FORUM

From Comprehensive High Schools to Small Learning Communities: accomplishments and challenges

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ABSTRACT This article describes progress made in organizing US high schools into small learning communities, a practice spurred by the recognition that many of America's large comprehensive high schools had become impersonal and alienating. Small learning community reforms show a pattern of sustained growth over the last four decades but also frequently fail to achieve instructional improvements. The challenge in making instructional improvements is to pursue sound instructional strategies which small scale uniquely positions teachers to carry out, and to make shifts in district policy and practice which currently pose barriers to adopting such strategies.

The Journey of Redesigning US High Schools

As a long-term student of high school reform and a former leader of a new small school, we are happy to report that the practice of organizing US high schools into smaller units shows a pattern of sustained growth and consolidation over the last four decades. This is a striking achievement in the world of education reform where even well-designed reforms come and go at a rapid pace. We discern three stages in the evolution of small learning community practice.

The Progress

The 1960s to mid-80s saw individual high schools located in urban centers engaged in efforts to organize into smaller units – schools within schools. The recognition that many of America's high schools, at one, two, and three thousand students, had become impersonal and alienating drove these efforts to make small replicas of the large institution. Even during these decades, however, educators identified an additional path for these reforms – the creation of

smaller programmatic – not just administrative – units (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 1976). Educators had the choice of organizing small clusters of teachers and students around different courses of study.

From 1985 to 2000, the need to create a sense of community in large high schools fused with national pressure to improve educational outcomes to produce district-wide mandates to reorganize high schools into smaller units. New York City pursued the 'house system' mandate; Philadelphia followed with the creation of 'charters' in all of its high schools. Chicago adopted a kindergarten-12th grade policy of forming schools-within-schools and new small schools with provisions for a high level of autonomy for the small units. All of these district reform initiatives envisioned schools organized around unique curriculum themes or innovative pedagogies. Progressive educational reformers who viewed standardization of practice as a crude and ineffective tool to achieve educational equity, in effect joined hands with conservative advocates of school choice to empower teachers and parents to launch and maintain local small schools (Meier, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 2001).

By 2000, the organization of large high schools into small learning communities had become a national reform movement. The US Department of Education under the Clinton Administration funded multi-million dollar projects to develop and scale up school reform models with small unit size as a required feature. First Things First and Talent Development High Schools were two high school models funded and which have since demonstrated positive effects on student achievement (MDRC, 2007). In 1999, the US Department of Education launched the Small Learning Community Program to support schools with more than 1,000 students to implement small learning community structures. Despite budget cutbacks, the program continues and to date has awarded grants to nearly 1,350 high schools. Private philanthropic institutions, most notably the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, but also the Annenberg and Carnegie foundations, have joined forces with these federal initiatives and have committed far more funding to support high school reorganization and new, small high schools.

A professional consensus that the scale of schooling matters has finally emerged (NASSP, 1996, 2004). School districts, irrespective of geographic region and urban/rural location, are now attempting to operate high schools as smaller units. To the early system-wide reform mandates of New York City, Philadelphia, and Chicago, we can add Atlanta, Boston, San Diego, Los Angeles, Oakland, and Nashville to name a few, as well as state-wide initiatives in Arizona, New Jersey, New Hampshire, and South Carolina.

The Limits

The sustained and spreading interest in small learning communities and small schools as the means to improve high school student achievement is encouraging. Small-scale schooling is easily jettisoned when it exists as an

exception to the rule but is hard to undo when taken system wide, especially when accompanied by supportive alterations in the operations of district offices. Yet, it is hardly time to relax. Some cynics claim school reorganization is a means to avoid federal 'No Child Left Behind' sanctions intended to force 'real' improvement. Even among advocates, it is clear that some schools and districts secure grants more out of motivation to augment funding in chronic short supply than a deep belief in the benefits of teaching and learning in a small learning community.

