Essential Elements

OREGON
small schools
INITIATIVE

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Essential Elements

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Essential Elements

Introduction

The following Essential Elements guided much of the work of the Oregon Small Schools Initiative as we worked with schools converting from large, comprehensive high schools to small schools on one campus and also with 'new starts', small schools that opened as charters or magnet schools. The elements served as a foundation for small school design and implementation, for professional development and curriculum design, for meetings and conversations, and for ongoing assessment and evaluation of the work. They continue to serve as touchstones for our small school leaders who know that this work is never really done

Overview

Effective schools may take different forms, but they share some common characteristics. They include vision, mission and beliefs held by all stakeholders; the commitment of and opportunity for all stakeholders to be involved in the work of the school; small size (fewer than 100 students per grade); and seven key attributes:

1. Common focus,
2. High expectations,
3. Personalized learning and environment,
4. Respect and responsibility,
5. Performance-based assessments,
6. Time to collaborate, and
7. Technology as a tool.

Schools that incorporate these attributes create conditions for powerful teaching and learning, eliminate the achievement gap, and better prepare all students for college, work and citizenship.

The Oregon Small Schools Initiative uses these 7 attributes of high achievement schools as a framework for defining the essential elements of successful small schools. In the Initiative's School Change Rubric Self-Assessment Tool, these attributes are incorporated into four areas:

Teaching & Learning,

Structure & Culture,

Community Engagement, and

Leadership Development.

Essential Elements

We hope you will explore these essential elements to better understand what it takes for small schools to achieve equitable, challenging and personalized learning for all students.

Essential Elements
Teaching and Learning

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In effective small schools academic achievement depends on a mix of interdependent elements:

- Teachers who challenge and support students to succeed at high levels
- Students who are engaged in learning
- Parents and community members who help define and hold students accountable to high standards
- Frameworks that outline essential learnings and high expectations for achievement
- Strategies that engage students in deep inquiry and meaningful exhibitions of learning

Unlike schools that sporadically test-drive new programs or introduce piecemeal change, successful small schools implement a holistic approach; they integrate all aspects of teaching and learning to help students and teachers accomplish great things.

What elements of teaching and learning are fundamental for successful small schools?

Equitable Outcomes. Equitable outcomes mean all students—regardless of cultural, racial, socioeconomic, linguistic, sexual orientation and special needs backgrounds—achieve at high levels. All students receive challenging and relevant curriculum, and are supported to reach their highest potential.

Academic Rigor. A rigorous academic program challenges all students to explore, research and solve complex problems as they develop deep understanding of core academic concepts and gain ways of thinking and doing that prepare them for college, work and citizenship.

Personalized Learning. When learning is personalized teachers and mentors use what they know about students to individualize instruction and help students take ownership over the direction of their learning.

Focus on Powerful Teaching & Learning. Schools that focus on powerful teaching and learning move away from conventional practices that position the teacher as expert; and toward reform-like practices that give students meaningful responsibilities in shaping their education.

Essential Elements
Teaching and Learning

Expectations & Accountability. Expectations of excellence are essential points of reference for school staff, students and their families, and community members. A consistent, on-going system of accountability gauges the progress toward achieving individual and school-wide goals.

Assessment & Evaluation. Effective assessment and evaluation is an integral part of the learning process; it gives students and teachers opportunities to weigh strengths and weaknesses and reflect on progress toward achieving goals.

The expanded descriptions below are based on Oregon Small Schools Initiative fieldwork.

Equitable Outcomes

Schools with equitable outcomes provide challenging and relevant curriculum to ensure that students from diverse cultural, racial, socioeconomic, linguistic, sexual orientation and special needs backgrounds achieve at high levels. A single vision for high achievement for all students is apparent in the structure and culture of the school and through the daily teacher practice in every classroom. To establish equitable outcomes teachers use what they know about students and their lives outside of school to design rigorous curriculum that meets individual learning needs and is connected to real life experiences. The result is that students see themselves—their interests and perspectives—reflected in their coursework. They feel empowered by and invested in what they are learning because they are gaining academic knowledge and skills that prepare them for college, work and citizenship.

In successful small schools, equitable outcomes are a function of a personalized environment that provides regular opportunities for students and teachers to structure powerful teaching and learning. This is in contrast to large schools, where students—particularly students of color or from low-income families—often report feeling disengaged from teachers, administrators and peers.

What are some considerations for ensuring equitable outcomes?

> **Embrace diversity**. Successful teachers do not shy away from issues of race, culture or background; they encourage discussion and reflection in their classrooms and among their peers. Embracing diversity begins with teachers honestly examining their

own attitudes about people of different race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability, and looking at how they respond in situations where there is diversity. Until they know themselves well, it is impossible for teachers (or anyone) to genuinely accept people and their differences. Teachers need time, and often coaching, to examine their own biases and define a school culture that honors what members of the school community share in common and what makes each individual unique.

Building on their self-reflection and acceptance of diversity, teachers can connect with students in meaningful ways. With opportunities to know students over time (such as through looping and advisories) and to engage parents actively in the work of the school, teachers learn about how students see themselves and the world. Teachers use this knowledge to engage students in coursework related to their diverse backgrounds, and to foster a positive classroom environment based on respect for self and others.

Schools need to specifically train teachers to incorporate students' backgrounds into their instruction. Teachers need professional development to expand their cultural sensitivity and ability to address issues of equity in the classroom.

By embracing diversity and actively rejecting negative stereotypes, racist behavior and false misconceptions, teachers set the standard that every student in every classroom is capable of achieving at high levels and realizing ambitious dreams for the future.

Accommodate diverse learning styles. Every student brings to the classroom his or her own learning style. For example, while some grasp concepts easily through written text or visual diagrams, others learn best by discussing ideas in a small group. Effective teachers consciously use a variety of strategies—direct instruction, guided inquiry, small group work, independent research—to give students a range of ways to connect with course material. Understanding how students learn is as important as understanding who they are as individuals. Strategies such as differentiated instruction and scaffolding allow teachers to challenge students with different learning styles, backgrounds, abilities and interests in a single class.

Ensure access and support. The essential components of achieving equitable outcomes are holding all students to the same

rigorous performance standards, and providing equitable access and support. Access is the availability of challenging courses with high expectations for all students. Support refers to the ways that the school's structure and culture provides the time and resources to help all students succeed. The measure of whether these components are effective is student outcomes.

Schools with truly equitable access and support for learning see minimal variation in achievement due to race, income, language and gender. Schools may point to increased numbers of students of color or from low-income families taking Advanced Placement classes as an indication of increased access to rigorous learning. Or they may tout the addition of peer-to-peer tutoring, translation services and after school enrichment programs to help students succeed in demanding classes. But unless these kinds of policies and practices are purposefully integrated they do not result in significant change for students who traditionally underachieve. When schools disaggregate their performance data, all students – not just certain groups – should be meeting high standards.

Welcome families to the life of the school. Parents shape their children's views of school and the importance of education. While a school may provide equitable access to challenging learning, whether students fully take advantage of those opportunities rests with the attitudes about education that they have gained at home. Making parents feel like welcome and valued members of the school community is an important (and often neglected) element of equitable outcomes. Parents have a range of memories from their own school experiences, many of which carry over to how they view their children's education.

Small schools' commitment to parent engagement helps create safe spaces where parents can discuss and reflect on school and their children. Home visits, translation services, and meetings at community centers and local houses of worship send the message that the school cares about connecting with families. When parents are invited and involved, they are more likely and better able to encourage their children to take advantage of what school has to offer and to support their children's efforts to achieve at high levels.

Essential Elements
Teaching and Learning

Academic Rigor

When instruction is academically rigorous, students actively explore, research and solve complex problems to develop a deep understanding of core academic concepts that reflect college readiness standards. Increasing rigor does not mean more and longer homework assignments, rather, it means time and opportunity for students to develop and apply habits of mind as they navigate sophisticated and reflective learning experiences. Students with strong habits of mind weigh evidence, consider varying viewpoints, see connections, identify patterns, evaluate outcomes, speculate on possibilities and assess value. They find creative paths to resolve problems when they don't immediately know the answer. Through an academically rigorous program students not only gain knowledge and skills to achieve at high levels, they also gain ways of thinking and doing that prepares them for college, work and citizenship.

In small schools teachers, students, families and administrators function as a learning community and academic rigor is reflected in how everyone thinks about, plans and is involved with instruction. Key characteristics of small schools' structure and culture—such as collaboration, personalized environment, shared mission, vision and values, and on-going professional development—are informed by and support the rigorous academic mission of the school.

Strategies to achieve rigorous academic instruction include:

Set high expectations for all students. Academically rigorous schools treat all students as if they are college bound. The school eliminates low-level, remedial-type sections of core classes to send the message that students cannot just get by doing unchallenging work. The academically rigorous school provides students with opportunities to earn dual credits by taking college-level classes, and opens those classes to all students. Students are required to take the SAT and ACT, so that college is an option for everyone. But academically rigorous schools do not just raise the bar, they also provide the supports necessary to ensure that all students can meet more stringent course and graduation requirements.

Depth over breadth. Schools can demand rigorous intellectual work from students only if they give up the goal of superficially covering as much content as possible. Not only are course catalogs scaled back, but topic lists within courses also are pruned to achieve focus and depth. Effective schools enable students to develop a deep understanding of complex issues by selecting broad

topics that act as a framework for many related ideas. Students study and explore these ideas from multiple perspectives and build an understanding of their interconnectedness while also building an understanding of core academic concepts.

Cross-curricular integration. Integrating curriculum across content areas develops skills and knowledge while expanding students' ability to understand conceptual relationships, and think creatively and critically. When concepts and ideas from different courses are brought into meaningful association, students draw their own conclusions and exert a power over their knowledge that motivates them to learn. Cross-curricular integration assumes a holistic, real-world approach to learning. Using common, broad concepts to frame specific subject-area content is representative of how we generalize, analyze and compare ideas in day-to-day life and work. Through cross-curricular integration students develop durable skills and knowledge; they gain what they need for a lifetime of decision-making and problem solving in a way that departmentalized subject matter cannot. The success of cross-curricular integration requires a school-wide commitment. Interdepartmental teams of teachers need time and space to collaborate and plan together.

