



# LSDS NOTES

## Student Voice Valued and Developed

League of Small  
Democratic Schools Notes

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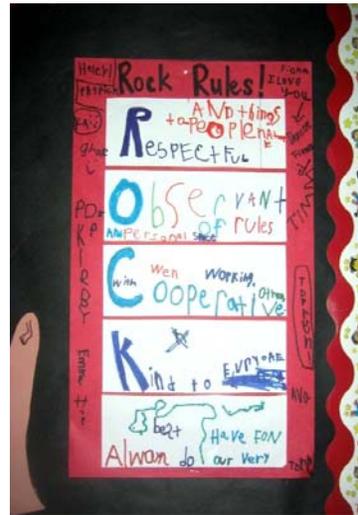
LSDS schools value student voice and seek to develop the capacity of students to participate actively in a democratic society. Visitors to these schools this year have reported a number of examples. Two schools in Colorado are featured in this issue of LSDS notes.

During Ann Foster's visit to **Odyssey** in Denver, she observed a middle school group talking about the roles and responsibilities of individuals and the general public. As a starting point for their conversation, the students used a newspaper article that described frivolous spending by pop culture stars. Students then compared the public's responsibility stemming from the support it gives stars by playing their CDs and going to their movies to the personal obligation of individual stars to behave responsibly, since they derive their ample financial means from the public.

An intermediate class at Odyssey was doing background research for an upcoming debate on Darwin and the theory of evolution. They were engaged in finding information that supported the theory of evolution or supported creationism as they prepared to debate the issues. Participants in this activity had a wide range of sources on both points of view and variations within each point of view.

At the **Lab School for Creative Learning** in Fort Collins, Foster discovered that Town Meetings were an essential component of the educational program. She reported that the school addresses the balance between freedom and restraint in their regularly scheduled town meetings. In an open learning environment, voice and participation are necessary and foundational to the culture. Keeping a balance of hearing various points of view and making group decisions that promote

consistency is an ongoing part of the culture. In order to provide educational information and background on the external factors that affect schools, the town meetings include speakers from the community, university, and school district. These speakers provide information and opportunities for interaction on issues such as high stakes testing.



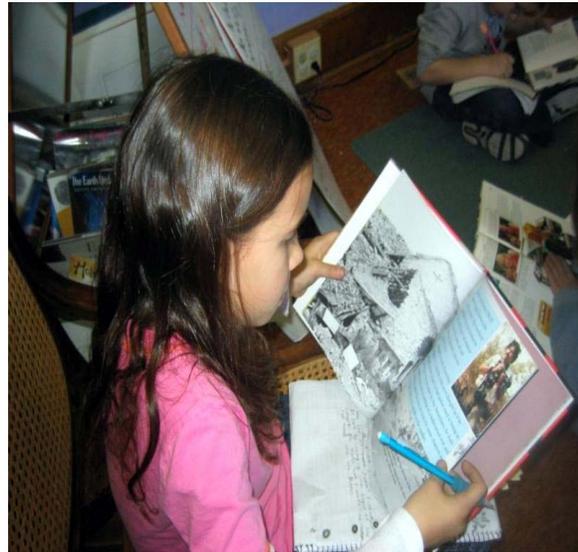
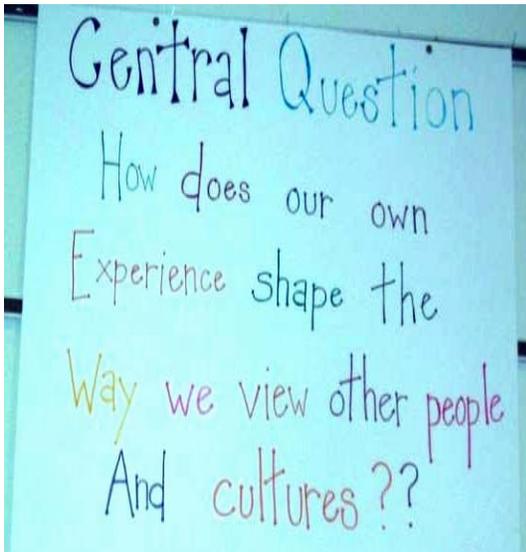
*Lab School for Creative Learning students create and post Rock Rules — expectations for all members of their community.*

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*If you have items to submit for future newsletters — please email them to Dick Clark at [rwcuw@msn.com](mailto:rwcuw@msn.com)*

## Scenes from LDS Schools



ABOVE: Lab School for Creative Learning student learning is guided by central questions.