Further, as bad as it is for educators to fail to sustain well-designed reforms, it is perhaps only slightly better for these well-designed reforms to persist as incomplete implementations owing to weak leadership or large pockets of staff resistance. We would argue that the bifurcation of small-scale schooling into small learning community reforms and small schools was driven by the failure of the former to achieve complete implementation within a reasonable period of time. Too often, staff failed to make the trade-offs necessary to schedule interdisciplinary teams of teachers with classes of students comprised only of the students in their small learning community or with common planning periods crucial to their ability to plan collaboratively. New small schools, in contrast, are able to avoid these problems altogether.

Currently, it is common to find small learning communities operating only at entry-level year, often as 'freshmen transition academies', or involving only adjunctive student support such as student advisory or peer mentoring and leaving instruction essentially unchanged. Yet, a commonly shared, basic notion of small-unit schooling recognizes that small size and more supportive relationships are not ends in themselves:

> An interdisciplinary team of teachers shares a few hundred (or fewer) students in common ... assumes responsibility for their educational progress across years of school, and exercises maximum flexibility to act on knowledge of students' needs. (Oxley, 2006, p. 1)

A small school community creates the conditions for teachers to work in a different way with students, to effect curricular and instructional improvements. The definition also points out the need for teacher teams to operate free from school practices and structures that prevent them from responding effectively to what they have learned their students need.

An evaluation of Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation-sponsored high school redesign efforts (American Institutes for Research & SRI International, 2003) noted that converting or starting a new school is an enormous undertaking which demands new kinds of learning and understanding. The work of restructuring an existing school requires attention to its existing culture and context, intentional communication and consensus-building among all stakeholders in each area that will undergo a shift. Small-scale schooling cannot accommodate the comprehensive high school's smorgasbord course offerings and separate special education and English language learner programs. It cannot realize its potential in an organization in which resource allocations support

large numbers of non-classroom staff and administrators rather than reduced student loads and increased time for teacher collaboration. It cannot flourish as an add-on to academic department structures. Small learning communities as a smaller, simpler cross-disciplinary organization of teachers and students use available resources to intensify teacher-student-parent relationships, teacher collaboration, and focus on academic study. These trade-offs represent deep changes in school culture and threats to American values of large size, comprehensive offerings and individual choice. Large public high schools are practically synonymous with educational quality given their correlation with the ability to populate a winning sports team and advanced levels of courses. They are perhaps the middle-class equivalent to private and normally small preparatory schools.

Leading a change so deeply embedded in the national consciousness requires uncommonly competent and stable leadership, a resource that has not yet caught up with the reform movement. We suspect that successful leaders are those that can make the case that small learning community practice does not abandon cherished values but approaches them in a different way. Large scale can be preserved where clear financial benefits are evident, such as in maintaining a large building rather than separate campuses for small schools; preserving school-wide sports teams and extra-curricular activities as a complement to small learning community programs; and offering choice at the level of small learning community program and classroom assignments rather than as individual course offerings.

The Cutting Edge

So, in spite of the spread of high school redesign efforts, we are chastened by knowledge of the incompleteness, even superficiality of many of these reforms. The cutting edge of high school reform efforts, however, shows the way to consolidating the gains. Research that has pointed out the failure of many small learning community reforms to achieve instructional improvements and clear student achievement gains has helped to focus reformers' attention on the creation of more effective instructional leadership and more time for teacher collaboration and professional learning as well as on adopting promising instructional strategies. Secondly, the clear need for district-level support of school reforms has thrown a spotlight on districts that have wrestled with the problem and quickened the pace of applying what has been learned from their examples.

The New Mantra: structure plus instruction

The challenge in making needed instructional improvements is to maintain a simultaneous focus on structural changes to support them. Highly respected research has concluded that 'the twin pillars of high school reform are structural changes to improve personalization and instructional improvement' (MDRC,

2007). The tendency for the two to become polarized and compete with each other, however, threatens to diminish the role of supportive structures given the pressure to address the current shortcomings of high school redesign efforts. Advocates and external technical assistance providers have to demonstrate more clearly perhaps how educators can capitalize on small school structure to improve instruction. For example, small learning community teams possess knowledge of students and their learning needs that they do not always translate into broader and more specific 'data' used in reflecting on and improving practice. Small learning community team members enhance their practice through informal sharing of strategies but seldom formally agree to adopt instructional strategies and learning goals in common to create instructional program coherence.