Curriculum mapping. Curriculum maps document the topics and skills that have been planned, taught and learned, helping teachers determine interventions and next steps. Curriculum maps help groups of teachers compare what has been covered in other grades, revealing repetition and gaps in the curriculum across disciplines, and highlighting strengths and weaknesses in aligning curriculum with district and state standards. Curriculum maps are useful in organizing and planning cross-curricular integration because they outline areas of thematic overlap across disciplines. Curriculum mapping fosters and supports collaboration among teachers, and promotes more effective instruction.

Stated outcomes, built-in supports. Clear expectations define what students should know and be able to do. The bar for achievement is set according to the standards of the community—the knowledge and skills that colleges expect of high school graduates and that employers expect in a globally competitive workforce. While all students are expected to achieve at high levels, school staff, parents and community members acknowledge that some students will need more help than others to reach their goals. By focusing on powerful teaching and learning, schools meet students where they are and help them bridge any gap to higher

achievement. Rubrics, exhibitions and portfolios are examples of authentic assessments that allow students to demonstrate what they know and can do. The process of defining these assessment practices involves school staff, students, parents and community members in an ongoing dialogue to understand, unpack and articulate standards in ways that have tangible meaning to everyone.

Personalized Learning

When learning is personalized, schools help students assess their own interests and talents, create a plan for achieving their personal goals, and demonstrate what they know and can do using a variety of media and clear standards—all with the close support of teachers and mentors. When students feel personally connected to what they are learning they become engaged and self-motivated because school has a tangible meaning to them.

Personalized learning and a personalized environment are easily confused. Although complementary elements of an effective small school, they are distinct. A personalized environment describes the structures (such as advisories, cohorts and looping) that provide opportunities for students to be known well by their teachers and other school staff. But how teachers gather and apply that knowledge is what makes learning personalized. When teachers and mentors establish supportive, non-threatening relationships with students they come to know students' talents, backgrounds, self-concepts, aspirations, strengths and priorities. Teachers personalize learning by integrating what they know about students' lives, strengths and priorities into challenging curriculum and projects. Personalized learning experiences are not necessarily unique to each individual student; however, they reflect themes, issues, concerns, and questions that are real to students.

The structure of a small school is well suited to creating a personalized environment, but teachers may need training on how to translate relationships with students into personalized instruction. Some approaches to personalized learning include:

Differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction is a broad term that refers to a variety of classroom practices that accommodate differences in students' learning styles, interests and prior knowledge. There are many myths about differentiated instruction—that it is mainly for students with learning deficits, that it does not work in classrooms where students have to master information for high-stakes tests, that it means dividing the class

into ability groups, that a teacher will have to write a lesson plan to fit each student or that brighter students will be asked to teach others. All these myths are just that, myths. Differentiated instruction is an approach to teaching that maximizes learning by meeting each student where he or she is.

When differentiating instruction, teachers focus on broad concepts that provide a common framework for all students and then guide students as they take increasing responsibility for in-depth work that is centered on their strengths and interests. Teachers use initial and ongoing assessments to gauge students' abilities and progress, and scaffold content for varying needs and interests. Differentiated instruction is a dynamic process—teachers organize and reorganize students into working groups, adjust complexity of instruction, and provide multiple methods and materials for students to explore content and build new skills. Differentiated instruction is a way to personalize learning, to recognize what makes students unique and to guide them toward building on their strengths and become independent learners.

Negotiated curriculum. Students want to examine their available options and set a path for both their daily and long-term plans. In high schools where learning is personalized, students exercise "voice and choice" and work with teachers to negotiate curriculum. Strategies such as internships, service learning, career-related learning experiences, and project-based learning give students opportunities to define learning goals, and determine relevant academic topics and themes. When students have choices in how they demonstrate their learning (such as through exhibitions, performance, or research papers) they assume a greater sense of accountability for their work. And when they are directly involved in defining the criteria for assessment (such as working with teachers and peers to design rubrics), they embark on their work with a deep, personal understanding of the standards for success.

Personal learning plans. Personal learning plans help students to articulate academic and personal goals and craft learning experiences (both in and outside of the classroom) that reflect their individual strengths and interests, and prepare them for post-high school education. For example, a student with a passion for working with animals might develop a learning plan that includes a sequence of relevant science classes, enrollment in a community college math class, an internship with a veterinarian, and a community service project with the Humane Society. Students work collaboratively with teachers and parents to develop their plans,

which they periodically revise and update. Personal learning plans empower students to reflect on and articulate what is important to them, and then structure learning that reflects their unique identity and perspective. The involvement of adults ensures that this happens without sacrificing high standards for achievement.

Personal learning plans engage students in taking responsibility for their learning and build students' confidence that their work will prepare them for leading successful adult lives. In a subject-based curriculum, knowledge of facts is often presented with no reference to the adult world. Through personal learning plans students incorporate learning experiences in the classroom and in the community with their interests. When learning is personalized students can readily answer the question "Why do I need to know this?"

Focus on Powerful Teaching and Learning

Teaching practices are a lot like tools: the best one depends on the job you are trying to accomplish. For example, research assignments can be effective in helping students hone their skills in gathering and analyzing evidence. But hands-on experiments are a valuable way to ground newly acquired knowledge in experience. Internships in the community can fire up students' passion for learning by involving them in crafting contextual experiences that are personally meaningful. But those experiences are even more powerful when students use them to apply an understanding of core content gained in the classroom. To focus on powerful teaching is to draw from a rich set of instructional opportunities that challenges and supports all students to achieve at high levels, and that helps students learn how to learn.

Schools that focus on powerful teaching and learning move away from conventional practices that position the teacher as expert and moves them toward reform-like practices giving students meaningful responsibilities in shaping their education. Schools that make this transition do so by making students' interests, personal experiences and prior learning the context for in-depth study of core academic concepts, and by requiring products and performances that demonstrate habits of mind (weighing of evidence, considering alternative view points, seeing connections and relationships, speculating on possibilities, and assessing social and personal value).

Essential Elements
Teaching and Learning

Conventional Practices	Reform-like Practices
Teachers frequently… • Lecture to the class • Lead practices on basic facts, definitions, computations, skills or procedures • Assess student performance using multiple-choice tests	**Teachers frequently** • Guide student research and analysis • Help students explore topics in depth • Assess student performance through hands-on demonstrations, exhibition and oral presentations
Students frequently… • Memorize facts, definitions or formulas • Practice computation procedures or skills • Prepare to take standardized tests	**Students frequently…** • Collect, organize and analyze information and data • Evaluate and defend their ideas or views • Decide how to present what they have learned

Source: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Year 2 Evaluation Report

The structure and culture of small schools provides advantages for focusing on powerful teaching and learning. With the autonomy to create variable schedules, structure teacher collaboration and provide personalized learning in a personalized environment, small schools have greater opportunity to engage all students in an integrated and rigorous course of study. Additionally, these schools provide professional development opportunities for teachers to gain and improve their reform-like instructional strategies.

What are essential elements for focusing on powerful teaching and learning?

Active Inquiry. Students are engaged as active participants in researching and exploring knowledge and skills. Activities inside and outside of the classroom draw out students' opinions and perceptions, and ask them to reflect on what they are learning and why it is relevant to their lives today and in the future. Students are not told what to think and understand, but are guided to decide how best to master and apply core content. Effective teachers draw from students' diverse experiences and work with them to structure learning that is both rigorous and relevant. The result is the elevation of critical thinking and achievement for all students at all levels. Some approaches to active inquiry include project-based learning, internships, and community-based and service learning.

Essential Elements
Teaching and Learning

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. In-depth learning is the foundation for creating an academically rigorous program.

Authentic learning. Authentic pedagogy is instruction focused on active learning in real-world contexts. For example:

> **Project-based learning.** Project-based learning engages students in learning knowledge and skills through a project that is structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks. The nature and duration of projects vary. Students can do projects alone or in groups, based on a single or interdisciplinary topic. Despite any specific differences, all effective projects recognize the ability of students to do important work, engage in the central concepts of academic disciplines, build a range of personal and professional skills, and use performance-based assessments.
>
> **Community-based or service learning.** Community-based or service learning provides opportunities for students to respond to a community-identified need. Activities in the community are coordinated with academics, allowing students to use practical applications of their learning to both enhance their understanding of content as well as serve the public.
>
> **Internships**. Internships place students in the workplace or in the community to work closely with adult mentors to complete a project or solve a problem. Internships vary in length and can last from a few weeks to years. Expectations for students' performance are high; interns are held to the same industry or community standards as adults. Students reflect on their internship experience through writing and the public presentation of final products.

Authentic learning experiences allow students to explore their interests and goals in the world outside of home and school. Such experiences challenge students to produce work that meets real-world standards of excellence, and reflect on, write about and publicly present their ideas. Authentic pedagogy challenges students to put themselves at the center of their learning and take charge of it.

Clearly stated outcomes. Clear expectations define what students should know and be able to do. Students produce quality work products and present to real audiences. Students' work is evidence of their understanding, not just recall. Assessment tasks allow students to exhibit

higher order thinking and teachers and students set learning goals and monitor progress. Rubrics, exhibitions and portfolios are examples of authentic assessments that allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. To be most effective, authentic assessments should be collaboratively designed by staff, students, parents and community members, and documented in a way that is understandable by all.

Scaffolding. When constructing a building, workers use scaffolds as temporary structures to support them while they complete jobs that would otherwise be impossible. Instructional scaffolding, named for its practical resemblance to physical scaffolds, collaboratively engages students in tasks that would be too difficult for them to complete on their own. The process begins with an assessment of students' existing skills. The teacher must be knowledgeable of content and sensitive to the students' background knowledge to assist the students in progressing from what they know and can do now to the next level of learning, and assess progress over time. Working collaboratively, students and teachers establish instructional goals and methods for assessing outcomes. The teacher initially provides extensive instructional support (or scaffolding) tailored to each student. This support may include cueing or prompting, questioning, modeling, telling, discussing and feedback on progress.

