Elevating the Conversation:

Building Professional Community in Small High Schools

Observations from the first year of a three-year study of small high schools in Washington State
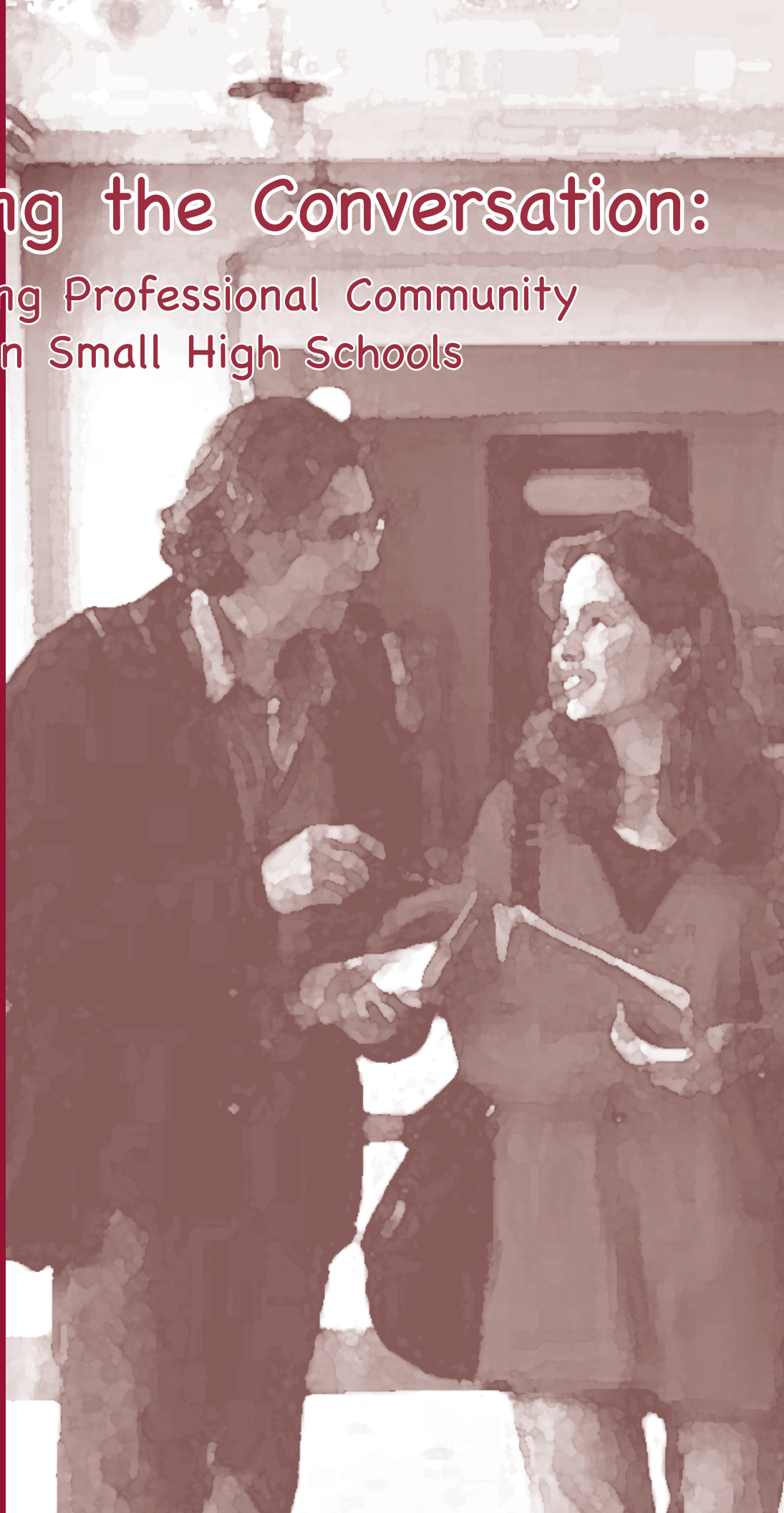
Autumn 2004

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Small Schools
PROJECT

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NOTES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONTENTS

The purpose of this three-year study is to understand aspects of the development of small schools and associated processes of change. The study focuses on a small group of Washington high schools that received reinvention grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In this study, we provide an initial account of the work in seven small schools in Washington State gleaned from interviews and repeated observations on-site in the various schools (for more information about the research protocol, see Appendix A). Six of these schools are located within recently converted large comprehensive schools (hereafter called "conversions") that have been reconfigured as collections of small schools; one additional school was "already-small" by our definition (under 400 students).

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

Pursuit of these three research goals creates several avenues for potential contribution to the knowledge base on school redesign. First, if theory and emerging empirical evidence about small schools are correct, the conversion of large comprehensive high schools into collections of smaller schools will enable greater individual attention to students and closer faculty collaboration on matters of teaching and learning, as well as a stronger sense of community within each small school.

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

Finally, the study seeks to understand the experience of already-small high schools engaged in redesign projects in the Gates initiative. Smaller size is only one structural aspect of what is a larger and more comprehensive set of changes in teaching, learning, and the development of professional community. In concept, already-small high schools may have an edge in making progress on various issues related to improving teaching and learning, given that they do not face the same structural challenges of their larger counterparts in creating new collections of small learning communities. A key issue in already-small schools is how the school community comes to view smallness as an asset, rather than a deficit, and how that affects school culture, leadership, and teaching practice.

We will produce three reports annually. We hope these reports will provide schools, districts, other technical assistance providers, foundations, and researchers with useful information in understanding what happens as schools redesign—including raising expectations for all students, changing teacher practice, and expanding leadership roles and structures.

Small School Grants

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

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

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

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

Five of the study schools received Achievers five-year grants. The *Washington State Achievers Program* works on school redesign within sixteen high schools serving large populations of low-income students. The program's resources are focused on improving college access for low-income students and combine academic readiness with scholarship opportunities. Students from low-income families are eligible to apply for one of five hundred Achievers scholarships given annually to graduates of Achiever high schools.[1] The sixteen Achiever high schools received their five-year grants in April 2001.

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

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

Case Study Schools

The following school descriptions provide a snapshot of the building demographics and the history of each school's redesign process.[2] This information is summarized in Figure A on page vi. For a discussion on the context of school reform in Washington State, see Appendix C.

Elm is one of seven small schools in a rural high school that is part of a district-wide grant. The building houses 1,650 students, almost all Caucasian. It is the only high school in the district. About 40 percent of the student body passed three sections (reading, writing, and math) of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) standardized test in 2004 and 12.9 percent qualified for free or reduced price lunch.

Soon after the district received the Gates grant, the high school teachers formed research teams to look at topics of personalization, technology, accountability, instruction, job-embedded staff development, and individual student transition plans. Their number one recommendation for moving forward as a building was to create small schools. Teacher teams designed the schools with specific content themes.

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

The school and district administrative leadership has remained constant since the grant was awarded. The school board has been supportive of the building's work throughout the restructuring effort.

Alder is one of five small schools in a building that received a model school grant. The building has the largest population of the four comprehensive high schools in this suburban district with 94 teachers and 1,750 students. The majority of students are Caucasian. Approximately 40 percent of the students passed three sections of the WASL in 2004 and 20 percent qualified for free or reduced price lunch.

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

Alder has approximately 360 students and 15 teachers, including all three industrial technology teachers in the building. Because of this focus and the school's vocational image, the student population was primarily male in the first year of implementation.

The district has been fairly hands-off throughout the conversion work, which school staff members interpret as being unsupportive. The superintendent and

building principal retired in July 2004 and one assistant principal accepted a position in another district.

Fir is a rural already-small school that received an Achievers grant. It is comprised of grades 6–12, though the grant only impacts grades 9–12. The school has 150 high school students, with a majority of Caucasians and a growing population of Hispanic students. One-third of the students passed three sections of the WASL in 2004 and over one-third qualified for free or reduced price lunch.

Receiving the Gates grant coincided with a desire to redesign this small, rural school to a block schedule in an effort to "go deeper" with instructional practice. During their initial grant years, staff formed a site council, de-tracked their math curriculum, and researched block schedule options. A key step for teachers at Fir was accomplished when they gained district and board approval to move ahead with schedule changes and the addition of advisory periods.

