

10 Ideas to Start Building a Culture of Thinking at Your School

- ✓ **Have a conversation using the Chalk Talk routine.** There are lots of possible topics, but one option is to label 4 sheets of chart paper with: Engagement, Independence, Understanding, and Thinking. Have teachers engage in conversation about these topics silently in writing. They can define the terms, say why they think they are important, share what they have learned is effective practice, and most importantly raise questions and issues about how to move these ideas forward in students' lives. After the silent period identify key ideas worth returning to and thinking more about. Some other good topics for Chalk Talk discussions are: What is *good* thinking and how do we promote it? How can we know our students are becoming 21st century learners and thinkers? What do we want the students we teach to be like as adults? If we couldn't rely on tests, how could we know our students are learning?
- ✓ **Do a ghost walk at your school.** Ask teachers to generate a list of what they would expect to see at a school that had thinking as its centerpiece and called itself a culture of thinking. After you have generated the list, send teams off to look for signs of a culture of thinking within the school. Where does it show up? Where is it missing that you might have expected? Are there any mixed messages? What might we do collectively and independently to show parents and students that this school really values thinking?
- ✓ **Engage in an article or book study.** There are several options for books or articles related to cultures of thinking: *Making Thinking Visible*, *Intellectual Character*, *Smart Schools*, *Intellectual Character*, *Making Learning Whole*, and *The Global Achievement Gap* are some. Teacher written articles from the www.StoriesOfLearning.com website can be downloaded. Research articles can be downloaded from www.RonRitchhart.com. You might want to use a different protocol to structure the discussion for each session. These can be found at <http://www.nsrffharmony.org/protocol>.
- ✓ **Identify, "What thinking lives in my classroom?"** Ask each teacher to identify the kind of thinking he/she is trying to promote in his/her classroom (this can be taken from the understanding map or from the Deluge of Dispositions sheet). Ask each teacher to come to the next faculty meeting with some evidence (anecdote, story, student work, narrative) that demonstrates how that thinking lives in his/her classroom and has a prominent place there. Extend this by surveying students about what thinking they think lives in that class.
- ✓ **Discuss a video.** There is a DVD included with *Making Thinking Visible* and a DVD on thinking routines is also available. There are lots of videos to be found on the web as well and from various organizations such as Edutopia. In watching and discussing videos it is important to have a purpose/focus and a protocol/structure for the discussion so that the session doesn't become about the teacher or the activity. You can focus viewing by looking for the types of thinking on display, the level of engagement and independence exhibited by students, the way the cultural forces are shaping the learning, the underlying messages about what learning is, the kinds of questions the teacher is asking, and so on. As one gets better at looking for learning and thinking, it raises your awareness of it and helps you notice it more in your own classroom.

- ✓ **Collect some data.** Find out what kind of thinking is going on in your school currently. Survey students on the type of thinking they feel they are doing in their classes. Collect assignments from all classes on a given day and analyze them using the Understanding Map and the Slice protocol. Observe in classroom and pay attention to what students are actually doing. Where and when do you see them thinking? What kind of mental activity are they actually engaged in? After you have a snap shot of where the school is at, identify the areas you want to work on going forward.
- ✓ **Try a Thinking Routine school wide.** As a school, pick one thinking routine to try out. Collect samples of student work from the routine and look across grade levels and subject areas to see what it can tell you about the development of students' thinking. Did older students produce more thoughtful work or did the younger students surprise you? What do you notice about the role the content/stimulus plays in producing deeper, richer thinking?
- ✓ **Convene a group to use the Looking At Student Thinking (LAST) Protocol.** A great way to get teachers more attuned to student thinking is to examine student work and actually look for evidence of thinking. Convene a group of interested teachers (6-8 is good) to engage in this process on a regular basis (note, it generally takes about 3 times through before people really get good at using a protocol). As a facilitator, remember that this isn't a protocol to assess performance, nor is it about helping a teacher plan, the heart of the protocol is about looking for thinking and raising questions and implications for us all
- ✓ **Institute a "What if...Week:"** Sometimes teachers are reluctant to take on new ideas for fear trying something new will harm students' preparation for important tests. Other times there is just a reluctance to try something new because it will feel uncomfortable. You can send a message to teachers about the importance of experimentation in teaching and learning about the effects on students by designating a "What if... Week" in which everyone agrees to try something new, not just for day, but for a whole week that they feel *has the potential to foster students' engagement, independence, understanding, or thinking.* This point is important. It isn't just trying something new, it is having a hunch that this new thing might have a specific benefit and then actually testing it out. For example, letting students come up with their own homework assignments to nurture independence and engagement or trying to ask more facilitative questions to uncover students' thinking. Everyone then tries their ideas out on the same assigned week: At the end of the week everyone reports back on what they learned. Some schools have extended this idea by instituting a "Risky June" at the end of the year.
- ✓ **Celebrate thinking.** Start each faculty meeting by sharing examples from classrooms of students engaged in good thinking. The kind of thinking behavior that makes a teacher stand up and take notice because of its depth, richness, or insightful nature. Identify the type of thinking. Hold a gallery walk of student work that displays the documentation of student thinking and learning. Invite students, parents, and teachers from other schools to view and comment on the work.