Gradually, students internalize the content and process, and are able to assume full responsibility for controlling the progress of a given task. The temporary support provided by the teacher is withdrawn as students construct permanent skills and knowledge. What, if any, scaffolds are used depends on the individual student's prior learning, and his or her ability to learn and apply new concepts. Scaffolds can be re-introduced whenever students need helping bridging the gap between what they know and can do and mastering more complex knowledge and tasks.

Expectations and Accountability

In schools with high-quality teaching and learning, school staff and the community engage in an ongoing dialogue on student performance. Expectations of excellence are developed and internalized by teachers, students, families and community members. They are posted publicly, and act as a point of reference for what students should know and be able to do by the time they graduate. However, it is not enough to expect all students to achieve. A consistent, ongoing system of accountability is required to gauge the progress teachers and students are making toward achieving the school's goals and supporting anyone struggling to meet the school's standards.

Essential Elements
Teaching and Learning

In successful small schools the process of setting and communicating high expectations for all students complements the process of tailoring a path to success for each individual learner. In effective small schools—which value and foster trust and respect—teachers and students regularly ask themselves and one another, “How am I doing?” and “How can I improve?”

Some strategies for establishing and maintaining high expectations and accountability are:

Establish essential learnings and adjust curriculum to meet the goal. Using state and local course standards as a guide, staff, parents, and community members can collaborate to identify key “power standards” that will provide rigor, focus and depth to the curriculum. These essential learnings should be limited to a short list (both school-wide and in each course area) to ensure proper emphasis. This first step helps the school to answer the question, “What do we want our students to know and be able to do?”

Multiple assessment tools. Once essential learnings are in place, schools can forge agreements about assessment tools to measure these standards. By consistently using agreed-upon assessment tools (such as portfolios, performance, public presentation, research and analysis, written reports and tests) that combine formative and summative feedback, students can have multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they know and can do, and staff will be able to collect meaningful evidence about their teaching strategies. This step helps schools answer the question “How will we know (what evidence will we accept) that students have mastered our outcomes?”

Accountability for all. In successful schools, teachers (not just students) benefit from regular opportunities to reflect on their practice. Using strategies such as curriculum mapping, compiling an annual portfolio, presenting their work to peers, and inviting other teachers into their classroom to observe as critical friends; teachers can define goals for themselves and reflect on their progress toward achieving them. In effective schools, teachers are learners, and, like students, are held to certain standards of accountability. Whereas, as it is often clear the importance of creating a personalized environment for students; teachers must work equally hard to achieve a climate of trust, safety and mutual respect among themselves. Without the assurance of having an open, non-threatening dialogue, it is impossible for teachers to collaborate

with peers in a way that results in meaningful reflection and improvement.

Reviewing samples of student and teacher work. To help ensure that expectations for students are consistent throughout the school, teachers should regularly meet to discuss student performance, work samples and achievement on the school's essential learning assessments. State and national standards and student work exemplars can be used to provide additional grounding. This prevents an abstract debate on expectations and facilitates an evidence-based conversation of how teachers define high expectations and how they implement teaching and assessment practices to reflect that definition. These types of discussions not only help ensure that the school's goals are uniformly defined for all students, but also promote a professional learning community.

Using data. Data analysis and discussion provide schools with powerful tools to identify problems, target improvements, monitor progress and make informed decisions regarding allocation of resources. Too many schools mistakenly focus on the process of change without also examining the learning results those changes produce for students. When data-driven inquiry is in place, there is a better chance to improve results for students because results are directly addressed.

Focusing on student achievement and using data for planning and decision-making is a cultural shift for most schools. All schools collect data for district, state or federal purposes, but few collect and interpret ongoing performance data (such as chapter quizzes, writing, samples, student portfolios) that can help them to adjust instruction and support systems for individual students. If schools expect teaching and learning to be a powerful process of inquiry, then they should model this by operating as empowered, data-driven organizations.

Student support strategies. Once schools know what they want students to know and be able to do, and how they will measure this learning, they must determine what they will do to support students who are performing below standards. Some of these strategies might include extra classes that support core academic subjects: after-school and peer tutoring programs, intensive work with learning specialists and mandatory summer school programs. Effective schools know that their ultimate success will be gauged by how well they meet the needs of their most challenging students.

Essential Elements
Teaching and Learning

Assessment and Evaluation

The word "assessment" derives from a Latin word meaning "to sit beside." This root meaning conjures an image of what effective assessment looks like—a teacher sitting next to a student to discuss his or her work, review progress of drafts and suggest next steps. Ultimately, teachers judge and give value (or "grade") to student work relative to a predetermined standard. This is the "evaluation" portion of the equation. As complementary processes, assessment and evaluation allow students to practice, refine, reflect on and demonstrate what they know and can do.

Effective schools use authentic assessment practices—such as portfolios, exhibitions and project-based products. These experiences give students and teachers frequent opportunities to gauge strengths and weaknesses and reflect on what is working (and not working) in the classroom. The result is that assessment and evaluation become learning opportunities that provide students and teachers dynamic measures of progress toward their goals.

In order for authentic assessment to be effective, teaching must be structured to give students the chance to succeed. For example, if students are asked to create a portfolio, they need opportunities to regularly revise their work, receive feedback, and become self-reliant learners through scaffolding and coaching. To make these elements part of regular classroom practice, teachers need a schedule that allows for collaboration and powerful teaching and learning. Unlike most schools, successful small schools have the flexibility and autonomy to ensure assessment and evaluation are part of the fabric of the learning experience rather than an after thought intended only to sort and categorize students.

Components of an effective assessment and evaluation system include:

> **Opportunities for formative and summative feedback.** Assessment and evaluation serve two complementary functions that are accomplished by providing students with two types of feedback. Formative feedback helps students reflect on how they learn, understand and enhance areas of strength, pinpoint and correct areas of weakness, and plan next steps for revision and improvement. Summative feedback is a final evaluation of demonstrated achievement. To be successful, students need opportunities for both kinds of feedback as each play a different

role in students' understanding of the value of what they are learning. In formative feedback the ongoing, back-and-forth dialogue between teachers and students about evolving drafts of work engages students in defining the direction and progress of their efforts. Eventually, however, summative feedback provides students recognition for the sum of their efforts. Both types of feedback help teachers to personalize learning. Through regular conversations with students about their work and progress, teachers gain insights into students' motivations, interests and perspectives. Knowing students well through the way they present and talk about their work provides valuable opportunities for teachers to help students assume greater responsibility for their learning.

Rubrics. Rubrics articulate the set of standards against which students' work and performance are judged; they paint a picture of quality work. Teachers commonly use rubrics in scoring and grading (summative evaluation), but rubrics also play an important role in instruction (formative assessment). Teachers can include students in the development of a rubric. This ensures the rubric is written in language students can understand and establishes students' sense of ownership in the process. Students use the rubric's criteria to help plan and complete their work. With instruction and guidance from teachers, students gradually develop an independent understanding of criteria-based evaluation and refer back to the rubric to self-assess their progress. This scaffolding process helps students become self-guided learners.

Exhibitions. Exhibitions ask students to demonstrate what they know by presenting the products of their work and defending the results of their learning. Exhibitions often combine several components, such as a research paper, portfolio, design product (a model, graphic, or dance), and an oral presentation. The best exhibitions are given before an audience of teachers, parents, classmates and/or community members, who examine and ask questions about the student's work and process. Knowing that their work will be publicly critiqued is a strong motivator. Preparing students for exhibitions requires teachers to focus on research, analytical and communication skills in the context of the content they are covering. The result is that students gain not only subject knowledge, but also the tools and self-confidence to demonstrate their knowledge in an authentic way.

Essential Elements
Teaching and Learning

Portfolios. Portfolios are a collection of students' work and their reflections (presented either in writing or as part of an oral presentation) on that work and the process involved in creating it. There are many different types of portfolios—they might be used to demonstrate students' best work across subject areas, record a project's process, or document ongoing growth in a specific academic area. Whatever the type, all portfolios include samples selected by students for the purpose of meeting pre-stated goals and criteria. Students engage in an ongoing process of critique and refinement that include formative feedback from teachers and mentors. A portfolio is often part of a culminating event (such as an exhibition) before an audience of school, family and community members.

Essential Elements
School Structure and Culture

SCHOOL STRUCTURE AND CULTURE

The effectiveness of a small school depends in large part on the talents and commitment of teachers, students, families and community members. But the best intentions of those involved are not sufficient to make small schools a success. Research shows that specific organizational capacities and cultural norms are necessary for small schools to succeed.

What, beyond competent individuals, does a small school need?

Equitable Environment. In equitable schools, students and teachers are appreciated as individuals; the environment is safe and inclusive.

Shared Vision, Mission and Beliefs. A collective understanding among school staff, students, parents and the community of the school's purpose and core values, and a common belief that all students can achieve at high levels.

Autonomy. The ability to realize the school's vision and implement its mission for student learning without being constrained by external mandates and regulations.

Learning Community. A commitment among school staff, students and parents working collaboratively to achieve a common vision for learning, and to continually share what they know and believe with the entire community.

Teacher Collaboration. Clearly defined opportunities for teachers to work together in a variety of ways: such as developing curriculum, discussing student work, and observing and reflecting on each other's teaching practices.

Personalized Environment. Students, teachers and families know each other well and develop deep, meaningful and positive relationships based on mutual trust and respect. Schools should be small (400 students or less) or organized to feel small.

School Climate. An environment in which students, parents, teachers and administrators feel known, valued, challenged, engaged, empowered, welcome and safe.

Essential Elements
<u>School Structure and Culture</u>

These concepts can be found throughout the literature of other national reform organizations. Although the terms and phrasing may differ from one organization to the next, the essential concepts show a unique degree of agreement.

