La Conner Middle School and High School

La Conner School District, Washington State

"Kids want to know: 'Why am I learning this? How am I going to use it?'
When you introduce transparency of the learning goals,
students start to become expert learners.
They start to create meaning, and own their learning."
—Christine Tripp, Principal

Address: 305 N. 6th St, La Conner, WA 98257 **Website**: www.lcsd.wednet.edu

Serving: The La Conner District serves 300 students in Grades 6-12, of whom 40% are Swinomish.

Tribal Lands/Affiliations: The La Conner district partners closely with the Swinomish Education Department, meeting regularly with and holding three formal consultations with the Tribe each year. District schools benefit greatly from the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community's daily presence in the school, and active involvement.

Principal: Christine Tripp, ctripp@lc.k12.wa.us

Profile by Joy Nolan of New Learning Collaborative and Chris Sturgis of LearningEdge, based on site visits between May 2022-May 2024.

"The number one thing for high school is credentials—
but attaching an A to F grade to something is not necessarily learning.
It can be more of a signifier of: *I mastered the game of school.* . . .
I like that MBL puts the emphasis on learning, puts everyone at their own pace,
competing with no one, normalizing going at different paces."
—La Conner MS/HS Principal Christine Tripp

Background: History, Culture, Heritage, and Innovation

La Conner, Washington is a small waterfront town about 70 miles north of Seattle, surrounded by small farms and farm stands, woodlands, waterways, and islands. Ferries are a common mode of transportation. Residents earn their living from the land, the sea, the arts, tourism, and in the broader Seattle region. La Conner is the oldest town in Skagit County, and is on the National Registry of Historic places. The town's annual Tulip festival is internationally known.

La Conner Middle and High School are situated across the Swinomish Channel from the Swinomish Reservation and Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, who contribute culturally and financially to district schools. History, heritage, and culture run through daily life here. A 60-foot history wall in the entry lobby of the middle and high school features photographs, artifacts and narratives that tell the story of this town and its schools from the 1800s to today. Many La Conner educators grew up locally and attended district schools, choosing to remain in this close-knit community to raise families and work.

The middle school and high school are founding members in the Mastery-based Learning Collaborative (MBLC). The two schools share a leadership team who see their MBLC work, with a dual focus on culturally responsive-sustaining education (CRSE) and mastery-based learning (MBL), as the central unifying principle for several innovative initiatives they are working on, such as:

- strengthening pedagogy and curriculum with Universal Design for Learning

- building out a mastery-based crediting system that recognizes students' out of school learning—whether it is learning connected to their cultural heritage, or involvement in a family business, often related to the region's farming and fishing industries
- powering continuous improvement with professional learning communities to support capacity-building across the staff

Instructional Model: Evidence-based Practices and Collaborative Innovation

La Conner's MBLC work builds on longstanding practices of continuous improvement with pedagogy, seeking to expand and deepen cultural awareness, and exploring and fostering evidence-based ways to offer greater transparency, autonomy and rigorous and relevant academics for learners.

Changing School to Benefit Learners
Over the years, La Conner educators have created pockets of innovation, trying out practices such as interdisciplinary learning, and standards-based instruction and grading. The La Conner campus offers a particular advantage for spreading innovation; the middle and high schools are connected by walkways, close enough for new practices to circulate.

Building on their thoughtful attention to evidence-based teaching and learning, and interest in innovating to improve pedagogy and outcomes for the students they serve, La Conner's first year in the MBLC was incredibly generative. The team leading the MBLC work met frequently, working on specific goals and projects. They regularly invited input from everyone on staff, and sought ongoing feedback from students and families.

Each time they proposed an innovation, such as using a 1-4 grading scale, or developing a portrait of a graduate, the MBLC team would invite staff to "talk us out of doing this." They invited skepticism, made their process transparent, engaging in collective decision-making, and sought honest feedback about what might or might not work and why. This helped the team to troubleshoot, and built trust and interest in the work; month by month, more staff members chose to join the MBLC team.

