



Project for School Innovation

PSI NET: FALL/WINTER NEWSLETTER

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Seasons Greetings!

Dear colleagues,

This issue of PSI Net finds Project for School Innovation's portfolio of activity full, robust and exciting. Our mantra more than ever is about REFLECTION - reflective teaching and reflective school leadership - and about INQUIRY; about ourselves, our colleagues and our results. While INNOVATION has always been a part of who we are and what we do, the word has taken front stage nationally, state wide and per district; Innovation dollars, Innovation initiatives, teaching for Innovation, scaling up Innovative strategies.

PSI's lens through which we will continue to pursue our work of finding and sharing great practices between charter and district schools, has become even more focused on the reflective work we do with school leaders. We have a principals network now of 80+ strong after seven years of conducting SNIP sessions (see write up below) and it has reinforced for us the importance of reflection and inquiry as one of the most

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critical paths to ANY kind of innovation.

During this time of thanks and good wishes, we offer you the reminder of the only gift you can give yourself - the gift of reflection. It's a great time to think critically about past challenges AND successes and use that to plan for a great year ahead. Give yourself the time, alone or with colleagues, to ask the tough questions that will ease the likely isolation and frustration felt in the throws of educational challenges - *What was I doing / thinking / saying that led to that success or that stumbling block? How am I reaching my students/ staff / parents? What is one thing, one small thing that I can modify in the coming year for self / student improvement and sustainability?*

Remember the quote by the great Nobel Laureate Linus Pauling when asked how he came up with great ideas,

"Come up with a lot of ideas and then throw all the bad ones out". Here's to a year of thoughtful reflection that gets us ever more close to the sharing of great educational ideas and true innovation! And of course, please help PSI to continue our critical programming for teachers and school leaders by contributing your tax-deductible dollars to PSI before the end of this calendar year (**Click [HERE](#) to Donate now**).

Best wishes for 2010 -
Ruth Feldman
Executive Director, PSI

Support and Study Groups

We convene action-research groups for principals and teachers to examine common challenges and share strategies for success.

Support Network for Innovative Principals

PSI is pleased to announce that Support Network for Innovative Principals (SNIP) has expanded to include three active cohorts! In addition to our Boston and alumni groups, we are happy to include participants from southeastern Massachusetts and even Rhode Island among our ever-expanding network of school leaders. As always, SNIP participants converge from a variety of backgrounds, schools, and experiences to discuss common challenges and offer support to one another.

This year's SNIP meetings include a renewed focus on cultivating the practice of reflection - something often overlooked in the hectic life of school leaders. PSI is

planning a spring retreat for SNIP participants, alumni, and anyone interested in school leadership issues, so stay tuned for updates!

We are pleased to welcome the Harold Whitworth Charitable Trust as a supporter of SNIP for 2009 - 2010 and their specific commitment to Boston Public School principals.

Collaborations

We partner with other organizations to facilitate projects that support educators in sharing their strengths and expertise.

Drop Out Prevention

Counting What Counts

Despite [greater awareness and new found commitment](#) to tackle many underlying issues leading to staggering numbers of drop outs, the high-school drop out crisis seems to still be with us. In an effort to combat this challenge PSI continues its relationship with three area high schools that specifically serve at-risk students who have either dropped out or are at risk of dropping out of school.

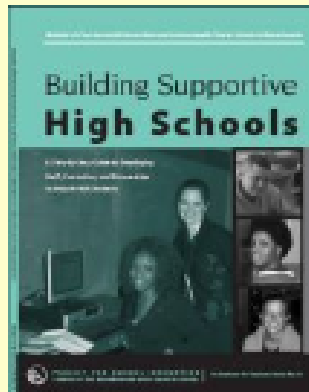
The three urban schools that serve at-risk high school youth; Boston Day & Evening Academy, Lowell Middlesex Academy and Academy of Strategic Learning, along with Professor Mike Nakkula of U Penn, collaborated to administer one more year of their specially designed Student Questionnaire to a total of more than 200 students.

Through their respective programming and student supports, these three schools have found that the key to success and resilience is in building strong relationships between student and adults. Relationships at school with teachers, guidance counselors, at internships or after school jobs - relationships with caring adults who can help guide and support are often the key to these students' success. Through our continued work with this At-Risk consortium, supported by a grant from AT&T, we have dug deeper into the ways in which these schools educate and retain many students who would otherwise never receive a high school diploma.

To complement the additional year of Student Questionnaires the team also engaged in follow-up student interviews and developed a tracking tool that captures the experience of the "whole student," not just a fractured glimpse of academic achievement or social / emotional needs. Our early results in using the three-tiered

methodology of student studies have given us a sense of what is most meaningful to them in their experience at the respective schools, what social supports are needed and appreciated in order to help them achieve academic success and what overall strategies of the school seem to be most helpful in getting them to stay and graduate and prepare for next steps.

Results and tools will be posted on our website in early 2010. To order a previous publication highlighting these schools' work with at-risk students, please click [here](#).



Neighborhood House Charter School

[Neighborhood House Charter School](#), PSI's founding organization, recently began work on a three-year project to improve and expand its counseling and student support services. PSI will assist in documenting and disseminating the project's ongoing work, whose goals are described here by Ellie Rounds, Dean of Special Education & Student Support:

"Our goal for our counseling and full service program is to improve the quality of learning time in the classroom by providing the supports our students need. Given our student population's great need for counseling and other support services, we expect that if we reduce classroom disruptions, teach students conflict-resolution and relationship-building skills, involve families to a greater extent in their children's education and well-being, educate our school community on community violence and social issues, and increase the numbers of students who have access to mental health services, our students will be able to focus better in the classroom and their academic performance will improve."

