

ALBUQUERQUE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Small Learning Communities Program Evaluation

Albuquerque High School
2002-2003

December 2004
Debra Heath



ALBUQUERQUE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Executive Summary

Albuquerque High School Freshman Academy 2002-2003 Smaller Learning Communities Program Evaluation

As part of a district-wide evaluation of small learning community (SLC) reforms, Research, Development and Accountability (RDA) evaluated the implementation and outcomes of Albuquerque High School's 2002-2003 freshman academy. Albuquerque High established its freshman academy in August of 2002. It implemented key components of the research-based small learning community (SLC) model, enrolling almost all 509 first-time ninth graders and organizing them into three teams, each with its own interdisciplinary team of teachers. All core 9th grade classes but science were held in one wing of the school, and teaching teams met regularly during common preparatory periods.

In its first year, Albuquerque High's freshman academy achieved notable improvements in school climate. Results from a variety of evaluation measures showed that, compared to their non-academy 9th grade predecessors, freshman academy students:

- felt more supported by adults in the school,
- experienced higher academic expectations,
- were more positive about school, and
- had more academic self-confidence.

While one year of reform rarely produces significant gains in student achievement, this evaluation found that the academy holds promise for improving student learning and performance. Comparisons between academy ninth graders and their predecessors showed:

- Academy students were more likely to meet typical 8th to 9th grade academic growth rates on the TerraNova.
- 79% of freshman academy students earned enough credits to pass to the next grade level, compared to 62% of pre-academy 9th graders.

Keys to success included the following academy features:

- Freshmen classes and lockers were in a separate wing of the school;
- Teachers had a common preparatory period to use for team meetings;
- Teachers shared almost all the same students on two of the three teams;
- The academy had a full-time administrator; and
- The school principal had commitment to and experience with SLC's.

RDA offers the following recommendations to strengthen AHS' freshman academy:

1. Schedule all academy students into pure teams;
2. Provide professional development and guidelines for increasing interdisciplinary activity;
3. Develop team goals and procedures;
4. Increase opportunities for intra-academy departmental teacher communication and collaboration; and
5. Increase compensation for the academy's administrative leadership.

Introduction

A Small Learning Community (SLC) is a separately defined, individualized learning unit within a larger school setting. Groups of students and teachers are scheduled together and frequently have a common area of the school in which to hold most or all of their classes. Common preparatory periods allow teachers to collaborate, learn from and support each other and provide students with integrated, interdisciplinary learning experiences. Some SLC's have a career focus and/or teacher-student advisory relationships. A freshman academy is one type of SLC, focused at the 9th grade level. The literature on SLC's defines the following ingredients 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, 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 adjust scheduling, curricula, budget, personnel, and other operational factors.

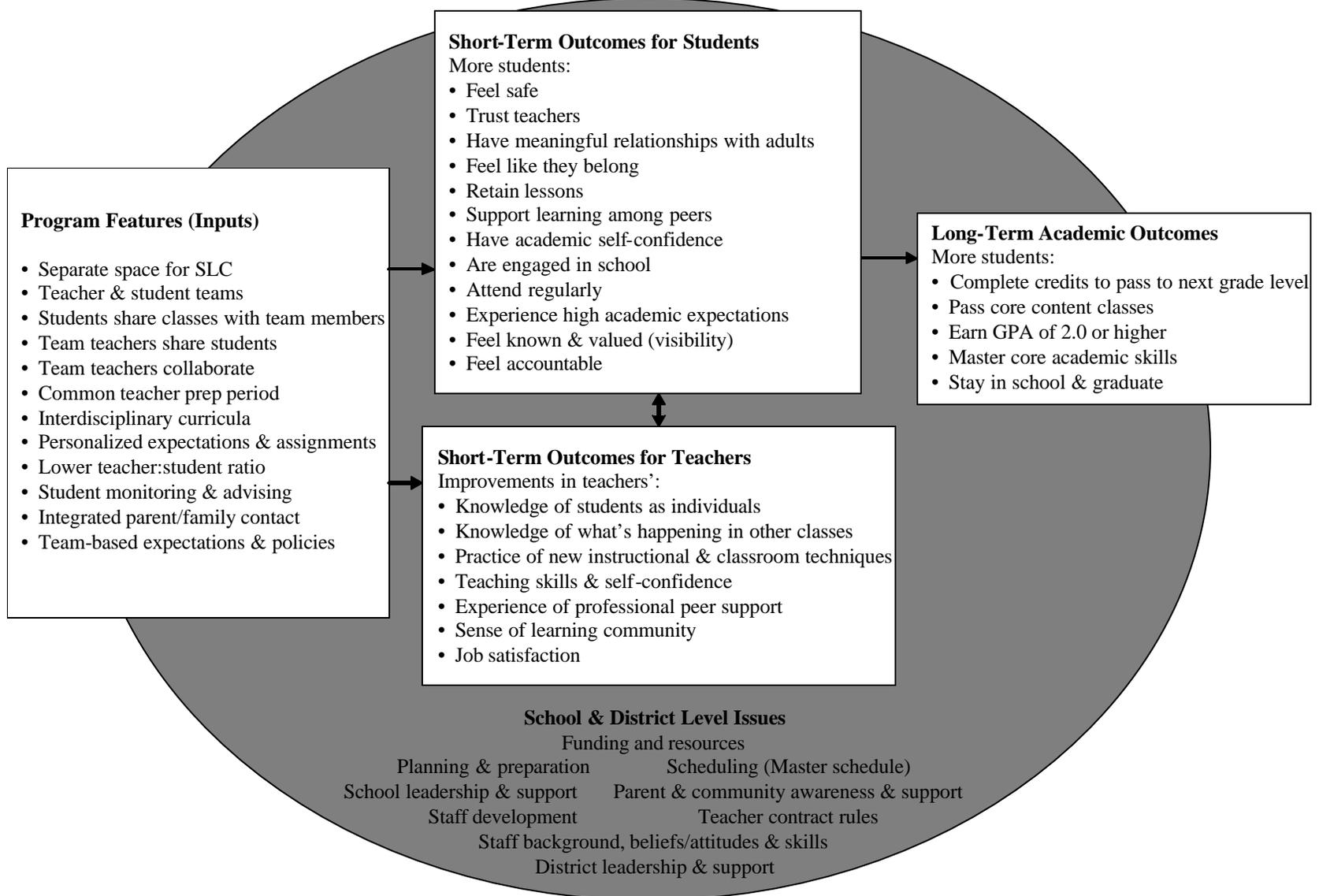
Between October 1, 2000 and September 30, 2003, Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) received funding from the U.S. Department of Education to implement small learning community programs in six high schools. Albuquerque High School used the SLC funds to create two small learning communities. It opened a career academy, called the Advanced Technology Academy (ATA), in the fall of 2000. The ATA is discussed in a separate evaluation report. In the fall of 2002, Albuquerque High created a freshman academy for all first-time ninth graders. Key to its creation was the school's new principal, who had helped establish another APS high school's freshman academy and was convinced of its benefits. With the academy, AHS administrators hoped to improve some of the school's most troubling statistics. Among the goals were to:

