



CONNECTIONS

EDUCATORS AND EMPLOYERS:
Discovering Solutions Through Partnering

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focusing on

Smaller
Learning

Communities

Smaller Learning Communities: Give Them a Little TLC

Tara Jones, Director of Career Pathways, CORD

There are many reasons why small learning communities are becoming a big initiative in education reform. Studies have indicated that the size of the learning environment affects student learning (Klonsky, 1998). The smaller the school, the larger the learning experience. In smaller environments, students seem to gain a feeling of belonging from the personal relationships they are able to develop with teachers, administrators, and their cohort of students. These relationships also foster accountability, as students are less likely to be lost in the crowd. Student attendance, graduation rates, and postsecondary enrollment increase, while dropout rates and disciplinary problems diminish substantially.

Although all of the above sounds great, the idea of small learning communities is a new concept for many high schools in the United States. As with any new change, there has to be an understanding of the process and “buy in” from all parties involved. In essence, they need a little **TLC—time, local support, and curriculum.**

Critical to small learning community success is taking the **time** to provide technical assistance that will help to lay out the big picture for all parties. Many

times when changes of this nature occur people believe that their jobs are in jeopardy or that they may not “fit in” the new system. It can be difficult for teachers who have traditionally worked within the silos of their academic disciplines to suddenly be thrown into situations in which they must integrate their work with that of teachers in other disciplines. However, when **time** is given to create common planning periods and professional development sessions to coordinate these efforts, successful programs and student enrichment will abound.

Another important component of small learning communities is **local support** from parents and industry. Having industry and parental support is essential. Industry professionals can validate the curriculum to ensure that the students are gaining the skills that are necessary for postsecondary and career success. They are a terrific resource for bringing the real world into the classroom and offering mentoring to students. Students hear about the importance of attendance and grades from teachers and parents their whole lives, but when industry professionals come into the school and make the same point—that

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In the next issue of *Connections*...

Career Pathways: The Next Generation of Tech Prep

Dan Hull, founder of the National Tech Prep Network, CEO of CORD, will release his paper at the NTPN Conference and discuss the Career Pathways Strategic Improvement Coalition.

Transforming Traditional Schools into SLC's

Pamela Hatton, Pinellas County School District, Pinellas County, Florida

Pinellas County is a peninsula on the west coast of Florida. Over the past 20 years the area has seen a 76 percent increase in population, which has had a tremendous effect on Pinellas County Schools. The school district operates 144 schools housing 112,520 students. This makes Pinellas the seventh largest school district in Florida and 22nd largest in the country.

In 2001 project planners looked at the demographics of the district's 16 high schools. Based on low achievement scores and graduation rates, the diversity of its student body, large numbers of discipline referrals and suspensions, high absentee and retention rates, and the low socioeconomic level of the neighborhood in which it is located, Lakewood High School met the criteria for application. In addition, Lakewood already had a magnet program (the Center for Advanced Technology—CAT) and an environmental technology program (Program for Environmental Technology—PET). When data for students in the two existing programs were compared to data for non-participating students, dramatic differences became evident. Students in the two existing programs scored significantly higher on standardized tests; had higher attendance, graduation, and promotion rates; and were less likely to be suspended or receive discipline referrals. The

data strongly support national studies showing that smaller learning communities (SLC) lead to more effective schools.

“Success or failure in transforming a traditional high school depends on commitment to change and commitment to implementing the key elements of SLCs.”

In 2002, after receiving notification of funding, Lakewood began the laborious, culture-transforming process of instituting three more themed SLCs: the Program for Athletic Studies (PAS), the Program in Cultural Studies (PICS), and Business Arts and Technology (BAT). In so doing, Lakewood would transform itself from a traditional urban high school (population 1806) into five SLCs. Many challenges have had to be addressed, such as the existing facilities, philosophical differences, and the notion of change. Success or failure in transforming a traditional high school depends on commitment to change and commitment to implementing the key elements of SLCs.

Incorporated into the curriculum of each SLC is an advisory period that addresses the needs of each individual community. This can include preparation for the FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test), remediation, academic counseling, and peer/mentor connection. The purpose is to help

students connect with their communities, succeed in their academic work, and maintain healthy relationships with peers and teachers. Additionally, a multimedia presentation has been developed for marketing the communities. This is shown to eighth graders at feeder middle schools as part of the transition to high school. Guidance counselors also meet with these students and assist them in selecting appropriate learning communities.

