



**Implementation of Small Learning Communities
2009**

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Preface

Due to high drop out rates and other problems plaguing urban high schools nation-wide, large districts have been converting their high schools to small, semi-autonomous units, called small learning communities (SLCs). The aim of SLCs is to improve academic achievement through personalized and relevant instruction in a small and nurturing setting. The creation of SLCs is a relatively recent reform with a developing research base, generally based on small schools research. In light of the benefits found (Cotton, 1996; Raywid, 1996; Fine & Sommerville, 1998; Lee et al, 2000; Allen and Steinberg, 2004) and the need to improve high schools failing large numbers of students, the U.S. Department of Education, Local Education Agencies (LEAs), and private foundations have provided funds to convert large high schools to SLCs. In line with nation-wide efforts, LAUSD is mandating that all high schools implement SLCs. In February of 2005, the Superintendent issued Bulletin 1600, a policy requiring the new construction of small schools and the redesign of large secondary schools into SLCs. At the time of this research project, 28 LAUSD high schools had their redesign plans approved and had begun implementation. Currently, over 50 high schools have begun the process of redesigning their schools. This study investigates the conditions and practices that support, and present challenges to, SLC implementation.

Data for this report was collected from three LAUSD comprehensive high schools, which had begun implementing SLCs. Interviews were conducted with administrators, SLC coordinators, School Improvement Facilitators, teachers and counselors. In addition, data collectors observed various meetings and professional development events at each site. General school-wide observations were also conducted.

This report highlights successful SLC implementation practices as well as challenges with which schools struggle. The aim is that the district learns more about how schools address the various attributes of SLCs and how to best support them. School sites can also use the findings presented here to understand other schools' experiences with SLCs and hopefully glean helpful lessons.

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Introduction

In this report, we present a study of the implementation of Small Learning Communities (SLCs) at three large LAUSD high schools. These schools completed their first year of implementation of their district-approved SLC plans in spring 2007. Sample schools may have been implementing all or some variation of the SLC components for more than one year, but this was the first year they were held to district standards for SLC implementation. The study schools experienced a range of successes and challenges in their first year of implementation.

We conducted in-depth case studies in three sample schools to provide insight into the conditions and practices that support, and present challenges to, implementation of SLCs, including New Technology High Schools (“New Techs”).¹ We hope this report serves to provide the district with valuable lessons to inform the continued and improved implementation of SLCs.

Methods

The purpose of this study is to provide information to decision makers regarding the evolution of SLC implementation in the district. In this study we addressed the following major research questions:

- What practices and conditions exist in three large urban high schools and SLCs that support SLC implementation and development?
- What practices and conditions exist that impede SLC implementation and development?

These questions were addressed using a qualitative case study method implemented in three high schools. Two research assistants were assigned to each school. These data collectors observed a variety of meetings and events that took place at the schools, and conducted relevant teacher and administrator interviews. Data collection occurred at each school between February and June 2007. While our study reveals findings from three

¹ At the time of the study, New Technology High Schools (New Techs) were considered SLCs and were held to the same attributes as SLCs by the district. However, unlike most SLCs, New Techs had their own location code and many New Tech personnel and students considered the New Tech a separate school.

unique cases, the themes that emerge are likely to be relevant and salient at other schools as well. The lessons learned can inform challenges to be met at other high schools.

Research and Background

As a response to high dropout rates and urban high schools' inability to meet the needs of all of its students, school districts have begun converting large comprehensive high schools into small, semi-autonomous units, or "small learning communities" (SLCs). The aim of SLCs is to improve academic achievement, particularly for students attending low-performing schools, through more personalized and relevant instruction. The goal is for teachers to form relationships with students, keeping them engaged with school and performing well academically.

The creation of SLCs is a relatively recent reform with a developing research base. The SLC movement is generally based on school size research (Allen & Steinberg, 2004; Cotton, 1996), which suggests that small schools enrolling a few hundred students are more effective than large schools at educating students (Raywid, 1998), particularly "socially marginal" students (Garbarino, 1980) and those from low socio-economic and minority backgrounds (Fine & Somerville, 1998; Lee, Smerdon, Alfeld-Liro, & Brown, 2000). Research on adolescent development also argues that small high schools make more sense for students (Farrell, 1990). Small, personalized environments can foster positive adult-student relationships, healthy adolescent development, and facilitate academic achievement for disadvantaged students.

All other factors being equal, smaller high schools yield higher attendance and graduation rates, lower dropout rates, higher academic achievement, more equitable outcomes due to less stratification within the school, increased parent involvement, and a safer and more orderly environment than large schools. College-going rates, extracurricular participation, teacher attitudes and satisfaction, and curriculum quality are all positively correlated with small schools (Fine & Somerville, 1998; Raywid, 1998). However, small schools differ from SLCs in important ways. Small schools are autonomous units generally housed in one building. SLCs are clusters of students and teachers, grouped thematically, that exist within the facilities of a large campus; therefore they may not have the autonomy and independence of a free-standing small school.

It is important to note that simply reducing a school's size is not enough to realize the benefits of small learning communities. Current research is mixed regarding the impact of SLCs on student achievement. Studies show that large high schools converting to SLCs create more personalized environments and a more positive school climates, although instructional reform is not always evident (Kahne, Sporte, de la Torre & Easton, 2008). However, when SLCs are well operated and implemented under the right conditions, they can produce the advantages of small schools (Cotton, 2001).

According to district guidelines, SLC development in LAUSD is to occur along the following seven attributes, which are aligned with characteristics of effective SLCs.

- Unifying vision and identity
- Rigorous and standards-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment
- Equity and access
- Personalization
- Accountability and distributed leadership
- Collaboration, parent and community engagement
- Professional development²

In addition, the district implemented New Techs at four secondary school sites during the study year. This initiative promotes personalized education, enhanced use of technology in instruction, project-based learning (PBL), and co-teaching across traditional subject boundaries. Many of the intended attributes of SLCs are also expected to be realized in the New Techs, with a goal of improving student outcomes including test scores, graduation rates, and college admissions.

Overview of the Report

In Chapter 1 of this report, we present a brief description of our study schools and the findings by SLC attribute. With Chapter 2, we present a discussion of overall supports and challenges to SLC implementation, and conclude with lessons gleaned from our study, and actionable recommendations. In the appendices, we present a literature review

² We learned that in practice, these attributes overlap and are not mutually exclusive. Themes tended to reappear when studying the different attributes; for example, interdisciplinary thematic curricula is discussed in the 'identity' section as well as the 'rigorous and standards-based curriculum' section.

on SLCs, organized around the seven attributes of successful SLC implementation as determined by the district. The appendices also include a description of our data collection and research methods, descriptions of the three case study schools in our sample, and their respective SLCs.

Chapter 1: **Findings**

All of the schools in our sample included thematic SLC units, as well as some combination of units that differed somewhat from SLCs such as New Techs, magnets and 9th grade academies. School A, a three-track high school, included a Humanitas and a Career and Technical Pathways (CTE) program. This “high” implementing school included a 9th Grade Academy divided into three “houses,” one for each track. On Track A, the Education and Police Academy SLCs and Law and Government Magnet were in session; Track B offered the Hospitality Tourism and Recreation, and Arts, Media and Entertainment SLCs; and Engineering & Design and the Public Services SLCs met on Track C.

In the year preceding data collection (2005-06), School B went from a multi- to single-track schedule. We consider their level of implementation to be “medium” in this sample. School B had four SLCs and one New Tech. The four SLCs at School B included: CAE (Creative Arts and Expression), GOAL (Global Outlook through Active Leadership), TPA (Teacher Preparation Academy), and ABC (Academy of Business and Communication).

School C began implementing four SLCs and a New Tech during 2006-07. School C worked with Talent Development and included a 9th Grade Academy, a Visual and Performing Arts Academy, a Health Science Academy and a Legal Studies Academy. In addition, School C housed a Math, Science, and Technology Magnet program. In our sample, School C endured the most challenges and was considered a “low” implementer.

In this section, we report overall findings for each SLC attribute, including general themes that emerged from our data. We highlight commonalities and variations between and among schools and SLCs. Because schools were in an early stage of implementation, we were able to collect more data for some attributes than for others.

Vision and Identity

Visions are statements that define and guide the mission and goals of the school or SLC. The vision can also encompass norms and expectations of students and

personnel. Although not always clearly identified as a school vision, sample schools had school-wide statements of commitments to their students' success. All of the SLCs, as expressed in the plans they submitted to the district, had well-articulated, thoughtful visions and distinct identities. SLC visions aligned cohesively with school-wide visions, which tended to be more broad and all-encompassing. SLCs displayed their visions in print brochures and informational materials distributed to incoming students, parents, and school and community members. While each SLC had a specific focus, all shared a commitment to helping students become well-rounded, literate and successful in various aspects of life after high school. For example, the TPA vision at School B stated that TPA “focuses on preparing students for career choices in the field of education and for post-secondary success.” The Health Science Academy at School C stated that it “will prepare students for both college and careers by helping them discover how learning and working are intertwined...” and “will provide students the opportunity to know first-hand the real world of health science careers.” The mission statement (synonymous with vision, in this case) of the Arts, Media & Entertainment Academy at School A stated that the SLC “combines academic rigor and modern technological skills to prepare students upon graduation for entry-level positions and post-secondary programs in media and design arts.”

