

# New England Small Schools Network

## Planning Manual

Center for Collaborative Education  
Boston, Massachusetts  
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## Introduction

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Congratulations! As members of the New England Small Schools Network (NESSN), you and your school community are about to embark on an important journey to transform and improve your school. The mission of NESSN, launched through a generous grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is to demonstrate the power of small schools in successfully educating our increasingly diverse student populations and preparing them for productive futures in a democratic world. The Network seeks to transform the face of public education by creating small schools that embrace the values of democracy, equity, and personalization.

NESSN is operated by the Center for Collaborative Education, a non-profit organization. Since its founding in 1994, the mission of the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) has been to improve student learning in K-12 public schools and districts by promoting models of whole-school change. CCE works with schools and networks of schools to help them engage in sustained reform focused on school and system-wide change and instructional improvement. CCE seeks to influence the larger public's views on education to better support change that fosters democratic and equitable schools.

This manual has been developed to assist faculty, administrators, community representatives, parents, and others involved in small-school planning and implementation. It is not meant to be all-inclusive; rather, the intent of the manual is to provide a helpful context along with some ideas and organizers to assist schools as they begin their work toward becoming small schools. While the manual plays a crucial role in this process, it should be used as part of a larger planning and professional

### **Small Schools**

- *small and personalized so students and teachers know each other well*
- *unified vision of teaching and learning that binds the school*
- *autonomy necessary to create unified learning communities*

development process for small-school design that includes technical assistance and coaching from NESSN staff, network meetings, summer institutes, and other support.

The manual is organized in the following sections:

1. **Small Schools Overview** Small Schools History and Background, Three Conditions for Successful Small Schools
2. **Building a Professional Collaborative Culture** What is school culture? Where does it come from? Sample Continuum of School Cultures; professional collaborative cultures
3. **Developing a Unifying Vision** The importance of developing and implementing a school vision
4. **Restructuring the School** Overview of organizational structures in schools
5. **Governing the School through Shared Leadership and Teacher Teams** Shared leadership and decision making, descriptions of sample teams in NESSN schools
6. **Working Together Effectively in Teams** Stages of team development, characteristics of effective teams, setting norms, team roles
7. **Using Protocols to Look at Student and Teacher Work** Using structured formats to discuss student and teacher work, guidelines for using protocols
8. **Peer Observation** Teachers observing each other in structured, supportive ways to improve student learning
9. **The Cycle of Action Research** Teachers studying what's happening in their schools and classrooms to improve instructional practice
10. **Grouping Students for Learning** Looping and multi-age grouping of students in schools, heterogeneous grouping of students in classrooms, school-wide advisory programs
11. **Organizing Time to Support Learning** School schedules
12. **Allocating Resources** Allocating available resources of money, staffing, and time

- 13. Developing Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment** Designing curriculum with a focus on teaching students to think, to develop habits of mind, a to become competent in worthwhile areas
- 14. Working with Parents and Community** A framework for creating a partnership with families, schools, and communities
- 15. Getting Started: Small-Schools Design and Implementation** A guide for schools and districts to plan and implement small-schools design

## 1. Small Schools Overview

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*Two years ago, approximately 24 percent of the students at Central<sup>1</sup> High School were dropping out before receiving a high school diploma, and daily absentee rates ran at about 20 percent. When state-mandated assessments were administered, 80 percent of the 1,400-student body failed some portions. Students reported that they don't feel safe at Central; educational materials such as textbooks, computers, and lab equipment were insufficient; and parts of the building were in desperate need of repair.*

*To address these problems, Central High School embarked on a massive reform effort to split the school into four small schools. Each school has its own principal and the autonomy to provide personalized attention to a smaller group of students. With the school now in its first phase of the reform, many see the first year as a transition year and know that more changes will be made as they learn what works and what doesn't. But already students and teachers are experiencing some of the advantages of breaking up the school into smaller sections. Many students talk about how their headmasters now know who they are and have the time to help them out, make sure they're coming to school, and are engaged in their learning. Teachers report that lower student-teacher ratios enable them to spend more time with students and improve their instruction.*

### **Small Schools:**

- 50-400 students
- faculty small enough to work together collaboratively
- defined geographic area with own administration, faculty, and student body

Like “Central” High School, many communities have been plagued by high dropout rates, increased school violence, declines in student learning, and inadequate resources. With high-stakes testing as a

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<sup>1</sup> Central High School, like all the schools described in the vignettes in this manual, is not a real school; its story represents a compilation of experiences of several large public schools undergoing the transformation to become a small school.

prerequisite looming in the near future for high school graduation, many schools are confronting these long-term problems and seeking solutions with renewed vigor. A growing body of research and evidence indicates that large, comprehensive schools, especially those serving high percentages of low-income students and students of color, need a radical overhaul if they are to be successful in raising and sustaining achievement for all students.

Such a radical overhaul must go beyond individual reforms like block scheduling, interdisciplinary curriculum development, and even high-stakes testing. These and other reforms, when implemented in isolation, have had little impact on raising student achievement<sup>2</sup>. Research linking school size to student achievement<sup>3</sup> indicates that school size affects student performance, particularly the performance of low-income students and students of color.

### **History and Background of the Small-schools Movement**

The small-schools movement started in the mid-1970s when Deborah Meier and a group of like-minded teachers founded Central Park East Elementary School in Harlem, New York. Meier believed that putting an emphasis on the size of the school would successfully bring the rigor and challenges found in many private schools to students in low-income communities. Two decades of subsequent research findings offer compelling evidence about the qualities and conditions of small schools that Meier believed would be especially effective for improving the education of urban students not well served by large schools.

#### ***The Gates Foundation's 7 attributes of high performing schools:***

- *Common focus*
- *High expectations*
- *Personalization*
- *Performance-based*
- *Climate of respect and responsibility*
- *Technology as a tool*
- *Time for teachers*

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<sup>2</sup> Cawelti, Gordon. *Effects of High School Restructuring: Ten Schools at Work*. Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Cotton, Kathleen. *School Size, School Climate, and Student Performance*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1997.

Small schools developed out of the fairly simple concept that schools ought to be places where each child is known, visible, and valued by at least one caring adult who takes responsibility and accepts accountability for his or her learning. Small schools are an attempt to address systemic ineffectiveness through redesigning and transforming large public schools. The small-schools movement seeks to improve dramatically the educational experiences and outcomes for students and their families.

Backed by research and a desire to improve conditions for student learning so that all students may participate fully in our democratic society, many large urban schools in cities such as Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle, Oakland, and Chicago have joined this movement to create a new vision of public education. This vision calls for maximum autonomy and flexibility in small-schools planning and implementation in exchange for strong accountability to ensure that all reform efforts are successful in raising student achievement for under-served students.

### **Three Conditions for Successful Small Schools**

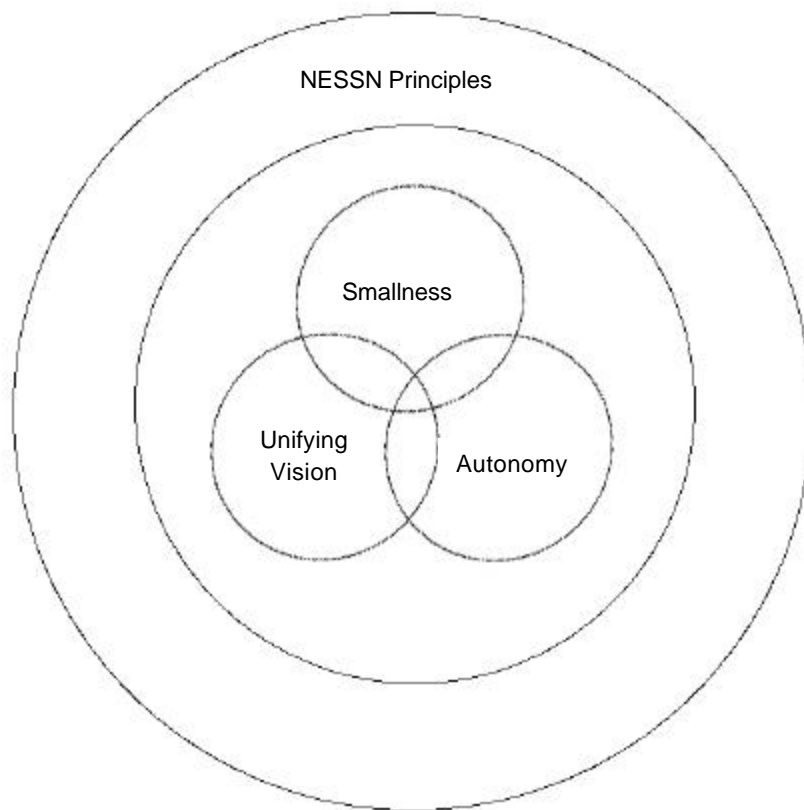
School size alone, however, is not an indicator of success. Public schools will be successful only if they have the following three conditions:

**Smallness** Schools are small and personalized so that students and teachers know each other well;

**Unifying vision** A school needs a unifying vision of teaching and learning that binds the school community and drives teaching, learning, and assessment, with the goal of creating powerful learning experiences for every student; and

**Autonomy** These schools have the autonomy necessary to create unified learning communities (i.e., budgets, staffing, curriculum/assessment, governance, and school calendar), while also benefiting from the economies of scale that remaining within a large district affords (e.g., transportation, facilities, payroll, legal services).

### Successful Small Schools



## **Smallness**

Increasingly, evidence points to the fact that small schools can be a powerful antidote to the failures of our nation's large, comprehensive schools. A comprehensive review of the research<sup>4</sup> on small schools reveals that students in small schools do as well academically as, if not better than, those in large schools. Student attitudes are more positive about school, attendance is higher, there are fewer discipline problems, and students participate more in extracurricular activities. All students have equal access to learning at high levels. Team teaching, integrated curriculum, cooperative learning, and other successful grouping and instructional strategies that are easier to implement in small schools are in greater evidence. Parents are more involved, and teachers report that working in small schools is more satisfying.

### **Important Conclusions about Small Schools<sup>5</sup>:**

- “Academic achievement in small schools is at least equal – and often superior – to that of large schools....”
- “Grouping and instructional strategies associated with higher student performance are more often implemented in small schools...”
- Student attitudes toward school are more positive in small schools.
- Small schools experience significantly fewer discipline problems and less truancy, violence, substance abuse, and gang participation.
- Levels of extracurricular participation are higher and more varied in small schools, and students in small schools gain greater satisfaction from participation.
- Student attendance is higher in small schools, while the dropout rate is lower.
- “Students’ academic...self-concepts are higher in small schools....”
- Small schools have a higher rate of parental involvement.
- Teacher attitudes towards their work and their administrators are more positive in small schools.
- Small schools are effective in combating the effects of poverty on student achievement and in narrowing the achievement gap that separates poor students from their affluent peers, as well as Black and Hispanic students from white students.

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<sup>4</sup> Cotton, Kathleen, *School Size, School Climate, and Student Performance*, Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## **GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTING SMALL SCHOOLS WITHIN A LARGER FACILITY**

**Membership:** 50-400 students representing the total diversity of the district, with representation from all grades. Students remain in the same learning community for as long as they are enrolled in the school.

**Equity among learning communities:** There is fair and equal distribution of resources among schools within the facility, including staff and space.

**Student diversity within small schools:** An equitable distribution of students in regard to income status, race, gender, ethnicity, home language, special education status, and academic achievement is maintained within each school. This distribution can be accomplished either by lottery or by controlled student choice coupled with ensuring balanced enrollment.

**Teacher choice in small-school membership:** Teachers need to have input into selecting which small school they want to join, while balancing the need to create equitable distribution of faculty strengths and talent among schools. Creating a community of professionals who share a common educational philosophy helps create a more powerful learning environment for students and their families. An equitable distribution of teachers in regard to race, ethnicity, and gender is also maintained.

**Autonomy:** Each school is autonomous, having control over hiring, scheduling, and allocation of resources. Small schools within a school may share use of facilities, certain courses such as Advanced Placement and select electives, and principal leadership that can advocate for the school at the district level.

## **Unifying Vision**

NESSN uses ten Common Principles as a foundation for their work in schools, with a commitment to equity and access for all students at the center. These principles grow out of the research that indicates key characteristics of successful schools, and they reflect the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's seven attributes of high-performing schools. Built on, in part, the Coalition of Essential School's Ten Common Principles, these principles provide a vision for effective small schools and guide the reform work on NESSN member schools.

Small schools use the ten principles as a way of focusing their work as they make decisions about school governance and develop the school's vision. They make sure the NESSN Principles are embedded in the school's curriculum and assessment practices. These principles are also used in annual assessments of a school's progress toward becoming a small school.

## ***Small Schools***

- *Equity and access for all students*

## TEN NESSN PRINCIPLES

1. **Habits of Mind** The school's central goal is teaching students to use their minds well in every area of work they undertake, to the end of becoming responsible members of a democratic community.
2. **Personalization** The school is small and personalized, so that teachers and students know each other well.
3. **Less Is More** The school's curriculum is driven by the concept of "less is more." Each student should master a limited number of essential skills and areas of knowledge.
4. **Equity and Access** The school's goals should apply to all students, while the means to those goals will vary as students themselves vary. In particular, there should be an explicit goal of raising learning and achievement of low-income students and students of color.
5. **Lower Student-Teacher Ratios** Student-teacher ratios are greatly reduced so that all faculty know their students well, with secondary ratios at no more than 80:1 and elementary ratios at no more than 20:1.
6. **Student-as-Worker; Teacher-as-Coach** The governing metaphor of the school should be student-as-worker and teacher-as-coach, thereby helping students to take responsibility for their learning. Learning should be purposeful, rigorous, and related to helping students become powerful in the real world.
7. **Assessment by Exhibition** Assessment should demonstrate what important things students know and can do, as well as where they are in need of more help. Students should demonstrate their mastery of competencies in various ways, including exhibitions and portfolios.
8. **High Expectations, Trust, Respect, and Decency for All** The tone of the school stresses values of high expectations, trust, respect, and decency on the part of all members of the community.
9. **Professional Collaborative Communities** The principal and teachers serve multiple obligations and demonstrate a sense of commitment to the achievement of all members of the school community. Teachers work together to create a professional collaborative learning community.
10. **Flexibility, Autonomy, and Shared Governance** The people closest to students, including teachers, administrators, parents, and the students themselves, are the policy makers and decision makers. This calls for democratic forms of school governance and facilitative leadership. The school has maximum flexibility and autonomy, enabling decisions to be made as close to the learner as possible.

## **Autonomy**

In order for schools to be successful in educating diverse students, each school needs significant, charter-like autonomies, while operating within the economies of scale afforded by being a member of a school district. These autonomies enable a school to build a unified learning community and use its resources in the best manner possible to provide personalized, high quality teaching and learning for students. These autonomies are granted with the expectation of increased accountability on the part of the school to track and demonstrate its progress.

### ***Small Schools:***

*Maximum autonomy  
and flexibility in  
exchange for  
accountability*

The New England Small Schools Network believes that schools should be granted autonomy in the following five main areas:

- staffing
- budget
- curriculum and assessment
- governance and policies
- school calendar

While the ideal extent of autonomy in each area is described below, NESSN acknowledges that gaining these autonomies within school districts is rooted in the local context of each community and is an evolutionary, developmental process.

## **FIVE NESSN AREAS OF AUTONOMY**

**1. Staffing:** NESSN schools have the freedom to hire and excess their staff in order to create a unified school community. This includes:

- deciding on staffing patterns that best meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of students;
- hiring staff that best fit the needs of the school, regardless of their current status (member of the district or not, although every teacher hired becomes a member of the local teachers union); and
- excessing staff (into the district pool) that do not fulfill the needs of the school.

**2. Budget:** NESSN schools have a lump sum per-pupil budget over which the school has total discretion to spend in the manner that provides the best programs and services to students and their families. This includes:

- creating a lump sum per-pupil budget, the sum of which is equal to that of other district schools within that grade span; and
- moving the district toward itemizing all central office costs and allowing NESSN schools to purchase identified discretionary district services or not, and include them in the school's lump sum, per-pupil budget.

**3. Curriculum and Assessment:** NESSN schools have the freedom to structure their curriculum and assessment practices to best meet students' learning needs. While acknowledging that all NESSN schools are expected to administer any state- and district-required test, these schools are given the flexibility to best determine the school-based curriculum and assessment practices that will prepare students for state and district assessments. This includes:

1. freeing schools from local district curriculum requirements; and
2. having graduation requirements set by the school, not by the district, with an emphasis on competency-based, performance-based assessment.

**4. Governance and Policies:** NESSN schools have the freedom to create their own governance structure that has increased decision-making powers over budget approval, principal selection and firing, and programs and policies, while being mindful of state requirements on school councils. This includes:

- having the school's site council take on increased governing responsibilities, including the following: principal selection, supervision, and firing, with final approval by the superintendent in all cases; budget approval; and setting of school policies; and
- giving the school flexibility to be freed from all district policies and set its own policies that the school community feels will best help students to be successful. This includes policies such as promotion, graduation, attendance, and discipline policies.

**5. School Calendar:** NESSN schools should have the freedom to set longer school days and calendar years for both students and faculty. In particular, research supports a correlation between faculty planning time spent on teaching and learning and increased student achievement. Scheduling that allows for summer and school-year faculty planning time contributes to a more unified school community and educational program. This includes:

- increasing planning and professional development time for faculty;
- increasing learning time for students; and
- organizing the school schedule to maximize learning time for students and planning time for faculty (e.g., longer days Monday through Thursday in order to have half-days for students on Fridays, providing faculty a significant planning and professional development block every Friday afternoon).

## **2. Building a Professional Collaborative Culture**

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### **What Is School Culture?**

Every school has its own culture. You can sense it as soon as you step into the building, or sometimes, even from the parking lot. Do student plantings edge the building? Is the building well maintained? Are parents milling around and talking? Inside, is student work displayed on the walls? What about the tone of the school: is it cheerful, somber, chaotic? Do you feel welcomed as you enter? Are the doors to the administrative offices open? Are there parents in the building? How do the students move through the hallways? How do they treat each other? What are they doing in the classrooms? What kinds of interactions take place between students and teachers? In the staff meeting rooms, what are the teachers working on and talking about?

*A school's culture is revealed through the details of its daily life.*

Through these details, a school's culture is revealed. All these interwoven elements—how members of a school community teach and learn from each other, interact, communicate, express themselves, work together, and celebrate—form the rich fabric of school culture. There is much to learn from the daily life of a school. A community's core values and beliefs about the purpose of its school underlie and inform all that occurs there.

### **Where does a school's culture come from?**

Whether consciously built or not, a culture exists within every school. This culture comes from the attitudes and beliefs of the people who work and learn inside the school, the cultural norms that have always guided how the school operates, and the relationships among people there. But school culture is also the result of external influences. Outside factors from the local school district and community, and from society at large have significant impact on how the school works.

Often these cultural influences, both inside and outside the school, work against reform: an uninformed public questions the need for change; skeptics in the district offices and even within the school undermine the change effort; resentment surfaces among those who favor the reform and those who do not. If the culture of the school is “don’t fix what isn’t broke” or “let’s just jump on to the next bandwagon of reform without questioning why in order to get more resources,” the reform effort won’t get the commitment necessary for success. Meaningful versus superficial and episodic reform requires building a culture to sustain and embrace it, one that involves and engages teachers in decision making about key educational matters and new approaches to learning and teaching. In order to achieve lasting reform, teachers and others in the school community need to go beyond learning to work together in teams, create interdisciplinary curriculum units, or examine issues in study groups. They need time to understand and integrate the researched-based principles of learning and teaching that underlie successful schools.

When schools seek to improve, a focus on the values, beliefs, and norms of both the school and the environment outside the school is necessary. School culture does not exist in a vacuum. It is created by internal and external forces and thus can be manipulated and changed to improve the school.

### **Different Types of School Cultures**

School cultures vary widely from school to school. From the hierarchical and bureaucratic organizational structures that characterized most public school systems in the last century to the newly developing professional collaborative cultures of today, a wide continuum of school cultures can be found. As schools move to build new cultures that are more effective in improving student learning, it is helpful to take a look at the following chart and assess where your school would be placed on this continuum.

## Sample Continuum of School Cultures

The following chart provides a general overview of types of school governance and decision making, as well as instruction, curriculum, and assessment.

Type of Culture	School Governance and Decision Making	Instruction, Curriculum, and Assessment
<b>Hierarchical and Bureaucratic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Centralized decision making by a small group of administrators with little or no teacher input</li> <li>▪ Teacher autonomy within the classroom with restricted participation in school-wide organizational and curricular decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defined by state and district specialists</li> <li>• Testing used to sort students homogeneously (by grade levels, for programs, in classroom groups)</li> <li>• Teacher's job is to present a prescribed set of content and skills.</li> <li>• Individual teachers are held accountable for student failure.</li> </ul>
<b>Non-collaborative<sup>6</sup>: Balkanization</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separate and competing groups seek power for own ends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor integration of curriculum and instructional goals</li> <li>• Atmosphere of competition among teachers</li> </ul>
<b>Non-collaborative: Comfortable Collaboration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comfortable, easy-going atmosphere is pleasant but does not solve troublesome issues facing the school community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers share some ideas, techniques, and materials to improve teaching and learning but avoid deeper issues that impact curriculum and long-range planning.</li> </ul>
<b>Non-collaborative: Contrived Collegiality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal, but not necessarily collaborative, structures (such as site-based management councils, school improvement teams, peer coaching) are in place and enable teachers to work together.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work appears collaborative on the surface but doesn't translate into the deeper, more significant and productive practices found in collaborative settings.</li> </ul>
<b>Professional collaborative culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal as facilitative leader; significant teacher involvement in decision making</li> <li>• Teacher and student collaboration on issues that affect the whole school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant teacher involvement in decision making about school goals, curriculum, and instructional practices</li> <li>• Collective responsibility for student achievement</li> </ul>

<sup>6</sup> Fullan and Graves (1991) offer descriptions of three non-collaborative cultures: Balkanization, Comfortable Collaboration, and Contrived Collegiality.

## Successful Schools and School Culture

Over the last three decades, much research has been conducted identifying several key characteristics of successful schools. These include:

- A clear and focused vision
- High expectations for all students
- Purposeful and meaningful work
- Positive home-school connections
- A learning community small enough so that each student is known well by a least one adult.

More recent and ongoing research (Levine and Lezotte, 1990; Fullan and Hargreaves, 1991; Fullan, 2001) into school culture adds collegiality and professional collaboration to the list. When teachers are collegial and work in collaboration with administrators, positive school outcomes are evident. Researchers now consider the creation of a professional collaborative culture a critical piece of successful schools.

*Research tells us that, for effective school change to take place, a culture of professional collaboration is necessary.*

### ***Glickman's Findings About Successful Schools***

- Faculty in successful schools are less satisfied with regard to their teaching than are faculty in less successful schools.
- In successful schools, faculty members supervise and guide one another, plan courses together, and work in coordination.
- In successful schools, faculty members are not treated as subordinates but instead are regarded as the colleagues of administrators and others involved in decisions and actions.
- Faculty members, administrators, and others in successful schools have established norms of collegiality for discussing and debating the big questions about how to constantly renew and improve the educational environment for all students.
- Successful schools seek, produce, and consume information, and they see educational renewal as a continuing process, not as an event.

## **Professional Collaborative Culture and the School Community**

In a professional collaborative culture, members of the school community work together effectively and are guided by a common purpose. All members of the community—teachers, administrators, students, and their families—share a common vision of what the school should be like. Together they create goals that lead them toward this vision. In doing so, they create a culture of discourse, where the most important educational matters facing the school are discussed openly and honestly. The teachers in these schools know they can be more effective and are continuously looking for the piece of advice, the book, the research, the organizational structure that will help them improve even more. The many different voices, experiences, and styles of the school community add to its strength and vitality.

*In a professional collaborative culture, members of the school community work together effectively and are guided by a common purpose.*

Many studies, including the research Carl Glickman cites in his book, *Renewing American Schools*<sup>7</sup>, support NESSN’s view that a collaborative culture best builds and sustains effective teaching and learning in schools. Glickman reports that in successful schools, teachers are always questioning their practices; faculty members guide one another, plan together, coordinate their practices, and participate in the most important decisions; and the larger questions about educational practice are constantly at the forefront of meetings and conversations. These elements – faculty members working together, discussing important issues relevant to their role as professionals, and taking a significant role in the school’s decision-making process—provide the foundation for developing a collaborative culture.

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<sup>7</sup> Glickman, Carl, *Renewing American Schools*, Jossey-Bass, 1993

## What does a professional collaborative culture look like in a school?

As an overview, the following list provides samples characteristics of professional collaboration in schools.

- **School governance structures engage the entire faculty** through teams, committees, and full faculty meetings to decide on key instructional, programmatic, and budgetary issues of the school. Many teachers are leaders, supported and nurtured by the principal. (See Section 5: *Governing the School through Shared Leadership and Teacher Teams.*)
- **Teachers work in teams** to plan and implement curriculum and assessments for students they share (See Section 6: *Working Together Effectively in Teams.*)
- **Teachers and others read and discuss texts** using a text-based discussion protocol (See NESSN Tool 12: *Text-based Seminar.*)
- **Teachers use consultancies to present and problem solve** instructional and curriculum dilemmas (See NESSN Tool 17: *Consultancy.*)
- **Teachers use protocols for looking at student and teacher work to improve student learning.** Colleagues offer support and feedback leading to greater risk-taking and experimentation. Failure, mistakes, and uncertainty in work are openly shared and discussed in order to provide support and help. (See Section 7: *Using Protocols to Look at Student and Teacher Work.*)
- **Teachers observe each other** and their classrooms, and have conversations about the observations to improve learning, teaching, and assessment (See Section 8: *Peer Observation.*)
- **Teachers examine multiple sources of data** to identify challenges, and use an inquiry process to develop school-wide solutions (See Section 9: *The Cycle of Action Research.*)
- **Attempts at school improvement are ongoing and comprehensive.** (See Section 15: *Getting Started Small Schools Design and Implementation.*)
- **There is ample time for teacher collaboration.** (See Section 11: *Organizing Time to Support Learning.*)

### **Benefits of Professional Collaboration for Teachers**

Expectations for today's teachers are higher than ever before. Teachers are asked to prepare all students to reach high academic standards. In many schools, the complex learning needs of diverse student populations are presenting new challenges. Changing instructional methods and approaches, and keeping up with current theories about teaching and learning require extensive intellectual preparation and training from teachers. Teachers can never know enough. Working together collaboratively enables teachers to pool their talents and resources to the benefit of all their students.

Glickman reports that successful schools are places where teachers are always questioning their practices; faculty members guide one another, plan together, coordinate their practices, and participate in the most important decisions; and the larger questions about educational practice are constantly at the forefront of meetings and conversations. These elements – faculty members working together, discussing important issues relevant to their role as professionals, and taking a significant role in the school's decision-making process—provide the foundation for developing a collaborative culture.

### **Benefits of Professional Collaboration for Students**

Just as teachers are being called upon to stretch and expand their skills, so, too, are students expected to meet more complex challenges in their learning experiences. When Newmann (see above) and others studied over ten thousand students enrolled in 820 high schools across the U.S., they found that when staff worked together collaboratively, students reaped the benefits. Students were more likely to be engaged in high intellectual learning tasks; they achieved greater academic gains in math, science, history, and reading than students in traditionally organized schools; and a smaller achievement gap existed between students from

different backgrounds than in the traditionally organized schools. (In smaller high schools, learning gains were distributed more equitably.)

### **Long-term, Sustainable School Change**

For long-term, sustainable school change to occur that results in improved student learning and achievement, building a culture of professional collaboration is a critical element of any model of school reform. When teachers work together and share decision making with administrators on key matters that affect the entire school, everyone stands to benefit. Working together effectively, teachers experience more job satisfaction and are able to create more authentic learning experiences for their students than when working in isolation. Students become more motivated, and their academic achievement increases.

