

Small Learning Communities

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While Small Learning Communities might mean a high school with a small enrollment, it can also mean smaller, discrete sets for students within a high school with a very large enrollment. Drawing on current research¹, the meaning of a small learning community was understood as well as the benefits and critiques of these so-called “SLCs.”

A Small Learning Community is no more than 900 students, while ranging from 200-400 students up to and exceeding 900. The poorer the socio-economic composition of the school population, the smaller the learning community should be. Further, overcrowding in an SLC is a barrier to student improvement.

Technically, an SLC is not simply a small high school, but an integral functional unit within a larger institution. A small high school is characterized by (1) broad-based educational experience, (2) traditional setup and scheduling and (3) the teacher as instructor and source of all knowledge (i.e. teacher-centric).

Conversely, the Small Learning Community is marked by (1) its focus on college readiness or career themes, (2) a culture of continuous improvement, (3) teams of teachers are assigned a cohort of students through a program’s progress, (4) scheduling is flexible, (5) learning opportunities are expanded (vis-à-vis a small high school), (6) learner-centric. SLCs may be a freshman academy, although grade-level SLCs are outside the scope of this inquiry.

While advantages of SLCs and small high schools have been identified, few examples of successful conversions (i.e. large schools to SLCs) exist. Recent research has shown that the education benefits associated with smaller schools or SLCs (relative to large high schools) are not clear.² The process of converting a comprehensive high school to SLCs can be disruptive to the school and efforts may or may not be successful. In fact, the Gates Foundation stopped funding to create small schools and SLCs because they found that track records of academic improvement were more linked to effective leadership. Improved academic progress was not necessarily occurring in the “small schools” they were funding.

1. *Educational Equity and School Structure: School Size, Overcrowding and Schools-Within-schools*. Rady, Lee and Welner. TCREcord The Voice of Scholarship in Education, 2004.

2. *Leading the Conversion Process: Lessons Learned and Recommendation for Converting to Small Learning Communities*. Fouts & Associates, LLC. September, 2006. Prepared for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.