

The Effect of Small Learning Communities on Academic Success:  
One School's Journey from Comprehensive to Personalized

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## Abstract

Many schools are starting Small Learning Communities yet much is unknown about their outcomes. Students are literally disappearing in comprehensive high schools and violence has escalated. Those who implement Small Learning Communities are looking to combat these problems. While rarely feasible to split large schools into smaller schools, it is plausible, as we have seen, to create smaller communities within the schools that reach out and individualize the material, with high expectations for learning that lessen the chance for students to fall between the cracks. This study aims to find out if Small Learning Communities have an effect on students' academic success. Are high schools students more engaged in classes as a result of being part of a small learning community? This is a case study of a large public high school in a suburb of San Francisco, California. The data is from the 2006 to 2007 school year, previous to the implementation of Small Learning Communities and is compared against data from the 2009 to 2010 school year, during which Small Learning Communities were in place to see if success is different once SLCs are put into place.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

To be a realistic candidate for college, students must start making decisions regarding certain prerequisites for college prep classes in junior high school. As recently as ten years ago it was almost unheard of for students to be taking classes other than those main core classes and an elective, not necessarily connected to what they wanted to study after high school. Small Learning Communities (SLCs) were introduced in high schools with large student populations so that students could get more one on one attention tailored to their postgraduate needs and wants. Students who had not thought past the end of the week were now being asked to think and make decisions about their future after high school. When I was a student I was not asked to think about what I wanted to do when I graduated high school; college was the time when one took classes specific to one's interests. Now there is a movement to have students take courses that peak their interests early on, to capitalize on that interest and turn that into engagement.

In 2010, the Department of Education allocated \$52.2 million to twenty-eight school districts across the U.S. to implement Small Learning Communities (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). SLCs or schools-within-a-school are programs designed to promote academic achievement in large schools, typically those of 1000 or more pupils. Students are usually grouped with other students that have similar interests or career aspirations. Teachers collaborate on the curriculum so that the material is streamlined in the core classes. An immense amount of time, energy and money go into creating and

executing these SLCs, yet not much is known about the differences these SLCs make in the academic achievement of students.

The purpose of this study is to find the effects of SLCs on student engagement in the classroom and their year-end grades in core classes in junior and senior year. The reasoning is to discover if the Department of Education should continue to budget for Small Learning Community grants. What effects do SLCs have on the academic engagement of high school students? Do grades in core classes improve for students who are in schools where SLCs are in place?

#### Theoretical Rationale

The *ideas* on which SLCs are built stem from Piaget's Constructivism theory; while the *implementation* is centered on federal law. In 1994 the U.S. Department of Education passed the United States Congress of the National School-to-Work Opportunities Act (NSTWOA) or as it is more commonly referred to, the School-to-Work Act. This legislation called for major changes in America's educational system. The School-to-Work Act built on Goals 2000 and the Security's Commissions on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), both also aimed to redesign education in the U.S. The School-to-Work act invited schools within all states to apply for funds to develop programs to better prepare students for careers after high school. When many schools chose to implement career academies, the Small Learning Community movement was born. Unfortunately, after time had passed, attention and funding came to an end. Shortly thereafter, two federal initiatives emerged: the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Act

(CSRDE) of 1998 and the Smaller Learning Community (SLC) grants that the U.S. Department of Education began awarding. In 2002, President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. This called for highly qualified teachers, students that pass exit tests and schools that must reach and maintain annual yearly progress (U.S. D.O.E., 2004). So in the last decade we have seen a surge in schools revisiting Small Learning Communities and although it has been in waves, SLCs have been a part of education legislation for the last twenty-five years.

Jean Piaget's theory of Constructivism says the learner internalizes knowledge through mechanisms: accommodation and assimilation or basically the individual learn by doing (Brandon, 2010). The idea behind SLCs is that students are having shared experiences among classes, including hands on projects that carry over, for example, from English to history. The hope is that students make a longer, deeper connection to the material through having a relationship with it. Another key component to SLCs is field trips, not only to get out in the "real world" but also to see the learning in practice. When students are taught about a concept, the judicial system for example, a small learning community has a group visit a courthouse or the capital so that they can see first hand the concepts in context. Constructivism does not solely rely on the work of students; the teacher plays an integral part in this theory, as well as in SLCs. The teacher is the facilitator; and this part is almost exactly the same between the theory and the practice. The teacher is in constant interaction with the learners; the teacher is the mediator, the one who brings students closer to the context (Brandon, 2010). To do this, facilitators

must create meaningful zones of proximal development and cognitive bridges. SLCs strive to make the change from the bell ringing to signal the end of knowledge gaining, to learning to being weaved in throughout the day. Concepts are more strongly grasped when viewed in different ways, varying levels and changing contexts. Additionally, having more than one teacher who presents material is helpful since each educator has their own experiences and their own ways of bringing knowledge to the classroom. Piaget says the process of active learning gives students the ever-broadening skill of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is the major goal of SLCs, where the point of learning is not simply to receive the diploma and to go through the motions, but to take the knowledge gained in high school and apply it to post-secondary education and career.