- Enhance students' sense of social support and belonging;
- Increase attendance;
- Improve academic performance (grades, credits earned, matriculation rates); and
- Reduce dropout.

Theory of Change

Figure 1 depicts the small learning community theory of change. Inputs such as teaming and interdisciplinary curricula were expected to produce changes in student attitudes and school climate, such as heightened academic expectations, social support, sense of belonging and school engagement. These intermediate outcomes, in turn, were expected to generate student performance benefits, such as increases in the proportion of students earning enough credits to matriculate to the next grade level and decreases in the proportion of students dropping out of school. This sequence of SLC inputs and outputs was to be supported by resources, policies and practices at both the school and district levels.

Albuquerque Public Schools SLC/Academy Logic Model



Evaluation Purpose and Methods

In July 2001, APS' Research, Development and Accountability (RDA) department began a multi-site evaluation of the district's Small Learning Community program. The Small Learning Communities Program Evaluation studied 8 SLC initiatives at 5 APS high schools. It resulted in seven reports, one district-level report which describes cross-site patterns and lessons learned, and six school-level reports. This report focuses on the Albuquerque High School freshman academy, during its first year of implementation in 2002-2003.

The purpose of the SLC Program Evaluation was to describe schools' SLC reforms and outcomes as well as identify the factors that supported SLC success. At both the district and the school levels, administrators wanted information that would help them decide whether to expand the SLC approach. They also wanted to know the best strategies for achieving positive results.

The evaluation used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Table 1 lists methods employed at Albuquerque High School. Using multiple methods allowed RDA to corroborate findings and validate conclusions. Throughout this document, bracketed codes are used to indicate data sources.

Table 1. Data Collection Methods Used to Evaluate AHS' Freshman Academy.

Method	Code	Purpose	Date
Program Logic Model	lm	Delineate actual program activities/strategies, anticipated outcomes & presumed mechanisms of change.	March 2003
Student Survey	ss	Identify student perspectives, attitudes & short-term outcomes. Assess school climate. Compare academy and non-academy 9 th grade results.	May 2002 May 2003
Teaching Team Report Interviews	tr	Define level & nature of teaming/collaborative activities, instructional activities & school structures. Identify implementation facilitators & constraints and perceived student, teacher & school outcomes.	May 2003
Student Focus Group	sfg	Define nature & level of SLC implementation from students' perspectives. Identify perceived outcomes.	May 2003
Student Records (Information Technology Services)	its	Compare SLC attendance, test scores and dropout rates to school goals & prior performance.	Fall 2001- Spring 2002 & Fall 2002 – Spring 2003

Administrator Interviews	ai	Describe SLC features and school's vision & goals for the SLC.	August 2002 August 2003
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Limitations

With only one year of academy implementation to study, this evaluation of Albuquerque High School's freshman academy was necessarily restricted. The first year of most programs is one of development and refinement. Only after several more years of implementation can an evaluation draw sound conclusions about a program's outcomes.

The fact that Albuquerque High School initiated the freshman academy portion of its SLC initiative in the final year of the SLC grant allowed RDA to gather baseline student survey data in May of 2002 as well as "post-test" survey data in May of 2003. RDA was able to compare pre-academy ninth grade attitudes and school climate with freshman academy attitudes and school climate. One limitation to these comparisons is that the two groups of 9th graders may have been different intrinsically. It is possible that these intrinsic differences were responsible for some of the evaluation's significant findings. It is also possible that differences between the two groups obscured real SLC effects.

Freshman Academy Program Implementation

This section will describe small learning community (SLC) reforms implemented by Albuquerque High School (AHS) at the freshman level during the 2002-2003 school year. A brief overview of the main features of the AHS freshman academy is followed by a more detailed description according to five research-based components deemed crucial for SLC success.

Albuquerque High's freshman academy embodied most features of the research-based small learning community model. It included 509 first-time 9th graders and 19 teachers who were scheduled into teams. Teachers met regularly to discuss students and coordinate instruction during common preparatory periods. Academy staff and students shared a common space separate from the rest of the school. The academy had the distinctive focus of transitioning students from middle school to high school. Finally, the academy had a small measure of autonomy in terms of curriculum and staffing.

In addition to these small learning community features, Albuquerque High instituted a "flex schedule" with two days per week of fewer but longer class periods. Freshmen also had a twice-weekly, mandatory study hall, which awarded a pass/fail grade based entirely on attendance. AHS gave each academy teacher responsibility for "mentoring" approximately 20 homeroom students during study hall.