Equitable Environment

In equitable schools, students and teachers are appreciated as individuals; they are not defined by cliques or stereotypes. The environment is safe and inclusive; cultural, ethnic, linguistic, sexual orientation and special needs backgrounds are valued and celebrated. An open commitment to equity drives all aspects of the school—from teaching and learning to leadership development and community engagement. An equitable school creates an environment where everyone feels respected, secure and challenged to do their best.

Equity is built into the fabric of effective small schools. Here, learning is personalized, leadership is distributed and all students are held to the same high expectations. Artificial barriers to learning opportunities—such as requiring a certain score on a high-stakes test for admittance to Advanced Placement classes—are removed. Not only are all opportunities open to all students; all students are expected to pursue them as part of becoming college-ready. In large schools, teachers, students, parents and community members are often disengaged from one another, making it difficult to establish basic ties of trust and communication. But in effective small schools everyone knows each other well, and relationships and acceptance are the foundation for the work that students, school staff, parents and the community do together.

What are some strategies to create an equitable environment?

> **Eliminate tracking.** The public school system has long sorted students into categories based on ability, designating students to specific "tracks." Despite the best efforts of committed educators, studies show that a student's assignment to a track affects a teacher's expectation of that student's current and future academic achievement; teachers expect less from students in low ability tracks. When students are tracked as low achievers, they perform poorly in large part due to the lack of challenging learning experiences and support. With few opportunities to push themselves and meet high standards, students in low achieving tracks end up fulfilling teachers' low expectations for them. And because students of color or from low-income families are

disproportionately placed into lower academic ability groups, tracking contributes to the historic achievement gap that divides students.

Research on tracking reveals that it has few advantages for high ability grouped students and major disadvantages for low ability grouped students. This underscores the importance of creating a learning environment in which all students are valued, seen as capable learners and encouraged to interact cross-culturally.

In small schools, students of varying abilities and backgrounds learn together. They work in flexible arrangements (studying independently, receiving one-on-one instruction from teachers, and collaborating in peer groups) and benefit from differentiated instruction, which tailors curriculum to individual student needs. In schools that actively reject tracking, advanced and honor courses have enrollments that reflect the demographics of the school. Course pre-requisites are removed to ensure that traditionally underrepresented students have access to classes that previously were the domain of only the highest achieving students. Supports (such as tutoring) ensure that all students have the help they need to get into and succeed in these more challenging classes.

Eliminating tracking is a first step in institutionalizing a commitment to high academic, non-discriminatory standards for all students.

Ensure quality teaching for all students. If schools are to provide students of all backgrounds challenging learning, they need teachers who can deliver differentiated instruction and use a range of teaching strategies that match students' learning styles. Successful teachers adjust their style of interaction (direct instruction, coaching, supervising) and type of assignments (individual reports, group projects, class-wide debate) based on students' needs and interests. No single instructional approach is a guarantee; teachers who are able to use a broad repertoire of approaches skillfully have the most success in reducing the achievement gap and creating equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Ongoing professional development is essential to build and support teachers' effectiveness in the classroom. In addition, ensuring quality teaching for all students may require strategic redeployment of the teaching staff. Traditionally, a school's most veteran and capable teachers gravitate towards teaching upper-level courses

that through tracking have filtered out students with learning difficulties.

Schools that are serious about creating an equitable environment assign their strongest, most experienced teachers to critical courses filled with students with the greatest learning challenges – such as 9th grade core academic areas. These schools have shed conventional seniority systems based on staff preference and convenience in favor of an approach that is best for students. They also recognize the importance of embedding supports (such as peer tutoring, double class periods, and after school tutoring) to help ensure students' success.

Make extracurricular activities a welcoming experience. Extracurricular activities define the social character of the school, create an alternative context for learning and provide opportunities for students to be recognized for their unique talents. Sports teams, student government, prom committee and clubs are some of the non-academic activities that represent the richness of school life.

In equitable schools every student is encouraged and supported in becoming actively involved in extracurricular activities; traditional barriers and stereotypes (only the "cool kids" can work on the yearbook, only the "geeks" play chess) are removed and newcomers are encouraged to learn the basics and join. For example, to understand the rigors of being a reporter on the school paper, students in English class write and critique articles, and then get feedback from the paper's editor on the strengths and weaknesses of their mock submissions. Intramural sports provide a chance to practice skills before trying out for a team.

For some students extracurricular activities are the reason they are motivated to work hard in school. Beyond the satisfaction of pursuing their personal interests, extracurricular activities are also beneficial for creating a strong college application. These benefits underscore the importance of not just making extracurricular activities available to all students, but finding ways to welcome and encourage school-wide participation.

Build durable learning with peer role models. Peer-to-peer connections are a powerful way to build and maintain an equitable school environment. When older students act as role models for students in lower grades and demonstrate how to handle situations by behaving in a way that is respectful of diversity, the learning is

practical and durable. Role models can also be useful for families, teachers and other school staff. Anytime a seasoned member of the school community can share insights on the norms and expectations of the school and demonstrate how they manifest, people more readily internalize what it means to support and function in an equitable environment.

Shared Mission, Vision, and Beliefs

In successful schools, staff, students and their families, and community members share a vision, mission and set of values. When these three elements are held securely in common, everyone in the school community knows why their work is important, what the school wants to accomplish and how their belief in what is possible translates into their day-to-day actions and interactions with one another.

With the autonomy to establish flexible schedules, collaborative teaching and learning, and shared leadership, small schools regularly engage staff, students and their families, and community members in a dialogue about what is important to them. Building a shared vision, mission and set of values requires knowing and respecting each person's dream for the school. Small schools devote considerable time and energy to ensuring that all stakeholders are personally committed to the school and see their ideas and priorities reflected in it.

Vision. A vision describes a compelling future. In its simplest terms, it is an answer to the question, "What do we want to become?" When people share a vision they are connected by common aspiration.

Mission. A mission describes what a school is about; it describes the framework of the school—be it an arts academy or a school that uses internships as the foundation for curriculum and instruction. The mission outlines what makes a school unique, reminds everyone what it wants to accomplish and maintains a focus on student learning.

Core Beliefs. Core values are a set of fundamental, guiding statements that define what the school values and describe how people should behave to reflect those values. When school staff, students and their families, and community members embrace a set of core beliefs, they are dedicating themselves to what they consider important and making a commitment to model those beliefs through their behavior whether in the classroom, at football games or during parent-teacher meetings.

Essential Elements
School Structure and Culture

Autonomy

The foundation of a small school's success is its ability to make autonomous decisions on issues that affect its structure, culture, academic program and governance. Successful small schools have control over their budget, curriculum, scheduling, staffing, space and leadership. Gaining these autonomies is often a gradual process, requiring a broad base of support among school and district staff, parents and the community. Once they are established, these autonomies are part of the school's formal written policies and practices.

Establishing autonomy provides small schools the best chance to build a unified learning community and use its resources to provide personalized, high quality teaching and learning to students. And, just as small businesses can adapt to changes in the marketplace more easily than large, bureaucratic companies, small schools with autonomy have the flexibility to alter their instructional program to meet the changing needs of individual students.

According to researcher Mary Anne Raywid, "the greatest inhibitor to a small school's ability to realize its potential is lack of autonomy—constraints imposed by stringent regulations, bureaucratic regularities, and longstanding labor agreements and the need to mesh with policies and practices of the board of education and the school district—and the hesitation of some education personnel at all levels to make fundamental changes in the way they function." The major challenge, she states, "is obtaining sufficient separateness to permit staff members to generate a distinctive environment and to carry out their own vision of schooling."

Below are general descriptions, based on the work by the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Small Schools, of the six key areas of autonomy essential for effective small schools. The process of establishing autonomy in these six areas varies depending whether a school is a new start or conversion school. For more specific information on these differences, see the Change Process.

> **Budget.** Small schools have total discretion to spend money in the manner that provides the best program and services to students and their families.
>
> **Curriculum**. Small schools have the freedom to design course content and select instructional materials that best meet students' learning needs and state standards.

Essential Elements
School Structure and Culture

Scheduling. Small schools have the freedom to set flexible class times, school days and/or school years for both students and faculty.

Staffing. Small schools have the freedom to hire or reassign staff that is committed to implementing the vision and mission to best serve students.

Leadership and Governance. Small schools have the freedom to create their own governance structure responsible for decisions over budgets, staff selection, programs, professional development, curriculum and policies.

Space. Small schools should have the freedom to configure physical spaces that have a unique community identity and that allow students, teachers, and families to interact and build relationships.

Learning Community

A learning community is characterized by commitment. In schools, this community is made up of staff, students and their families, and members of the broader local community. The "commitment" they share is to build strong relationships with one another and work collaboratively to realize the school's vision and mission. A successful small school is by definition a learning community.

In small schools there is greater opportunity to create a structure, leadership and culture that encourage staff, students, and families to come together to discuss, make decisions and collectively solve problems. However, small size is no guarantee that a school will function as a learning community.

Here are some school-wide conditions that can help foster the development of a learning community:

Culture of inquiry. Learning communities create a culture of inquiry in which people at all levels of the school use a range of strategies—such as action research, critical friends forums, examination of disaggregated data, structured reflection and conversations—to assess and improve teaching and learning. At every decision point the vision and beliefs of inquiry rests with the capacity of staff, students and their families, and the community to

self-assess, accept feedback, respect and trust one another, and be open to change. In a culture of inquiry the work of challenging and supporting students to succeed is never done; the school community is always asking itself, "Are we serving all of our young people?" "How could we do an even better job?"

Autonomous structure. For a small school to function as a learning community, the school needs sufficient autonomy to create schedules that build in regular time for teachers to meet, talk, plan, and observe and reflect on each other's teaching methods. These are important steps toward eliminating teacher isolation and creating a professional practice based on mutual respect. The school's schedule should also include regular and meaningful opportunities for students and their families to discuss classroom and school issues with staff. In a learning community, everyone is actively engaged in seeking and sharing knowledge.