#### Assumptions

My assumption is that students who come from a school that has Small Learning Communities are likely to have more confidence in what they want as a career field and thus be more focused when they get to college. Directly, I am presuming that students who come from Small Learning Communities will have higher grades in their core classes, English and social science, on average, than students who did not participate in SLCs.

#### Background and Need

The gap in the research seems to lie in the actual outcomes of these SLCs. It is well documented what is anticipated of Small Learning Communities, but concrete numbers and comparisons are not available for before and after the SLCs were put in place on a



large scale. The purpose of this study is to answer whether or not SLCs are providing improvements in students' grades, and thus if the Department of Education should continue to budget for SLC grants.

Hyslop's study "The Role of Career Academies in Education, (2009)" was the starting point for my own research. Her findings included the following:

...more than one million students, or 7,000 students each day are not reaching graduation. Yearly, only about 70% of students nationwide earn a diploma. Twenty-eight percent of four-year post secondary freshmen and 42% of two-year transfer students into post-secondary schools, require remedial course work. Only 50% of those entering post-secondary education are expected to graduate, this is one of the lowest rates for an industrialized nation (Hyslop, 2009, p. 2).

In addition to: "The National Academy Foundation, which supports 529 academies in 49 states, reports that 90 percent of students enrolled in its programs graduate and 80 percent of those go on to college" (Hyslop, 2009, p. 33). I wanted to see what these numbers looked like in an actual school, which led me to examining Sycamore High School's transition from comprehensive to SLCs.

## Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

The current literature only included information about the lead up to Small Learning Communities, but stopped short of analyzing SLCs in place. I therefore felt it was time to add some research on the outcomes of SLCs based on my study of a “typical” high school. The existing literature tends to center around four areas: what Small Learning Communities and other types of similar school reforms are, research showing the need for SLCs to be in place, how students can benefit from SLCs and lastly, how to implement them.

### Historical Context

The move to SLCs can be traced back to the late 1960s when a school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania started career academics (Sammon, 2008). Locally, Sir Francis Drake High School in San Anselmo started “academies” in the 1970s (Dougherty, 2010). Over the years districts have called these programs different names but at the root they were all the beginnings of SLCs. While schools were taking their individual routes to SLCs, the U.S. Department of Education passed the United States Congress of the National School-to-Work Opportunities Act (NSTWOA) or as it is more commonly referred to, the School-to-Work Act. This legislation called for major changes in America’s educational system. The School-to-Work Act built on Goals 2000 and the Security’s Commissions on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), both also aimed to redesign the education in the U.S. The School-to-Work act invited schools within all states to apply for funds to

develop programs to better prepare students for careers after high school (Sammon, 2008).

When many schools chose to implement career academies, the Small Learning Community movement was born.

Unfortunately, after time had passed, attention and funding came to an end. However, not too much time had passed before two federal initiatives emerged: the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Act (CSRDA) of 1998 and the Smaller Learning Community (SLC) grants that the U.S. Department of Education began awarding. Additionally, major foundations such as Carnegie, Annenberg, and the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, as well as many other smaller regional funders, contributed significant money into large, comprehensive high schools in an effort to make them smaller, more personalized environments for teaching and learning (Sammon, 2008). In 2002, President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. This called for highly qualified teachers, students that pass exit tests and schools that must reach and maintain annual yearly progress (U.S. D.O.E.). Also during this time student enrollment was at an all time high across the country. In the early 2000's it became commonplace to have schools of 2,000 to 3,000 pupils. Schools in major metropolitan areas such as Miami and Los Angeles, commonly see schools with enrollment of up to 5,000 (Sammon, 2008), even though research shows that many of the schools in this country are too large to effectively educate today's youth. This supports the move to smaller school environments for improved teaching and learning opportunities (Sammon, 2008).

In the late 1990s, the U.S. Department of Education presented research which stated that schools of 1,000 or more students experience 825% more violent crime, 270% more vandalism, and 1000% more incidents involving weapons. (U.S. Department of Education [D.O.E], 2010). More recently, research shows that we are only graduating 50% of African Americans, 51% of American Indians, 53% of Latino and Hispanic students, Whites at 75% and Asian students at 77%. Even in the best case we are leaving 23% of our students behind (Sammon, 2008). Those who implement Small Learning Communities are looking to combat these problems. While rarely feasible to split large schools into smaller schools, it is plausible, as we have seen, to create within the schools smaller communities that reach out and individualize the material, while maintaining high expectations for learning that lessen the chance for students to fall between the cracks.