Teachers and students were not always aware that the school might have a school-wide *and* that the SLC had its own unique vision. For example, in some cases, teachers followed the school-wide vision and may not have been aware of the SLC vision. When asked what the vision of his SLC was, one teacher responded,

That's a good question.....ha, ha, ha! To my knowledge we're just sticking with the vision of the school.....trying to build life-long learners. Ever since the first WASC visit back in 2004, that's always been the vision....so unless it changed you know....that's the vision that we're sticking with because it does provide unity school-wide anyways.
(Teacher, School C)

This teacher's comment alluded to the relationship between the school-wide and the SLC visions. It is unclear whether students and teachers felt a greater affinity to their school as a whole or to their SLC, and what the implications of focusing more strongly on one or the other might have been. The teacher quoted above implies an importance of school-

wide unity. Whether teachers and students should focus on school-wide visions or strengthen individual SLC visions remains an open question.

Some respondents discussed concrete ways in which the school and SLC visions were implemented. For example, in the School C's Legal Academy, teachers described norms for behavior and work habits in every classroom within that SLC. Legal Academy teachers met to discuss expectations for classroom instruction and behavior and how to communicate these to students consistently. As one teacher reported, "We've talked about how we want a legal or a law and justice classroom to look a certain way ... when a teacher says 'we're doing group work,' there are already certain norms and expectations that everyone knows like, 'hey, I'm in this academy and this is the expectation ...'" (Teacher, School C). However, the teachers did not specify how norms were communicated to students or whether the students ascribed to the norms.

SLC identities were also clearly spelled out in their written descriptions, and made evident in various ways. SLC identities were defined by each SLC's theme, such as Health Sciences or Visual and Performing Arts, and held together by distinct groups of students and teachers. Respondents shared that when students took all or most of their classes in their home SLC, identity was solidified. At School A, SLCs were over 90% "pure," meaning that almost all students were placed in one of the SLCs. Some "passporting," traveling between two or more SLCs, occurred for uncommon classes such as Advanced Placement (AP) and language classes. In classes in which students from two SLCs were represented, the teacher had to tie in the content with the two corresponding themes. SLC pride and identity was strong at School A, and the administration also continued to encourage school-wide unity. Students were reminded that they were part of a larger School A identity.

At School B, school-wide identity and solidarity was strengthened through a universal effort to thwart attempts by a nearby charter school to recruit potential School B students. In response to the charter school's presence, School B created a strong recruitment program; marketing School B as a whole school rather than having individual SLCs recruit students on their own. The school emphasized the range of programs (e.g., SLCs, sports) they could offer that charter schools could not. In this case, school-wide identity took priority over individual SLC identity.

Schools and SLCs used a variety of strategies to reinforce their identities. SLCs often implemented their identities through SLC logos and colors. Some SLCs even had mascots and t-shirts that the students wore to identify their SLC. In most cases, students designed and voted on the SLCs' colors and logos, which created a sense of pride, ownership and investment among students in their SLC. However, in some cases, the SLC identity remained at the superficial level for students. As one teacher stated, "I think we're the same as other SLCs here on campus. I think it's a label where the kids go 'ok, we're *this*' but I don't think they really understand the purpose of this SLC. I think uniforms would be good for group identity, but I don't think the kids would like it" (Teacher, School C). Identifying with a small, cohesive group may benefit students in some ways, such as giving them an identity even if only in name; but many students may not have fully grasped the underlying academic focus of the SLC.

Another way SLCs demonstrated their identities was through maintaining and caring for their distinct physical environments. Teachers and students contributed to the SLC space to make it their own. At one New Tech, teachers and students planted a garden providing both a pleasant aesthetic environment and fruit bearing trees. At School A, each SLC had what was called a "WOW Room" which exemplified the theme of the SLC. For example, the Arts, Media and Entertainment SLC had a film studio, and the Law and Government Magnet had a courtroom. School C worked with an external agency, Architects for Achievement, with whom the School Improvement Facilitator (SIF) met weekly, to create unique contiguous spaces for each SLC on campus.

SLCs also solidified their identities through their curricula and instruction, including field trips and events that reinforced the theme of their community. For example, the Fire Academy at School A took a field trip to a fire station. At School C, the Health Science SLC put on a health fair at the end of the year. Teachers also used thematic projects, led by an essential question to guide each interdisciplinary unit within an SLC. In the School of Engineering & Design, the question for a 10th grade curriculum was "Is it possible to become so comfortable with structure that one ceases to grow?" The questions that guided each unit within the curriculum included: "How does form follow function?" and "How do the parts affect the whole?" These questions applied to each core course. For example, in science, students learned about genetics and mutation, and in

world history students studied the industrial revolution under the same guiding question. While thematic units were successful in cohesive SLCs, teachers in general expressed a desire for more professional development on how to incorporate themes into their content areas. Math and science teachers in particular struggled with this aspect of thematic teaching.

New Techs differed from most SLCs because of their unique position and identity. These schools considered themselves completely separate small schools. At most New Techs, students wore uniforms and each school had its own theme (e.g., Youth Empowerment). In addition, New Techs had their own administration and approached instruction through project-based learning (PBL), which enabled teachers to collaborate on instruction through themed projects instead of isolated activities. Such an approach facilitated the implementation of the school's theme through everyday instruction.

While SLCs were successful to varying degrees in implementing their visions and identities, they also encountered some challenges. Some teachers, especially lead teachers, found it difficult to implement the vision of their SLC because of the SLC's lack of autonomy from the school as a whole. The SLC concept runs counter to how most teachers and administrators operate a school. Running semi-autonomous units within one large school can be a challenge for most educators. One lead teacher attributed the inadequate autonomy to the lack of knowledge about how to implement this innovative design. He stated,

The problems we have are based on the fact that we are expected to be autonomous but are not.... why? Because they just don't know how to do it. The counselors and the principal just do not know how to do it. They've gone to see other SLCs at schools, but what they know is only the traditional concept. (Lead Teacher, School C)

As demonstrated above, some sample SLCs with strong leaders and high levels of teacher collaboration were able to implement their identities through interdisciplinary themes. But in some cases, SLCs had difficulty realizing their themes through integrated instruction. One School B teacher spoke about his SLC and the difficulty with carrying out its theme, as well as the importance of SLC leadership:

The intent was to teach students about the large global community that is culturally and economically linked. There haven't been any steps towards it though. GOAL didn't coalesce. Its spirit didn't coalesce. The leaders

didn't unify it. The administration and lead teachers were negligent. I feel bad that GOAL doesn't work. It could work in the future. We're trying to turn it around right now. The new lead teacher jumped right in. He's very positive on the SLC concept. (Teacher, School B)

Conditions which enabled SLCs in our study to implement their visions included strong leadership, sufficient autonomy from the main school, and teacher collaboration. We found that high functioning SLCs had leaders who were proactive and committed to the SLC design but who also provided autonomy to their teachers. When teachers worked well together and bought into their SLC's vision, led by effective and dedicated lead teachers, they were able to create multi- and inter-disciplinary units that covered core content areas, met state standards, and were tied together by a unifying theme related to the vision of the SLC. Interdisciplinary themes solidified SLC identities. Furthermore, participants informed us that SLC staff required sufficient autonomy to make decisions related to schedule, curricula, and materials, but that lead teachers and administrators also needed ongoing support as to how to effectively guide their SLC toward implementing its identity and vision for student success.

Standards-Based Curriculum

All SLCs were expected to offer a standards-based curriculum embodying high expectations and a college-preparation focus to their students. In the three schools we studied, a standards-based curriculum was supposed to be aligned with the requirements for admission to the University of California or California State University systems, the A-G requirements. At the time of data collection, district graduation requirements for all students were being aligned with the A-G requirements. In addition to offering such content, SLCs were expected to make every effort to monitor student performance and use that data to drive decision making for improvement.

SLCs in each of the three schools offered a standards-based curriculum designed to prepare students for college acceptance. The SLCs offered many courses that would fulfill the A-G requirements. However, advanced courses, such as AP classes, were not offered by every SLC. Students were given the option of "passporting" to other SLCs that offered a particular course. While this practice might have threatened the purity of the

SLC, administrators and teachers in each of the three schools noted that “passporting” was necessary when additional teachers could be hired or if there was not enough interest for an SLC to sustain entire sections of the course.

The most common SLC-level strategy to ensure that a standards-based curriculum was being offered to all students was through the offering of thematic, interdisciplinary units. All SLCs in each of the three schools had a thematic focus. Teachers in each SLC designed their curricula to fit this focus with varying degrees of success. In School A, teachers in many SLCs spoke of collaborating with other teachers within and across SLCs to develop thematically relevant lessons. As described above, we observed professional development where writing assignments were structured around broad questions like “why is society so interdependent?” and “how is the whole the sum of its parts?” Each SLC developed prompts specific to its thematic orientation. In School B, the principal noted that SLC success with thematic development depended on the experience and creativity of the teachers. He reported that more experienced and creative teachers were able to create coherent thematic units while less experienced teachers were not. There were higher concentrations of less experienced teachers in School B’s struggling SLCs. School C showed little success with developing thematic units. One teacher was quoted as saying, “There are no major differences from the SLC to the traditional school practices only that now you are labeled as a Legal Academy and have to integrate some aspects of it in the curriculum.” However, other teachers noted that the reason for being unable to organize instruction thematically was the wide-ranging ability levels of their students. They explained that when classrooms had students with reading levels ranging from 2nd to 11th grade, they believed it was difficult to organize thematic instruction to all students.