Through working in SLCs, the staff is able to implement and expand personalization strategies and make effective, innovative changes in the curriculum and in their instruction. Grant funds have enabled the school to provide professional development as it relates to the needs of the staff and the goals of our SLCs. This past summer CTIP (Curriculum Technology Integration Project) training was given to a number of staff members, providing them with skills to meet the technology requirements of NCLB through experiences in integrating technology into classroom planning and instruction.

It is too early to provide data illustrating positive results. This is the first year that the entire staff and student body are geographically located by community. With this shift we are seeing more collaboration between teachers. In the beginning not all teachers bought into the SLC concept. We continue to stay the course and believe that positive experiences will change attitudes. ▲



Dekalb County School System Smaller Learning Communities Grants Keys to Personalizing Large High Schools

By Leah Felcher, Dekalb County Schools, Dekalb County, Georgia

The DeKalb County School System in DeKalb County, Georgia, is a large urban school district with a districtwide enrollment of over 98,000 students. There are currently 83 elementary schools, 18 middle schools, 20 high schools, and 18 specialized centers. The school system has applied for three Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) grants funded by the USDOE and has been awarded all three for a total of approximately \$3.95 million. Two of the grants are three-year implementation grants, and the last received is a one-year planning grant. The two implementation grants, one for nine high schools received in July 2002 and the other for four high schools received in July 2003, have enabled us to transform the landscape of our large high schools. Our goal in applying for the grants has been to create small, safe, and successful learning environments by restructuring our high schools into transition academies and career academies and by implementing personalization strategies such as alternative scheduling, adult advisory systems, and extra help.

The USDOE 2003 RFP defines an SLC as “an environment in which a core group of teachers and other adults within the school know the needs, interests, and aspirations of

each student well, closely monitor his or her progress, and provide the academic and other support he or she needs to succeed.” The DeKalb County School System has defined four major initiatives for all thirteen of its high schools receiving funds from implementation grants. The four initiatives are Ninth Grade

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Transition Academies, Career Academies for grades 10–12, the Summer Bridge Program for rising ninth graders, and Making the Senior Year Count. As a district we did not want thirteen different SLC projects with few common threads

but one SLC project with four common threads. Furthermore, we believe that if we successfully implement these four initiatives, we will have created SLCs that meet the USDOE definition and, most importantly, meet the needs of our students.

The DeKalb County School System is committed to the High Schools That Work (HSTW) key practices, and our board of education has officially designated the HSTW model as “the” school reform model through board policy. Thus, making HSTW our technical assistance provider for the SLC grants is a perfect fit. Our partnership with HSTW has served us well in meeting our professional development needs. We have designed SLC quarterly workshops, provided for a technical assistance visit to each of our SLC schools, and attended national specialty HSTW workshops and the Summer Annual HSTW Conference. Our four major initiatives not only mesh with the USDOE definition but also help us to implement the HSTW design.

All thirteen of our SLC high schools will be implementing grades-10–12 career academies by the fall of 2005. The DeKalb Tech Prep Consortium will serve as a

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major resource in helping us to do so. Our Tech Prep consortium has organized its efforts into three career concentrations—health/medical, information technology, and engineering and industrial technology. Many of our SLC career academies will fall into one of these three concentrations. We will work directly with our Tech Prep consortium in providing the SLCs with career academy resources, internships, and articulation to postsecondary institutions, thus creating a seamless transition model in which students obtain the skills necessary for success in industry.

During the past two years of implementation, we have encountered many challenges. Our first challenge was figuring out how to create a districtwide structure that would meet the needs of all the students in all thirteen of our SLC schools. As stated earlier, we considered it very important not to have thirteen high schools just doing their own thing. Rather, we wanted to come up with a structure that could be evaluated effectively across the district. The four major initiatives emerged from discussions in which all the SLC schools provided input into what that structure would be. The second major challenge has been the logistics of scheduling SLCs so that the teachers in each SLC have a common planning time. Some schools have been able to

accomplish this on their own, but, because of our point system allocation for personnel, some have not. We continue to work with schools on an individual basis with the goal of making this happen in the years to come. Third, as we begin to implement career academies, we face the challenge of consistency in programs of study. While we want each high school to create career academies that meet the needs of their student populations, we want similar academies to have the same programs of study. Thus, we have formed a Career Academy Curriculum Committee that has heard input from the schools as to what kind of career academies they want to offer and how the academies should be structured. This committee began its work this summer with the goal of creating systemwide career academy guidelines and programs of study for all proposed career academies by the end of the first semester in December.