Table 2. AHS Freshman Academy Program Features 2002 - 2003

Program Features	AHS Freshman Academy
1 st Year of Operation	2002-2003
Total Student Enrollment	509
Percent of Total Grade Level Enrollment	92% (excludes D level special education students)
Student Selection Methods	First-time freshmen only. Honors assigned to Teams 1 and 2, Bilingual assigned to Team 3
# Teams	3 (Team 3 had 2 sub-teams)
# Teachers per Team	4 (Teams 1 & 2), 9 (Team 3)
# Students per Team	125 (Teams 1 & 2), 220 (Team 3)
Teacher Course Load	5 (6 for teachers who sold prep period)
# Common Prep Periods Per Day	1
Teacher Caseload (average)	105 - 135
SLC Administration & Support	Ninth Grade Dean/Academy Director Clerk Resource Teacher Counselors
Separate Space	Yes, separate hall of the school
Special Education Inclusion	A, B & C levels (learning disabled)

Student and Teacher Teams

All first-time 9th graders were enrolled in the freshman academy and assigned to three teams. Learning-disabled students were integrated into each team and shared classes with general education students. Two of the three teams were “pure” with 4 core curriculum teachers and a Special Education resource teacher all sharing the same students. Honors classes and students were on Teams 1 and 2. The third team was a hybrid. It had 8 core content teachers, plus one bilingual teacher and 2 Special Education resource teachers. No two teachers on Team 3 had exactly the same students. Furthermore, some Team 3 teachers taught classes outside the freshman academy and some “sold” their preparatory period.

Teacher Collaboration and Interdisciplinary Activity

Teacher Collaboration

Teaching team interviews revealed that teachers met with their teams weekly. Team 2 held one extra meeting per month to focus on curriculum planning. Teachers reported spending the bulk of team meeting time discussing student concerns such as attendance, behavior and grades and holding conferences with students and parents. Teachers on Teams 1 and 2 also shared curricular plans and topics. Team 3 teachers met regularly in two sub-groups and occasionally as one large team. Since they did not all share the same students and rarely met as a full group, discussions tended to involve only 2 teachers at a time, and they did not attempt to coordinate lessons or assignments [tr].

Teachers reported that an academy administrator, and often a counselor, attended each team meeting. Teachers appreciated this regular attention and support, and said it resulted in efficient responses to their concerns. A side-effect of formal collaboration was an increase in overall communication. Teachers reported that they visited with each other much more often than they had done in the past [tr].

Teachers explained that their teamwork resulted in more efficient and effective student placement. For example, Special Education students were given more opportunities to try regular education conditions, and students in need of special services were identified and placed with minimal delay [tr].

Interdisciplinary Activity

Interdisciplinary activities tended to be informal and infrequent during this first year of SLC implementation. Team 2 teachers and students were the only team members that described formal interdisciplinary projects. These included collaborations between the English, Science and Math teachers on a month-long research project, as well as collaboration with elementary school teachers and students on an environmental project. Team 1 teachers reported that they highlighted connections between subjects during instruction. More than two-thirds of 9th graders responding to the student survey (68.6%) agreed that teachers helped them see connections between different subjects and classes.

Team 3 protested that their hybrid structure made it impossible to plan and conduct interdisciplinary activities. Teachers also reported that mid-semester schedule changes and the presence of some reclassified students constrained interdisciplinary activity across all three teams [tr].

All teaching teams reported coordinating assignment due dates and test schedules [tr]. Students confirmed this and were highly appreciative, as indicated in the following exchange:

“They take into consideration that she just gave out a huge project that’s due this date, so one teacher’s going to say, well she gave it out first, I’m going to be a little more lenient and give it the next day, give them a little more extra time. So we’re not working on two big projects at the same time.”

“And since they talk, most teachers don’t have tests on the same day. If someone’s having a big exam over a big unit that you just did, maybe your other teacher will wait until the next day or the next week.” [sfg]

Team Rules & Identity

According to teaching team interviews and discussions with the academy director, there were few formal team rules, and the academy did not set specific guidelines or targets for the teams. Consequently, teams varied widely in their practices related to parent conferencing, field trips, team events and interdisciplinary activities [tr, sfg, ai].

One result was that students had vastly different experiences depending on their team affiliation. Some ninth graders described a clear sense of team identity and closeness, developed through field trips, team teaching, interdisciplinary projects and other team events. Other ninth graders said they didn’t realize they were on a team [sfg]. Students were aware that teams offered different opportunities, and they expressed a desire for more consistency, as highlighted below:

“Sometimes it does seem that some teams are closer than others. So maybe when Team 1 does something, have Teams 2 and 3 also do it.” [sfg]

“I think they all need to have equal honors classes and people. Because Team 1, I noticed, has the honors classes and Team 2 or 3 doesn’t have as many or any at all.” [sfg]

“They should equal out each team’s classes and try to equal out the strategies, and keep the strategies the same so it works out. Because that’s fair.” [sfg]

Parent Outreach

The team structure facilitated parent outreach. Teachers collaborated within their teams and with counselors to contact parents. They informed parents about behavior issues and poor attendance. Some teachers also made a point of calling to recognize positive behavior and accomplishments. Teams 1 and 2 reported two parent conferences per month, conducted during common preparatory periods and lunch. Team 3 usually conducted parent conferences during lunch and, alternatively, provided recommendations for counselor-led conferences [tr].

Separate Space

Providing staff and students with their own space, separate from the rest of the school is key to a small learning community's ability to foster a sense of community, visibility, collaboration and safety. The freshman academy had a separate hall within the school building. Student lockers, the 9th grade office, and all core content classes except science were located there. Freshmen also had their own study hall and in-school suspension room. Almost two-thirds (63%) of academy students felt they benefited from having a separate ninth grade hall. They said it increased teacher-student contact, improved attendance and prevented fights [ss, sfg]. The following exchange among students illustrates the many benefits students perceived in having a separate space for the freshman academy:

“It keeps us away from the older kids and that eliminates a lot of fights.”

