

# How Small Schools Grew Up and Got Serious (But Didn't Lose Their Spunk)



Leaders with a powerful vision of instruction were able to move ahead swiftly on reforms, generating the needed support in a variety of ways.

**By Diana Oxley and Katie Whitney Luers**

Many large, comprehensive high schools were reorganized into small learning communities (SLCs) and autonomous small schools in the past decade. Some critics say these efforts failed. Others claim these efforts were important experiments for replacing a deficient high school model. Regardless, both the successes and failures of these experiments provide many lessons.

Education Northwest provided technical assistance to the federal Smaller Learning Community Program grantees since the program's inception in 2000. From those experiences, and from research and evaluation of both SLCs and small schools, we have drawn five lessons. The first two lessons point out the central role played by a strong instructional vision in successful SLCs and small schools. The last three lessons identify the kinds of support that were critical to implementing SLCs and small schools. Together, the lessons describe a set of logical propositions for high school redesign that may help steer reforms to more certain outcomes.

## Lessons from High School SLC/Small School Reform Efforts

1. A strong vision of improved instruction needs to drive high school reorganization.
2. A strong vision of improved instruction focuses on strengthening the instructional core.
3. Strengthening the instructional core requires substantial shifts in resources.
4. Swift implementation of SLC/small-school structures allows staff to take up the work of strengthening the instructional core more quickly and effectively.
5. Full and sustained implementation of reforms requires district stewardship.

## Lesson #1: A strong vision of improved instruction needs to drive high school reorganization.

Rigor, relevance, and relationships constituted the small schools mantra. Two of those nouns refer to instruction. In many cases, SLC initiatives aimed to organize teachers and students around thematic and coherent courses of study, yet SLCs and small schools eventually became synonymous with only structural change. Many educators failed to link structural reforms to curricular and instructional improvements.

Why? The explanation that surfaced most frequently was that the curricular and instructional strategies that SLCs and small schools are uniquely suited to support — interdisciplinary collaboration on the-

matically organized curricula and student-centered instructional methods — ran up against academic divisions, standardized testing aligned with these divisions, and a pattern of resource use that shortchanges teacher collaboration, preparation, and development.

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Structural reforms that didn't involve instruction became difficult to justify in the face of pressure to address student underachievement. Limits on funding often led staff to choose instruction over structure.

In contrast, where school and district staffs had an instructional vision strong enough to negotiate these barriers, they saw restructuring as only one dimension of the reforms they needed to pursue to improve high school practices. Districts specified the research-based instructional practices and goals for student achievement that SLCs and small schools are meant to achieve. Districts helped schools mobilize the stakeholder support and leadership needed to implement these practices within each SLC and small school.

### **A Strong Instructional Vision for High School Reorganization**

- Identify the research-based instructional practices that SLC and small-school staffs will use (for example, interdisciplinary collaboration to create program coherence, differentiated instruction);
- Establish goals for student achievement that the practices are expected to achieve;
- Develop a plan for gaining stakeholders' support of desired practices; and
- Require instructional leadership.

When district and school leaders saw instructional improvements as integral to restructuring, they were more likely to leverage the improved relationships with students and parents to improve instruction. Teachers also collaborated more effectively in order to support both student and teacher learning. Interdisciplinary teams that had common planning time frequently used some of this time to discuss the students they shared and to gain important knowledge about students' learning styles, gaps in knowledge and skills, and life circumstances. This information helped them tailor their instruction and respond to student behavior more effectively.

### **Lesson #2: A strong vision of improved instruction focuses on strengthening the instructional core.**

SLCs and small schools that tried to operate as they always did (that is, as comprehensive high schools) inevitably found it difficult to organize all students and teachers in teams that shared common classes and planning time. In order to fill classes, these schools' master schedules continued to slot students for advanced or remedial courses without regard to their team assignment. Similarly, not all teachers on a team shared common planning time. These problems weakened teams' ability to build a strong and coherent program.

Faculty who pursued a vision of teaching and learning that suited a small-scale school adopted strategies geared to "shoring up the core" (Center for American Progress and Education Resource Strategies 2009). What these educators appeared to value most was ensuring that all students master core content. They had to confront the question of how to improve teaching and learning through a common core curriculum, offering different levels of challenge and support to students while preserving the structural integrity of the SLC or small school.

Faculty who focused on creating a strong core curriculum ultimately developed agreements about how to increase rigor, for example, by aligning the curriculum with content and power standards and creating common assessments and benchmarks. In these schools, leaders eliminated remedial course offerings to expose all students to rigorous content. Teachers also developed strategies to support students with a history of underachievement who were now placed in on-grade courses.