Shared decision-making. Successful small schools have a governance structure based on collaborative learning, shared decision-making and distributive leadership. Professional development, critical friends' networks and open forums help build the capacity of school staff to conduct research, weigh evidence and make informed decisions. Successful small schools have the autonomy to establish "flat" structures in which the principal works to empower staff to become leaders and decision-makers in the building. In comprehensive high schools with a bureaucratic, hierarchical structure the principal often dominates, making it difficult for staff to propose divergent views or make suggestions for change.

Forging new relationships between administrators, teachers, and staff allows everyone at every level to grow professionally. But the change in power and decision-making cannot end with the school; new kinds of relationships also need to be forged with the district. Successful small schools operate within districts that share and support their vision for personalized structures and strategies, and help find ways to empower teachers and school staff.

Teacher Collaboration

In successful small schools teachers have time to engage in regular, meaningful discussions about their teaching practice. This collaborative time—which is built into the school schedule and is the foundation of all school professional development—is spent in a variety of ways:

- planning for team teaching
- determining the best ways to meet the needs of individual students
- observing one another's classes
- studying their own and others' best practices
- analyzing student work together
- refining assessment practices
- bringing what they know about student learning to bear on curriculum decisions
- reflecting on their own teaching practice
- conducting action research on promising classroom strategies
- working together on leadership teams to craft school policies

By increasing time for professional interaction, teachers enhance their skills and report greater job satisfaction and a sense of appreciation. Some argue that by increasing time for collaboration small schools are reducing the amount of time teachers spend in the classroom. However, without expert teachers who are continually learning and growing as professionals, much of the work they do in the classroom will not be successful. Besides being a powerful staff development approach that improves student learning, teacher collaboration helps eliminate the job dissatisfaction and professional isolation experienced by many teachers.

While most schools support this approach, few schools create daily and weekly schedules to facilitate ongoing teacher collaboration. Below are some considerations for creating effective collaboration:

> **Longer blocks of time**. Small schools have the autonomy to define a schedule with longer, varied blocks of time in the day and week. Such schedules create opportunities for students to spend time learning off campus (for example, taking classes at local colleges, doing internships or service learning projects in the community). When students are learning off-site, teachers have regular opportunities to work together.
>
> **Varied blocks of time.** Another approach to scheduling is to vary the length of days. For example, some schools start late or release students early one day a week. Students' hours can be adjusted over the course of the week to make up for any time lost by these changes to the daily schedule. The schedule can be similarly shifted so that teachers meet on a designated day after school.
>
> **Effective strategies.** Adequate time is the first essential element of teacher collaboration. Equally important is ensuring that teachers

have training in the strategies and protocols necessary to be effective once they gather to tackle issues of instructional practices. Study groups, action research teams and critical friends networks are opportunities for learning, problem solving, professional growth and collegial support. However, teachers need professional development to learn how to apply such processes of inquiry.

Personalized Environment

A personalized learning environment is characterized by the ability of students and adults in the school to develop meaningful, sustained connections to one another. In a personalized learning environment, students are treated as individuals; they are given responsibility, spoken to honestly, and treated with dignity and respect. Through these connections teachers get to know students well; they become familiar with students' learning styles, interests, backgrounds, and goals. Knowing who their students are and how they learn, teachers can adjust instruction to leverage students' strengths and build curriculum around issues relevant to their lives. The personal connection between teachers and students also allows teachers to push students farther. Teachers can demand higher levels of achievement because their expectations are based on a personal understanding of students' capabilities. Because of their sustained, mutual trust, students grant teachers the authority to challenge them as learners.

In studies of successful small schools, students compare their schools to a family and credit their academic achievement to their supportive relationships with teachers. With reduced enrollments and lower daily student loads, teachers in small schools have greater opportunity to establish and sustain relationships with students and their families. Families appreciate the chance to contact and be contacted by adults in the school who know their children well. The result is a caring network of adults invested in the success of each student.

What are some strategies to realize a personalized environment?

Cohorts. In a cohort approach, smaller groups of students are scheduled together to share a set of classes and teachers. This strategy allows teams of teachers who share the students in common to use a tag-team approach on student support, enrichment, and discipline. Integrated projects are more easily implemented within the cohort, as teachers know that all students in the group share certain classes in common. Cohorts also allow

for students to develop positive peer relationships within a safe group of classmates that they see regularly throughout the school day. While the small school movement generally seeks to create schools of 400 students or less, most successful schools limit cohorts within these schools to 60-120 students.

Looping. In this approach, students and teachers are scheduled together for multiple terms or years. Through looping, teachers get to know students and their families over an extended time, allowing them to tailor instruction to students' strengths and interests. Looping also helps teachers maximize their time in the classroom. Once norms and routines are established, teachers can concentrate on instruction without having to get to know a new group of students every few months.

Advisories. Advisories are another way that small schools provide student support and enable strong relationships. Advisories consist of 10 to 15 students who meet regularly with a faculty advisor for academic and personal support. Teachers often advise students they also teach in class, which increases their personal bond. At some schools students stay with the same advisor for several years to build strong relationships over time. Most successful programs schedule advisory groups to meet at least 2-3 times per week.

Student Choice. Students are personally connected to school when what they are learning reflects their passions in life. Students' who work with teachers to negotiate the curriculum, develop personalized learning plans, scaffold complex tasks, or structure internships are invested in their learning because they can see and explore the relationship between school, who they are and their goals for the future. In this kind of setting, the purpose of learning shifts from "getting through the book", to capitalizing on students' interests to go deep into challenging content. Students are motivated to study, research, question, reflect, write and present ideas when they feel that the content they are learning is personally relevant.

Mentors. Mentors are powerful advocates, supports, instructors and role models for students. Mentors are adults in and outside of the school; they are teachers, administrators, advisors, internship supervisors, community service leaders and members of the community. Mentors play a wide range of roles in students' lives—they instruct, serve on exhibition panels, give advice, counsel, or just listen. In short, mentors are caring adults who help guide students through decisions regarding academics, college, careers,

personal issues that affect learning or whatever else relates to the student's life and activities in school. In a personalized learning environment every student has a connection to a mentor who is able to help that student challenge him/herself to achieve to his/her highest potential.

School Climate

School climate describes the norms and attitudes that shape a school. In successful small schools, cooperation, collaboration, respect and shared responsibility characterize the interactions of students, teachers, staff and families. Diversity is consistently celebrated as an asset through all messages and actions of the school. In classrooms and hallways, cafeterias and offices, the school consistently operates as a positive and inclusive learning community. Nothing—and no one—is taken for granted.

To visitors, a school's climate is palpable. The facilities are well maintained by and for students to ensure a safe, positive environment in which to learn. Conflict between students is addressed through peer mediation, empowering students to diffuse volatile situations and resolve issues in a fair, collaborative way. Fear of violence in classrooms, hallways and bathrooms is eliminated, allowing students to concentrate on learning. Discipline policies and practices are not punitive, but are instead aligned to reflect the priority of student learning. In successful small schools, cooperation, respect and responsibility are the norm and there is an intentional focus on maintaining a positive atmosphere.

Everyone benefits from a positive school climate. Students, who often feel "invisible" in large schools, benefit from the personalized environment that characterizes a small school. Parents are encouraged to actively participate in all elements of their child's education and the life of the school. Teachers report greater job satisfaction in the climate of a small school, which fosters the school's growth as a learning community. In large schools, administrators' responsibilities often are bureaucratic with limited connection to the realities of teaching and learning. In contrast, principals in a small school become facilitators of the learning process, establishing new roles for themselves and teachers in an environment of shared leadership and collaboration.

In a small school everyone matters. While small size is necessary to achieve this climate, it alone is not sufficient—parent engagement, student engagement, equitable and distributive leadership, collaboration, and the establishment of a learning community are all essential elements

in creating an environment where young people and adults feel welcome to learn together.

Essential Elements
<u>Community Engagement</u>

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

It turns out the adage, "it takes a village to raise a child," also applies to creating and maintaining great schools. Research shows that successful schools depend on the combined input and energy of all stakeholders—school staff, students, parents and community members. Meaningful community engagement goes well beyond the traditional open house events and newsletters. It involves everyone in setting goals, solving problems, voicing ideas, learning new skills and taking action to create an environment where all students achieve at high levels.

Successful community engagement takes time and commitment. The process begins with listening to what people have to say and assessing what is important to them. Then, identify and inform them about opportunities for taking action. Then stakeholders need to learn the skills necessary to get involved in meaningful ways. Too often, community engagement is an afterthought or remains on the bottom of the list of things to do in the busy schedules of teachers, administrators and district staff. But schools cannot do the job they are meant to do in isolation; they need the active, informed involvement of stakeholders to achieve their goals.

Essential to the success of any community engagement effort is the development of a strategic plan to ensure the school engages the right people at the right time, is clear what it wants people to do once they are on board, and engages them in meaningful work that brings good results.

What are the key elements to build and maintain community engagement?

Equitable communication. Effective community engagement means everyone's voice is heard, every perspective is considered, and every person—regardless of their racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic or socioeconomic backgrounds—is welcomed as a valued member of the dialogue.

Student engagement. No one knows more than students about the strengths and weaknesses of schools from inside school walls. When asked what they think about schools, students are insightful when speaking from their own experiences. Student input is a critical component for small school design and governance.

Essential Elements
Community Engagement

Parent engagement. Parents are the most influential force in their children's lives. When parents are partners and leaders in school decision-making, they develop essential skills to advocate for their own and all children.

Community engagement . The community is the source of ideas, resources and political leverage. Including the perspective of community members ensures there is common understanding of what knowledge and skills students need to be productive citizens, and how schools can empower students to define and achieve their goals.

Equitable Communication

Equitable communication ensures that all voices—not just the ones of the most involved parents, of the racial majority or of the traditional decision makers—are heard; everyone's opinion is valid and valued. Equitable communication also means that the dialogue about school, students, achievement, progress and next steps is ongoing; it is never too late for anyone to join the conversation.