“Especially in gang-related stuff.”

“And all your classes are close together so you're not having to go from one side of the school to the other and all the way back.”

“Yeah, it eliminates tardiness.”

“You just go down the hall and you see all your teachers.” [sfg]

Distinctive Thematic or Curricular Focus

Small learning communities research shows that SLC's need a distinctive thematic or curricular focus in order to develop a clear sense of identity and purpose. Albuquerque High's freshman academy began with a clearly defined student population and unique agenda. First, it enrolled all the school's freshmen and did not include students who were repeating the 9th grade. Secondly, its distinctive focus was to ease the transition from middle school to high school and prepare ninth graders for the upper grade curriculum.

Autonomy and Flexibility

Autonomy was not a stated goal of the Albuquerque High School freshman academy, however it is one of the key features of highly successful small learning communities. Autonomy in the areas of budget, schedule, staffing, curriculum, leadership and governance, assessment and space maximizes the ability of a SLC to “personalize” education to meet the particular needs of its

student body, and to make changes throughout the year as needed. Most small learning communities take multiple years to develop autonomy.¹

The freshman academy had its own administrator, teachers², and support staff as well as a separate space and distinctive mission, but its budget, scheduling, counseling, staffing, curriculum and space were inextricably tied to those of the larger school. Academy teachers and administrators did not express a desire for more autonomy from the larger school. Without greater autonomy, however, research shows that SLC needs will be compromised to accommodate school-wide interests.

¹ *The Learning Network* (2003), Small Schools Project, University of Washington College of Education, 4(2).

² Some teachers taught classes in the upper grade levels as well.

Freshman Academy Program Results

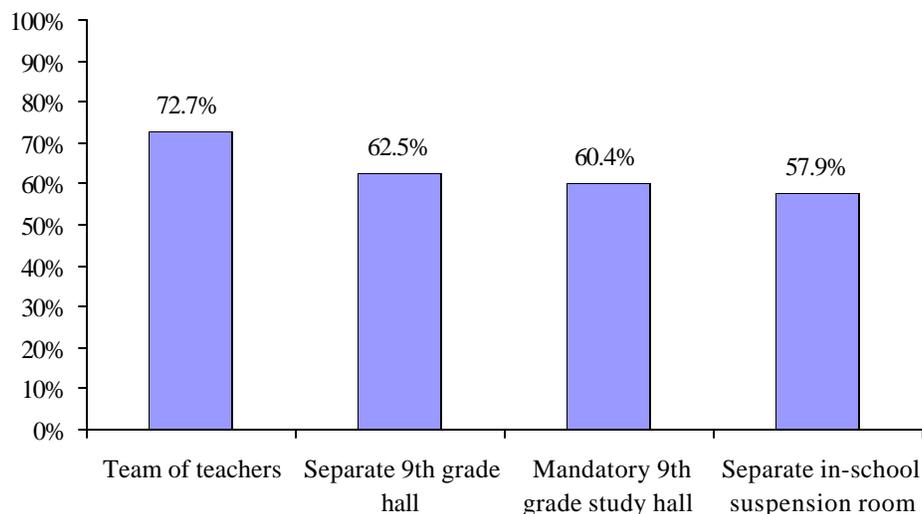
Freshman academy results are presented in four sections. The first two sections describe students' and teachers' satisfaction with the freshman academy. Students provided their opinions about the freshman academy through a survey and a focus group, both administered in May 2003. Teacher opinions were gathered through team interviews. The third section summarizes the academy's impacts on school climate and student attitudes. Results are drawn from two student surveys, one student focus group, and teaching team interviews. The fourth section outlines impacts on student performance, including attendance, test scores, grades, credits earned and dropout. These results are analyses of data from the district's Student Information System.

Student Satisfaction

Overall, students were positive about the Freshman Academy. Over two-thirds of students surveyed in May of 2003 said that the academy helped them make a smooth transition to high school (68.8%) and that they would recommend the academy to other students (66.9%). Over half said the academy felt like a "place of support" (57.9%).

Asked about benefits, ninth graders were most in agreement that they benefited from having a team of teachers who worked together to coordinate lessons and handle student concerns [ss]. Over half of freshman academy students also agreed that they benefited from having a separate 9th grade hall, a mandatory study hall and a separate in-school suspension room.

Figure 2. Percent Freshman Academy Students Saying They Benefited from Selected Freshman Academy Features (Student Survey, May 2003).



Teacher Satisfaction

Teachers reported higher morale, job satisfaction and sense of support compared to their previous experience. Working together, they enjoyed the ability to share ideas and information, track students, and quickly engineer schedule changes to meet classroom management and learning needs. This social and professional networking was particularly important to the many academy teachers who were new to teaching altogether or new to Albuquerque High.

The special education teachers said they were generally pleased with the freshman academy as well, with some reservations. One said he felt more integrated into the larger school now that he met regularly with core content teachers. Another wished for more opportunities to meet exclusively with special education teachers.

The academy's separateness caused dissatisfaction for some academy teachers. They said scheduling conflicts often caused them to miss school-wide professional development sessions and departmental meetings, which made them feel isolated from the larger school [tr].

Student Attitudes & School Climate

School climate refers to the overall culture, norms and expectations in a school. Research has shown that school climate has a profound impact on student achievement and other educational outcomes.³ When teachers have time to collaborate and spend time with students one-on-one, they come to know their students well (visibility), can personalize instruction and support, and can hold students accountable to high academic standards. Supported by their peers and teachers, students gain motivation and self-confidence to succeed. Studies show that when students experience social support and high academic expectations simultaneously, their likelihood of making academic gains increases.⁴ They are also less likely to drop out.⁵

Social support is the personal relationships that students have with people – peers, teachers & other adults -- who may help them do well in school. Social support creates motivation, builds confidence and provides role models and psychological safety for academic success.