The superintendent has been supportive of the changes at Fir and small school design considerations directed the design of a new building that will open in the fall of 2005. The school principal left in the spring of 2004 to pursue a different job opportunity.

Chestnut is one of six small schools in an Achievers high school. The building houses 1,750 students, more than half of whom represent minority populations. Fewer than 20 percent of the student body passed three sections of the WASL in 2004 and over two-thirds qualified for free or reduced price lunch. Two-thirds of the high schools in this urban district received Achievers grants.

A small group of teachers worked on the initial grant proposal. Teachers formed a leadership team to research small schools and developed an RFP process. The small schools served grades 9–10 in the first year of implementation, except for Chestnut, which was allowed to implement 9–12 after a student survey showed they would have enough juniors and seniors sign-up. Other juniors and seniors maintained their existing high school experience in a separate small school that will phase out as each class graduates. In the first year of implementation, one of the small schools dissolved due to lack of cohesion, but another is scheduled to open in the coming academic year.

During the first year of implementation, Chestnut served approximately 180 students, well over half of whom were freshmen and sophomores, with nine full-time teachers. Chestnut was the only small school to advertise Advanced Placement courses, thereby attracting high achieving students to the upper grades.

The principal retired in July 2004.

Cedar is one of six small schools at an Achievers high school in a smaller suburban district. The building is one of two comprehensive high schools in the district, serving a working class neighborhood consisting of 1,950 students, two-thirds of whom are Caucasian. Approximately 24 percent of the student body passed three sections of the WASL in 2004 and 40 percent qualified for free or reduced price lunch.

The beginning of the building's conversion process coincided with a district initiative to study school reform. The staff met to identify ways to increase student achievement and concluded that small schools were a viable option. A small leadership committee comprised of the principal and several interested teachers

put together the grant proposal and met weekly to create small schools based on career-based themes. Teachers were assigned to the schools based on their preference and eventually re-designed the schools to reflect curriculum-based themes.

Cedar has international, global studies, communications, and technology themes, and serves 394 students with 17 full- or part-time teachers.

The building principal and superintendent accepted positions in other districts during the grant's second year.

Hemlock is one of three small schools at an Achievers high school—the only high school in the district, an urban fringe district with a highly transient immigrant population. The building houses 750 ethnically diverse students. Approximately one-quarter of the student body passed three sections of the WASL in 2004 and almost half of the students qualified for free or reduced price lunch. The school has been a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools since 2000.

Prior to receiving the grant, the school had established a leadership committee to guide the staff in looking at school-level data and creating a common vision for the future. Teachers developed small school designs through an RFP process. The leadership committee chose the academies and assigned staff based on teacher preferences.

Hemlock has 320 students and 16 staff, including all of the building's visual and performing arts teachers. The staffing is a reflection of the school's intended arts focus.

The district's longtime and supportive superintendent left the district early in the grant's third year and was replaced with an interim until a new superintendent was hired at the end of that year. The school board developed and passed a policy in support of small schools during the second year of the grant.

Birch is one of five small schools at an Achievers high school, which is located in a large urban fringe district. The building has a diverse student population and is one of four comprehensive high schools in the district, serving 1,300 students in grades 10–12. The ninth grade will join the high school in the coming year, as the junior high schools convert to middle schools. Approximately one quarter of the student body passed three sections of the WASL in 2004 and almost half of the students qualified for free or reduced price lunch.

A core group of teachers at Birch has been planning the conversion process for three years. They have focused on developing a common focus and responding to district goals related to the conversion process. Birch will open in the fall of 2004 with about 200 ninth and tenth graders—all of whom will be new to the high school. Currently, there are 12 to 14 teachers assigned to Birch, but several more staff will join them as the school's population grows in succeeding years.

The superintendent aims to treat all schools in the district equally and not allow one school to move ahead of others in terms of school reform. All high schools in the district will be forming small learning communities for ninth and tenth grades during the 2004–2005 school year, but teachers at Birch intend to extend their small school through the eleventh and twelfth grades.

Figure A: An Overview of Redesigned Small Schools 2003–2004

	Elm	Alder	Fir	Chestnut	Cedar	Hemlock	Birch
Grade levels served in 2003–2004	9–12	9–11	9–12	9–12	9–12	9–12	No students until Fall 2004
Number of students & percent of building enrollment	315 (19%)	360 (21%)	150 (100%)	180 (10%)	394 (20%)	320 (43%)	No students until Fall 2004
Number of teacher FTE	11.6	15	18.5	7	16	14.7	13
Number of teachers	14	16	19	11	17	16	13
Number & percent of new staff members in 2004–2005	3 (21%)	2 (13%)	1 (5%)	3 (27%)	1 (6%)	3 (19%)	12[†] (57%)
Is counselor part of the staff?	Yes	Yes	*	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Is special education integrated into the school?	Yes	Yes	*	Yes	Yes	No	No
Do students "crossover" between schools?	Yes	Yes	*	Yes	Yes	Yes	No students until Fall 2004
Other noteworthy characteristics			*	Only school in building serving grades 9–12		Transient population	Only 9th & 10th grade students will participate

[*] Fir is an already-small school
[†] Staff will grow to 21 teachers in the fall of 2004

Ed Merino left another social studies department meeting feeling frustrated. As a teacher new to Gilliam High School, he had looked forward to meetings with his colleagues to get some direction for his classes and to find out what other teachers were doing. But the department members spent over an hour talking about next semester's schedule and textbook details. At the last meeting, they had reviewed the budget. At neither meeting was there time to talk about teaching, and he wondered if they ever would get around to it.

Ed was worried about his two classes of American history review, the classes for students who had failed last year. He knew he needed help with these classes, but he didn't quite know where to start looking. Serious behavior and attendance concerns were beginning to emerge, as well as reading problems. He wondered about getting together with the other teachers who had these same kids. Maybe together they could come up with plans to help them succeed. But the building was so large and the kids so scattered throughout a population of 1800 students that getting together with their other teachers was not only impractical, it was probably impossible.

Earlier, Ed had suggested to the department head that maybe some of the veteran teachers could observe his classes and make some recommendations or at least talk to him about what they saw. "There just isn't enough time for that, Ed. We're barely surviving with what we do now. Look! If you're qualified to teach in the high school, you're qualified to teach your own classes. That's how we've always operated here."

Ed concluded, "Everybody here seems like a good teacher, and I know I could learn a lot from them, but when it comes right down to it, the way things are now, I guess I'm on my own." [3]

[3] Ed Merino and Gilliam High School are fictitious entities, but developed from multiple observations of teachers and their interactions in large, comprehensive high schools.

Introduction

[4] See for example, Sizer, 1985.

Numerous accounts of life inside large comprehensive high schools illustrate ways that structural constraints and social norms inhibit the ongoing development of strong professional community.[4] Yet community building is critical for today's schools because it is "the tie that binds students and teachers together in special ways, to something more significant than themselves: shared values and ideas. It lifts both teachers and students to high levels of self-understanding, commitment, and performance."[5]

[5] Sergiovanni, 1994

One of the promised benefits of small school structure is the creation of greater opportunity for the development of community, particularly among professionals. As the opening vignette suggests, schools are traditionally organized in a cell-like fashion that leaves teachers isolated and working relatively independent of each other.[6] Successful teachers often value collegiality—teacher isolation and a lack of shared professional culture are conditions that tend to threaten teacher growth and learning.[7]

[6] Lortie, 1975

[7] Rosenholtz, 1989; Johnson, 1990

[8] See Appendix B for a complete list of the Seven Attributes of High Achievement Schools.

In its grants to high schools, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation emphasizes common focus and collaboration among staff.[8] For example, the Foundation suggests that teachers focus on a few important goals and adopt a consistent instructional approach based on shared beliefs about teaching and learning. The Foundation views time to collaborate, with a focus on classroom practice, as a critical element of professional community.

