

THE POWER OF SMALL SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS



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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Aligning Curriculum, Improving Instruction, Engaging Communities

In 2015, the Washington State Legislature enacted “Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty in Washington State” (SB 5433). Elements of this legislation included an expectation that school districts use a place-based approach and teachers get an opportunity to choose how to fulfill the related curricular requirements. The “what” of the law was clear; unanswered, though, was the “how.”

Funded by a Washington State Achievement Council 21st Century Grant, Western Washington University’s Woodring College of Education and Huxley College of the Environment, in collaboration with the Swinomish Tribe, formed a partnership with the La Conner and Concrete school districts to immerse K-12 teachers and principals in the Since Time Immemorial (STI) curriculum. The project also provides access to the Digital Library database and science lessons focusing on topics like salmon recovery, tideland impacts, and water use in the “Science and the Swinomish” project.

“ We didn’t realize how powerful the collaboration between the two districts was going to be...I have lots of teachers who want to be involved.” — Jaci Gallagher, Principal, Concrete Elementary School



APPLYING STI

Starting in 2016, principals, teachers, and university faculty, guided by Swinomish Tribal leaders, first learned together in a four-day summer institute, combining classroom and field experience in both science-related STI and the Digital Library. Once the 2016-17 school year began, principals and teachers met several times to develop lessons incorporating their new learning. With the support of instructors from Woodring and Huxley, teams of teachers and principals from LaConner and Concrete developed robust, scientifically sound, culturally significant, and enduring lessons.

After preparing their first set of lessons for trial, teachers from one district traveled to observe the lessons in the classrooms of the partnering

district. Principals from La Conner and Concrete, mentored by faculty from the Woodring Administrative Leadership Program, collaborated in observing lessons in both districts. Following the lessons and observations, principals and teachers met to discuss and refine their work, incorporating formative assessment data and adjusting instruction as needed for future lessons. Participants repeated this process throughout the 2016-2018 school years: collaborating, teaching, comparing, and refining in an iterative process to build exemplar lessons and units of instruction designed to engage and inform all students.

POWERFUL COLLABORATION

Since the beginning of the Science and the Swinomish project, when the grant partners first considered desired outcomes for this grant-funded effort, learning about, developing, and adding robust science lessons to the STI curriculum were at the forefront. However, following the first round of lessons and observations in partnering district classrooms, it was apparent something much more powerful was set in motion.

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With both La Conner and Concrete School District populations hovering around 600 students, neither teachers nor principals have job-alike peers within their districts to share their practice with. As Michael Holbrook, Concrete Middle/High School principal, noted, “In small, rural districts we work mostly in isolation, so having the opportunity to work together with another small district was priceless. It was the value gained from sharing of ideas, not only about the project, but through the collaboration of educational practices in general that became an unexpected, pleasant outcome and a major benefit to both schools. We cultivated friendships and a working relationship that will continue long after the project is over.”

Michael’s job-a-like at La Conner High School, Todd Torgeson, agrees. “The Science and the Swinomish Project has been such a positive experience,

“ There’s so much more that unites us than divides us, but we would have never known that if we hadn’t worked together.”

— Beverly Bowen, Principal,
La Conner Elementary School





as it has allowed teachers and administrators from two different small schools to come together to collaborate on instruction and student learning.”

Beverly Bowen, La Conner Elementary Principal, explains that when small schools come together, “Teachers have the opportunity to visit other classrooms and see varying methods of instruction, classroom management, and technology, along with engagement of students. Teachers have been very appreciative of the time spent working collaboratively to develop lessons and then see them in action.”

Jaci Gallagher, Concrete Elementary principal concurs, adding, “We didn’t realize how powerful the collaboration between the two districts was going to be...I have lots of teachers who want to be involved.”

For small, rural school districts, creating partnerships and working together to strengthen professional development and student opportunities is highly recommended. Beverly Bowen summarizes, “There’s so much more that unites us than divides us, but we would have never known that if we hadn’t worked together.” ■





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