As for results, we are beginning the third year of our first implementation grant and the second year of our second implementation grant. Thus, we don't have any hard numbers to report at this time. We have contracted with an outside evaluator, Wellsys Corporation, which has just begun its initial

evaluation of our first Summer Bridge Program and our Ninth Grade Transition Programs. They will conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the SLC project at each of the 13 high schools, using both quantitative and qualitative data. Feedback from the schools thus far has been very positive, and the opportunity that these grants have afforded our students, teachers, and administrators has created much excitement in our school system.

The USDOE began funding SLCs in fiscal year 2000 with \$45 million and has continued the funding through fiscal year 2004 with almost \$174 million. Each year has brought more stringent accountability measures. For example, the grantees awarded for fiscal year 2002 are required to have an outside evaluator whereas the previous two cohorts did not. The grantees for fiscal year 2004 must be willing to go wall-to-wall with their SLCs by the end of the third year of their implementation grant. Thus, this grant is not for every school or school system. However, we in the DeKalb County School System feel very fortunate to have this opportunity to fund changes we had already begun, and we hope that these grants will allow us to make the landscape of our large high schools more personal and successful for our students. ▲

Using SLC's to Improve Test Scores

By Terri Lozier, Streamwood High School, Streamwood, Illinois

Streamwood High School (SHS) is one of four public high schools in School District U-46, the second largest school district in Illinois. The district serves almost 40,000 students, is experiencing dramatic growth, and continues to absorb 1200 new students per year. SHS is a large, comprehensive high school with a diverse student population. Enrollment for the 2004–2005 school year is over 2400. SHS was placed on the early academic warning list due to low scores on the Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE) for three consecutive years (school years 2001–2004). SHS applied for and received the federal Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) planning grant in 2000 and received the SLC implementation grant in late September 2003 to restructure its school learning community. The major issues to be addressed by the grant included low test scores, evidence of achievement gaps among student populations, student disenfranchisement, and disciplinary actions that detract from student learning time.

The process that led to our successful application started over five years ago. In the spring of 1999, more than 160 stakeholders (teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, students, and business partners) reviewed standardized test results and participated in extensive discussions regarding needs, which led to identification of four all-school goals. Upon receipt of

the planning grant in 2000, a freshman planning committee comprising 14 members (including teachers from each division, guidance counselors, and administrators) was formed to research and develop the SLC. During the 2001–2002 school year, an SLC consisting of 85 randomly selected freshmen was piloted. Based on the success of the pilot, every freshman was placed into an academy in the 2002–2003 school year. In the spring of 2002, SHS applied for but did not receive an implementation grant. The result was a loss of momentum for creating SLCs. Freshmen were placed in academies, but, without resources for professional development, SHS was unable to provide necessary services in skills remediation.

In late March 2003, school staff members and members of the parent/community/business advisory boards were asked to vote on a revised school improvement plan. The plan identified High Schools That Work (HSTW) as the comprehensive school reform (CSR) model provider and moved from four all-school goals to three all-school goals that better reflected the requirements of NCLB in reading, math, and student engagement. A 95.3 percent majority passed the plan. (We believe that having an outside provider, HSTW, contributed significantly to our success in getting the implementation grant.)

The key components of our grant to restructure the school learning community are as follows: (1) all ninth graders, including special needs and limited English proficiency students, will be placed in a freshman academy; (2) placement into the freshman academies will be based entirely upon course selection; (3) students will not be placed according to ability, performance, or any other measure of merit; (4) each academy's teachers will be given common planning periods to discuss curricular and student needs; (5) entering ninth-grade students who read at two or more years below grade level will be placed into reading programs; (6) every student in grades 9–12 will be included in an advisory program in which students stay with the same advisors for four years; (7) all students in grades 10–12 will be eligible to participate in our proposed career pathways (selection of pathways being based on results of the Holland Career Inventory, use of Career Cruising, input of counselors and parent, and the student's choice); (8) the resource center (tutoring center) will be open to all students before and during school hours; (9) all incoming freshmen will go through a day-long orientation program; and (10) a career specialist will help to place students into job shadowing programs.