This school year, La Conner's teacher-innovators continue to build capacity and expertise that power their schoolwide change process, despite budget cuts that have made it harder to find all the time and energy they would ideally like to devote to realizing their MBLC goals. They understand that teaching and learning designed for students to reach genuine proficiency calls for a range of curriculum and pedagogy changes. They are increasing active/hands-on learning; designing more rigorous, authentic assessments; and considering the relevance of daily lessons for preteen and teenage learners from distinct cultural backgrounds—working toward a time when no student will think to ask, "Why are we learning this?"

Teachers collaborate and share out as they all move ahead. Some opt to learn about, try out, and share classroom moves meant to foster engagement, agency, and proficiency; others are driven to research and share back about grading tools and progress-tracking methods. Teachers regularly engage in 15-day challenges: each chooses a standard or unit to work on. They create learning objectives, a schedule and lessons. Then they teach for 15 days,

gather exit data (feedback from students and assessment data), and come together to talk shop about how it all went. This approach encourages innovation, allows teachers significant latitude in how they innovate, and builds collective expertise and efficacy across the staff.

The La Conner district's equity policy aligns closely to MBLC work in the middle and high schools, articulating principles and practices meant to improve learners' educational experience, and providing clear support for the schools' work on culturally responsive-sustaining MBL. The equity policy contains elements such as: "We will reduce achievement and opportunity gaps by using culturally responsive, inclusive, standards-based instruction," and "All students have the ability to meet our ambitious expectations for success in school and after graduation."

Portrait of a La Conner Learner

La Conner started down the path to MBL by creating a Portrait of a La Conner Learner that names shared outcomes for all students to gain before they graduate, such as Nurture Curiosity, Solve Problems, Build Relationships, and Communicate Effectively—skills that, when mastered, will also be useful as students move on to post-secondary work, education, and community life.

"We started by asking: 'What should students know and be able to do?' We invited as much input as we could get," says Beth Clothier, La Conner's Director of Teaching and Learning. A committee of district educators engaged in conversation with staff, students (kindergarten, and grades 5-12), the district's Native American Parent Advisory Council (NAPAC) and other district families. "We invited everyone to name five abilities that everyone should learn, from preschool through graduating high school." A committee of district educators categorized responses, identified common themes, considered balance, and worked to draft and define the portrait. They got feedback from staff: What to change, what was missing? "It was an involved process— four months of meeting and discussions," says Clothier. "And now our Portrait includes the ten outcomes the community was telling us they most wanted." Teachers and departments are now creating rubrics and proficiency scales that define success criteria and state standards alignments for these outcomes.

Close Partnership between the District and the Swinomish Tribe: Advocacy and Support for Native Learners

The Swinomish Tribe provides a range of services for the La Conner District's Native students—including adult education, workforce development, and counseling. Each middle and high school grade has a dedicated paraprofessional funded by the Tribe, who serves as Education Support Advocate for Native students. The Native American Parent Advisory Committee meets monthly. Clarissa Williams, the district's Community and Cultural Liaison, works with teachers to infuse the state's Since Time Immemorial curriculum and other courses with Swinomish culture, language, and history. A federal grant funds a Lushootseed Language and Culture Class and other cultural activities, such as an indigenous science class, Between Two Worlds. The Tribe also employs an attendance officer who works closely with the district, checking in with students who have missed school, and liaising with families and schools about Native student attendance.

As part of the Swinomish Support Staff for La Conner Schools, Sally Schroeder, Out of District Student Support and Mastery-Based Learning Instructor, partners with district teachers to infuse cultural education into and beyond the school day. For example, the Swinomish 13 Moons Native Foods curriculum involves harvesting, studying, and preparing Indigenous plants and other Native foods. The curriculum includes environmental health, intergenerational knowledge transfer, weaving, woodworking, Native language, and cultural values such as resilience, self-determination, and connections to the land and the community. Participating students collect and analyze data, learn to make high-quality observations, and study the impact of pollution on the local environment.

Mastery-based Crediting

District educators and the Swinomish Tribe are partners in building out an array of opportunities for students to earn academic credit for out of school learning. "Students deserve credit for their skills and expertise," says Schroeder. "The depth of their expertise and understanding is often amazing."