### **Building a Collaborative Culture**

To build a collaborative culture, all members of the school community:

- Share the belief that working collaboratively is the best way to reach the school's goals.
- Develop organizational structures that allow teachers to form teams and work together.
- Agree on norms so teams can work effectively.
- Define a vision for the school based on school competencies students should have.
- Set goals to achieve the school vision.

## **Tools for Assessing your School's Culture**

As you begin to think about your school's culture, here are some tools to help you focus your analysis. These two tools provide a survey format. Group members may choose to fill out the surveys individually and then come together in teams to discuss their findings.

<b>Tools for Assessing your School's Culture</b>	
<b>Name of Tool</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
NESSN Tool 1: Building a Collaborative Culture	To assess current school culture for the purpose of discussing areas for improvement
NESS Tool 2: Glickman's Findings on Successful Schools	To assess where your school is in relationship to Glickman's findings on successful schools

**NESSN TOOL 1:**  
**BUILDING A COLLABORATIVE SCHOOL CULTURE: HOW ARE WE DOING?**

*Purpose: to assess current school culture in order to discuss areas for improvement*

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For the following questions, rate how you think your school is doing. Then discuss areas of weakness and ways to improve. Use this scale:

1 = No, or rarely, or only a few teachers

2 = Some, but not much, or not everyone

3 = Most teachers and teams do fairly regularly

4 = All teachers do regularly

**DO WE:**

\_\_\_\_\_ Look at student work in teams using defined protocols, and use these discussions to take steps to improve learning, teaching, and assessment?

\_\_\_\_\_ Observe classrooms and have follow-up conversations with the teacher whose classroom is being observed to improve learning, teaching, and assessment?

\_\_\_\_\_ Work in teacher teams to plan and implement curriculum and assessments for shared students?

\_\_\_\_\_ Engage in text-based discussions?

\_\_\_\_\_ Use critical friends groups to bring instructional dilemmas to the forefront and receive feedback on them?

\_\_\_\_\_ Work in study groups to examine data, conduct action research, and try new strategies for solutions for improving learning, teaching, and assessment?

\_\_\_\_\_ Serve on faculty panels to judge and assess student work that is presented through exhibitions, demonstrations, and portfolios?

\_\_\_\_\_ Work in teacher teams to develop rubrics for assessing student work?

\_\_\_\_\_ Collaboratively examine multiple sources of data to identify challenges, and then use an inquiry process to develop school-wide solutions?

(continued next page)

## NESSN TOOL 1:

### **BUILDING A COLLABORATIVE SCHOOL CULTURE: HOW ARE WE DOING? (continued)**

For the following questions, rate how you think your school is doing. Then discuss areas of weakness and ways to improve. Use this scale:

- 1 = No, or rarely, or only a few teachers
- 2 = Some, but not much, or not everyone
- 3 = Most teachers and teams do fairly regularly
- 4 = All teachers do regularly

#### **HAVE WE:**

\_\_\_\_\_ Set norms as a faculty for how we work with each other?

\_\_\_\_\_ Developed a shared vision and common agenda among the entire school community for moving the school forward?

\_\_\_\_\_ Developed school-wide habits of mind?

\_\_\_\_\_ Created a shared decision making governance structure that engages the entire faculty through teams, committees, and full faculty meetings to decide on key instructional, programmatic, and budgetary issues of the school?

## NESSN TOOL 2:

### GLICKMAN'S FINDINGS ON SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS

*Purpose: To analyze the current state of collaborative work in your school in relation to Glickman's five findings of successful schools..*

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For the following findings, rate how you think your school is doing. Then come together as a group for sharing. Discuss areas of weakness and suggest ways to improve. Use this scale:

- 1= This finding does not characterize our school at all.
- 2= There is little evidence of this finding in our school.
- 3= There is some evidence of this finding in our school.
- 4= This finding characterizes what goes on in our school.

\_\_\_\_\_ Faculty in successful schools are less satisfied with regard to their teaching than are faculty in less successful schools.

\_\_\_\_\_ Successful schools are places where faculty member supervise and guide one another, plan courses together, and work in coordination.

\_\_\_\_\_ In successful schools, faculty members are not treated as subordinates but instead are regarded as the colleagues of administrators and others involved in decisions and actions.

\_\_\_\_\_ Faculty members, administrators, and others in successful schools have established norms of collegiality for discussing and debating the big questions about how to constantly renew and improve the educational environment for all students.

\_\_\_\_\_ Successful schools seek, produce, and consume information, and they see educational renewal as a continuing process, not as an event.

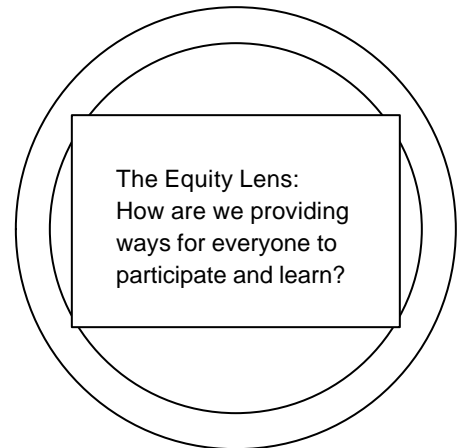
### 3. Developing a Unifying Vision

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*On a hot afternoon in September, a group of students, teachers, parents, community members, and administrators, known as “The Butler Vision Team,” sat around a school library table at Butler High School. Scattered across the table was a selection of student drawings, slips of paper, index cards, and meeting notes the group had collected over a one-month period. The Vision Team had asked members of the Butler School community to be part of creating the school’s vision. In classrooms, at PTO meetings, in faculty meetings, and at community forums, the Vision Team asked people to look into a crystal ball and reflect upon what their ideal high school would look like, what they hoped students would be like when they left the school, and what they wished it were like to work and learn in the school.*

*One teacher asked, “I know our school’s vision statement is important, but how are we ever going to compile all these papers into one succinct, clear message to guide our school?”*

*As members of the Vision Team started reading and talking about the papers, they found that most described a similar picture of what the school community wanted Butler High School to be.*



Developing a vision (or mission) statement, a clear statement describing a school community’s “dream school,” is one of the most critical tasks a school undertakes on its road to becoming a small school. The process of creating this statement can be long and frustrating, causing many to scratch their heads and wonder,

“How can such a short statement take so long to write? What’s the big deal anyway?” Dealing with people’s dreams, especially when they concern their children’s futures, can be a complex and passionate undertaking. And yet, when developed correctly, the vision statement becomes a powerful tool, guiding many individuals on a common path for creating and sustaining school change.

The vision statement answers questions such as these:

- What should our school look like if we want to successfully educate all students?
- What are the students doing in this school?
- What do teaching and learning look and sound like?
- Are students painting, reading, doing experiments, dancing?
- Who’s teaching them, and how?
- Are the classrooms noisy or quiet or both?
- How do people interact in our school?
- Are we finding ways for everyone to get a chance to participate and learn?

*The vision statement boils down the images and ideas people have of their ideal school into succinct, clear prose.*

The statement boils down the dozens of images and ideas people come up with for their ideal school into succinct, clear prose.

### **The Ten NESSN Principles and the School Vision**

The Ten NESSN Principles play an important role in the development of a school vision. While these principles do not

represent the “right answer” about what should be included in a vision statement, they do serve to remind us of the importance of articulating a vision that includes all students, provides opportunities for students to use their minds well, and promotes a professional, collaborative culture. As part of the “visioning” process, schools make sure that the NESSN Principles are embedded in their vision statement.

Everybody has a chance to provide input and be involved in creating this statement – teachers, students, parents, administrators, members of the community. Even before the statement is agreed upon and displayed on poster board in the school’s front hall or sent home in the PTO newsletter, just taking the time to reflect and talk about what’s important in a school can energize and unify the school community. Through discussion and exploration of differing interpretations on the part of individuals within the school community, the vision comes to life. The vision statement represents this process and becomes symbolic of a school’s collaborative spirit. It sets the tone for future planning and development.

“The Mission of the Greater Egleston Community High School is to create a community of learners who provide responsible local and global leadership and participation.”

Greater Egleston Community  
High School  
Boston, MA

### **Celebrating the Vision**

Once the entire school community has reached consensus on the wording of the school vision, it’s time to celebrate! Some schools present the vision for the first time in a school-wide assembly.

Others publicize it in school newsletters and local papers. Copies of the vision can be posted in classrooms, the cafeteria, the gymnasium, the local grocery, and the public library. A flag with the vision statement can be paraded around the school. Whatever course a school decides to follow in presenting and celebrating the vision serves as an important affirmation of a school’s commitment to improving all students’ learning. With public

displays of the vision, a school community makes a public statement about their intentions for the school.

### **Putting the Vision to Work**

The vision statement focuses all the work of a school. It guides curriculum development, learning and teaching, and assessment. Planning teams revisit the statement when making key decisions about important issues such as curriculum, budgets, and student placement. When faced with school dilemmas, teacher teams look to the vision statement for guidance in solving problems. Often, when people start using the vision statement in real-school situations, they find certain parts of the statement need strengthening or rewording. The vision statement is a work-in-progress, revisited and fine-tuned as the school evolves.

*The mission statement of Fenway High School in Boston, MA reflects a deep commitment to social justice, equity, and activism. Each year the faculty goes on a retreat to review their mission statement and five-year plan to see how they're doing in support of this commitment. This year, faculty commented that although they continue to use essential questions (What does it mean to be human and how do we learn the rules of life? How do you do the right thing in the face of injustice?) that move students toward the school's mission, they weren't promoting as much activism as in past years. One teacher remarked, "We don't seem to be doing the letter-writing campaigns, the sit-ins, the political forums to the extent we did in the old days. We should take a look at trying to support kids to actually organize and do more politically-motivated, anti-injustice activities in our city and community."*

"Fenway's Mission is to create a socially committed and morally responsible community of learners, which values its students as individuals. Its goal is to encourage academic excellence and habits of mind, self-esteem and leadership development among all the schools' students."

*Fenway High School  
Boston, MA*

## Tools for Developing a Vision Statement

The following tools will help you develop a vision statement for your school. Start with Tool 3 as a way to relate personal experience to the ten principles of effective learning and teaching found on page 12. This process will then inform your work when you use Tools 4 and 5 to develop and fine-tune your statement. It may seem like a lot of work for a short piece of writing, but the vision statement serves to focus and guide all the work of school change.

<b>Tools for Developing a Unifying Vision Statement</b>	
<b>Name of Tool</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
NESSN Tool 3: Powerful Learning Experience	To show the relationship between an individual's powerful learning experience and principles of effective learning and teaching
NESSN Tool 4: Developing a Vision Statement	A process for developing a vision statement
NESSN Tool 5: Vision Statement Checklist	To make sure a school's vision statement is in line with principles of effective teaching and learning

## NESSN TOOL 3: POWERFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCE

*Purpose: To show the relationship between an individual's powerful learning experience and principles of effective learning and teaching*

### **YOU WILL NEED:**

Paper for writing activity, flip charts to record discussion, copies of ten principles of effective teaching and learning found in Appendix A for all participants.

### **GUIDED WRITING ACTIVITY:**

Individuals take time to reflect on and then write about a powerful learning experience that they have had either inside or outside of school. A powerful learning experience is one where you experience a feeling of "ah-ha!" It can be an individual or group learning experience where the learning is personal and meaningful with positive and lasting outcomes. (5-10 minutes)

### **DISCUSSION IN PAIRS:**

In pairs, share and discuss the powerful learning experience you wrote about. List characteristics of your experiences. (5 minutes)

### **GROUP DISCUSSION:**

As someone facilitates a group discussion about the powerful learning experiences, someone else records characteristics on chart paper. A list of common characteristics of the powerful learning experiences discussed is compiled to summarize the discussion. (10-15 minutes)

### **PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE LEARNING AND TEACHING:**

Make copies of the ten principles of effective teaching and learning found in Appendix A and hand them out. In pairs, see where the characteristics of the groups' powerful learning experiences are reflected in these principles. (5 – 10 minutes)

### **GROUP DISCUSSION:**

Facilitate a discussion about the common characteristics and where they are reflected in the ten principles. Discuss ways of incorporating them in the school vision statement. (5-10 minutes)

## NESSN TOOL 4: DEVELOPING A VISION STATEMENT

*Schools can follow simple steps to develop a vision statement that is consistent with principles for effective learning and teaching. The process generally takes no more than one to two months.*

### PROCESS

#### 1. FORM A “VISION TEAM” TO FACILITATE THE PROCESS

Members should include students, parents, faculty, staff, administration, and people from the community.

#### 2. GATHER IDEAS FROM STUDENTS, PARENTS, FACULTY, AND OTHERS

Ask small groups in classrooms and at special meetings to reflect on what they think their school should be like by responding to questions such as these:

- *What does my ideal school look like?*
- *What does learning and teaching look like in my ideal school?*
- *What do we want all students to know and be able to do by the time they leave this school?*
- *How do people interact in my ideal school?*

Students may provide written responses as an essay assignment or as a culmination of class discussions. Parents and other community members provide input through a simple survey or in focus-group activities.

#### 3. DRAFT THE VISION

The vision team synthesizes the views and ideas presented in 2 above, and writes a draft vision. Use the checklist on the next page to make sure it reflects principles for effective learning and teaching.

#### 4. REVIEW AND REDRAFT THE STATEMENT

Circulate the draft among members of the school community for comment and consensus. The vision team then makes any necessary changes.

#### 5. APPROVE THE VISION

Present the vision at a meeting of the full faculty for approval and adoption.

#### 6. DISPLAY, CELEBRATE, AND KEEP THE VISION ALIVE

The whole school community affirms, displays, and celebrates the vision. Hold a public celebration of the vision that involves everyone. Display the vision in all rooms and use it as a basis for decision making in the school.

## NESSN TOOL 5:

### VISION STATEMENT CHECKLIST

*Answering the questions on this checklist will help you make sure your school's vision statement is in line with principles of effective learning and teaching. This checklist may be used during the entire vision development process and especially during the review and redrafting stages.*

#### CHECKLIST

- Was the vision developed collaboratively?
- How does the statement promote equity?
- How is it useful as a tool to develop curriculum and assessment?
- Is the language clear and succinct?
- Where are principles of effective teaching and learning embedded?
- How does the vision seek to improve academic achievement and learning for all students?
- How do we communicate the vision to all members of the school community?
- How do we celebrate and make it public to the whole school community?
- How often do we plan to revisit it?
- How can we tell if the vision is embedded in all the work of the school?

## 4: Restructuring the School

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*The 1600-student North High School was in the early planning stages to restructure their large high school into smaller learning communities. The Planning Team – with representative membership from the faculty, administration, student body, and community – was meeting regularly. This team had already led and facilitated the process to create a new vision for North High School, and the well-crafted statement was displayed throughout the school. Now it was time to get down to the nuts and bolts of school organization. Making the school smaller was a great idea, but how, exactly, would they divide up the students and teachers to make smaller learning communities? Who would be in charge of each small school? What schedule should they use? What would the new school budget look like?*

The structures that guide a school community through its day-to-day operations—its master schedules, the length and frequency of class periods, how students and teachers are grouped, and how financial resources are allocated—reflect the beliefs and values of the school. If a school believes that all students learn in the same way and at the same pace, then traditional structures, in which all students attend classes for 42-minute periods and sit in rows to listen to teacher lectures, might make sense. However, when a school recognizes that students learn in different ways, and the school wants to provide learning opportunities to help all students succeed, traditional school structures need to be reexamined.

Small schools evaluate existing school structures to make sure they support the school community’s vision about what it wants for its students by asking and answering questions such as the following:

*School organization includes structures for:*

- *Governance*
- *Student and Teacher Groupings*
- *School schedules*
- *Resource allocation*

- Does the way students are grouped allow access to rigorous learning opportunities for all students?
- Do teachers have enough common planning time and other resources to create a curriculum that helps students develop habits of mind and the skills of intellectual inquiry?
- Do students and teachers have long enough blocks of time to engage in authentic, intellectual work?
- Are the budget decisions based upon a school's learning goals?

By consciously aligning organizational structures with the underlying beliefs about students and schools, small schools foster higher student achievement and a positive collaborative culture among students and teachers alike.

Creating a culture of authentic learning in small, democratic communities is essential to improved student performance and achievement. Students need caring communities that both support and challenge them academically. Small schools create organizational structures to guide them on their journey to improve student learning and achievement. Guided by the NESSN Principles and their own vision statements, the schools figure out which structures would best meet their schools' needs.

## **Structures for School Organization:**

**Governance Structures:** Who makes the decisions in the school and how are decisions made?

**Student and Teacher Groupings:** How are students and teachers grouped to improve learning and achievement, and who decides?

**School Schedules:** How is time organized, and who decides?

**Resource Allocation:** How are resources of money, staffing, and time used, and who decides?

## **The Interconnectedness of School Structures**

Schedules, student groupings, and allocation of resources are often the most entrenched aspects of a learning community, creating a complex weave of interdependent elements. Making one change in a school can quickly affect the entire foundation. For example, when a school decides to have its ninth grade students present cumulative portfolios as part of an end-of-year requirement, it may find itself redesigning the master schedule so that teachers have more advisory time with their students to help them develop their portfolios. For structural change to be effective, schools need to take into account all the interrelated factors involved in making the change rather than proceeding in a piecemeal fashion.

This interconnectedness can be viewed as a strength because it allows schools to function as one unified system. A unified system enables educators to recognize patterns and relationships, develop continuity among a myriad of projects and initiatives, and thus learn more effective ways of structuring itself. However, for some this complexity can be overwhelming, causing a reluctance to

*Real improvements can be seen only when a structural change includes a clearly defined mission to improve student learning, faculty ownership of the process and commitment to developing a deeper understanding of teaching and learning, and ample resources allocated to support change.*

change anything for fear of disrupting the whole system. Careful planning and ensuring that the whole school community is informed and involved are critical to successful structural change.

In order for any change to be made within a school, such as improving student achievement or developing a collaborative culture among colleagues, educators often look first at the school's structures. Structures alone, however, do not improve a school or student achievement. Rather, they create the conditions for more effective teaching and learning. While some may think that changing the schedule is easier than changing the underlying beliefs or norms that cause the school to function as it does, a combination of factors is usually at work when a school shows real and lasting improvement. Real improvements can be seen only when a structural change includes a clearly defined vision to improve student learning, faculty ownership of the process and commitment to developing a deeper understanding of teaching and learning, and ample resources allocated to support change.

**Key Strategies for Structuring Small Schools:** Below are four key strategies for structuring small schools. Each strategy is discussed in detail in the manual sections that follow.

**A. Using Democratic Forms of Governance** (see Section 5)

- Use leadership structures and decision-making procedures that model democratic practices.

**B. Grouping Students and Teachers for Learning** (see Section 10)

- **Organize small schools into even smaller units.** While a small school of 350 students provides greater personalization than does a larger school, sometimes even this size does not allow teachers to know all their students well. In these cases schools often look for additional ways to help create the sense of a small and caring learning community by breaking a school into smaller learning groups that can provide support for teams of teachers and students. One way to create smaller groups is to organize teachers and students into academic teams with no more than 50–100 students per teacher. **Teachers are organized into small interdisciplinary teams of two to four people sharing a common group of no more than 50–100 students. Common planning time is created for teams to engage in discussions about teaching and learning.**
- **Explore grouping options such as looping and multi-age grouping.** Looping refers to the practice of teaching the same students for more than one year. With multi-age grouping, students of more than one grade are together in a class. The practices of looping and multi-age grouping can increase opportunities for building teacher-student relationships and addressing the learning needs of all students.
- **Group students flexibly for learning.** Students are placed in heterogeneous learning groups within the classroom in order to hold all students to rigorous academic standards and to allow teachers to build on students' different learning styles and needs. These groupings are flexible, allowing students to be in different groups for different learning experiences and purposes.

**C. Organizing Time to Support Learning** (see Section 11)

- **Create school schedules that allow for flexibility, longer blocks of learning, and common planning time.** Flexible block scheduling allows teacher teams to configure their time as needed to meet their learning goals. Longer blocks of learning exist to accommodate in-depth inquiry and varied instructional strategies. Teacher teams have long blocks of time for planning and curriculum development.

**D. Allocating Resources** (see Section 12)

- **Allocate resources to support the school's vision and learning goals.** Decisions on how to allocate school and district resources, including funding for professional development, teaching staff, and release time, are based on a school-wide comprehensive plan developed with the consensus of the faculty. Professional development is largely school-based and rooted in conversations about the daily practices of learning and teaching.

## 5. Governing the School through Shared Leadership and Teacher Teams

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*The people closest to student— teachers, administrators, parents—and the students themselves, are the policy makers and decision makers. This calls for democratic forms of school governance and facilitative leadership. The school has maximum flexibility and autonomy, enabling decisions to be made as close to the learner as possible.*

NESSN PRINCIPLE  
10: Flexibility,  
Autonomy, and  
Shared Governance

Small schools use leadership structures and decision-making procedures that model democratic practices. Guided by NESSN Principle 10, which calls for democratic forms of school governance and facilitative leadership, and in accordance with local and state requirements, small schools have the autonomy to create their own governance structures to set up the processes for communication and decision making within a school. In small schools, the whole school community works together to set agendas and make decisions. A well-run school depends on the ideas, experience, and input from every person involved.

### **NESSN AREA OF AUTONOMY 4**

#### **Governance and Policies:**

NESSN schools should have the freedom to create their own governance structure that has increased decision-making powers over budget approval, principal selection and firing, and programs and policies, while being mindful of state requirements on school councils. This includes:

1. The school's site council takes on increased governing responsibilities, including the following:

- Principal selection, supervision, and firing, with final approval by the superintendent in all cases
- Budget approval
- Setting of school policies

2. The school has flexibility to be freed from all district policies, and set its own policies that the school community feels will best help students to be successful. This includes policies such as promotion, graduation, attendance, and discipline.

### **Shared Leadership: Working Together Collaboratively**

Small schools create governance structures so that all members of the school community – faculty and staff, parents and students, administrators, and community members – work together collaboratively and have a say in how the school is run. People representing the different stakeholders in the school community become active members of the major governing bodies of the school. Guided by a common purpose, these groups work together collaboratively to set goals and make decisions that lead the school toward its vision. Members respect each other by valuing their differences and being open to each other’s ideas. Even when there is disagreement, people listen to each other because they believe deeply that differences and conflict are vital in the process of moving their school forward.

Shared leadership means that many more people than just the administrators have both the information and power to make decisions and enact changes. Instead of one or two people making decisions alone, working teams make decisions by consensus after all participants have voiced their opinions and either support or consent to the change. Facilitative and shared leadership requires an operational structure that allows more people to lead the thinking of the school and to participate in making decisions at all levels. To build a practice of facilitative and shared leadership, a school forms teams and gives them significant responsibility, schedules regular meeting times, improves methods of communication, and finds effective ways to implement decisions.

With shared leadership, teachers become members of teams and play a substantial role in the change a school undertakes.

### ***Shared Leadership:***

*Many more people than just the administrators have both the information and the power to make decisions and enact changes.*

As teachers participate on the school’s Leadership Team, study groups, and academic and discipline-based teams, they are able to influence their school’s direction and make decisions about the school’s curriculum, teaching priorities, budget and expenditures, and hiring. When teachers have a genuine part in making decisions and implementing changes, they become more committed to reform efforts. In a collaborative culture, reform is not imposed upon teachers but created by them.

Parents and other community members also have a stake in the shared leadership of a school. Led by teams of teachers and the Leadership Team, the small school makes it possible for those outside of the school to participate in school reform. For example, the school might request feedback from parents on the challenges that affect students and the family-school connection. Or, a parent may join a study group. With these groups’ new role in school leadership comes the responsibility to work closely with the school to understand its work and its needs.

### **Membership in School Governance Groups<sup>8</sup>**

- All major groups should be represented, with access always open to others.
- Regular classroom teachers should be in the majority.
- The school principal should be a “standing” (automatically included) member.
- The group as a whole should fairly represent the gender, ethnic, and economic populations of the entire school community.

### **Sample teams working collaboratively in small schools:**

- *Initial Planning Team*
- *Leadership Team*
- *Governance Board*
- *Academic Teams*
- *Discipline-based Teams*
- *Critical Friends Groups*

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<sup>8</sup> from *Renewing American’s Schools*, by Carl Glickman, 1993

## **Making Decisions Collaboratively**

All significant school-wide decisions are made as a result of a collaborative process where the work of one team informs the others. No one person or group is making important decisions alone. Teachers and other members of the school community have the information needed to make decisions and the power to help enact school change. Multiple avenues are available to all stakeholders to communicate their ideas and concerns. The members of the full faculty consider all significant decisions using a consensus model for decision making.

Each school makes its own decisions about the kinds and number of collaborative governance teams they have. The following chart gives examples of teams, who is on them, what the teams do, and recommendations for how often they meet.

### ***Consensus:***

*All members agree to accept a decision and to take responsibility for implementing it. Those who do not wholeheartedly support the decision must be willing to experiment with it for a certain period of time before it is reassessed or refined.*

**Sample Groups Contributing to Shared Leadership and Decision Making  
in NESSN Schools**

Name	Roles	Membership	Meetings
<b>Initial Planning Team</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assists in initial planning and design of school</li> </ul>	Six to twelve members including educators from local school district, students, parents, and community members	As needed
<b>Governance Board</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has authority over (1) hiring and supervision of the principal (with the superintendent having final sign-off); (2) approval of the annual budget; and (3) setting of school policies (e.g., promotion and retention policies). NESSN governance bodies have bylaws that detail what scope of decisions they make compared to those the principal and faculty make.</li> </ul>	In Massachusetts, the Governance Board is the School Council, as defined by the Education Reform Act, and in high school councils consist of the principal, at least an equal number of parents and teachers, and community members, as well as a student. The principal and one other member are co-chairs. The number of members is up to each school. Most states, like Massachusetts, have guidelines for membership.	Once per four to eight weeks
<b>Leadership Team</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinates change effort</li> <li>• Facilitates and manages data-based inquiry and decision making</li> <li>• Models shared leadership for the school</li> <li>• Develops collaborative accountability</li> <li>• Develops system of communicating teams' and school progress internally and to the school community</li> </ul>	Six to twelve members including teachers representing all student age levels and disciplines, principal, instructional specialists, parents (optional), and community member (optional).	Once every two weeks for two hours
<b>Full Faculty</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes decisions by consensus on all important matters affecting the whole school</li> </ul>	Full faculty	Once a month

**Sample Groups Contributing to Shared Leadership and Decision Making  
in NESSN Schools (con'd)**

<b>Academic Team</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develops instructional practice to improve teaching and learning for students they teach</li> <li>• Makes recommendations to the Leadership Team for school-wide changes in instruction based on their work in the classroom</li> <li>• Uses protocols such as consultancies, text-based discussions, looking at student work, and peer observation to improve practice</li> </ul>	Two to six teachers who share the same students	At least twice a week for at least 45 minutes each time
<b>Critical Friends Group</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Primarily engaged in structured discussions about classroom practice to improve learning and teaching</li> <li>• Discussions may evolve into proposals for full faculty to consider</li> </ul>	Six to ten teachers across grade levels and teams	At least once a month for at least 90 minutes
<b>Study Group</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investigates a topic related to teaching, learning, and assessment based on data and consensus from full faculty</li> </ul>	Four to eight members:  Mostly teachers; may include administrators, parents, community members	Every two to four weeks for one to two hours
<b>Discipline-based Team</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maps school curriculum</li> <li>• Develops coherence within discipline</li> <li>• Identifies best practices within the discipline</li> </ul>	All teachers who teach a specific discipline	Once a month for one to two hours

## **A Study Group at Cass High School**

*Rushing out of the main office, tenth grade teacher Harold Benson passed his colleague, Maria Cordero, in the hall.*

*“Hey, Maria, where does our study group meet this afternoon?” he asked.*

*“Tony’s room. Did you get the article I put in your box?”*

*Looking over his shoulder, Harold called back, “Yeah, I liked that one a lot. Can’t wait to hear what Tony has to say about it.”*

*Harold Benson, Maria Cordero, Tony Maddux, and three other teachers from Cass High School are members of a study group investigating the effect of teacher expectations on low performing students. The faculty came to consensus that this was an important topic for a study group to investigate after analyzing the data, which revealed that 73 percent of students with a C- average or lower reported that they have higher expectations for themselves than their teachers do. The teachers formed a study group to better understand why students perceived that their teachers had low expectations of them and what could be done about it. They will use their findings to make recommendations to the full faculty and Leadership Team.*

*Two months into the study, the teachers have read and discussed several articles on their topic. They have also interviewed 20 students—12 students whose average is lower than a C- and 8 students who have better than a B average. In the interviews, the students were asked to share their thoughts on how they and their teachers expect them to do in school.*

*At the study group's second presentation to the full faculty, Maria gave an update on their progress and preliminary findings. She also asked the faculty what questions they had about the topic and what directions the study group should take. The presentation and discussion that followed helped the faculty develop interest in the research and share their ideas. Eventually, the whole school will look to this study group for guidance about how to improve the learning of students who have an average below C-.*

### **Descriptions of Sample Teams in NESSN Schools**

**The Leadership Team** coordinates the school's effort as its members gather information, guide the vision-making process, and communicate the school's progress to all members of the school community. To undergo major change, any organization needs a group of people who understand the change process, is committed to it, and takes responsibility for its success. Whole-school change requires extensive coordination, communication, and management. In a small school, the Leadership Team takes the central role of leading the change process that a school undergoes while ensuring that the faculty and staff are an integral part of all change.