#### Review of the Previous Literature

What are SLCs and comprehensive High School reform? The literature defines a comprehensive high school as “those found in small cities where a single high school served the entire community and provided an extensive range of courses, including foreign languages and vocational courses” (Bracey, 2001, p. 413). The goals of SLCs are to create pathways between high school, further education, and the workplace (Smith & National High School Center, 2008). “While there are no simple solutions to the dropout crisis, there are clearly ‘supports’ that could be provided to improve students’ chances of staying in school. While most dropouts blame themselves for failing to graduate there are things schools can do to help them finish” (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006, p. 6).

Schools with SLCs look to make what is learned in the classroom more relevant to the students' lives, having smaller classes with more one on one instruction, involvement and feedback. Theme-based schools, such as ones that focus on science and technology or the arts, are another way to prepare students for their future (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Drawing on the history of small alternative schools and schools within schools that have succeeded in creating more nurturing environments for students and their teachers, the notion of breaking large high schools into smaller units has found favor as a way to increase personalization, relevance and rigor of coursework, and teacher collaboration (David, 2008, p. 84).

The theory that SLCs rest on is as follows:

organizing schools into smaller educational environments will help to build more collaborative and collegial communities of teachers, providing them with the autonomy and motivation to make better curricular and pedagogical decisions in the interest of their students and therefore improving student learning (Supovitz, 2002, p. 1603).

In the SLC model, large public high schools are redesigned to replace large and impersonal schooling with smaller, more career oriented education environments. It calls for small, interdisciplinary teaching and learning teams, providing students with rigorous and relevant curriculum and instruction. Students have opportunities to form closer student-teacher relationships, have more exposure to subjects of

interests with real-world relevance and are better prepared for postgraduate careers or post-secondary education. Essentially, personalizing the school environment is a central goal of efforts to transform America's schools (Felner, Seitsinger, Brand, Burns & Bolton, 2007).

Why do U.S. schools need Small Learning Communities?

It now appears though that large schools, especially large high schools, produce their own set of problems, which a growing number of researchers and policy makers think can be solved by returning to small schools. A study conducted by Lee and Loeb found that being in a smaller school, responsibility for student achievement by teachers increased (Bracey, 2001). While progress has been made in some areas, students in the United States are under-prepared to compete in the increasingly global economy. More than one million students, or 7,000 students each day are not reaching graduation. Yearly, only about 70% of students nationwide earn a diploma (Hyslop, 2009).

More jobs than ever before require some type of post-secondary education in addition to a high school diploma, but many of the U.S. students who do graduate high school have not been able to make a smooth transition to college. Twenty-eight percent of four-year post secondary freshmen and 42% of two-year transfer students into post-secondary schools, require remedial course work. Only 50% of those entering post-secondary education are expected to graduate, this is one of the lowest rates for an industrialized nation (Hyslop, 2009). Because school districts are trying to meet minimum requirements for entry, a situation has been created in which students are ready

for college but not ready for the work force. Students who choose not to go to college are no longer prepared for the path they've chosen. "Schools have lost their ability to prepare students for the technical aspects of many jobs. The United States long-held confidence that most students will leave high school ready to work has been shattered" (Williams, 2005, p. 34). Also as requirements for college continue to increase, more instructional time is devoted to college prep courses; this has resulted in a slow erosion of career and technical education programs and an increase in core academic courses. Additionally, the separation of academic disciplines creates artificial boundaries between subjects that students could better understand as interrelated parts (Dodge & Kendall, 2004).

In schools in which SLCs have been implemented, students were more likely to report feeling held to high academic standards than students in traditional settings. Schools that have implemented SLCs report that they "significantly improved students' intentions, awareness, understanding and plans related to careers and college. The number of students that planned on attending some sort of schooling after high school increased by 26%" (Heath & Albuquerque Public Schools, 2005, p. 1). Eighty-one percent of survey respondents said that if schools provided opportunities for real world learning , such as internships, service learning projects, and other opportunities, it would have improved the students' chance of graduating from high school. Outside studies noted that clarifying the links between school and getting a job may convince more students to stay in school (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

In the Department of Education's landmark study "Second to None: A Vision of the New California High School, (2010)" important areas that need to be addressed to equip students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce are highlighted. The study reports the following:

By creating both academic and career pathways for students, we will improve our ability to help all students. A comprehensive approach to instruction where students participate in projects and practice an interdisciplinary array of skills from math, language arts, fine arts, geography, science and technology needs to be taken" (paragraph 11).

Some students struggle understanding academic concepts when taught using an abstract, nonetheless students need to understand such concepts, as they relate to the workplace and to the larger society in which they live and work. In a traditional classroom students are left to make these connections on their own, in SLCs the goal is to have that connection made organically and obviously (Williams, 2005).

In What Ways Can Students Benefit from SLCs?

Because the over arching goal of a small learning communities is to have every student reach their full potential most advocates have argued that SLCs raise student achievement, especially for minority and low-income students, combat anonymity and isolation, increase the sense of belonging, and increase parent and community involvement as well as attendance and graduation rates (Bracey, 2001). Additionally, small schools



consistently reported higher levels of social support and caring, which made it harder for student to fall between the cracks. Not just underperforming students can benefit from SLCs, those who are shy or prefer to just blend in can as well. Many students report having classes that were so big that teachers did not know their names (Bridgeland et al, 2006).