Students earn credit after Tribal elders sign off on a learning experience, a teacher certified in the relevant subject(s) aligns the learning with district learning standards and concurs that the student has demonstrated mastery, and the district counselor records the mastery-based credit on the student's transcript. "The elders are doing the teaching," says Schroeder. "Our role is not that of a gatekeeper; our role is to align the learning to academic standards."

"For Canoe Journey, a student might study weather, tides, even the physics of paddling—and/or music, the fine arts, Native culture," says Schroeder. "It's often science, but it's truly cross-cutting. It depends on the student and what they get into."

La Conner middle and high school students can earn physical education and/or science credit when they participate in any of several 3-4 day outings the La Conner staff organize and run each year. These outings, popular with students, include backpacking and camping at Mount Baker, and cross-country skiing and camping in Olympic National Forest. Students can also earn credit for participating in cultural activities with the Tribe and in the community, for work experience, internships, and more.

Grading That Supports Learning

"The grading system shows me what I already know, what I don't know, and what I need to learn. It makes school not so stressful."
—10th Grade La Conner High School Student

In many schools—and especially in high schools—grades serve two key purposes that are in tension, if not in outright conflict. Classroom grades can be useful, timely **feedback** for students as they seek to master learning goals, providing clarity about their strengths and growth areas. Grades also operate as **credentials** that open and close doors. *Is my average high enough so I can play on a school sports team? Will I have access to* AP classes*? What colleges will accept me? How much merit aid will I receive?* These are weighty concerns about present and future opportunities that may be in or out of reach, based on those credentials. Research shows that pressure to earn high grades distracts students from the very learning that would improve their grades.

In a traditional grading system, students compete for points. They may be rewarded points for effort, participation, or extra credit assignments that don't contribute much to their learning. They may lose points for missing deadlines, or talking in class. Much has been written about problems with letter and number grades.

La Conner, in building staff capacity with competency-based grading, sees big advantages for learners and the learning process: It aims to take the "noise" out of grades, focusing solely, and therefore more clearly and helpfully, on where a learner is, in relation to success criteria for the stated learning goals.

As the La Conner team has sought to develop a framework for feedback and grades that is organized around academic standards, Marzano proficiency scales have been one reference point; these scales name clear success criteria for priority standards, using 1-4 grades (rather than using 0-100 or F-A grades). These broader grading categories allow the La Conner team to offer learners actionable information about their strengths and growth areas, without encouraging competition for grades and points. Students get feedback on exactly what they need to do to move from one step in the scale to the next.

La Conner's MBLC team members know that an important step forward—when they are ready—will be using a competency-based grading tracker that tracks progress on learning outcomes rather than on more traditional gradebook categories such as effort, quizzes, homework, and tests. They've done extensive research on options such as Empower, JumpRope, and other grading platforms—and have wisely chosen to stick with their current more traditional grading software until their outcomes-based approach to teaching and learning has developed to the point where staff feel they have truly outgrown their current grading system.

When Is the Right Time to Change Grading Policies and Grading Tools?

For schools making a shift to MBL, there are two schools of thought about when to make significant changes to school wide grading policies and systems. Some choose to lead with grading changes, while others decide to focus on building capacity with mastery-based pedagogy, curriculum, and assessments—before changing their grading policies and systems.

The case for making grading an opening move in the transition to MBL: Some want the immediate benefit that comes from replacing the sorting function of A-F grading and the GPA with a focus on mastering the standards and/or competencies. Some see it as a way of signaling to students, parents and teachers that things are changing. And some move forward because they have conflated mastery-based learning (which offers hands-on/active learning, timely feedback, authentic assessments, and other shifts) with standards-based grading (which can increase clarity about grading, but is often implemented without widespread classroom and curriculum shifts).

There are some predictable problems that can come with introducing new grading policies and systems before staff, students, and families have a well-developed understanding of the principles and practices of MBL. For example, without all the pieces in place, schools may find that few of the benefits of MBL will accrue. Staff may feel pushed into working with a new grading tech tool, and may find it stressful and labor-intensive to use such a tool before their practice is truly based on students' mastery of learning outcomes, rather than on unit by unit completion. Trying to ensure they are grading accurately in the new way—often before they feel ready to do this—can feel like high-stakes stress, and can bleed away staff enthusiasm for making the shift to MBL overall. School leaders and staff will have to address parents' concerns and questions about the new system, perhaps without the experience and deep understanding that could make those communications useful and clarifying.

