

Students are Now Acting like Students
Year One Evaluation of the Smaller Learning Communities Grant
Chicopee and Springfield (Massachusetts) Public Schools

REPORT SUMMARY

U.S. Department of Education Grant to NCES District 2511130

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Prepared for:

The U.S. Department of Education
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Chicopee Public Schools
Springfield Public Schools

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Introduction

In fall of 2003, the first year of implementation for a smaller learning communities grant from the U.S. Department of Education began in five high schools in the Springfield and Chicopee (Massachusetts) Public Schools. In reality, a couple of the high schools, convinced of the possible benefits regardless of available resources, had already implemented ninth grade academies in the previous one or two academic years. This report is a summative evaluation of the first year of implementation of this grant and is, perhaps more importantly, a formative evaluation, making recommendations for the remaining two years of the grant and beyond.

Smaller learning communities, as an education reform strategy, are designed to give students and teachers in large high schools a sense of being in a smaller setting and increasing the likelihood that every student will be known and supported by one or more teachers or staff within the school. At the heart of these smaller learning communities are teams of teachers and students who stay together throughout a year and, if a practice labeled “looping” is implemented, for multiple years of high school.

The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission was approached by the Regional Education and Business Alliance (REBA) in September 2004 with a request that the Commission’s Regional Information Center conduct the third-party evaluation of the smaller learning communities grant. Knowing the importance of this project not only to the two communities receiving the grant, but to the region as a whole, we were eager to participate and are hopeful that our involvement will only increase the degree of this project’s success. It is important to understand that we are not impartial in our posture toward this project and are enthusiastic supporters. However, we have done our best to produce a report of the utmost professional

integrity and honesty, because we believe that this is the most genuine form of support we can offer.

The report itself relies on two primary sources of information: interviews with administrators, teachers, and students; and quantitative data obtained both from the districts and from the Massachusetts Department of Education. We had hoped to deploy and analyze detailed surveys of every teacher and student in each of the five high schools, but there was not sufficient time from when we joined the project until this report was due in which to develop and utilize an instrument we would trust. Therefore, surveys will be developed and deployed in spring of 2005, but they are obviously not a component of this report.

In general, we found that everyone we interviewed was very forthcoming and honest, providing a wide range of opinions and a depth of information. It was clear through our interviews that in particular schools we were scheduled to interview either those teachers having the best or those having the worst experience with smaller learning communities. Among student interviews we clearly had, in every high school, a cohort of some of the highest achieving and mature students in each school. Students were selected for interviews by each school and in the future we may want to implement some random or quasi-random method for getting a broader sample of student opinions.

With respect to quantitative data, we were faced with attempting to report comparable data for high schools from two districts with two different data management systems. In some cases, data available for one district was not available for the other. One district has recently changed their software package for student data management and this affected our ability to get much historical data. Nevertheless, we have used, to the best of our ability, the data that was available and we believe it begins to paint a picture; though, with only one year of the grant

completed, most of the quantitative data in this report serves as benchmarks for future measurement.

Unsurprisingly, the experience of the five high schools with smaller learning communities is very different from one school to another, and even within schools. Therefore, we elected to include in this report individual assessments of each school and an overall assessment that attempts to bring together the findings and lessons learned from the project as a whole.

Our ultimate findings and recommendations are limited by our own perspective and information as third-party evaluators. Certainly viewing the initiative from the outside has advantages of greater objectivity and we believe our findings will be useful; however, we also know that ours is not the only perspective and there are things that can be seen or learned only from the front line. It is our hope that this report will serve as a new and different lens on the initiative and that it will be used in combination with other perspectives to sharpen the focus and improve the outcomes of this exciting project.