While two-thirds of students in a comprehensive high school said there was a staff member or teacher who cared about their success, only 56% said they could go to a staff person for school problems and just 41% had someone in school with whom to talk about personal problems. More than 62% said their school needed to do more to help student with problems outside of class. Seven out of ten favored more parental involvement (Bridgeland et al., 2006). SLCs look to create these relationships and allow for a group of teachers to have shared students so that multiple people know one student and it makes reflection more possible. Integrated instruction promotes the discovery of connections, a vital skill in our changing world, where learning how to learn is more important than memorizing specific data that may soon become obsolete or irrelevant. A learning community weaves together the learning, skills, and assignments of two or more classes into a unified mosaic of educational objectives by blending the instruction of logically related disciplines. The same cohort of students enrolls in all classes within the learning community (Dodge et al., 2004).

In studies conducted by Jacobs, Shoemaker, and Bonds, Cox and Gantt-Bonds (as cited by Williams, 2005) it has been shown that integrated curriculum, interdisciplinary

teaching, thematic teaching, synergistic teaching, or SLCs ,regardless of what it is called, engages students in learning to a greater extent. In fact, most learners, when measured for academic retention, excel when information is delivered and connected contextually to something “real” (Williams, 2005). The creation of a more personalized context alters the regularities of the complex social settings of the school in ways that ‘unlock student energy and motivation’ and that gives students ‘a sense of growth, of personal agency, of competence, of being someone who’s individuality is recognized and fertilized.’ “SLCs foster productive learning both by removing developmentally hazardous conditions that may be present in the school context and by providing the opportunities to learn, opportunities to teach, and learning supports that enable a school to become a positive, developmentally enhancing context” (Felner et al., 2007). Additionally, because learning communities include at least two classes, and sometimes more, students are given the gift of time together. In these situations students get to know each other’s strengths and weaknesses and can provide and receive help accordingly (Dodge, 2004).

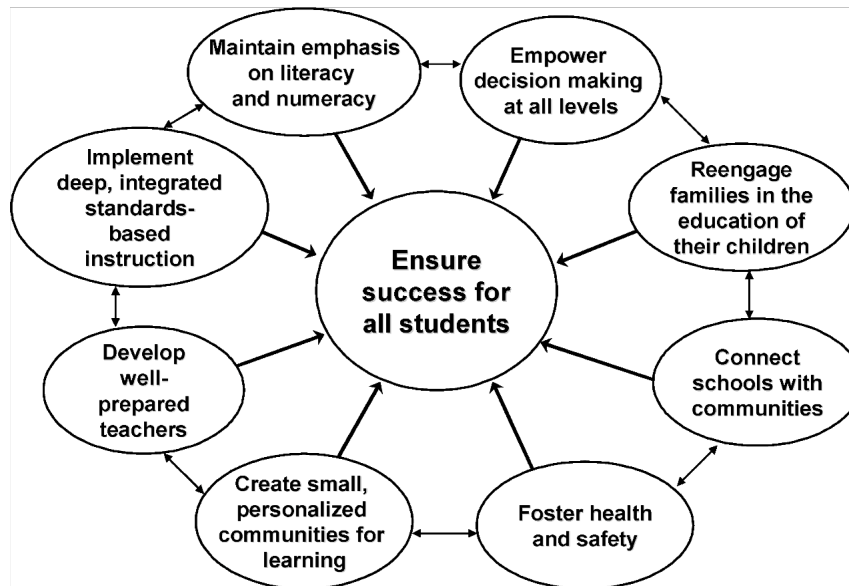


FIGURE 1. These nine dimensions of Small Learning Communities all lead to success for the students who take part in them. (Felner et al., 2007, p. 212)

### How Can Schools Go About Implementing These Programs?

Most authors who examine how to implement SLCs agree on the dimensions, or steps that are necessary. They also agree that while a school may have partial success in obtaining implementation of any one element, successful and full, sustainable implementation, and maximum impact depends on the degree to which the comprehensive model is attained (Felner et al., 2007). The following components are the most commonly cited as necessary elements in a school where SLCs will be implemented- *structural and organizational characteristics*. When one begins to instill change into a school in the form of instruction, it is not simply changing one aspect. To produce the dramatic change in student experience and student outcome the entire school

