

The OTHER 3 R's

Small Schools Project examines instructional change through relationships, relevance, and rigor

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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 reinvention 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, providing participants with opportunities 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 matter.
- 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 collective practice. We characterize individual adult learning by growth in a teacher's relationship with her students (adjusting her practice according to student needs and achievement), a personal interest in the learning topic, and personal commitment to attempting new teaching strategies and inviting feedback.

Collective adult learning is characterized by growth in teachers' relationships with each other as part of a strong professional community, a con-

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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).



nection between the small school vision and the group's instructional goals, and a group commitment to collaborate on aspects of their practice that matter for improving student learning. The adult learning process becomes transformative when teachers' practices and beliefs are challenged or changed, and student achievement increases.

The momentum generated by the

individual and group learning processes is strengthened by mutual accountability 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 individuals and the group.

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

A CLOSER LOOK AT THREE SMALL SCHOOLS

We found that all seven schools in

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

The project

The Small Schools Project, part of the Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest, provides technical assistance to new small high schools and conversion schools.

Resources include school and district coaching, professional development activities for educators and administrators, publications, and the web site, www.smallschoolsproject.org.

At the web site you can also find the study described in this article, entitled "Adult Learning: Turning the Corner to Instructional Change."

coach/facilitator, modeler, and prod-der. 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, teacher leaders 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.

An instructional framework is:

1. A construct about teaching and learning that guides decisions inside and outside the classroom;
2. An overarching theory of teaching and learning that provides guidelines/key areas of focus for what is important; and
3. A guide for practice, not a teaching recipe (Marzoff, 2005).

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,

Professional communities

Professional communities are groups of teachers, teacher leaders, and other professionals working together in redesigned small high schools who:

1. Work toward having a collective focus on student and adult learning;
2. Share common norms, values, and goals that are evident in their work with each other and in their classroom practice; and
3. Have sufficient time and structures available to build collaborative relationships and interdependence (Wallach & Gallucci, 2004).

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.

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Qualities of distributed leadership

1. Leadership is shared among people in different roles.
2. Leadership is situational rather than hierarchical.
3. Authority is based upon expertise, rather than formal position (Wallach, Lambert, Copland, & Lowry, 2005).