For the purposes of this report, we refer to "professional communities" as the groups of teachers, teacher-leaders, and other professionals who are working together in recently redesigned small high schools. The professional communities that we are studying are small by traditional high school standards, ranging in size from nine to about 16 teachers. In contrast with traditional high school departments, each of the communities consists of teachers from across content

areas including English, history, mathematics, science, and electives, as well as special support service providers (such as teachers of English language learners and teachers of special education students). Most of the professional communities also include at least part-time participation of school administrators and/or counselors. A few schools also included paraprofessionals.

The redesigned schools in our study have all, with one exception, made their transition from large, comprehensive schools to collections of small schools within the past two years. The final building is transitioning to small schools in the fall of 2004. This paper describes the development of these small professional communities to date and the ways that professional practice has been impacted through the redesign process thus far.

Based on previous research and the Small Schools Project's work in schools, we anticipate that professional communities in small schools: 1) work toward having a collective focus on student and adult learning; 2) share common norms, values, and goals that are evident in their work with each other and in their classroom practice; and 3) have sufficient time and structures available to build collaborative relationships and interdependence.[9] With these practices in place, teachers learn from each other and use this knowledge to inform and improve instruction and student achievement.

Characteristics of these groups can affect the ways that professionals within them learn. In both high school departments and elementary school grade-level teams, professional communities—or, communities of practice, as they are sometimes called—have been found to vary in the degree to which they exhibit certain attributes. Some professional communities are characterized as *strong* communities of practice, in which teachers work together in designing instruction and have a significant influence on each other's practice. Others are *developing* communities of practice, in which teachers have taken some steps toward collaboration, but have yet to exert significant influence over each other's work.[10] In more developed professional communities, we assume that teachers share common goals, are working closely with each other to improve their instructional practice, and are participating in activities aimed at supporting their professional growth—with the goal of increasing student success.

We are interested in understanding how, if at all, the professional communities in these seven small schools are developing into strong communities of practice, as well as understanding what inhibits such growth. Our report offers a window into the work inherent in efforts to transform professional practice in these settings. It is divided into two main sections.

The first section, titled "What We're Seeing," describes early observations of the professional communities and interviews with participants. We begin by illustrating characteristics of strong and developing professional communities and the ways that these communities are cultivating commonly understood values, sense of purpose, and shared language. We show examples of communities that are moving from having a shared focus to "elevated" conversations regarding instructional practice and student needs. Finally, we consider the ways that informal and formal structures act as supports for teacher learning over time.

In the second section of the report, titled "What We're Wondering About," we share the concerns voiced by our study participants regarding their work. Teach-

[9] See Achinstein, 2002 for a review of the research on professional communities.

[10] The original research found professional communities among teachers to vary in terms of their relative strength (strong/weak) and their relative openness to reform ideas (open/closed or innovative/traditional). For a detailed discussion of these characteristics of professional communities see McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003 and Gallucci, 2003.

ers, administrators, and other study participants describe concerns about insufficient time, increased workloads, staff turnover, and lack of district support, raising additional questions worthy of consideration about the strength and sustainability of their professional communities over time.

Strong Professional Communities Share a Sense of Purpose

STRONG PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES
In the more developed professional communities, we saw teachers sharing common goals, working to improve their instructional practice, and participating in activities aimed at supporting their professional growth. Evidence of stronger professional communities included:

- A theme or vision held in common.
- Teachers creating shared curricular goals such as "essential questions."
- Teachers expressing a sense of professional cohesion.

[11] Questions represent one way to organize a class, with the course content reflecting the answers. Asking questions as a way of organizing content also serves to strengthen students' sense of their own authority over the content. Essential questions, a strategy developed by the Coalition of Essential Schools, are provocative and multilayered questions that reveal the richness and complexities of a subject or discipline.

At this early point in the redesign process—and in our data collection process—we see a considerable range in terms of how clearly teachers articulate their small school's vision using similar, or shared, language. However, the small size of these professional communities seems to facilitate the development of common norms, expectations, and a shared sense of purpose among teachers. We characterize some of these communities as "strong" or more developed in their sense of professional focus and vision. Others we see as still developing a sense of purpose that is shared and well understood by all teachers.

Teachers in four of the seven schools demonstrated consensus and clarity in articulating their small school's vision and focus. They used similar or shared language regarding their work. They described a cohesive stance regarding student expectations and, in one case, the teachers developed "essential questions"[11] aimed at achieving curricular coherence across course offerings. In other cases, teachers described a new sense of professional cohesion.

Common Theme & Vision

Adherence to and articulation of a common theme or vision for the small school is a key aspect of a developed professional community. Teachers at Cedar, for example, spoke about the theme and vision that they hold in common. The staff decided early in the redesign process to adopt a theme that took advantage of the communication and technology specialists in their small school and emphasized an international focus, which they felt was important in light of their diverse student body. The teachers hold a consistent and unified view of reasons for converting the large high school into small schools and appear to subscribe uniformly to the need for the redesign process. During their two planning years, the staff built a vision of a small school strongly unified through this common theme.

Several aspects of the process of working toward consensus on the theme merit mention. First, teachers felt that working together over time is important:

> I think we are a cohesive group because we were able to work through issues. We had a two-year [planning] process and were able to dump the pathway we were on at the beginning and yet come full circle back to a pathway that we all agree is important. We all came up with these standards together. This is what's important. This is what we want our students to look like.

Second, teachers discussed narrowing potential goals down to one or two that they considered critical:

> We [said we] can't do everything right now, so let's choose a couple. So we made a big list of things we wanted to get accomplished and chose a couple we thought were most important. We all agreed to commit to those.

Finally, teachers felt the process of reaching consensus was an important quality of their professional community. A teacher at Alder described the process of being brought on board with the core values and focus of her small school, which was developed by a smaller group of teachers the year before she joined:

> There definitely was a [vision-sharing] process because we agreed on protocol, on how we were going to deal with different situations. And then there was an immersion…they really brought us on board with the philosophy that came behind developing the main ideas…. There were certain things that were the core values that they wanted to keep and there were other ones that they were willing to let go of.

Shared Curricular Goals

Another indicator of a strong professional community was the development of shared curricular goals in the form of school-wide essential questions that guided Cedar's attempts to integrate central themes into their curriculum. Every teacher tried to address the essential question as it applied to his or her class (for example, "What is culture?"). During their first year as a small school, most of the teachers found a way to weave the "culture" question into their courses, some more successfully than others, depending largely on their subject matter. Teachers described the importance of an essential question in terms of achieving their shared goals related to curriculum integration:

> One of the big reasons for essential questions is they start integrating information for the kids even without being in the same classroom at the same time…also it is encouraging teachers to devise their own essential questions that are more germane to what they're teaching. I have six posted on my wall.

Rather than developing a common question, teachers at Chestnut expressed their curricular goals through their vision for students' success. While students in this building "always felt teachers cared about them," they did not necessarily feel that teachers cared whether they did well academically or not. In the small school setting: "Teachers are communicating loud and clear, 'we want you to be successful and we are not going to take no for an answer.'" Teachers have more informal discussions about students and "have a common language when we talk about why we want kids to do things." Teachers in this school talked about the kinds of activities they engage in that relate to this vision for student success:

> We talk at our [weekly] morning meetings about who's in trouble and who we should be looking out for. When we did scheduling for second semester, we knew of cliques of kids who didn't do well in class together, so we were able to separate them.

Professional Accountability

In strong professional communities that shared a common sense of purpose, teachers also talked about a new sense of professional unity and accountability. A teacher from Elm noted that the professional bonding with her peers was "the most dramatic short-term" change and "it is absolutely beyond my expectations." Even though teachers have gone from a traditional department-based structure to a multidisciplinary team structure, "teachers feel like they have a place to call home" because of the conversations and the learning that is happening. Teachers at Elm also expressed that knowing more about each other's work was important for both their individual and their collective practice because it reduced the teachers' sense of isolation. "In the classroom you are usually left on your own…. Through these discussions I am hearing and seeing what people do with the kids."

Teachers often characterized the shift away from isolated practice as an inability to "hide" in a small professional community. In five buildings, classrooms are

clustered by small school as much as possible. Because of these changes, teachers say they know each other, both professionally and personally, and have a "support network" for dealing with students that they never had before. Reported two teachers:

> I think that it's harder to be a lazy teacher because…in this particular space and with this particular group of people where we're constantly talking about what we're doing, it would be very obvious and apparent if you were lazy.