needs to be in a fluid place to allow for the best results. *Attitudes, norms and beliefs of staff*: Staff buy in is essential, both initially and over time. Michael Mifflin also touched on this in his interview, saying that this was a challenge but once they got past this and got teachers to see the benefits, they picked up speed in the right direction. *Climate/ empowerment/ experimental characteristics and features of the school and district*: This category is very inclusive. It includes conditions such as levels of stress, safety and support for students. The experiences that teachers have had with support, the degree to which teachers and administration feel empowered to make decisions to better the school. *Capacity/ skills*: at the root of this category is that in order to do something well you must first know how to do it. SLCs that are effective have teachers who are well prepared to be a part of a small learning community. The last component is *practice/ procedural variables*: these are the actual practices, processes, and procedures that are used in the school context for instruction, decision making, leadership, administration, staff development, parent involvement, community involvement and building and conveying high expectations (Felner et al., 2007). Time is also a key factor in the success of a Small Learning Community. In the book, *System Wide Efforts to Improve Student Achievement*, Oxley (2006) states that small school advocates argue that students' entire school day must be organized within their SLC in order to give teachers the degree of autonomy and flexibility they need to be responsive to students. Research on half-day SLCs has shown favorable effects on students' sense of community and academic achievement. Therefore,

it is difficult to say how much stronger the effect of an all day arrangement may be (Oxley, 2006).

While most cases of school reform involving SLCs are one school that creates smaller communities but shares all the same administration and overhead, there have been cases of extreme implementation. In a high school in the Northeastern United States they took “creating a school within a school” to a whole new level. This school created six separate schools, sharing only land and hired twelve new people for created positions. Six of those twelve hires were new principal positions, as each school would now have their own principal (Nehring & Lohmeier, 2010). Obviously this is not the norm because of the high costs involved in doing setting up the school in this manner.

#### Statistical Information

The cost of the average SLC grant from the Department of Education for a school district is about \$1.8 million for a five-year grant. Currently, twenty-eight school districts in the United States receive SLC grants (D.O.E. 2010). There are 16,210 school districts in the United States; meaning that less than 1% percent of school districts in the U.S. are receiving these monies. If every school district received a grant it would cost \$29,178,000,000 every five years. The Department of Education has an annual budget of around \$45 - \$47 billion. Which would make the DOE’s five year budget about \$230 billion, thus if every school district in the United States received grants to implement Small Learning Communities it would cost 12% of the budget.

#### Administrative and Legislative Records

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which was amended by, Title V, Part D, Subpart 4, Sec. 5441 - of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and later reauthorized as a result of The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, authorizes Smaller Learning Community grantees to use their funds to, among other things: study the feasibility of creating Smaller Learning Communities; research, develop, and implement strategies for creating Smaller Learning Communities; provide professional development for school staff in the teaching methods that would be used in the smaller learning community; and develop and implement strategies to include parents, business representatives, community-based organizations, and other community members in the activities of the Smaller Learning Communities. Furthermore, Congress appropriated \$125 million to the Smaller Learning Communities program for the fiscal year 2001. In December of 2001, Congress appropriated \$142 million to the Smaller Learning Communities program for fiscal year 2002 funds for the 2003 SLC competition (D.O.E., 2010).

#### Interview with an Expert

According to Michael Mifflin (pseudonym, personal communication, March 31, 2011), the Vice Principal and director of Small Learning Communities at Sycamore High School (a pseudonym) in Sonoma County, the unintended benefit of students seeing a united front, and having a network for both the students and the teachers seems to be the two biggest benefits of SLCs. Students have continuity and flow in their work; rather than

having separate classes where the door closes behind you, you're bring classes together in an organic way. In an in-house survey from 2010, 60% of teachers felt they had a stronger connection to their students. 60% said they were enjoying Small Learning Communities and 78% said they felt closer to their colleagues. "Those numbers jump off the page at you, 78%- you can't ignore that" according to Mifflin.

He said that difficulties in scheduling are probably the most challenging aspect of SLCs. "When you have a school of 2,000 and you want to keep teachers happy, give students what they want and have SLCs (which limit the movements you can make) it becomes a very big project."

When discussing Sycamore High's success over the last four years with SLCs and how this school has kept them working, even though many other schools (including the other high school in this district) have tried, struggled and did not keep them going, Mr. Mifflin said, "It was difficult in the beginning. You have teachers who are stuck in their ways and have years invested in their curriculum and their way of thinking a classroom should be run. You don't want to get rid of that but you want to incorporate and build on that. We had some teachers who had co-taught and had their own SLCs in a way. We needed to expand that and create a situation in which these SLCs were inclusive, not exclusive. The major challenge was getting the 'verbal' teachers on board because once you get them on your side you can get the masses to listen. The way we succeeded was having individuals who were committed to making it work. A good group of students that

allowed us to try and struggle and try and make changes and try and try and try until we got it right. But most importantly we had a staff that was committed to sustaining it.”

Mr. Mifflin said he sees Sycamore High’s SLCs continue to take off and keep going, “because we are over the hump, the hard part is behind us. We have the difficulties figured out. I think other schools will need “something” to grab onto. Some students are already doing inter-district transfers because they have heard such great things about what we are offering here.”