In effective small schools, staff, students, parents, and the community regularly address issues of race, language, socioeconomic status, power and their relationship to teaching and learning, leadership development, and the structure and culture of the school. Norms of, and expectations for, equitable communication become ingrained; they move beyond theory (what is posted on a sheet of paper in the school's main office) and become practice (how school staff relates to and seeks out the diverse opinions of all its members).

The personalized environment of successful small schools is safe and inclusive. Old notions about communication (parents of students of color are not interested, teachers know best, students are not mature enough to contribute to the conversation, businesses don't know anything about schools) are discarded, and everyone is invited to the table.

What are some strategies for creating equitable communication?

> **Free lines of cultural communication.** So many of the world's problems can be attributed to a breakdown in communication. In schools, problems in cross-cultural communication may be caused by lack of knowledge about other cultures and the subtleties of cultural issues. Opening lines of communication requires

acknowledging and understanding the wide range of cultural differences in the school community, which may relate to race, ethnicity, social status, profession, income level or disability. The first steps are for stakeholders to understand their own culture and be conscious of the dynamics inherent when different cultures interact. Then they need training and support to learn about the personal and professional cultures of fellow stakeholders, and how to work productively in a diverse group.

Shared, continuous ownership. Equitable communication cannot be mandated; it evolves as diverse members of the school community come together to solve problems, learn skills and exchange ideas. Students, parents, community members and school staff need to engage in different types of dialogue—informal conversations, committee meetings, school-wide forums, professional development retreats—to build relationships and cross-cultural understanding. Equitable communication is never "done." Once the school community has established a safe and inclusive dialogue, it needs to continually reach out to newcomers (in-coming students and their families, recent staff hires, new businesses in the area). And as the community grows and changes, schools need to recognize that the conditions for equitable communication also may need to change. For example, an increase in the number of Latino families might necessitate translators and more in-person parent interactions. An increase in demand among students to be involved in school governance might require new forums for students to voice their ideas. Because the needs, interests and diversity of a school can shift from year to year, it is important to maintain a dialogue that is not only open to all but that remains relevant to the lives and experiences of everyone in the school.

Mutual respect everywhere. Equitable communication is not limited to site council meetings, parent-teacher conferences and public forums; it happens wherever students, families, community members and school staff interact. In the classroom or the hallways, at basketball games or standing in line in the cafeteria, everyone regards each other with mutual respect and dignity. Equitable communication is not a special behavior reserved for certain types of school activities; it is what people do, it is how they engage one another.

New approaches to communication. To engage parents and community members from all cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, special needs and socioeconomic backgrounds, schools need to use new strategies to create open and explicit dialogue regarding issues

of student achievement, equity, diversity and empowerment. Home visits, forums, town hall meetings and visits to community organizations and events are approaches to reach out to, train and empower underrepresented groups. Translating all school written documents and public meetings into the languages of the stakeholders is essential in establishing equitable communication.

Student Engagement

Involving students as active partners in the life of a school is a self-reinforcing process—when students are included in making decisions about what and how they learn, they are more likely to be motivated to learn; when they are motivated to learn, they are more likely to suggest and take advantage of opportunities to make decisions that affect their learning and the school. Too often, schools (often because of their impersonal size or bureaucratic organization) are unable to include students in a meaningful way in any decision-making. When adults in schools do not hear the voices of students, they lose the opportunity to motivate students to achieve at high levels.

Why do small schools build student awareness and engagement?

Education about kids, by kids. Every student is unique; each has a different combination of interests and opinions. What unites all students is a desire to achieve something in life, to reach a personal goal. No matter what students aspire to, they need an education that prepares them for college, even if they decide to go into the workforce immediately after high school. The stakes are high for students and they are entitled to influence the decisions that are made about education.

A common mindset is that education is for the benefit of students, with critical decisions made by adults. But powerful teaching and learning puts students center stage and makes learning about them, using their experiences, backgrounds and connections to the community to make learning rigorous and relevant to their lives. When students are challenged to achieve at high levels and receive the support they need, education is also by them. Students must have opportunities to develop the skills and tools to inform their own learning—from what happens in the classroom to how the school is run.

Essential Elements
Community Engagement

A challenge for schools is to ensure that traditionally underrepresented students (low-income students, students of color and those who do not speak English) participate and that equitable communication provides a safe environment in which they can share ideas.

How can small schools engage students in a meaningful way?

Give students representation and voting rights on school leadership bodies. In successful small schools students participate regularly on school reform panels, committees and task groups. Their role exceeds token membership mandated by by-laws; their input is sought out and valued as an essential perspective on school life. Students are involved in creating the vision and design of restructured or new schools. They have voting rights and the expectations for their attendance and participation are the same as for adult members. This not only enriches the school's decision-making, but also prepares students for active participation in a democratic society by engaging them in respectful debate and discourse about matters that are important to them and the community. Such preparation both motivates and educates students.

Include students in shaping the curriculum. In small schools, teachers look to students for input on integrating their interests and backgrounds into the curriculum, while still addressing the need for all students to achieve at high levels and meet state standards. In the personalized environment of a small school, students and teachers collaboratively plan powerful teaching and learning. They work together to create curriculum themes, project topics, rubrics and other assessments. When curriculum is skillfully framed around broad concepts and scaffolded to build self-directed learning, teachers can engage students in a meaningful way in the design of curriculum (through project-based learning, service learning, and internships) and assessment (using portfolios, rubrics, and exhibitions).

When teachers know about their students' existing knowledge and skills, as well as their academic and nonacademic interests, the context for learning changes—teachers teach to a roomful of engaged individuals rather than to a class of passive learners.

Provide students opportunities to develop partnerships with employers and organizations in the community. Small schools eliminate traditional barriers that segregate young people from

adults and instead create connections between students, teachers and community mentors. High schools that make a difference in young people's lives are connected to their communities—to employers, postsecondary institutions, and community-based organizations. Learning experiences in the community, such as working with adult mentors in internships and service learning, provide opportunities that motivate young people to work hard, and develop knowledge and skills necessary for success. Learning and applying what they know outside of the classroom, and being held to real-world standards for performance is empowering. It gives young people the chance to be consumers, users and resources of knowledge.

Parent Engagement

Parents have a unique perspective on schools; they are experts on the effect schools have on their children. Often what is working or not working in schools is clear to parents by how their children talk about and apply what they are learning. However, despite their "insider" view, parents are often excluded from helping make decisions on the education of their children. With limited contact with teachers and administrators, there is rarely a clear path for parents to follow to affect the school's curriculum, culture or practices. But schools need parents. Overcoming systemic challenges, such as closing the achievement gap and ensuring all students are college-ready, requires engaging parents as partners in and champions for change.

Many schools do not recognize the untapped potential in their parent community. And among the schools that do, many struggle to mobilize parents in meaningful ways. A challenge for all schools is to ensure that traditionally underrepresented parents (low-income parents, parents of color and those who are non-English speaking) participate and that equitable communication provides a safe environment in which to share ideas.

Constraints on time and resources often prevent large comprehensive high schools from regularly communicating with parents and encouraging their active involvement. In small schools, however, the foundation for parent involvement is part of the personalized environment and powerful teaching and learning that focuses on knowing students and their families well, and integrating that knowledge into the curriculum. Small schools recognize the influence parents have on students' success and break down traditional barriers to school-family connections.

Essential Elements
<u>Community Engagement</u>

Why do small schools build parent awareness and engagement?

Parents as powerful allies. When parents are fully involved in schools—from working with their children at home to advocating for strong public education in the community—everyone benefits. Students with involved parents, no matter their background, earn higher grades, attend school more regularly, and are more likely to graduate and go on to college.

Parents who have a voice in the school develop greater confidence in themselves and the school. And as they evolve as leaders, parents gain the skills, knowledge and contacts to better support their children's learning in the classroom and at home. As they become involved in schools, parents communicate and model the importance of education to their children. Parents are also valuable resources for engaging other parents, leveraging connections in the community and sharing their expertise in the classroom. Schools cannot do the job they need to do alone. Parents are an essential part of what make great schools great.

How do small schools involve parents in the work of the school? Some strategies, as discussed in "*The Case for Parent Leadership*," include the following:

Expand the notion of "parent." For some young people, parents are not the only people involved in their lives and education. Grandparents, other relatives, guardians, and family friends also nurture and represent the interests of students. While parents play that role for most students, it is not fair to assume that is the case for all students. By getting to know students through personalized learning in a personalized environment, teachers and schools staff can learn about and reach out to the people central in students' lives. Limiting that view to only parents could hinder the success of some students by excluding the extended group of people who help shape their lives.

Welcome parents on their terms. Start with where parents are; never underestimate what they can bring to the table or assume they know more than they do. Parents are most likely to become involved if they understand they should be involved, know they are capable of making a contribution and feel invited by the school.

Effective small schools recognize that schools can be intimidating places for parents. Creating an environment where parents feel

welcome and encouraged to share their ideas is the first step toward building the bonds of trust and respect necessary for strong involvement. Schools need to review how they traditionally reach out to parents and assess the effectiveness of those approaches. Communication plans need to target parents from all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. Newsletters, web pages and speeches can be useful to disseminate information, provided the messages are clear, free of jargon and relevant to parents' experiences. However, to motivate and prepare parents for involvement, more personal and active approaches are necessary. Focus groups, leadership training, on-line conversations and forums are ways to not only convey information but also to ask parents to share their ideas, plan a process and take action.

Schools also need to be creative in terms of when and where they involve parents. For example, are activities for parents held in the day, at night, at the school, in local churches or other community locations? Are meetings and materials translated? Are parents invited by mail, on the phone or in person? How do all of these factors combine to make parents feel welcome and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate? The success of any effort to build common ground with parents requires that schools identify and respect the many issues—racial, ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic—that affect parent involvement.

