point seem prepared to provide separate budget lines for each small school, or to consider different administrative arrangements for these schools. For instance, in multiple high school districts, conversion schools are still expected to submit course descriptions for a course catalog in early January, even though most established small schools have no real need to do so.

Moving into the arena of high school conversions is moving into new territory, so it seems reasonable that many district-school issues will only be resolved over time. We see little evidence to date, however, that districts are moving proactively to anticipate, let alone enact, changes that will provide support to small schools. No district has been willing to consider developing a set of prior agreements that would establish parameters and provide support for the new small schools now under development. Only one district has thus far seen fit to develop a district policy recognizing the development of small schools.
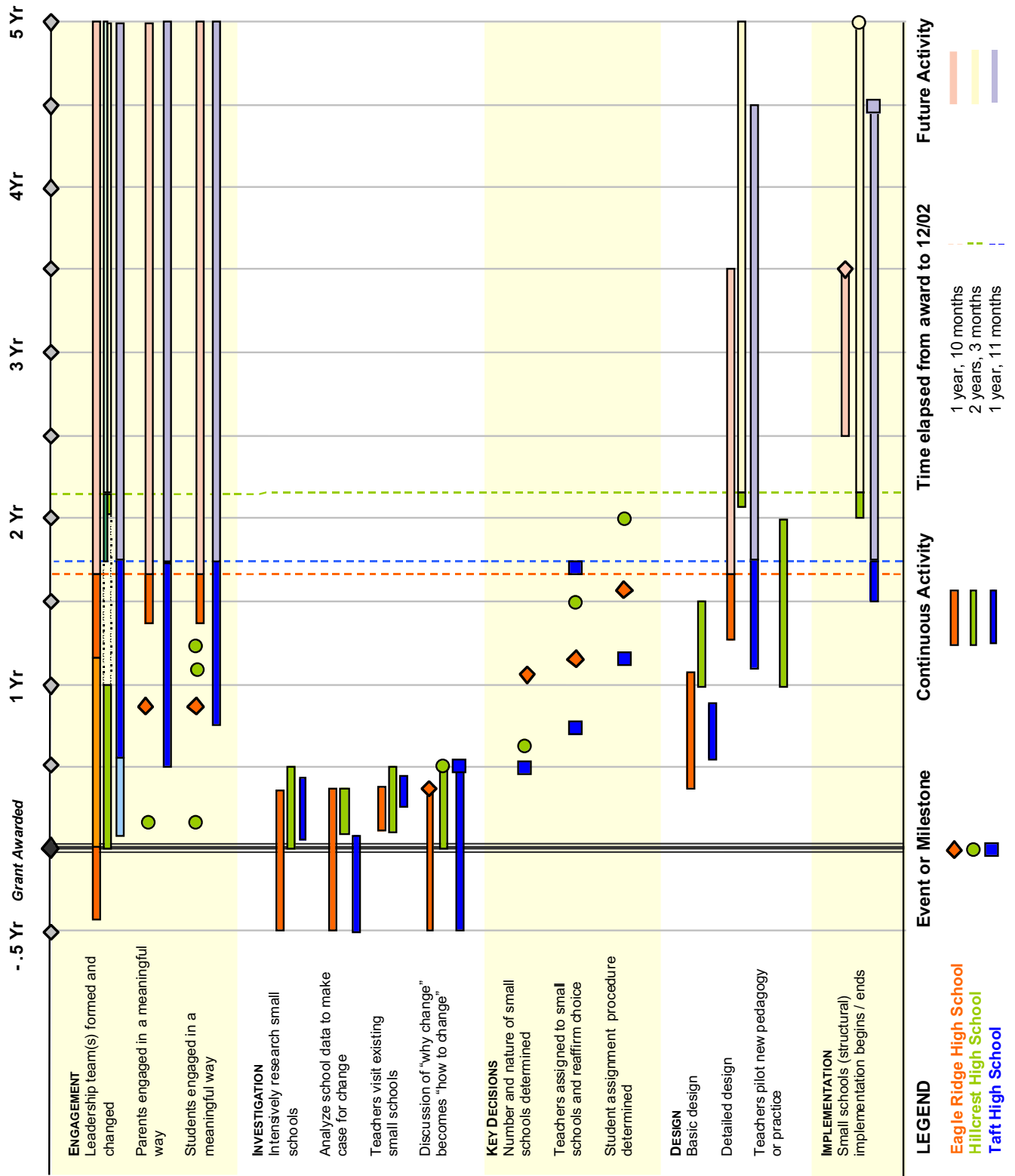
Parent and community support will be critical to the success of small schools. The development of small schools to replace existing comprehensive high schools in most communities will be perhaps the most significant change in high school education in the past fifty years. For the change to be successful, parents and other community members will need to understand the reasons for this change. We believe as well that parents and communities can contribute to making the change successful by helping schools solve some of the technical problems that exist.