#### Sample and Site

Mr. Michael Mifflin is the Vice Principal of Sycamore High School. He is also the director of Small Learning Communities at SHS. During our interview he offered wonderfully thorough insight into how this particular school made the transition from comprehensive high school to one with SLCs. Additionally, he was able to contribute information about SLCs in general and his knowledge through research about other schools that have implemented them and information he has gathered through research.

#### Ethical Standards

This paper meets the requirements for human subject standards of the internal review board for the protection of human subjects from Dominican University of California to ensure that ethical standards were met; Dominican University IRB procedures were followed. IRB approval number is 8279.



### Chapter 3 Method

When selecting a method in which to conduct my research, an analysis of data from one high school seemed to be the most appropriate. A survey would have been less appropriate because it would have added more research to the discussion of SLCs and would cause more inferring from one more researcher, rather than providing concrete data in either direction. Since only one high school was studied, comparing two school years (one pre- SLC implementation and the other post- SLC implementation) it could be considered a single case study. Gathering data post-hoc was the most cost effective and accurate way to obtain the information. Both sets of data were analyzed the same way and certain information was recorded from each and then compared and contrasted. The information was picked randomly with the limitation that the first year be recent enough that the information was still available but occurred before SLCs and the second set had to be from a school year 2007 or later and they were the first group to go completely through high school with SLCs in place.

#### Sample and Site

I focused my research on Sycamore High School not only because I work there and had seen SLCs first hand and wanted to share that with the educational community, but because Sycamore has had substantial success in implementing and sustaining SLCs and I knew it could be a model for other educators looking for reform in their own schools.

### Access and Permissions

I have access to Sycamore High School because I work there. I met with the Vice Principal who is also the SLCs director and was granted permission for interviews and to archival records. A formal Institutional Review Board proposal from Dominican University was approved, and a 'consent to participate letter' for the interviewee was sent out prior to each interview, read and signed, and returned to me prior to the interview.

### Data Gathering Strategies

To understand what kind of results Sycamore had with the implementation of SLCs, I studied archival data from the school year 2006 to 2007 and 2009 to 2010. This information was all readily available as it is the information Mr. Mifflin and his team use to submit the SLC grant each year. Additionally, I conducted interviews with a few key people in the SLC program at Sycamore to give me some context and more concise knowledge about Sycamore High's individual journey from Comprehensive high school to a school with Small Learning Communities. All information collected, including interviews, was obtained through the necessary channels per Dominican University's Internal Review Board for human subjects.

### Data Analysis Approach

Two groups both from the same school were selected for review at different times; group one consists of pre SLCs in which the number of grades of A and grades of B in English and social science in senior year (A1), average GPA of the senior class (A2) and the retention rate (A3) are measured. In group two the measures are the number of grades of

A and B awarded in English and social science in senior year (B1), the average GPA of the senior class (B2) and the retention rate (B3).

If the following is reported in the data collection results,  $B1 \& B2 > A1 \& A2$  and  $B3 < A3$ , it may indicate that SLCs are making a positive impact on this high school and we can apply this as a model to other high schools of similar demographics.

## Chapter 4 Findings

## Description of Site, Individuals, Data

Sycamore High School is a mid-to large size public school in the San Francisco Bay Area. The school is composed of 1889 students: 64% identify themselves as White, 25% as Black, less than 1% American Indian, 7% as Asian and 23% as Hispanic (Sycamore High School, 2010). The city in which the school is located had an estimated 60,000 residents in 2010. The median household income was \$72,881. It is estimated that six-percent of the population is below the poverty line (U.S. Government, 2010) The school currently has four SLCs in place: Green Careers Pathway (GCP), Health Careers Pathway (HCP), Liberal Studies (LS) and Marketing, Media & Management (M<sup>3</sup>). Down from six SLCs last year, which will be discussed further in chapter five. The school consists of about 90 teachers and runs on a schedule of three block periods a day of 100 minutes each. Having significant breaks between each period allows for collaboration, informal study sessions within the SLCs and a chance for teachers to set up for lessons specific to SLC in which they are teaching.

<b>PERIOD</b>	<b>Mon, Tue, Thur, Fri</b>	<b>Wed</b>
Zero	7:20 - 8:10	7:20 - 8:10
First/Fourth	8:20 - 10:05	8:20 - 9:50
Tutorial	10:05 - 10:35	9:50 - 10:10
Second/Fifth	10:45 - 12:25	10:20 - 11:45
Lunch	12:25 - 1:10	11:45 - 12:25
Third/Sixth	1:20 - 3:00	12:35 - 2:00

The data for this study is post-hoc. The original purpose of the data was for the yearly Project Status Update because it is funded by a grant from the Department of Education. The data, which in its entirety will be referred to as PSU from this point forward, is composed of California Standardized Testing (CST) scores, Academic Performance Index (API) scores, the Early Assessment Program (EAP), Exit Exam Scores, surveys, interviews and school-wide data information specialists.

