

The Urban Education Collaborative



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Small Learning Communities: Recommendations for Success

Over the last 15 years, a variety of efforts to transform American high schools have gained both public and private support. Significant among these efforts are initiatives to implement small learning communities (SLCs). Like other reform efforts, SLCs have several goals, including “downsizing large schools, meeting the needs of at-risk students, solving the problem of failing schools, modeling the process of school restructuring, personalizing education for all students, empowering teachers and extending their roles, preventing dropping out, and finding an equitable substitute for tracking” (Raywid, 1996, p. 9).

In 2004, Delaware’s Christina School District (CSD) was among many high-poverty districts awarded funding for implementation in its three high schools theme-specific SLCs—at the time, an emerging model with a strong *theoretical* base. The district’s 3-year federal grant, designed to build on a 9th-grade academy piloted in 2003–04 at one high school, would create 9th-grade transition academies and career-themed SLCs in all high schools. These reform structures were to be characterized by (a) interdisciplinary teams of core subject teachers across all grade levels to foster personalized and continuous relationships between the teams of teachers and their students; (b) rigorous curricula to meet the needs of all children; and (c) the provision of high-quality, sustained professional development in core subjects and SLC implementation. This brief provides an overview of CSD’s efforts to establish SLCs, both at the district and school level, highlighting challenges to the SLC design and its implementation.

Evaluation Design

The study enlisted primarily qualitative research methods, including interviews, observations, and document reviews to describe and assess the level and nature of SLC implementation. Data were analyzed through a best practices framework, with particular attention to the progress of school- and district-specific goals and the potential of long-term sustainability. That framework was derived from Oxley (2003, 2004), who specified a broadly encompassing set of five domains of best practices in SLC implementation: (a) interdisciplinary teaching and learning teams; (b) rigorous, relevant curriculum and instruction; (c) inclusive programs and practices; (d) continuous program improvement; and (e) district and building support. This brief is organized around these five key elements.

Results and Recommendations on Best Practices

Schools and districts approach SLC implementation with differing levels of commitment and readiness. In CSD, the initial idea for SLCs was a response to a funding opportunity and

pursued with limited stakeholder support or involvement. As a result, little attention was paid to what Torrez and Kritsonis (2008) describe as pre-implementation principles for successful SLCs in large high schools: the necessity of establishing, early in SLC planning and implementation, a clear understanding of the need for the SLCs and a long-term commitment to and plan for sustaining SLC structures and roles, including professional learning communities and practices. Torrez and Kritsonis found that when time is not spent building staff members’ deep understanding of the need for, purpose of, principles of, practices of, and skills required by the SLC model, schools are likely to experience slow and inconsistent change. Similarly, Fouts et al. (2006) found that “the schools most successful at converting to SLCs focused considerable attention on a ‘moral imperative’ to change their practices to better serve their students” (2006, p. 3).

When schools are driven by a clear and consistent commitment to and vision for change, attention to key design principles—not just as structures, but as processes for creating meaningful differences in classroom practice and school culture—SLC implementation is more likely to have positive outcomes.

BUILDING/DISTRICT SUPPORT

Research on school improvement finds that district leadership plays a significant role in the success and sustainability of school-based reforms. The CSD effort suffered from high administrative and teacher turnover. In the early years of the grant, such attrition coincided with low teacher, student, and community morale, associated with leaders’ poorly articulated vision for the SLCs and their failure to engage the community in the SLC development or to explain specific school goals—all leading to a limited buy-in. Both the role of the SLC coordinator and the purpose of the high school SLC teams’ meetings became less clear, and parents grew impatient with slow change.

For successful implementation of SLCs, a clear and consistent vision for reform must be reinforced across all organizational levels. Also necessary is early community involvement in determining the themes of study and the procedures for students’ selecting them. So, districts should implement a specific districtwide strategy for reaching out to and informing parents about the reform initiative, the rigor of SLCs, and the design and foci of their various academies.

INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING AND LEARNING TEAMS

CSD’s high schools made significant progress in adopting many of the core structures of the SLC model. Initially, for teachers, time was dedicated to planning across subjects, flexibility in

the composition of teams was provided, and some investments in professional development on team building were made. Over time, though, as resources dwindled and leadership turned over, the frequency of teacher team meetings was reduced, and some teams were combined, with teachers working across academies; theme foci diminished.