The case for putting standards into place as an instructional tool before you align grading: The more gradual approach, in which the staff organically outgrows their "old" grading methods, gives them time to

- tap into how transparency can engage and motivate students
- develop strategies for students to access additional instructional support and be able to eventually reach success
- Use learning outcomes as the basis for all teaching and learning, assessment, and grading.
- Gather stories of students engaging, thriving, and surpassing expectations.

Some likely issues with this more gradual strategy: As teachers' and students become more and more focused on building proficiency with learning outcomes, grading the old way feels stale and unuseful. Basing grades on proficiency rather than completion is one of the best ways to help students refocus on learning rather than points.

La Conner Middle School and High School thought through this choice very carefully, and discussed it regularly as a staff. They did extensive research to understand various policies and tools, and invited plentiful feedback from colleagues about various options they were researching and considering. They wisely chose to change some of their grading policies to be more mastery-based, but to take a more gradual approach with swapping

out their familiar grading tools for something new, perhaps before they and their students were fully ready for it. They feel this has helped them to focus energy on building shared understanding and shifting practices in the classroom—and that they will be ready, more unified, and well informed when they decide it's time to choose a grading tool organized around learning outcomes.

As you navigate grading changes as part of a broader school wide shift to culturally responsive-sustaining MBL, here are some considerations:

How have you engaged students, parents and teachers in examining traditional grading policies and exploring alternatives?

What features and capacities have you put into place that will enable standards-based grading?

What are the anticipated consequences of how you have chosen to sequence new grading policies within your implementation plan? How will you manage those consequences?

School Change as a Collaborative Effort

La Conner is developing a roll-out plan that recognizes that the transition to MBL is a 2nd order change. Second order change is when the purpose, values or beliefs are different from the original organization. It's impossible to simply introduce one new practice, curriculum, or program. Instead, it requires a mindshift and the capacity to engage in rethinking what is needed given the new purpose, values or beliefs. In the case of MBL there are two large underlying changes. First, the purpose has shifted from educating students while simultaneously ranking them to determine who should go on to college. Second, the research on learning offers school design and practices to engage and motivate all students, not just those being rewarded with good grades and the promise of college. Strategies to develop new practices, such as co-designing, prototyping, and piloting, are opportunities to engage people in understanding the underlying shift while also encouraging them to take ownership over the new approach.

La Conner's roll-out plan has been to invite teachers to investigate CRSE/MBL, introduce new practices into their classroom, and participate in a community of learners who are sharing their insights along the way. The goal is that over time, more and more teachers will be interested and willing to try new practices. Of course in every school there are some teachers who may sit back and firmly choose not to participate. They may hold beliefs that cause them to doubt the new purpose and beliefs or simply have innovation exhaustion. It's a condition that can hamper improvement at any school, any time.

The key to the leadership strategy is to balance flexibility so teachers have a chance to innovate with a strong community that reflects together so that insights and practices are shared as they are developed. Leaders prioritize setting aside specific time for teachers to work together; building capacity of teachers to participate in PLCs; and partnering advanced teachers with those that are new to MBL, offering Modern Classrooms Project self-directed courses; and a Summer Institute for teachers to continue to explore and fine-tune practices. Eventually they would like to create a mastery-based online course for staff about their CRS-MBL system.