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We also needed operational strategies to keep the plan moving forward. These include: (1) coordinating all plans with HSTW; (2) providing a rigorous academic core curriculum aligned to state standards (all entering freshmen being required to take algebra and biology); (3) requesting teacher volunteers to be part of the freshman academy program; (4) providing numerous professional development opportunities in content areas, skills across the curriculum, and career development; (5) requiring students who do not meet state standards to be placed in the student-friendly resource center for tutorial help; (6) arranging for low-performing students to work before school or during a study period on activities designed to extend learning time in core subject areas; (7) involving staff in reviewing and revising CSR and SLC initiatives; and (8) informing and involving parents, community leaders, and business representatives in the decision-making processes through the parent and community advisory boards.

One problem we encountered was late notification of receiving the implementation grant. The 2003–2004 school year had already begun, teaching schedules were set, and it was impossible to free up teachers and/or administrators to lead the change initiatives. Another

problem was rescheduling the student day. We needed to do this for advisory periods. This required a change in the teachers' contracts. It took several meetings and several votes (over the course of a year) to finally get the advisory period approved for our school (although some teachers still question the impact that advisories have on students). We also are facing resistance to the implementation of career pathways. We chose the career pathways format suggested by HSTW. The problem we encountered began when we tried placing our already-approved classes into one or more of the career pathways. Teachers and divisions became very territorial and many elective teachers felt that their classes belonged in every pathway. Many teachers saw this as an effort to eliminate teaching positions and courses. We are still working on this to try to satisfy as many teachers as possible without giving up the integrity and purpose of career pathways.

Fortunately, with grant money also come many **benefits to the students we serve**. This year, with planning, we have been able to offer teams that are more heterogeneous than in the past. We have been able to place students who are likely to have difficulty in algebra and biology into extended period classes. Freshmen who are two or more grade levels behind in

reading have been placed into reading classes. We refined our freshman orientation program. Our career specialist is taking all freshmen through Career Cruising. We have monthly advisory programs that began in September. All teachers will be inserviced on the implementation of reading and numeracy strategies. All math teachers will go through differentiated instruction practices. Students in grade nine will choose their classes next year based on our proposed career pathways. We have planned two family literacy nights during which students' families will receive reading strategies to be used at home.

I believe our 8.3 percent increase in Prairie State Achievement Examination scores this year is due primarily to three factors. The first is effective leadership and a common vision for student success. The second is a positive change in school culture. The third is that, because of the penalty phase of NCLB, the staff knew that if they didn't bring about school change, someone else would come in and tell them how to change. Our staff took the initiative because they wanted a voice in how and what the school change would be. We don't always agree with each other, but I believe everyone knows they have the opportunity to be heard. ▲



Using SLC's to Engage Students at the Highest Level

By Lola Beckman, Green River Educational Cooperative, Bowling Green, Kentucky

Green River Regional Educational Cooperative in western Kentucky received the federal Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) implementation grant in 2003. Four of our member schools received the \$1.9 million grant to be disbursed over three years: Apollo High School in Owensboro (Daviess County), Daviess County High School in Owensboro, Ohio County High School in Hartford, and Barren County High School in Glasgow. All are large high schools that needed improvement in meeting annual yearly progress, and all met the other program criteria, including student enrollments of at least 1000.

Our first year has been spent in planning and implementing freshman academies in three of our schools (Apollo, Ohio County, and Daviess County) and a career academy in Barren County High School. The advantage of having a small "academy" community for freshmen is that it improves the transition into high school. Small learning communities help to ensure that every student is engaged at the highest level. They also improve the culture and sense of belonging during the freshman year, reduce the dropout rate and number of disciplinary incidents, and improve attendance and academic achievement. Career academies offer the same

Key Components of the SLC Grant

1. Shared planning for teachers, teacher/advisers, student and teacher teams
2. Integrated curriculum
3. Curriculum collaboration
4. Professional Development opportunities
5. Aid to teachers in the form of curriculum support
6. Stipends for planning time

advantages but also begin to direct the student toward a career cluster that may influence the student's choice of college major. Our plan for the next two years of the grant is to establish career academies in all of the four grant schools and to continue to improve the existing freshman academies.