**Full Faculty** meets once a month or as needed. Full faculty meetings become working meetings where the faculty is asked to reach consensus on decisions affecting the whole school. They set time limits to announcements about the school operation and calendar so the faculty may engage in the significant work of larger issues such as vision setting, analysis of data, and defining school-wide habits of mind. When necessary, the faculty come prepared and informed to reach consensus on an issue. At other

times they listen actively to and then discuss presentations by academic teams and study groups.

**Academic Teams** form the core of the collaborative structure of shared leadership in a small school. An academic team consists of two to six teachers who teach and are responsible for the same students. This team meets at least twice a week for a minimum of 45 minutes each time. The purpose of this team is to develop a home-base for students and teachers alike. With an academic team, especially if teachers teach more than one subject, students usually interact with fewer teachers. As a result, teachers and students know each other better. Teachers understand their students, know what motivates them, what discourages them, and what kinds of challenges or help they respond to. Communication with parents is more consistent when an academic team organizes how and when to make contact. Because students work with the same teachers and peers, their level of comfort and stability rises, which results in more opportunities for leadership and learning.

Each academic team works to develop its practice by reflecting on student work and instructional practices. Because they share responsibility for the same students, these teachers meet to plan curriculum, set academic expectations, and develop the best ways to teach their students. These teachers look at student work collaboratively to answer questions about their teaching and student learning. Through peer observation, consultancies, and text-based discussions, teammates work to improve their practices. The best academic teams act as teaching laboratories where each member is helping the others improve their work with students.

The academic team is a safe harbor where members work together to create dynamic learning opportunities for their students.

Teammates learn from each other by sharing their successes and struggles. The successes of a team are often greater because they

are shared, while the difficult moments are diminished because the teachers do not struggle alone.

**Critical Friends Groups (CFG)** are composed of six to ten teachers across grade levels and teams who meet at least once a month for at least ninety minutes. They are primarily engaged in structured discussions about classroom practice to improve learning and teaching. As they develop a strong foundation in group process skills, CFG members bring student work, lesson and unit plans, case studies, classroom dilemmas, etc. to their group to receive honest and critical feedback from colleagues in a supportive environment. Protocols for looking at student and teacher work provide a structured, focused format to their discussion as they take a serious look at their own and others' classroom practice and make changes as necessary. The group develops among themselves a schedule of peer observations, using specific protocols, which allows them to see these changes in practice and which provide feedback to one another on instructional practice. Their discussion may evolve into proposals for full the faculty to consider.

**Study Groups** investigate a challenge area that was identified as a result of data-based inquiry into school practices. Study groups provide structure for small teams of four to eight teachers to work together on specific topics related to learning, teaching, and assessment. The topic or question needs to be specific enough to result in outcomes that will improve the learning, teaching, and assessment. The study group is modeled after action research, where teachers frame a question for in-depth investigation that will move them toward changing their practice. Just as in action research, the focus of study groups is on forming a question, collecting quantitative and qualitative data that informs the question, analyzing that data, and testing the results. Study groups cultivate collegiality, recognize and expand the knowledge and expertise of group members, and improve student learning.

Study groups meet on a regular schedule for one to two hours every two to four weeks. Topics usually take a number of months or longer to be investigated thoroughly. Often, a group can continue for years as their study leads them to new conclusions and different questions. They keep the Leadership Team and faculty informed of their progress and produce a set of recommendations for the Leadership Team and faculty to consider, decide upon, and implement on a school-wide basis.

**Discipline-based Teams** consist of teachers who teach the same subject, and they meet once a month for one to two hours.

Mapping the school curriculum and developing coherence within their subject area are the primary responsibilities of these teams. Discipline-based teams also keep abreast of new developments in their field and discuss ways to improve their practice. Members often practice peer observations because some teachers may be teaching the same or similar material. These teams focus on the discourse and problem solving that will improve teaching, learning, and assessment in specific subject areas.

## Focusing on making decisions with educational impact

The Leadership Team of NESSN schools focuses its decision making on those decisions that have the most impact on improving student learning. They concentrate on “core” and “comprehensive” impact decisions. “Zero” and “minimal” impact decisions are those that don’t really change the fundamental teaching and learning practices in a school and should not be the focus on the Leadership Team. “Zero” and “minimal” decisions can be the work of subcommittees, study groups, or individual staff members. It is helpful for schools to post guidelines for how each of these decisions is made. The chart below gives examples of each kind of decision.<sup>9</sup>

<p><b>Comprehensive Impact Decisions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ School budget</li> <li>▪ Hiring of personnel</li> <li>▪ Deployment of personnel</li> <li>▪ Personnel evaluation</li> </ul>	<p><b>Minimal Impact Decisions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Textbook adoption</li> <li>▪ Parent programs</li> <li>▪ Inservice days</li> <li>▪ Small budgets</li> <li>▪ Discipline policy</li> </ul>
<p><b>Core Impact Decisions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Curriculum</li> <li>▪ Staff development</li> <li>▪ Coaching</li> <li>▪ Instructional programs</li> <li>▪ Student assessment</li> <li>▪ Instructional budget</li> </ul>	<p><b>Zero Impact Decisions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Parking spaces</li> <li>▪ Lunchroom supervision</li> <li>▪ Faculty lounge</li> <li>▪ Sunshine fund</li> <li>▪ Adult recreation</li> <li>▪ Bus duties</li> <li>▪ Refreshments</li> </ul>

<sup>9</sup> Glickman, Carl D., *Renewing America’s Schools*, Jossey-Bass, 1993

## 6. Working Together Effectively in Teams

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Creating effective teacher teams that are committed to improving student, team, and school performance is a complex undertaking. Understanding what creates effective teams will help make teacher teams successful. Numerous studies and books chronicle the complexities of developing teams within organizations. These studies and books also document the practices that help teams successfully meet their goals. Their findings can be adapted to schools.

### Stages in Team Development

Bass and Avolio (1994)<sup>10</sup> identify these five common stages that team members go through on their way to working together effectively:

- 1. Forming:** The development of mutual acceptance during early meetings and activities. During this stage, team members are friendly and often will not disagree with each other's ideas.
- 2. Storming:** The development of open, honest discussion of differences that can develop into group conflicts. This stage is a natural part of developing trust and open dialogue about issues. Caring and honest acceptance of differences will foster better planning.
- 3. Norming:** The team starts to establish the norms for working together, being productive, and cooperating. The team is meshing together and becoming more cohesive and creative as open and honest conflict gets resolved into productive working relationships.
- 4. Performing:** The team has its goals, working roles, and norms; members can solve problems openly and honestly, plan new programs, and communicate with each other and the rest of the staff.

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<sup>10</sup> accessed on 9/24/01 <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/leadrsdp/le2stage.htm>

**5. Reforming:** All teams eventually lose and then add members. In this stage, the team begins anew as old members move on and new members are added. The process of becoming a team starts again.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE TEAMS**

A detailed discussion of each of these characteristics of effective teams follows this list. In schools, effective teams:

- Have a culture of discourse at their center
- Have a clearly defined purpose that guides their work and specific, measurable goals that they achieve
- Are committed to norms that guide how the team operates
- Are disciplined in maintaining their focus
- Communicate effectively within the team and with those outside of the team
- Improve the ability of team members to function as a team in the future

### **Discourse: Effective teams have a culture of discourse at their center.**

In a culture of discourse, team members discuss and think about significant issues related to improving teaching, learning, and assessment. Team members demonstrate respect for each other by valuing differences of opinion and being open-minded to others' ideas. Disagreements and challenges are welcomed in team discussions as they often push collective thinking to a deeper level. Ultimately, many of these conversations result in improved student learning and growth.

It takes time and discipline to raise the quality of teacher discourse – focusing on ideas and application rather than on the housekeeping details that often take up so much of teachers’ time. Teams may use text-based discussions, case studies, and protocols for looking at student work to deepen their conversations and get them focused on the substantial issues surrounding teaching and learning. At times, meetings can become uncomfortable when a group is hashing out important and difficult issues. However, when a culture of discourse is at the center of a team’s operations, the work of the team is better informed by the expertise of its members and more likely to effect lasting change.

**Purpose: Effective teams have a clearly defined purpose that guides their work and specific, measurable goals that they achieve.**

The most successful teams have a purpose or mission they are deeply committed to that drives them forward. A clearly defined purpose energizes a team because all members understand exactly why they are together. Similar to an overarching goal, the purpose or mission defines the general intent of the team. The common purpose serves to keep the team focused at all times. All actions and decisions must make sense relative to this purpose.

Specific, measurable goals are the steps that will lead a team toward accomplishing its purpose and making an impact on the school or students. Too often in schools, committees continue to meet and plan, but fail to achieve measurable results. Often, at the end of the school year, or when the team loses its momentum, little or no action has taken place. Clear, measurable goals prevent this wheel-spinning by focusing discussion on action and how to achieve the desired outcomes.

**Norms: Effective teams define and are committed to norms that guide how the team operates.**

Underlying any school change effort are norms and values that guide how people work together and what they do. Norms are ways of working together that can help groups be more thoughtful and productive. In school cultures of a hierarchical and bureaucratic nature where teacher autonomy and privacy are valued, norms for teachers include staying in their classrooms with the door closed, and “doing their own thing” without the benefit of working with their colleagues. This isolation tends to confine an individual teacher’s intellectual development to instructional and procedural matters. Curriculum often becomes piecemeal with little or no integration across disciplines or grade levels.

*Norms: ways people have of working together*

When teachers work together in a culture of professional collaboration, they develop norms that assist their involvement in curriculum development and school organization. By taking on more academic and social responsibilities, and working together collaboratively, teachers can have an effect on the entire school, not just one classroom.

As groups of teachers work together, the variety of approaches they represent may lead to unproductive conflict and disagreement if there are no ground rules for conversation and planning. Setting norms of mutual respect and equal participation, for example, can help groups deal with the common disagreement and conflict that so often stalls or derails effective group work. Group members agree to norms in areas of logistics, timeliness, courtesy, decision making, workload assignments, and setting priorities because they are guided by the common purpose of improving their school.

Creating a common approach based on agreed-upon norms allows a team to spell out how team members will work together.

Agreement on a common approach allows the team to have a process for dealing with the myriad details of its work. If how the team functions is clear, then honesty, openness, and consistency follow because all members understand how the group should operate. Norms are explicit and maintained by all members of the team, especially by the team leader.

### *Operating as a Team*

Norms need to be set in many different areas, including decision making, logistics, how to give feedback, how to treat each other, how the norms will be monitored, and the roles team members will take. Within each area, the essential question is “How do we want to operate as a team?” Following are some key components:

- **Decision making.** NESSN recommends that any significant decisions that affect the entire team be decided by consensus because this method is most effective for incorporating differing viewpoints and for creating the discourse that contributes to a collaborative culture. Consensus requires that all members express opinions on any decision and agree that they can live with the decision that is being considered. Any decision a team makes should be judged on two criteria: (1) how well the decision deals with the matters at hand, and (2) how committed the group members are to carrying it out.
- **Logistics.** These are the nuts and bolts of how the team operates. Examples of logistical issues include meeting schedule, start time, end time, lateness, and attendance. Although they seem like small matters, many of these items can become much larger issues unless they are spelled out clearly and accepted by all team members.
- **How to treat each other.** People have different styles of participating and different levels of tolerance for discussion,

disagreement, and interruption. The norms set in these areas are designed to help team members communicate with each other in a respectful and caring fashion. Setting norms on how to listen, participate, and handle conflict allows team members to discuss and decide how they want to treat each other.

- **How to give feedback.** Giving and receiving feedback is one of the most important processes for a team. Effective feedback makes it possible for team members to continue to do what they are doing well and to know what they need to do to improve. Feedback is most useful when it is given in the spirit of trying to help a colleague do something better, as if one is giving a gift to another that will be useful. Agreement needs to be reached about when feedback will be given, how it will be given, and what will be done with it. Possible guidelines include using ‘I’ statements, being specific, and explaining how the feedback affected the person giving it. Specific questions that focus the feedback can be helpful as well. Guidelines and protocols help make feedback a regular occurrence that all team members can use to make their work and the team’s more effective.
- **Clearly defined roles for each member of the team.** Team members need to fulfill a number of different roles so the team operates smoothly. These roles can be rotated among the members, but teams often choose to keep the facilitator consistent because of the complexity of that role. Teams should spend time during their first meetings deciding what roles will fit their work and help them reach their goals. These roles could include, but are not limited to, facilitator, recorder, timekeeper, and observers. Any role a team decides to use is not the exclusive responsibility of the person who takes on that role. All team members are responsible for making sure all roles are working effectively.

## **DESCRIPTIONS OF TEAM ROLES**

**Facilitator** – The facilitator’s primary responsibility is managing the process of the team and helping it stay focused on its purpose, goals, and norms. The facilitator should help build commitment and the confidence of the group. Perhaps most importantly, the facilitator is not there to control or run the team, but to create opportunities and a tone that allows all members to utilize all of their skills to help the team.

Running effective meetings is one way a facilitator helps the team reach its goals. The facilitator’s responsibility for running effective meetings includes: distributing an agenda prior to each meeting, making sure all team members’ ideas are heard, and keeping the meeting focused on the agenda and the issues that are being discussed. The facilitator ensures reflection at the end of each meeting to see how effectively the team worked together during the meeting.

**Recorder** – In addition to taking minutes of the meetings, this person is also responsible for communicating with groups outside of the team such as parents, other teachers, the principal, and the Leadership Team.

**Timekeeper** – This person keeps a close eye on the progress of all meetings to make sure the entire agenda will be addressed or purposely delayed until the next meeting.

**Observers** – Essentially all team members take this role and watch carefully to see how the team is operating in relation to its norms, goals, and purpose. It is everyone’s job to observe and give feedback on how team members interact with each other, any patterns of behavior, and how the group maintains its focus.

**Focus: Effective teacher teams are disciplined in maintaining their focus.**

Teams in small schools have numerous responsibilities. How a team manages these differing roles and relationships affects their success. The successful team uses its purpose, goals, and norms to maintain its focus. With each new idea, discussion, or possibility, all team members should ask whether the issue fits the purpose, moves them toward achieving the performance goals, and can be dealt with within the team's operating approach.

For example, a study group investigating the school's ability to teach low-level readers might find it difficult to meet and remain focused when mid-term reports due, a field trip is planned for the next day, and two teachers have a public exhibition of student work that evening. Yet, despite the many immediate pressures its members face, this team will meet because its members understand that the long-term results of their work is vital to their growth and student progress.

To maintain focus, team members should continuously assess the team's work. Keeping records of lessons learned, ideas discussed, decisions made, actions taken, and communication with people outside the team can help evaluate a team's focus.

***Components of effective meetings:***

- An agenda is distributed in advance
- Meetings start and end on time
- Team members ask clarifying questions when something is unclear
- Discussion stays on topic
- Plans about who will do what by when are finalized and recorded
- Commitments are carried out prior to deadlines

- Meetings are evaluated periodically for productivity, thoughtfulness, and how well members interact

**Communication: Effective teacher teams communicate within the team and with those outside the team.**

Depending on the nature of their work, teacher teams must communicate with other teachers, the Leadership Team, the principal, other teams, parents, students, or the larger community outside of school. Effective communication informs other members of the school community of a team's progress and allows outside groups to aid the team's work. Teams need clear systems for passing on materials, discussions, and results from their work. Distributing minutes or short updates to those affected by or connected to the work helps keep those outside the team informed. Giving presentations to other teams or parent groups, creating team portfolios, or inviting community members to sit in on meetings are other ways for teacher teams to build bridges to those who can help them.

**Progress: Effective teacher teams improve the ability of their members to function as a team in the future.**

While it is important that a team reach its goals, *how* they reach them is equally important. Truly dynamic teams show evidence of growth over time. For example, in the first year, members may become familiar with the team format and protocols used to guide discussions. In subsequent years, teams may make individual refinements and changes according to their needs. With experience, team members learn to work together better while they develop skills that they can bring to other teams they may work

Use NESSN Tool  
16 to assess team  
progress.

with in the future. Improving each member's ability for teamwork not only helps the existing team, but moves the whole school forward. These team skills may include developing trust between group members, being open and honest with feedback and praise, creating agendas, developing communication methods, and facilitating meetings.

## Tools for Helping Teams Work Together Effectively

As you start working together, Tools 6 and 7 will help you put norms in place so your work can be productive and satisfying. Tool 6 provides areas for you to review before embarking on Tool 7, when your group will actually be developing the norms to guide you throughout your work. Tools 8, 9, and 10 are useful for running effective meetings. Tools 11 and 12 will assist in team building and allow members to get to know each other. Tools 13 and 14 help teams work through issues that may present obstacles to working together effectively. Use Tool 15 to help you make decisions by consensus, and use Tool 16 to assess how your team is doing as part of a professional collaborative culture.

<b>Tools for Helping Teams Work Together Effectively</b>	
<b>Name of Tool</b>	<b>Description</b>
NESSN Tool 6: Setting Norms for Collaborative Work	To become familiar with different areas to consider when setting norms
NESSN Tool 7: Activity for Setting Norms	To set norms for collaborative work
NESSN Tool 8 Guidelines for effective meetings	Provides a list of guidelines for running effective meetings
NESSN Tool 9: Creating Meeting Agendas	Characteristics of effective meeting agendas and suggestions for how to get items on the agenda
NESSN Tool 10: Sample Format for Recording Team Meetings	A form for recording what happens during a team meeting
NESSN Tool 11: Compass Game	Enables teams to explore various preferences that individual members use to approach teamwork, enlarges understanding of the strengths and limitations of each preference, and suggests ways to utilize these differences in a team's work
NESSN Tool 12: Text-based Seminar	Enables a team to examine in depth a relevant issue by focusing on a short article or excerpt from a book
NESSN Tool 13 The Final Word	Expands a group's understanding of a text in a focused way and in a limited amount of time by looking at one significant quote or section from selected text(s)

NESSN Tool 14: Obstacle Resolution Protocol	Resolves an obstacle that is preventing participants from making progress toward a desired outcome
NESSN Tool 15: Making Decisions by Consensus	Provides guidelines for reaching decisions by consensus
NESSN Tool 16: Assessing a Team's Quality of work	Provides areas of discussion and sample indicators for teams to use to assess their work

## NESSN TOOL 6:

### SETTING NORMS FOR COLLABORATIVE WORK

*Norms are ways of working together that can help groups be more thoughtful and productive. They fall into two categories: procedural and interpersonal. Once norms have been established, it is important that the entire group, not just the facilitator, takes responsibility for making sure that the norms are respected, and for redirecting the group when they are not. Norms can change and evolve as the group develops and matures.*

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#### **AREAS TO CONSIDER WHEN SETTING NORMS**

**Logistics:** meeting time, place, duration, and frequency

**Timeliness:** start time, finish time, lateness, and attendance

**Courtesy:** listening, interruptions, equal participation, dealing with disagreements, respect, empathy, and sharing the workload

**Decision-making Process:** How will we make decisions? Reach agreements? How will we show agreement?

**Workload Assignment:** How will work be assigned? How will conflicts with existing workloads be settled?

**Setting Priorities:** How will we discharge responsibility for on-time completion and equal distribution?

**Enforcement of Norms:** How will we make sure the norms are followed?

## NESSN TOOL 7: ACTIVITY FOR SETTING NORMS

*In this activity, members of a team write statements about how they want their team to operate and then categorize the statements into procedural norms and interpersonal norms. The group discusses the statements and reaches consensus on norms for their group.*

### PROCEDURE

1. The facilitator passes out post-it notes to each team member.
2. Each person writes a norm, or a statement about how he or she wants the group to work together, on a post-it.
3. The team shares its individual notes and divides them into the two categories – procedural norms and interpersonal norms.
4. Within each category, group the suggestions that are similar (For example, *take turns speaking* and *make sure everyone speaks* should be grouped together)
5. Give a name to the norm for each group. (From the example above, the norm could be “Make sure everyone is heard.”)
6. The group discusses the norms that have been suggested and checks to see whether or not the group is in agreement. The group should reach consensus on the ones it accepts.

### HINTS

- The team will work with greater commitment if they themselves generate their norms.
- Post the norms during each meeting.
- Reflect on norms at the end of each meeting.
- Add new norms as the team develops and new situations arise.

## NESSN TOOL 8: GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

*When a team is first established, it is helpful to distribute the following guidelines for discussion. You may adapt them to fit the needs of individual teams and revisit these guidelines as necessary.*

### GUIDELINES

- The agenda is distributed with sufficient time for members to prepare for the meeting.
- Members arrive on time for meetings.
- Meetings start and end at the scheduled times.
- Each meeting has an assigned facilitator, recorder, and timekeeper. (Often these are rotating positions.)
- Teams follow norms they have established together. (See Tool 7 for a norm-setting activity.) These may include:

*trusting that members can say what they truly feel about an issue*

*keeping confidentiality when members agree to do so*

*asking clarifying questions when in doubt about an issue*

*having a chance to consider more than one solution to an issue*

*thoroughly understanding an issue before reaching consensus*

*encouraging participation by everyone, even the quietest members*

- There are set time limits for the meeting (and for individual agenda items when possible).
- At the end of each meeting, the facilitator summarizes what has been accomplished. Plans on “who will do what by when” are finalized and recorded in the minutes.
- The recorder distributes minutes of meetings to all team members in a timely fashion.
- Someone takes responsibility to communicate regularly with Leadership Team and other interested groups. (This may be a rotating position.)
- Periodically, teams evaluate meeting efficiency, productivity, and use of time.

## **NESSN TOOL 9:**

### **CREATING MEETING AGENDAS**

*Creating and using effective agendas for team meetings is one of the most important tasks a team can engage in. Teams should make sure that someone takes on this responsibility for each meeting. This task may rotate among team members, or a designated facilitator may take responsibility. Creating effective agendas can help teams plan meetings, maintain the focus of meetings, promote meeting productivity, and provide a way to keep a record of what happens during the meeting.*

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#### **AN EFFECTIVE MEETING AGENDA**

- Is realistic for the amount of time scheduled for the meeting
- Allows time to review the agenda at the beginning of the meeting
- Allows time to summarize what happened at the end of the meeting

#### **GETTING ITEMS ON THE AGENDA**

- Set up a team mailbox in a place that is accessible to team members. Members fill out a form with a description of what they want to discuss, how long they think the agenda item will take, and who will present the item to the team.
- Circulate a blank agenda to team members to list items for the meeting.
- Generate ideas at the current meeting to address at the next meeting.
- Allow time at the beginning of each meeting when the agenda is being reviewed to suggest additional items.
- Email the facilitator with proposed agenda items.

**NESSN TOOL 10:  
SAMPLE FORMAT FOR RECORDING TEAM MEETINGS**

*This form may be reproduced for recording several agenda items at a meeting.*

<b>TEAM:</b>		<b>DATE:</b>	
MEMBERS PRESENT:			
<b>AGENDA ITEM:</b>		<b>TIME ALLOTMENT:</b>	
<b>Discussion Notes</b>			
<b>Action Plan</b>	<b>People Responsible</b>	<b>Deadline</b>	
<b>AGENDA ITEM:</b>		<b>TIME ALLOTMENT:</b>	
<b>Discussion Notes</b>			
<b>Action Plan</b>	<b>People Responsible</b>	<b>Deadline</b>	

## NESSN TOOL 11: COMPASS GAME

*The Compass Game enables teams to explore various preferences that individual members use to approach teamwork, enlarges understanding of the strengths and limitations of each preference, and suggest ways to utilize these differences in a team's work.*

### **Overview:**

The activity includes:

- Identifying one's style of work within a group.
- Working with others of the same style to identify a particular style's strengths and limitations for members whose styles are different.
- Sharing strengths and limitations with members who have other styles.
- Developing a common group value for all compass point styles, validating everyone's contributions while recognizing one's limitations.

### **Participants:**

Compass Game works best with a group of 15–40 members. If the group is smaller, some parts of the activity need to be adjusted (group discussion and debriefing). If the group is larger, more time should be allotted to the discussions and debriefing.

### **Time Commitment:**

From start to finish, Compass Game takes about 30 – 60 minutes to complete.

### **Directions:**

1. Make copies and pass out the Compass Game worksheet on the next page. Have members circle individually which direction they believe accurately describes the way they work within a group. (It is important to make this distinction because we often work differently within a group than we do on our own.) Have members do this without any discussion.

2. After individuals have identified themselves privately on paper (1-5 minutes), separate the group into 4 smaller groups of each direction.

**\*\***Have groups answer the questions on the back of the worksheet, chart their responses on a piece of chart paper and be prepared to report back to the full group.

**\*\* DO NOT** give any more directions than the last sentence! The manner in which each group proceeds with the task is very telling about their styles of work!

**\*\* DO** give groups a 15-30 minute time limit. Be firm about the time limits since the way that groups deal with time limits is also very telling!

**\*\* DO** give groups a large sheet of chart paper to record their answers.

**\*\* DO NOT** give groups any direction or requirements about the way their answers should be recorded or about the way they should report back to the full group. The styles that groups use even to make a wall chart are telling!

## NESSN TOOL 11: COMPASS GAME (cont'd)

### Directions (con'd)

3. If the activity is being conducted by a leader or group of leaders who have previously done Compass Game, it can be interesting and useful to have the leaders sit in with the four groups strictly as observers. It is often valuable for a leader to sit in on a group that does NOT match his or her personal style. For example, if you see yourself as an East, sit in as an observer with the Norths, etc. DO NOT give any comments or let your facial expressions give away what you observe!
4. When the time limit is up, reconvene as a large group and post the chart paper posters. The leaders can suggest that everyone take a look at the ways different groups used to complete the task.
5. Have direction groups take turns sharing their responses with the full group. Members can feel free to ask questions or make some remarks, but mostly this time should be used to listen and learn, not to discuss relative merits of the styles. If leaders or others served as group observers, it can be valuable to have them share their observations of the manner in which different groups approached their task.
6. When groups have finished, the leader or leaders can facilitate the group in a "debriefing" of the activity. The following questions can be useful in providing insights for the entire group.
  - *Did individuals believe they were in the right direction group?*
  - *How could they tell?*
  - *What ratio of the different compass points would make an effective and productive team?*
  - *What would happen if a team was missing one of the directions?*
  - *What would happen if a team was made up of only one direction?*
  - *How can knowing this information be useful in your work as a team?*
  - *How can a team balance having fun, getting work done, and allowing for personal styles?*
  - *Is there a connection between the way you approach your regular job and your personal style of working in groups? Are they similar or different? How about in your relationships with family and friends?*

**NESSN TOOL 11:**  
**COMPASS GAME (con'd)**

*Copy and hand out this sheet to participants.*

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**DIRECTIONS:**

Circle which “direction” you think best describes the way you work within a group.

