

## ***Thinking is Contagious!***

### ***How our Cultures of Thinking Journey Began***

By Laura Weakland, Fourth Grade Teacher, Dolsen Elementary, SLCS

In the spring of 2012, I participated on an interview team for new teachers at Dolsen. Several of the prospective teachers used “thinking routines” in their interview lessons. I became very curious about what a “thinking routine” was and asked my principal, Megan Goodemoot. She gave me the book, *Making Thinking Visible*, by Ron Ritchhart, Mark Church, and Karin Morrison. Over the summer, I read it from cover to cover and began to plan ways to make the thinking in my classroom more valued, visible, and actively promoted. When we returned to school in the fall and my principal asked me to participate in the Cultures of Thinking Leadership Foundations seminars, I was ecstatic! I was so excited to meet Ron Ritchhart and to attend professional development on these ideas. We meet four times and with each meeting and extended learning assignments, I grew in my own understanding of the importance of creating a culture of thinking for teachers at our building in order to bring cultures of thinking to our classroom. I began by creating a survey of staff to uncover the professional learning culture that was already present at our school. I uncovered strong messages of collaboration, work ethic, and a devotion to learning. As I began to progress in my own Cultures of Thinking journey, I began to talk to others about what I was learning. Because of this already strong underlying professional learning culture, teachers quickly became excited to learn more! A steady stream of teachers began to walk into our principal's office asking for a copy of the book. Chalk talks began to appear in the halls. Discussions about thinking routines began to occur over lunch or outside our classrooms as we waited for students to arrive. Excitement grew and thinking had become contagious!

As teachers began to try thinking routines and were talking more about making thinking visible, I developed the idea of coming together and talking after school about what we were trying. I then created an after school professional learning community (PLC). I established some norms for the group: ***every teacher's thinking would be valued, visible, and actively promoted; come more than you don't come, and PLC meetings would run for 20 minutes!*** I sent out invites and almost everyone on our staff showed up for the first meeting! At each meeting, we tackle a “big idea” surrounding bringing a culture

of thinking to Dolsen and use a thinking routine as a tool to advance our learning of the big ideas. Big ideas that we have discussed this year include *What is a Culture of Thinking?*, *The 8 Cultural Forces*, *What Makes a Good Question?*, *What is Thinking?*, *The Physical Environment*, and *Positive Interactions as a Center of Gravity in a Classroom Culture*. In addition to bringing some of the big ideas to staff, I also wanted to give them opportunities to try some of the thinking routines and to experience for themselves the key thinking moves they uncover. I feel it is easier to lead students in thinking, when you have had the opportunity to participate in the thinking routine firsthand. Thinking routines that staff members have participated in thus far this year at our PLC include *Sentence, Phrase, Word; What Makes You Say That?; I Used to Think...Now I Think...; Chalk Talk; 4Cs; and Color-Symbol-Image*.

As we begin to close out the year and think about next year, I asked the staff what was happening in the classroom with regards to Cultures of Thinking that they believe came from something they learned, did, or was inspired to do from on one of our PLC meetings. The feedback was tremendous! One of our kindergarten teachers wrote that she was skeptical at first, but then she took some of the strategies and techniques she had learned from our brief meetings and adapted them to kindergarten. She says she has seen an improvement in students' questioning and thinking in all subject areas. She will now tell you she is a "Visible Thinking" believer! One of our fifth grade teachers says the culture of thinking has evolved greatly in his classroom since attending PLC meetings. He began by implementing the "What Makes You Say That?" routine in their daily discussions. Students are not even prompted anymore and automatically follow up their responses with "I think this because..." One of the third grade teachers stated she noticed an increase in her students' willingness to share new thoughts and are less afraid of being "wrong." Her classroom discussions are richer and the thinking is more visible through the use of routines like "See, Think, Wonder," "Claim, Support, Question," and "What Makes You Say That?" A first grade teacher stated that one of the things she values most from the PLC meetings is the emphasis on "language." She too has noticed a change in the language her students are using as well as, an awareness of the language she is using to support and advance her students' thinking. Lastly, one of our speech and language teachers stated that the collaborative discussions that she has participated in has excited her to try thinking strategies and she sees the value in using them in student learning.

This year has been an exciting one at Dolsen in our Cultures of Thinking journey. When students are empowered to make their thinking visible and when the culture of a school sets the stage that thinking is valued and actively promoted, students and teachers alike feel the energy and the desire to think and learn is contagious!