Only one school developed significant support and accountability for its teams, and even there, the focus strayed from integrated instruction and specific instructional strategies. Few interdisciplinary teacher teams moved to meaningful levels of mutual accountability or collaboration on designing, implementing, and collectively reflecting on engaging, rigorous, vertically aligned instruction or on differentiating learning needs and strategies to meet them. Instead, teachers used much of their shared time discussing individual students in terms of behavioral problems. Likewise, curriculum discussions often concentrated more on scheduling and logistics than on the challenges of creating opportunities for in-depth, active learning of rigorous content.

SLC themes and shared planning time do not, in and of themselves, transform classroom practices and school climate. In successful reforms, collaborative planning must be both frequent and efficient (Raywid, 1993). Schools elsewhere have benefited from a shared vision for teaching and learning and more and better scaffolded professional development for teachers to develop lessons, discuss student progress, observe each other and model lessons, be observed, and receive regular feedback on and support in reflecting on their instructional practices. Such professional learning communities offer great promise for school improvement.

In CSD, competing priorities and declining resources often threatened teacher teams' collaborative planning. Changing leadership and a poorly communicated vision for the SLCs resulted in limited follow-through on SLC priorities. Facing fiscal uncertainty, staff attrition, and increasing accountability pressure, districts and schools are encouraged to preserve and make improved use of common planning time, including through greater professional development supports, such as early team building and help using data to inform instruction and accountability. Adopting interdisciplinary teacher teams and allocating time and space for their meetings is not the same as fostering communities of practice; additional, deliberate work is required.

RIGOROUS, RELEVANT CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

The three high schools made significant investments in a variety of curriculum and instructional models concurrent with SLC implementation. Although CSD courses were informed by Delaware's state standards, the presence of a coherent district or schoolwide curriculum was not obvious. Rather, teachers exercised considerable autonomy in determining course content and performance expectations. Efforts at cross-course collaboration relied on retrofitting of instructional practices and evidenced a lack of clarity about learning objectives.

Ensuring that school staff have sufficient knowledge and resources to implement a myriad of programs with confidence and fidelity—and in coordination—requires considerable expense of time as well as dollars. The mix of programs and their costs need to be considered along with the benefits and costs of implementing SLC programs of study. Efforts should not be seen to be in competition for dollars or teachers' or leaders' time. Most importantly, programs should be seen as supports, not substitutions for high-quality instruction.

INCLUSIVE PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES

Eventually, the three high schools took steps to ensure that the SLC effort engaged the broader school and district com-

munity and that all students were served by and included in the effort. Schools attempted to correct mistakes made in Year 1 that made some programs of study seem less inclusive by bringing special education teachers onto SLC teams. However, the transition from the design to implementation phase suggested a need to be more inclusive of teachers, particularly to engage them in more significant efforts at instructional improvement. Improved student progress monitoring at the school and team levels would also have helped those teachers who argued for more guidance in understanding the needs of their individual students and applying strategies to effectively differentiate instruction to meet those needs.

Some real progress was made in parent engagement, including the development of a broader notion of parent involvement to include much more regular and meaningful teacher–parent contact. District and school leaders should take advantage of such developing staff expertise to leverage more systemwide improvements and to move schools and teachers beyond models of parent involvement that focus on special events and student crises.

CONTINUOUS PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

By the end of Year 2, much had been done to create systems of data and information to support continuous improvement both at the individual school and district levels. However, progress was much slower at the grade, team, and classroom levels, where many improvement opportunities were missed and which might have benefited from a planned cycle of inquiry approach.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that introducing Oxley's five key structural and procedural changes, SLC best practices, are necessary but not sufficient to achieve success and sustainability of this reform model. *To be fully realized and lasting, reform efforts must be accompanied by a fundamental cultural shift throughout the local education community, a shift that makes normative new ways of thinking and new behaviors—behaviors integral to the SLC model.* Districts and schools implementing SLCs must first establish a clear, consistent vision for reform; lay a good foundation by getting full buy-in from stakeholders; and ensure early and ongoing community involvement. Throughout the implementation process, parent involvement, progress monitoring, instructional innovation, interdisciplinary teaching and learning, and a focus on teaching and learning leading to communities of practice are essential to establishing successful SLCs. SLC implementation should be understood as a continuous process of communication and engagement, instructional improvement, and assessment and reflection. As with other recent studies of SLCs, this study finds that to be both successful and sustainable, SLC implementation efforts must keep a commitment to improving teaching and learning at the center of the work.

References

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