**PERSONAL STYLES**

**“Compass Points”**

**NORTH: Acting ("Let's do it")**

Likes to act, try things, plunge in.

**EAST: Speculating**

Likes to look at the big picture, the possibilities, before acting

**SOUTH: Caring**

Likes to know that everyone's feelings have been taken into consideration,

that their voices have been heard, before acting.

**WEST: Paying attention to detail**

Likes to know the *who, what, when, where, why*, before acting.

**NESSN TOOL 11:**  
**COMPASS GAME (cont'd)**

**Personal Style Questions:**

*Record the group's answers on this form or on chart paper.*

*What are the strengths of our style? (list four adjectives)*

*What are the limitations of our style? (list four adjectives)*

*What style do we find the most difficult to work with? Why?*

*What do others need to know about us that will make our work together more successful?*

## **NESSN TOOL 12: TEXT-BASED SEMINAR**

*In a text-based seminar of 40 minutes to one hour, a team examines an issue from an outside point of view by focusing on a specific article or excerpt from a book. This seminar helps build a culture of discourse in a school by allowing for enlargement of intellectual understanding. Participants read a short article or excerpt from a book that is related to teaching and learning and then engage in a discussion about the text. The purpose of the discussion is not to persuade other group members of a particular point of view but to clarify, build upon, and enhance understanding of the text. Text-based seminars give participants an opportunity to extract different meanings and ideas from a text and to discuss important issues related to the text.*

### **PROCEDURE**

#### **1. SELECT THE TEXT**

Choose an article or book excerpt that will have implications for teaching and learning. The article may be selected by the team facilitator or by an individual member of the team.

#### **2. READ THE TEXT (5 – 15 MINUTES)**

If the text is long, the facilitator may distribute it before the meeting, or a shorter text may be read for the first time during the meeting. If participants have already read the text, allow 5 minutes of seminar time to review it. If a short article is to be read during the seminar, 10 –15 minutes should be enough. While reading, participants may take notes, underline or highlight important ideas, and record questions the text raises for them.

#### **3. BEGIN THE DISCOURSE (5 –10 MINUTES)**

There are two effective ways to begin the discourse. Each member of the seminar may take turns reading aloud a sentence or two that has particular significance to them, and share why they responded to that particular excerpt. Or, the facilitator may present a framing question to start the discussion.

(continued next page)

**NESSN TOOL 12:**  
**TEXT BASED SEMINAR (con'd)**

**4. DISCUSS THE TEXT (20 – 30 MINUTES)**

The facilitator leads the discussion. He or she should remind participants to refer to the text to support their comments. Groups may want to follow these guidelines:

*Listen actively.*

*Build on what others say.*

*Expose/suspend your assumptions.*

*Don't step on other's talk. Silences and pauses are OK.*

*Emphasize clarification, amplification, and implications of ideas.*

*Converse directly with each other, not through the facilitator.*

*Let the conversation flow without raising hands, as much as possible.*

*Make references to the text and encourage others to do the same.*

*Watch your air time for how often you speak and how much you say when you speak.*

**5. CLOSE THE DISCUSSION (5 MINUTES)**

The facilitator closes the discussion about the text, highlighting two or three main points of discussion and thanking participants for their perspective. The result is that all participants leave the seminar with a deeper understanding of the text. Many times this leads to agreement for further exploration of the topic.

## NESSN TOOL 13: THE FINAL WORD

(Exercise courtesy of Patricia Averette of the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project and Daniel Baron of Harmony School, Bloomington, Indiana)

**Purpose:** *To expand a group's understanding of a text in a focused way and in a limited amount of time.*

**Preparation:** Each person selects and marks what is for him or her **one significant** quote or section from the text(s).

Please work in groups of four, with a designated timekeeper/facilitator for each of the four rounds.

**FOR EACH ROUND: (4 rounds of 15 minutes each)**

- The person who starts gets 4 minutes.
- Each person responding gets 3 minutes (3 people = 9 minutes).
- The person who started has the **FINAL WORD**—2 minutes

**Explanation of procedure for each round**

- Begin by designating a facilitator/timekeeper. These roles should **not** be filled by the person who will begin the round (and who has the **FINAL WORD**).
- One person begins by explaining the significance of her or his quote/selection from the text(s) to the group. (4 minutes)
- After this person is finished, each person then comments on the same quote/section. You may choose to respond to what the first person has said, **OR** to speak to the quote or section in any other way that extends the group's understanding of the text. Each person in the group has 3 minutes to respond, for a total of 9 minutes.
- The person who started then has the **FINAL WORD**. (2 minutes)

**ROUND TWO then begins**, with the next person explaining to the group the significance of her or his quote/selection from the text(s). Rounds two, three, and four follow the same format as round one.

## NESSN TOOL 14: OBSTACLE RESOLUTION PROTOCOL

(A variation of the Final Word Process, Adapted by Steven Strull)

**Purpose:** *To resolve an obstacle toward progress of a desired outcome.*

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**Preparation:** Each person in the group reflects on **ONE** obstacle that is keeping them from making progress toward a desired outcome. While there may be many obstacles, this protocol focuses on one at a time. Additional sessions may be scheduled to deal with multiple obstacles.  
Please work in groups of 4, with a designated timekeeper/facilitator for each of the four rounds.

**FOR EACH ROUND:** (4 rounds of 15 minutes each)

- The person who starts gets 4 minutes.
- Each person responding gets 3 minutes (3 people = 9 minutes).
- The person who started resolves his or her obstacle—2 minutes

### **Explanation of procedure for each round**

- Begin by designating a facilitator/timekeeper. These roles should **not** be filled by the person who will begin the round (and who will resolve their obstacle).
- One person begins by explaining the obstacle he or she is facing and any related context. (4 minutes)
- After this person is finished, each person then comments on the obstacle and offers alternatives for overcoming the obstacle. The premise here is that after all obstacles have been resolved the underlying goal can be achieved. Each person in the group has 3 minutes to respond, for a total of 9 minutes.
- The person who started will then resolve his or her obstacle. (2 minutes)

**ROUND TWO then begins**, with the next person explaining his or her obstacle. Rounds two, three, and four follow the same format as round one.

## **NESSN TOOL 15:**

### **MAKING DECISIONS BY CONSENSUS**

*This tool provides guidelines for reaching decisions by consensus.*

#### **WHAT IS CONSENSUS?**

Consensus means general agreement. For consensus to exist, it is not necessary for every member to agree in full, but for every participant to have a chance to be heard and, in the end, be able to “live with” the decision. Participants don’t have to consider the decision made to be the best one, but the decision should not violate any member’s personal convictions. There should be no member who strongly opposes the group’s decision.

Reaching consensus requires

- time
- active participation from all members
- skills in communication, active listening, conflict resolution, and facilitation
- creative thinking and open-mindedness

#### **HOW TO FACILITATE FOR CONSENSUS:**

- Help the group work together in positive ways.
- Clearly state the problem and ask the group to arrive at a solution that they all can live with
- Take disagreement for granted, but do not emphasize it.
- Involve everyone in the discussion.
- Use brainstorming as a tool to generate many ideas without judgment.
- Consider all ideas, one by one, giving pros and cons and modifying the ideas when necessary.
- Identify two to three of the best, most workable, solutions.
- When necessary, remind the group of its goal – to reach consensus.
- Ask group to show a “thumbs up” if they agree with or can live with the decision, and a “thumbs down” if they cannot.

#### **CONSENSUS CHECKLIST:**

- Did each member give an opinion?
- Did each idea presented receive comments and consideration?
- Did members who disagreed with the decision express their concerns, reservations, and feelings before the idea was adopted?
- Is any team member hesitant to actively support the decision?

## NESSN TOOL 16:

### ASSESSING A TEAM'S QUALITY OF WORK

*To maintain the quality and effectiveness of a team's work, team members need to take time to reflect on what the team is doing. Following are areas of discussion that can help teams assess their work. Teams may use these questions to gauge their work and use the indicator chart for each question to note the team's effectiveness.*

#### **PROCESS:**

#### **1. How effective is our team in developing practices that improve student learning?**

Not effective									Very effective
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#### **Sample indicators:**

- What practices for instructing and assessing our students have we changed, tried, or added to our repertoire?
- How have we addressed the needs of diverse learners?
- Do we use protocols for looking at student work to tell us about how our students are doing?
- Do we observe each other's classrooms and have follow-up discussions about what we observe to improve learning, teaching, and assessment?
- Have we developed rubrics or assessment criteria for assessing student work?

(continued next page)

## NESSN TOOL 16:

### ASSESSING A TEAM'S QUALITY OF WORK (CONT'D)

#### 2. How effective are we in communicating our work?

Not effective	_____	Very effective
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- Do we allow time at each team meeting for an update from the leadership team liaison?
- Do we maintain and distribute clear, concise minutes to team members and others who may be interested?
- Do we employ multiple ways of communicating our work such as newsletters, email communication, displays, presentations to other groups, and team mailbox?
- Do we allow time for team members to socialize?
- Do we include written reflections on our team's work and progress as part of team meetings?

#### 3. How effective are we in team facilitation and decision making?

Not effective	_____	Very effective
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#### Sample indicators:

- Have we established team norms and do we respect them?
- Do we make team decisions by consensus?
- Do we use the expertise of individual teachers and teams to inform our thinking on specific issues?
- Do we make presentations to the full faculty for decisions on issues that impact the entire school?
- Do we make sure every team member is accountable for team progress and performance?

## NESSN TOOL 17: CONSULTANCY PROTOCOL

**Purpose:** *This protocol is used to get feedback on a set of questions or concerns posed by a teacher about certain aspects of student or teacher work. It was developed as a part of the Coalition of Essential Schools' National Re:Learning Faculty Program and further adapted and revised as part of the work of the Annenberg Institute's National School Reform Faculty Project, now located at the Harmony Education Center.*

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**Time :** at least one hour

**Roles:** Presenter, Facilitator

1. The presenter gives a quick overview of the work, highlighting the major issues or problems with which he or she is struggling, and frames a question for the consultancy group to consider. The framing of this question, as well as the quality of the presenter's reflections on the work and/or issue being discussed, are key features of this protocol. **10 minutes**
2. The consultancy group asks clarifying questions of the presenter, or questions that have brief, factual answers. **5 minutes**
3. The group then asks probing questions of the presenter. These questions should be worded to help the presenter clarify and expand his or her thinking about the issue or questions the he or she raised for the consultancy group. The goal here is for the presenter to learn more about the question he or she framed or to do some analysis of the issue presented. The presenter responds to the group's questions, but there is no discussion by the larger group of the presenter's responses. **10-15 minutes**
4. The group then talks with each other about the work and issues presented. *What did we hear? What didn't we hear that we needed to know about? What do we think about the question or issue presented?*

Some groups like to begin the conversation with "warm" feedback, answering questions such as "What are the strengths in this situation or in this student's work?" "What's the good news here?" The group then moves on to cooler feedback, answering questions such as "Where are the gaps?" "What isn't the presenter considering?" "What do areas for further improvement or investigation seem to be?" Sometimes the group will raise questions for the presenter to consider: "I wonder what would happen if?" "I wonder why...?" The presenter is not allowed to speak during this discussion, but instead listens and takes notes. **15 minutes**

5. The presenter then responds to what he or she heard (first in a fishbowl, if there are several presenters). A whole group discussion might then take place, depending on the time allotted. **10-15 minutes**
6. The facilitator leads a brief discussion about the group's observations of the process. **5-10 minutes**

## 7. Using Protocols to Look at Student and Teacher Work

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*When one of the ninth grade teams at West High School first started meeting to look at and discuss student work, Ms. Wilkes, an English teacher, was reluctant to participate. She felt she had enough work of her own to do, correcting papers, planning lessons, and meeting with parents after school. With all she had on her plate, giving up an hour of time to sit around talking about other kids' work just didn't seem worth it.*

*Besides, the idea of laying her and her students' work on the table for others to critique made her feel vulnerable. Even the norms the group established of listening thoughtfully and openly and treating others and their work with respect and support didn't reassure her.*

*After several sessions of using protocols to discuss the work of her colleagues, however, Ms. Wilkes began to gain confidence in the process. Together, the team had helped the science teacher fine-tune her lab writing assignments so that the students' lab reports were more focused. They helped the social studies teacher rephrase an assignment he gave every year to encourage students to not only recount but interpret historical events.*

*Four months after they first started meeting, Ms. Wilkes decided to go for it. She brought in a sampling of persuasive essays her students had written. She was frustrated with the haphazard organization of the essays and didn't know what to do. Her question for the group: How can I get my students to develop their arguments in a more deliberate way?*

*After much discussion, Ms. Wilkes realized that she needed to allow her students more time for writing workshops before they started the essays and more peer-editing between drafts.*

The practice of looking collaboratively at student and teacher work results in teachers' making refinements to instruction, curriculum, and assessment with the goal of improving student learning. Schools collect data to document how close students are to meeting the school's learning goals. Since student work is one of the most authentic data sources teachers have to gauge student progress, teachers engage in a structured process to analyze and discuss this work. This process, in which teachers meet in small groups led by a facilitator, is called a protocol.

*Protocols provide a structured format, set schedule, safe space, and specific guidelines for communication for teachers and others to discuss student work as a means to improving learning and teaching.*

During a protocol, groups of teachers primarily, but also administrators, parents, students, and members of the community, meet regularly for a specific period of time to share and discuss student work. This work is usually in response to teacher assignments for classwork or homework and includes essays, drawings, projects, presentations, portfolios, and videos. The purpose of these conversations is to examine the work in order to arrive at a more formal understanding of learning, teaching, and assessment. To make sure the focus of each conversation stays on improving student learning, groups use protocols that provide structure and guidelines for their discussion. This is not a time to make judgements about student or teacher work, but to collectively seeks ways to improve it.

Student work includes:

- Essays
- Drawings
- Projects
- Presentations
- Portfolios
- Videos

The school schedule reflects this commitment to improving student learning by allowing for regularly scheduled, significant amounts of time for protocols. Time in all schools for teacher collaboration is limited. Looking collaboratively at student work requires more teacher time than individually grading the work. Finding time for this in-depth process can be a challenge. However, the benefits to the school community at large indicate the importance of creating the time and space.

## Benefits of Looking at Student and Teacher Work

There are many benefits of looking at student and teacher work.

They include:

- **Gaining a more comprehensive understanding of student competencies.** Student work helps teachers get inside students' heads and understand what they are thinking and how their thinking is developing over time.
- **Embedding professional development in teachers' daily practices to improve student achievement.** When teachers participate in ongoing conversations about teaching and learning, they promote the practice of reflective thinking about their beliefs, assumptions, and practices. Collegial feedback and critical analysis of student and teacher work in a safe and structured format create a culture of continuous learning.
- **Building a sense of community.** Looking collaboratively at student work and participating in collective problem solving moves teachers away from the isolating concept of "my students" and toward the community concept of "our students." These practices develop a culture of shared problem solving and demonstrate the power of focusing collective perspectives on a single issue.
- **Fostering a culture that collaboratively assesses the quality and challenge of teacher assignments.** Collegial feedback and discussion enables teachers to critically analyze whether their assignments or units ask students to construct knowledge, develop habits of mind, and make connections between school and the real world.
- **Developing shared, public criteria to assess student work.**  
As teachers look at student and teacher work, they develop a

shared language for assessing the work and a common understanding of what quality student work looks like. When these criteria are made public and shared with students, the quality of their work continues to improve.

### **What goes on during a protocol?**

There are different protocols for different purposes, but, in general, each protocol follows a similar pattern with these five parts: presentation of student work by presenter; questions to the presenter from the group about the presentation, group feedback about the work; response to feedback from the presenter; and debriefing by the group's facilitator.

In a consultancy protocol, for example, a teacher/presenter selects a piece of student work he or she has concerns about to share with the group. Led by a facilitator, the group has established norms for how they work and converse together. The presenter frames a question about the work to help participants focus their observations and discussions. For example, Ms. Wilkes, in the vignette on page 80, brought in a sampling of student persuasive essays and asked her colleagues how she could help her students develop more deliberate arguments. After the group examines the work with the framing question in mind, they ask questions to clarify the presenter's concerns. This done, the group talks among themselves using descriptive, not critical, language about the work and suggests strategies to address the presenter's concerns. During this time, the presenter is an active listener, but not a participant. Next, the presenter responds to what he or she has heard, followed by a whole-group discussion. At the end, the facilitator summarizes the conversation, which might include suggestions on how to make the student work/teacher assignment better and how

*Protocols usually have five segments:*

- *Presentation*
- *Questions*
- *Feedback*
- *Response*
- *Debrief*

to place it within a context of the teaching and learning goals of the whole school.

### **Looking at Student and Teacher Work: Beginning the Process**

When teachers first begin using protocols as a way of looking at their students' work, teacher assignments, and instructional practices, the process may feel formal or stiff. Because teachers are not used to sharing work publicly with peers, the process can feel intimidating. However, with time and practice the protocols create a safe, nurturing environment for teachers to make public their students' and their own work. As teachers gain experience, their comfort level rises, as do the benefits.

Many protocols have two "rules" that often cause the most discomfort among participants until they get used to them. One rule restricts when the presenting teacher has a turn to talk and when the group giving feedback can talk. At first, being told "you can't talk now" makes almost everyone feel awkward. But soon, participants see the benefits to careful, active listening. The other rule occurs during a segment of the protocol when those giving feedback talk about the presenter in the third person, as if the presenter weren't in the room. Again, although this practice may seem unusual at first, the benefits to being able to listen without needing to respond or participate soon become apparent.

In many NESSN schools, everyone in the school community is involved in looking at student work. As the school community sets learning goals, they must look beyond standardized test scores to the daily work and exhibition projects that students produce.

## **What work should you bring?**

There are many kinds of student work to bring to a session for discussion. Below are some examples. Make sure to bring the teacher assignment, directions, or prompt given to the students along with the criteria or rubric used to assess the work.

*Choose work about which you have a real question or concern, work that would benefit from having several people look at it.*

## **Examples of Student Work:**

- Written work or artwork from several students in response to the same assignment
- Several pieces of work from one student in response to different assignments
- One piece of work from a student who you think completed the assignment successfully and another from a student who did not complete the same assignment successfully
- Work done by groups of students (at least two groups)
- Videotape, audio tape, and / or photographs of students working or presenting their work

## **Which protocol should you use?**

The purpose of looking at student work will dictate the details about the process: how much time it will take, who is involved, and how frequently the process is used. Academic teams who share the same groups of students usually look at student work on a weekly basis. However, throughout the school year it is also important for other teams, such as discipline-based teams, study groups, the school-site council, and

Protocols have varying purposes.

the Leadership Team, to regularly use the protocols work to inform their decisions.

The protocols for looking at student and teacher work have varying purposes. Some analyze what student work demonstrates about student learning while others solve particular instructional dilemmas. As teachers work with the protocols, they may modify them to fit specific time requirements or to help teachers and administrators examine the work more closely. At first, using protocols may feel artificial and limiting; however, teachers soon find that protocols help them mine the wealth of riches that student work contains. Through the use of the protocols, teachers clarify problems, identify evidence to support opinions, share perspectives, and reflect on their practice.

### **General Guidelines for all Protocols**

Before using protocols to look at student and teacher work, it is helpful to review the following guidelines with all participants.

#### ***Norms for Participants:***

**Be respectful of teacher/presenters.** By making their work more public, teachers are taking a risk. As colleagues expose themselves and their work to peer review, remember to be thoughtful in how you word your responses.

**Contribute to the substance of the discussion.** Thoughtful, probing questions and comments are beneficial. “Cool” (see below) questions enable participants to take the work to a deeper level.

**Be aware of air time.** Protocols sometimes run on a tight schedule. Try to keep your comments succinct and relevant to the discussion.

**Be respectful of the facilitator's role.** Do this especially regarding keeping time and following protocol guidelines.

### *Guidelines for Facilitators*

**Be assertive about keeping time.** Each part of a protocol is crucial to the success of the exercise. Make sure you allow time for all parts of the protocol.

**Be protective of teacher/ presenters.** Many teachers may not be used to colleagues' critiquing their work. Try to determine just how "tough" your presenter wants the feedback to be. Inappropriate comments or questions should be recast or withdrawn.

**Be provocative of substantive discourse.** While "warm" (see below) feedback is supportive, it often doesn't push a presenter's thinking. Encourage probing "cool" questions and comments for a more beneficial protocol experience.

## Feedback and Questions During Protocols

All participants in a protocol need to be considerate about how they speak, paying careful attention to the way they phrase their questions and comments for feedback.

**“Warm” feedback and questions** are positive comments and questions often used to begin the conversation. They are supportive and encouraging and put the presenter at ease. Examples:

*What are the strengths of this work?*

*What’s the good news here?*

*In what ways has (teacher) encouraged students to ...?*

*I like the way he /she has ...*

**“Cool” feedback and questions** often follow the “warm” questions and are more challenging as participants voice doubts about and questions in the work. Examples:

*I wonder if you’ve considered...*

*Have you thought about...*

*Where are the gaps?*

*I wonder what would happen if you tried...*

## The Protocols for Looking at Student and Teacher Work

The following protocols will help teams build a professional collaborative culture. The *tools and techniques*, or protocols, in this section are culled from a variety of sources and, according to Joseph P. McDonald, “while designed and promoted by particular organizations, belong to the community of teachers at large” (2001, p. 215)<sup>11</sup>.

Our work, however, is largely informed by the initial efforts of the Coalition of Essential Schools and subsequent work of the National School Reform Faculty and Looking at Student Work Collaborative. It is in the spirit of our ongoing commitments and efforts in these organizations that we present these protocols as *tools and techniques* that will contribute to and benefit all schools as they build professional collaborative cultures.

<b>Protocols for Looking at Student and Teacher Work</b>		
<b>Name of Protocol</b>	<b>When to use it</b>	<b>What work to bring</b>
NESSN Tool 17: Consultancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To get feedback on a set of questions or concerns posed by a teacher on certain aspects of student or teacher work; can also be used as a problem-posing or problem-solving protocol</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Written reflection by presenter</li> <li>A question to focus the feedback</li> <li>Student work that illustrates the question or concern</li> </ul>
NESSN Tool 18: Collaborative Assessment Conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To learn more about the goals, interests, problems, or issues a student or students find most compelling by looking at what they choose to focus on in the context of an assignment</li> <li>To reflect and gather ideas for revision classroom practice</li> <li>To help teachers improve objective observational skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One or two pieces of student work</li> <li>Works best with open-ended assignments</li> </ul>

<sup>11</sup> McDonald, J.P. (2001). “Students’ work and teachers’ learning.” In Lieberman, A. & Miller, L. *Teachers caught in the action: Professional development that matters*, New York: Teachers College Press.

<p>NESSN Tool 19: Tuning Protocol</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To develop more effective exhibitions and assessments</li> <li>• To develop common standards for students' work</li> <li>• To reflect on and gather ideas for revision classroom practice</li> <li>• To support student performances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student exhibitions or long-term projects; may include a videotape of a student presenting the work and a written piece</li> <li>• Assignment or lesson for exhibition or long-term project before it is given to students</li> </ul>
<p>NESSN Tool 20: Charette</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To get feedback on a process or piece of work when the teacher, student, or group is experiencing difficulty with the work; when a stopping point has been reached; or when additional minds could help move it forward in a collaborative atmosphere</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any "work in progress"</li> </ul>
<p>NESSN Tool 21: Critical Incident Protocol</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For a teacher to reflect with colleagues on an incident from his or her work that was particularly rewarding, puzzling, or devastating in order to gain new insights into teacher practice and student learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written piece by the presenter that tells about the incident in as much detail as possible</li> </ul>
<p>NESSN Tool 22: Descriptive Review</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A focused analysis of certain characteristics of student writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A selection of previously scored "low," "medium," and "high" student writing samples from several teachers, including at least one ELL student</li> </ul>

## NESSN TOOL 17:

### CONSULTANCY PROTOCOL (con'd)

#### SOME TIPS FOR CONSULTANCIES (for each of the steps on the previous page)

**Step 1:** The success of the consultancy often depends on the quality of the presenter's reflection in Step 1, as well as on the quality and authenticity of the question framed for the consultancy group. However, it is not uncommon for a presenter to say at the end of a consultancy, "Now I know what my real question is." That is fine, too. It is sometimes helpful for the presenter to prepare ahead of time a brief (1-2 page) written description of the issues for the consultancy group to read as part of step 1.

**Steps 2 & 3:** Clarifying questions are for the person asking them. They ask the presenter "Who, what, where, when and how." These are not "why" questions. They can be answered quickly and succinctly, often with a phrase or two.

Probing questions are for the person answering them. They ask the presenter "why" (among other things), and are open-ended. They take longer to answer, and often require deep thought on the part of the presenter before he or she speaks.

**Step 4:** When the group talks while the presenter listens, it is helpful for the presenter to pull her/his chair back slightly away from the group. This protocol requires the consultancy group to talk about the presenter in the third person, almost as if he or she is not there. As awkward as this may feel at first, it often opens up a rich conversation. Remember that it is the group's job to offer an analysis of the issue or question presented. It is not necessary to solve the problem or to offer a definitive answer.

It is important for the presenter to listen in a non-defensive manner. The presenter should listen for new ideas, perspectives, and approaches and listen to the group's analysis of his or her question/issues. The presenter should listen for assumptions—both his or hers and the group's—implicit in the conversation. The presenter should also be alert for judgment by the group; this is not supposed to be about the presenter, but about a question he or she has raised. The presenter should remember that he or she asked the group to help with this question or issue.

**Step 5:** The point of this time period is not for the presenter to give a "blow by blow" response to the group's conversation, nor is it to defend or further explain. Rather, this is a time for the presenter to talk about what were, for him or her, the most significant comments, ideas and questions heard. The presenter can also share any new thoughts or questions he or she had while listening to the consultancy group.

**Step 6:** Debriefing the process is key. Do not short-change this step.

## NESSN TOOL 18:

### COLLABORATIVE ASSESSMENT CONFERENCE

From *Looking Together at Student Work*. Blythe, Allen, & Powell. [Teachers College Press](#) (1999).

**Purpose:** Since its development by Steve Seidel and colleagues at [Harvard Project Zero](#) in 1988, the Collaborative Assessment Conference has been used for a variety of purposes: to hone teachers' ability to look closely at and to interpret students' work; to explore the strengths and needs of a particular child; to reflect on the work collected in student portfolios; to foster conversations among faculty about the work students are doing and how to support that work.

The Collaborative Assessment Conference **provides a structure for teachers to look together at a piece of work**, first to determine what it reveals about the student and the issues that student cares about, and then to consider the implications of that student's issues and concerns for teaching and learning in general. The structure for the conference evolved from three key ideas:

- **Students use the school assignments, especially open-ended ones, to tackle important problems in which they are personally interested.** Sometimes these problems are the same ones that the teacher has assigned, sometimes not. This means that a piece of student work has the potential to reveal not only the student's mastery of class goals, but also a wealth of information about the student, including his or her intellectual interests, strengths, and struggles.
- Adults can only begin to see and understand the serious work that students undertake if they **suspend judgment long enough to look carefully** and closely at what is actually in the work, rather than what they hope or expect to see in it.
- **Teachers need the perspectives of others** (especially those who are not familiar with their students or classroom contexts) to help reveal the many facets of a student's work and to help generate ideas about how to use this information to shape daily practice.