> Here I am in my small school team now and I am not in isolation…the teachers can't hide.

Several teachers in strong professional communities suggested that the change from isolated practice to collaborative work led them to develop a shared sense of professional accountability. One teacher described this as accountability to the small school: "So, if I am going to help keep Elm viable beyond just a title, I have to make sure that I can churn out…well-educated science students." Another teacher at Elm shared a similar perspective:

> I have always known that personally I need to be accountable for what goes on in my classroom and I need to make sure that they are getting the best possible. The difference now is that I have more people who are going to be aware of how I'm doing. So that means that I need to be even more conscious of if they are not getting it, how can I bring it around so they can get it?

Teachers in this group attributed this new sense of accountability to the small size of their staff: "I think the main thing is that being in this smaller cohort of staff, we are able to not only keep tabs on our students, but keep tabs on each other."

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>
> *Principal of Cedar School*

In stronger professional communities, there is also room for disagreement among the group members, suggesting that they have created a safe place to work through conflict and disagreements. Recounts a teacher: "We don't have to agree. I'm willing to speak my piece. And I feel that I'm not the only one. We're able to make decisions and discuss our own problems. That would never happen on a staff of a hundred."

Chestnut demonstrated a strong focus on rigorous instruction and a vision for autonomy within the larger high school structure. There were nine teachers in this small school, most of whom were experienced professionals who taught advanced courses. One teacher said of the group: "We are growing as a team, learning to trust each other and work together better." Other teachers at this school described their focus on students:

> Our goal and focus is on the students. To draw them in and care about their education and care about doing academic work that is challenging and to bring what you know about them into your teaching. We drew up ground rules about tardiness, attendance, preparedness. We will hold the core value of common respect, to make a common commitment.

Examples from these professional communities highlight the potential for teachers working in small high schools to develop strongly shared values, visions, and norms that guide their individual as well as their collective instructional practice. In other small schools, professional communities are still working to reach similar signs of cohesion and strength.

We envision a progression where small schools exhibit a range of strengths in their development of communities of practice. Figure B depicts how the attributes our

schools exhibit may be viewed as building blocks toward developing stronger professional communities.

Figure B: Developing Professional Community in Small Schools

MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY
SYSTEMIC CHANGES
GROUP COMMITMENT

COLLEGIALITY
PLANNING & TALKING ABOUT BROADER CHANGE
PERSONAL COMMITMENT

Teachers integrate new classroom practices, which build on their professional learning and take advantage of the professional community.

ISOLATED PRACTICE
INDIVIDUAL TEACHER CHANGES
ACCEPTANCE OF NEED TO CHANGE

Teachers engage in "formal" professional learning opportunities, which are structured and regularly scheduled, such as Critical Friends Groups, Lesson/Book Study, and peer observation.

Teachers feel a heightened sense of accountability based on increased expectations from peers, students, administrators, and themselves.

Teachers engage in "elevated conversations" about student issues, curricular focus, and classroom practice, which serve as "informal" learning opportunities.

Teachers are collegial and trust one another.

Teachers have common curricular goals and expectations for student achievement.

The small school staff has a theme or vision that is understood and articulated by everyone.

Staff shares broad understanding and agreement about the need to redesign the school.

The attributes our schools exhibit may be viewed as building blocks toward developing stronger professional communities, which move from accepting the need for school change to joint planning, and ultimately to changed behavior. We observed teachers first establishing a common vision and curricular goals, which then facilitated the development of collegiality and heightened expectations for their work. Changes in teachers' practice began on an individual level and in working with other teachers to support students. Teachers expressed a desire to move toward changing their classroom practice with students.

Professional Communities in Development

Teachers in three small schools within our sample demonstrated less clarity about their school vision and had a weaker school focus. In these schools, staff members experienced less camaraderie and collaboration in their work together. We also saw less evidence of shared language across a broad range of teachers.

In one small school, teachers of ninth and tenth graders had been planning together over a two-year period, while teachers of eleventh and twelfth graders were on the periphery of the change process. The stated focus of this small school was on "equity" and the mission of the school was described as "empowering students to better their world." As teachers predicted, not everyone expressed the same understanding or acceptance of the small school focus. For example, some teachers revealed an apprehension about how the theme would affect their classroom practice: "It's not as clear as I think it probably should be, like we have some type of international peace-keeping mission, but how it's going to play out in the curriculum, if it will at all, that is kind of skeptical on my part."

Two of the professional communities, characterized as still developing, have a divided staff where a small, but vocal group of teachers does not support the idea of small schools and believes that the restructuring effort may not be sustainable. Tension appears to be coming from disagreement about the need to redesign the school at all, as well as a decision-making process that is at times unclear and inconsistent:

> It gets frustrating. [You show up, do the work] and then you come back the next day and you see an e-mail that says, "Oh, we changed what we decided."

> I will outlast the small schools project.... I fully believe that…I think that it will eventually go away…. I don't think that there is the core support here for it to be able to be sustainable.

We also saw evidence in the data that these professional communities are struggling to move forward. Teachers described one school as being "stuck" because of the way decisions, such as the length of block schedule, were made and remade:

> We've got to quit this crises management stuff and get back to looking at our curriculum and how we're meeting the kids' needs. Get back to that instead of trying to fix things. We're just sort of spinning our wheels.

A significant number of the teachers felt like they were "effective the way it was before and that a lot of [the redesign] isn't necessary."

It is possible that given support and time, the professional communities we describe as developing will move toward a stronger sense of shared purpose. We think that being strong in terms of sharing a common focus, vision, and language is an important foundational step for these professional communities. In the next section, we describe the conversations that we observed among teachers in the seven schools as they work together to improve educational outcomes for their students.

Elevated Conversation

In this first year of data collection, we found that teachers are talking to each other more than ever before about a common vision for their school and their students. This shared focus or sense of purpose found in four of the professional communities provides a strong foundation for teachers to begin taking the conversation further, *elevating* it to the level of discussing teaching and learning. One teacher's experience at Alder exemplifies this positive shift: during twelve years teaching at a comprehensive high school, she never went to the lunchroom because she didn't want to listen to the "isolated conversations going on about things outside of school." The lunchtime conversation within her current professional community is completely different:

ELEVATED CONVERSATION
Elevated conversation happens when teachers collectively focus on issues related to individual students, classroom practice, and problem solving. Through such conversations, we saw teachers developing camaraderie and learning from one another by discussing challenges and new ideas.

> We talk about students, we talk about their problems, we talk about small school problems and how we can solve them; we talk about curriculum and problems; we get ideas from each other and a lot more collegial contact time. It pushes me to really strive to be as good as they are.

Re-focusing on issues related to individual students, classroom practice, and problem solving typifies what we have defined as *elevated conversation*. Through such conversations, teachers developed camaraderie and learned from one another by discussing challenges and new ideas. The emergence of elevated conversation is a significant indicator of the development of a strong community of practice in a redesigned small school—in which teachers learn from each other and use the knowledge to improve instruction. For many teachers in these schools, it is the first time they have discussed substantive issues of teaching and learning with their peers across disciplines.

Our data indicate that the members of stronger professional communities share more than just a common focus—they have a sense of collegiality and have heightened expectations for their work in the restructuring effort. In these schools, by design, they also teach the same groups of students. To read more about the changing nature of the professional community in small schools, we recommend *Knowing and Being Known: Personalization as a Foundation for Improving Student Learning in Small Schools*,[12] which is also based on the seven small schools in our study.

[12] This report, also published by the Small Schools Project, discusses the results schools are beginning to see from knowing students and their learning needs more deeply. Progress to date includes teachers recognizing the need for personalization, designing structures to support personalization, perceiving (along with students) positive differences in relationships, and beginning to talk about and implement changed instructional practices to meet the needs of individual learners. It can be downloaded from http://www.smallschoolsproject.org; look under "Small Schools In Action/What We Are Learning."

