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## SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES 2000 – 2003

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In the fall of 2000, Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) received a federal grant of 2.4 million dollars to create Small Learning Communities (SLCs) in six high schools<sup>1</sup> over a three year period. The goal was to make APS' large, anonymous schools feel smaller and safer, and to make sure that every student received the personal support that would help her succeed academically through to graduation and beyond.

Small Learning Communities are separately defined, individualized learning units within a larger school setting. A freshman academy is one type of SLC, focused at the 9<sup>th</sup> grade level. Career academies are organized around career themes.<sup>2</sup> The literature on SLCs defines the following components as crucial for success:

1. *Student and Teacher Teams*: Students and teachers are scheduled together in interdisciplinary teams.
2. *Teacher Collaboration and Integrated Curricula*: Teachers meet regularly to discuss students and plan integrated curricula during common preparatory periods.
3. *Separate Space*: SLC staff and students share a common space that is separate from the rest of the school.
4. *Distinctive Thematic or Curricular Focus*: Each SLC has a distinctive thematic or curricular focus.
5. *Autonomy and Flexibility*: Each SLC has autonomy and the flexibility to tailor instruction, schedules, hiring, professional development, curriculum and assessment to SLC interests and student needs.

Five APS schools successfully implemented SLCs during the 2000-01 to 2002-03 period and are therefore included in this report.

- Two schools had partially implemented freshman academies prior to receiving the grant;
- Three schools initiated freshman academies in the final year of the grant; and
- One school implemented a career academy.

In brief, APS' evaluation of SLC programs showed the following results:

- Well implemented Small Learning Community programs produce statistically significant improvements in school climate, student dropout, attendance & grade completion;
- Faithful implementation of the SLC model yields the strongest results; and
- Teacher collaboration and team exclusivity are two keys to success.

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<sup>1</sup> Albuquerque, Cibola, Eldorado, Del Norte, Rio Grande and West Mesa high schools.

<sup>2</sup> Career pathways may or may not be organized as small learning communities.

## SLC PROGRAM EVALUATION PURPOSE & METHODS

APS hired a full-time evaluator to evaluate whether SLC goals were achieved and to identify what could be done to expand success. The evaluation used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods across 8 SLC programs at 5 different schools over 2 full years.<sup>3</sup> Data collection methods included:

- Student surveys
- Student focus groups
- Teacher & teaching team interviews
- Administrator interviews
- Parent surveys
- Activity logs & recall sheets
- Student records of attendance, test scores, dropout, grades & credits earned

Using multiple methods allowed the evaluator to corroborate findings and attribute improvements directly to SLC reforms. Statistical analyses showed significant changes in school climate, student attitudes and academic persistence. Qualitative findings confirmed and explained the quantitative results. Full school-level reports detail these analyses.

## SLC PROGRAM EVALUATION RESULTS

The evaluation found three main domains of small learning community impact: school climate, student attitudes, and academic persistence. In addition, SLCs improved parent involvement and satisfaction as well as teacher satisfaction, skills and self-confidence. The evaluator triangulated findings from multiple sources and methods, including teacher interviews, student focus groups, student surveys, parent surveys, and student attendance and performance records.

### School Climate

School climate refers to the overall culture, norms of behavior, environment and expectations in a school. This evaluation found that, when fully implemented, SLCs produced improvements in the following aspects of school climate: student visibility, academic expectations, safety, and peer collaboration and support.

**Student Visibility:** SLC students were more likely than non-SLC students to feel known and recognized for their efforts at school. By giving teachers time to discuss students and spend time with students one-on-one, SLCs improved the degree to which teachers knew their students and therefore could meet individual student needs.

**Academic Expectations:** Students in SLCs were more likely to report feeling held to high academic standards than students in traditional settings. For example, while in an SLC setting 71% of students said teachers cared if they didn't do their work, compared to 57% of these same students after leaving the SLC setting.

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<sup>3</sup> One of the 5 schools attempted to implement 2 career academies without success. A sixth grant-funded school implemented career pathways without SLC characteristics. These efforts are not described in this report.

**Sense of Safety:** The separate space combined with teaming and heightened visibility increased students’ sense of safety in all aspects of school-life. Students in SLCs were more likely than non-SLC students to report feeling safe in class, passing between classes, at lunch, and outside around the school.

