

# Lessons Learned

A series published by Education Northwest that distills and shares research and experience from the field

Volume 1, Issue 1 | April 2010

## Lessons Learned From High School SLC and Small School Reform Efforts

*Diana Oxley and Katie Whitney Luers*

**FOR THE LAST DECADE, SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (SLCs)** and small schools have dominated the education landscape as cures for large comprehensive high schools' failings: high dropout rates and graduates unprepared for postsecondary careers and college. Recently, redesign efforts have begun to falter in light of evaluations showing stalled implementation and limited impacts.

Education leaders and practitioners are left to wonder, should we cut our losses and pin our hopes on another reform movement? Evidence and the experience of Education Northwest, gained from working with more than 1,200 secondary schools and districts nationwide during the past six years, offer three reasons for not following that course. First, research suggests that SLC and small school structures are useful—if not

sufficient—reform objectives: Further instructional improvements are needed. Second, staying the course allows staff members to learn and build on achievements, including stakeholders' ownership of reforms. Finally, continuing the initiative has implications for the efficient use of resources at a time when such resources are severely strained.

Taken together, research and experience suggest that high school improvement has less to do with identifying another, "better" reform than implementing the current strategies fully and faithfully. The six lessons that follow identify key issues for implementing SLCs and small schools more effectively. The first three lessons point out the critical need to put a coherent vision of quality instruction at the forefront of any high school reorganization

effort. The last three lessons identify the supports needed for effective and sustained implementation of reforms.

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

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

### Lessons learned from high school SLC/small school reform efforts

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

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

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

### Lesson # **2** A strong vision of improved instruction capitalizes on small scale

A central question for SLCs and small schools is how to capitalize on smaller units to achieve improved instruction. Education Northwest's publication *From High School to Learning Communities* (Oxley, 2008) emphasizes that rigorous and relevant curriculum and instruction, and interdisciplinary teacher teams are highly interrelated, mutually dependent dimensions of practice. Strong relationships can be leveraged to create better conditions for teaching and learning—differentiating to students' interests and

needs; motivating students through high expectations and personalized supports; and assessing student progress on a frequent and formative basis. Staff members also use common planning time to collaborate more effectively with each other, students, and families to support both student and teacher learning. Faculty and leaders work toward a singular or coherent instructional vision in mutually reinforcing ways. Faculty strives to realize the vision through instruction and student support. Leaders of successful SLCs and small schools focus on the structural changes (e.g., planning time, reduced student load) that support teachers' adoption of effective instructional strategies.

It is the combination of both personalizing the school environment and providing more effective instruction that has proven effective in increasing graduation rates (Dynarski et al., 2008). However, if improved relationships are not integral to improved teaching methods, and interdisciplinary teams don't improve instruction or support students, they remain peripheral to the "real work" of schools.

### Lesson # **3** A vision that capitalizes on small scale focuses on strengthening the instructional core

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

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

Many SLC and small school staffs use interdisciplinary collaboration to strengthen the core curriculum. For example, in a school where SLC staff members decided to focus on writing, they aligned the methods of teaching writing in each of their courses and analyzed student writing in interdisciplinary team meetings. As a result, student achievement on state writing assessments improved dramatically. The interdisciplinary teams that formed the backbone of these SLCs often made collaboration on instruction seem not only manageable but the natural course of action.

SLC and small school structures also support vertical alignment in ways that faculty alone cannot achieve. For example, in cases where interdisciplinary teams looped with their students, teachers were able to pick up students' learning from the previous year, avoid unnecessary repetition of material, and build on existing expectations. The seamless instruction that was possible in these SLCs and small schools increased learning time and effectiveness.

Lesson #

# 4

## Substantial changes in resource allocation are required to

### strengthen the instructional core

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

Leaders who succeeded in gaining teacher ownership of improvement initiatives restructured working conditions to make this difficult work doable. Teachers particularly welcomed increased instructional time and smaller student loads. Strengthening the core in these ways required more teachers in core subject areas. Choices had to be made in allocating resources among course offerings and services. Principals used a combination of strategies to move resources to the core, such as eliminating electives and partnering with community colleges to offer advanced courses.

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

To quell controversy about moving resources to where they are needed, leaders must solidify a compelling vision of instruction among stakeholders.

Lesson #

# 5

## Swift implementation of SLC/small school structures allows staff to take up

### the work of strengthening the instructional core more quickly and effectively

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

In spite of the many barriers to implementation that slow or stall progress of SLC and small school reforms, some schools manage to move quickly to implement SLC structures. Their goal has been to design the reforms in one year and implement them in the next so that staff can quickly begin to improve instruction, aided by the new structures. These schools often

enjoy stable and strong school leadership and receive support from well-established, third-party partners.

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

Lesson #

# 6

## Full and sustained implementation of reforms requires district stewardship

In our work, we have observed that school districts that adopted a districtwide policy to reorganize high schools into SLCs or small schools generated excitement and momentum for the reforms even as they stirred controversy. High school leaders in these districts

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

1. Align existing resources with needs for improving the instructional core
  - Lower class size, especially at the ninth-grade level
  - Reduce teachers’ class load
  - Increase instructional time
  - Increase teacher quality by moving experienced staff to ninth and tenth grades
  - Assign teachers on special assignment to the core
2. Follow initial year of planning with schoolwide implementation of structures in the second year
3. Invite third-party partners to support instructional improvement
4. Adopt SLCs/small schools as high school best practice at district level

experienced sustained support from the district and the community at-large; district leaders saw progress, if at a slower pace in some schools than others.

In districts where only some of the high schools pursued reorganization, a different pattern emerged. Many schools under these conditions are still struggling to implement reforms or have backed away from them. Creating a mix of traditional and reorganized high schools conveyed the idea that high school transformation is a punishment rather than a set of best practices that improve education for the highest, as well as the lowest, performing students.

While restructuring may have improved the climate of these schools, it was not accompanied by dramatic actions to improve instruction that only a district can undertake: Campaigns to attract experienced staff, stem staff turnover, or provide intensified professional learning. Further, these districts did not seek to collaborate with unions to alter hiring practices; create new policies on school choice and autonomy; change transportation schedules; or attract business partners.

Without this level of district support, it is not surprising that rigorous and coherent programs of study did not emerge in these lower performing schools. In these districts, the continuation of comprehensive high schools serving more affluent neighborhoods and graduating more college-bound students reinforced the perception that good schools are large and offer a plethora of advanced courses.

## Summary

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

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

## References

- Dynarski, M., Clarke, L., Cobb, B., Finn, J., Rumberger, R., & Smink, J. (2008). *Dropout prevention: A practice guide* (NCEE 2008–4025). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>
- Oxley, D. (2008). *From high school to small learning communities: Five domains of best practice*. Portland, OR: Education Northwest.
- Roza, M. (2008). Breaking down school budgets. *Education Next*, 9(3), 28–33.

*For more on Recreating Secondary Schools, access the resources at [educationnorthwest.org](http://educationnorthwest.org), in the Projects section or contact Diana Oxley at [Diana.Oxley@educationnorthwest.org](mailto:Diana.Oxley@educationnorthwest.org), 503.275.9613.*

Founded in 1966 as Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Education Northwest works with schools, districts, and communities on comprehensive, research-based solutions to the challenges they face. Four priorities frame our work: supporting educators; strengthening schools and districts; engaging families and communities; and conducting research, evaluation, and assessment. Watch for additional issues of Lessons Learned, a series that distills our experience and research, in the Resources section of [educationnorthwest.org](http://educationnorthwest.org).

101 SW Main St, Suite 500, Portland, OR 97204-3213  
503.275.9500 | 800.547.6339