Each of the seven small schools showed some evidence of teachers engaged in elevated conversation characterized by discussions about individual student needs, course content, and planned changes in classroom practice. Many teachers describe this level of conversation as a significant change that can be credited to working in a small professional community. The small size appears to lead to teachers knowing their colleagues and students better than before, and to decreasing the typical isolation of high school classrooms. Teacher expectations for themselves and their peers are frequently heightened as well. Alder's building principal explained: "The degree of staff interaction has changed significantly. I think the kinds of questions and conversations teachers are having is significantly different than before we started the process." Teachers from three other schools further illustrate the change:

> Teachers are realizing how much and what other teachers do.

> We are growing as a team, learning to trust each other and work together better…. The fact that we're together even once a week…is a huge change because that kind of thing never happened before.

> They are just a phenomenal group, they just really are the leading edge of pushing things…wanting the child/student to raise the bar, high standards, intellectual stuff where in a whole building it was more of a 'survive the day' and 'get through the year' mentality.

While indicative of the positive changes in small schools, these teachers' experiences are not universal. One teacher in a small school, where the professional community is still "developing," described their meetings as being similar to the former comprehensive school staff meeting "where we are here because we have to be here and I am just going to sit here and wait until they tell me what to do and then I will do the least amount that I have to, to satisfy what they ask me to do. And not that we're all the way to that, but we are closer than I would like us to be."

Elevated Conversations Bring Increased Expectations for Teacher Work

Teachers described "higher expectations" for their work coming from administrators, students, and themselves. In addition to increased familiarity with each other, higher expectations can be traced to the decentralized decision-making that characterizes four of the small schools included in this study, where teachers have more authority and accountability for student outcomes. Teachers' comments suggested that for some, increased expectations are a direct result of the redesign process:

> I think administration's expectations of us are higher because we wanted this…. This is the opportunity to make dreams come true…. Everyone expects a high standard of excellence…it escalates everybody and keeps us going.

> Students are learning to have higher expectations and [be more] demanding…I believe students are raising their expectation of what could happen.

> I now believe that we do our kids a disservice by not expecting more of them, that we are disrespecting our students by saying 'I am going to teach down here because that is all I think you can do.'

Within two of the small schools, public displays of student work and anticipated publication of Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) scores (disaggregated by small school) are reportedly increasing teachers' expectations for their own work as well as that of their students. Hemlock's first exhibition of student work raised concerns among teachers. Wondering if they actually trusted kids to do the work, teachers revealed a deeper anxiety about their own ability to motivate students.

> "I am going to be directly responsible for their science…. If the kids do poorly I have to basically face my peers and say 'this is what happened.'"
>
> *Teacher at Elm School*

A teacher from Elm expressed concern about preparing his students for the WASL, knowing that the community will be watching how students perform in his subject. "I am going to be directly responsible for their science…. If the kids do poorly I have to basically face my peers and say 'this is what happened.'"

While most teachers report knowing their colleagues' work better, teachers at Elm described a tension in bringing up negative feedback from students and challenging their peers to improve. One teacher explained: "The kids…become pretty comfortable with you and they will let you know the teachers that aren't really

pulling their weight." But, he isn't yet comfortable approaching particular teachers and saying "let me tell you what kids are thinking." Colleagues who are perceived negatively create tension because incoming students often select a school based on the teachers. Attracting new students each year is crucial for survival. Commented a teacher: "You want teachers to be doing a good job if you want to get the kids in your school." Even those who are more comfortable now in confronting other teachers described it as a new and difficult experience.

The Nature of Elevated Conversation

Our data suggest that elevated conversation happens in both structured and casual settings, though the peer learning opportunities are equally profound in each. For example, some teachers commonly have structured meeting times where they discuss failing students, share curricular ideas, and plan for the future. But these conversations also often take place over lunch, in the halls, or after school.

NATURE OF ELEVATED CONVERSATION Elevated conversation includes both *practice-oriented* and *reflective* or *philosophical* discussions about teaching and learning. Our data indicate that some teachers feel the conversations are most effective when there is a balance between discussing practical and philosophical topics.

These examples of elevated conversation, which tackle aspects of teaching practice, were the most commonly seen across the schools. However, "practice-oriented" conversations sometimes went hand-in-hand with more reflective, philosophical conversations. These two types of elevated conversation appeared to occur equally among strong and developing professional communities, though they became more routine and inclusive of all staff as the community grew stronger.

At Hemlock, teachers found that creating a theme-based interdisciplinary project led to collaboration and discussions about rigor. Having a common focus meant that all teachers were more invested in the students' success. Reported a Hemlock teacher: "It also gave us an opportunity to get on the same page about the standards…so that we can really understand what an A looks like with these projects and we are not just awarding credit to students based on certain personal response." Thus, the conversation moved from practice (how to do an interdisciplinary project), to reflecting on the topic of rigor (what constitutes exemplary student work), and then back to practice and assessment (assigning grades to projects).

A teacher-leader at Birch is creating structures for teachers to take on the philosophical topics of equity, college readiness, and rigor. One teacher in this school reported that the elevated conversation encouraged reflection on his practice: "The plain old discussions within Birch have really deepened my commitment to teaching. I have evaluated that teaching and have accepted the fact that teaching is different now than 24 years ago." The staff begins each meeting with a check-in that engages the teachers in personal reflection. "For example, we were beginning to plan our parent [information sharing] process and [the] question to the group was 'What did it mean to you to have your parents involved or not involved in school, particularly high school?' And that was a particularly interesting conversation." On the topic of whether "it is acceptable to say that we want to prepare all kids to go to college," teachers reflected on the extent to which going to college was an informed choice when they were teenagers.

While the topics of parent engagement and college access are philosophical, they are rooted in practical concerns that schools must consider. As the previous anecdotes illustrate, Birch's teacher-leader has found another way to elevate the conversation by connecting practical, even mundane, topics to both personal history and principle — and model constructivist teaching in the process.

> "The plain old discussions within Birch have really deepened my commitment to teaching. I have evaluated that teaching and have accepted the fact that teaching is different now than 24 years ago."
>
> *Teacher-Leader at Birch School*

We found that professional communities engaged in elevated conversations to varying degrees and with varying frequency. It was also common for conversations to get stuck in the more global concerns about restructuring. While these topics are important, teachers were easily sidetracked by re-visiting issues such as scheduling and what courses people would teach, rather than how teachers would change their classroom practice.

Early data indicate professional communities that achieve a balance between discussing concrete aspects of teaching practice and more philosophical topics in education create the most rewarding and productive elevated conversation. Some teachers noted that engaging in one without the other was a source of frustration. Philosophy without concrete direction produced anxiety about preparing for the coming year of implementation at one school:

> Philosophy is a large part of it … but, I'm a concrete sequential type person. I want this done. I want to know what's going to happen with special ed. I want to know what's going to happen with integration. Philosophy is good and that's going to get us together, but we also have certain things that we need to get done by next year.

At another school, overemphasis on creating a project drowned out the deeper conversation about the project's purpose:

> I think our problem is we emphasize what I consider the fluff — the bells and whistles, the logistics of the [exhibition] — and not the fact that our kids can't read or [do math]. I think those are the issues … we give lip service to literacy and numeracy, but that's not where we spend our time. We spend our time on what makes a good presentation. But when I bring that up, I am told the [exhibition] does help that. I'm sorry, as cool as it is to have a student write and perform a Johnny Cash song, he's not a better calculus student for it. He doesn't read better or understand the world better than he used to.

Improving Student Achievement

The challenge teachers now face is harnessing the improved communication and changing professional culture in order to improve student achievement. While several individual teachers employed new practices based on their increased knowledge of students and teachers, such progress is not, as yet, pervasive in any of the seven schools. Teachers have noticed their peers, "trying to do more than just stand and deliver, trying to make it more student-centered learning than teacher directed" where "students are doing most of the guiding to other students… [are] more in control of their education" and the teacher is "more like a guide." One teacher gave herself permission to "fall behind" in the curriculum because "my kids now know the stuff that we have covered at a better depth than my kids have ever known."