High academic expectations, in this report, means an emphasis on academic success and conformity to specific standards of achievement. High academic expectations may come from the amount of homework teachers assign, the challenge of coursework, the emphasis on achieving specific standards, and assessment methods. Research links high academic expectations with greater student effort, more time spent on academic tasks and ultimately higher student performance.

Results of student surveys and interviews suggest that the freshman academy increased both the level of academic expectations and the level of social support that ninth graders experienced from teachers at Albuquerque High. Students also reported greater enjoyment of school, heightened visibility, and increased academic self-confidence. Peer support and overall sense of safety did not increase in measurable ways. Each of these results is described in detail below.

Academic Expectations

Academy students were more likely than their 9th grade predecessors (2001-02) to report that teachers expected them to reach high levels of academic performance.⁶ Differences were slight but consistent. In particular, higher percentages of academy students felt teachers cared if they got bad grades and thought teachers considered it important for students to do well.

Students explained that having teachers collaborate in teams increased their experience of academic challenge and support: “They try to find your weak and strong points and try to push

³ Bookover et al. (1978), How and Hannum (1997), West (1985) cited in Johnson, Bruce (1998) *The Relationships Between Elementary School Teachers’ Perceptions of School Climate, Student Achievement, Teacher Characteristics, and Community and School Context*. Dissertation. University of New Mexico.

⁴ Lee, VE, et.al. (1999) *Social Support, Academic Press, and Student Achievement: A View from the Middle Grades in Chicago*, p. 2.

⁵ Darling-Hammond, L, et.al. (2002) *Reinventing High School: Outcomes of the Coalition Campus Schools Project*, *American Educational Research Journal*, 39(3), pp. 639-673.

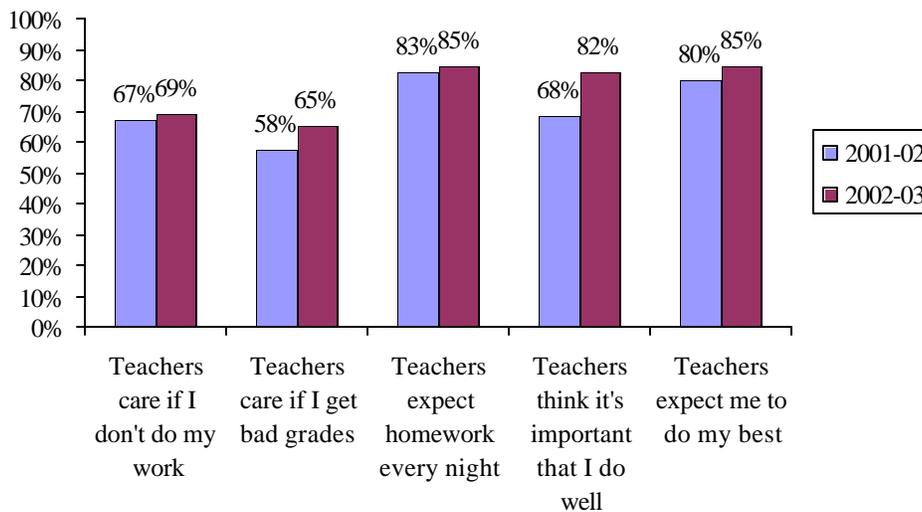
⁶ Scales in 2002 and 2003 were different and therefore not directly comparable.

them.” Students said they appreciated when teachers verbalized a belief that all their students could do well. This could be a statement as simple as, “You guys can do this, it’s easy, you know.”

At the same time, some students wished teachers did more to motivate and challenge them when they were under-performing. One student attributed her low grades in English class to her teacher’s low expectations: “I’m getting a lower grade in my English class than in all the rest of my classes. And I think it’s because my teacher doesn’t push me to do anything.” [sfg] Another student commented:

“I think that some teachers need to push the kids who aren’t doing anything more, get them more motivated. And a lot of teachers just kind of motivate the ones that are doing stuff, instead of helping out and saying ‘why aren’t you doing your work?’ or ‘you need to start doing something.’” [sfg]

Figure . Percent Ninth Graders Experiencing High Academic Expectations: Pre-Academy (2001-02) Compared to Academy (2002-03).

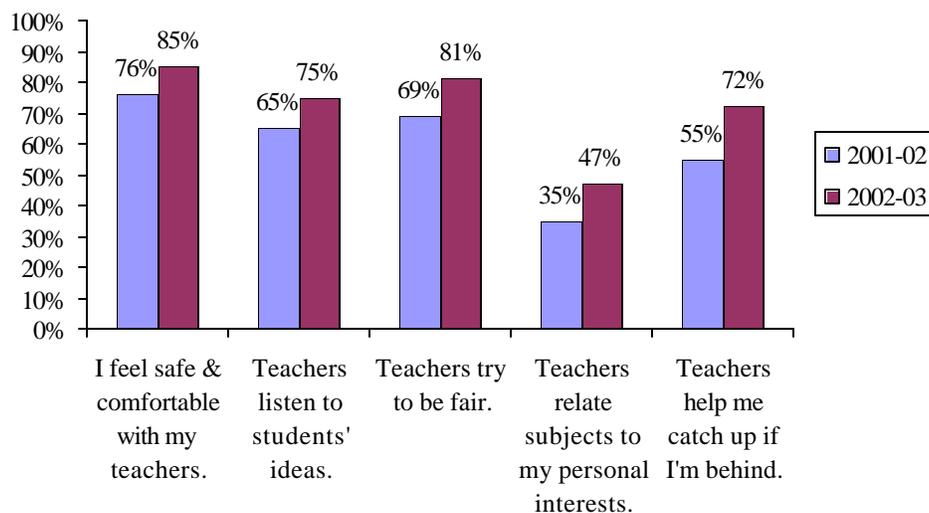


Teacher Trust and Adult Connection

Evaluation results indicate that the academy cultivated trust in teachers and increased connections with adults at school.