Efforts to create a more rigorous curriculum most often proceeded along disciplinary lines. However, many of these schools used interdisciplinary collaboration to strengthen the core curriculum. For example, in a school where SLC staff members focused on writing proficiency, faculty members aligned the methods of teaching writing in each course and analyzed student writing in interdisciplinary team meetings. As a result, student achievement on state writing assessments improved. Teams collaborated on interdisciplinary units and projects organized around real-world problems, common instructional methods and learning routines, and common expectations for successful academic behaviors. The interdisciplinary teams that formed the backbone of these SLCs often made collaboration on instruction seem not only manageable, but the natural course of action.

SLC and small-school structures also created opportunities for vertical alignment of the curriculum. One strategy was to create benchmark interdisciplinary, performance-based assessments, such as sophomore gateway exhibitions or senior projects. Students demonstrated their progress toward mastery of the skills and knowledge related to the theme of their SLC (for example, research, critical thinking, and communication skills that are pertinent to all subject areas).

The structures of SLCs and small schools supported vertical alignment in ways that faculty, by their effort alone, could not. When interdisciplinary teams looped with their students, teachers were able to capitalize on the knowledge they gained of students from one year to the next. Teachers were able to pick up students' learning from where it left off

the previous year, avoid unnecessary instruction of the same material, and save time that's typically spent at the beginning of the year establishing rapport and trust with students. The seamless instruction that became possible in these SLCs and small schools increased learning time and effectiveness.

### Strategies to “Shore up the Core”

- Align instruction with course standards;
- Align instruction with essential skills and knowledge common to all core subjects;
- Create standards-based interdisciplinary units and projects;
- Integrate core content into elective classes;
- Double-dose math and English;
- Link a tutorial to English or math;
- Adopt instructional strategies in common;
- Loop with students to build seamlessly on student learning across grade levels;
- Eliminate remedial courses;
- Eliminate separate classes for students with mild to moderate disabilities; and
- Assign more experienced teachers to 9th- and 10th-grade core courses.

### Lesson #3: Strengthening the instructional core requires substantial shifts in resources.

Creating a rigorous, relevant, and coherent core curriculum required that teachers change their practice and adopt new roles. Teachers required extensive time to collaborate on improving their instructional programs. Developing consensus on the instructional vision, aligning instruction with content standards, developing new interdisciplinary projects, and engaging in collaborative professional learning are all labor intensive. Furthermore, teachers had to take on new responsibilities that might have been the sole function of a specialist in a comprehensive high school. Professional development and planning were needed to help teachers support all students in rigorous heterogeneous classes, perform advisory and intervention roles, and mentor and learn from colleagues.

To help teachers meet these challenges, school leaders sought to create the conditions in which teachers were most likely to take on the challenges and sustain them. Leaders who succeeded in gaining teacher ownership of improvement initiatives restructured working conditions to make this difficult work doable. Teachers particularly welcomed increased instructional time and lowered student loads, which allowed them to incorporate interdisciplinary projects, conduct better formative assessments, and include special education students. Teachers in successful schools used increased collaboration time to

expand their role in student support and accountability for student outcomes. Principals noted that teachers who had been reluctant to take on new challenges were willing to do so under these conditions.

### Create Conditions for Instructional Innovation

- Reduce class size in core subjects, especially in 9th grade;
- Reduce teacher class load and increase instructional time by having teachers teach four instead of five classes for the same number of periods;
- Dedicate large blocks of time for humanities, math/science, and advisory in combination with reduced periods of electives;
- Increase instructional time for 9th-grade core courses by eliminating an elective and lengthening periods;
- Increase common planning time with late school start; and
- Eliminate duties not related to improving instruction.

Strengthening the core by reducing teachers' student loads and increasing instructional time in the core required more teachers in core subject areas. Because no new funds were earmarked for staffing, choices had to be made. Principals used a combination of strategies to staff core subject classes. Core subject teachers were hired to replace retiring or re-assigned teachers of elective courses. Teachers of some advanced courses that could be taught at a nearby community college were reassigned to 9th- and 10th-grade courses. Staff who taught targeted student support programs, such as AVID, returned to instructing the core because SLCs intentionally assumed most of these support functions. And attendance office and security staff members were traded for core subject teachers as SLC teams took responsibility for their students' behavior and the specific areas of the building to which they were assigned.

Reallocating resources often created controversy. Yet, the trade-offs were unavoidable if leaders were to fully support the changes in teacher practice they desired. However, when we first helped leaders examine how they allocated resources, we found clear discrepancies between the improvements they sought and the resources they initially provided for them. For example, in nearly every school we assisted, only about half of the teaching staff was dedicated to core subjects.

Leaders also must confront a question of equity. Analysis of resource allocation patterns reveals that such courses as algebra, which all students are re-

quired to master, receive fewer dollars than courses that only high-achieving students take, such as Advanced Placement courses, which have lower class enrollments and more experienced, higher-paid teachers (Roza 2008). The discrepancy in spending is large. Some small schools and SLCs began to address this inequity through class size reductions of 9th- and 10th-grade core courses or shifting some of the more experienced teachers to these courses.

