Lessons Learned From High School SLC and Small School Reform Efforts
Diana Oxley and Katie Whitney Luers

For the last decade, small learning communities (SLCs) and small schools have dominated the education landscape as curbs for large comprehensive high schools' failings: high dropout rates and graduates unprepared for postsecondary careers and college. Recently, redesign efforts have begun to falter in light of evaluations showing stalled implementation and limited impacts. Education leaders and practitioners are left to wonder, should we cut our losses and pin our hopes on another reform movement? Evidence and the experience of Education Northwest, gained from working with more than 1,200 secondary schools and districts nationwide during the past six years, offer three reasons for not following that course. First, research suggests that high school improvement has less to do with identifying another, "better" reform than implementing the current strategies fully and faithfully. The six lessons that follow identify key issues for implementing SLCs and small schools more effectively. The first three lessons point out the critical need to put a coherent vision of quality instruction at the forefront of any high school reorganization effort. The last three lessons identify the supports needed for effective and sustained implementation of reforms.

A strong vision of improved instruction needs to drive high school reorganization

Educators have tended to approach SLCs and small schools as merely structural changes. However, when a strong instructional vision drives reorganization, district and school staffs see restructuring itself as only one dimension of the reforms they need to pursue to institute high school best practice. The vision for instruction specifies the research-based instructional practices and goals for student achievement that SLCs and small schools are meant to achieve. For example, one large urban district specified in its transformation initiative that "participating schools will use their small size to develop focused and coherent instructional programs which include challenging and relevant curricula that develop students' basic literacy skills and result in high-level competencies in all subject areas." Their stated goals were to "graduate at least 90 percent of ninth-graders in four years and ensure all students graduate ready for college with real postsecondary options."

Lessons learned 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 capitalizes on small scale
3. A vision that capitalizes on small scale focuses on strengthening the instructional core
4. Substantial changes in resource allocation are required to strengthen the instructional core
5. Swift implementation of SLC/small school structures allows staff to take up the work of strengthening the instructional core more quickly and effectively
6. Full and sustained implementation of reforms requires district stewardship

Lessons

Our first three lessons suggest that staff members and leaders of successful SLCs and small schools and their districts are able to re-envision quality instruction at the high school level as a well-taught, rigorous core curriculum. The second three lessons suggest that successful SLCs and small schools require substantive forms of support. Supports that proved critical included more focused and effective use of resources and a short time line for restructuring designed to create conditions for targeted instructional innovation. Not least, district leaders "had the backs" of these schools.

These lessons emerged from broad-based observations and evaluations of restructuring efforts, but it remains to be seen whether they can lead to success at scale. Better informed efforts should help to improve implementation and reveal more clearly the merit of these reforms.

References


For more on Recreating Secondary Schools, access the resources at educationnorthwest.org, in the Projects section or contact Diana Oxley at Diana.Oxley@educationnorthwest.org, 503.275.9613.

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2 Strategies to create a coherent vision of quality instruction for high schools

- Specify the research-based instructional practices that high school staffs will use.
- Establish goals for student achievement.
- Use interdisciplinary teams as the key mechanism for professional development, instructional improvement, and student support.
- Align curriculum with course standards, essential skills, and knowledge common to all course subparts.
- Support all students to succeed in rigorous courses through targeted supports, elimination of remedial courses, and inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classes.
- Build strong, long-term relationships between teachers and students through looping, advisories, and interdisciplinary team collaboration.

3 A strong vision of improved instruction capitalizes on small scale

A central question for SLCs and small schools is how to capitalize on instructional improvements that high school staffs will use. Establish goals for student achievement. Use interdisciplinary teams as the key mechanism for professional development, instructional improvement, and student support. Align curriculum with course standards, essential skills, and knowledge common to all course subparts. Support all students to succeed in rigorous courses through targeted supports, elimination of remedial courses, and inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classes.

4 A vision that capitalizes on small scale focuses on strengthening instructional core

SLCs and small schools that attempt to operate as they always have (i.e., as comprehensive high schools with many course offerings and levels) inevitably find it difficult to organize all students and teachers within teams that share common classes and planning time. This substantially weakens teams’ ability to build a strong and coherent program.

How can staff members provide the challenges and support all students need while preserving the structural integrity of the SLC? The answer is to “shore up the core,” signaling that all students’ mastery of core content is the priority. Leaders eliminate remedial course offerings to expose all students to rigorous content. Staff members develop complementary strategies to support students with a history of underachievement by offering them a double dose of math or English. They may also offer tutorials that are taught by the same teacher as the core course or hold academic advisories.

5 Substantial changes in resource allocation are required to strengthen the instructional core

Creating a rigorous, relevant, and coherent core curriculum requires SLC and small school teachers to change their practice and adopt new roles. Teachers need extensive periods of time to collaborate on improving instruction and to take on new responsibilities that might have been the sole function of a specialist in a comprehensive high school. Professional development, planning, and collegial exchange require resources.

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 smaller student loads. Strengthening the core in these ways required more teachers in core subjects and more discussions among teachers about ways to make in allocating resources among course offerings and services. Principals used a combination of strategies to manage resources to the core, such as eliminating electives and partnering with community colleges to offer advanced courses.

These trade-offs can be controversial, but they are unavoidable. Leaders have to confront the question of equity. Analysis of resource allocation patterns reveals that required courses such as algebra receive significantly fewer dollars than courses that only high-achieving students take, such as Advanced Placement courses with lower class enrollments and more experienced, higher paid teachers (Rora, 2008).

6 Swift implementation of SLC/small school structures allows staff to take up the work of strengthening the instructional core more quickly and effectively

A widespread belief among reformers has been that high school redesign takes years to accomplish since it involves whole school transformation, cultural change, and structural reorganization to support instructional innovation. A typical pattern that reforms have followed is a year of planning, followed by incremental steps to establish ninth-grade houses, and then eventual scaling back of plans to extend interdisciplinary teaming to upper grade students in the face of multiple electives and pathways.

In spite of the many barriers to implementation that slow or stall progress of SLC and small school reforms, some schools manage to move quickly to implement SLC structures. Their goal has been to design the reforms in one year and implement them in the next so that staff can quickly begin to improve instruction, aided by the new structures. These schools often enjoy stable and strong school leadership and receive support from well-established, third-party partners.

“Quick wins” have become a recognized element of turning around low-performing schools. Slow progress in implementation does little to purchase teacher ownership of reforms and may actually work against it. Incomplete implementation postpones results; in turn, postponed results weaken the case for reform. The onus of leadership is to create a plan that provides a next-year time line for implementing SLCs.

In our work, we have observed that 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 leaders in these districts enjoy stable and strong school leadership and receive support from well-established, third-party partners.

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### Strategies to support and sustain implementation of SLCs/small schools

1. **Align existing resources with needs for improving the instructional core**
   - **Lower class size, especially at the ninth-grade level**
   - **Reduce teachers’ class load**
   - **Increase instructional time**
   - **Increase teacher quality by moving experienced staff to ninth and tenth grades**
   - **Assign teachers on special assignment to the core**

2. **Follow initial year of planning with schoolwide implementation of structures in the second year**

3. **Invite third-party partners to support instructional improvement**

4. **Adapt SLCs/small schools as high school best practice at district level**
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