In Collaborative Assessment Conferences, the presenting teacher brings a piece of student work to share with a group of five to ten colleagues (usually other teachers and administrators). The process begins with the presenting teacher showing (or distributing copies of) the piece to the group. Throughout the first part of the conference, the presenting teacher says nothing and gives no information about the student, the assignment, or the context in which the student worked.

## **NESSN TOOL 18 (con'd):**

### **COLLABORATIVE ASSESSMENT CONFERENCE**

Through a series of questions asked by the facilitator (such as, "What do you see in the work?"), the group works to understand the piece by describing it in detail, raising questions about it, and speculating about the problems or issues with which the student was most engaged. They do this without making evaluations about the quality of the work or its appeal to their personal tastes. The facilitator helps this process by asking participants to point out the evidence in the work on which they based the judgments that inevitably slip out. (For example, if someone comments that the work seems very creative, the facilitator might ask the participants to describe the aspect of the work that led him or her to say that.)

In the second part of the conference, the focus broadens. Having concentrated intensively on the piece itself, the group, in conversation with the presenting teacher, now considers the conditions under which the work was created as well as broader issues of teaching and learning. First, the presenting teacher provides any information that she thinks is relevant about the contexts for the work. This might include describing the assignment, responding to the discussion, answering questions raised in the first part of the conference (though the presenting teacher can choose which of those questions to respond to), and describing other work by the child, and/or commenting on how her own reading or observation of the work compares to that of the group's.

Next the facilitator asks the whole group (presenting teacher included) to reflect on the ideas generated by the discussion of the piece. These might be reflections about specific next steps for the student in question, or ideas about what the participants might do in their own classes, or thoughts about the teaching and learning process in general. Finally, the whole group reflects on the conference itself.

## NESSN TOOL 18 (con'd):

### COLLABORATIVE ASSESSMENT CONFERENCE

Below is a working agenda for a Collaborative Assessment Conference. The time allotted for each step of the conference is not fixed, since the time needed for each step will vary according to the work being considered. At each stage, the facilitator makes the decision about when to move the group on to the next step. Typically, Collaborative Assessment Conferences take from 45 minutes to an hour and 15 minutes.

#### **I. Getting started**

- The Group chooses a facilitator who will make sure the group stays focused on the particular issue addressed in each step.
- The presenting teacher puts the selected work where everyone can see it or provides copies for participants. She says nothing about the work, the context in which it was created, or the student until Step V.
- The participants observe or read the work in silence, perhaps making brief notes about aspects of it that they particularly notice.

#### **II. Describing the work**

- The facilitator asks the group, "What do you see?"
- Group members respond without making interpretations, evaluations about the quality of the work, or statements of personal preference.
- If evaluations or interpretations emerge, the facilitator asks the person to describe the evidence on which those comments are based.

#### **III. Asking questions about the work**

- The facilitator asks the group, "What questions does this work raise for you?"
- Group members state any question they have about the work, the student, the assignment, the circumstances under which the work was carried out, and so on.
- The presenting teacher makes notes about these questions but does not answer them yet.

#### **IV. Speculating about what the student is working on**

- The facilitator asks the group, "What do you think the student is working on?"
- Participants, drawing on their observation of the work, make suggestions about the problems or issues that the student focused on in carrying out the assignment.

#### **V. Hearing from the presenting teacher**

- The facilitator invites the participating teacher to speak.
- The presenting teacher provides her perspective on the student's work, describing what she sees in it, responding to questions raised, and adding any other information that she feels is important to share with the group.
- The presenting teacher also comments on anything surprising or unexpected that she heard during the describing, questioning, and speculating phases.

#### **VI. Reflecting on the CAC and thanking the presenting teacher**

- The group reflects together on their experiences of or reactions to the conference as a whole or to particular parts of it.
- The session concludes with acknowledgment of and thanks to the presenting teacher.

## NESSN TOOL 19: TUNING PROTOCOL

***Purpose:**To develop more effective exhibitions and assessments. The Tuning Protocol was originally developed as a means for the five high schools in the Coalition of Essential School's Exhibitions Project to receive feedback and fine-tune their developing student assessment systems, including exhibitions, portfolios and design projects. It has since been adapted as a tool for looking collaboratively at both teachers' and students' work and used extensively in the work of the National School Reform Faculty.*

Often the presenting teacher begins with a focusing question or area about which she would especially welcome feedback, for example, "Are you seeing evidence of persuasive writing in the student's work?" or "Does this lesson accommodate different learning styles?" The overarching purpose of a tuning protocol is to give teachers critical feedback on a single aspect of their practice, either through their work or the work of their students.

Participation in a structured process of professional collaboration like this can be intimidating and anxiety producing, especially for the teacher presenting work. Having a shared set of guidelines or norms helps everybody participate in a manner that is respectful as well as conducive to helpful feedback.

### **Guidelines:**

- Be respectful of teacher-presenters. By making their work more public, teachers are exposing themselves to kinds of critiques they may not be used to. Inappropriate comments or questions should be reworded or withdrawn.
- Contribute to substantive discussion. Many teachers may be used to blanket praise. Without thoughtful, probing, "cool" questions and comments, teachers will not benefit from the tuning protocol.
- Be respectful of the facilitator's role, particularly in regard to following the guidelines and keeping time. A tuning protocol that doesn't allow for all parts (presentation, feedback, response, debrief) will do a disservice to the teacher-presenters and to the participants.

### **Schedule for Tuning Protocol:**

- |  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>1. Introduction</b> – Protocol goals, guidelines, and schedule                      | 5-10 min.  |
| <b>2. Teacher Presentation</b> – Context for work, focusing question; group is silent. | 10-15 min. |
| <b>3. Clarifying Questions</b> – This is not the time for warm/cool feedback.          | 5 min. max |
| <b>4. Examination of work sample(s)</b>  | 5-15 min.  |
| <b>5. Pause for reflections</b> – Participants reflect on potential contribution.      | 2-3 min.   |
| <b>6. Warm and Cool Feedback</b> – Group shares feedback; presenter is silent.         | 15 min.    |
| <b>7. Reflection</b> – Presenter speaks to issue(s) deemed appropriate.                | 10-15 min. |
| <b>8. Debrief</b> – Open discussion on the experiences of the group                    | 10 min.    |

## NESSN TOOL 20:

### CHARRETTE

***Purpose:** to get feedback on a work in progress when a teacher, student, or group is “stuck.”*

Written by Kathy Juarez, Piner High School, Santa Rosa, CA

The charrette is a term and process borrowed from the architectural community. **The purpose of a charrette is to improve a piece of work.** As described by Carol Coe at Puyallup High School (WA), charrettes are used to “kick up” the level of both student and teacher performance. In their Research and Development Class, for example, the Steering Committee might call for class charrettes on a matter of class procedure.

However, a more common occurrence is that one of the design teams within the class will call for a charrette when it is “stuck” - when the members of the team have reached a point in the process where they cannot easily move forward on their own.

Charrettes are not normally held during the final exhibition of work or at the completion of a project; they are not culminating assessments or final evaluations. Instead, they are held in a low-stakes/no-stakes environment, where the requesting team has **much to gain from the process and virtually nothing to lose.** In short, charrettes are used to scrutinize and improve work before it is ever placed in a high-stakes environment.

1. A group or an individual from the group requests a charrette when one or more of the following conditions exist:

- a. the group is experiencing difficulty with the work,
- b. a stopping point has been reached,
- c. additional minds (thinkers new to the work) could help move it forward.

2. A second group, ranging in size from three to six people, is formed to look at the work. A moderator/facilitator is designated from the newly formed group. It is the moderator's job to observe the charrette, record information that is being created, ask questions along the way, and occasionally summarize the discussion.

3. The requesting team presents its “work in progress” while the other group listens. (There are no strict time limits, but this usually takes five or ten minutes.)

4. The requesting team states what it needs or wants from the charrette, thereby accepting the responsibility of focusing the discussion. This focus is usually made in the form of a specific request, but it can be as generic as “How can we make this better?” or “What is our next step?”

5. The invited group then discusses while the requesting team listens and takes notes. There are no hard and fast rules here. Occasionally (but not usually) the requesting team joins in the discussion process. The emphasis is on improving the work, which now belongs to the entire group, both the requesting and the invited team. The atmosphere is one of “we're in this together,” and our single purpose is “to make a good thing even better.”

6. When the members of the requesting group know they have gotten what they need from the invited group, they stop the process, briefly summarize what was gained, thank the participants and moderator and return to the drawing board.

## NESSN TOOL 21:

### CRITICAL INCIDENT PROTOCOL

**Purpose:** *This protocol provides an opportunity for a teacher to reflect with colleagues on an incident from his or her work that was particularly rewarding, puzzling, or devastating in order to gain new insights into teacher practice and student learning. It is a formal process for critical friendship using a variation of Costa and Killick’s model.*

A facilitator should be assigned for each round. The facilitator’s role is to keep the conversation moving through each phase and to facilitate the final conversation. The facilitator should also keep time.

The “learner” or presenter presents a critical incident from and within the context of his or her work—as a text for learning. The learner also frames a professional outcome toward which he or she is working. The group listens carefully to understand the incident and the context, and then asks clarifying questions. As the learner listens, the “friends” then discuss and raise questions as advocates for the learner’s success. The learner responds and the group talks together about the content and/or process of the conversation.

Learner presents critical incident	10 min
Friends ask clarifying questions	5 min
Friends raise questions, note the significance of the incident in the context of the learner’s work, and discuss as advocates. Learner listens.	15 min
Learner responds. Then the group engages in general conversation about the content and/or process.	15 min
Debrief the process	5 min

## NESSN TOOL 22:

### DESCRIPTIVE REVIEW: A SLICE OF WRITING

**Purpose:** *In this protocol, a group does a focused analysis of certain aspects in a range of samples of previously scored student writing. (This protocol comes from the National School Reform Faculty.)*

#### PROCEDURE:

##### Gather the Writing Slice

Gather samples of student writing from several teachers for analysis. Each sample should be the result of using the same writing prompt across a grade span, a grade level, or the curriculum. Samples should be scored by students' individual teachers before the descriptive review. Include one "high," one "medium," and one "low" sample from each teacher. One sample should be from an ELL student. If there are too many samples, eliminate the "medium" sample, but keep the ELL sample. Cover or remove all student names and scores.

##### Set-up

Everyone gets the same **paginated** packet of student work.

Everyone speaks each round. Rounds can go clockwise or counter-clockwise.

Everyone speaks in turn and describes ONE thing, and only ONE thing he or she sees in the writing.

Facilitation is "intrusive," keeping each round of descriptions at a particular level, while keeping things moving quickly. There is no discussion at this time.

Facilitation includes a short recap of one or more rounds, if appropriate.

Facilitation may ask participants to pause and reflect between some rounds (e.g., a quickwrite.)

**Process** (continued next page)

**NESSN TOOL 22:**  
**DESCRIPTIVE REVIEW: A SLICE OF WRITING (con'd)**

**Process** (Times are adjustable depending on time available.)

**(5 minutes)** Explain the process. Introduce and briefly discuss the framing question.  
(e.g., *What are the characteristics of proficient writing?*)

**(15+ minutes)** Participants examine the writing samples, looking for evidence of *proficient writing*. They take notes, listing the **page number** and specific examples for reference during the discussions.

**(30+ minutes)** The Rounds: (Facilitator takes close notes of participant responses.)

1. General impressions
2. Literal – physical
3. Literal – physical
4. Literal – physical
5. Elements – style
6. Elements – tone, audience, etc.
7. Common values (*What positive evidence is showing up again and again?*)
8. What's missing?

## 8. Peer Observation

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*Math teacher Melanie Turner watched over groups of her tenth graders as they worked together on group projects. Though she always had a balance of academically strong and weak students in these cooperative learning groups and switched group roles for each new project, the groups always resorted to the same pattern in which the strong, outgoing kids took over. She wondered if she were doing something wrong, and if there were some way she could better facilitate this process.*

*At the end of the day, she decided to ask a colleague, Oscar Sanchez, to do a formal peer observation. He agreed. In a pre-observation conference, Melanie told Oscar about her concern and asked him to focus his observations both on the group dynamics of her student groups and on her role as teacher.*

*Several days later, Oscar came to Melanie's classroom, clipboard in hand, ready to observe and take notes. His peer observation revealed that Melanie unknowingly fed into the group dynamics she was unhappy with by always addressing her comments to the "strong" students in each group. Oscar also noticed that, although the students understood their roles as recorder, reporter, observer, and facilitator, they did not have the tools necessary to carry out these roles successfully.*

*In a debriefing conference, Oscar presented his findings to Melanie. Together they brainstormed solutions to the problem for Melanie to try out the next time she used cooperative learning groups.*

Peer observation is one of the most powerful tools of a professional collaborative culture. In peer observation, teachers observe their colleagues in a structured, supportive way in order to improve student learning. When teachers teach in isolated classrooms, there

*Peer observation: Teachers observe each other in a structured, supportive way to promote substantive discussion about teaching.*

is little opportunity to get feedback on how one is doing or to learn from another. Without the stimulation that comes with such collegial discourse, many teachers stick with the same old lessons and instructional techniques they've always used. Lacking an ongoing infusion of new ideas and support from colleagues, many teachers become dispirited and frustrated when their students don't make progress.

### **Broadening the Definition of Professional Development to Include Peer Observation**

Teacher participation at professional conferences, in-house workshops, or courses at the local university alone do not always help teachers to improve their practice in meaningful ways. The “one-shot deal” approach to professional development is ineffective. Rather, schools need to develop a comprehensive, long-term plan.

In order to do this, schools first develop priorities for staff development based on school-wide goals. From these priorities, schools develop plans for coherent, sustained professional growth programs. Such programs require more time and resources than sending individual teachers off to conferences or conducting the traditional system-wide staff development day. Schools must provide teachers with adequate resources of time and expertise over a period of years so they can integrate new skills and instructional approaches into their daily practice. A variety of methods should be used for building staff expertise. These include peer observation, visiting other schools, and forming partnering relationships with universities.

Peer observation can help teachers become more effective as practitioners, increasing job satisfaction and improving student achievement. As schools broaden the definition of professional development to include more

flexible approaches to building staff knowledge and skills, many schools are using peer observation as part of a comprehensive professional development plan.

### **What happens during peer observation?**

Peer observation is a three-part collaborative process in which teachers observe and are observed by each other in order to improve their practice.

#### ***Part 1: Before the Observation***

Part 1 takes place before the actual observation when the observer and the teacher to be observed meet. During this meeting, the observed teacher tells his or her colleague what the observer should focus on in the classroom. The focus of the observation might be a particular student, student interactions within a group, the lesson, teaching techniques, or teacher/student interactions. The observed teacher tells the observer what is going to happen in class on the day of the observation and what the observer should pay attention to. Together they clarify the purpose of the observation.

#### ***Part 2: During the Observation***

At the time of the observation, the observed teacher introduces the observer to the students and explains why he or she is there. During the observation the observer records what he or she sees, keeping in mind the agreed upon focus of the observation. NESSN Tool 28, a form to record observations, reflections, and questions, can be very helpful during this part. Observations are descriptive phrases that answer questions such as *What is the teacher doing or saying? What are the students doing or saying?* Examples of reflections and questions are *Students seem confuse— why? Are there other ways to present material?* In addition, the observer should note time intervals.

### ***Part 3: After the Observation***

Equally important as Parts 1 and 2 is the 30-45 minute debriefing session that follows soon after the observation. In this part, the observing teacher and the observed teacher together reconstruct what happened during the observation. Focusing on the goals of the observation, they each talk about what they felt went well during the class and what they might change. The observed teacher asks for specific descriptions and constructive feedback, and the observer describes rather than evaluates what he or she saw.

### **Benefits of Peer Observation**

As teachers observe their colleagues and discuss what they've seen in a structured, supportive way, they derive many benefits. These include:

- Learning about students: how they respond to different subject areas, instructional methods, grade levels; perform in different learning environments; display different learning styles; interact in pairs and within groups; interact with the teacher; ask and answer questions
- Becoming aware of the physical environment and its match with instruction
- Examining instructional materials in relation to teaching and learning
- Receiving a critical, focused analysis of different aspects of teaching
- Being exposed to new ideas and ways of teaching to try in the classroom

- Modeling collaborative practices for students
- Broadening their view of education to include whole school, putting an individual's work in context
- Being encouraged to seek responses and solutions to school-wide problems

### **Developing Skills for Peer Observation**

Just as teachers need to take care in how they give feedback to colleagues while working together in teams (see Section 7) and while using protocols for looking at student and teacher work (see Section 8), teachers also need to develop similar skills for peer observation. Before engaging in the following peer observation protocols, teachers should be familiar with their different purposes and processes. They should also be aware of and have practice in using the essential skills of active listening and observing, using descriptive rather than evaluative language, and moving from positive to challenging comments.

## Tools for Peer Observation

The following tools will help you conduct peer observations.

<b>Tools for Peer Observation</b>	
<i>Protocols 25-28 were designed by Simon Hole with additions and modifications by Carrie Brennan, John Newlin and John D'Anieri, and Gene Thompson-Grove.</i>	
<b>Name of Tool</b>	<b>Description</b>
NESSN Tool 23: Video Camera	Provides a way for an observer and person being observed to discover what each “sees” during an observation
NESSN Tool 24: Focus Point	A particular aspect of the presenter’s practice is the focus of this observation protocol
NESSN Tool 25: Interesting Moments	A shared experience where the observer and presenter work together during both the observation and debriefing
NESSN Tool 26: Teaming	A protocol for a co- or team-teaching observation where participants are both the observers and the observed
NESSN Tool 27: Observer as Learner	A protocol for observers to use observation as a means to learn how to improve their own practice
NESSN Tool 28: Peer Observation Record	A form to record observations, reflections, questions, etc. for peer observation

## NESSN TOOL 23: VIDEO CAMERA

*The purpose of this protocol is to develop observational reliability between the observer and the observed. An underlying assumption is that no two people, observing the same event, will see the same thing, as the perceptions and prior experiences of each act as a filter. This protocol provides a way for the observed and the observer to discover what the other “sees” during the observation, and to help each learn to see as much as possible.*

- 1. Pre-Observation Conference:** The person to be observed outlines what will be occurring during the observation.
- 2. Observation:** Observers watch the lesson, class, performance, etc. To the greatest extent possible the observer acts like a video camera, scripting and making note of as many events as possible. Care should be taken to not attempt to interpret or question during the observation.
- 3. Affirmation:** Observers talk about what they appreciated and valued with questions and comments such as:  
*What meaning did this have for me?*  
*What is honest and true for me as a responder?*  
*When you did such and such it was evocative, challenging, unique, etc.*
- 4. Questions and conversation:** The presenter, or person who has been observed, asks specific questions. Usually the presenter has the same questions as the observers do; when the presenter starts the dialogue, the opportunity for honesty increases. Observers answer questions and formulate questions in return, trying to be neutral (not “why didn't you do it differently?” but “what did you have in mind when you chose to present the lesson in this way?”) This increases the likelihood of hearing what others are saying and actually learning from it.
- 5. Response and discussion:** Observers respond to presenter's questions, leading to content discussion of the substance of the lesson or performance. Observers offer opinions freely but should ask for permission from presenter to be critical. Most reactions to the work that are formulated as mature criticism are merely opinions. These can be used to weave one's own solution, but may be hard for the person being observed to hear or to use. Personal stories can be included here (What comes up for you as a result of this conversation?).
- 6. Next steps:** What are the next steps for the presenter to improve the lesson, performance, etc.? The presenter may now state a particular dilemma. Suggestion: this can be a conversation between the presenter and the facilitator, only, with the others watching.
- 7. Debrief.** During the first part of the debriefing, the observer reconstructs the observation from her notes. The observed should listen carefully, taking note of any details that escaped her notice and jotting down anything remembered that is not mentioned by the observer. The observed speaks during the second phase of the debriefing, naming those details of which she was not aware and adding her own.

Note: It is important that both parties refrain from interpretation. To say that the student was bored is very different from saying that the student drew circles and designs in the margins of papers, yawned, and looked out the window. Value statements (“That was a great lesson.”) should also be avoided.

## NESSN TOOL 24:

### FOCUS POINT

*This protocol is designed to help deepen the observed teacher's understanding of his practice. The observer's role is to note those events that relate to a particular aspect of the observer's practice and to then act as an active listener as the observed attempts to make sense of those events.*

**Pre-Observation Conference:** In addition to outlining what will be occurring during the observation, the person to be observed asks the observer to focus on a particular aspect of his practice. Example: "Would you look at how I respond to student questions?"

**Observation:** The observer focuses on that aspect of practice raised during the pre-observation conference. Field notes include both descriptions of "focus" events and related questions that the observer may want to raise during the debriefing. (The observer may also want to note events and questions outside the focus of the observation, but these may or may not be discussed during the debriefing.)

**Debriefing:** The observer begins by restating the focus and asking the observed teacher to share his thoughts. Example: "What did you notice about how you responded to student questions?" As the observed talks, the observer may 1) supply specific events that either corroborate or contrast with the observed teacher's statements, 2) summarize what the observed is saying, 3) ask clarifying questions, or 4) raise questions related to the focus that were noted during the observation.

**Note:** Events and questions not directly related to the focus of the observation should be raised only after asking for permission from the observed teacher, and some practitioners think even asking for permission is inappropriate. The observer should refrain from stating her ideas and perspective on the issues unless specifically invited to do so.

## NESSN TOOL 25: INTERESTING MOMENTS

*The underlying assumption for this protocol is that the observer and the observed will work together to create some new knowledge—they are in it together. The observation is a shared experience, and so is the debriefing. One outsider, after listening to such a debriefing, stated that it was a seamless conversation. “The two of you were discovering something about the events you had seen.”*

**Pre-Observation Conference:** Because this form of observation is more open-ended, it is not strictly necessary to have a pre-conference, although it may help to orient the observer as to what will be happening.

**Observation:** The observer maintains an open field of vision, noting anything that strikes her as particularly interesting—anything that may lead to ‘deep’ questions.

**Debriefing:** Either participant begins by raising a point of interest, stating as clearly and as fully as possible what occurred. A conversation develops around the incident with both observer and observed attempting to sort out, “What was going on there?” As the ideas build, both are responsible for keeping the conversation on track while maintaining the flexibility necessary to create new understandings.

**Note:** Prerequisite for this protocol is a high level of trust between the two participants: trust that the debriefing is not about evaluation; trust that each will be thoughtful, will listen and respond to the other; trust that whatever knowledge is created will be shared knowledge.

## NESSN TOOL 26:

### TEAMING

*In the “Interesting Moments” protocol, the debriefing process became more of a shared activity; both participants searching for some understanding, trying to create meaning. In this version, the participants also share the planning and implementation of the lesson(s) that is to be taught. Utilizing either a form of parallel teaching or a more seamless co-teaching, the participants are both “on” with the students. Both are observers and the one observed.*

**Pre-Observation Conference:** This takes the form of a planning session. Issues of outcomes, goals, objectives, assessment are discussed and the activity is planned. If the two participants will be co-teaching and one or both are unfamiliar with the art of teaching with a partner, special attention should be paid to the issue of who will do what and how they will interact when working with the students.

**Observation:** It is important that some form of observational notes are taken. In a co-teaching situation, some people carry a clipboard or notebook as they move around the classroom, taking time to note anything of interest. Others feel this distracts them (or their students) and prefer to write as soon as possible after the event. A third method would be to videotape the session and use the playback during the debriefing. (Warning: the use of video needs to be considered carefully. Among other considerations, it creates the need for a longer debriefing period)

**Debriefing:** As with the “Interesting Moments” protocol, either participant begins by raising a point of interest, stating as clearly and as fully as possible what occurred. A conversation develops around the incident with both observer and observed attempting to sort out, “What was going on there?”

**Note:** Despite research that extols the benefits of team teaching (as opposed to team planning), this pedagogy is a break with the cultural norm of isolation that exists in most schools. Even though many who participate in long-term team teaching find it exhilarating and the best form of staff development, it is not often done.

## NESSN TOOL 27: OBSERVER AS LEARNER

*The primary "learner" in this protocol is the observer. The observer's only purpose is to learn how to improve her practice. Since the observer has little responsibility to the observed teacher, the duration of the observation and even the level of attention to what's going on is determined by the observer, as long as this is fine with the person being observed. This protocol may significantly increase the frequency of visits to each other's classrooms since observers may be able to do some quiet paperwork during their stay, and therefore are more likely to use a prep period to visit another teacher's classroom. The time involved may also be reduced if neither party desires a pre-observation conference.*

**Pre-Observation Conference** It is not necessary to have a pre-observation conference unless either party would like to have one. A pre-observation conference would help to orient the observer as to what will be happening.

**Observation:** The observer focuses on whatever she wishes.

**Debriefing:** The observer often asks the observed questions that might help her better understand the choices made by the observed.

**Note:** Given the potential feeling of vulnerability on the part of the observed teacher in any situation, and especially in a situation such as this where the observed teacher may have little idea of what the observer is focusing on, it's important that the observer try to ask questions during the debriefing in a way that does not put the observed teacher on the defensive.

**NESSN TOOL 28:**  
**PEER OBSERVATION RECORD**

*This form provides a way to record data observed during peer observation.*

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**PRE-OBSERVATION MEETING**

Research question:

Observed Teacher's Goals for the Visit:

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**THE VISIT**

Observations:

Reflections / Questions:

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**DEBRIEFING THE VISIT:**

Key ideas and reflections:

Implications for future practice:

## 9. The Cycle of Action Research

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*At an academic team meeting in late November, four teachers from Wilson High School's tenth grade team were using a protocol to look at samples of student essays to analyze the changes between first and final drafts. They framed a question to focus their discussion: What evidence do we see that shows improvement between the first and final drafts of these essays? After careful analysis and discussion, they decided that there wasn't much evidence at all that showed improvement between drafts. "It looks like they just moved a couple of sentences around, corrected their spelling errors, and copied the essay over," said one teacher. "They don't get what revision is all about."*

*"Maybe it's because we're not being effective in showing them," offered another teacher.*

*Together, the team decided to do an action research project to see how they were currently teaching writing so they could find ways to improve it. They stated the problem this way: Final drafts of student essays do not show evidence of a careful revision process. Then they formed the research question: How can we help students make improvements between first and final drafts of essays? To study the problem, they made a plan to collect data that included peer observations, observations of students at work in peer editing groups ("shadow" studies), and more writing samples.*

*Several months later, after completing the data collection phase of action research, they sat down to analyze what they'd collected. Among their findings were the following: 1) students hadn't*

*"Action Research is a fancy way of saying let's study what's happening at our school and decide how to make it a better place."  
Emily Calhoun (1994)*

*received enough training in how to give feedback in their peer editing groups; 2) a formal process didn't exist for teachers to meet one-on-one with their students; and 3) many students were not engaged with the essay topics they were assigned.*

*The teachers then proposed solutions to the problems. They agreed to set aside a block of time to practice the peer editing process with students. They outlined a process by which they would work with students individually. And, they made a commitment to allowing students more choice in what they wanted to write about.*

Action research allows teachers to work together to pose questions about their practice, collect data relative to their questions, analyze the data, and then make changes in their practice based on that analysis. Action research is conducted by teachers who want to do something to improve their situation. Instead of studying what others are doing or have done, teachers take a look at what they themselves are doing in their classrooms in order to improve it. In action research, teachers set the agenda: they identify something they want to study to improve teaching and learning, and they also read the research. Because they choose issues of personal interest, they are more committed to the goals they set for themselves, rather than having goals imposed upon them.