In each of the schools, math and science teachers expressed frustration at the difficulty of integrating their content into the thematic units. The subject matter being addressed in math and science classes did not necessarily make it easy to adapt to different thematic curricula. A teacher in School A gave the example of trying to adapt Algebra to a unit on film studies in her media-focused SLC. She found it much more difficult to do so than her peers teaching English and social studies.

Other challenges made it difficult for teachers to implement a standards-based curriculum. For example, math teachers in School C also had to contend with changes in class scheduling that interfered with their normal lesson pacing plans. School C converted to block scheduling, where four 90-minute instructional periods were offered instead of more and shorter periods. Several math teachers stated that the lessons from their textbooks required a 45- to 60-minute period and could not be adapted to a 90-minute period without wasted instructional time.

Administrators in all three schools stated that SLC staff was expected to examine standardized test and course grade data on a regular basis to determine the success of their thematic units. This examination was meant to drive SLC-level improvement. Teachers in all three schools noted that they looked at student test scores within their SLCs. However, the degree to which they examined student data varied. In School A, SLC staff was observed examining student standardized test data and changing an upcoming essay assignment to address student weaknesses in writing sub-scores. In School B, staff from the SLC that emphasized project-based learning was observed examining student performance on projects. In School C, several teachers stated that student scores were examined but we did not observe this occurring.

The high implementing school had well-established interdisciplinary thematic units through which a standards-based curriculum was delivered. However, schools and SLCs varied to the degree with which they offered a rigorous standards-based (college preparatory) curriculum to all students. Integrating themes with core content, multi-disciplinary, teaching and adapting to changing schedules all presented real challenges for teachers in delivering standards-based instruction in a newly designed SLC structure.

Equity and Access

SLCs should be designed to ensure heterogeneous student groupings, with access to rigorous curricula and equitable services for all students. Ideally, students in the sample schools should have been placed in SLCs in accordance with their choice and curricular interest, not their achievement level or language status. Sample schools reported that students had the opportunity to choose their SLC, but in cases in which students did not make a choice, they were placed based on availability and space. All

SLCs examined at the three study schools were designed to be equitable and offer a rigorous curriculum, including college preparatory courses, to all students. However, we observed some challenges in implementing true equity in all SLCs school-wide. At best, students were placed according to their choice; however their choices were limited to a few SLCs or by schedule (for example, in the multi-track school). In the least equitable cases, some SLCs were seen as the “default” SLC, or those having the lowest performing students. We found that schools generally had difficulty addressing the needs of English learners (ELs) and students with disabilities through SLCs. Barriers to achieving equity in our three study schools revolved around several major issues: the concentration of teachers with the least dedication or skills in one SLC, the perception of student quality or ability, logistics (e.g., scheduling and school calendars), meeting the needs of English learners and meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

One of the biggest concerns of SLCs regarding equity was the uneven placement of teachers across SLCs. At one school, respondents described one of the SLCs as the “old white male” SLC. When the school was beginning to implement and shape its SLCs, the teachers who comprised this SLC did not choose to be design team members nor did they choose one of the other SLCs. Respondents, including the principal, reported that these teachers were older, veteran, traditionally-minded teachers who had not bought in to the SLC reform, and who, by default, had all ended up in the same SLC. In addition, some teachers at School C reported they did not have a choice about their placement. The grouping of similarly disinterested or unmotivated teachers in one SLC had potentially negative implications for the students in that SLC. These students may have been denied the benefits of a SLC experience, including personalization and integrated thematic instruction.

Some informal tracking of students into SLCs and New Techs also took place. At our lowest performing school, challenges to student equity were most obvious. New Tech teachers at School C reportedly complained that they had the “worst” students. They also reported that students who wanted to be in New Tech were not placed there, but that New Tech became a “dumping ground” for low-achieving and poorly-behaved students. Because of this perception, New Tech teachers were open about their desire to get the “best students” from School C’s main campus. Teachers were observed discouraging

each other from recruiting “undesirable” students. When considering recruitment of a particular student, one teacher was observed stating, “look at [the student’s] friends... we don’t just want students here [who] want to play on computers.”

School staff also grappled with challenges such as scheduling limitations and lack of resources, which prohibited true equity across all SLCs. In multi-track schools district-wide, attendance and performance tend to be lower on B track. At our multi-track study school, there were no AP classes offered on B track. Some schools simply could not offer AP classes in all of their SLCs because they lacked teachers or sufficient numbers of students. If one SLC offered an AP class that others did not, AP was identified with that particular SLC even if students from other SLCs took the class. This situation exemplifies the tension between “wall to wall” enrollment and the “purity” of SLCs with respect to equity and access. When schools go “wall to wall,” it means all students on campus are placed in an SLC. However, it is difficult to maintain distinctions between SLCs when students spillover into other SLCs to take classes not offered in their home SLC. This phenomenon throws off an equitable heterogeneous balance of students in each SLC if, for example, high performing students across SLCs are leaving their home SLC to take AP classes in one particular SLC.

Other logistical issues included a lack of teachers. Because some schools lacked sufficient staff, several science and remedial math teachers reported teaching classes across SLCs. One teacher noted that his SLC needed more math teachers. Although he used to have an aide who was a tremendous help, especially with the lower performing students in his class, after the SLC changed to 4x4 block scheduling, his aide was moved into another SLC. This loss made it challenging for the math teacher to attend to all students in his class. As he explained, “The fast kids always complain that they are not being challenged and are bored, and the slow kids say they need more help. Both the groups get bored if they don’t get my assistance.”

Challenges involving ELs reflected a tension between striving toward heterogeneity and meeting student needs on a practical level. At School B, most of the EL students were in one SLC. But, as respondents argued, if ELs were spread out across SLCs they would not receive the services they need. As the lead teacher reported, “Unfortunately, the SLC movement, while it’s great in some ways, has really hurt ESL

students in general because the resources have been spread out. But we've managed in this way to make them still available." At our most successful school, ELs were distributed across SLCs but the school struggled with providing adequate services to all. The school leaders were pondering moving all ESL students into one SLC, although they realize that this raised concerns about equity.

In addition across SLCs, many teachers found it easier to teach ELs of the same level in one classroom setting, but this practice segregated ELs. To address this issue at one study school, all teachers were trained in EL strategies so that they could attend to the needs of English learners in all classrooms. Advisories also helped ensure equity. With proper advisories, each student had a teacher who specifically monitored that student's academic progress and behavior, regardless of SLC placement. Another practice that promoted equity was having effective counselors in each SLC who placed students in appropriate courses based on their needs and interests, avoiding de facto tracking.

Similarly, students with disabilities required services that not every SLC could provide. At School A, the special education teachers still met as a department because they found it difficult to do curriculum mapping and integration. Special education teachers and students with disabilities felt somewhat excluded from SLCs. School B faced the same challenge; the school did not have enough resources in each SLC to meet student needs. Somewhat surprisingly, at School C, teachers reported that students with disabilities did feel included in each of the SLCs and did feel they had equal access. At School C students with disabilities had one reading class but for the rest of the day they were integrated into other classes. In this case, the special education teachers acted as resource teachers to support general education teachers and students across SLCs throughout the school.

Inclusion models were theoretically equitable and aimed at heterogeneity. But some teachers were concerned that students who needed special attention were not getting the services they required in a mixed classroom through the SLC design. One teacher discussed having 7 to 10 students with disabilities in her class. While this made the class more mixed, she did not have any assistance and was not trained in special education. Some teachers grouped higher achieving students with lower performing students or struggling students, but this strategy did not work for all students or classes.

In many cases, teachers needed assistance from special education professionals to ensure proper equity in a class comprised of mixed abilities.

Issues of equity remained problematic for all schools. Even “model” SLCs struggled with heterogeneous student groupings. More qualified personnel and classroom support were required for teaching groups of students with mixed abilities. Schools simply lacked the resources and teachers to adequately serve the needs of all students. The practical need to best serve students (which may be best achieved by placing all students with disabilities or EL students in one classroom or SLC) must be balanced with the ideals and standards of equity which allow access of high quality instruction and services to all students across SLCs.

Personalization

Schools implemented a variety of personalization strategies during the year of our study. One major change that came along with SLCs was the development of distinct contiguous spaces for individual communities. Because students took all or most of their classes with the same core teachers, they remained in the same building, hallway or physical area of the school for most of the day. The close proximity of the students’ classes allowed for teachers to see the same students repeatedly, becoming more familiar with students than if they had just seen them once a day. Furthermore, students stayed in the same general area, and because their classes were close to each other, they were less likely to be tardy. At one school, teachers actually complained that students were getting to class too quickly.

Schools took steps to personalize each SLC’s part of the campus by posting signs, painting murals and even planting gardens. Some personalization strategies are similar to building identity in that such practices connect students more meaningfully with school. One school’s Education Academy had an area called the Education Plaza, which included a courtyard with tables set up on one side. Teachers were observed holding parent-student conferences in the plaza. Schools also posted pictures of students and student work in the hallways of their particular SLCs. As described above, students in some SLCs also chose colors, logos, and in some cases, designed and created tee shirts to represent and build pride in their SLC.