#### Overall Findings, Themes

There are four goals that make up the “project” that the Project Status Update (Sycamore High School, 2011) is examining. 1) Improve student achievement for *all* students. 2) Ensure every student is prepared with skills and knowledge necessary to successfully participate in both secondary education and employment. 3) Ensure a personalized experience for every student and 4) Ensure that teachers participate in structured collaboration resulting in rigorous and relevant curriculum and a personalized learning experience for all students. In this paper “success” is composed of the first three.

While I included the actual number of grades of D and F as a factor that I deemed an important part of the “success factor” the PSU does not provided the raw numbers, instead they generalize that, “there was a notable reduction in the Ds and Fs in both the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades in every subject except physical science, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade course, and world history, a 10<sup>th</sup> grade course. Lowering the number of students who need to be reclassified, meaning they start their “sophomore” year as a freshmen or their “junior year” as a sophomore, etc as a result of their receiving grades of D or F in classes, has had varying

success in each of the grades. In 2007 the numbers of students who needed to be reclassified in each grade were as follows: 9<sup>th</sup> grade – 20 students, 10<sup>th</sup> grade – 32 students, 11<sup>th</sup> grade – 3 students and 12<sup>th</sup> grade – 4 students. The following year, 2008, the amount of 9<sup>th</sup> graders needing to be reclassified decreased by 45%, 10<sup>th</sup> graders by 53% and 12<sup>th</sup> graders by 400% to zero students needing to be reclassified as seniors; an amazing achievement.

The great success however was overshadowed by the number of 11<sup>th</sup> graders needing to be reclassified increasing by 33%. The use of this data helps to identify students at risk is helping to ensure more timely and systematic intervention for students at risk of reclassification. The SLCs are increasingly focused on monitoring achievement levels and intervening on behalf of students of concern. This is an improvement over the previous system in which teachers did not communicate because they did not share students and thus it was easier to have the attitude that someone else would do something. Additionally, in 2007 44% of students said they had an adult on campus they could go to for support. In 2009 this figure had risen to 68%. Having an adult on campus to support you clearly can make a significant difference in staying in school or dropping out. Common practices in SLCs help focus teacher-teams on developing integrated, multidisciplinary curriculum, and timely intervention for students of concern, public recognition of successful students, community and team building, and student-centered professional collaboration. If nothing else, SLCs are keeping the students of Sycamore in school through graduation.

Likely the most impressive gains have been made in retention. In the 2007 school year the graduation rate was at 70%. In just two years, the graduation rate jumped to 83% with 461 graduates; the highest in the school's history. Many factors may have contributed to this. When surveyed 55% of the student-body reported that their "learning was preparing them for their future college and career goals." This was a 7% gain from the 2007 school year.

Ensuring every student is prepared with skills and knowledge necessary to successfully participate in both postsecondary education and employment is a key component in the Project Status Update as well as in my definition of success for this research. In the 2009-2010 school year Sycamore made important progress in creating more learning opportunities for all students that are relevant, engaging and related to students' college and career goals. In the year previous to the implementation of SLCs, 76% of students tested in the category that they needed to be in the Early Assessment Program, which is a head start program to help them prepare for the English placement test for the California State University system. After SLCs were put in place only 69% of students still fell in the category. While still high, it is one of the areas that Sycamore looks to improve through continued use of SLCs. More than any other data, EAP results provide academic departments and SLCs critical feedback that can be used to appropriately develop and align curriculum to college-readiness standards. Thus, the results have become a critical focus of the English department. Another goal is to increase the percent of students who place in at least English 1A and Algebra 155,

transferable English and the most common math prerequisite, in their first semester of college. In 2007, 50% of students were enrolled in English 1A in their first year and 47% of students were in Algebra 155. Sycamore looks to increase this number by 3-5% every year.

In terms of personalization, students are responding favorably to survey questions pertaining to the personalization of their education and counseling services. Results from the 2009-2010 school year show that educational strategies and practices used by Sycamore have increased personalized learning for a large number of students in just a few years. A four-year academic plan has proved effective, community building activities, and integrated interdisciplinary curriculum have aided in the personalization of learning. In the Spring of 2010, 47% of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders and 60% of juniors and seniors state that their academic plan reflects their personal needs and interests. While only 58% of Freshmen and Sophomores and 56% of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders agree that their learning is preparing them for their future college and career goals, Sycamore believes that stabilization of the SLC cluster-structure will enhance teacher collaboration and allow them to further tailor classes to the needs of their students.



<b>Have you met and worked with a counselor to develop a plan that reflects your personal needs and interests?</b>					
2007			2009		
Grade	Freshman	Senior	Grade	Freshman/ Sophomore	Junior/ Senior
Yes	19%	27%	Yes	57%	63%
No	81%	73%	No	43%	37%

Teacher participation in collaboration and other aspects of SLCs is impressive. In the year after SLCs were implemented, 62% of teachers reported, “the amount of time I spent on SLC collaboration has increased.” From year one of SLCs to year two, hours of teacher collaboration increased 39% from 88.5 to 144 hours. When it comes to teachers’ opinions on curriculum and instruction being organized so that all students are expected to learn or perform at high levels, 87% reported that they agreed or strongly agreed.