Big Questions Driving Our Work: Being the Change We Want to See

1) *What's the most powerful, helpful, and clear way to build a shared culture of learning that benefits our students' wellbeing and academic growth?*

2) *How can we benefit from the considerable and ever-growing expertise of our staff, as we engage with the larger MBLC community of schools dedicated to CRS-MBL?*

3) *How can we partner with our Swinomish Tribal experts to increase our ability to recognize and credit rich and rigorous our students' out of school learning?*

4) *How much should shifts be made collectively and uniformly, and how much should the pace and substance of change be left to individual teachers' sense of readiness and willingness?*

5) *How can we honor and benefit from our staff's deep local expertise, while also taking the school in new directions with culture and academics?*

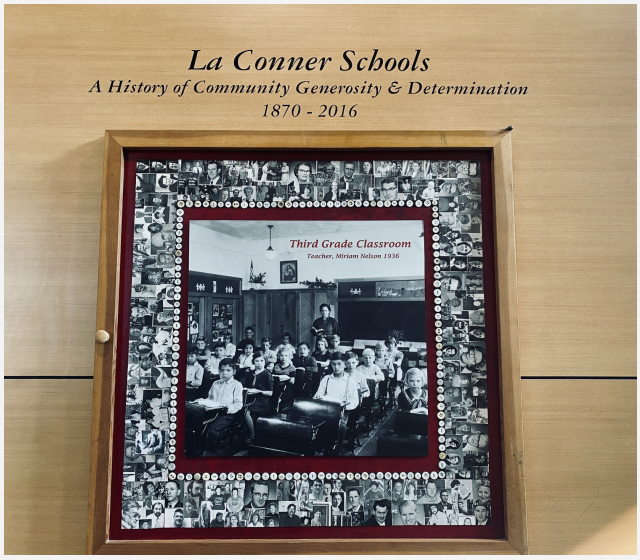
How Will Participating in the Washington MBLC Advance Your Efforts?

La Conner looks forward to working with the MBLC as a way to accelerate its transition. One of the most valuable benefits of the MBLC is the meaningful conversations among other educators who care deeply about providing the best for students.

All photos by Joy Nolan, New Learning Collaborative

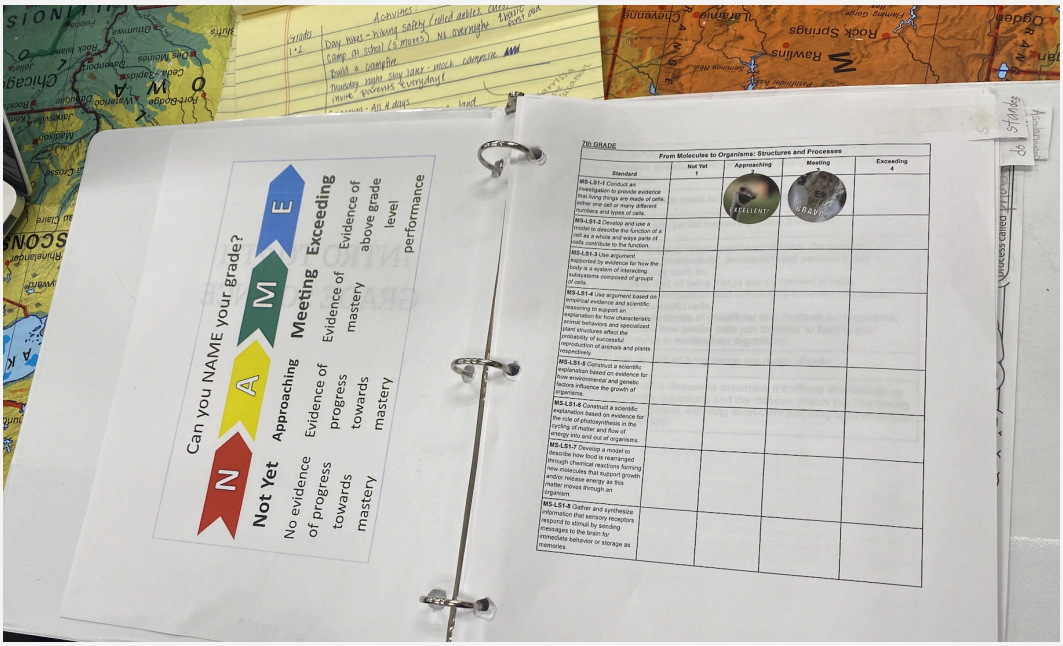
Above: Rainbow over a daffodil field, on the road leading to La Conner district schools