At a school that is struggling with SLC implementation, we observed discussions about student government and student committees, which supported personalization of the schooling experience. The lead teacher of one of their SLCs allowed students to choose the design of their government. It was difficult, but he noted

I deliberately stopped any attempts by the faculty to outline the student government because I didn't want to impose anything. I wanted them to develop under our guidance and support. I was stubborn about it and made enemies, but I don't care because the students are now bubbling at the idea. (Lead Teacher, School C)

While student government usually involves a small number of students, at the SLC level the government was more visible and included a higher proportion of students than if the government just functioned at the whole school level. At this particular school, we observed the importance placed on student voice. At an SLC team meeting, teachers identified student representatives to serve on various committees. Although the purpose of these committees was unclear, and teachers selected the students, there was an effort to give students a voice in their SLC's activities. Giving students voice in the operation of their SLCs provided student investment and buy-in into their own education, and also created a personal connection for the students involved.

SLCs implemented a number of personalization practices to support students' social and emotional development. At the core of these practices was building relationships between students and teachers, and among the students themselves. Many respondents described advisories as a strategy to support personalization. Advisories functioned like homerooms, in which students met with the same teacher every day for a short period of time during which the purpose was relationship-building. Advisories included mentoring, addressing students' personal problems, note-taking skills, organization, and/or conflict resolution. At some schools, advisories had a suggested curriculum; at others, the time was less formally structured providing opportunities for teachers to get to know students and monitor their progress through high school. The goal was for each student to have one advisor throughout his or her four years of high school. For example, one school had multi-grade advisories, so that older students could share experiences with 9th graders.

An important characteristic of advisories was teacher looping. Some respondents discussed looping as an effective way to personalize instruction. Through looping, students had the same core teachers every year of high school. Looping provided opportunities for teachers and students to build relationships and for teachers to familiarize themselves with individual student instructional needs. As one teacher reported, “I really appreciate having the same students I had last year, because I feel like I build a stronger bond with them, and they are more willing to work for me.” At one school, a factor that posed a challenge to looping was block scheduling. One lead teacher reported that the school’s schedule did not allow for an advisory period, but that the school tried to build in the elements of the advisory if the school could not schedule the time.

Not all teachers and students favored looping. One teacher reported that he liked having new students each year, noting, “I like turnover sometimes. I want to see new students sometimes... I like fresh starts.” Some reported that students may have been hesitant to sign up for a class because they knew they were going to get a particular teacher year after year. For students and teachers who do not match well with each other, looping may not be the answer. In such cases, schools should work to ensure that students are a good fit with the SLC and identify teachers with whom they would work best.

In SLCs that were not implementing advisories, teachers expressed a desire for such a program that increased personal connections with students. A few teachers reported that students suffered from low self-esteem related to difficulties based on language barriers or coming from families with low education levels. One teacher discussed the problems one of her students described to her, including drug use and abuse in the home, parents going to jail and his ending up in foster care. The teacher decried the lack of resources available to students, saying, “I don’t think there’s enough for them. I think that has to do with personalizing. Personalizing is so huge. It has to do with having a safe place, having to trust, knowing that you can say anything ...” Another teacher expressed the significance of teachers sharing personal stories with students, which builds trust and “allows you to know your students better, and they’re not going to feel comfortable with you if they don’t know anything about you.”

A great deal of personalization took place through practices that involved a team of teachers and other adults spending an extended amount of structured time discussing a few individual students, such as “This Week’s Student” or Coordination of Services Team (COST). COST was a multidisciplinary team involving counselors, teachers, special education experts and other specialists who identified approximately 5 to 10 students per week who were at-risk or experiencing a problem. The team met weekly, discussed the students and planned an intervention for each child. COST teams at two schools reported “promising” results. At one school, the team reported that after four months of having a COST team, the special education referrals decreased dramatically. In addition, SLC teacher teams chose one or a few students each week on which to focus. Teachers discussed those students’ strengths and areas for growth and how to best address the students’ needs. Because all or most of the teachers in the SLC knew the student, they felt they were able to have productive conversations.

Counselors also assisted in understanding personalized needs of students. Some schools had one counselor per SLC which made a clear difference. This model allowed counselors to see and get to know the same smaller group of students than before SLCs. As one noted, “We are really able to stay on top of who is going to class and who is not... our attendance rates are actually pretty good... students who didn’t want to be here, they are coming to class now, which is an improvement from before.” (Counselor, New Tech). In SLCs which were not as personalized and cohesive, the link to counseling was weak. In more successful SLCs, counselors were integrally involved and attended regular SLC meetings. Other SLC personalization activities mentioned by study participants included Open House, sports tournaments, field trips, community breakfasts, and awards assemblies in which all students in the SLC were recognized. The importance was that time and structure were provided for teachers and students to build relationships.

When asked how instruction was personalized, in addition to looping, many teachers and administrators discussed thematic teaching and project-based learning. Teachers discussed how using essential questions to guide academic curricula could create personal connections with students. For example, as described earlier in this report in the school of Engineering and Design SLC, one overarching question for the 10th grade was “Is it possible to become so comfortable with structure that one ceases to

grow?” In one unit, students learned about ancient civilizations to the French revolution in world history class and macromolecules, cells, and DNA in biology. The ideas of form and function permeated all content areas, tying the subjects together and making the schoolwork relevant to students. This project involved creating an ancient city and comparing it to the structure of a cell. Informants explained that when instruction is tied to issues students related to in their personal lives, learning and engagement was enhanced.

Schools and SLCs were at different stages of personalization during our study, and challenges persisted. Large classes inhibited personalization. Elective and “common” teachers who taught across SLCs found it difficult to build relationships and personalize instruction for students. Schools continued to struggle with these issues. But, overall, as a result of various personalization strategies, most respondents from all schools reported a noticeable difference in students’ attitudes and behavior. They believed that referrals and disciplinary incidents had declined. Personalization may be the attribute of SLCs that made the most detectable impact on schools, teachers and students. The link between personalization and academic achievement has yet to be firmly established; however data from this study suggest that when students were individually known, teachers and administrators were more likely to believe that students’ instructional needs were being addressed. Building relationships and personalizing the schooling experience takes time. If the strategies and practices are encouraged and maintained, SLCs can provide an ideal vehicle for fostering personalization.

Accountability and Distributed Leadership

Strong distributed leadership is a key to successful SLC implementation. There must be a balance between autonomy and accountability. SLC lead teachers must support and be supported by their teachers and school administrators. Autonomy must also be appropriate, both in terms of student population and decision-making power.

In School A, all of the SLC lead teachers could be characterized as strong leaders. They organized SLC-specific professional development, both around the development of thematic units and organizational issues. Most teachers at School A spoke highly of their lead teachers, calling them capable and hard-working. The SIFs at School A also spoke

highly of the lead teachers. The SIFs and the principal indicated that they saw themselves and the lead teachers as a team moving toward more effective SLC implementation and improved student achievement. The principal noted that she created a vision for the school. The SLC lead teachers were responsible for implementing that vision in the context of their SLCs. The principal reported that she was largely satisfied with the direction of each of the school's SLCs. There was a high degree of teacher buy-in within each SLC and she credits the lead teachers with sustaining buy-in and addressing teacher concerns.

In School B, the SLC lead teachers of the two high-functioning SLCs and the New Tech were identified as being effective. They were observed working with their teachers to implement SLC-specific professional development. However, due to the accreditation process, they were not able to do this as often as the School A lead teachers.

Both the SIF and SLC teachers described the lead teachers of the low-functioning SLCs as ineffective. They did not engender teacher buy-in and did not address SLC-specific concerns. The SIF noted that these two SLCs started prior to her arrival so they had more time to engender buy-in amongst staff and learn how to function as a unit. The low-functioning SLCs were started during 2005-06, but the lead teachers were not installed until the end of that school year. The SIF believed that the low-functioning SLCs might evolve into higher-functioning units with some more time to develop thematic content and teacher buy-in.

The lead teachers at School C were generally identified as ineffective. However, the reasons they were identified ineffective were different from those given at School B. School C's principal was seen by most teachers, lead teachers, and the SIF as being too authoritative, dictating the structures of each SLC and of professional development activities. Teachers noted that having a controlling principal made it very difficult for the lead teachers to develop professional development activities and contribute to decision making at the school level. However, the SIF noted that the lead teachers were making strides in developing buy-in for the thematic orientations of the SLCs.

One component of appropriate autonomy is the maintenance of "pure" SLCs. Students should have all of their courses taught by teachers in their individual SLCs to the greatest extent possible. School A made a successful push to keep their SLCs as pure

as possible. Teachers only taught students in their SLCs and students rarely took classes outside of their SLCs. However, according to the lead teachers, this was problematic because fewer students took honors and AP courses. Teachers encouraged students to take classes only within their SLCs. The SLC lead teachers noted that they worked with their teachers to balance the purity of SLCs with student needs and school resources. Schools B and C reported that they were about 80% 'pure.' Several teachers were assigned to multiple SLCs. The principals of both schools said they used this strategy to get around having limited resources to hire new teachers. This was not the case in the New Techs, where teachers did not teach courses for students in other SLCs. Students were also sometimes placed in courses outside their SLC due to school-level scheduling mistakes. This was seen by the principals and lead teachers as a by-product of the conversion process. As the schools became more familiar with SLC implementation, they anticipated that these mistakes would decrease.