Conclusion

In reviewing the goals identified by each high school for Year One of the smaller learning communities grant, we believe the first year in the Chicopee and Springfield public schools was largely successful. Leadership teams were established to champion the implementation of the smaller learning communities and, in four of the five participating high schools, ninth grade success academies were established that included nearly all ninth graders. Furthermore, common planning time, in a variety of forms, was provided for teachers in every high school, though the amount of time was very limited in two of the five schools. The common planning time was particularly meaningful in boosting parental involvement with a child's education because a parent could be scheduled to meet with a student's entire teaching team at one time. A number of professional development activities were provided to teachers working with the SLC academies and these were, with a few exceptions, found to be useful. Also, materials were purchased, such as student calendars or organizers, that supported student awareness of their own learning.

The implementation of advisory groups is the one activity identified as a year one goal by every high school that was not achieved in any of the five high schools in Year One. Looking back, those involved in setting the implementation timeline would probably now suggest that simply making functional ninth grade academies with their associated common planning time was a lofty and significant goal by itself. All five high schools, reflecting on their inability to launch advisory groups during Year One, intend during Year Two or at the beginning of Year Three to have advisories fully operational. There is no question that both teachers and administrators view advisories as central to the achievement of the smaller learning communities' goals.

Apart from the degree to which participating high schools achieved stated Year One goals, there are a number of other important findings from this evaluation that affect the future of implementation. These findings are presented, by category, in the left-hand column below. Furthermore, some of our findings suggest possible changes or improvements as implementation moves forward in years two and three. These recommendations are outlined below in the right-hand column.

| Key Findings | Recommendations |
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| <i>Implementation of Smaller Learning Communities</i> | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In at least two of the five high schools, the presence of repeaters in the ninth grade caused problems with purity and successfulness of teams during Year One. ▪ The two vocational schools involved in the project have unique and particularly challenging staffing and scheduling issues with respect to implementing academies, because students are splitting their class time between vocational programs and academic courses. ▪ In Springfield, the continual assignment of new students to schools throughout the year and, more importantly, the frequent movement of students between schools was identified as a problem for the successful implementation of pure teams. ▪ In some high schools, the implementation of teams has engendered resentment among non-team teachers. However, we found less evidence of this than expected and where it was found there were usually rational reasons. For example, in one school where non-team teachers have expressed resentment, they are having to cope with 30-35 student classes while team | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In every school where the presence of repeaters is a problem for teams, follow the model adopted in Year Two by the High School of Science and Technology of separating repeaters from the ninth grade academies. ▪ Provide additional professional development or technical assistance to the two vocational high schools that is specifically tailored to help them overcome scheduling and staffing obstacles and to identify the best approach to implementing SLCs in their unique contexts. ▪ Limit, at the district level, the ability of students to transfer between schools during the school year and limit the extent of shuffling done by the district for disciplinary or other reasons. ▪ Implement as quickly as possible tenth grade academies and eleventh and twelfth grade career academies to engage the majority of teachers in the SLC process. ▪ Improve information dissemination about the project to all teachers in each building. ▪ Expand SLC professional development |

| Key Findings | Recommendations |
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| teachers have 20-25 students in each class. | activities, in appropriate cases, to non-SLC teachers so they experience a benefit from the program. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students appear to dislike teams because they limit their socialization or ability to be with their friends in class. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wait and see if students perspectives change if they begin to feel differently about school and about their own abilities in school. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The use of student portfolios or planners in several high schools was cited as improving students' awareness of their progress as learners. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use some form of student self-organization or management tool in every high school. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students and teachers feel that, in some cases, having teams makes it more difficult for a student to change classes if there is either a behavioral or academic reason that their current class is not the best place for them. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examine the degree of movement between classes to determine if it is too limited to allow students to be in the appropriate classes for their academic level. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advisories have not been implemented. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement advisories in every school as soon as possible. |