**Peer collaboration and support:** Scheduling groups of students with the same teachers and often the same classes fostered student collaboration and improved typically low levels of peer support for academic work.

Student Attitudes

Student survey, student focus group & teacher interview results indicate that SLCs enhanced student attitudes about school and learning, including their engagement in school, their trust of teachers and their career and post-secondary orientation.

**Student Engagement:** Teaching teams generated interdisciplinary activities which fueled students’ engagement in school and in learning. Table 1 illustrates how students on teams with high levels of interdisciplinary practice were more likely to say they looked forward to class and school and more likely to say they were interested in their schoolwork than students on teams with lower levels of interdisciplinary activity. The lowest level of interdisciplinary practice was associated with the lowest level of engagement.

Table 1. Association between Levels of Interdisciplinary Activity & School and Academic Engagement

| <b>Interdisciplinary Activity Level</b> | <b>School &amp; Academic Engagement (Mean)</b> |
|---|--|
| Low                                     | 2.30   |
| Medium                                  | 2.43   |
| High                                    | 2.56   |

**Teacher Trust:** SLCs significantly enhanced students’ trust in teachers by providing personalized instruction and support as well as consistent expectations across classes and teachers. Students in SLCs were more likely to say they felt comfortable and safe with their teachers and more likely to think that teachers cared about them, listened to them, and helped them catch up if they fell behind.

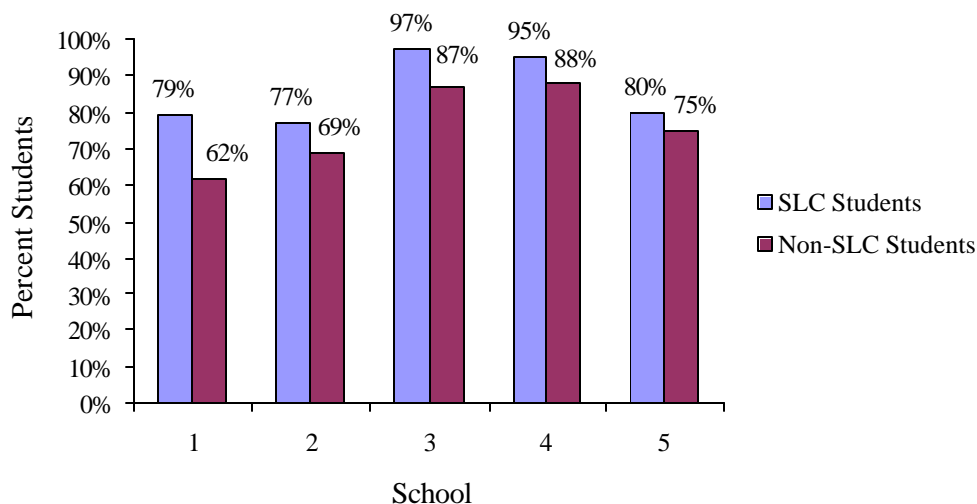
**Career & Post-Graduation Orientation:** The career SLC significantly improved students’ intentions, awareness, understanding & plans related to careers and post-secondary education. For example, the proportion of students planning to go to college or technical school increased by 26%. Concurrent college enrollments increased five-fold, and the proportion of students with strong career focuses increased from 26% to 42% in one school year.

## Academic Persistence

APS' small learning community programs improved students' *academic persistence*, a commitment to academic success demonstrated through attendance, credit-earning and staying in school. Quantitative results are supported and explained by qualitative findings.

**Credits to Pass:** At all 5 schools with freshman academies, SLC students were more likely than their non-SLC peers to earn enough credits to pass to the next grade level.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1. Percent SLC Students Earning Enough Credits to Pass to the Next Grade Level Compared to Non-SLC Students at 5 Schools.