Another component of appropriate autonomy is decision-making power. SLCs are expected to have the opportunity to make decisions that will lead to improved functioning with limited administrative interference. In School A, all SLC lead teachers indicated that they had decision-making power within their SLCs. The administration gave them the opportunity to decide on their own courses of action and worked with them to ensure that such courses of action were aligned with district policies and mandates. In School B, the lead teachers noted that they felt like they had the freedom to make their own decisions. However, they also expressed frustration over what they felt was an inconsistent enforcement of district policies and mandates by the administration. Lead teachers at School C noted that there was little decision-making power given to the SLCs. The principal ran the school and tried to run the SLCs. One lead teacher indicated that he could understand why a principal might not embrace the SLC model. It inherently involved some relinquishment of administrative power. He opined that School C's principal might not be ready to give up such power as they were a Program Improvement (PI) 5 school and needed to make significant improvements. This lack of autonomy was most evident in the New Tech campuses. Administrators and teachers at School B's New Tech indicated a high level of decision-making power while School C's New Tech

reported the opposite. They also expressed concern that the model would not work and would have to be eliminated as an SLC due to lack of buy-in.

SLCs varied in their levels of autonomy from their larger schools, and with regard to distributed leadership. Challenges to successful implementation were presented when principals were reluctant to concede power or SLC priorities conflicted with general school improvement strategies. Only in our highest implementing school did teachers feel SLC leaders had sufficient autonomy from the school's administration. Schools and SLCs must work together toward consistent goals to achieve a balance of authority, autonomy, and leadership for educating their students.

Parent and Community Engagement

Parent and community engagement continued to be a challenge for many schools and SLCs overall. School staff extended a great deal of effort and creativity to entice parent and community participation. Some SLCs experienced more success than others in this area. For most SLCs, parent and community involvement was an area of growth that schools will have to work on for years. But some lessons may be shared by the more successful communities, including the New Techs and the 9th Grade Academies.

Parent involvement took on various forms. Most schools had a parent center but did not hold regular activities. Parents were invited to traditional family events such as Open Houses, Back-to-School nights, awards assemblies, holiday celebrations, and talent shows. Some SLCs also held fairs. For example, one SLC held a Health Fair for parents, community members, and other SLCs at their school. Other activities that parents participated in included school improvement activities, such as campus clean up days, bowling nights, family pizza Fridays, Math Night, and parent meetings. At least one SLC had a garden that parents and students worked on together.

Schools utilized repeated and multiple efforts to garner parent participation in school activities. Forms of contact from the school to parents included phone calls home, letters to parents, and verbally telling students to ask parents to come to school events. In addition, Tele-parent, an automated system that calls parents and informs them if their child is absent or tardy, was used by some schools. This program takes time to install and to learn how to use; some schools had the program but had not begun utilizing it. But

when used effectively, respondents informed us that Tele-parent helped to increase parent attendance at school activities.

An important activity that required parent involvement was the student-led conference. These conferences involved the teacher, parent, and student and often took place during Open House or on specified parent conference days. Many teachers reported very few parents attended parent conferences and that only the parents of high performing students showed up. It was a continuing challenge to get parents of low achieving or at-risk students to come to these activities.

The two New Techs in our study reported the greatest levels of satisfaction with parent engagement in comparison to other SLCs. New Techs clearly had a high level of parent involvement. The New Techs asked parents to commit to 25 hours per year of volunteering at the school. New Techs had more structured environments than other SLCs, and students had to apply for admission. Motivated parents may have been more inclined to enroll their children in New Tech, which may partially explain their higher parent involvement. Although respondents from the New Techs reported satisfaction with parent involvement, they still experienced challenges. As one teacher stated,

. . . our first meeting with parents...we were really prepared and about two or three parents came, so it was really disappointing . . . so what we did was we started sending letters, calling parents, and asking students to bring their parents in here . . . and the next meeting we were expecting three, and around 25-30 parents came so it was really nice. (Teacher, New Tech)

Some New Tech respondents reported that their challenges included parents' availability and sometimes the language barrier.

Ninth Grade Academies also reported relatively high levels of satisfaction with parent involvement. One 9th Grade Academy teacher claimed that as an SLC they had "tremendous" parent turnout for Open House. She made it a point to not only contact parents with negative news, but also sent positive notes home about students. Another 9th grade teacher also reported that parents were heavily involved in back-to-school and parent nights. The parents were cooperative and involved and teachers had regular contact with them. This could have been because 9th grade students were younger and new to high school, and parents were especially concerned with how their children were

doing. In addition, the 9th Grade Academies were designed to be particularly nurturing environments.

Many SLC teachers stated that they simply did not know why parent involvement was so low. After describing efforts to invite parents, including sending out invitations to events and calling parents, one teacher reported, “But still, I don’t know why in our high school, there are not many parents coming in, despite all of the things that we have been doing.” This school used an automated phone system to call parents, initiated student-led conferences, and extended and altered meeting times to accommodate parents’ schedules. Teachers and staff were at a loss for new ways to improve parent involvement. As one teacher asked, “What haven’t we done?” Some suggested having one assigned parent liaison per SLC would help improve parent involvement.

Respondents discussed other strategies that work to increase and maintain parent involvement. Schools used incentives such as providing food and music at school activities such as Open House. School staff reported going to extreme measures to increase parent participation. Students were told that their report cards would be withheld if their parents did not come to a parent assembly. This resulted in a strong parent turnout for the 9th Grade Academy assembly at which students chose SLCs for their following year. Others reported that repeated phone calls and telling students that their parents were required to come to school events were sometimes the only strategies that worked.

SLCs should capitalize on getting parents involved early on in the year. The beginning of the year seemed to be when parents were most willing to engage with the school, and when teachers and school personnel made the most effort. In the spring, toward the end of the year, as one lead teacher reported, “It is late in the year and people are running out of steam. We did have some parents’ involvement earlier on, but it is hard to keep the momentum up as time goes on.”

Schools experienced a number of challenges with regards to parent participation. Respondents reported the language barrier, poverty, and the lack of parents’ availability as major obstacles to getting parents involved with their children’s school. As one teacher reported, “You’re not going to get a parent who wants to come and do something if they don’t understand what you’re saying. You’re also not going to get a kid who wants to come and do something if they have to go to court and translate for their mom.” Another

challenge to contacting parents through letters was interception of mail by students. In addition, some research participants perceived that parents did not give priority to education, stating that, in their community, the parents had a “strong work ethic but not a strong education ethic.” Many parents worked all day and sometimes held more than one job. Teachers realized this makes parent engagement and involvement difficult.

Language differences can be an obstacle, and having Spanish-speaking teachers and staff is helpful. But second languages can also be used as tools to engage parents. For example, in one SLC, staff reported, “EL parents are actually the parents who are the most active and supportive. They meet once a month regularly and go over issues that they want to address and things to take on. They want more involvement with the whole SLC, not just [with EL issues].”

Involving community members and partners can also be challenging. Schools with long established partnerships with local businesses had the best community relations and involvement. Such agencies provided internships and funding for the SLCs. One SLC had a partnership with a local law school in which law students acted as mentors for the high schools students. Respondents reported that a community liaison was critical. Several respondents reported that their school had a community representative but they were not aware of what the representative was doing. Much community involvement came directly from individual teachers taking initiative. Partnerships took time and effort to develop and build.

One school had a professional development activity, which familiarized the staff with the school’s neighborhood and surrounding community. The school’s police officer took teachers on a bus ride through the community. The teachers were able to see first hand where and how their students lived. As one teacher commented,

[The officer] pointed out all the low rent apartments, all the gang areas, went to the community center, and we actually went into the community, went into the mall ...at that time I had been here 4-5 years, other teachers were here 20-25 years and had never gone into the community. That was eye opening, it was really nice. Even going along with the SLC model, having a smaller community, it’s hard to find personalization and to know where they’re coming from. [For the] magnet it would be harder because the kids come from all over. For the regular school, that was good PD.
(Teacher, School A)

Some reported that bureaucracy could be challenge to community involvement because of the process of getting speakers approved. Some schools had partnered with UNITE LA, with varying success. At one school, the principal expressed disappointment with the UNITE LA representative because of her inability to collaborate effectively with the SIF. But at the same school's New Tech, the respondents seemed happy with UNITE LA, stating that they were important in gaining parent and community involvement, including service learning.

SLCs had varying success with parent and community involvement, but overall this area remained a challenge for all. The strongest partnerships grew out of individual relationships and contacts, as well long-standing collaborations between schools and community agencies. Language barriers and parent availability presented challenges to meaningful parent engagement. Finally, school personnel expressed a need for support on innovative and effective parent involvement strategies.

Professional Development

The three schools organized professional development in different ways. However, in each school, the SLC lead teachers claimed that the bulk of professional development happened in weekly SLC meetings. This was true in higher functioning SLCs. In our observations and interviews, it became clear that strong SLC lead teachers were able to work with their teachers and administrators to provide relevant and applicable professional development. In the lower functioning SLCs, meetings were organized sporadically and were not necessarily differentiated to meet individual SLC needs.

In School A, the lead teachers worked within their SLCs to determine professional development activities that supplemented district-organized activities. We observed SLC staff going on retreats to engage in professional development activities related to a school-wide writing assignment. Each SLC worked on creating a thematic writing prompt. The New Techs were similar to School A. The lead teachers worked with their directors to organize activities, often concerning project-based learning opportunities for students.