### **Action Research: A Continuous Cycle of Inquiry**

Action research involves a continuous process of inquiry that aims at changing practice. After teachers form questions about what they want to study, collect and analyze data, and make improvements in their practice as a result of their research, they repeat the cycle by raising new or refined questions. As teachers try out new ideas and instructional strategies, this “cycle of inquiry” provides regular opportunities for reflection. When action research is conducted in collaborative groups, teachers have

opportunities to receive ongoing feedback from colleagues as they attempt new instructional strategies. They also have the opportunity to investigate and share findings on how changes in practice affect student learning.

Action research is always based on an articulated vision of what effective instruction and student learning should look like. The cycle of action research includes the following elements:

[ART/DESIGN: insert cyclical graphic called **The Cycle of Action Research** with these elements: **Problem formation, data collection, data analysis, determine solutions, action planning, assessment.**]

**Problem formation:** Develop a research question and hypothesize about the underlying causes of the question or problem.

**Sample Criteria for Action Research Questions**<sup>12</sup> includes:

- Questions should be focused on an instructional dilemma.
- Questions should not be “yes/no” questions.
- Questions should help explore the nature of the relationship.
- Avoid evaluative words.
- Try to surface assumptions and clarify terms embedded in the question.
- Try to balance between a narrow and an open-ended question.
- Avoid “why” questions.
- Those involved shouldn’t already know the answer to the question.
- Those involved must be passionate about the question.

**Data collection:** Collect data on your research that will help prove or disprove your hypothesis. Possible sources of data include surveys, observations, interviews, achievement data, curriculum materials review, and discussions about student and teacher work. Also, read research available about your instructional dilemma.

**Data analysis:** Analyze data and determine causes of the question or problem. This is a key step in the cycle of action research. If you don’t identify the real cause of the problem, you won’t necessarily select the best solution.

**Determine solutions:** Based on your analysis of the data and the causes of the problem that you identified, determine solutions that will effectively address the question or problem.

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<sup>12</sup> From IITIC (Improving Instruction Through Inquiry and Collaboration), Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest Center, accessed from <http://www.essentialschools.org/fieldbook/schdesign/inquiry/collectdata/iiticrquestions.html>

**Action planning:** Develop and implement an action plan based on the solution to the question or problem. At some point, present findings and propose a plan to the full faculty.

**Assessment:** Assess the impact of the solution on improving student learning, and make refinements.

## Tools for Action Research

The following tools will help you conduct the cycle of action research. Record details about the action research, including the plan for data collection on tool 29. Use 30 to identify two of the most likely causes of your instructional dilemma. And, finally, use tool 31 to record the plan for action research in detail, including timeline, budget, and persons responsible.

<b>Tools for Action Research</b>	
<b>Name of Tool</b>	<b>Description</b>
NESSN Tool 29: Action Research Planning Sheet	Questions that guide the data-collection phase of action research and planning
NESSN Tool 30: Determining Possible Causes of the Problem	Used for brainstorming, refining, testing, and selecting hypotheses as a way to identify two or three most likely causes of the problem
NESSN Tool 31: Action Planning Form	A form to record research question, proposed solutions, strategies/tasks/actions, person(s) responsible, timeline, and budget resources

## NESSN TOOL 29:

### ACTION RESEARCH PLANNING SHEET

#### *Cycle of Action Research: Data Collection*

*This tool is used after a group has formed a question or problem for action research. Its questions guide the data collection phase of action research and planning.*

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#### **Research question:**

- What are several supporting questions that have emerged from your discussions of your research question?
  
- What are some of the sources of data you will investigate?
  
- What are some different ways you might collaborate on this project? (Examples: teaming up on research question; sharing results; including students, families, and community members)
  
- What are some of the strategies / activities you will use to test your question? (The “action” part of the research)
  
- What is the initial timeline for the project?

## NESSN TOOL 30:

### DETERMINING POSSIBLE CAUSES OF THE PROBLEM

#### *Cycle of Action Research: Determine Solutions*

*This tool is used after a group has formed a question or problem for action research. It is used for brainstorming, refining, testing, and selecting hypotheses as a way to identify two or three most likely causes of the problem.*

#### **Research question:**

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**Brainstorm Causes.** Consider all possible reasons that the problem exists. Develop a list of hypotheses. The group should not expect to arrive at an immediate or single explanation or cause for the problem.

**Refine and Test Hypotheses.** Review the list of hypotheses to eliminate those that are least likely to be the causes of the problem. Test those that are most plausible to confirm whether they are probable causes.

Hypothesis (Why does the problem exist?)	How will we test it?	After we test it, is the hypothesis feasible?
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		

**List causes.** From the tested hypotheses, list one, two, or three most likely causes of the problem to be used in developing solutions.

#### **Causes:**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

**NESSN TOOL 31:  
ACTION PLANNING FORM**

*Use this form to record research question, proposed solutions, strategies/tasks/actions, person(s) responsible, timeline, and budget resources.*

**Group name:**

**Action research question or problem:**

**Proposed solutions:** As you consider solutions, ask:

*Will the implementation of this solution address the problem?*

*What are the potential obstacles?*

*Is the solution practical?*

*Are there enough resources?*

<b>Strategies / Tasks / Actions</b>	<b>Person (s) Responsible</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Budget / Resources</b>

## 10. Grouping Students for Learning

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*The school is small and personalized so that teachers and students know each other well.*

NESSN PRINCIPLE 2:  
Personalization

*Student-teacher ratios are greatly reduced so that all faculty know their students well, with secondary ratios at no more than 80:1 and elementary ratios at no more than 20:1.*

NESSN PRINCIPLE 5:  
Lower Student-  
Teacher Ratios

A small school has a defined geographic area, with a dedicated administration, a faculty small enough to work together collaboratively, and a student body numbering anywhere between 50 and 400 students. Schools make very different decisions about how to configure their student populations, depending on the existing size and location of the school and its student body. They need to develop policies for student enrollment, figure out how to group the students within the building, and group them within the classroom so that all students receive the benefits small schools can provide.

***Small Schools:***  
*50-400 students*

### Developing Policies for Student Enrollment

Developing policies for student enrollment in small schools can create great dilemmas for the governing bodies of small schools. Small schools are shown to be more successful when staff is self-selected and students volunteer to enroll. And because students choose to enroll in a particular small school, usually due to the focus of the school program, their parents tend to be more involved, thus boosting the academic achievement of their sons and daughters.

*Small schools are more successful when staff is self-selected and students volunteer to enroll.*

However, school governing bodies must take great care to avoid creating a system of “haves and have nots” within a school district by attracting only the most motivated students and cooperative families or a disproportionately higher percentage of affluent or white students. Enrollment policies should show the school’s intention to benefit all students in a community by calling for a balanced representation of all students in the district. The student enrollment of a small school must be both a result of student and parent choice and a reflection of equitable representation across the entire school district by race, ethnicity, income status, and gender.

### **Student Grouping within Small Schools: Looping and Multi-age Grouping**

Within small schools students and teachers can be grouped to promote longer and more meaningful student-teacher relationships. Options to grouping by grade level include looping and multi-age grouping. Looping means teaching the same students for more than one year. With multi-age grouping, students of more than one grade are together in a class. Most multi-age classes are looped, meaning that students stay with the same teachers for more than one year. The practices of looping and multi-age grouping can greatly increase opportunities for building relationships and addressing the learning needs of all students.

#### ***Looping***

- *Teaching the same students for more than one year*

#### ***Multi-age grouping***

- *Students of more than one grade in a class*

### **Looping**

Looping is the practice of the same students and teachers working together over multiple years. Some schools group students and teachers for two years (e.g., ninth and tenth grades only), while in other schools students and teachers work together for their entire tenure.

### ***Benefits of Looping***

- **Develop relationships.** Students have the opportunity to develop relationships over a longer period of time. Because teachers know their students well, less time is spent on review and pre-assessment of students' skills and knowledge, and more time is spent on in-depth learning experiences. The pacing in the second year tends to be faster because teachers build on previous skills and knowledge, going deeper into topics and moving more quickly.
- **Positive relationships, fewer behavior problems.** Similarly, parents and teachers get to know each other over the course of more than one year and are able to build richer and more fruitful relationships. Teachers find they have more positive interactions with students, while discipline and behavior management decreases. This climate encourages intellectual risk-taking and greater involvement of students. Students benefit from time spent developing social skills and cooperative group strategies.
- **Interpersonal conflict resolution.** When a teacher and a student clash in single-year groupings, there is less incentive to work through the problem. Looping gives teachers the incentive to work harder to reach students; likewise, it gives students the incentive to work through problems and conflicts.
- **Reduction in grade retention.** Looping can reduce grade retention because it provides students with the chance to raise achievement over the course of two years rather than just one.
- **Student confidence.** Individual students respond to the increased intimacy by participating more actively and

feeling greater confidence and pride in being part of a group. Students tend to feel less nervous and apprehensive beginning the school year, particularly their second or subsequent years with a group.

### ***Challenges to Looping***

- **Unsuccessful groups:** While looping does afford a group the opportunity to grow and develop together, if the chemistry of the group is not working or if the group development process is not effective, students as well as teachers can feel “stuck with each other” for not one year, but two or more years. Clear guidelines for moving students and reforming groups at the end of the year can solve this challenge.
- **Professional Development:** Teachers new to this method need support, reinforcement of content knowledge, planning time, and mentorship to set goals for individual students and develop an effective two-year or longer curriculum.

### **Multi-age Grouping**

In a multi-age group, students of two (or more) grade levels are together in each class. At the end of each year, older students move on and a new class of younger students moves up a grade to join the group. Multi-age groups are typically looped, meaning that students stay with the same teachers for more than one year.

#### ***Benefits of Multi-age Grouping***

- **Social and academic flexibility.** More social and academic flexibility is possible for students who may be more advanced in some areas and not in others. For example, a

student may be socially mature but weak in a particular academic area.

- **Heterogeneous grouping.** Multi-age grouping supports heterogeneity and encourages leadership and confidence-building among all students. There are opportunities for students to take on leadership roles beyond academics. Students can model effective behaviors in groups and in other ways important to learning.
- **Student responsibility for learning.** Multi-age grouping increases students' responsibility for their learning since students are encouraged to learn at their own level and pace.
- **Students as mentors.** Multi-age grouping provides opportunities for older students to mentor younger students. There is always a group of students who are familiar with the class routines and who can act as role models for the new and younger students. In this regard, learning is reinforced through students' teaching students, rather than just the teachers' teaching.
- **Less competition.** Multi-age grouping diminishes competition among students because it breaks down "class" structures between older and younger students and limits the arbitrary privileging of older students.

### *Challenges to Multi-age Grouping*

- **Professional development.** Professional development is needed for teachers in the areas of content knowledge and developing varied instructional approaches. Because many teachers are unfamiliar with multi-age grouping, a school

may benefit from providing mentorships and other forms of support for teachers.

- **Allocating and providing resources.** The wide developmental range of students in a multi-age class requires schools to rethink how they assign existing staff such as aides, specialists, reading tutors, or student teachers.
- **Family support and buy-in.** Many families are unfamiliar with the benefits of multi-age groups, and they may be uncomfortable with this structure. It is important for schools to provide adequate information to parents about multi-age groupings, as well as to plan a transition period during which concerned students and their families can adapt to the new structure.

## **Heterogeneous Learning Groups**

As small schools seek ways to create school cultures that encourage and support high achievement for all students, they abandon traditional “tracking” systems that place students in learning groups according to academic achievement as measured by standardized tests, teacher recommendation, or other predetermined criteria. Tracking is the practice of grouping students for long periods of time according to perceived ability with little or no flexibility for changing student needs and performance.

Small schools, with their commitment to equity and excellence, often group their students heterogeneously.

Separating students into groups according to their perceived academic abilities and achievement (homogeneous grouping) weakens the learning experience for everyone. Often, the myth informing such student groupings is a hierarchy that suggests students must master a certain set of skills and content before

moving on to another level. Students placed in lower tracks seldom find the opportunities to move on to classes in which they are appropriately challenged to use advanced skills and content (Wheelock 1992).

With students of color and economically disadvantaged youth often placed disproportionately in the lower tracks, the achievement gap widens (Oakes 1994). Tracking reinforces racial and social isolation, a damaging proposition at any age but especially as adolescents are developing (and making lasting decisions about) their sense of identity and place in the world. Students placed in low and advanced tracks often spend their school years with the same group of students, losing out on opportunities to know and learn from other students.

Instead, small schools place students in heterogeneous learning groups that reflect the learning characteristics of all students, including learning style, academic achievement, personal interests, and prior knowledge.

### ***Benefits to Heterogeneous Grouping***

- **High expectations for all students.** Small schools, with their commitment to equity and excellence, group their students heterogeneously so that everyone benefits. Students traditionally labeled as “low achievers” are held to the same high expectations as the “advanced” students. As expectations for their work moves beyond fill-in-the-blank exercises to authentic learning experiences that require critical thinking, low achievers are challenged and motivated to achieve at higher levels.
- **Access to challenging curriculum and instruction for all students:** All students have greater opportunities to learn. Students who have traditionally held places in higher tracks

are expected to perform to high standards in heterogeneously grouped classes. They are assessed on their demonstrated skill level and knowledge rather than on a perceived level of their ability, which was often determined years earlier.

- **Varied and individualized instruction.** Higher-track students in homogeneous settings are often under-challenged because instruction is not individualized and varied in approaches that push students to learn in new ways and develop critical thinking skills. Similarly, lower-track students often do not perform at higher levels because they are given unchallenging assignments. A heterogeneous class allows teachers to draw upon students' particular strengths and "intelligences" to create a rich learning environment.
- **Students learning from each other.** Students with all learning styles and levels of achievement have much to learn from the insights and experiences of their classmates as they engage in collaborative discourse and intellectual inquiry on topics of interest to them. In heterogeneously grouped classrooms, instruction is differentiated to reflect the varied learning needs of each student.

### **Differentiated Instruction in the Heterogeneously Grouped Class**

Simply putting a diverse group of students in a classroom does not ensure that significant learning will take place. Providing challenging content and a variety of learning strategies so that all students are able to understand and make connections with the content is essential. Using a differentiated instructional approach is an effective means for addressing the needs of each learner. In a school where teachers have small class sizes and no

more than 80 students in total, teachers can develop a range of practices that allow for differentiation and modification based on students' needs.

Teachers usually differentiate their instruction in one of three ways: by task, by activity, or by assessment. To differentiate by activity, for example, the task and means for assessment remain consistent for all students, but the activities that lead to completion of the task vary, depending on the learner. A teacher may assign all students the same task, for example, writing a children's story. However, she may differentiate the activities so that students are successful at completing the task. Some students may have an individual conference, some may meet to peer critique each others' drafts, while others may work in a small group with the special education teacher on a storyboard template that helps them develop their plot ideas. In this example, when the teacher assesses these students' stories, she uses the same rubric for all students. Knowing students well allows teachers to create the varied and differentiated instruction that helps all students achieve at high levels.

Examples of differentiating by task or assessment would be to ask students to respond in different ways to a piece of literature they have all have read. They might demonstrate their understanding of a character's motivations in a novel by acting out a scene from the story, writing an interpretive essay, or creating an outline for a sequel to the novel.

Practices such as project-based learning, reading and writing workshops, and well-structured and flexible cooperative learning groups can help motivate students to become active, responsible learners. Both teachers and students need training in how to utilize a variety of such learning strategies, and some students will still require additional support.

## **GUIDELINES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IN A HETEROGENEOUSLY GROUPED CLASSROOM**

- **Differentiated Instruction:** Vary instruction in ways that address individual learning needs. Differentiating instruction by task, activity, or assessment affords teachers the flexibility to meet the different learning needs of all students.
- **Flexible groupings:** Group students according to students' learning needs and the requirements of the content or activity presented. At times it is appropriate to have short-term groupings of students for specific purposes such as building basic numeracy and literacy skills.
- **Collaborative work:** Engage students in collaborative learning experiences. Encourage student input in making decisions about what and how to teach and learn. Use a variety of strategies for learning and teaching, including cooperative learning groups, project-based learning, peer tutoring, and process writing.
- **Training in classroom practices:** As schools move from homogeneous to heterogeneous groupings of students, both teachers and students need to be trained in new strategies for learning. For teachers, this requires an initial investment of time and effort through professional development opportunities inside and outside the classroom, along with a good dose of trial and error. However, once some of the key strategies used in the heterogeneous classroom are learned and practiced throughout a school, there are great benefits.
- **Additional support and enrichment for students:** When necessary, provide additional support and enrichment opportunities for students by using additional staff (instructional aides, special education staff, etc.) in the classroom. Students may also benefit from mentoring programs and cross-age tutoring, or from after-school and Saturday homework centers.

## **Advisory Programs**

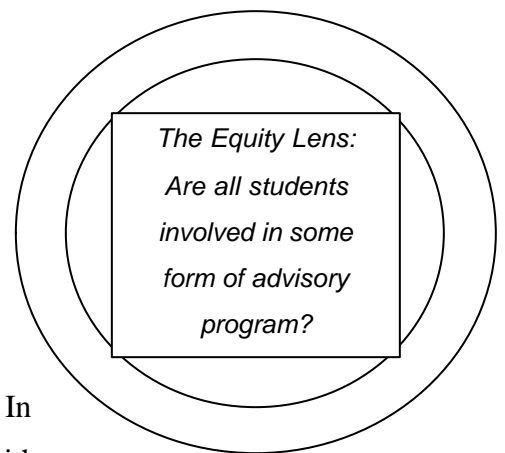
Small schools need to create environments that promote personalized, caring relationships between adults and students, and provide opportunities for these relationships to develop and flourish. Such relationships support and reinforce student learning and help students to grow into productive, responsible adults. A strong correlation exists between a student's academic success and having a close, personal relationship with at least one adult in the school. There are numerous ways that individual teachers create caring and personalized environments in their classrooms everyday. Advisory programs provide a way for a school as a whole to support meaningful relationships between students and adults.

Advisory initiatives in small schools often take the form of structured programs that meet at specific times during the week. In advisory programs, groups of 10 to 15 students meet regularly with an adult, usually during the school day. Students stay with the same advisor throughout their tenure at the school.

Providing ample time for students and adults to interact informally and naturally around things of interest to them is essential.

Student-adult relationships can grow when adults work with small groups of students during learning experiences in the classroom, on service projects within the community, or in special interest clubs.

In small schools, both structured programs and informal opportunities should exist to create opportunities for building relationships.



## Examples of How Schools Use Advisory Time

- **Working with students on academic issues.** During a scheduled advisory period, students explore school-related issues such as developing study skills and individual learning plans, learning to use the library/resource center, planning for college, and learning peer mediation skills.
- **Working to help the community.** Groups of students and adults form service organizations to help the community by providing services to local senior centers, parks, libraries, etc.
- **Working within the school community.** Adult advisors help students gain workplace skills such as planning and collaborating to provide a useful service to the school community. For example, one group of students experienced in technology helps their peers learn computer skills, while another takes part in a program to read to elementary students.
- **Discussing social and developmental issues.** Trained adults facilitate discussions with students about social and developmental issues, and about concerns of adolescents such as peer and family relationships, health care, nutrition, and career planning.
- **Sharing common interests.** Students and teachers interact informally around a shared interest such as a craft, hobby, sport, or academic field.

## 11. Organizing Time to Support Learning

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*NESSN schools should have the freedom to set longer school days and calendar years for both students and faculty. In particular, research supports a correlation between faculty planning time spent on teaching and learning and increased student achievement. Scheduling that allows for summer and school-year faculty planning time contributes to a more unified school community and educational program. This scheduling includes:*

- *Increasing planning and professional development time for faculty*
- *Increasing learning time for students*
- *Organizing the school schedule in ways that maximize learning time for students and planning time for faculty (e.g., longer days Monday through Thursday in order to have half-days for students on Fridays, enabling faculty to have a significant planning and professional development block every Friday afternoon).*

NESSN AREA OF  
AUTONOMY 5:  
School Calendar

### **Time as a Resource and Scheduling as a Tool**

When the focus of a school is on improving student learning, problems with seven or eight, 42-minute classes a day begin to surface. Based upon administrative and institutional needs, the seven- or eight-period- a-day schedule does not necessarily meet the pedagogical requirements of learners. The 42-minute class period in separate subject areas provides limited opportunities to meet the diverse learning styles of students or to engage them in meaningful, authentic work. The amount of class time allotted is always the same, regardless of the complexity of the material, project, or subject area. Interdisciplinary connections among

*When the focus of a school's change effort is on improving student learning, time becomes a resource, and scheduling becomes a tool to more effectively serve students.*

subject areas are superficial at best. Time spent passing between and settling into classes is lost.

When the focus of a school's change effort is on improving student learning and not on finding the perfect schedule, time becomes a resource, and scheduling becomes a tool to more effectively serve students. However, lengthening class periods or making other changes in the school schedule alone will not improve student learning (Canady and Rettig 1995). Teachers need to develop curriculum and adopt teaching practices that provide students with meaningful and authentic learning experiences.

### **Guidelines for Using Time to Support Learning**

- **Student learning time.** Longer blocks of instructional time allow students and teachers to delve more deeply into learning experiences than the traditional 40- some minute period allows. Instead of the class period coming abruptly to an end, students and teachers can let lively discussions about a book they're reading or a social issue they're examining come to a natural end. Students can make real progress on group projects or labs. When students have the time to understand new concepts and apply what they've learned, they are more apt to retain information. Teachers can change student groupings multiple times in one learning block according to students' interests and diverse learning needs. In longer learning blocks, teachers can use time creatively to increase student learning.
- **Flexibility in scheduling.** Flexibility in scheduling allows academic teams to use the blocks of time to best serve their learning purposes. For example, on a two-person team, a science/math teacher may want to use the time to work with students on a project for a whole week. Or, a team might want

to create a United Nations conference for an entire day.

Teacher teams should be in charge of dividing their own blocks of time to best suit instructional purposes.

- **Common planning time for academic teams.** There is ample common planning time for the members of academic teams to develop interdisciplinary curriculum that focuses on essential questions, to use protocols for looking at student and teacher work, to coordinate team logistics, and to meet with parents. Lack of common planning time for teachers has emerged as one of the key deterrents to making effective school change. Schools must find ways to provide enough time for teachers to work together to improve their practice.
- **Include specialty-subject teachers.** Finding ways for specialty-subject teachers to participate as team teachers is challenging. Often these teachers meet with many more students than team teachers and need to teach while team teachers have common planning time. Rotate specialty-subject teachers' schedules each term so that they can join at least one team per term. In doing so, specialty-subject teachers share common planning time with team teachers and meet to discuss students, look at student work, and plan interdisciplinary curriculum.
- **Interfacing with support and non-teaching staff.** Because there is usually a network of adults supporting students, it is important to include these staff members in team meetings. One possibility is to rotate the weekly agenda of team meetings so that each day's meeting includes the appropriate staff. For example, one day might focus on special education or differentiated instruction in the classroom, in which case the special education teacher should be present, if she is not

already a core team teacher. Another meeting day might be dedicated to team-wide curriculum planning, in which case the Director of Instruction or Community Service Coordinator might participate.

## Sample Schedules

**Flexible Block Schedule.** This model works for either a four-person or a two-person team. The chart below shows the schedule that one group of students would follow. Sample A requires the team teachers to divide the time as they see fit. This ensures maximum ownership and flexibility. While students are taking specialty subjects, the core teachers have common planning time. In this scenario, specialty subject teachers are available to participate in common planning time two or three days per week. The academic team teachers can meet from 12:45 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, and from 1:40 p.m.–2:30 p.m. on Mondays and Fridays. Fifteen extra minutes are built in to the morning block to allow for settling in, daily attendance, announcements, a mid-morning break, and/or passing time.

<b>Sample A: Flexible Block Schedule</b>					
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:25 – 12:00 (215 min.)	Core Block	Core Block	Core Block	Core Block	Core Block
12:05 – 12:40 (35 min.)	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
12:45 – 1:35 (50 min.)	Advisory	Gym	Music	Gym	Advisory
1:40 – 2:30 (50 min.)	Spanish	Spanish	Spanish	Spanish	Spanish

**A/ B Schedule.** This model works for either several small schools within a larger school building or a single school (either stand-alone or part of a larger school building). The premise of this schedule is to allow for longer blocks of time (in this case 90 minutes) for students and teachers to engage in substantive learning experiences. Classes meet every other day. Teachers see a smaller number of students each day, and students take a smaller course load on the “A” and “B” days. Additionally, teachers within the small school could schedule common planning times during their open blocks; each teacher in the small school would teach or team-teach during two or three of each day’s blocks. Days are not assigned; rather “B” always follows “A,” taking into account holidays and in-service days.

Sample B: A /B Schedule		
Time	“A” Days	“B” Days
8:00 – 9:30	Period 1	Period 2
9:35 – 11:05	Period 3	Period 4
11:10 – 1:15	Period 5 and lunch: one half of the students have lunch for 35 minutes at beginning of period; the other half have lunch for 35 minutes at the end.	Period 6 and lunch: one half of the students have lunch for 35 minutes at beginning of period; the other half have lunch for 35 minutes at the end.
1:20 – 2:50	Period 7	Period 8

[ART/DESIGN: insert sample Fenway schedule]

## 12. Allocating Resources

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*NESSN schools have the freedom to hire and excess their staff in order to create a unified school community. This includes:*

- *Hiring staff that best fit the needs of the school, regardless of their current status (member of the district or not, although every teacher hired becomes a member of the local teachers union)*
- *Excessing staff (into the district pool) that do not fulfill the needs of the school*

NESSN AREA  
OF AUTONOMY  
1: Staffing

*NESSN schools have a lump sum, per-pupil budget over which the school has total discretion to spend in the manner that provides the best programs and services to students and their families. This includes:*

- *creating a lump sum, per-pupil budget, the sum of which is equal to that of other district schools within that grade span; and*
- *moving the district toward itemizing all central office costs and allowing NESSN schools to purchase identified discretionary district services or not, and include them in the school's lump sum, per-pupil budget.*

NESSN AREA  
OF AUTONOMY  
2: Budget

School reform to improve teaching and learning does not always require additional funding. While grants can provide new funding sources for coaching and professional development on a short-term basis, schools that are interested in long-term, sustainable reform

*Schools interested in long-term, sustainable reform need to rethink how they allocate available resources of money, staffing, and time.*

need to rethink how they allocate the resources already available to them. These resources include money, staffing, and time.

Reallocating resources can trigger difficult changes for schools. If a school decides that it wants to lower its student-teacher ratio by transitioning to an in-class model of special education academic support, and lower teachers' student loads by creating two-person teams, individuals will inevitably be affected. While these sorts of decisions should be consensual among the faculty, school leaders should be mindful that change is difficult, both logistically and personally. Giving individual teachers time to make decisions, to transition, and to develop new skills is essential to making effective changes<sup>13</sup> (Miles).

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<sup>13</sup> Miles, Karen Hawley, and Matthew Hornbeck. Rethinking District Professional Development Spending: New American Schools.

## **EXAMPLES OF HOW TO USE RESOURCES**

**Special Education Teachers:** Use in-class consultation models for academic support by placing special education teachers in regular classrooms with their colleagues instead of in a Resource Room.

**Title I Teachers and Funding:** Staff Title I teachers as regular classroom teachers. Title I teachers can also serve as team-based or school-wide instructional facilitators. Use Title I funds for school-based professional development.

**Two-person Academic Teams:** Reduce student-teacher ratios by organizing teachers into two-person teams.

**District-wide Early Release Time:** Negotiate with the district to claim all district early release time for school-based professional development.

**Substitute Teachers:** Use substitute teachers to free up team teachers for common planning time to work on curriculum and develop coherence across grades.

**Administrative Staff:** Streamline administrative staff, shifting roles to instructional facilitators and literacy and math specialists.

**Professional Development Conferences:** Approve teacher attendance at conferences only when the conference content supports the school's professional development goals.

**School-based Professional Development:** Use full faculty meeting time to create two- to three-hour blocks for professional development and study groups. Use common planning time among team teachers for professional development. As much as possible, save business items for written communication.