Many teachers confirmed that students were learning more and performing better academically, as expressed in the following comment:

*“I probably have 4 or 5 that are failing across my 120 algebra students. It’s not 4 or 5 out of each class anymore.”*

Students explained that the interdisciplinary nature of instruction within their SLCs enhanced their ability to comprehend and retain new information:

*“You learn twice as much as you would in the one class. I think more sinks into you.”*

*“If they’re teaching you about a disease in Biology and then you go to English and you read literature on how it affected people’s lives, it helps you understand more about it.”*

**Attendance:** Attendance records from 4 schools, as well as qualitative data from students, teachers and administrators, all suggest that SLCs improved student attendance. Students cited a wide range of ways SLCs motivated them to attend, including the development of friendship

<sup>4</sup> Comparison groups vary by school. At 3 schools comparisons are between SLC and non-SLC students within the same cohort. At 2 schools, comparisons are between SLC and pre-SLC cohorts from 2 successive years.

networks within their teams, the greater availability of peer support for class-work, and the convenience of having classrooms close together. The following student comments illustrate two additional attendance motivators: increased visibility and enhanced accountability, which were generated by team collaboration and classroom clustering.

*“It’s hard to go from one class to another without other teachers seeing you.”*

*“The other teachers are going to tell that I was here...so it’s stopped me a couple times from ditching.”*

**Dropout:** Both this evaluation as well as an independent study of APS dropout rates found that SLCs helped prevent students from dropping out. One school, for example, reduced its dropout rate among first-time ninth graders to 0.5% one year. A completely separate study of 2001-02 dropouts confirmed the SLC evaluation results. Adjusting for critical influencing factors, e.g., the proportion of students who were female, ELL, special ed, FRPL, minority and over-age for grade level, and student achievement levels in each school, the study showed that:

- The APS high schools with fully developed 9th grade SLCs had significantly lower dropout rates than the APS high schools without SLCs.
- SLCs reversed the minority bias in dropout rates. Hispanic students were less likely to drop out than Anglo students.<sup>5</sup>

## SLC SUCCESS FACTORS

Evaluation findings suggest that the following factors are crucial to successful SLC program implementation and optimal results.

### *Teacher Practice*

**Teachers meet & collaborate frequently:** Every teacher team must have a common preparatory period that can be used at least weekly for teacher collaboration, with additional periods for parent and/or student conferences.

**Instruction is interdisciplinary:** Interdisciplinary instruction is key to enhancing student engagement in school and student learning.

### *Team Characteristics*

**Teams are exclusive:** The exclusive assignment of teachers and students to one team allows teachers to provide consistent expectations, interdisciplinary activities and team events. Exclusive student groupings also facilitate peer social and academic support.

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<sup>5</sup> Zvoch, K. (in press). *Freshman year dropouts: Interactions between student and school characteristics and student dropout status.* Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk.

**Teaching teams are stable across years:** Instructional reform and innovation benefit from consistent effort within the same teaching teams over multiple years.

**Teams have a maximum of 120 students and a minimum of 4 teachers :** Personalization, student visibility and trust in teachers are best fostered with small student to teacher ratios within each team and SLC.

### *Organization, Resources & Leadership*

**Teachers share common space separate from the rest of the school:** The most successful SLC programs give SLCs a separate space within the school and cluster classrooms by team. Physical proximity helps students stay visible and accountable. Sharing space also allows teachers to exchange information, plan, collaborate and support students throughout the day.

**Each SLC has its own administrator:** SLC-specific administrators are best positioned to understand and therefore support the particular interests of the SLC and its students.

**School principals champion, prioritize and help negotiate SLC reform:** The principal's leadership is required to achieve comprehensive and sustainable reforms.

**Implementation is incremental:** Focusing on one SLC and/or one team at a time facilitates teacher buy-in and gives administrators time to craft effective SLC structures, procedures and schedules.

**SLCs need funding** for SLC specific administrators, for maintaining low student to teacher ratios, and for providing teachers with adequate time and/or stipends to support collaboration, professional development and student advising.

## **SLC EVALUATION CONCLUSIONS**

Albuquerque Public Schools implemented key components of the research-based SLC model and achieved notable improvements in school climate, student attitudes and academic persistence.

Quantitative and qualitative results show that:

- Compared to their non-SLC counterparts, SLC students feel more visible, more safe, and more supported by peers and teachers;
- SLC students experience higher academic expectations, feel more engaged in their schoolwork, and better understand the connections between school and careers; and
- SLC students are more likely to attend classes, earn enough credits to pass to the next grade level and stay in school.

Expanding SLCs to more APS schools and other grade levels will require continued attention to the research-based model. As fidelity to the SLC model diminishes, the likelihood of achieving SLC goals also erodes. Professional development for teachers and administrators will be critical, as will the designation of a district-level champion who can support schools' SLC reforms.