The majority of teachers interviewed have the desire to work closer together, but for the most part, have not yet found a way. They want to take advantage of the

fact that they are teaching the same students. Initially, that seems to include being aware of each other's curriculum content—even across core disciplines—and subscribing to a common understanding of good pedagogy. A teacher at Cedar explained: "I have become more dependent on my colleagues and I am excited about that. It has changed and excited me to be able to work and talk with people after so many years of not doing so. More and more, we're getting adult affirmations and support." One change found across the small schools that supports this new interdependence is the way students "are going through a smaller group of teachers" rather than "scatter[ing] to 30 different teachers" after each period. Hemlock's building principal noted that teachers are "talking about…'This is what I'm doing, this is my planning, here are the kids I have, this is how I'm doing.'"

> "I have become more dependent on my colleagues and I am excited about that. It has changed and excited me to be able to work and talk with people after so many years of not doing so. More and more, we're getting adult affirmations and support."
>
> *Teacher at Cedar School*

Within two of the stronger professional communities, early data show that a number of students are better served because teachers are in each other's classrooms. In these examples, special education teachers work with one small school population rather than being spread across two or more small schools. They are able to discuss individual students with general education teachers and coordinate a follow-up strategy—"The follow-up part is something that almost never happened in the big school." Because they know all of the students so well, special education teachers interact with the general student population, "which never, ever happened in the big school…. When I go to class, I see how other kids react. I will approach the teacher and say, 'with this student, why don't we try that?'"

Special education teachers reported that other teachers have become more sensitive to individual students' needs. There is a recognition of special education kids and teachers are more willing to individualize assignments. It also helps special education students, indeed all students, to see the same group of teachers several times in their schedule.

Elevated Conversation as a Necessary First Step Toward Changed Practice

While individual teachers have been influenced to adopt new teaching techniques, elevated conversation and the emergence of a new professional culture has not led to substantial changes in professional practice across the small schools thus far. One teacher's observation is representative of what is happening in all seven schools: "The good news is that there's conversation about kids, both good and hard situations, we're able to talk about kids. There's progress, but I haven't seen real fundamental change in what's happening in the classrooms yet." Our observations have led us to view elevated conversation as a necessary precursor to moving in that direction.

In this first year of small schools implementation, teachers are predominantly talking about changing their classroom practice in terms of planning for the coming year. Whether it was discussing structures like looping or exploring pedagogy such as Socratic questioning and strategies for teaching in a block, teachers report that they want to do more and plan to take "more risks" in the future. Reported a teacher: "I think next year we are all going to be a lot more focused on teaching

practices within the [small schools]. It definitely will happen next year and that is a plus."

> "The good news is that there's conversation about kids, both good and hard situations, we're able to talk about kids. There's progress, but I haven't seen real fundamental change in what's happening in the classrooms yet."
>
> *Teacher*

Several teachers mentioned preliminary conversations about teaching integrated units. Alder facilitated the conversation by creating a bulletin board where each teacher had a space to post what she is doing in her classes, encouraging others to make connections. But across the seven schools, teachers and administrators seemed to have varying degrees of understanding or clarity about what "integrated projects" might mean. Some teachers talked about covering the same curricular content or themes across classes, others are focused on having common expectations and standards for assignments. Still others described integration as being between teaching style and individual students' skill levels:

> They're starting to talk about integrated curriculum, how and what it means. Does it mean it's skill-based? For instance, we're all going to do something that has to do with Africa. Or, are we all going to be working on taking a piece of literature and breaking it down and understanding it or working on some other kind of comprehension or writing strategy?

The key discovery in these early data is that some teachers are talking about curricular integration and the topic of integration is providing teachers with one focus for their conversation.

Clearly, these seven professional communities need more time to understand how to use elevated conversation as a springboard for changing teaching and learning and to find common understanding about these changes. But while teachers share the desire to work more closely together, they need regular, designated meeting time and formal professional development to empower them to do so. "They are looking for a better structure to interact with one another, for being able to watch one another teach and have conversations about teaching and learning."

The Nature of Professional Learning

In this section, we describe the ways that professionals in small schools are learning—both informally because of increased opportunities to talk with each other and to learn about each other's practice, and formally through structures that have been put in place to sustain and shape their professional development.

Informal Opportunities for Professional Learning

Teachers in this study reported many informal opportunities for learning that exist as a result of their membership in small professional communities. Teachers talked about having increased opportunities to talk about students and to discover what their colleagues do. In some cases, teachers' expectations for their work were raised as a result of their work with a group of teachers who share a common vision and set of goals for their students. For example, one teacher's desire to advance professionally was heightened because of his conversations with colleagues about kids and teaching and learning: "I don't want to just be seen as somebody who's like 'the shop teacher.'"

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

We saw professional communities providing informal opportunities to learn when:

• Teachers had increased opportunities to talk with one another.

• Teachers developed a sense of trust with one another.

• Teachers' work was made public.

In other cases, teachers felt comfortable enough among the small school staff to ask for help with their teaching. They established norms for seeking informal support, such as carving out time to discuss "students of concern" at staff meetings and asking the advice of the group. According to a Cedar teacher: "We will send out an e-mail, 'I have this particular student in my class and if anybody has them, what do you see that's going on? Here's my concern.' And we get responses back from all the staff." Another teacher recounted a similar experience: "Within two days I had five different teachers from my school in my room helping me with kids, and that is unique. That is very different."

> "Within two days I had five different teachers from my school in my room helping me with kids, and that is unique. That is very different."
>
> *Teacher at Cedar*

Having more opportunities to talk helped teachers develop enough trust to share their own inadequacies. For some teachers, this sense of trust extended into after school hours. One teacher described a sense of support that she experienced when a fellow staff member called her in the evening and asked, "How can we help you?" She elaborated by explaining that the atmosphere among staff in her small school was non-judgmental. She attributed this positive tone to her teacher-leader:

> I think that part of our success…is the way we communicate with each other…the atmosphere is created by the teacher-leader—that everybody should feel comfortable. No matter what is said out loud, don't be afraid that you are going to be judged…. That opens a lot of trust among us.

Teachers in four of the small schools talked about their teaching practice becoming more public—a phenomenon that sets the opportunity for teachers to learn from each other. Hemlock's principal commented that for the first time in his 17 years as a school leader, teachers in the small schools were inviting him into their classrooms:

> People are coming to me and saying, 'I'd really like you to come in. I'm starting this new unit and I am having trouble with student engagement and I

would like you to come in and give me some feedback on how I can increase their engagement.'

Teachers at Cedar reported that they were working together on curriculum ideas and that they were getting used to having other teachers visit their classrooms:

> I am working closely with other staff members, working together on curriculum ideas, on exchanging project ideas…having people in my classroom and being in other people's classrooms. That's never happened before.

They referred to this phenomenon as one in which the "walls" between their classrooms were coming down. "Teachers," they said, "are starting to experience what's going on in other classrooms as teamwork has started." They explained that this provided the opportunity for "teachers to teach teachers" suggesting that "the experts are here right now in the building."

It seems clear from these examples that some teachers are learning from one another through their involvement in small schools. But, the learning experiences vary—from one school to another and from one teacher to another.

Formal Structures to Support Professional Learning

Teachers in the seven professional communities have explored structures that have the potential to support their learning over time. We call these structures "formal" because they offer protocols[13] to guide the conversation. For example, Alder and Cedar started fledgling Critical Friends Groups (CFGs).

- *Critical Friends Groups* CFGs are typically groups of six to eight colleagues who agree to meet regularly and to look closely at one another's practice and at student work.[14] Members of these groups usually develop agreements about what constitutes good teaching and learning, visit each other's classrooms, and gather evidence of what works best for student learning. The Small Schools Project and Coalition of Essential Schools, organizations that offer regular professional development support to the Gates Foundation grantee schools in Washington State, have emphasized in their meetings, workshops, and publications the important role CFGs can play in supporting professional communities.

  Several study participants saw CFGs as a structure to support their learning. A teacher at Cedar said: "I love the fact that we have done CFGs and I can bring a project to the table and get ideas." In other cases, however, teachers had not found the time to participate in CFGs given other small school staff responsibilities: "A lot of that planning time is being spent on working towards the structural quality of reform…that and people are going to so many meetings, meetings, meetings." Hemlock had implemented CFGs building-wide before the redesign work began, but has not been able to adapt the structure to support CFGs in each of the new small schools.