ABOVE: Odyssey students use textbooks like those in any school. However, involvement in decision making through the family council is something that isn't found in most schools.

## Wakefield's Elementary Student Council



During his visit to Wakefield elementary, Dick Clark sat in on a student council meeting as they practiced the routines of parliamentary governance and considered issues such as the fund raising project they had launched to help the victims of the recent Tsunami disaster.

Created originally because students had no way to voice their concerns about their lunch program, this student government experience was helping these youngsters learn about decision making processes.

Not all the council's actions centered around solving school problems or responding to natural disasters elsewhere in the world.

The council planned a fun activity they called Wacky Hair Day.

On Feb. 25, 2005 the all Wakefield Elementary students were welcome to bring along their wackiest hairdo and teachers were also welcome to get a little messy with their hair.

The council judged the day as a success because many of the students joined and showed up in class with wacky hair.

In the picture below kindergarten teacher Linda Steinman poses with some of her wacky hair students.



# National Summit Calls for Strengthening High Schools

Richard W. Clark

On February 26, 2005 Bill Gates addressed the nation's governors at a summit concerning high schools. Calling our existing high schools "appalling," Gates said that "today, only one-third of our students graduate from high school ready for college, work, and citizenship."

Assuming that he is correct, two-thirds of our students fail to meet these three fundamental purposes of secondary education. To correct this situation, Gates identified "the new three R's, the basic building blocks of better high schools:

- The first R is Rigor – making sure all students are given a challenging curriculum that prepares them for college or work;
- The second R is Relevance – making sure kids have courses and projects that clearly relate to their lives and their goals;
- The third R is Relationships – making sure kids have a number of adults who know them, look out for them, and push them to achieve.

The three R's are almost always easier to promote in smaller high schools. The smaller size gives teachers and staff the chance to create an environment where students achieve at a higher level and rarely fall through the cracks. Students in smaller schools are more motivated, have higher

attendance rates, feel safer, and graduate and attend college in higher numbers." (<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/MediaCenter/Speeches/BillGates/BGSpeechNGA-050226.htm?version=print>)

Note the difference between the "first R" and the expression of concern for two-thirds of the graduates. At two points during his speech, Gates mentioned the responsibility of high schools to prepare students for citizenship. However, he limited his comments to matters related to work and college as he spoke of reforms that must happen. In brief, he failed to address the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary for effective participation as a citizen.

## *Bill Gates identified*

*Rigor,*

*Relevance,*

*and Relationships*

## *As 3 R's for 21st Century High Schools.*

Elsewhere in his remarks Gates rightly said "... first we have to understand that today's high schools are not the cause of the problem; they are the result. The key problem is political will." The lack of political will he was speaking about refers to the failure to design high schools to prepare all students for higher education. To an even greater extent, the charge can be made that there is a

lack of political will to design education to prepare students as participants in a democratic society.

Achieve and the National Governor's Association, who sponsored the summit, noted in their report that

"The mission of high schools is to prepare all students for college, careers and citizenship. The state education accountability system should be consistent with that mission. High schools must be held accountable for increasing the percentage of incoming 9th graders who graduate ready for college and work." (*AN ACTION AGENDA FOR IMPROVING AMERICA'S HIGH SCHOOLS; 2005 Achieve, Inc., and National Governors Association. p. 18.*)

In other words, they framed the problem the same way Gates did, and then, just as he did, focused on two of the three responsibilities: preparing students for college and preparing students for employment.