Support powerful roles for parents. In nearly all schools, parents are encouraged to help their children at home and volunteer for specific tasks at the school. These are time-tested roles, and both parents and schools feel comfortable with them. But parents can, and should, have a voice in major decisions that affect their own and other children.

In small schools parents are active and meaningful participants in school governance bodies and school improvement teams. Parent representatives serve in key roles on committees throughout the school and are voting members on school decision-making bodies. Parents participate in action research, making decisions about programs and hiring, school improvement and contributing to problem solving at every level. Playing a leadership role does not necessarily come naturally for parents, especially in a school culture that has historically supported deference to teachers and principals. Schools include parents in professional development days and school reform conferences to help them acquire the skills they need to be effective leaders and advocates in the system.

Essential Elements
Community Engagement

Examine attitudes toward authority, participation and service. Typically, parents who want to be involved with their children's school join the PTA, help to fund raise, attend plays and sporting events, and volunteer in the classroom. Parents usually expect to fight for their own children's success, but feel it is the school's responsibility to play that role for students whose parents are not involved. In many schools, teachers, principals and staff feel that the safety, integrity and success of the school is largely their job to oversee and are wary of who they allow to influence the vision or daily operation of the building.

This traditional model of authority, participation and service inhibits parents from assuming new roles as partners and leaders. Those new roles require everyone in the school community to understand and support the valuable contribution parents can make. It means a shift in the status quo. In their new roles parents take on greater responsibilities such as collaborating with administrators, holding schools accountable for all students achieving at high levels, identifying and securing resources for schools, and advocating for education in the media.

Partner with parents, their children and school staff to develop curriculum. Research reveals that even as children mature into adolescence, parent involvement in their learning remains important. Unfortunately, most large schools lack the structure and culture to support parent involvement, which progressively declines as students move through elementary and middle schools to high school.

In effective small schools, parents understand the vision of the school and are active partners in designing curriculum. Teachers, students and their parents meet regularly to review the student's work, craft learning plans, assess progress, and set behavioral expectations and academic standards. By becoming actively involved, parents become aware of what their children are learning and how they can help them progress.

Community Engagement

Communities are a rich, but often untapped, resource for schools. In many schools education is limited to the classroom, where teachers teach

and students learn. But reforms in education have revealed the power—and importance – of making learning relevant to students' lives by creating connections between the classroom and the community through experiences such as internships, service learning, and public exhibitions of work. Small schools rely on the community not only as the source of learning opportunities, but as partners in designing the school's vision, curriculum and programs. These schools recognize that community members are vital to their success.

Why do small schools build community awareness and engagement?

Education is everyone's business. Whether or not community members have school-age children, education affects everyone. Students ride public transportation, frequent local stores, gather in coffee shops and otherwise encounter community residents on a daily basis. These same young people are potential future employees, tenants and regular customers. Communities with high achieving schools attract new businesses that build stronger local economies. Everyone in the community is a stakeholder in education and should have opportunities to discuss and understand the mission, vision and goals of the school.

As with all stakeholders, community engagement begins with assessment—what do people think about local schools? What do they think about the community in general? By linking what is happening in schools to public concerns, the relevance of education becomes evident. When people understand the urgency of getting involved with schools as a way to support what they know and care about in the community, they are motivated to get informed and take action. A challenge for all schools is to ensure that a representative group of community members participates and that equitable communication provides a safe environment in which to share ideas.

The risk of not involving community members is great. Community members react with skepticism when educators offer solutions without first defining the need for change and canvassing for input. A move away from familiar large, comprehensive schools to small, personal ones will seem like just another fad. For the mission and goals of small schools to be understood and supported, community members need to be involved in the conversations from the earliest design phase.

How can small schools engage community members in a meaningful way?

> **Host targeted forums**. Successful small schools recognize that community members are not a monolithic group and engage them on issues that have particular meaning to them. Meetings that

target subgroups in the community—such as local union representatives, retailers, social service agency staff—allow small schools to speak to the concerns and interests of specific segments of the community. Community members appreciate recognition of, and the opportunity to share, their unique perspective on school issues.

Develop meaningful, working partnerships with employers. Employer partners are a source of valuable expertise and input. Working with teaching teams, employers can help schools develop authentic learning experiences (such as job shadows and internships) that bring a school's vision for rigorous and relevant learning to fruition. Employers contribute real-world perspectives to designing curriculum and evaluating student work, and crafting the school's vision and policies. They bring unique insights to school planning and program development; their ability to articulate the knowledge and skills required by careers underscores the importance of all students achieving at high levels. Employers also have political leverage in the community, making them powerful champions for small schools.

Include community partners in school decision-making. Community members can play a variety of roles in helping shape both the structure and culture of the school. As voting members on oversight committees and other leadership bodies, community members can inform decisions on staffing, budgets, space and scheduling. The autonomy of small schools allows them to involve community partners in leadership roles that would not be possible in a school with top-down management.

Involve community partners in assessing public opinion and developing a strategic communication plan. With training, community partners can design survey questions, facilitate focus groups and lead inquiry groups to assess parent, student and public opinion on education and local schools. With a deep understanding of the issues that they gain through such experiences, community partners become valuable resources for how and when to communicate the vision and mission of small schools. Their "insider" perspective on the realities and priorities of businesses, organizations, and public service and policy agencies is pivotal when trying to communicate to, and engage the support and involvement of audiences not traditionally connected to schools.

Involve community partners in curriculum design. Community partners can serve as excellent "consultants" in designing

curriculum and assessment. The emphasis small schools place on personalizing and customizing learning means there is greater opportunity to incorporate real-world issues and problem-solving into the curriculum. Community partners are valuable resources for building professional-level expectations and standards into projects and can help create dynamic learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom. Community members are also effective members of assessment teams to review portfolios and serve as panel members at exhibitions. Their ability to view student work through the lens of real-world standards is invaluable.

Essential Elements
Leadership Development

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Schools today educate a diverse population of students and prepare them for a rapidly changing, information-based global society. Where once schools prepared students either to go to college or enter the workforce, now all young people need a pathway to postsecondary education to achieve a successful future. Effective schools organize what they teach and how they teach to match these demands. They also pay attention to how they operate, creating flexible and inclusive structures that support and model a professional learning community.

The mission of small schools to put students at the center of the learning experience does not begin and end in the classroom; it extends throughout the entire school community and involves teachers, administrators, students, families and community members in making decisions together. Moving beyond traditional principal-dominated school leadership models, these schools seek to enlarge the circle of leadership, influence, and accountability. Small schools embrace such alternative approaches to leadership because they provide a framework for priorities such as teacher collaboration and personalized learning in a personalized environment.

What are essential elements in small schools efforts to create effective leadership?

Equitable Leadership. Leadership is equitable when decision-making bodies at all levels of the school reflect the racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic diversity of the community.

Distributive leadership. Distributive leadership is a "flat" organizational structure; the power of decision-making is spread across a representative group of players in the school and the community.

Effective governance. Effective governance is characterized by decisions that are made in a fair and timely way by a representative governing body.

Professional development. Well-designed professional development builds skills among teachers and other staff so they are confident and competent to actively participate in all levels of school decision-making.

Essential Elements
Leadership Development

Equitable Leadership

In a school with equitable leadership, decision-making bodies reflect the racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic diversity of the community. The school models its ideal for an equitable environment by recruiting, retaining and developing staff, students, parents and community members from diverse backgrounds to serve as leaders at all levels.

Small size is not a guarantee of equitable leadership. Small schools need to take advantage of specific aspects of their structure and culture to ensure they retain leadership that reflects the wider community. Some of these elements include active involvement of community members, students and parents, distributive leadership, and autonomy in hiring.

Key conditions to strive for when trying to establish equitable leadership include:

- School decision-making bodies actively recruit and develop representatives who reflect the diversity of the school community
- Teacher-leader positions are shared by staff from different backgrounds
- Hiring practices aggressively seek teachers and administrators who reflect the demographics of the community
- Parents and community members from all cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic special needs and socioeconomic backgrounds are involved in all aspects of the school and decision making
- School actively involves community and parents through home visits, forums, focus groups, town hall meetings and community events
- School and the community create open and explicit dialogue regarding issues of student achievement, equity, diversity and empowerment

Distributive Leadership

Distributive leadership spreads decision-making authority throughout the school, creating a “flatter,” more representative governance structure. Unlike traditional, principal-dominated school leadership models, distributive leadership provides opportunities for everyone—including teachers, students, parents and community members—to participate in key decisions. There are many advantages to this type of organization. It fosters community engagement, provides opportunities for professional

and personal growth, and enables sustained progress despite inevitable changes in leadership over time.

Effective small schools avoid traditional “top-down” organization and instead create a shared sense of community that nurtures active engagement in learning and collaborative problem solving at all levels. With more people involved, everyone quickly learns that there isn’t a “somebody else” who will make decisions for them. The result is greater involvement and ownership. Creating a flat leadership structure is not a guarantee of effective governance; leaders need to establish clear structures and guidelines to function efficiently.

What are some methods for establishing distributive leadership?

Define new leadership roles. Part of establishing distributive leadership is letting go of traditional notions of how schools should be run.

- **Principal.** Many schools have an authoritarian-style of leadership, with the principal determining the course for the school, and teachers and staff adhering to directives. Principals in successful small schools are inclusive and flexible. They provide opportunities for staff, students and community members to gain necessary skills to be effective leaders and assume leadership roles on site councils, action research teams and committees. These principals model collaborative learning and decision making through the way they engage and empower others.

- **Research by Kathleen Cotton** reveals that this type of shared decision making is inversely related to student achievement and success. Students in schools run by principals with more collaborative approaches do better than their peers in schools run in a more authoritarian manner. Whether the influence of principals is direct or due to other variables (such as teachers’ increased authority to make decisions concerning curriculum and instruction) is unknown. But the evidence is clear: the most successful principals are visionary leaders, who focus their staff and community on continuous instructional improvement and who pursue ways to increase their own learning.