Below: Detail from the history wall in the school lobby



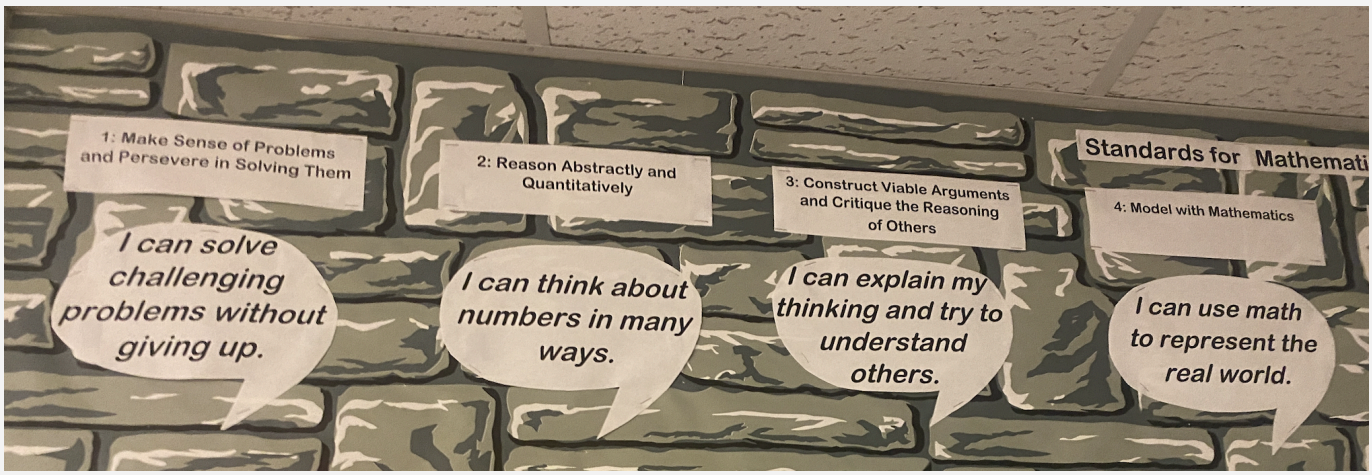
Detail from the history wall in the school lobby