**Longer Blocks of Learning Time:** Shift to longer blocks of learning time to increase instructional time and reduce "passing" time.

## Sample Ways Schools Find Time to Work Together

Here are some ways schools have found time for collaborative work.<sup>14</sup>

- Release students early one day a week.
- Use teacher assistants to release teachers for one–hour study group meetings.
- Use teams for parents and/or business partners to release teachers for meetings.
- One day a week, begin school 30 minutes later and ask teachers to come in 30 minutes earlier.
- Assign teachers to the same study groups while their students attend classes of art, music, physical education, and other “specialty” areas.
- Hire a team of substitute teachers to spend a day every other week at the school in order to release groups of teachers for collaborative work.
- Schedule “special enrichment assemblies” for students to provide time for teachers to meet.
- Limit meetings of the full faculty to one day a month.
- Compensate teachers for collaborative work done after school.
- Start school 5 minutes early and end 5 minutes later Tuesdays through Fridays; on Mondays have students leave at 1:45 and teachers leave at 4:25
- Shorten required after school time for teachers to 15 minutes four days a week to allow for an hour of collaborative work after school one day a week.
- Use a team of college or university students to free teachers for collaborative work.
- Create regular common planning time for academic teams by sending all students in a cluster or grade level to specialists during a designated period.

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<sup>14</sup> Some of these ideas come from a paper by Carlene Murphy of August, GA: *Finding Time for Faculties to Study Together*, intended for publication in the summer 1997 issue of *Journal of Staff Development*.

### 13. Developing Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

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*Just like backstage before opening night, the energy in the hallways at East High School on Student Exhibition Day is charged with excitement and anticipation. One student is looking frantically for a poster he fears he left at home. Another frets over the school's scratchy sound system for a multimedia show. A third, who has tried to anticipate every question the panel might ask of her, paces back and forth, suddenly unsure she's prepared to answer even the most basic questions. In the school lobby members of the judging panels – faculty, parents, and experts from the community – sip coffee and eat donuts while they anxiously wait for the exhibitions to begin.*

*Now in its third year of using final exhibitions as one criterion for graduation, members of the East High School community are proud of this day. Not only does it represent a culminating experience for each individual high school senior, but it is also the result of creating a vision for the school where all students learn to use their minds well. In brainstorming sessions a few years ago, Planning Team members asked each other, How would we know if a student were using his or her mind well? What evidence would we look for?*

*In the exhibition today, members of the original Planning Team are seeing their vision in action as:*

- *one student goes over notes to discuss a cross-section of African-American achievements in several fields*

- *another student attempts to answer her own question, How will our city have enough energy to get through another hot summer without outages?*
- *a third student stretches before performing an original dance and then discussing how the dance was created within a historical context of dance in America.*

## **Rethinking Curriculum**

Traditionally, a school’s curriculum has been seen as a vast body of knowledge divided into several subject areas (math, social studies, English, the sciences, languages, etc.) that students are asked to “cover” and learn in a given period of time. In this race to cover material, learning often becomes a question of memorizing or accumulating facts and information that are quickly forgotten once students leave school. Cognitive theorists in the last few decades have established that simply memorizing or accumulating facts does not mean that humans are engaged in learning. Learning is an active process: a student learns through experience, by thinking (using his/her mind well), acquiring information in a meaningful context, and applying it in the real world.

This notion of learning as an active process has implications for how schools develop curriculum. Instead of trying to cover a broad range of content, schools find ways to limit and simplify what students learn. Schools redesign their curricular offerings with a focus on teaching students to think, develop habits of mind, and become competent in those areas that are the most worth knowing.

*Curriculum:  
What knowledge is  
most worth knowing?  
Why? For whom?  
Who benefits? Who  
decides?*

## **NESSN Principles and Curriculum, Instruction , and Assessment:**

The following four NESSN Principles guide curriculum development, instruction, and assessment in small schools:

- **Habits of Mind**
- **Less is More**
- **Student-as-Worker; Teacher-as-Coach**
- **Assessment by Exhibition**

### **Habits of Mind**

*The school's central goal is teaching children to use their minds well in every area of work they undertake, with the result of becoming responsible members of a democratic community.*

Small schools help students acquire and develop habits of mind. Developed over time, a habit is a pattern of behavior that occurs without thought on the part of the individual. Students acquire habits of mind that assist learning through frequent repetition of specific patterns of thinking and ways of looking at the world. Making suppositions, asking questions, reasoning, making connections, looking for evidence, and recognizing perspectives are all considered habits of mind.

Habits of mind are the lenses through which students see, figure out, and appreciate their world. They guide students' thinking, actions, and interactions. For example, when a student considers the documentation of an historical event, one habit of mind might be to use multiple perspectives and ask, *Whose viewpoint is represented here?* If students were to conduct field research at a

*What ways of thinking and acting and knowing do we want our students to develop and acquire?*

National Park, they would look for evidence of past inhabitants. Habits of mind cross all content areas. In mathematics, students may be asked to look for patterns, but they also use this habit of mind in their study of world literature, their own personal behavior, and the sciences.

Teaching students to use their minds well in every area of work they undertake is the central goal of small schools. All instructional practices, curriculum development, and assessment experiences are guided by the question, *What ways of thinking and acting do we want our students to develop and acquire?*

#### **Examples of Habits of Mind**

- **Being persistent:** using a variety of methods before finding a correct solution: *Have you used multiple ways to solve a problem? Have you tried everything?*
- **Using evidence:** evaluating sources of information: *How do you know? What is the evidence? Is it credible?*
- **Looking for relevance:** deciding which information is useful and which is not: *So what? Is this information worthwhile?*
- **Considering point of view:** analyzing information by thinking about point of view: *Who is the author? Where is he or she coming from?*

## **Less is More**

*The school's curriculum is driven by the concept of "less is more." Each student should master a limited number of essential skills and areas of knowledge.*

Instead of developing curriculum guides with lots of material for students and teachers to "cover" in a unit or school year, NESSN schools determine their curriculum by asking which are the essential skills and areas of knowledge related to the needs and interests of the students. During a course of study, students acquire knowledge from different areas while developing skills to understand and use that knowledge in real-life situations. For example, students gain knowledge of the major events leading up to and during the Civil War while developing skills such as gathering evidence from different types of historical sources and making connections to current events they read about in the newspaper.

When NESSN schools develop their curriculum, they think in terms of what learning competencies they want students to achieve at the end of a course of study. Schools base their choice of learning competencies on student needs and interests, teachers' areas of expertise, and the theme or knowledge area being studied. Competencies are limited so that the focus is on student learning and not on how much material is covered. From the beginning, learning competencies are shared and often developed with students. If students know what they are striving for, they will be better able to assess their progress along the way. While learning competencies are the same for all students, the content and skills may vary, depending on student interest and ability.

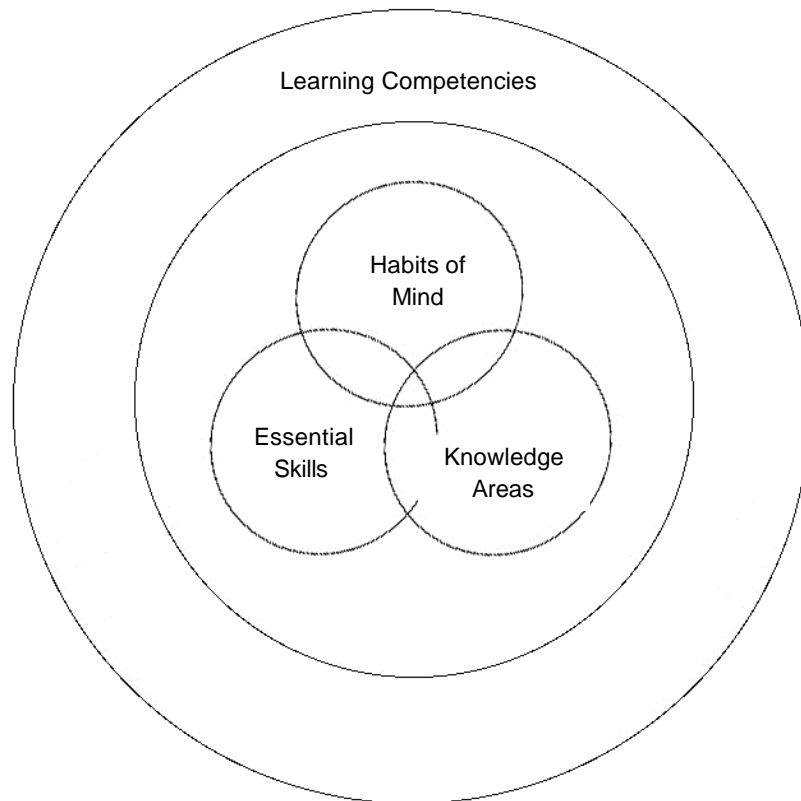
*What essential skills and areas of knowledge should students learn?*

### **Learning Competencies: Interrelated**

- *Habits of mind*
- *Knowledge areas*
- *Essential skills*

**Learning Competencies** – The learning competencies of a unit or course of study are a synthesis of the specific habits of mind, area of knowledge, and essential skills that serve as the learning goals for that study.

- **Habits of mind** – The ways of thinking and being and acting that students develop during the course of study.
- **Knowledge area** – A body of knowledge that is essential for students to learn.
- **Essential Skills** – What students will be able to do by the end of a unit or course of study.



### **Student-as-Worker; Teacher-as-Coach**

*The governing metaphor of the school should be student-as-worker and teacher-as-coach, thereby helping students to take responsibility for their learning. Learning should be purposeful, rigorous, and related to helping students become powerful in the real world.*

Once the learning competencies – habits of mind, knowledge area, and essential skills – for a unit of study have been determined, teachers look for ways to engage students in learning experiences that are purposeful, challenging, and related to helping students become powerful in the real world. This means moving beyond textbook-based instruction toward project-based curriculum that incorporates a wide variety of instructional materials and strategies and promotes challenging, intellectual work that connects to the real lives of the students.

When students and teachers engage in project-based learning, there is a shift in traditional classroom roles. As students become project “workers,” they take on more ownership and responsibility for their learning. The “teacher-as-coach” becomes a facilitator of learning, guiding students in discussions, setting up projects, locating resources, and linking students’ work with their community.

## **Assessment by Exhibition**

*Assessment should demonstrate what important things students know and can do, as well as where they are in need of more help. Students should demonstrate their mastery of competencies in various ways, including exhibitions and portfolios.*

NESSN schools move towards defining competencies students need to fulfill in order to graduate from school, and they plan graduation exit exhibitions and portfolios that allow students to demonstrate that they've accomplished those competencies. One of the key components of NESSN curriculum design and implementation is the student exhibition as a means to assess student progress and achievement. Exhibitions are the projects or performances students present at culminating moments throughout their education. These exhibitions might occur at the end of a six-week unit, at mid-year, or as a requirement for high school graduation. Exhibitions tie together all the work and competencies each student has accomplished during a course of study, and, thus, represent the complex process of curriculum development, instructional practice, and assessment in small schools.

Assessment asks students to demonstrate what they know and can do. Teachers gather this evidence throughout a unit of study or period of time, and also in a final exhibition, culminating project, or performance. Very early in the curriculum development process, teachers think about ongoing and final assessments and how students might demonstrate their achievement of learning competencies.

To accommodate the wide range of learners in their classrooms, teachers devise a variety of assessments that demonstrate the different elements of student understanding. Such assessments ask students to explain, interpret, apply, analyze, synthesize, solve

problems, and communicate information. Teachers also ask their students to demonstrate understanding of others and themselves as examples of how they have learned.

From the beginning students should have a clear understanding of what is expected of them in terms of the quality of their work and how their work will be evaluated. For example, teachers can use rubrics, develop assessment criteria with students, and display models of exemplary work to help students understand what is expected of them. Rather than just giving students a grade that tells them how they did in relation to each other or to an unidentified standard, teachers use assessments that give students feedback, and this feedback helps them improve. Assessment tasks that are based on clearly communicated learning competencies help students know what is important to learn and assist teachers in understanding the effectiveness of their teaching is.

**Characteristics of Effective Assessment:**

It is transparent—students know the criteria, learning goals, and timing of assessment.

It drives curriculum planning and teaching—what students are asked to do depends on how they will be asked to demonstrate their learning.

It takes many forms and is conducted in numerous ways.

It helps students, teachers, parents, and others understand what a student knows and can do; allows adults to understand what a student needs to improve.

It is ongoing, tied to the learning goals, and used to inform curriculum planning, teaching, and professional development.

The central goal of NESSN schools is to teach students to “use their minds well in every area of work they undertake.” This goal has implications for how schools develop curriculum, what

instructional practices they use, and how they assess their students. Developing curriculum is a complex process that rarely follows a prescribed pattern. Teachers may come up with ideas for projects, themes, and learning activities on the way to work, in the middle of teaching a class, during a conversation with a colleague, or even in the shower. Some may begin with a theme students want to explore while others start with habits of mind. Some may use state frameworks while others find inspiration at a professional conference or visiting a website. No matter how the process gets started or where it leads, teaching students to use their minds well is at the center of all curriculum development work in small schools.

## **Tools for Developing Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment**

Following are five tools to help individual teachers and teacher teams develop curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Used together, these tools comprise a flexible model for curriculum development based on the following five components:

**Theme** is the concept or big idea around which the study is centered. It should be a concept that is important to humanity and can be explored across disciplines, eras, and cultures. For example, power, balance, force, relationships, patterns, and freedom are all appropriate themes. Themes should engage students by being tied to their interests and concerns.

**Essential Questions** help focus students on the most important aspects of the theme. Teachers and students consider two or three substantive questions throughout the unit and look at them from multiple perspectives. These questions lead to other questions that will engage students and deepen their inquiry.

**Learning Competencies** describe what students should learn and be able to do as a result of the unit of study. Learning Competencies are a synthesis of three areas: habits of mind, essential skills, and knowledge area.

- **Habits of mind** – The ways of thinking and being and acting that students develop during the course of study.
- **Knowledge area** – A body of knowledge that is essential for students to learn.
- **Essential Skills** – What students will be able to do by the end of a unit or course of study.

**Assessment** is divided into Culminating Assessment, Ongoing Assessments, and Reflection, assessment is designed so that students and teachers know how they are doing and what they have to do to improve.

- **Ongoing Assessments** The work and assignments that show how students are doing as the unit progresses
- **Culminating Assessment** A project or performance that asks students to apply the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind they developed throughout the unit. All the work and learning of the unit build toward the creation of the culminating assessment.
- **Reflection and Self-assessment** Occurs throughout the unit as a part of ongoing assessment and at the end of the unit when students and teachers look back on the unit to see what worked well and what can be improved

**Sequence of Learning Experiences** These are the ways in which students engage with the content, learn the skills, and develop the habits of mind that are the goals of the unit. This sequence of activities should be designed to move students toward achieving the learning goals and should build towards the culminating assessment.

<b>Section 14: Tools for Developing Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment</b>	
<b>Name of Tool</b>	<b>Description</b>
NESSN Tool 32: Theme, Essential Questions, and Learning Competencies	A form to record theme, essential questions, and learning competencies for a unit of study
NESSN Tool 33: Creating a Culminating Performance or Project	Questions that guide the creation of a culminating performance or project
NESSN Tool 34: Ongoing Assessments	A process to use for creating ongoing assessments during a unit
NESSN Tool 35: Learning Experiences	Questions that guide the selection of learning experiences to help students reach learning competencies
NESSN Tool 36: Sequence of Learning Experiences	Guidelines for mapping out the sequence of learning experiences
NESSN Tool 37: The Final Reflection	Examples of questions to ask students for them to reflect on what and how they learn and a form for teachers to use to reflect on the unit.

**NESSN TOOL 32:**

**THEME, ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS, AND LEARNING COMPETENCIES**

*Use this form to record the theme, essential questions, and learning competencies for a unit of study.*

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What theme will students investigate?

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What two or three essential questions will guide student inquiry?

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**THE LEARNING COMPETENCIES**

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Habits of Mind: What ways of thinking and acting will students develop?

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Essential Skills: What will students be able to do as a result of this study?

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Areas of Knowledge: What will students know by the end of this study?

### NESSN TOOL 33:

## CREATING A CULMINATING PERFORMANCE OR PROJECT

*Use these directions and questions to guide the creation of a culminating performance or project.*

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1. Brainstorm how people outside of school use the habits of mind, skills, and content that students will be learning.
  2. Select one or more of the ideas you thought of and shape them into a culminating project or performance that students could do.
  3. Check to see if this project will ask students to apply the Habits of Minds and the Essential Skills of the unit.
  4. Check to see if this project will ask students to demonstrate their understanding of the Knowledge Area.
  5. What opportunities will there be for students to do original work or construct knowledge?
  6. In front of what public audiences will students demonstrate their learning?
  7. What value does this project have beyond the assignment?
- 

**Describe the Culminating Project or Performance that will allow students to demonstrate their mastery of the Learning Goals.**

**NESSN TOOL 34:**  
**ONGOING ASSESSMENTS**

*Use this process to create the ongoing assessments for a unit.*

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1. List what you would see or hear from students if they were using the Habits of Mind and applying the Essential Skills of this unit.
  2. Figure out how students could do the things you listed in #1.
  3. List how students will demonstrate that they have learned the Knowledge Areas of the unit.
  4. Figure out how your students will do the work you listed in #3.
  5. Make sure there are opportunities for students to reflect on the quality of their work and how they are learning.
  6. Make sure there are opportunities for students to give and receive feedback on each other's work.
  7. Make sure there are opportunities to for you to give regular feedback to students that will help them improve their work during the unit.
- 

**Evidence of Learning and Growth:** What evidence will students need to show you to demonstrate that they are attaining the different Learning Competencies as you proceed through the unit?

Habits of mind:

Essential Skills:

Knowledge areas:

**NESSN TOOL 35:**  
**LEARNING EXPERIENCES**

*These questions will guide the selection of learning experiences to help students reach the learning competencies for the unit.*

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List the learning experiences that students could do to develop the habits of mind and use the skills and content of this unit.

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**SELECTION:** Apply the following questions to each experience you listed above to help you decide which ones will be most useful in helping the students attain the learning goals.

1. How does this activity help students deepen their understanding of the Essential Questions?
2. Which Learning Competencies does this activity help students attain?
3. How does this activity allow students to develop new ideas or better understanding?
4. How does this activity help you assess what students have learned or are learning?
5. How does this activity stimulate the curiosity of students and engage them in meaningful work?
6. In what ways does this activity prompt students to reflect on their work and the world around them?

## NESSN TOOL 36: SEQUENCE OF LEARNING EXPERIENCES

*This tool presents guidelines for mapping out the sequence of learning experiences for the unit.*

**Order the learning experiences you have selected to show the progression of the unit toward a culminating project. Map out a rough sequence including major deadlines and important checkpoints of student understanding and skill development. Consider the following guidelines:**

1. The beginning of the unit should engage students and spark student interest in the theme and essential questions.
2. The learning competencies should be clear to the students from the beginning of the unit (including discussion of competencies, students rewriting the competencies in their own language, developing competencies with students, and students deciding what evidence should show attainment of the learning competencies).
3. Spend time determining what students already know and can do in relation to the learning competencies.
4. The standards of quality and what students should do for each activity should be clear (including the use of models, rubrics, assessment criteria, project timelines, and lists of assignment requirements).
5. Experiences that teach skills, habits of mind, and knowledge area should be organized so they build on one another and lead to the culminating performance or project.
6. Instructional and learning methods should be varied. Give students opportunities to make decisions and choices about their learning and the work they will do.
7. Include checkpoints during the study when student progress toward the learning goals can be gauged.

### **Considering student needs and interests**

- How will the work be organized and structured so students know what they have to do?
- What opportunities will students have for making decisions and choices about their learning?
- How will students know the standards for the work they do?
- How will all students receive support needed for achieving the learning competencies?

**NESSN TOOL 37:  
THE FINAL REFLECTION**

*Examples of questions to ask students for them to reflect on what and how they learn and a form for teachers to use to reflect on the unit.*

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**What questions will you ask student so they can reflect on their work, what they learned, and how they learn best?**

Examples include:

*What have you learned?*

*What assignment helped you learn the most?*

*At what point during the unit did you work the hardest and why do you think you worked so hard then?*

*What do you wish you had done differently in this unit and how can you make sure you do this in the future?*

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**Teacher Reflection**

What worked well in planning this unit?

What did students respond to most favorably?

How would you do things differently when you teach this unit again?

What did you learn from creating and teaching this unit that you can apply to the next unit?

## 14. Working with Parents and Community Members

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One of the most important ways for schools to improve student learning is to increase parent<sup>15</sup> and community involvement. In the last thirty years, results from a variety of studies<sup>16</sup> send a simple, yet powerful, message: when parents are actively involved in their children's education, the children do better in school. Research shows that parent involvement has an enormous impact on students' attitudes toward school, their attendance and behavior at school, and their academic achievement. Higher rates of graduation from high school and enrollment in higher education are also evident when parents are involved with their children's education. A powerful predictor of a student's achievement in school is the extent to which that student's family, in partnership with the school, is able to

- create a home environment that encourages learning,
- express high expectations for a child's achievement and future career,
- become involved in their child's education at school and in the community.

The relationship between schools and families must be reciprocal, with both parties taking responsibility for student learning and both working together to improve education in the home and school. Furthermore, when schools promote partnerships with parents and the community, based on the belief that all share responsibility for a child's learning, not only are results seen in improved student

*The relationship between schools and families must be reciprocal, with both taking responsibility for student learning and both working together to improve education at home and in school.*

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<sup>15</sup> The word "parent" refers to custodial and non-custodial biological, step, adoptive, and foster mothers and fathers; grandparents; relatives; and any other adult who has a significant role in raising and caring for a child.

learning for all students, but also in stronger schools, families, and communities.

### **Benefits of Parent and Family Involvement in Schools**

Henderson and Berla (1994) discuss the benefits of parent and family involvement for students, schools, and the parents themselves.

**Student Benefits:** “The studies have documented these benefits for students:

- Higher grades and test scores.
- Better attendance and more homework done.
- Fewer placements in special education.
- More positive attitudes and behavior.
- Higher graduation rates.
- Greater enrollment in postsecondary education.” (p. 1)

**School Benefits:** “Schools and communities also profit. Schools that work well with families have:

- Improved teacher morale.
- Higher ratings of teachers by parents.
- More support from families.
- Higher student achievement.

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<sup>16</sup> Henderson, A., and Berla, N. (1994) *A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement*, Washington, D.C., National Committee for Citizens in Education.

- Better reputations in the community.” (p. 1)

**Parent Benefits:** “Parents develop more confidence in the school. The teachers they work with have higher opinions of them as parents and higher expectations of their children, too. As a result, parents develop more confidence not only about helping their children learn at home, but about themselves as parents. Furthermore, when parents become involved in their children’s education, they often enroll in continuing education to advance their own schooling.” (p. 1)

### **Six Areas for Parent and Community Involvement in Schools<sup>17</sup>**

Traditionally, parent involvement in a child’s education has consisted of activities done at home such as helping out with homework, encouraging a child to read, and making sure a child attends school. At school, parents are typically involved in fund-raising activities, volunteering at the school during the day, attending PTO meetings, going to concerts and other school events, and meeting for parent-teacher conferences. Joyce Epstein, director of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children’s Learning at Johns Hopkins University, broadens these traditional ways for parents to be involved by presenting a framework for six types of expanded involvement. The framework moves parent involvement beyond simply helping out with homework or going to holiday concerts to providing opportunities for parents, communities, and schools to forge a real collaborative partnership where all members work together to improve their schools, families, and communities. This framework (adapted

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<sup>17</sup> The six areas are adapted from: Epstein, J. L., (1995), “*School/Family/Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share.*” Phi Delta Kappan, 76.

from Epstein's) comprises the following six areas of active participation by parents and community members in their schools:

**Parenting:** Assisting families with parenting and child-rearing skills, and assisting schools in understanding their families.

**Communicating:** Developing effective communication from home-to-school and school-to-home.

**Volunteering:** Creating ways that families can be involved in the school or school programs, and creating effective methods of recruitment.

**Student Learning:** Linking families with their children's curriculum through learning activities that can be done at home, as well as homework.

**Collaborative Decision Making:** Including families as decision makers, advocates, members of schools councils, and committees.

**Collaborating with the Community:** Coordinating services in the community with family needs, and providing services to the community.

## **Parenting**

Families provide for the health and safety of their children, and maintain a home environment that encourages learning and good behavior in school. NESSN schools reciprocate by providing training and information to help families understand their children's development and how to support the challenges and developmental changes students face. Staff at NESSN schools are committed to understanding students and their families.

***Sample activities:***

- Develop personal contact with parents through parent-teacher conferences, home visits, and parent liaisons.
- Create a parent center, or place in the school for parents and families, with comfortable furniture, a phone, coffeepot, bulletin board with announcements, and resource materials.
- Help parents understand their roles in the school/family/community partnership, such as getting to know their child’s teacher, asking questions, participating in school activities, and monitoring homework.
- Offer workshops to parents on school-related and parenting issues, such as making the most of a parent-teacher conference, increasing your child’s motivation to learn, encouraging reading in the home, and understanding the developmental stages of children and their learning.
- Learn strategies for involving “hard-to-reach” parent groups, such as parents with limited English skills, single parents, nontraditional families, and fathers, by making schools and classrooms accessible to all parents.
- Use strategies to foster parent involvement at school, including informal school-family gatherings, workshops, and special events.
- Provide opportunities for families and community members to visit the school through Open Houses, classroom observations, class parties, etc.

- Link parents to community resources that support families, such as youth organizations, nutrition programs, and counseling agencies.
- Partner with community organizations to provide workshops, training programs, and support groups for families.

## **Communicating**

Effective communication among members of the school, home, and community is a crucial element in the framework for parent and community involvement. Schools need to reach out to families with information about school programs and student progress. All communication should be ongoing, two-way, and presented in a variety of formats. Communication should be easily understood, free of jargon, and in a language spoken by the family at home.

### ***Sample activities:***

- Make parents and community members feel welcome in the school with prominent welcome signs, friendly staff, orientations/open-houses, and “user friendly” school directories and maps.
- Introduce school policies and programs at the beginning of the year with welcome letters, information packets, school calendars, and information sessions.
- Establish ongoing methods of communication that are two-way, such as parent-teacher contracts, notes for keeping in touch, telephone conversations, email, classroom newsletters, and letters from home for parents to provide information to educators about their child.

- Develop a way to provide information to parents whose first language is not English; involve staff and school volunteers of diverse backgrounds to make families comfortable.
- Use cassette tapes to present information to parents with low literacy skills.
- Celebrate student work through various school displays and programs.

## **Volunteering**

Schools welcome and actively seek assistance from parent and community volunteers. Parents and community members share responsibility for students' academic achievement and their personal and social development by making significant contributions to the environment and functions of the school. To enable more parents and community members to participate, schools create flexible schedules and match the talents and interests of parents and others who want to help out to the needs of students, teachers, and administrators. Volunteers should be valued for their efforts in whatever capacity they are able to participate. Even minor participation can provide a basis for future collaboration and involvement.

### ***Sample activities:***

- Poll parents and community members about special skills, talents, and experiences they can share with students as part of classroom activities. Set up this information in a volunteer database and distribute to staff for easy access.

- Encourage parents to sign up early in the year for specific activities to help out at the school.
- Provide volunteers with adequate training.
- Recognize volunteers' contributions in newsletters, ceremonies, or certificates of appreciation.

## **Student Learning**

Families and community members, as well as teachers, play an integral role in assisting student learning. With the guidance and support of teachers, family members and community programs can supervise and assist students at home with homework assignments and other school-related activities. With more opportunities to relate and apply school learning to home and community settings, students connect the school curriculum to skills that are required in the real world.