#### Reallocate Resources to Instructional Core

- Cull elective offerings of weak courses;
- Move advanced courses to community colleges;
- Phase out staff assignments where functions were addressed by SLCs;
- Increase class size of some elective courses; and
- Require every certified staff member to teach one or more classes.

#### Lesson #4: Swift implementation of SLC structures allows staff to take up instructional improvement more quickly and effectively.

Many reformers believe that high school re-design takes years to accomplish. The federal Smaller

Learning Community grants began as three-year grants. Grantees often used the first year to plan and cultivate teacher ownership of the plan and the second and third years to implement 9th-grade houses and teams. At this pace and over this time period, they were unable to document much improvement in student outcomes as a result of their restructuring. Even in later years, when grants were awarded for five years, efforts to extend interdisciplinary teaming, common planning time, and thematic programs to upper-grade-level students and teachers frequently encountered barriers. Leaders in these schools scaled back plans to restructure and pursued other improvement strategies.

A decided advantage of many small schools was the ability to sidestep wide-scale changes to the existing school, to hire staff who supported the model, and to start fresh. Even under these circumstances, small schools often grew slowly, admitting a new class of 9th graders each year, advancing existing classes to the next higher grade, and not reaching full capacity until four years later. Once leaders implemented reforms, they struggled to sustain them in the face of such threats as staff turnover, community resistance, weak student outcomes, and unstable funding.

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Despite the many barriers to implementation that slowed or stalled progress of SLC and small-school reforms, some schools managed to quickly implement wall-to-wall SLC structures. Two high schools in New York City, for example, designed their reforms in one year and implemented them in the next so staff could quickly begin the work of improving instruction, assured of the full support of the new structure, distributed leadership, and interdisciplinary teams. These schools enjoyed stable and strong school leadership and were guided and supported by well-established third-party partners (Duch 2009). They may also have benefited from New York City's long history of restructuring comprehensive high schools.

In these schools, third-party partners supplied and supported a model for instructional improvement while teacher leaders within each SLC guided and monitored teachers' work. The design of SLCs followed no single model, varying from school to school. The constant was the goal of fully organizing teachers and students into SLCs in the year following the planning year. According to school leaders, the condensed time frame paid off in improved student attendance and school climate. Noting these gains, teachers were much more willing to accept the structural changes and take on the challenge of improving instruction.

### Expedite Implementation

- Use initial year for planning, followed by full implementation of SLC structures in the second year;
- Approach restructuring as a means to instructional improvement;
- Engage third-party partners to supply and support a model for instructional improvement; and
- Build teacher and community ownership based on results of restructuring.

### Lesson #5: Full and sustained implementation of reforms requires district stewardship.

School districts that adopted a districtwide policy to reorganize high schools into SLCs or small schools generated excitement and momentum for the reforms even as they stirred controversy. High school reforms in these districts enjoyed sustained support from district leaders and the community.

In districts where only some of the high schools pursued reorganization, a different pattern emerged. Many schools under these conditions are still struggling to implement reforms or have backed away from them. Where reforms were implemented at a

high level, usually in small schools, some staff members now find their work threatened by district or community leaders who want to revisit the decision to reorganize schools.

High schools selected for reorganization were often the lowest performing and served the highest concentrations of disadvantaged families. They sometimes showed little improvement after reorganization. The district policy of creating a mix of traditional and reorganized high schools conveyed the notion that high school transformation is an intervention rather than a set of best practices that improve education for the highest as well as the lowest performing students. The comprehensive high schools serving more affluent neighborhoods and graduating more college-bound students reinforced the perception that good schools are large and offer a plethora of advanced courses.

While reforms may have improved the climate of these reorganized schools, they were not accompanied by district actions to attract experienced staff, stem staff turnover, or provide intensified professional learning. Furthermore, these districts did not seek to collaborate with unions to alter hiring practices, create new policies on school choice and autonomy, or change schedules or transportation.

### Augment District Support for SLC/Small School Reforms

- Pursue districtwide reforms of all high schools in line with best practices;
- Recruit strong teachers and leaders;
- Support school schedules and transportation flexibility to meet learning and professional collaboration needs; and
- Collaborate effectively with unions to create flexible hiring practices.

## CONCLUSION

Faculty of successful SLCs and small schools were able to re-envision high school instruction as a well-taught, rigorous, core curriculum. With a powerful vision of instruction, leaders were more inclined to move swiftly on structural reforms and make the trade-offs in resource use required for instructional improvements. Not least, district leaders were more likely to generate a level of support needed to implement and sustain the reforms.

These lessons emerged from our broad-based evaluations of restructuring efforts. Better informed efforts should help increase implementation of these reforms and reveal their merit more clearly. **■**