  Most schools saw Critical Friends Groups as a good thing, but, caught up in the early years of a restructuring effort, they simply had not institutionalized the process to the point of realizing its benefits.

- *Teacher Study Groups* Teacher study groups are another formal structure, which Birch had begun to implement. A number of teachers saw the study group as a structure to support their professional learning. One interviewee described the collaborative learning process, which involved reading a profes-

[13] A protocol is a guided format that provides focus and structure to teachers' conversations about their classroom practice. See the Resources section of this report for information about where to access protocols on the Internet.

[14] Cushman, 1998

sional book on literacy instruction. As part of that activity the professional community sought out and considered suggestions made by the high school literacy coach:

> We've been involved in trying to get a book study going on literacy. We started with a very readable book for high school teachers. We did the first chapter and people really liked it. So now we are going to 'jigsaw' the rest of the book when we get time. It's very hard to get time. But people are interested in literacy…we've invited [the literacy coach] to join us.

Another teacher at this school noted that she has learned from the experience of discussing classroom practice with the small school professional community. She commented that, as a first-year teacher, the specific focus on literacy (evidenced by their joint reading of the same text and inviting an outside expert to visit their meetings) has supported her professional growth: "There's been a lot of literacy coaching and the literacy team comes up with the different strategies." There "hasn't been a lot of follow through on it," but this teacher has already "tried one or two things" in her classroom.

- *Peer Observation*   Administrators can play an important support role in creating formal structures for professional learning. The building principal joined teams of teachers at Cedar in visiting colleagues' classrooms. Observations focused on a key question, such as, "How do we know students are achieving?" and were followed by discussion. Teachers at Alder also received release time to individually observe other teachers' classes, which led to conversation among them about "common themes and ideas that we can teach." Alder's assistant principal felt his job was to "nurture" the small school, as evidenced by teachers' experiences with him "bringing…research-based knowledge and ideas and helping [them] apply those."

While these are promising examples, we saw few formal structures for professional development among the seven small schools overall. In fact, many teachers "wish [teaching practice] was more different, to be honest." We heard frustration that some of the structures that might help teachers sustain and improve their work were the very things that they had little time or energy to develop.

Barriers to Developing Professional Community

The first year of this three-year study revealed that the seven small schools exhibit different levels of professional community. Already, teachers face various challenges to sustain them and to achieve the desired goal of developing their teaching practice. Commonly cited inhibitors include increased workload, insufficient time, lack of district support, and staff turnover. The following section discusses these concerns, which we will continue to watch in the coming years.

Increased Workload

Even the schools that are experiencing early success face serious constraints to developing professional community and changing their classroom practice. It remains to be seen how long teachers can sustain their current enthusiasm and commitment to the additional work required in the restructuring effort before burning out. Data gathered from all 73 redesigned small schools in Washington show that teachers average four preps per semester/trimester, which is one more than the previous year.[15] On top of this, teachers act as advisors and "have the responsibility of being the liaison for the student between the parents and the school…the workload has increased tremendously." Part of the problem is that few schools have yet created structures that support teachers' changing roles. Reported a teacher: "We're still constrained by a six-period, 55-minute schedule which is buzz sawing your way through a student load of 150 kids a day and [it] doesn't lend itself to some real innovative and exciting teaching practices."

[15] Survey data gathered during the 2003-2004 school year by the Small Schools Project.

Lack of Time

Most of the teachers in the seven schools feel as if there is insufficient time built-in to their regular schedule to approach the level of collaboration and professional development that characterize strong professional communities. At Alder, teachers regularly (and sometimes reluctantly) volunteer their time to meet. The commonly used incentive of compensating teachers for extra work hours "doesn't make any difference when you don't have the time to do it all." With regard to Cedar, an interviewee said: "I see all the things they want to do…when will they do it?…Having enough time to cooperate—it's not clear that that's there." Whether looking at pieces of student work together or being able to analyze a videotape of one's work with a colleague, too many other things compete for teachers' time. "It's not because there is a lack of desire, but it just seems like other things always get in the way."

Only a couple of small schools have regularly scheduled time for professional development, collaboration, or staff meetings. When time is scheduled, it is often poorly utilized. We observed district- and building-wide administrative issues taking time from small school staff discussions. Teachers also get bogged down, spending "most of [the] time talking about structural stuff…. What we are not talking about is specifically what is happening in our classrooms."

Districts play an important role in supporting professional communities by approving, or disapproving, additional resources, such as paid planning time for teachers. One school's late-start days dropped from 20 to 6 in three years because the community had been "very challenging, if not opposed, to release time" and school board members were "adamantly opposed to it."

Lack of District Support

Several districts in this study operate with the belief that all of their high schools must be treated equally, regardless of the high school's commitment to significant restructuring. One district administrator explained: "We said you are going to do [the restructuring] using the same amount of resources everybody else has because we want to maintain equitable distribution of resources, so we didn't give them anything above and beyond."

The repercussions of such a point of view include scenarios such as: no funding to update the school building in order to accommodate several distinct small schools; an inability to reschedule student transportation for flexible scheduling; district-directed professional development; and inflexibility in re-designating teaching positions (for example, from vocational education to general education). We did find exceptions, including one district (which has multiple high schools) where central office staff supervised students who arrived on the early bus, so teachers could attend the weekly late-start sessions.[16]

[16] See the Resources on Professional Community section of this report for suggestions on how to ask your district for teacher collaboration time.

Staff Turnover

Most of the small schools can anticipate changes in staff being a point of stress, whether it is due to administrator and teacher turnover or to growth in staff size. While teacher turnover is common in high schools, the issue for the redesigned small schools is how to integrate new staff members into the professional community. It is unclear what role small school staff members will have in making hiring decisions about new teachers and how well prepared they are to acculturate new administrators and teachers into the small school vision.

In the coming year, three of the buildings will have a new principal. Alder will experience changes at every leadership level—the superintendent, principal, assistant principal assigned to the small school, and the teacher-leader. At Birch, where the staff has been working together for years, several new teachers will join them when the building adds another grade level. Fifty-seven percent of the teachers will be new in the coming year. "The challenge is to bring them up to date with procedures and district policies…they were not part of the conversations."

In addition to the typical staff turnover that any school experiences in a year, Hemlock has experienced the departure of key teachers over the past three years. These teachers were instrumental in writing the original grant to the Gates Foundation and creating the initial enthusiasm for the restructuring effort. Although they left for typical reasons, primarily having to do with new professional opportunities, their departure caused a feeling of abandonment among some of their peers. "Part of the reason I wanted to do this was the opportunity to work with those people and kind of buy into their vision and then the perception from my perspective was that they bailed, they jumped ship."

> "Last year the significance of our experience was losing a principal. And what that did was change the ownership so it was no longer a one-person ownership. It turned into people realizing that it's all about what we put into this."
>
> *Teacher at Cedar*

Staff turnover can also precipitate a positive change. Because Cedar's original push to redesign was perceived as being top-down, teachers' suspicion and hostility nearly brought the effort to a standstill in the first year. When the principal left in year two, teachers were inspired to take on more of a leadership role and awarded the new leader with their trust.

One teacher explained: "Last year the significance of our experience was losing a principal. And what that did was change the ownership so it was no longer a one-person ownership. It turned into people realizing that it's all about what we put into this." The challenge now is to help incoming staff members to understand and share in the ownership and vision for small schools.

While some teachers at each of the seven schools are realizing the benefits of small professional communities, they face serious challenges to sustainability and success. As our early data reveal, a manageable workload, sufficient time, district-level support, and a process for acculturating new staff members will be qualities to watch for in the coming years.

The first year of this three-year study provides an initial look at how professional community is developing in seven redesigned small schools. Teachers' experiences revealed several tensions inherent to small school redesign work and we observed areas of conflict between the new small schools and the traditional high school structure, which are both cultural and political. As we assess the schools' progress, we are left with a number of questions, listed below, about the support structures and sustainability of each small school's efforts to create professional community.

How are teachers' and administrators' daily schedules and time demands changing to support their new roles?