- Academy survey respondents were more likely than pre-academy 9th graders to feel safe and comfortable with their teachers and to say that teachers listened to what students' had to say, tried to be fair, and helped them catch up if they were behind.
- Almost one-half of freshman academy respondents said that teachers related subjects to their personal interests, a sizeable increase over pre-academy results.
- Almost three-quarters of the freshman academy survey respondents said that they knew at least one adult at school that they would go to for help, advice or support if they needed it. This was a significantly greater sense of adult connection compared to 2001-02 ninth graders ($p < .001$).⁷

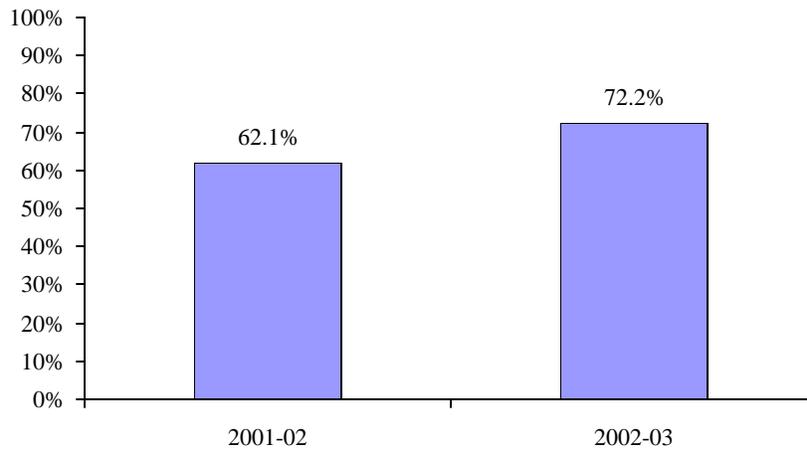
Figure 4. Percent Ninth Graders Indicating Trust in Teachers: Pre-Academy (2001-02) Compared to Academy (2002-03).



Students explained that most but not all of their teachers showed caring and respectful attitudes toward students. In their view, “caring” teachers pushed students to achieve academically, gave students individualized academic support, treated all students equitably and fairly, rewarded good performance consistently, gave students a second chance when they behaved badly or made mistakes, and were flexible when students had obligations that conflicted with class assignments [sfg].

⁷ A “p-value” of less than .05 provides confidence that the differences between groups were real rather than due to chance.

Figure 5. Percent Ninth Graders Reporting Adult Connection at School: Pre-Academy (2001-02) Compared to Academy (2002-03).



Student Visibility

Visibility is the degree to which each student is known and is recognized by peers and staff for his or her efforts, talents, interests and personal circumstances. Visibility also reflects the degree to which students are acknowledged and held accountable for their participation in school life. Evaluation findings suggest that Albuquerque High's freshman academy improved student visibility but that there remained room for improvement.

Academy survey respondents were more likely than 2001-02 respondents to feel known and recognized for their efforts at school ($p < .05$). Ninth graders explained that the academy's team structure raised students' visibility and connection to peers. Sharing classes with the same group of students throughout the day helped them develop friendships and support each other academically, as evidenced in the following comments:

"It helps get to know people. Because I just moved here this summer. And I really didn't know anybody. So having teams helped me get to know people in my classes that I would have other classes with in the day."

"It is kind of cool because you have the same schedules as your friends. Because we can talk about the teachers, our homework." [sfg]

Students also felt better known and understood by their teachers due to teacher collaboration, as indicated in the following comments:

"I like the way the teachers talk to each other and talk about you and kind of get feedback on how they're doing in every class."

“When they have their team meetings, they all have me in a class. And if someone says ‘what’s wrong with Abigail, she’s not doing that good,’ other people can say ‘well, she’s doing great in my class.’ [sfg]

On the other hand, fewer than half of the academy respondents felt that people recognized them for their efforts at school, and about one-third felt none of their teachers knew their interests and talents. The academy conducted a ropes course in the fall semester and a poetry slam in the spring, but only one team had a field trip before the end of the school year [tr]. More field trips and team events could give students valuable opportunities to demonstrate their talents and interests, thus amplifying their sense of being known.

Table 3. Percent Ninth Graders Expressing Sense of Visibility at School: Pre-Academy 2001-02 Compared to Academy 2002-03.

Survey Item	Percent Agree 2001-02	Percent Agree 2002-03
Most people at this school know who I am.	60.7	65.9
People at this school recognize me for my efforts.	32.6	39.1
How many teachers know your interests and talents?	Not included in 2002 survey.	None = 32.2 1 to 3 = 50.5 5 or more = 16.2

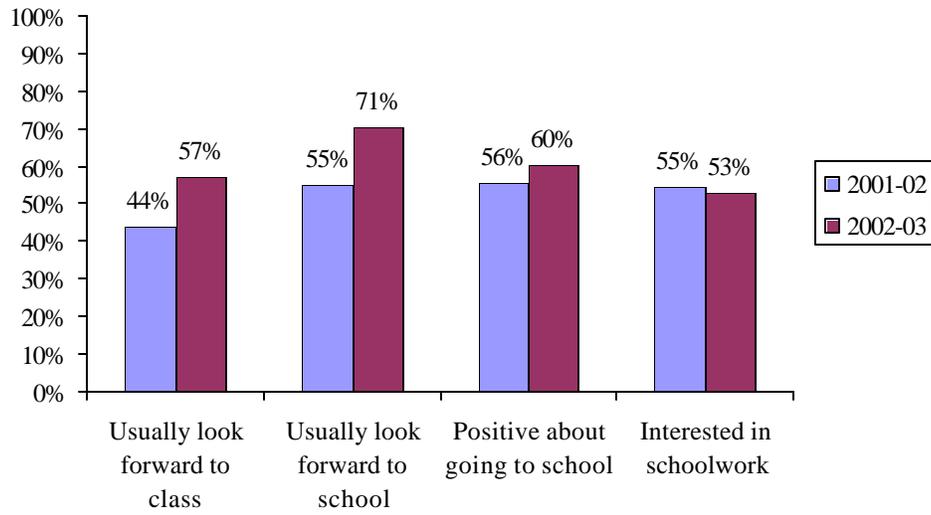
School and Academic Engagement

One of the aims of small learning communities is to increase students’ enjoyment of school and their engagement in learning. Student survey results suggest that the academy succeeded in increasing students’ enjoyment of school ($p < .0001$), but was less successful at increasing their engagement in the learning process.