School B was undergoing the accreditation process during our data collection. This provided insight into how SLCs adapt to external pressures. Much of the time, professional development was spent handling issues related to accreditation. Teachers were actually more likely to be organized in accreditation task forces rather than by SLC. While this grouping of teachers by task force rather than SLC team can be problematic for SLC professional development, much of what was discussed by the accreditation task forces aligned to the seven attributes of effective SLC implementation. For example, several teacher groups were observed discussing the visions and missions of School B and its SLCs. These were critical components of School B's school accreditation plan. Determination of vision is also a component of one of the seven attributes.

School B's SLCs were also observed participating in some SLC-specific professional development activities. School B's high-functioning SLCs were similar to School A in that the SLC lead teachers were primarily responsible for organizing professional development activities. However, the professional development in School B's low-functioning SLCs was supplied by the district. In School C, most of the SLCs were observed conducting weekly meetings in conjunction with the weekly school-wide professional development session. But the professional development was organized by either the principal, the district, or by the external organization responsible for running one of the SLCs. SLC lead teachers were not observed organizing SLC-specific professional development activities.

While professional development activities were observed in the lower-functioning School B SLCs and in the School C SLCs, they were mostly those being offered by the district. This was problematic because most district-provided secondary-level professional development in 2006-07 was still focused on academic departments. For example, the district's science specialists developed science-focused professional development activities to be implemented by high school science departments. Several SLC lead teachers in School C noted that they were overwhelmed by trying to adapt district-provided professional development for their individual SLCs. Instead, they focused on organizational issues and developing thematic units rather than on instructional activities. In School B, science teachers continued to meet as a department.

While this allowed for the science teachers to address instructional issues, it led to less time being available for SLC professional development meetings.

SLCs structured professional development in different ways across the three schools. Across all SLCs it was apparent that there was an effort to ensure that professional development was consistent with SLC and school goals. Some practices, such as WASC accreditation, supported SLC attributes, and others, such as district-wide PD, were not aligned with SLC goals and therefore presented challenges to teachers instead of resources. Additionally, respondents expressed that it would be helpful if PD was targeted toward interdisciplinary teaching and not only department-driven.

Summary of Findings

In this study, we examined three distinct LAUSD high schools implementing SLCs. Our findings are based on interviews with lead teachers and administrators, school visits, and meeting and professional development observations. The conclusions of this study are not meant to generalize to all schools, but we believe the lessons learned can be transferred to schools throughout the district.

Overall, we found that high-implementing SLCs had a clear vision and identity which included more than just names and logos but norms that were consistent throughout the SLC, so students had clear expectations in every classroom. Furthermore, the themes of the SLC identities were integrated meaningfully into all courses of the SLC. Themes served to enhance content and improve learning, making student work meaningful and relevant. Schools and SLCs were challenged with the possibility of all teachers not buying into the vision, and the tension between SLC and school-wide visions and identities.

Schools struggled with achieving equity and heterogeneity across SLCs. Schools and SLCs needed resources to serve all students, with an intense focus on the needs of ELs and students with disabilities. Some schools had teachers trained in EL and special education strategies in each SLC, but a lack of professional expertise sometimes resulted in an inequitable concentration of special needs students in one SLC.

Not all agreed on the best personalization practices, but participants clearly agreed that personalization had a positive impact on SLC implementation. Successful personalization strategies included advisories, looping, and counselor intervention.

Schools struggled with autonomy and distributed leadership. SLCs required adequate independence from the main school but for some administrators, relinquishing control was a challenge. School principals committed to the SLC model provided support to lead teachers while granting them the independence they need to exercise distributed leadership throughout their SLC.

All schools struggled with parent and community engagement. Building on personal relationships and existing partnerships was a strategy that has worked for some SLCs. Increasing parent engagement is a larger district problem that is being explored at a central level. However, study schools and SLCs made a small impact through repeated personal connections with parents through phone calls, corresponding with parents to communicate students' successes (not just when students were performing poorly), student-led conferences and other outreach efforts.

At high-implementing schools, PD was teacher-driven. Mandated district PD was simply not aligned with the SLC structure and model. PD was often provided by content area, but SLCs encouraged teachers to collaborate and plan in multi-disciplinary groups, across content areas. These discrepancies must be recognized and addressed to adequately address the PD needs of teachers.

The purpose of this study was to explore the initial successes and challenges of three distinct LAUSD high schools in the early stages of their conversion to SLCs. Through the stories of these schools, we hope this study has provided insight into some issues high schools face in redesigning their campuses into Small Learning Communities. At the time the study began, seven schools in the district had their plans approved for SLC implementation. Currently over 50 high schools are in the process of implementing their SLC designs. Furthermore, with the recent adoption of the Small Schools Resolution by the Board, more SLCs will be built in the near future. With such widespread implementation, we hope the district and school sites will find the information here useful in going forward with improved implementation.

Recommendations

Based on our analysis, we present the following recommendations to help support schools with implementation along the seven attributes of successful SLCs:

Unifying Vision and Identity

- Schools should have clearly defined visions for both the school as a whole and each SLC
- To the extent possible, faculty and students should be involved in construction and implementation of the visions of the schools and SLCs
- SLC identities should be distinct from each other, and meaningful to students and staff
- Identity should go beyond names and logos; and should be integrated into norms of behavior and standards of quality work

Rigorous Standards-Based Curriculum

- School leaders should provide professional development to teachers on how to teach mixed-ability students in one classroom

- SLC teams should be afforded the structures and time for teachers to collaborate to address the instructional needs of students
- Math and science subjects need to be integrated meaningfully into standards-based interdisciplinary thematic curricula
- Implications of students passporing outside their SLCs for AP courses, and the possibility of SLCs offering more high level rigorous college-preparatory courses to keep students in their home SLC should be explored

Equity and Access

- All teachers should be trained in strategies that address the needs of ELs and students with disabilities so that such students do not end up inequitably placed in one SLC
- Heterogeneous groupings of students and teachers across all SLCs must be ensured

Personalization

- Schools or SLC leaders should provide structures and times for personalization to occur, for example, in the form of advisories
- COST teams or some equivalent, should be implemented at each school and/or SLC
- Contiguous spaces allowing the same small group of teachers and students to see more of each other throughout the day need to be solidified

Accountability and Distributed Leadership

- Local Districts should provide principals and administrators with support and guidelines to successfully lead their school in full SLC implementation with adequate autonomy granted to SLCs

Parent and Community Engagement

- Teachers should correspond with parents to communicate students' progress and successes, and not only when students are performing poorly
- Teachers should implement student-led conferences
- Teachers and school/SLC leaders should use personal relationships with community agencies to build on and establish partnerships
- Schools should establish parent and community liaisons for each SLC

Professional Development

- School and SLC leaders should provide teachers with PD on how to integrate their content with the thematic elements of their SLCs
- Principals and administrators should allow PD to be teacher-driven and directly meet the needs of teachers
- Central and/or Local District leaders should develop district level PD that is designed for SLC teams, including how to plan and implement interdisciplinary units for groups of mixed- ability students
- Central and/or Local District leaders should provide school administrators with guidelines for overseeing SLC lead teachers while allowing sufficient autonomy to SLCs

Limitations

While this research provided useful information, we were limited by several factors. First, we only studied three high schools in the entire district. Therefore, findings cannot be generalized to all high schools in the district, but lessons can be transferred. Another limitation is that many of the measures of success and effectiveness we refer to are defined as such by the respondents themselves. We did not collect objective evidence such as student attendance, grades, or test scores and link them with SLC practices. Our findings are limited to the perspectives of the respondents with whom we spoke. Despite these limitations, we were able to collect a great deal of in-depth qualitative data that we hope will serve to inform schools, the district and other stakeholders.

Appendix A: Literature Review

Recent studies of high school conversions into SLCs in large districts reveal that the characteristics of effective SLCs align with the district's attributes.

Unifying Vision and Identity

A shared vision created by a group of educators, support staff, students, parents, and community who comprise the school learning community who assume responsibility for the learning of every student through a distinctive and focused standards-based curriculum.

Studies show that in successful SLCs, staff and students are focused on a few important goals that have a common focus or vision. The visions are usually based on a theme or identity, such as science, technology, or the arts, that the SLC participants share an interest in and choose. Effective SLCs adopt a consistent research-based instructional approach based on shared beliefs about teaching and learning. The use of time, tools, materials, and professional development activities are aligned with instruction based on the SLC's theme (AIR, 2005; Wallach & Lear, 2003).

Teachers, staff, students and other community members should ideally co-construct and buy in to the vision of their SLC. Visions should encompass self-determination, autonomy, distinctiveness and commitment from staff. In an instance of a failed SLC conversion, reluctance and lack of buy-in for the reform made it difficult for the school to adopt a vision and coherent set of values to move the school forward (Colorado Children's Campaign, 2005).

The identity of an SLC should cohere around a distinct mission, with a focus on student learning (Cotton, 2001). This means that academic coursework and planning should be shaped around the SLC's theme to engage students in a rigorous curriculum (AIR, 2005). Each SLC's theme should be incorporated into all core and elective courses. An example is the Career Academies (CA) (Kemple & Snipes, 2000) model, which includes both academic and vocational curricula. While models vary, all are "schools-within-schools," small clusters of students who generally have the same teachers and block of classes together. Each CA's academic and vocational curricula are based on a theme, e.g. Health Science Academies. Students take core courses in the CA and electives outside the academy. Employer partnerships and other institutions provide

resources, guest speakers, internships, and might serve on the advisory board of an academy. Several SLC models have followed the CA design such as Talent Development and First Things First (Kemple & Snipes, 2000). While variations exist, all models call for SLCs to have distinct identities and visions.