The key components of the SLC grant are professional development opportunities, aid to

teachers in the form of curriculum support, and stipends for planning time. The strategies of the grant are tied into eight components of the High Schools That Work initiative, which champions high-level courses and challenging assignments for all students, supports career and technical courses, and stresses the meeting

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of standards through added support and the raising of expectations for all. Shared planning for teachers, teacher/advisers, student and teacher teams, integrated curriculum, and curriculum collaboration are all key components of the SLC grant.

Research and data collection played a critical role in our application for the grant and in our plan for SLCs in our schools. Nearly one-third of our students qualify for free/reduced lunch, half scored

below the state-mandated level of proficiency in core content areas, and there are significant achievement gaps within student subgroups (poverty, disability, gender). Nonacademic data are also telling. Among our freshmen, 21 percent fail at least one core content course, and 8 percent are retained (i.e., nearly five times the number of upperclassmen). And, at two of our schools, postsecondary attendance rates are well below the national average.

The goals and objectives of our plan include not only the successful transition from middle school to high school, but also from high school to college.

This has been an exciting opportunity and we look forward to meeting our goals in the next two years. Each step leads us closer to reaching the overall goal of the Green River Regional Educational Cooperative: "Supporting success for every child." ▲

Connecting Students to High School: Smaller Learning Communities at Southeast Raleigh Magnet High School

Nancy Driscoll, Center for Leadership and Technology, Raleigh, North Carolina

See Connecting Students to High School, page 4.

Small Learning Communities

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grades and attendance have a direct impact on college opportunities and adult success—students will take notice. Parental involvement is also essential. When parents plug themselves into the learning community, they learn what is expected of their kids, and how they as parents fit into their children’s educational development. As they become an integral part of the process, they learn how to better encourage the students and hold them accountable. **Local support** is key.

Curriculum is another important aspect of small learning communities. The curriculum becomes the road map for the students and all parties involved in the program. High school curriculum for small learning communities should begin in the 9th grade and include materials that help students transition into high school and develop good life practices, including soft skills, a strong work ethic, and technological skills. As the

students advance through high school they should be given a contextual focus around their academics, but also enough flexibility to be gaining skills that will benefit them no matter where their careers and life paths may take them. **Curriculum** is your guide.

Small learning communities are being encouraged on many fronts, and they have great things to offer to American education. Just remember: When pursuing this initiative, you will have to give it a little **TLC (time, local support, and curriculum)**!

The articles in this issue were written by recipients of the smaller learning communities grants issued by the U.S. Department of Education. Information about SLC grants can be found at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/slcp/index.html>.

Even if you cannot obtain one of these grants, we challenge you to learn about the characteristics and advantages of small learning communities so that you can take steps toward school improvement in your local area.

Reference: Klonsky, Michael. (1998). Small schools: The numbers tell a story. University of Illinois at Chicago. Small Schools Workshop. ▲

Connecting Students to High School

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related to the career field, and students engage in competitions and service activities for which they receive special recognition at graduation.

Our new focus on becoming a principle-centered school of leadership is being infused throughout the school. Staff members are being trained on Covey’s “seven habits of highly effective people,” and our AC program provides discussion topics on such as leadership, habits that promote success, and principle-based decision making. We have also developed a broad leadership-centered “freshman experience” that begins with our summer Bulldog Student Leadership

Institute, which introduces rising freshmen to the school. This introduction is followed by a “9–12” senior mentoring program (in which seniors assigned to 9th-grade AC groups serve as mentor/tutors to our freshmen) and a leadership curriculum. The leadership curriculum is embedded in our English and history classes and delivered by a leadership development staff person.

The unique programs at SRMHS provide wonderful opportunities for the diverse student population at our large, suburban high school. Both neighborhood and magnet students benefit from these programs and the feeling of belonging that they engender. ▲

CONNECTIONS

Kristin Zastoupil, Editor
Mark Whitney, Associate Editor
David Bond, Director, NTPN

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National Tech Prep Network



Questions about Connections?

Contact: Kristin Zastoupil, NTPN,
P.O. Box 21689, Waco, TX 76702-1689;
254-772-5095 ext. 253; or
kzastoupil@cord.org