A teacher leader hands several sheets of paper to 14 teachers sitting in a circle. “Take a minute to look these over,” he says, “and then we’ll talk about what we can learn from what the kids say.”

The room falls silent as the teachers look over the results of a student survey. Suddenly a teacher says, “I always struggle with this kind of survey. I can beat myself up over it.” Other teachers offer support, saying, “That’s easy to do, but it’s not about us, it’s about what our kids need.”

“Yes,” says one of the teacher leaders, “and what it tells us about maybe changing the way we teach. For example, what I see is that some of the students are asking for more rigor. I’m afraid that if I asked for more, I’d leave the bottom third of my class behind and condemn them to a failing grade.”

“I back off. It scares me,” he adds, not afraid to admit he doesn’t have all the answers. “But then I ask myself, ‘Am I shying away from rigorous work?’”

A FRAMEWORK FOR LEARNING

The teachers in this small high school have worked together for three years. They share a commitment to adult learning as a necessary step to improved student learning. They have developed relationships with colleagues that enabled them to challenge each other through rigorous conversations and learning activities that were relevant to their individual and collective teaching situations.

The principles of relationships, relevance, and rigor (the three R’s) provide a framework for structuring conversations and initiatives in instructional practice (Wagner, 2002). Typically, this framework is applied to student learning. In this article, we apply the three R’s to adult learning and highlight three small schools in order to understand what makes the difference — what turns the corner — to instructional change.

At the Small Schools Project, we’ve spent six years working with more than 94 high schools, 68 of which were part of 18 sites converting from large comprehensive high schools to small, focused schools. The following is adapted from a report...
that draws on data from a three-year study (fall 2003 to spring 2006) of
seven small schools in Washington state. These schools received reinven-
tion grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Through our
work, we have come to understand that what is true for transformational
student learning is also true for transformational adult learning:
• Instruction must take place within
a community of learners, provid-
ing participants with opportuni-
ties to build on each other’s
knowledge, offer feedback, and
refine thinking.
• Instruction must be personalized —
honoring learners’ interests and
strengths, as well as eliciting and
challenging learners’ preexisting
understanding of the subject mat-
ter.
• Instruction must include frequent
formative assessment, which helps
make learners’ thinking visible to
themselves and their peers
(National Research Council,
1999; Wiggins & McTighe,
2006).

Effective adult learning requires a
combination of individual and collec-
tive practice. We characterize individ-
ual adult learning by growth in a
teacher’s relationship with her stu-
dents (adjusting her practice accord-
ing to student needs and achieve-
ment), a personal interest in the learn-
ing topic, and personal commitment
to attempting new teaching strategies
and inviting feedback.

Collective adult learning is charac-
terized by growth in teachers’ relation-
ships with each other as part of a
strong professional community, a con-
nection between the small school
vision and the group’s instructional
goals, and a group commitment to
 colaborate on aspects of their practice
that matter for improving student
learning. The adult learning process
becomes transformative when teach-
ers’ practices and beliefs are chal-
lenged or changed, and student
achievement increases.

The momentum generated by the
individual and group learning process-
es is strengthened by mutual account-
ability between and among teachers to
open their practice. Teachers provide
and receive feedback on instruction
with the goal of transforming the
practice and beliefs of both the indi-
viduals and the group.

Transformative learning, therefore,
requires collaboration, risk taking,
and individual as well as group com-
mitment. These qualities both rely on
and help to define relationships, rele-
vance, and rigor within the adult
learning community.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THREE
SMALL SCHOOLS

We found that all seven schools in

KEY QUALITIES OF THE 3 R’S IN ADULT LEARNING

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

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

Rigor
• Instruction is grounded in content that is complex, ambiguous, provocative,
and emotionally or personally challenging.
• Teachers are engaged in active participation, exploration, and research.
• Teachers set learning goals for themselves and monitor progress toward
academic excellence.
• Teachers develop resilience, flexibility, and confidence by facing academic
challenges and temporary classroom setbacks that are opportunities for
deeper learning (Karschney & Squires, 2005).
the study exhibited elements of the three R’s in terms of adult learning. However, three of the schools — which we call Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut — show the most promise toward creating learning opportunities that are transformative. Although it is too soon to tell from our data, we expect that this change in adult behavior will lead to changes in student engagement and learning.

Teachers in these three schools are moving from talking about instructional change to making it happen. In the schools where this movement occurred, three additional components were also in place. Relationship-driven, relevant, and rigorous adult learning are supported by distributed leadership, an instructional framework, and a strong professional community.

**DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP**

Over three years, a new leadership structure was emerging. This new structure moved away from a reliance on administrative hierarchies and moved toward a network of shared practice. As a result, everyone in the school became responsible for leadership. Within the small schools, teachers began to address school issues under the leadership of the most qualified staff member, regardless of his or her rank within the traditional high school hierarchy. At the same time, all three schools elected a teacher leader.

As the leaders closest to the change, teacher leaders epitomize this distribution of leadership. They play a number of important roles in supporting adult learning, including vision keeper, instructional coach/facilitator, modeler, and producer. In addition, teacher leaders act as advocates for their small school to the building leadership council. Making decisions through a leadership council shifts accountability for the choices made from the traditional hierarchical model to a more reciprocal model because both administrators and teachers participate.

In all three schools, teachers discussed the importance of changing teachers’ instructional practice and their role in supporting their small school colleagues with implementing these changes. For example, Cedar’s teacher leaders periodically initiate and participate in ongoing e-mail conversations, including:

- How are you incorporating rigor and authenticity into your first-semester finals?
- How are you embedding rigor into your daily instruction?
- When we consider the Cedar vision, where specifically are we making progress?

Cedar’s teachers made a group commitment to change their instructional practice and engage in learning activities individually and collectively. They hold themselves and one another accountable by agreeing to implement new instructional strategies and opening their classrooms to one another for observation and feedback.

The teacher leaders create and support this culture of risk taking by scheduling public demonstration lessons for each of the teachers to demonstrate new instructional strategies in their classrooms.

The principals of all three schools recognize the critical role that building leadership plays in supporting adult learning and instructional change, including evaluating each professional learning opportunity based on how it will help improve student achievement.

**INSTRUCTIONAL FRAMEWORK**

In all three schools, teachers talked about how their schoolwide instructional framework helped guide the staff’s collective practice as well as their individual classroom practice. These frameworks emerged over the course of developing the small schools. Teachers worked together to create a collective mission and vision for their school and for classroom practice.

Alder’s teachers said their instructional framework involved making their teaching practice more hands-on, project-oriented, and inquiry-based. Teachers use Essential Questions as one strategy to support this focus. Essential Questions, developed by the Coalition of Essential Schools, are multilayered questions that reveal the complexities of a subject or discipline.

At Cedar, the teachers chose the text *Teaching What Matters Most* as their school’s instructional framework because the book’s focus on thought, authenticity, rigor, and differentiation matched their needs and priorities.

The book, by Richard W. Strong, Harvey F. Silver, and Matthew J.
Perini (ASCD, 2001), was given to all Gates grantee high schools in Washington.

At Chestnut, teachers engaged in joint work around “Habits of Mind” and “Habits of Work” that the staff developed and recorded on posters to hang in each classroom. “Habits of Mind” were first developed by Deborah Meier and her colleagues at Central Park East Secondary School 20 years ago. Many schools adopt the habits as they were written, while others add to or create their own, as Chestnut has done.

The goal at each school is to use a common approach and language to facilitate students and teachers making connections across the disciplines.

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

In his career working in schools, Roland Barth (2006) found that “the nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else.”

Teachers at Alder, Cedar, and Chestnut spoke about how their new professional communities were providing them, for the first time in their careers, the opportunity to move from isolated practice to collaborative work across disciplines. We found that a strong focus, a clear vision, and a shared language are the requisite first steps toward building collegiality. These elements helped establish a sense of trust among teachers in professional communities. When trust was established, teachers were more likely to collaborate, seek advice on student issues, and discuss classroom practice.

This trust led to increased risk taking among the teachers in these three small schools, as well as an increased sense of individual and group accountability to themselves, their colleagues, and their students.

As one teacher said: “[The pressure to make class more rigorous] isn’t necessarily from our administration. The rigor question comes from accountability to our staff. Because we are a small school, because I know every one of these kids … I’m in a way accountable for their [achievement]. I know that next year, every single one of these kids is going to go to that room with my colleague. If they are all horrible writers or can’t read for a purpose or any of that, it reflects on me.”

Teachers’ conversations happen in both structured and casual settings. For example, teachers commonly have structured meeting times where they discuss failing students, share curricular ideas, and plan for the future. But these conversations more frequently take place over lunch, in the halls, and after school.

Teachers in all three schools have made impressive progress toward turning the corner to instructional change through their commitment to adult learning in service of improved student learning. They demonstrate the importance of relationships, relevance, and rigor in adult learning and how the components of distributed leadership, a clear instructional focus, and well-developed professional community make the three R’s more robust.

REFERENCES