Rigorous and Standards-Based Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

A standards-based educational program embodies high expectations for every student so that they achieve grade-level standards, use appropriate technology, district adopted textbooks, and materials to support instruction, meet high school graduation requirements, A-G college entrance requirements, and are prepared for post-secondary experiences and the world of work.

Effective SLCs offer a rigorous and relevant curriculum to all students. All SLCs should set high standards and provide common and clear expectations for students. Students should be promoted to the next instructional level only when they have achieved competency. Students should receive additional time and assistance when needed to achieve this competency.

Teaching and learning should be linked to standards, and SLC curricula should be both rigorous and relevant, which are not incompatible (AIR, 2005). Curricula should be focused on depth rather than breadth, and programs should include community service, internships and preparation for higher education and the workforce. Adaptive pedagogy should incorporate multiple instructional strategies including projects, scaffolding and group work (Cotton, 2001; Wallach & Lear, 2003). In successful SLCs, instruction is differentiated and curriculum is integrated with the SLC's thematic focus (Cotton, 2001).

Using student work and performance assessment data is also integral in driving instruction. Such data should be available for teachers to reflect upon and in turn improve their own practice guided by teaching standards. In high functioning SLCs, teachers design engaging and imaginative curriculum linked to learning standards, analyze results, and have easy access to best practices and learning opportunities. Such schools publish their progress to parents and engage the community in a dialogue about continuous improvement (Wallach & Lear, 2003).

Student-centered instruction and “reform-oriented teaching” (as opposed to traditional teaching) (AIR, 2005) is linked with improved student achievement. These types of instruction include active inquiry and the use of technology for in-depth learning (AIR, 2005). SLCs provide a context for active student learning guided by rigorous standards. However, significant instructional change and improvement is often missing in studies of SLCs, particularly for those schools that have recently implemented the reform (Kahne et al., 2008). Smaller communities can allow students to produce quality work products and present their work to real audiences. Successful student work shows evidence of understanding, not just recall of facts. Meaningful assessment tasks allow students to exhibit higher-order thinking by discussing their work and understanding of it. Both teachers and students should set learning goals and monitor their progress (Wallach & Lear, 2003).

Equity and Access

Every student will participate in a rigorous quality curriculum that is culturally relevant and linguistically responsive to their unique learning needs, thereby eliminating achievement gaps between groups of students.

Students and teachers feel more committed and invested in their school if they have a choice in the program and curriculum offered. Ideally, each SLC has a unique vision and thematic focus that students and teachers choose. However, this choice must be balanced with concerns of equity. Often times, students do not choose SLCs by theme but according to choices their friends make, and in many cases SLCs can lead to re-stratification within high schools (Lee & Ready, 2007). SLCs can become de facto “tracks”, in which students are grouped by ability or other social characteristics such as race, rather than interest in content. Schools must ensure heterogeneous and diverse SLCs. Equitable schools include multicultural and anti-racist teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, knowledge of the community, and democratic decision-making.

Regardless of student composition, equity must be ensured across SLC’s on the same campus (AIR, 2005). For example, all students must have access to honors and advanced courses. This may entail doing away with an ‘honors track’ or program, and this may be difficult for some families to accept. As Wallach and Lear (2003) state “the

unavoidable reality is that, in virtually all comprehensive high schools, some students are advantaged. That advantage is often tied to social class, race, and influence. When those advantages are challenged, conflict is inevitable.” SLCs must learn how to implement a narrow, equitable curriculum that serves all students best. This includes special needs students and English learners who should not be isolated in one or a few SLCs.

Personalization

Sustained and mutually respectful personal relationships are developed in which every student is well known by a group of educators who advise and advocate for them and work closely with them and their families over time. The size of the SLC is appropriate to its vision and mission, generally ranging from 300-500 students.

One of the clearest and most important beneficial outcomes of SLCs are those resulting from increased personalization of the learning context. Research on adolescent development reveals the value of a personalized environment for student learning at the high school level. Adolescence is a period in which students experience different identities, or “selves” (Erickson cited in Farrell, 1990), e.g., self as student, family self, and self-in-peer-group. Adolescents have to negotiate these different identities and multiple environments including school, family, and peer groups. They need healthy personal adult relationships for guidance; yet they simultaneously need to learn independence. Small, personalized environments can foster positive adult-student relationships, healthy adolescent development, and facilitate strong academic achievement for all students. In addition, small size changes the focus from discipline and control (in large high schools) to teaching and relationships. As Darling-Hammond (2002) states, “many traditional schools infantilize students, particularly adolescents, by treating them as if they need to be constantly monitored and controlled. Just when students need to be gaining some independence, they are treated as if they cannot be trusted, and they often act accordingly” (p. 23). In large, impersonal environments, students often develop an identity that is oppositional to school.

SLC personalization strategies include advisories, looping, student of the week, and tutoring (Wallach & Lear, 2005). The structures of advisories vary, but the aim is to have a scheduled time during which teachers and students can meet regularly to build

relationships. Some occur daily, like homerooms, and some advisories are scheduled weekly for longer periods of time. Looping enables teachers to stay with the same group of students as those students move through their years of high school. Groups of teachers may discuss a student of the week, or a small group of students. Teachers could choose students who are struggling, or merely focus on different students and their particular needs, which allow for personalized instruction from each teacher.

As a result of such strategies, teachers reported that personalization increased as they attempted to get to know students better. In a study of Washington state high school conversions, most (80%) of the teachers in the created some sort of advisory system that keeps students with same teacher for more than one year. Teachers began to see the benefits and power of personalization and autonomy, including being able to act on behalf of their students (Wallach & Lear, 2005). Students and teachers perceived generally positive relationships with each other (Lambert & Lowry, 2004). In a study of high school conversions in Chicago, schools implementing SLC type programs showed evidence of higher academic press, social support, collective responsibility and fewer absences when compared with traditional high schools (Kahne et al., 2008). When the learning environment is personalized, student engagement, academic self-concept and satisfaction with their academic progress and social responsibility increase. These variables are associated with greater implementation of SLCs (AIR, 2005).

Accountability and Distributed Leadership

Members of the SLC work together, share expertise, and exercise leadership to ensure that student achievement is the intended result of all decisions. They retain primary responsibility, appropriate autonomy, and are accountable for making decisions affecting the important aspects of the small learning community.

Strong, distributed leadership is essential in converting a school into effective SLCs. Leadership must be shared, and each SLC's staff and administration should be given sufficient autonomy to make decisions for their community. Relationships with large, bureaucratic districts can undermine the independence and innovation of new SLCs. For example, districts and states create mandates, such as those stating that all schools must use the same literacy program because of a highly transient population

(Wallach & Lear, 2003). Yet, SLCs need some level of autonomy to make curricular and programmatic changes and decisions for their students (Darling-Hammond, Aness & Ort, 2002).

Critical to SLC success is democratic decision-making and functional accountability (Cotton, 2001). Shared norms and values, decisions made close to classrooms, faculty governance, student and parent involvement should all be part of shared leadership. SLCs need multiple forms of assessment, data-driven decision making, district support and resources, and the ability to network with other SLC's.

SLC conversions are challenged by a change in culture and organization of the high school, and struggle with SLC autonomy. Teachers must collaborate across subject departments in systems where teachers are used to working in content areas. Most high schools operate in a hierarchical fashion with top-down policies. In SLCs, teachers are expected to take on leadership roles, mentor and advise students. This can create an additional burden for teachers who are unsure of the payoff that this extra work will produce (Wallach & Lear, 2003; 2005). In addition, it is difficult for SLCs to carry out policies with sufficient autonomy while subject to school-wide, district and state regulations. Districts schools must collaborate to achieve a balance of shared leadership and governance for SLC (Colorado Children's Campaign, 2005; Steinberg, Allen, & Almeida, 2001).

Collaboration, Parent and Community Engagement

All members of the SLC are viewed as critical allies and are significantly included in the school community (i.e., students, teachers, support staff, parents, administrators, business, and community partners). An ongoing partnership is aimed at supporting continuous improvement of student achievement. Authentic engagement leads to sustained participation in critical school decisions and implementation of school efforts.

Many schools struggle with parent and community engagement. Successful SLCs develop relationships and making connections with families. Family and community connections include creating family-school partnerships and treating families as experts, for example, exploring what knowledge and experience they can bring, looking at student work together, co-constructing schools (including families in developing visions),

supporting family learning (such as English classes for parents of ELs) (Darling-Hammond, 2002). Effective SLCs have higher parent involvement and satisfaction rates and more meaningful communication between parents and staff (Cotton, 2001).

Partnering with outside reform groups early in SLC conversion can lead to effective parent engagement. LAUSD and other large school districts have partnered with Talent Development and First Things First, for example. Talent Development Schools in Philadelphia showed increases in number of students passing classes and earning enough credits to advance to next grade. First Things First, which includes teacher looping and a faculty advocate system, has shown increased graduation rates and test scores (AIR, 2005). These are whole school partnerships, but local neighborhood and community engagement are also essential to connecting student learning with their personal lives.