Science teacher Maddie Huscher explains her grading system to visitors



Above: Swinomish art on display in the district office

Below: Learning outcomes based on Math Practices from the Common Core Standards



We are a community who values
Respect
Kindness
Effort
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Respeto
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Amabilidad
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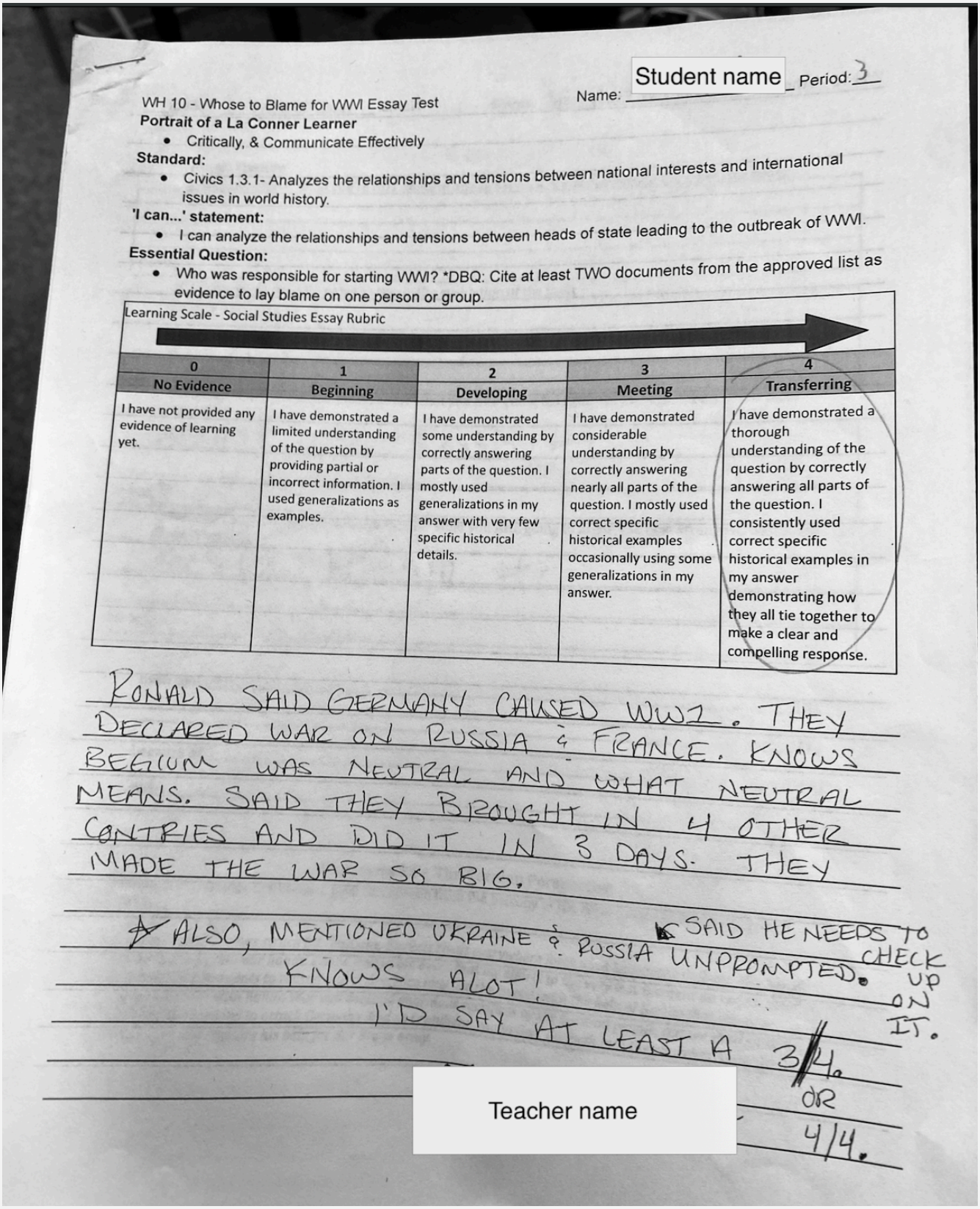
Esfuerzo
La Conner
BRAVES
La Conner Middle -
High School

Student-friendly classroom and Care closet,
both created by Special Education teacher Juliene Wall



Name: Student name _ Period: 3

WH 10 - Whose to Blame for WWI Essay Test

Portrait of a La Conner Learner

- Critically, & Communicate Effectively

Standard:

- Civics 1.3.1- Analyzes the relationships and tensions between national interests and international issues in world history.

'I can...' statement:

- I can analyze the relationships and tensions between heads of state leading to the outbreak of WWI.

Essential Question:

- Who was responsible for starting WWI? *DBQ: Cite at least TWO documents from the approved list as evidence to lay blame on one person or group.

Learning Scale - Social Studies Essay Rubric

0 No Evidence	1 Beginning	2 Developing	3 Meeting	4 Transferring
I have not provided any evidence of learning yet.	I have demonstrated a limited understanding of the question by providing partial or incorrect information. I used generalizations as examples.	I have demonstrated some understanding by correctly answering parts of the question. I mostly used generalizations in my answer with very few specific historical details.	I have demonstrated considerable understanding by correctly answering nearly all parts of the question. I mostly used correct specific historical examples occasionally using some generalizations in my answer.	I have demonstrated a thorough understanding of the question by correctly answering all parts of the question. I consistently used correct specific historical examples in my answer demonstrating how they all tie together to make a clear and compelling response.

RONALD SAID GERMANY CAUSED WW1. THEY DECLARED WAR ON RUSSIA & FRANCE. KNOWS BEGIUM WAS NEUTRAL AND WHAT NEUTRAL MEANS. SAID THEY BROUGHT IN 4 OTHER CONTRIES AND DID IT IN 3 DAYS. THEY MADE THE WAR SO BIG.