### ***Sample activities:***

- Organize activities in and out of school where adults and students learn together such as family math, science, and technology events.
- Involve parents in developing the school's curriculum and setting learning goals for students.
- Design homework tasks that require students and families to interact so parents become aware of what and how their children are learning.
- Provide information to families about skills required for students at each grade level.

- Encourage family participation in setting student goals each year and in planning for college or work.
- Provide learning packets and activities for summer vacations.
- Provide clear, practical information about home-teaching techniques so that parents can support and enhance student learning.

### **Collaborative Decision Making**

Parents and community members have meaningful roles in the collaborative processes of school planning and decision making. Collaboration with parent and community groups brings additional skills, resources, and points of view to support school improvement. All members of the school community are involved in decision making, not just school staff. (See Section 5: *Governing the School through Shared Leadership and Teacher Teams* for more information about collaborative work.) Parents and community members can be important advocates for improving public education.

#### ***Sample Activities:***

- Make sure parents and community members are represented on planning and advisory committees and the school council.
- Seek parent and community input on school policies related to budget, teaching and principal hiring, schoolwide plans, and parent involvement.
- Provide training in collaborative practices.

- Encourage parent and community participation at the school, district, state, and national levels to address issues that impact student learning.

### **Collaborating with the Community**

Schools help families gain access to support services offered by community organizations and agencies such as healthcare, cultural events, tutoring services, and after-school child-care programs.

Schools and students contribute services to the community. The school itself also becomes a resource for families and community members by extending its hours of operation and providing its facilities for community meetings, adult education, local theatrical events, health screenings, etc.

#### ***Sample Activities:***

- Make the school building available to parents and community members for educational, recreational, and social activities.
- Engage community groups such as service organizations, churches and religious groups, cultural organizations, social service agencies, and businesses in collaborative efforts to improve student learning and family life.
- Develop partnerships that encourage local businesses and service providers to help prepare students for the world of work and civic responsibility.
- Work with parents and community to provide safe and valuable after-school and summer experiences for students at all grade levels.

## **Important Considerations when Implementing Parent and Community Involvement Programs**

### **Training for Parents, Community Members, and School Staff:**

Professional development is a critical part of effective partnerships. Teachers and other members of the school staff need to develop the necessary skills for working with families and the community. Many times teachers come from middle class backgrounds that differ greatly from the backgrounds of many of their students. Schools should offer teachers professional development on becoming aware of the impact these differences can have on student learning. Other professional development offerings for teachers include collaborating with parents and families, learning about family dynamics and nontraditional family structures, understanding diverse cultures, and effective two-way communication. In turn, training should be provided to parents and community members in these areas and others:

- parents' and community members' roles in the partnership
- how groups work together effectively
- how children learn during different stages of their development
- the school organization
- preparing the school budget.

**Reaching out to Parents:** Some parents consider volunteering at their child's school an integral part of being a parent and derive satisfaction from successful interactions between home and school. Often, simply because it's easy, schools call on these same

“activist” parents when volunteers or parent representation on committees are needed. Many other parents, however, are unable to participate for a variety of reasons. Barriers to these parents’ participation include having unsuccessful school experiences in the past themselves, their work schedules, not knowing how to help out, limited proficiency in English, or coming from cultures where parent involvement in the school life of their child is not the norm. For these parents, schools need to make an extra effort to invite participation and broaden the list of parents who represent the school. When schools encourage parent involvement in positive ways, parents usually respond enthusiastically.

**Finding Time to Design and Implement Programs for Parent and Community Involvement:** Teachers and others who work in schools already have a long list of responsibilities; mandating them to sit on parent advisory panels or work with volunteers from the community can seem impossible unless ample time is provided. Teachers need time for learning and developing leadership skills and strategies for effective communication and group facilitation. Sections 12: Organizing Time to Support Learning, and 13: Allocating Resources provide valuable information on finding time for collaborative work in schools.

## 15. Getting Started: Small-schools Design and Implementation

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Following is a guide for districts and schools to plan small schools. Each district will take its unique path to developing small schools, but there are some common elements that all districts should consider. While the steps are presented sequentially, districts may choose a different sequence that suits them. Indeed, some districts may already be well on their way in small-schools design and even implementation; this guide can then serve as a checklist to assess progress. In using this guide, districts should also refer to the NESSN Planning Manual to assist in each step, as well as to the NESSN Principles and Autonomies.

As districts and schools use this guide, consider the following:

**Ensure Representation of Key Constituencies on Leadership and Design Teams.** Small schools cannot be created in isolation from those who will be affected by them. The design of small schools will have greater integrity when crafted with the input of many. Including diverse representation of key constituencies on the district Leadership Team and school-level Design Teams ensures that diverse voices are crafting the new small schools.

**Ensure Regular Communication and Opportunities for Input of the Entire School Community.** Small schools will be successful when they build support among all the constituencies of the school community – faculty, administration, families, students, and the larger community. While representation helps to accomplish this, everyone involved needs to be regularly apprised of the process of small-schools development and its benefits, and

have opportunities to provide input into shaping the evolving models.

**The NESSN Autonomies are Crucial to the Success of Small Schools.** The New

England Small Schools Network believes that smallness enables greater personalization and conditions that enable high-quality teaching to occur—but small alone is not enough. In order for small schools to attain their individual visions of excellence, they need to have autonomy over critical conditions of schooling, including budget, staffing, curriculum/assessment, governance and policies, and time. This flexibility enables small schools to craft educational experiences that best meet the needs of the diverse students that they serve.

**In the End, It Is All About Learning, Teaching, and Assessment.** Smallness and autonomies enable schools to focus on the essence of the educational experience for students – learning, teaching, and assessment. Small schools strive to ensure that learning is purposeful, challenging, and has value in the world beyond school. Every student is engaged in learning experiences that ensure students are fully prepared to be productive citizens in a democratic society.

## Timeline for Small-schools Design and Implementation

The chart below suggests a timeline for NESSN Design activities to be conducted at school and district levels in order to implement the design.

<b>Design Activity</b>
<b>At the District Level</b>
Establish a district-wide Small Schools Leadership Team to develop a district plan and to pursue the NESSN autonomies.
Develop a district plan for small schools.
Build community support for small schools.
Deliver a clear message to the community on the district's path.
<b>At the School Level</b>
<b>For large school conversions:</b>
Create a design team to guide the conversion. Decide on the framework for the small schools (e.g., theme or philosophy), size, enrollment process, and faculty assignment process (steps d-e below).
<b>For small schools, either single or sharing a facility:</b>
a. Create a planning team for each small school.
b. Develop a vision and design for the small school.
c. Partner with a NESSN founding school.
d. Decide on the student enrollment process.
e. Decide on the selection/assignment process for the school leadership and faculty.
f. Develop a partnership with a NESSN founding school.
g. Design the governance and leadership for the small school.
h. Construct the curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
i. Create the schedule and student groupings.
j. Design the personalized culture of the school
k. Design the professional collaborative culture of the school
l. Plan family and community partnerships.

## **Steps to Consider in Small-schools Design and Implementation**

### *At the District Level*

**Establish a district-wide Small Schools Leadership Team to develop a district plan and to pursue the NESSN autonomies.** The five NESSN autonomies – staffing, budget, curriculum and assessment, governance and policies, and school calendar for faculty and students – are critical to the success of small schools. Each district should create a district-wide NESSN Team to pursue gaining these autonomies for the projected small schools. The team should consist of those district staff who have authority over the five autonomies (e.g., budget director, human resources director, NESSN coordinator, curriculum coordinator), teacher union representation, and representation from each of the proposed small schools (or, to keep numbers down, representation from each large school to be converted into small schools). The goal is to gain the same level of autonomies for each of the proposed small schools in the district. The team will deal with some areas that merely need Superintendent and/or School Committee approval (e.g., some areas of the budget, curriculum and assessment, governance and policies), while others may also need teacher union approval (e.g., some areas of the budget, staffing, and school calendar). The initial autonomies that each small school will receive should be defined by the June prior to a September start-up date.

### ***Questions to Consider:***

- *Staffing:* To what extent will each small school be provided with staffing autonomy to hire and excess staff, and to decide on the staffing pattern that best meets the needs of the school?
- *Budget:* To what extent will each small school be provided with a lump sum, per-pupil budget over which the school has discretion to spend to provide the best services to students and their families?
- *Curriculum and Assessment:* To what extent will each small school have freedom to set its curriculum and graduation requirements?
- *Governance and Policies:* To what extent will each small school have increased governing authority over budget approval, principal selection and firing, and programs and policies?

- *School Calendar:* To what extent will each small school have the freedom to set longer school days and years for both students and faculty, with a particular focus on creating greater time for faculty to meet?

**Develop a district plan for small schools.** This plan should articulate a rationale, design, and timeline for creating small schools in the district. The plan should articulate each of the small schools and its basic construct and philosophy. For large school conversions, the plan should articulate the small schools to be housed within the larger school facility. There should be a defined roll-out plan for each of the district's small schools.

***Question to Consider:***

- *Key Tenets to the Plan:* Is the plan clear to the public?

**Build community support for small schools.** Small schools are not necessarily what most adults have experienced; in particular, adults are most familiar with the large, comprehensive high school. They may not see the immediate benefits of small secondary schools. Each NESSN district should have a plan for building community support for small schools. This could include community forums, newsletters sent to families, and business roundtables. The research on small schools needs to be shared in lay terms, as well as include district data revealing that significant student populations are not currently being served well with large schools.

***Question to Consider:***

- *Building Support:* How will this plan build community support for small schools?

**Deliver a clear message to the community on where the district's path.** In order to build momentum and commitment to the transition to small schools, a strong message needs to be given to the larger school community stating the district's intent to move to small schools (e.g., how many in which facilities), the reasons why, the plan for district roll-out of small schools, and the timeline, as well as a commitment to seek public input along the way. This message is best delivered by the Superintendent and is especially critical in building faculty commitment to small schools.

***Question to Consider:***

- *Community Message:* What is the critical message that you want to communicate to the community?

***At the School Level***

**For Large School Conversions:**

**Create a design team to guide the conversion.** This team should comprise representative faculty constituencies in the school, as well as district representation. This team should be responsible for deciding how many small schools there will be, the guiding framework for each small school (e.g., theme or philosophy), the size of each small school, the student enrollment process (see step d below), and the faculty selection/assignment process (see step e below).

***Questions to Consider:***

- *Design Team Composition:* Who will the Design Team consist of? What constituencies will be represented? How big will the team be? How will members be selected?
- *Role of the Design Team:* What will be the charge of the Design Team (e.g., developing a design framework for breaking down a large school into smaller schools)? What are the parameters of the Design Team (e.g., their role is completed once the design is finished and approved)?
- *Communication and Involvement with Key Constituencies:* Who are the key constituencies that need to be kept informed and have opportunities for input? How will you ensure that these constituencies are regularly informed about the Design Team's progress? At what key junctures will you gain their input, and how will you do this?
- *Timeline:* What is the timeline for developing the design plan? For gaining input from key constituencies?
- *Design Framework:* How many small schools will there be? What size will each small school be? What will be the guiding framework for each small school (e.g., theme or philosophy)? What will be the student selection process for each small

school that ensures equitable enrollment across race, income, and achievement (see step d below)? What will be the faculty selection/assignment process for each small school that ensures each small school has a core group of faculty committed to the vision of their particular small school (see step e below)?

**For Small Schools, Either Free-standing or Sharing a Larger Facility:**

**a. Create a design team for each small school.** Each small school to be created should have a Design Team that guides the design phase through to the launching of the small school. This Design Team could consist of the new small schools leader, faculty who will be working in the small school, and prospective parents and students. Alternatively, instead of having students and parents on the team, the team could conduct focus groups for parents and students to gain their input. Ultimately, the team should consist of 7-10 members. The Design Team is responsible for guiding all aspects of small-school design, through to implementation (e.g., vision, governance, teaching and learning, professional support, family and community partnerships).

***Questions to Consider:***

- *Design Team Composition:* Who will the Design Team consist of? What constituencies will be represented? How big will the team be? How will members be selected? Are members of the Design Team automatically members of the new small school (in most cases, yes)?
- *Role of the Design Team:* What will be the charge of the Design Team (e.g., developing a design for a designated small school within a large building, developing a design for a small, free-standing school)? What are the parameters of the Design Team (e.g., their role is completed once the design is finished and approved)?
- *Communication and Involvement with Key Constituencies:* Who are the key constituencies that need to be kept informed and have opportunities for input? How will you ensure that these constituencies are regularly informed about the Design Team's progress? At what key junctures will you gain their input, and how will you do this?

- *Timeline:* What is the timeline for establishing the Design Team? For developing the design plan? For gaining input from key constituencies?

**b. Develop a vision and design for the small school.** Each small school should have a coherent, well-articulated vision of what the school represents, and what students are expected to achieve. The vision should be shaped by and reflect the NESSN Principles for small schools. This should be developed by the planning team, with wide input. Once developed, it should be manifest in all documents created for the school (e.g., handbook, curriculum guide, orientation material), and present in the small-school's decision-making, policy development, instructional practices, and other planning.

***Question to Consider:***

- *What is the vision for your school that will drive all aspects of the school?*

**c. Develop a partnership with a NESSN founding school.** Each NESSN new school should partner with a NESSN founding school to receive mentoring support in the form of two onsite consultation days and two school visit days per school year.

***Question to Consider:***

- *Goals:* What do you hope to learn and gain from the partnership?

**d. Decide on the student enrollment process for the school.** The student assignment and enrollment process should ensure equitable enrollment by race/ethnicity, income status, and gender, and result in enrollment of these categories that reflects their relative percent within the district at that grade level. For this reason, controlled choice, with a 5 percent plus or minus range of the district averages of the grade level, is recommended for all NESSN schools, including large schools converting into smaller schools. The enrollment process should also include a wide distribution of information about the school so that students and families may make an informed choice about selecting the school.

***Question to Consider:***

- *Student Assignment:* What student assignment process will be adopted that will ensure equitable enrollment among the small schools?

**e. Decide on the selection/assignment process for the school leadership and faculty.**

Ideally, the school's leadership should be selected by the governing body, with approval from the Superintendent. Because this may not be possible in all cases, there should be a process in place that ensures the leadership embraces and is committed to the vision of the school. It is preferable to have faculty voluntarily select the small school in which they work, while ensuring in large school conversions that each small school receives an equitable distribution of faculty by race/ethnicity, academic discipline, and other local considerations. In all cases, this selection/assignment should be accomplished in concert with the local teacher's union.

***Question to Consider:***

- *Faculty Selection:* What faculty assignment process will ensure a critical mass of faculty committed to the school's vision within each small school?

**f. Develop a partnership with a NESSN founding school.** The NESSN founding schools are eight of the Boston Pilot Schools and Parker Charter School, successful existing small schools that abide by the NESSN principles and autonomies. They are committed to host two school visits from NESSN schools each year, and provide two days of consulting to paired NESSN new schools.

**g. Design the governance and leadership for the small school.** Each small school should have a clear governance and leadership structure to guide it.

***Considerations to Discuss:***

- The governance and leadership structure reflects the NESSN principle of democratic decision making.
- Each NESSN school should have a school council governing body that reflects the respective state guidelines for representation (this usually includes administration, faculty, parent, and community representation, and sometimes student representation at the high school level). This body helps guide the school in all phases, and takes on increased governing responsibilities, including principal selection, supervision, and firing (with final approval by the

superintendent), budget approval, and setting of school policies. This body usually meets no more than once per month.

- Each NESSN school should also consider having a Leadership Team, a faculty-administration body that meets more often (twice per month) to focus more deeply and in greater detail on guiding the school's implementation in all aspects. The team should be representative of all faculty constituencies.
- The decision-making process should include input and decision making by the full faculty for any significant decisions to be made that affect the small school.
- The governance structures should ensure access of students, faculty, and families to bring issues forward for consideration, for making decisions in a timely manner with sufficient input, and with communicating effectively with the entire school community.
- The leadership of the school should be clearly delineated – whether it be a principal, director, or teacher leader. If the small school is housed within a larger facility that houses multiple small schools, and there is a building-wide principal or administrator, the relationship between the small-school leader and the large-school leader should be clearly defined for all.

***Questions to Consider:***

- *Leadership:* What will the leadership of the school be (e.g., principal or some other title)? How will this person be selected? If the small school is sharing a building with other small schools, will there be a building principal, and if so, what will be the delineation of roles between the building principal and the small-school leaders?
- *Governing Body:* Who will make up the school's governing body? What constituencies will be represented? How will they be selected?
- *Decision Making:* What will be the shared decision-making structure of the school? What decisions will the school governing body make? The head of the school? The school's Leadership Team? The faculty? Parents? What will be the process for making decisions?

**h. Construct the curriculum, instruction, and assessment for the small school.** This is the heart of the small-school planning process, and should include as many faculty that will be teaching in the small school as possible. It is recommended that NESSN schools construct their curriculum, instruction, and assessment to be competency-based; that is, the goal is to have every student master a set of defined competencies and to demonstrate this mastery in a variety of ways in order to graduate from that school. The construct of curriculum, instruction, and assessment for the small school should be driven by the following NESSN Principles:

- Habits of mind
- Less is more
- Student-teacher loads of no more than 80:1 at the secondary level and 20:1 at the elementary level
- Student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach
- Assessment by exhibition
- Equity in access to knowledge

***Considerations to Discuss:***

- Design of the curriculum
- Competencies for graduation (at the elementary, middle, or high school level)
- The school's habits of mind
- Design of the assessment system
- Academic support for students

***Questions to Consider:***

- *Habits of Mind:* Will the school have overarching habits of mind that drive the curriculum? If so, by what process will they be developed?
- *Less Is More:* How will you construct the curriculum to focus on less is more, and depth over breadth?
- *Lower Student-Teacher Ratios:* How will the schedule be constructed to lower student-teacher ratios to 80:1 for secondary teachers?

- *Student-as-Worker*: How will the curriculum be constructed to emphasize project-based learning, opportunities for application of learning, and students' engaging in purposeful and meaningful work?
- *Assessment by Exhibition*: What will be the graduation requirements from your school? How will graduation requirements ensure that students demonstrate mastery of key competencies? How will portfolios and exhibitions be embedded in both graduation requirements and the ongoing curriculum?
- *Schedule*: How will the schedule support less is more (e.g., longer learning blocks), student-as-worker, and assessment by exhibition?

**i. Create the schedule and student groupings for the school.** The schedule and student groupings should reflect the NESSN Principles.

***Considerations to discuss:***

- How to ensure significant common planning time for faculty teams.
- How to create longer learning blocks of time for academics, in order to focus on the NESSN Principles of less is more, student-as-worker, and assessment by exhibition.
- How to create teams of teachers that are responsible for and accountable to a defined group of students.
- How to ensure equity in access to a high quality curriculum for all students and avoid tracking or ability grouping.
- How to create student-teacher loads of no more than 80:1 at the secondary level and no more than 20:1 at the elementary level.
- How to create sustained student-teacher relationships over time, for example, advisories, looping, and multi-age classes.
- How to integrate special education and bilingual/ESL students.

**j. Design the personalized culture of the school.** A key characteristic of small schools is their ability to better create personalized cultures in which each student is known well by at least one adult. This characteristic is one critical correlate to students successfully completing their school career.

***Questions to Consider:***

- *Personalization:* How will you ensure that every student is known well by at least one adult over time (e.g., advisories)? What supports will be available for students who need it (including special education), and how will the supports be managed and delivered (e.g., Student Support Teams)?
- *High Expectations, Trust, Respect, and Decency for All:* How will you establish a school culture of high expectations, trust, respect, and decency?

**k. Design the professional collaborative culture for the school.** There are direct correlations between having a professional collaborative culture that focuses on teaching and learning, and seeing increases in student achievement. Each NESSN school should design the structures, schedule, and culture of the school to guarantee significant, sustained time for faculty to meet and discuss teaching and learning, and to provide them with the support to learn and practice tools for doing so.

***Considerations to Address:***

- Create significant blocks of time weekly for faculty to meet in various groupings – full faculty, academic teams, Critical Friends Groups, or study groups.
- Specifically, identify a time for Critical Friends Groups to meet. These groups meet regularly, with consistent group membership over time, to engage in collaborative practices focused on improving teaching and student learning.
- Provide training to teacher leaders to become Critical Friends Group facilitators, experienced in facilitating groups to look collaboratively at student and teacher work, peer observation, and action research.
- Design a formal process for supporting and assessing teacher performance.

***Questions to Consider:***

- *Professional Collaborative Communities:* What structures and activities will be put in place to ensure the building of a unified professional collaborative community (e.g., Critical Friends Groups, looking at student work, peer observation, action research)? When will faculty meet, how often, and in what groupings?
- *Schedule:* How will the schedule and staffing pattern be constructed so as to create time for teachers to meet?

- *Staffing:* What will the staffing pattern of the school look like? How will staff be selected for the new small school?

**I. Plan family and community partnerships .** In considering ways to involve families, the small school should identify strategies for reaching out to families. These strategies can include involving them in ongoing efforts to improve student outcomes, keeping them engaged in meaningful dialogue about student learning, and providing multiple roles and opportunities for families to participate in the school, particularly in its academic programs and its governance. Each small school should also seek to establish substantial community partnerships that support the achievement of the school's vision.

## Appendix

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### Chart of NESSN Tools

The following chart gives an overview of the NESSN Tools for each section in the manual.

<b>Section 3: Tools for Assessing your School's Culture</b>	
<b>Name of Tool</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
NESSN Tool 1: Building a Collaborative Culture	To assess current school culture for the purpose of discussing areas for improvement
NESSN Tool 2: Glickman's Findings on Successful Schools	To assess where your school is in relationship to Glickman's findings on successful schools

<b>Section 4: Tools for Developing a Unifying Vision Statement</b>	
<b>Name of Tool</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
<b>NESSN Tool 3:</b> Powerful Learning Experience	To show the relationship between an individual's powerful learning experience and principles of effective learning and teaching
<b>NESSN Tool 4:</b> Developing a Vision Statement	A process for developing a vision statement
<b>NESSN Tool 5:</b> Vision Statement Checklist	To make sure a school's vision statement is in line with principles of effective teaching and learning

<b>Section 5: Tools for Setting Norms</b>	
<b>Name of Tool</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
NESSN Tool 6: Setting Norms for Collaborative Work	To become familiar with different areas to consider when setting norms
NESSN Tool 7: Activity for Setting Norms	To set norms for collaborative work
(See also Tool 11: Compass Game)	

<b>Section 8: Tools for Working Together Effectively in Teams</b>	
<b>Name of Tool</b>	<b>Description</b>
NESSN Tool 8 Guidelines for effective meetings	Provides a list of guidelines for running effective meetings
NESSN Tool 9: Creating Meeting Agendas	Characteristics of effective meeting agendas and suggestions for how to get items on the agenda
NESSN Tool 10: Sample Format for Recording Team Meetings	A form for recording what happened during a team meeting

NESSN Tool 11: Compass Game	Enables teams to explore various preferences that individual members use to approach teamwork, enlarges understanding of the strengths and limitations of each preference, and suggests ways to utilize these differences in a team's work
NESSN Tool 12: Text-based Seminar	Enables a team to examine in depth a relevant issue by focusing on a short article or excerpt from a book
NESSN Tool 13 The Final Word	Expands a group's understanding of a text in a focused way and in a limited amount of time by looking at one significant quote or section from selected text(s)
NESSN Tool 14: Obstacle Resolution Protocol	Resolves an obstacle that is preventing participants from making toward progress of a desired outcome
NESSN Tool 15: Making Decisions by Consensus	Provides guidelines for reaching decisions by consensus
NESSN Tool 16: Assessing a Team's Quality of work	Provides areas of discussion and sample indicators for teams to use to assess their work

Section 9: <b>Protocols for Looking at Student and Teacher Work</b>		
<b>Name of Protocol</b>	<b>When to use it</b>	<b>What work to bring</b>
NESSN Tool 17: Consultancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To get feedback on a set of questions or concerns posed by a teacher on certain aspects of student or teacher work; can also be used as a problem-posing or problem-solving protocol</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Written reflection by presenter</li> <li>A question to focus the feedback</li> <li>Student work that illustrates the question or concern</li> </ul>
NESSN Tool 18: Collaborative Assessment Conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To learn more about the goals, interests, problems of issues a student or students find most compelling by looking at what they choose to focus on in the context of an assignment</li> <li>To reflect and gather ideas for revision classroom practice</li> <li>To help teachers improve objective observational skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One or two pieces of student work</li> <li>Works best with open-ended assignments</li> </ul>
NESSN Tool 19: Tuning Protocol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To develop more effective exhibitions and assessments</li> <li>To develop common standards for students' work</li> <li>To reflect on and gather ideas for revision classroom practice</li> <li>To support student performances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student exhibitions or long-term projects; may include a videotape of a student presenting the work, and a written piece</li> <li>Assignment or lesson for exhibition or long-term project before it is given to students</li> </ul>

NESSN Tool 20: Charette	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To get feedback on a process or piece of work when the teacher, student, or group is experiencing difficulty with the work; when a stopping point has been reached; or when additional minds could help move it forward in a collaborative atmosphere</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Any “work in progress”</li> </ul>
NESSN Tool 21: Critical Incident Protocol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For a teacher to reflect with colleagues on an incident from his or her work that was particularly rewarding, puzzling, or devastating in order to gain new insights into teacher practice and student learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Written piece by the presenter that tells about the incident in as much detail as possible</li> </ul>
NESSN Tool 22: Descriptive Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A focused analysis of certain characteristics of student writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A selection of previously scored “low,” “medium,” and “high” student writing samples, including at least one ELL student, from several teachers</li> </ul>

#### **Section 10: Tools for Peer Observation**

*Protocols 25-28 were designed by Simon Hole with additions and modifications by Carrie Brennan, John Newlin and John D’Anieri, and Gene Thompson-Grove.*

<b>Name of Tool</b>	<b>Description</b>
NESSN Tool 23: Video Camera	Provides a way for an observer and person being observed to discover what each “sees” during an observation
NESSN Tool 24: Focus Point	A particular aspect of the presenter’s practice is the focus of this observation protocol
NESSN Tool 25: Interesting Moments	A shared experience where the observer and presenter work together during both the observation and debriefing
NESSN Tool 26: Teaming	A protocol for a co- or team-teaching observation where participants are both the observers and the observed
NESSN Tool 27: Observer as Learner	A protocol for observers to use observation as a means to learn how to improve their own practice
NESSN Tool 28: Peer Observation Record	A form to record observations, reflections, questions, etc. for peer observation

#### **Section 11: Tools for Action Research**

<b>Name of Tool</b>	<b>Description</b>
NESSN Tool 29: Action Research Planning Sheet	Questions that guide the data collection phase of action research and planning
NESSN Tool 30: Determining Possible Causes of the Problem	Used for brainstorming, refining, testing, and selecting hypotheses as a way to identify two or three most likely causes of the problem
NESSN Tool 31: Action Planning Form	A form to record research question, proposed solutions, strategies/tasks/actions, person(s) responsible, timeline, and budget resources

<b>Section 15: Tools for Developing Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment</b>	
<b>Name of Tool</b>	<b>Description</b>
NESSN Tool 32: Theme, Essential Questions, and Learning Competencies	A form to record theme, essential questions, and learning competencies for a unit of study
NESSN Tool 33: Creating a Culminating Performance or Project	Questions that guide the creation of a culminating performance or project
NESSN Tool 34: Ongoing Assessments	A process to use for creating ongoing assessments during a unit
NESSN Tool 35: Learning Experiences	Questions that guide the selection of learning experiences to help students reach learning competencies
NESSN Tool 36: Sequence of Learning Experiences	Guidelines for mapping out the sequence of learning experiences
NESSN Tool 37: The Final Reflection	Examples of questions to ask students for them to reflect on what and how they learn and a form for teachers to use to reflect on the unit.

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