Prospect Hill Academy

PSI is engaged with [Prospect Hill Academy Charter School](#) as they partner with two K-8 Somerville public schools, the [Winter Hill Community School](#) and the [Healey School](#), to promote and develop the core professional development model used at PHA: *Collaborative Inquiry*.



Liz Murray, PHA Middle School Director and SNIP Participant, with students

Collaborative Inquiry is embedded in the belief that powerful learning occurs when teams of educators intentionally collaborate to design instructional plans and evaluate the effectiveness in their classroom instructions. The cycle is iterative and ongoing with the goal of sustained, systematic, and demonstrable progress over time.

This model is on the one hand surprisingly simple, yet on the other hand challenging to implement as it requires educators to shift the paradigm from more traditional professional development and common planning time to structured and disciplined collaboration with focused outcomes. Teachers need to learn a new set of "technical" skills and need to learn how to effectively collaborate. In many respects, the shift required is cultural in nature and requires a systems approach to move the work forward.

PSI is helping to facilitate and document the ongoing work at the school team and administrative levels and will be documenting the process for further use and implementation. A full report and usable tools and resources should be available by late 2010. Until then, please read our interview with project coordinator Jessie Gerson-Nieder of Prospect Hill Academy below.

Inquiring Minds

PSI Net Profile

Interview with Jessie Gerson-Nieder: Collaborative Inquiry Coach, Prospect Hill Academy

***PSI:** In your own teaching experience, what benefits have you seen in using Collaborative Inquiry?*

Jessie: When I became a member of Collaborative Inquiry team, I realized that even good teaching and strong lessons are markedly improved when working in a focused and rigorous way with a team of committed fellow teachers. I also realized how much about the efficacy of my lesson I had previously been taking on faith. I was pretty sure my students were learning what I wanted them to learn-I graded homework, class work, projects, essays, and tests. But the process of using data to deliberately identify critical skills I wanted students to master, working with colleagues to come to a clear understanding of what mastery would look like and strategically evaluating the success of my lesson objectives was a revelation. Collaborative Inquiry gave me the information I needed to truly differentiate my instruction by crafting student groups and lesson plans to meet students where they were and move them to where they needed to be. It made me fully realize the importance of common language, priorities, and strategies across grade levels and content areas and gave me an increased sense of confidence that I was giving my students the best education possible.

***PSI:** At the Somerville district schools, what initial steps are teachers taking to embrace and use Collaborative Inquiry?*

Jessie: Teachers at the Winter Hill and the Healey, under the leadership of principals Steve Tuccelli and Mike Sabin, have demonstrated an impressive commitment to and understanding of the challenging work of Collaborative Inquiry. Pilot teacher groups have been meeting regularly to look at data, unpack standards, identify non-negotiable skills, develop common rubrics and collaboratively plan rich lessons around those skill areas. They have developed their own entrance and exit slips and shared the successes and the areas of need that this new focus on regular interim assessment reveals. The teacher teams have made great progress in a short period

of time and the work is now expanding to include triple the number of groups, putting the project ahead of the timeline laid out in our action plan. The teachers, with their willingness to commit their time, effort, and expertise to this project deserve a great deal of credit for that forward momentum.

PSI: Collaborative Inquiry emphasizes using student performance data to guide curriculum planning. What are some challenges and limitations to utilizing data in decision-making, and how do you address them?

Jessie: I think that because of the realities of high stakes testing and because data seems so unequivocal in a field that is full of difficult decisions and uncertainty, it risks becoming an end rather than a means. Ideally, teachers should understand data well enough to evaluate its full meaning and potential usefulness as they work to plan the best learning experience possible for their students. In Collaborative Inquiry, data isn't just MCAS or MAP scores- although those are certainly valuable, it can also be exit slips, teacher designed assessments, or a common question identified on a well-crafted homework assignment. By expanding the definition of data in this way, and by offering more context and training in how to unpack and understand standardized test results, Collaborative Inquiry supports teachers as they approach data with a sense of purpose and ownership rather than trepidation or resentment. In addition, it answers the question "Now what?" Too often, schools analyze their data at the beginning of the year; identify areas of strength and weakness and then stop. Collaborative Inquiry sees data work as an ongoing parallel process to the work of planning and teaching excellent lessons that address the needs indicated by that data. It is a powerful partnership.

Dissemination

We publish teacher-authored guidebooks and train educators to coach their peers through workshops and consultations in order to share effective practices within and between charter and district schools.

Co-Teaching for Inclusion

In pursuit of our mission to disseminate best practices, PSI has been working to update the Tools and Resources portion of our web site. We recently added a video link to a presentation given by two PSI Associates from the [Henderson Elementary School](#) (formerly the O'hearn School)

Darleen Jones-Inge and Terri Wellner, both long-time teachers from the Henderson School (formerly the O'Hearn School) are featured in a short video that highlights the innovative co-teaching approach practiced school-wide at Henderson and describes how this method can accommodate students' various learning needs.



Watch a few minutes of their peer coaching session at [Academy of the Pacific Rim](#), a nearby Boston charter school, as they give helpful tips and recommendations for adopting this different yet compelling model of instruction. Please click [here](#) to be re-directed to the video, and visit our [Tools and Resources](#) page for further updates.

PSI Staff Update

Sumeet Goil

Please welcome Sumeet Goil to PSI! Sumeet graduated from Brown University in May 2009 and will be serving at the Project for School Innovation through a yearlong program organized by New Sector Alliance. Sumeet brings experience teaching and mentoring Providence middle school students to PSI, along with a strong interest in educational reform. He looks forward to assisting PSI with its marketing, evaluation, and collaboration work during this important period of school innovation and reform. Welcome!

*Best wishes for a great holiday season!
Stay tuned for program updates and new opportunities at <http://www.psinnovation.org>*

-Project for School Innovation