Professional Development

SLCs implement central and local district training and resources. Continuous professional learning is focused on improving practices and performance as a vehicle for school improvement and program coherence. This is accomplished through collaboration, reflection, analysis of student work and data, and a review of pedagogy. Common planning time is provided for teachers to gain in-depth knowledge of their content standards, work on lesson design, and review student data.

Teacher collaboration and professional development are also likely to increase and improve with successful SLC implementation. Skilled teachers have pedagogical content knowledge, are able to make content accessible to all students, and understand the needs of diverse learners. Collaborative planning and professional development must include joint planning, time for collaboration, carefully crafted lessons, and a collective SLC perspective (AIR, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2002).

Teachers and administrators need support to ensure ongoing and relevant professional development. SLC teams need time for collaborative decision making. They also require ongoing, embedded, site-specific PD including thematic integration of curriculum around SLC's focus. Teachers also need support and training on differentiated instruction due to the diversity of students they will have (Cotton, 2001). PD focused on rigor and relevance is also essential (AIR, 2005). Schools may partner with external providers and agencies for professional development but teachers must have a say in the

content and structure. The most effective PD is teacher-driven and teacher-led. Schools may explore whether PD should be structured by SLC or departments, or alternate between the two.

SLC conversions will no doubt create challenges for teachers. In evaluations of recent SLCs, teacher practice and instruction did not significantly change in the first couple of years of the conversions (Wallach & Lear, 2003). Teacher workloads increased and they did not feel they had sufficient time for collaboration and professional development. In addition, professional collaboration within the SLCs disrupted teacher roles in departments. There was also a hesitancy to offer a narrow and focused curriculum within the SLC because schools wanted to offer all that a comprehensive high school would. Offering “crossover” courses, in which students could take classes in different SLCs threatened the individual SLC structure and culture. Teacher buy-in to the SLC vision, time to collaborate and co-plan, and relevant professional development are essential in alleviating the struggles teachers will face with SLC conversions.

Appendix B: Data and Methodology

In-depth case studies were developed for each of the sample schools with the purpose of engaging in cross-case analysis along each of the seven attributes. By examining multiple case studies, it was possible to determine similarities and differences between the cases while ensuring that findings also speak to the larger phenomenon under investigation (Stake, 2006).

Interviews are a common method of qualitative case study research. Teachers and administrators were interviewed for this study. We used a stratified random sampling method to select teachers. We randomly chose five teachers within each SLC. All lead teachers, School Improvement Facilitators (SIFs) and principals were interviewed. Other key informants interviewed included assistant principals, counselors and SLC coordinators. Interviews lasted about one hour and were digitally recorded unless the respondents objected. Interviews were kept confidential. Responses were reported in the aggregate and no names are used to identify direct quotes. A total of 52 teachers and 25 administrators were interviewed.

Relevant observations were also conducted. Examples of activities observed include SLC team meetings, lead teacher meetings, school-wide professional development, SLC retreats, school site council meetings, parent events, and awards ceremonies. In total, 64 meetings were observed at the three sample schools. Data collectors also observed and recorded notes on the school's physical aspects, including the presence of evidence of SLC identity (posters, signs, and symbols), contiguous spaces, and materials reflecting other attributes such as parent involvement, community engagement, vision, and personalization.

Appendix C: Sample Information: Case Study Schools

Three of seven high schools whose plans were initially approved by LAUSD in fall 2006 were selected for participation in our study. These three schools exhibited unique levels of implementation prior to the beginning of data collection. The sample was purposively generated based on level of SLC plan implementation: high, medium, and low. Two of the sample schools had six SLCs and the third had five. Therefore, we examined a total of 17 SLCs across the sample.

These were three very different schools, but all were conversion schools: large high schools that have been redesigned, to varying degrees, according to the SLC model. At the time of the study, all of the schools included thematic SLC units, as well as some combination of units that differed somewhat from SLCs such as New Techs, magnets and 9th grade academies. These differed from SLCs in important ways. Some were considered variations on, or types of, SLCs; and some were considered totally separate schools. Yet all of these subunits shared similar characteristics. These similarities and differences, and their implications on implementation are discussed in this paper.

Table 1: Description of Sample Schools

School	SLC Configuration	Total Enrollment	% Minority	% EL	API	Graduation Rate
A	6 SLCs; 2 Magnets; 9th grade academy	3200	96.8% Black and Latino	45.5	608	65.2%
B	4 SLCs; Trade Tech; New Tech	2106	99% Black and Latino	50	457	54.0%
C	4 SLCs; New Tech; Magnet	1761	99% Black and Latino	42	495	36.7%

Source: LAUSD, 2006-07

The following information pertains to the schools at the time that data collection for this study began, in spring 2007.

School A

School A was a three-track high school that had been working with the small learning community idea for almost two decades with the inception of its Humanitas program in the late 1980's. As enrollment grew, the student population at School A became too large to sustain the Humanitas model. By 1996, the school was forced to change its structure, moving to a year-round calendar. School A experimented with various "small learning community" designs, including career and technical education (CTE) pathways funded by Perkins grants, a model that included 12 pathways. Realizing this structure included too many programs, with federal and district funding, the school redesigned into its current SLC structure, modeling its SLCs on its successful magnet program.

The SLCs that existed at School A were built around the CTE pathways that had been evolving at the school for many years. Each SLC claimed to offer a rigorous academic curriculum and a CTE pathway, providing academic, vocational and technical skills to all students. The school had a 9th Grade Academy divided into three 'houses, one for each track. It offered six SLCs and a Law and Government Magnet. At the time of data collection, on Track A, the Education, Police Academy and Magnet were in session; during Track B, the Hospitality Tourism and Recreation and Arts, Media and Entertainment SLCs were in session; and Engineering and Design and the Public Services SLCs met on Track C. Each SLC had its own students, administrator, lead teacher, teachers, counselor, and clerical staff. During this time, the school reported that it was 96% "pure" or "wall to wall," with some "passporting" occurring to allow students to take special classes (e.g., AP courses) outside their SLC.

School A received funding from several grants, including Perkins CTE funding and community partners. The school had strong ties and partnerships with community agencies, including private businesses, colleges and universities, and public and non-profits (hospitals, LA city fire department). These partners provided many services including funding, internships, advisement, and job shadowing for students. School A served as a national model school for implementation of SLCs, and often had schools from across the nation visiting its campus to learn from their experiences.

School B

School B was a school that had undergone many changes in the two years prior to our study. The school transformed from a large, multi-track school in turmoil to a completely redesigned high school with a focus on academic achievement via its five small learning communities. At the time of data collection, School B enrolled about 2200 students in four SLCs and one small school called New Technology High School (see below). In addition, in partnership with Los Angeles Trade Tech College, a small group of 140 students participated in the Trade Tech small learning program. This program had been in existence for 13 years and served students most at risk of dropping out. Because Trade Tech was a small, unique, and non-heterogeneous group, it was not considered an SLC in the context of this report.

School B teachers banded together during the year of this study in the face of the possibility of a local charter school recruiting potential students. School B's competition with the charter school led teachers, staff and students to work together to create a strong presentation of School B's offerings to incoming freshman.

The four SLCs at School B were: Creative Arts and Expression (CAE), Global outlook through Active Leadership (GOAL), Teacher Prep Academy (TPA) and Academy of Business and Communication (ABC). Each SLC had about 450 students that spanned 9th through 12th grades, 20 teachers, and its own distinct vision and mission. All programs offered A-G courses that fulfilled California public university entrance requirements. The school was on a 4x4 block schedule and the SLCs operated in their own contiguous spaces. School B also had a school-wide vision, and prided itself on being a community-centered neighborhood school. The school reported that overall, the SLCs were approximately 70 to 80% "pure."

School C

School C is a high school in south Los Angeles which began implementing four SLCs and a New Tech High during 2006-07. At the time of data collection, School C worked with Talent Development (TD), an external agency which provided funding, support and professional development to the school in implementing its SLCs. The TD

model included an intensive focus on the 9th grade, 4x4 block scheduling and teacher coaching.

School C's SLCs included a 9th Grade Academy, a STARR Academy (focused on visual and performing arts), a Health Science Academy and a Legal Studies Academy. In addition, School C housed a math, science, and technology magnet program. Each SLC had a lead teacher and counselor. School C was working with external agency, Architects for Achievement, to redesign the school to ensure contiguous spaces for the SLCs. School C had planned to be at full SLC implementation by 2007-08. According to the principal, during the year of data collection they focused on personalization and the following year the school expected to turn its emphasis to instruction. It is unclear how "pure" the SLCs were at School C at this stage in implementation.

New Technology High Schools

Two of the schools in our study had New Technology High Schools (New Techs), which considered themselves separate schools. They had their own location codes, schedules, and policies. New Techs were considered separate small schools housed on the campus of the large host school, but in a separate location. Teachers and students came from the host school, and students applied to the New Techs as they would other SLCs. For the purposes of our study, New Techs were considered to be similar to SLCs yet varied from common SLC models. New Techs tended to have more structured and prescribed educational programs. Some elements of New Techs were that they had their own principal and administration, they used technology every day in every class period, and they used project-based learning to help students become career- and college-ready. In addition, at some New Techs, students wore uniforms. One day a week, students had "professional" dress, dressing as they would for various professions. While New Techs were almost 100% pure, there was some access to classes on the main campus for students who needed or wanted to take a course not offered through New Tech.

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