School personnel are not typically provided extra time to meet the increased demands of their new roles. Restructuring class schedules to provide regular time for teacher work and professional learning would balance the added responsibilities, such as student advising, curricular collaboration, and parent communication. District and school leaders play a role in relieving this tension insofar as they have the authority to support structural changes and allow teachers to determine how meeting time is spent. Teachers in turn must become more disciplined at utilizing their time wisely to capitalize on learning opportunities and incorporating new knowledge into their professional practice.

How are professional learning opportunities structured to support teachers in changing their instructional practice?

A tension exists between the expectation for changes in teachers' instructional practice and the lack of formal structures to encourage and support the learning necessary to make those changes. Even though teachers share many of the same students (and can therefore talk about students' needs), they operate within old structures like a six-period schedule with a load of 150 students. Until these kinds of structural changes occur, teachers cannot fully implement new classroom practices.

Teachers also need more authority to direct their professional learning and classroom practice, which is fundamentally an issue of trust. Districts must support teachers in using their knowledge of students to make judgments about instruction. This issue remains largely unaddressed in public schools but is a key factor in the small schools' redesign work. Structural and operational decisions must increasingly become the small school's responsibility, thereby becoming less district-driven.

As teachers develop a common focus, shared expectations, and collegiality, how will they contend with the teacher and administrator turnover that is characteristic of large high schools?

Teacher and administrator turnover is a fact of life in most high schools. But, research suggests that a common focus, shared expectations, and collegiality are hallmarks of strong professional communities. Teachers in small schools will have to overcome staff changes and share their vision for success in order to sustain their work.

The departure of even one or two people in a small school can have a profound effect on the staff. Whether people perceive the change as a natural occurrence

and how they deal with it are the central issues. We expect that staff changes will become easier as schools adopt practices of distributed leadership, distributed skills, and shared institutional knowledge.

While these tensions create obstacles that threaten the school redesign work, all seven schools are realizing some of the benefits of being small. Teachers indicate their hope for further change in the future. We will watch for evidence that they are building on the strength of professional community to create sustainable learning opportunities and changing classroom practice in order to better serve students.

This report provides an early look at how professional community is developing in seven redesigned small schools. The professional communities are in varying degrees of development in terms of teachers' ability to articulate a common focus and curricular goals. Teachers also express different levels of camaraderie and collaboration in their work together. Although the nature and depth of the development of professional communities varies, often substantially, each of the seven schools has made significant gains through the redesign work.

In all seven schools, we found teachers discussing student needs and classroom practice with one another—an occurrence that we labeled "elevated conversation." In having these conversations, teachers seemed to be taking advantage of the informal opportunities for learning inherent in the small school structure. At some schools, teachers were exploring formal structures to support ongoing professional learning. While we saw few examples of formal structures among the small schools, teachers are clearly learning together. It is still early in the redesign process to expect many structures to be institutionalized; the evidence of interest in adopting new practices, such as Critical Friends Groups and study groups, is a promising indication of support for professional learning.

Teachers also expressed frustration at their inability to capitalize on the changing professional culture as much as they would like. While several said they felt better able to serve students because they now share a small cohort of them and are able to seek advice from their colleagues, many teachers wished for more collaboration and changes in teaching practice. Even so, our data show that teachers are learning a lot from each other, in large part due to the culture shift that small size has made possible.

We anticipate that with strong leadership and time, the professional communities we describe as developing will move toward a stronger sense of purpose that all teachers in the community can articulate. We believe that being strong in terms of sharing a common focus, vision, and language is a first step toward building collegiality and trust. When this happens, teachers collaborate more, seek advice on student issues and discuss classroom practice. We think this kind of elevated conversation is a precursor to developing a sense of mutual accountability and sustaining formal learning opportunities to improve instructional practice. We will watch for evidence in the coming years of teachers building on their professional learning and taking advantage of their professional community to integrate new classroom practices and increase student achievement.

Between fall 2003 and spring 2006, the Small Schools Project research team will conduct on-site observations, interviews, focus groups, and document review. Our spring 2004 data collection included the following methods:

Interviews

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

Focus Groups

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

Observations and Document Review

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

Gates Foundation Seven Attributes of High Achievement Schools

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

Gates Foundation Essential Components of Teaching and Learning

- *Active Inquiry*   Students are engaged in active participation, exploration, and research; activities draw out perceptions and develop understanding; students are encouraged to make decisions about their learning; and teachers utilize the diverse experiences of students to build effective learning experiences.

- *In-Depth Learning*   The focus is competence, not coverage. Students struggle with complex problems, explore core concepts to develop deep understanding; and apply knowledge in real world contexts.

- *Performance Assessment*   Clear expectations define what students should know and be able to do; students produce quality work products and present to real audiences; student work shows evidence of understanding, not just recall; assessment tasks allow students to exhibit higher-order thinking; and teachers and students set learning goals and monitor progress.

Washington's public schools, like those in most other states, are embedded in an ongoing statewide effort to reform and improve student achievement. In Washington, the reform effort both supports and constrains serious work at school redesign. After a decade of uncoordinated efforts following the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, Washington State reform took serious hold with the passage of House Bill 1209 in the Spring of 1993.[17]

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

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

House Bill 1209 also created what is now known as the Washington Assessment of Student Learning, or WASL, a test that would be administered to virtually all students in grades four, seven, and ten, and provides the state with a "snapshot" of how the state's schools are doing. The WASL has been phased in over the past several years, with the science test making its debut in the spring of 2003.[18]

During the 2003 legislative session, the Washington State legislature approved the requirements for the Certificate of Academic Achievement (formerly the Certificate of Mastery), which requires the class of 2008 to pass the WASL in reading, writing, and math in order to graduate.[19] Students in the class of 2010 will also have to pass the science WASL. Students who do not pass the WASL the first time around will have up to four opportunities to retake it.

While the WASL will not be "high stakes" until 2006, when the class of 2008 takes and must pass the 10th grade test, the results are already widely reported in the media, and, in some districts, principal evaluations are based in part on improving WASL scores. The 2003 WASL results show that 64 percent of students met the standard in reading, 65 percent met the standard in writing, and 44 percent in math. However, only 38.9 percent of the students passed all three sections of the test.[20] Without dramatic improvement, six out of ten students will not graduate from Washington high schools in 2008.

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

[17] U.S. Department of Education, 1983.

[18] The science WASL is administered in grades five, eight, and ten.

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

[20] Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction website, **http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us**; look under "State Results"

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

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

If you are interested in learning more about professional community and how to create structures to support and sustain professional community at your school, we encourage you to review the following websites' compilations of articles and resources:

Study Kit for Redesigning Large Schools

The School Redesign Network at Stanford University has compiled several resources related to school redesign, including an entire module on professional community. The resources explore how small schools are reorganizing to foster: shared forms of leadership; continuous professional development and collaboration; hiring and evaluation processes based on these principles; and the inclusion of families and the larger community in the life of the school. Resources include:

- Protocols and models for looking at student work together
- Tips for having meaningful professional discussions
- Tips for developing effective professional development
- The seminal article on the topic, called "Building Professional Communities" by Sharon Kruse, Karen Seashore Louis, and Anthony Byrk

More information can be found at
http://www.schoolredesign.net/srn/server.php?idx=454

Planning Resources for Teachers in Small High Schools

Published by the Small Schools Project, the second volume of this series includes a collection of promising resources on professional community in the Adapting Classroom Practice section. Resources include practical tools, professional development options, and critical readings on the topic:

- Information on Critical Friends Groups
- Protocols from the National School Reform Faculty that provide ways to get feedback on work in progress, examine student work as a means to refine curriculum, and discuss a dilemma
- Information and tips on implementing Whole Faculty Study Groups
- Information and tools for implementing Lesson Study
- Tools for collaborative curriculum planning

More information can be found at http://www.smallschoolsproject.org under "Tools/Classroom Resources."

Asking your School Board for Teacher Collaboration Time

Finding teacher collaboration time is challenging and more and more schools are going to their boards with requests. If yours is one of them, this document will help you think through what you need to include in your board presentation.

More information can be found at http://www.smallschoolsproject.org under "State & District Support."

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