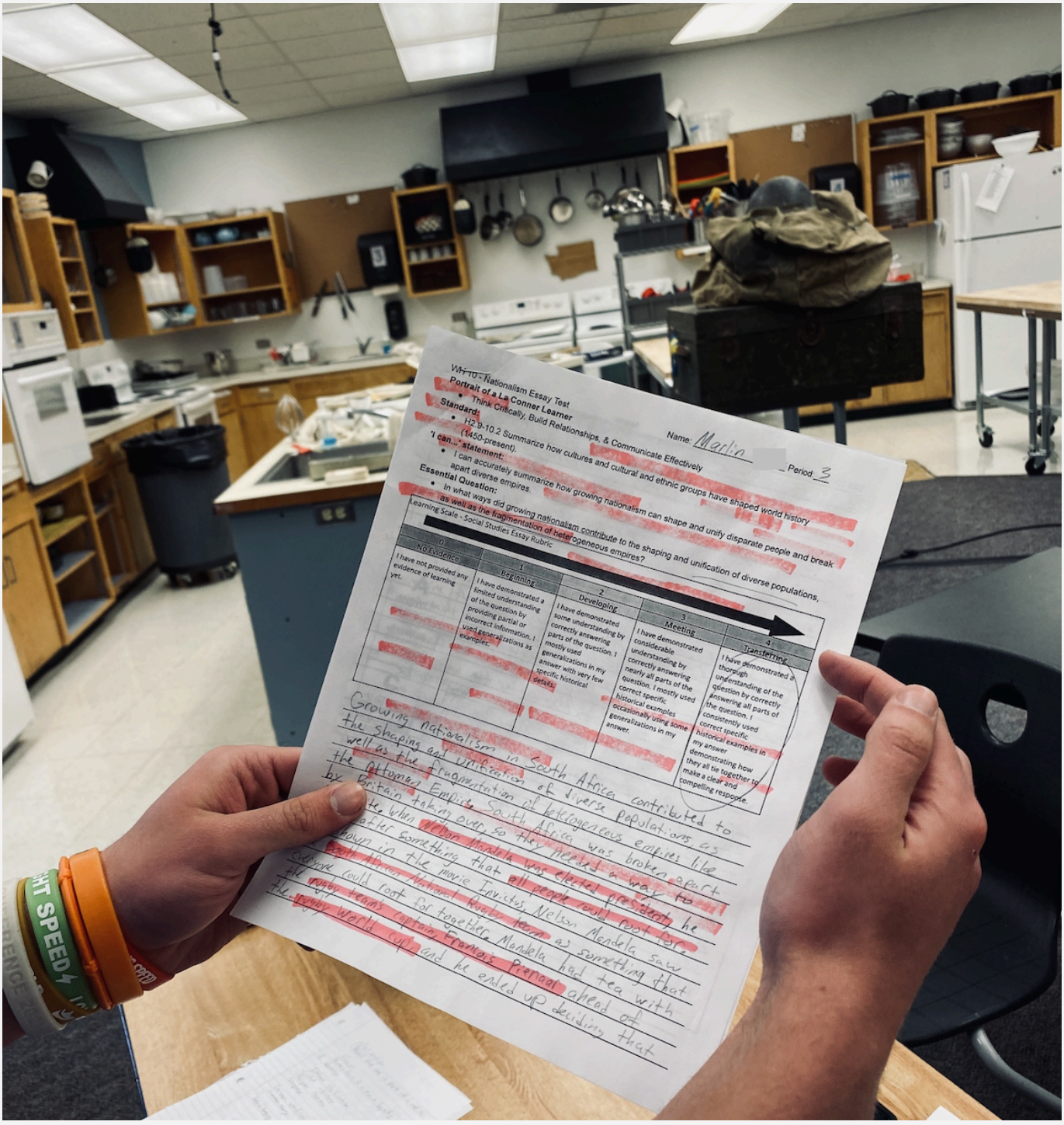
ALSO, MENTIONED UKRAINE & RUSSIA UNPROMPTED. SAID HE NEEDS TO CHECK UP ON IT.

KNOWS ALOT!

I'D SAY AT LEAST A 3/4. OR 4/4.

Teacher name

Teacher feedback on a high school history assignment



Student explaining the feedback he got on a recent history assignment.