Each of these three schools has made successful efforts to keep parents and the community informed of its activities, and this has been sufficient thus far. What seems unclear is how broad and deep understanding of the proposed changes is, and whether communities will be supportive when the inevitable problems associated with change and implementation surface.

When it comes to including parents and the community in an ongoing way in small school design matters, the schools have been more hesitant. Most school staffs have little experience working collaboratively with parents on what is surely an open-ended task. Most teachers are themselves engaging for the first time in a school design process. Most school personnel spend considerable time convincing communities that their schools are doing a good job. In Washington, most school districts depend on local levies to supplement an inadequate and still-unequal state funding formula – another reason why it is difficult to talk candidly about any significant school problem related to long-standing assumptions about the purpose and organization of American high schools. And, after twenty years of widespread criticism of public schools nationally, most educators are understandably reluctant to present a problem to their community without having the answer well-defined. Nonetheless, avoiding early engagement of parents and other community members in the discussion and problem-solving appears to be a missed opportunity and a potential land mine.

Equity is a primary filter through which the redesign work is viewed, and may raise complex issues that the school is not fully equipped or prepared to address. To their credit, each of these schools has, at moments of greatest uncertainty, confusion, or hesitation, used equity as the lever to continue its work. At the same time, it raises, in each community, matters of privilege that are difficult to discuss. The unavoidable reality is that, in virtually all comprehensive high schools, some students are

ENGAGEMENT
Leadership team(s) formed and changed

Parents engaged in a meaningful way

Students engaged in a meaningful way

INVESTIGATION
Intensively research small schools

Analyze school data to make case for change

Teachers visit existing small schools

Discussion of "why change" becomes "how to change"

KEY DECISIONS
Number and nature of small schools determined

Teachers assigned to small schools and reaffirm choice

Student assignment procedure determined

DESIGN
Basic design

Detailed design

Teachers pilot new pedagogy or practice

IMPLEMENTATION
Small schools (structural) implementation begins / ends

LEGEND

Eagle Ridge High School
Hillcrest High School
Taft High School

Event or Milestone   Continuous Activity   Time elapsed from award to 12/02   Future Activity

1 year, 10 months
2 years, 3 months
1 year, 11 months

advantaged. That advantage is often tied to social class, race, and influence. When those advantages are challenged, conflict is inevitable.

Moving to small schools will mean that some of those structural advantages will be diminished, or disappear altogether. Thus far, as Professor Tom Gregory of Indiana University points out in an unpublished paper, leaders in many conversion high schools find themselves assuring anxious (and mostly middle class) parents that everything they value in the present arrangements of schooling will remain, when in fact that will be all but impossible. It is unclear whether schools and communities will be willing to confront these issues directly and openly. But it seems certain that those engaged in conversion efforts must take this on directly and openly to be successful.

Changing teacher practice and expectations may take more time than is available in a society accustomed to quick results. Small schools that serve all students well operate on a different set of beliefs about learning and typically have a substantially different set of relationships and pedagogical practices associated with them.

Teachers in effective small schools depend on reciprocal and ongoing relationships with students (and often their families) to adapt and customize curriculum for their students. They typically work in collaborative teams with other teachers who teach the same students, sharing information about students, planning ideas, and curriculum. Grant agreements with the foundation include the expectation that students will engage regularly in active inquiry rather than passive absorption of information, in-depth learning rather than settling for broad, superficial surface knowledge, and that they will have more authentic opportunities to show what they know and are able to do than is common with most paper-and-pencil tests.

These changes will take substantial time. While some changes in relationships and teacher practice will be apparent in early implementation stages, several years will be required for the changes to be both broad and deep, and for students to realize the most significant benefits. "Implementation dips"– common when new programs or practices are introduced – may pose more significant barriers if parents and other community members are uneasy about the changes taking place.

Few schools have as yet provided concrete support for teachers to acquire the skills necessary to make these deep changes. Nor have they

engaged in conversations with parents and the larger community about the time and resources needed for the professional development of school personnel. As part of the effort to convince parents of the need to change – rather than engaging them early on in helping to identify and solve the problem – we fear that schools will "over-promise" results, making "under-delivery" inevitable.

This report examines the early stages of a multi-year change process. Eagle Ridge, Hillcrest and Taft high schools provide examples and insights into enacting school change. Strong leadership, a high degree of trust among staff, and an inclusive change process have so far supported these schools in creating successful change processes. Even in this environment, the work has been difficult and several challenges remain on the horizon.

The lessons drawn from their experiences are reinforced by the Small Schools Project's work with other Gates grantee schools in Washington State. While planning is an important first step, most of the real work to implement change has barely begun. Future reports will focus on other aspects of the conversion process.

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