Teachers of Sycamore High School view the curriculum of the school to be rigorous and relevant. One aspect in which Sycamore High is not very strong is having a clear and concise pyramid of intervention in place for all students. Although teachers seem to think this has improved somewhat since SLCs were started, they hope that this is something that SLCs will continue to improve. The teachers and counselors continue to work to ensure that students’ academic and personal needs are met in a timely and personalized matter. It is anticipated that through the development of common SLC practices which establish goals for collaborative curricular development, community building, student recognition, and timely interventions for students of concern, this issue will improve

## Chapter 5 Discussion /Analysis

### Summary of Major Findings

This research indicates that SLCs positively effect students' attitudes towards their academic success, most notably: graduating high school. Sycamore High School had a graduating class of 461, the highest number since the school opened, and this was done in a declining economy with many students leaving the county. Because this school is representative of other schools in the nation, this success can be recreated in schools of similar make-up. Additionally the research shows that SLCs aren't a quick fix but rather an investment of time into the improvement of the school.

### Comparison of Findings to Previous Research

This study emerged out of the lack of information of this kind, so it is not possible to compare the findings to previous research in its raw form. However, as mentioned throughout, when going through the existing literature I could not find a school that has had the level of success of implementing SLCs, let alone the successful multi-year carry out success. It is because of this that I believe this research can be used as a model for a school of similar characteristics, looking to successfully implement SLCs. The research discussed repeatedly the importance of teacher buy in and that this one factor could make or break the success of SLCs in a school. Teacher "buy in" at Sycamore High is at very high levels. In fact, Sycamore High School's cross-town equivalent likely failed because of this very issue. They had strong resistance among the staff and had trouble getting the SLC program off the ground and ended up walking away from it completely. Because

this component is vital to the success of a school's implementation of the program, it would be worth the time to research their school's attitude of SLCs. If not popularly supported, are the teachers' minds changeable or should the school avoid the time and resource investment and choose a different path?

Also, most of the research that is currently in existence was about "getting it wrong" (Lee, M., & Friedrich, T. 2007; Nehring, J. H., & Lohmeier, J. H. 2010; Styron, R. A., & Peasant, E. J. 2010). Examples and studies of schools that weren't successfully transitioning from Comprehensive high schools into smaller better functioning ones. This study is an example of getting it right.

#### Limitations/Gaps in the Study

The limitation in the research is that sometimes success cannot be clearly measured. Is it just about the numbers? Success can be measured in other ways. What if one student doesn't drop out because Small Learning Communities positively affected him or her? Was it a success? Yes. Was it "worth" it? Not to the school, but what if it was your child, would it be worth it? Unfortunately, these are questions that are hard to cover in research. Unless a case study was done on each individual student who falls into the "likely to dropout" category you don't get to see the individual stories behind the numbers.

#### Implications for Future Research

To take this research a step further I would like to see this become a manual for how to transition your mid-to-large sized comprehensive high school to a successful school with Small Learning Communities. This is the start of that manual that would delve deeper

into the ways in which Sycamore H.S. did it specifically. I envision interviews with key staff and faculty, a synopsis of the lead up to the actual trigger being pulled and a clear step by step guide to make it a reality in your school.

#### Overall Significance of the Study

This research is important because we have an example of a school in front of us that beat the odds. That had success with something a lot of schools have struggled with and have ultimately walked away from. While this is not the only school in the country that has been successfully able to implement SLCs, it is one of the few that did it nearly seamlessly and had success very early on, almost immediately. Because the Department of Education is 1) spending tens of millions of dollars annually on this and 2) looking to have more schools follow suit, this successful example would be a great asset for them to be able to show as a model of the goal these schools are trying to reach.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

Name:

Number of years teaching:

Position in the school:

How did you get involved in working with Small Learning Communities?

What does your involvement entail/what is your role in SLCs?

What benefits are there to SLCs?

Are there any drawbacks?

The Department of Education estimates that it costs a little less than two million a year, per school district, to have Small Learning Communities in place. What is that money spent on?

Describe additional work is required of teachers who teach in Small Learning Communities. How many hours per week do you estimate teachers spend on SLCs each week?

This school has had Small Learning Communities in place for about 5 years. Some schools have tried it, struggled and didn't keep it going, what or how does this school do to keep them working?

Last year this school had six SLCs for students to choose from, this year there are four. How is it chosen what areas (themes) the SLCs will cover?

What part of SLCs do you think are the most important; the guidance that is created or the collaborative-curriculum?

What do you think the future holds for Small Learning Communities? Is this a fad or is this something we are going to see in more schools across America?

What else would you like to add?