- **Teacher leaders.** Teacher leadership brings decision-making authority close to the classroom and gives teachers a new sense of responsibility and ownership in the school. Teacher leaders have responsibilities ranging from setting agendas and

facilitating regular staff meetings to documenting the work of the small school and keeping statistics on overall student development. Teacher leaders are important liaisons between staff, parents and administrators and keep stakeholders abreast of all information related to action research, professional development, events and policies. Teacher leaders generally receive a stipend and additional training to assume these responsibilities.

- **Campus manager.** In converted small schools that share space a campus manager is responsible for site-wide issues. The manager ensures that the schools are able to operate in ways that are consistent with their vision, mission and beliefs by overseeing issues regarding facilities, services and safety. The campus manager also plays an important role in monitoring each school's approach to issues such as student enrollment, curriculum, or schedules to ensure that no aspect of one school's operation hampers the success of the others.

Provide structured leadership opportunities for all stakeholders. A successful school cannot flourish (at least not for long) on the actions of one charismatic leader; schools need to develop leadership capacity in people who reflect the demographic diversity of the community. Effective small schools provide teachers, students, parents and community members the chance to develop the skills necessary for leadership roles in the school. These schools then design and promote a variety of opportunities for all stakeholders to voice their opinions, participate in key decisions and take on leadership roles. For example, students participate in professional development days to learn the facilitation skills they need to lead community forums. Parents participate in training to learn to design surveys to collaboratively conduct action research with teachers. Community members learn to analyze data so they can effectively inform the work of the school improvement committee they are in charge of.

Effective small schools intentionally create opportunities to spread skills, knowledge, authority and influence throughout the school community. Leaders know the demographics of their school and encourage all members, especially those from traditionally underrepresented groups, to participate. In effective small schools, leadership development and professional growth pathways are intended to build everyone's capacity. Building capacity in this way enables sustained progress and support of the school, despite changes in leadership.

Essential Elements
Leadership Development

Redefine leadership as relationships. In traditional hierarchical schools, leadership is defined by what the persons in charge do for or to the other members of the community. In schools with distributive leadership, the focus shifts to how people interact with one another to make change happen. In successful small schools leadership is a collaborative and inclusive process; it is defined by people's relationships to one another—their personal connections, mutual respect and shared knowledge. A person's status in a small school—be it student, teacher, or parent—does not affect his or her legitimacy as a decision-maker. Anyone who supports the mission of the school and is committed to working collaboratively with a diverse group is valued and encouraged to participate.

Create representative leadership councils. In successful small schools teachers, parents, students and community members representing diverse groups have high levels of participation in key leadership roles. They have voting privileges on committees and councils, a signal that their opinions are meaningful and their participation is welcomed. Creating representative leadership councils is an essential part of building community engagement.

Gather feedback from stakeholders. Even though not all stakeholders can participate in leadership roles, their opinions and perspectives should still be sought. Town-hall meetings, focus groups, home visits, surveys and one-to-one conversations are ways to collect feedback from the broader community. To ensure representative participation it is essential to ensure that materials and discussions reflect the cultural, ethnic, linguistic and socioeconomic diversity of the community.

Effective Governance

In schools that are governed effectively, decisions are made in an efficient and timely fashion by a diverse and representative governance body. Some of the key characteristics of an effective governance system are:

Legitimacy – decision-making structures, process, and groups are seen as fair, open, appropriate, representative, and authoritative

Efficiency – decisions are made in a timely way and meetings are run smoothly

Essential Elements
Leadership Development

Clarity – guidelines outlining how decisions are made exist in writing and are understood by all stakeholders, meetings are open, written notes of meetings are shared widely

Effective governance is essential in small schools, where there is a continuous process of inquiry and improvement. The intimate, flexible nature of small schools enables staff to regularly examine their teaching and learning practices and the steps students are making toward achieving standards. This kind of ongoing self-study demands a system of decision-making that is efficient so that the school can continue to make progress toward its goals for all students.

What are some strategies small schools can use to ensure effective governance?

Create representative leadership councils. In successful small schools, teachers, parents, students and community members have high levels of participation in key leadership roles. They have voting privileges on committees and councils, a signal that their opinions are meaningful and their participation is valued. Creating representative leadership councils ensures that the thoughts and concerns of all constituents are heard in a timely way and is an essential part of building community engagement. This reduces the need to revisit issues and factor in opinions that were not previously voiced. It also eliminates feelings of exclusion that can stall a process and sow feelings of mistrust in the community.

Clarify everything in writing. Schools with effective governance systems are schools that have taken the time to create clear guidelines that explain exactly which decisions are made when and by whom. These schools' leadership groups have written by-laws that are easily understood and consistently followed. And they are diligent to distribute useful meeting notes to all constituents in a timely fashion after every meeting. With these critical pieces in place, school decisions and policies cease to be a mystery to students, parents and new staff members.

Open meetings to all stakeholders. In successful small schools, decisions are part of an open forum. Whether or not members of the school and the community are active participants on councils and committees, they should have the opportunity to attend and/or be informed about the process. Meetings should be open to the public and meeting minutes should be made available in a variety of formats (online, as part of newsletters, and posted at school). The minutes should be published immediately following meetings so

that community members can remain up-to-date on school issues. Meetings and meeting minutes should be translated whenever necessary.

Make fairness and efficiency the rule throughout the school. Decision-making practices should be consistent at all levels of the school. All committees and councils should adhere to the same standards of representation and efficiency. No group decision should be deemed "too trivial" to adhere to standards for participation or timely decision-making. An effective school models effective governance throughout the school.

Professional Development

Well-designed professional development creates a professional learning community and focuses everyone's attention on improved staff performance and student learning. Too frequently, professional development is viewed as secondary to other school obligations. But such a view is shortsighted; it ignores the long-term return on investment to students when teachers, administrators and other staff have regular opportunities to work together as they build their knowledge and expertise.

In effective small schools professional development is strategically aligned with the schools' vision and includes accountability measures (such as oral and written reports, peer reviews, classroom observations, and data analyses) that provide feedback on the impact of training activities. The autonomy of small schools allows them to design schedules that support regular collaboration among teachers and staff, and provide a wide range of opportunities—from workshops to action research to critical friends networks—to define, practice, reflect on, share and evaluate effective practices.

High quality professional development is results-driven, standards-based and job-embedded. It provides opportunities for ongoing learning that involves and engages the whole staff in positive growth toward achieving the school's vision of excellence. Some strategies for structuring effective professional development, as outlined by the National Staff Development Center, include:

Value staff ownership. Most of the staff development that is conducted with K-12 teachers follows a short-term transmission model—training is often episodic with no sequence of skill

development or follow-up. Rarely are participants given an opportunity to comment on what training is needed and as a result, activities frequently focus on issues that have little relation to what is already going on in classrooms, the school or the district. To be meaningful, staff development should reflect the vision of the school, be based on researched areas of need and acknowledge participants' existing practice. Staff should be included in a variety of ways—such as using surveys, action research, critical friends networks and classroom observations—in planning the sequence of professional development activities and in assessing their efficacy over time.

Staff ownership of professional development is often overlooked. Schools need staff to be more than just compliant in their participation in professional development activities; they need them to be invested in the process as learners in a community. Professional development has the greatest impact when teachers and administrative staff can clearly identify the ways in which training is helping them make progress toward achieving a common set of goals for learners—students and adults—in the school.

Make ongoing, collective learning the focus of professional development. Workshops, trainings and speakers are useful for introducing new concepts and strategies, but effective staff development helps educators fully understand the purposes and critical attributes of those new ideas, and their connection to other approaches. Promoting this kind of deep learning requires giving teachers and administrators frequent opportunities to practice new skills until those skills become automatic and habitual. Such opportunities should be school-wide, during the school day and in collaboration with colleagues. For example, joint lesson planning, curriculum mapping, group problem solving, discussion and dialogue, writing, and practice with feedback are opportunities for day-to-day active learning. Engaging in these types of professional conversations gives teachers and staff the chance to internalize what they learn and define areas in which additional learning is needed.

Acknowledge different learning styles. The most powerful forms of professional development often combine learning strategies. Because people have different learning styles and strengths, professional development must include opportunities to see, hear, and do various actions in relation to the content. It is also important that educators are able to learn alone and with

others and, whenever possible, have choices among learning activities.

For many educators, staff development is synonymous with training, workshops and large group presentations. Awareness of new ideas may be achieved through these approaches, but unless they include numerous live or video models of new instructional strategies, demonstrations in teachers' classrooms and coaching or other forms of follow-up, new ideas are not likely to become a routine part of teachers' instructional practice. Teacher and administrator learning can occur through collaborative lesson design, the examination of student work, curriculum development, case studies, action research, study groups and professional networks.

It is essential that staff development leaders and providers select learning strategies based on the intended outcome, and participants' prior knowledge and experience. For example, an extended summer institute with follow-up sessions, action research and study groups will deepen teachers' content knowledge and provide necessary feedback when implementing new instructional strategies. A two-hour after-school workshop will not achieve that goal.

Use data to target professional development efforts. Data from various sources can serve a number of important staff development purposes.

First, data on student learning gathered from standardized tests, district-made tests, student work samples, portfolios, and other sources provide important input to the selection of school or district improvement goals and provide focus for staff development efforts. This process of data analysis and goal development typically determines the content of teachers' professional learning in the areas of instruction, curriculum, and assessment.

Second, data can be used in the design and evaluation of staff development efforts, both for formative and summative purposes. Early in a staff development effort, leaders must decide what adults will learn and be able to do and which types of evidence will be accepted as indicators of success. They also determine ways to gather that evidence throughout the change process to help make midcourse corrections to strengthen the work of leaders and providers. Data can also indicate to policy makers and funders the

impact of staff development on teacher practice and student learning.

A third use of data occurs at the classroom level as teachers gather evidence of improvements in student learning to determine the effects of their professional learning on their own students. Because improvements in student learning are a powerful motivator for teachers, evidence of such improvements as a result of staff development experiences helps sustain teacher momentum during the inevitable frustrations and setbacks that accompany complex change efforts.

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