As technical assistance providers under contract with the federal Small Learning Community Program and individual school districts, we see the greatest potential to improve small learning community instruction in creating instructional program coherence. Research on learning and cognition (Greeno et al, 1996; Bransford et al, 1999) demonstrates that teaching is more likely to produce learning when it connects learning in different contexts and over an extended period of time. When learning is linked in this way, students are able to extend and deepen existing knowledge and adjust and refine understandings. Students' ability to apply learning in different contexts allows them to test what they know and generalize their knowledge. Small learning community teacher teams are uniquely positioned to strengthen student skills and deepen their knowledge across different contexts and years of schooling. What they lack is embedded, instructional leadership with capacity to guide and support their efforts.

Leadership is needed to guide teams in defining 'essential learnings' they will share in common and make a priority of their instruction. To create authentic coherence, essential learnings or student proficiencies must be consistent with state standards for curriculum content, yet map out common ground for collaboration across disciplines and give meaningful expression to small learning community program themes. State standards that make provisions for literacy across the curriculum, for example, give a leg up to the task, but not all do so. Further, for essential learnings to carry weight, students must publicly demonstrate proficiency. Leaders therefore have to be able to support teachers' development of demonstrations, fair assessments for them, and benchmarks to keep students' progress on track. Finally, leaders need to learn how to facilitate teachers' adoption of instructional strategies they will share in common to promote students' acquisition of desired learning habits and routines.

The work is ambitious, yes, but may well be self-sustaining. When teachers collaborate on instructional strategies, they voice how powerful it feels to pull together toward the same end. Most importantly, research demonstrates that where a staff succeeds in creating instructional program coherence, students show gains in achievement (Newmann et al, 2001).

Where the Learning Curve is Steepest:
school district leadership

Literature on what school districts need to know and do to support high school redesign is growing rapidly. Just a few years ago, the soundest generalization one could make about district support was that district staffs simply lacked knowledge about how to provide it. The literature, however, reflects only a fraction of the knowledge that loose networks of district leaders, foundation staffs, and external technical assistance providers are passing among themselves. In Atlanta, Georgia, for example, consultants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, three high school model development organizations, and the Northwest Regional Educational Lab have come together at various points to coordinate high school redesign and learn from each other.

Here, as at the school level, the concept of instructional program coherence offers a promising framework for clearing away the barriers and directing more support to high school reorganization. The need is for alignment of district school improvement goals, reform initiatives, offices, and programs with the goal of generating support for teacher collaboration on shared goals and strategies in each small learning community and small school. This means, for example, that rather than creating a separate office of high school reform, district leaders ask all district staff to take stock of their activities and modify, integrate, or eliminate them as needed to direct district staff support and resources to creating school instructional program coherence.

Where large numbers of programs are mounted to address identified students' learning deficits, fewer resources are available to build rigorous, coherent, and focused courses of study that might work for all students. Newmann et al (2001) have observed that because low-performing schools have so many challenges, staff have assumed that student diversity requires distinct program interventions for each group and learning need. This fragmentation of efforts to improve school outcomes results in staff specialization and categorical funding. While each program and/or intervention has strengths, the overall effect is to create gaps in school practice and prevent staff and students from building seamlessly on learning over time and from class to class.

An expanding knowledge base and developing leadership hold promise for high school reform. Increasingly, it is clear that knowledge and leadership-building needs are greatest at the district level. School staff resistance to reform may prove to be largely an artifact of the failure of district staffs to recognize the implications of school-level reforms for changes in their own manner of functioning.

The work is complex, yes, but learning is its own reward, and individuals at all levels of the educational system are now engaged in it. We have begun to penetrate the meaning of a systemic approach to high school reform.

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