- Compared to 9th graders in 2001-02, higher proportions of academy students said they looked forward to class and to school and felt positive about going to school.
- On the other hand, similar proportions of pre-academy and academy students reported interest in their schoolwork.

These findings may be explained by the fact that the academy’s first year entailed reforms that were largely structural. The separate space and team structure with teacher collaboration built a healthy social climate, which made students feel positive about attending class and school. However, as is typical in the first year of reform programs, teachers had not yet changed their instructional practice in systematic or consistent ways. This may account for the lack of difference between academy and pre-academy ninth graders’ interest in schoolwork.

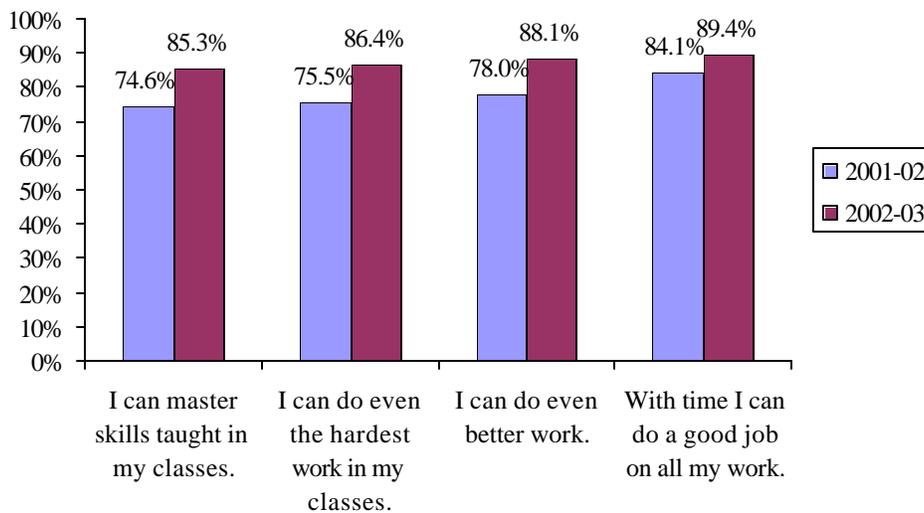
Figure 6. Percent Ninth Graders Agreeing with School & Academic Engagement Items: Pre-Academy (2001-02) Compared to Academy (2002-03).



Academic Self-Confidence

Research indicates that giving students safer and more supportive learning environments can enhance students' academic self-confidence. Survey and interview findings suggest that Albuquerque High's freshman academy may have had this effect. Freshman academy students entered ninth grade with lower average standardized test scores compared to their non-academy predecessors. Nevertheless, at the end of their ninth grade year they reported higher levels of academic self-confidence ($p < .0001$) [ss]. Teachers confirmed this finding, explaining that the absence of 10th-12th grade students in most 9th grade classes provided a safe climate in which 9th graders spoke up more often and took more risks [tr].

Figure 7. Percent Ninth Graders Expressing Academic Self-Confidence: Pre-Academy (2001-02) Compared to Academy (2002-03).



Peer Support for Academic Work and Peer Relations

SLC research shows that supportive peer environments are key to fostering academic success by providing role models and psychological safety. Survey and focus group results indicate that while Albuquerque High's freshman academy increased students' experience of high academic expectations, it did not improve the poor climate of support for academic work among students.⁸ Just about one-quarter of students reported that most or all of their classmates thought it was important to do homework, pay attention in class, attend class and get good grades. The majority said only a few students supported academic work [ss]. Focus group findings confirmed survey results. One student commented that, "people don't even care about their grades or going to class." [sfg]

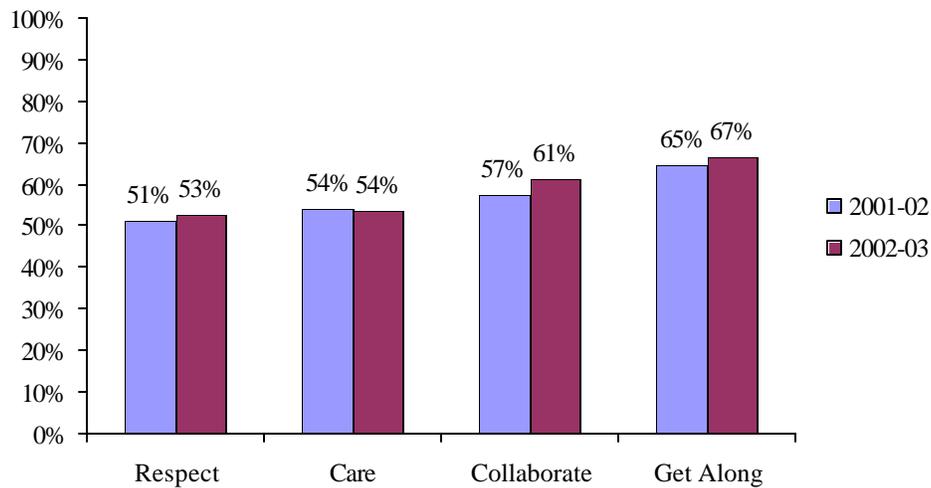
⁸ Differences between academy respondents (2002-03) and pre-academy respondents (2001-02) were non-significant.

