

Smaller Learning Communities

National High School Center

Smaller learning communities (SLCs) refer to all school design efforts intended to create smaller, more learning-centered units of organization (Oxley, 2007). These communities serve up to a few hundred students, and are formed either by building new limited-size schools or by converting comprehensive high schools into multiple communities. The goals of creating SLCs are to increase student engagement and teacher involvement. Many educators believe that in small schools teachers know their students better; students feel less isolated and alienated; discrepancies in the achievement gap can be reduced; and teachers are encouraged to develop innovative strategies (Cotton, 2001).

Common structural approaches to SLC efforts include the following:

- Small schools break large schools into small, multi-grade, autonomous programs housed within a larger school building. Schools-within-a-school may be organized around themes. Each has their own culture, program, personnel, students, budget, and school space.
- Career academies organize curricula around one or more careers or occupations by integrating both academic and occupation-related classes. (For more information see the section on “Thematic Learning Academies” in this chapter.)
- Freshman academies, also called ninth grade academies, are designed to meet the needs of ninth grade students as they make the transition from middle school to high school. (For more information see the section on “Thematic Learning Academies” in this chapter.)
- “House” plans assign students within the school to groups, either across all grades or by grade level, each with its own disciplinary policy, student activity program, student government, and social activities.
- Magnet programs usually have a core focus (e.g., math and science, the arts) and selectively draw students from the entire district (Page, Layzer, Schimmenti, Bernstein, & Horst, 2002; Bernstein, Millsap, Schimmenti, & Page, 2008).

One of the most common strategies used in SLCs is interdisciplinary team teaching, which groups core teachers to share students in common for multiple years and integrate various curricula. Other personalization strategies that can often be found in SLCs include teacher advisory programs that assign teachers to a small number of students for whom they are responsible over multiple years; adult advocates or mentors who offer support and guidance to students on a regular basis over several years; and family advocate systems that bridge the gap between school and home with regular meetings of students and families with their family advocate at the school (Bernstein et al., 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Action Principles

For State

1. Provide assistance, information, and/or support for establishing smaller learning communities.
2. Foster state-level policies and funding support strategies to promote the creation of SLCs.

For District

1. Partner with parents and community stakeholders to foster awareness and support for SLCs.
2. Provide adequate resources for developing and sustaining the SLC, including building space, financial support, staff, etc.

For School

1. View the SLC as a means to an end, not an end unto itself.
2. Ensure teachers’ support of the goals and methods of the SLC and plan for the changes in their working environment.

3. Form interdisciplinary teams of teachers that share students and planning time in common and support the development of innovative curriculum and instructional programs.
4. Provide professional development focused on SLC structure and strategies, including effective teaming practices.
5. Designate specific assignments within the SLC for school administrators, counseling staff, special educators, and remediation specialists.
6. Ensure that school admission is driven by student and teacher choice and that the SLC attracts a diverse group of students.

Resources and References

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