## High school summit, continued

After the meeting, the nation's press reported Gates' criticism and described the follow-up orchestrated by the planners of the summit. For example, the Boston Globe story on February 28, 2005 began as follows:

“WASHINGTON — A coalition of 13 states, including Massachusetts, confirmed plans yesterday to require tougher high school courses and diploma requirements, changes that could affect about one in three students. The participating states have committed to making their core high school classes and tests more rigorous and to match their graduation standards with the **expectations of employers and colleges** [emphasis added]. The states also pledged to hold colleges more accountable for ensuring students graduate. (Boston Globe, Feb 28, 2005) [nb. Oregon is the only LSDS state signing up for this initial follow-up activity.]

The announcement is the most tangible sign that the nation's governors, gathered in the capital for a summit on improving high schools, want to see immediate progress.

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### Reflection

How does your school address Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships? What are the requirements for preparing citizens that are not automatically satisfied by preparing students for employment and college?

This sequence of comments and events raises a couple of questions for Achieve and the National Governor's Association:

- (1) Given the questionable quality of general education in most of higher education (with the exception of the small liberal arts colleges), why not place more of the blame for the problems associated with completing college on the higher education institutions? And, given the problems with much of the undergraduate curriculum why does it make sense to move that curriculum into the high school?
- (2) Given the concern expressed about high schools' failure to prepare 2/3 of the students for work, college, and citizenship (a failure that I agree exists in many non-LSDS schools and one that Bill Gates used as a framework for his remarks), why not speak more directly to what the schools need to do to provide graduates with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to function as citizens?

Certainly, the core requirements one finds in most colleges and the curriculum that now exists in high schools fail to develop the requisite skills of critical inquiry, understanding of the principles central to our constitution, attitudes regarding social justice and fairness, and understanding of the philosophical and historical roots of our democratic system.

The recent Knight survey on the First Amendment makes it clear that freedoms guaranteed by this part of our constitution are not well understood by students or educators.



As someone who has had an opportunity to study the condition of high schools throughout the country during the past 15 years – and to look closely at the undergraduate curriculum in our institutions of higher education – I applaud the work that Achieve and the governors are doing and urge that they expand the perspective to recognize the recommendations and plans found in the work of ASCD and the First Amendment Center's First Amendment Schools and “The Civic Mission of Schools” outlined by CIRCLE and Carnegie. Both of those projects are consistent with the aims of the Agenda for Education in a Democracy, which guides the work of the Institute for Educational Inquiry and which is central to the League of Small Democratic Schools.

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Agenda for Education in a Social and  
Political Democracy



## Common Characteristics of LSDS Schools

- **Democratic purpose:** LSDS schools believe the primary purpose of schooling is to develop in young people the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students require for successful participation in our nation's social and political democracy.
- **Student achievement:** Students in such schools are successful academically and socially.
- **Ongoing professional development:** All members of the school community engage in continuous learning.
- **Approaches to learning:** These are schools that use a wide variety of approaches to learning including engaging students with parents and other adults within the community.
- **Small size:** They are small schools – small enough so that faculty members can gather as a group for dialogue.

*Regional Meetings: Northwest—May 12-15 in Seattle*

*Rocky Mountain/Plains — June 15-17 at Eagle Rock*

## Reporting Requirements for 2004-2005

All LSDS schools agreed to provide required semiannual documentation of their work as part of their application to the League. For 2004-2005 that documentation will consist of

- (1) Completion of a written two- to three-page summary description of the work related to the Agenda for Education in a Democracy and the League-related work that the school has done during

2004-2005 that is to be completed prior to the start of the 2005-2006 school year.

- (2) Forwarding copies of "school report cards" for 2004-2005, as such reports are required by state and federal mandates.
- (3) Forwarding copies of any research reports prepared by the school or by outside agencies concerning the school during 2004-2005.

- (4) Reports of any cross-site visits completed during the year.

