

National Impact for Pre-Implementation of Smaller Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

This article clearly defines the three crucial pre-implementation principles to maximize the success of Smaller Learning Communities in large high schools. Establishing clear understanding for the need of the SLC initiative is the first of these principles. Long term commitment to a sustained plan for relevant SLC professional learning opportunities will guarantee proper training, skills, and knowledge for those working within the SLC school. The final principle defined within this article is the establishment of a foundation for professional learning communities. The absence of any one of these principles can seriously affect the success of a SLC school.

Introduction

Implementing smaller learning communities in large schools can be argued as the best way to advance student achievement and improve teacher professional learning. Research has been rapidly accumulating that, as far as high schools is concerned size does matter-and smaller is better (Daniels, Bizar, and Zemelman 2001). Student achievement in small schools is superior to that in large schools (Bates 1993; Eberts,

Kehoe, and Stone 1982; Eicherstein 1994; Fowler and Walberg 1991; Kershaw and Blank 1993; Miller, Ellsworth, and Howell 1986; Robinson-Lewis 1991; Walberg 1992) (as cited in Cotton, 1996). Most would agree that SLC's alone will not solve all academic gaps. Benefits such as improved collegiality and collaboration among teachers combined with improved personalized student-teacher relationships would seem to be sufficient factors to convince educators to embrace the SLC model. Limited research supports the superiority of large schools over small schools. Educators continue to struggle with successful implementation and sustainability of the small school concept.

The Purpose of this Article

The purpose of this article is to assist schools in recognizing the importance of the preparation required during the pre-implementation phase of the SLC initiative. To insure the successful initiation of the SLC model, schools must not overlook the importance and commitment to professional learning. Schools not willing to make a commitment to pre-implementation education and preparation are likely to experience slow and inconsistent change as a result.

Understanding the Need for a SLC

Establishing the need for SLC's is fundamental for creating the understanding and support required to begin. Understanding the important concepts that make SLC's worth studying starts with the end in mind, the child. Educators and students in mega high schools are familiar with the reality that developing a supportive and nurturing atmosphere is difficult. Students in large high schools can go through their entire high school experience and potentially not have the same group of students in class more than once. Each year students adjust to a new set of teachers who have limited or no history with the student. This traditional setting decreases the potential of establishing meaningful relationships. Studies have established that students need relationships with both peers and adults as part of a healthy learning environment. Adult connections and personalization improves the school experience.

Each student needs to know at least one adult in the school is closely concerned with his or her fate...The relationship between the student and the advocate should ensure that no youngster experiences the sense of isolation that frequently engulfs teenagers during this critical period of their lives. Having someone on his or her side can help a young person feel a part of the school community (National Association of Secondary Principals, 1996, p. 31). If high achievement for all students is the goal of

reform, then personalization and a rigorous curriculum are two essential ingredients. Although some students might be able to make it though four years of high school despite the lack of any personal connections, all students require a supportive environment-some more than others. Creating that environment is essential to bringing learning to fruition. (National Association of Secondary Principals, 2004, p. 67)

An increased emphasis on strengthening relationships with students is at the center of the SLC model. It is imperative to establish a clear understanding of what that means to teachers and staff as well as what is expected of them. Planning ongoing professional learning that will assist the faculty in understanding the changes that need to occur will be at the focal point of creating understanding and embracing relationships. Although few would argue that teachers have been historically excellent mentors, the focus on more meaningful student relationships must be implemented correctly or it could be perceived as an extra responsibility added to an already difficult profession.

Pre-Implementation Professional Learning

Campus teams working in the pre-implementation stage must be fully committed to a sustained plan that will provide relevant SLC professional learning. The planning of professional learning during pre-implementation is often overlooked by school administrators. When limited planning or little effort is taken to provide relevant professional learning opportunities that ensure staff members' deep understanding of the skills needed for using the new practices a SLC model will find it difficult to succeed. Too often, unfortunately, little care is taken to provide professional learning that insures staff members' deep understanding of content and development of skills for using new practices (Hord and Sommers 2007). Professional learning that assists the process by creating a clear understanding of the initiative and the components that will be needed to create consensus for the initiative are critical to the process from the beginning to full implementation.

Below is a list of topics that require professional learning during pre-implementation:

- What is a professional learning communities
- Professional learning communities individual and team responsibilities
- How to develop interdisciplinary lessons
- Interdisciplinary teaching techniques
- Use of advisory period
- Building support for individual and student groups

- Building capacity in the program
- Sustained leadership
- Team stability
- Articulation with college/university systems
- Building community support

Professional Learning Community

Working as an effective professional learning community is important to the early success of the SLC initiative. The first and most fundamental task of building a collaborative culture is to bring together those people whose responsibilities create an inherent mutual interest in exploring the critical question of PLC (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). The challenge for administrators is overcoming the established traditional school and familiar structure that creates an environment of isolation for teachers. This isolation results in a natural disconnection from colleagues and limits opportunities to share the educational process. Department level meetings, although informative and critical to communication, are not in most cases characterized as a professional learning community. The importance of providing training that assists teachers in the process of working together as well as emphasizes the impact that professional collaboration has on both students and teachers is a powerful step. Allowing teachers to collaborate without appropriate training or understanding why they are collaborating has the potential of creating frustration due to a lack of common experience in the process of working together and the expected outcomes of such efforts. In fact, we are convinced that one of the most common mistakes school administrators make in the implementation of improvement initiatives is to focus exclusively on the “how” while being inattentive to why (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006)

A key to implementing a PLC that embraces collaboration will require a commitment to team planning time. Allowing collaboration time is important however allowing collaboration time during the school day is a tremendous reassurance to the commitment of SLC implementation. Expecting teachers to work in professional learning communities and creating outcomes that are benefiting the process of collaborative lesson development, discussions regarding teaching strategies, and opportunities for discussing strategies to assist struggling learners is more meaningful when a time commitment from the district is recognized.

Creating the Right Conditions

Under the right conditions, the problems of commitment, alignment, motivation, and change largely melt away (Collins 2001). Implementation teams that understand the importance of creating the right conditions start by establishing a foundation that a change from the present system is beneficial for students. Positive factors such as opportunities for increased and improved student relationships with peers and faculty resulting in improved attendance, decreased dropout rate, and improved academic success are keys to convincing educators to embrace the necessity for SLC's. Comprehending that the process involves a different level of collaboration than most educators are familiar with requires a paradigm shift for many teachers. Benefits such as engaging in professional conversations in relation to educational practices and resolving common instructional issues are important. In addition the by product of building professional relationships strengthens the bonds between teachers creating stronger more meaningful support groups.

Concluding Remarks

Finally the success of SLC's is dependent on a sound pre-implementation plan that is systematic and focused on creating a common and clear understanding of the initiative. The outcome and the impact on students as well as teachers is the driving force that necessitates a smooth transition from the present structure.

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