Common Planning and Prep Time

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Common planning time has been used for planning, discussion of students, support, and meetings with parents. This activity has been invaluable and may be the most significant success of the SLCs thus far. However, in two high schools the amount of common planning time afforded to teachers on SLC teams was very limited. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make every effort to provide the most possible common planning time for SLC teams in every high school. Based on interviews, we would recommend at least two meetings per week as a minimum for such time to have the desired impact. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The use of logs tracking the activities of teams' common planning time has been applied in most schools and has been useful in improving the use of the time. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement planning time logs in every SLC school. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> While only one high school has formally provided team teachers with common prep time for their team, such time is available in at least two of the other high schools because the schedule causes team teachers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If possible, formalize common prep times in every high school, even if only once a week. |

| Key Findings | Recommendations |
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| to have the same prep period. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SLCs have not yet led to much interdisciplinary curriculum, as the use of formal or informal common prep time for interdisciplinary curriculum planning is optional and erratic. An unintended benefit of common planning time has been its usefulness in helping new teachers become oriented to their profession and their school. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide additional professional development on using common prep time and preparing an interdisciplinary curriculum. Consider how to develop interdisciplinary curriculum that is engaging enough that students do not tire of addressing common topics across subjects. |

Professional Development

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some professional development activities have been very well received by teachers, while others have been seen as less useful. For example, a professional development workshop on using technology was viewed as highly repetitive and unnecessary. Professional development activities scheduled near the end of the school year or during the summer, if staff and team assignments are not in place for the following school year, lose some value because teachers are not attending together with their team for the following year. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Narrowly focus professional development workshops on providing teachers with the tools to make the best use of the activities of SLCs. Examples might include training on how to best use common planning time, how to design interdisciplinary curriculum units, and how to implement advisories. Schedule professional development activities early in the school year or late in the summer once teams have been identified so that teams can participate together and then have the maximum amount of time to practice what they have learned during the school year. |
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Outcomes

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There were no remarkable achievement gains noted in any of the high schools after Year One, but this was anticipated because outcome gains were not expected from one year of work in a three-year project. MCAS passing rates have steadily improved in every high school, but this is a trend pre-dating SLCs and, while it might | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify means of distinguishing between achievement gains made as a result of SLCs and gains made as a result of other |
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| Key Findings | Recommendations |
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| <p>be improved by the implementation of SLCs, is largely the result of intensive efforts to improve MCAS performance across the state.</p> | <p>school improvement efforts.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Comparing conversations with students in teams and students not in teams, those students in teams appear to be more satisfied with their high school experience thus far. ▪ Students and teachers appear to feel that students on teams are not as able to get away with poor behavior or achievement because of the level of accountability through the teams. ▪ Through parent conferences during common planning times, teachers feel they have been able to better engage parents in their children's education. However, this was cited only at those schools with greater amounts of scheduled common planning time. ▪ Dropout rates have been generally declining in four of the five schools, but as with MCAS scores this trend pre-dates SLCs and is likely a result of numerous factors. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide as much common planning time as possible to allow more opportunities for parents to meet with the entire team of teachers. |

Evaluation Strategy

- In measuring non-quantifiable information, this evaluation relies entirely on interviews with non-random samples of teachers and students. This means that we are largely dependent on particular peoples' perceptions. This emerged as a problem when findings from interviews indicated that a particular activity did not happen when it in fact happened. There is sometimes a difference between what happens and what individuals remember
- Surveys of every student and teacher in each high school were a part of the initial design for the Year One evaluation, but time constraints precluded their use. In spring of 2005, implement such a survey and then repeat it at least two additional times in the future. This will eliminate concerns about the non-randomness of interviews and provide a wider set of perceptions that will likely provide a more accurate picture.

| Key Findings | Recommendations |
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| <p>having happened.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Because Chicopee and Springfield use different data management software, it was difficult to obtain the same information for all five high schools. Furthermore, because of changes in database software, it was not possible to obtain as much historical data as would have been useful to measure changes pre- and post-SLC implementation. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Begin collection of quantitative data in the summer for next year's evaluation to give district staff sufficient time.▪ Provide district data managers with spreadsheet data forms, created by the evaluators, that will collect the same information from each district. |

To the credit of those guiding the implementation of the smaller learning communities grant in Chicopee and Springfield, they were already aware of most of these findings and many of the recommendations were already being implemented as part of Year Two activities.

Overall, the smaller learning communities project is on track in Chicopee and Springfield, and we expect to find significant advances in implementation by the end of Year Two, particularly the implementation of advisories.