Table 4. Percent Freshman Academy Students Reporting *Most* or *All* Students Support Academic Work.

<i>How many of the students in your classes:</i>	Percent Reporting Most or All
Think doing homework is important.	20.3
Feel it is important to pay attention in class.	26.4
Feel it is important to attend all their classes.	28.3
Try hard to get good grades.	25.1
Think getting good grades is cool.	28.6

Similarly, survey results indicate that although the academy improved students' relationships with teachers, it did not improve the overall climate of peer relations. In both years, between one-half and two-thirds of respondents agreed that students treated each other with respect, cared about each other, collaborated to solve problems, and got along well together.⁹ Other schools have shown that peer support for academic work and peer relations may be enhanced by providing opportunities for team building and cooperative learning. This may occur as AHS refines its freshman academy structures and as teachers gain more experience.

Figure 8. Percent Ninth Graders Reporting Positive Peer Relations: Pre-Academy (2001-02) Compared to Academy (2002-03).



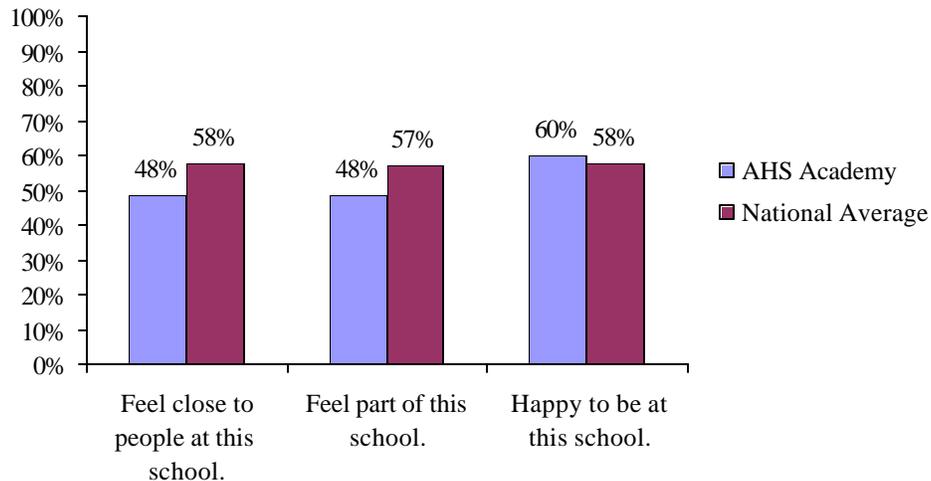
⁹ These results are similar to results from other APS freshman academies.

Sense of Belonging (Attachment)

One of the primary goals of the AHS freshman academy was to enhance students' sense of belonging to school, elsewhere termed "attachment." School attachment was measured by the extent to which students felt close to people at their school, felt part of their school and were happy to be at their school. Attachment and sense of belonging have been linked to reductions in student violence and substance use as well as improvements in academic performance.¹⁰

Just under half of Albuquerque High's survey respondents said they felt close to people at school and felt part of the school. This was slightly less than results from a national survey of teenagers.¹¹ More than half of the respondents indicated that they were happy to be at their school. This was similar to the national rate, perhaps suggesting an attitude of loyalty that transcended the need to belong.

Figure 9. Percent Agreeing with School Attachment Items: AHS Freshman Academy Students Compared to National Sample.



¹⁰ Called "connectedness" in Blum, RW et. al. (2002). *Improving the Odds: The Untapped Power of Schools to Improve the Health of Teens*. Center for Adolescent Health and Development, University of Minnesota. Minneapolis, MN.

¹¹ The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health in-school questionnaire was completed by over 90,000 7th – 12th graders from 132 schools around the United States in the 1995-95 school year.

Safety

Teachers and students reported that giving freshmen a separate space within the larger school helped minimize fights and gang-related behavior. As two students commented:

“It keeps us away from the older kids, and a lot of the upperclassmen think that oh, they’re just freshmen, let’s go pick on the freshmen. And a lot of the freshmen won’t put up with that. Some of the freshmen will fight back. And that does, I think, eliminate a lot of fights.”

“Especially in gang related stuff.” [sfg]

Survey results indicate that any decreases in fighting did not necessarily increase students’ sense of safety, possibly because most students already felt safe within the school. In both years, over two-thirds of survey respondents reported feeling safe in the halls and bathrooms, during passing periods and at lunch. It appears that more could be done, however, to improve students’ sense of safety outside on school grounds. Almost half (43%) of freshmen surveyed in the spring of 2003 did not feel safe outside around the school.

Student Performance

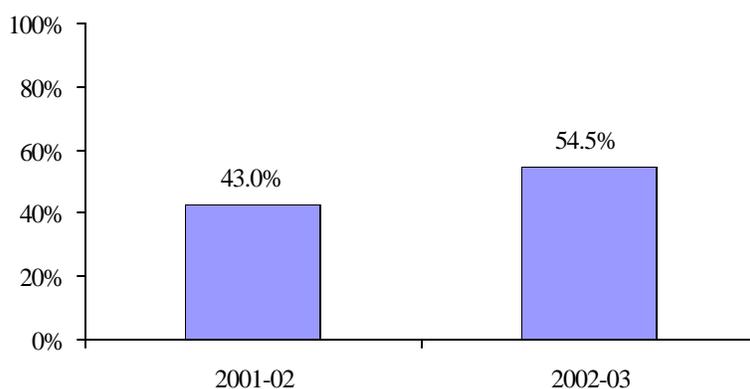
Results from the first year of freshman academy implementation at Albuquerque High indicate that the academy holds promise for improving student learning and academic achievement. Compared to non-academy 9th graders from the previous year, academy students showed gains in test score growth and rates of matriculation to the next grade level. Earned grades did not show significant improvements. Attendance rates also appeared to change little from 2001-02 to 2002-03, although data imperfections undermined reliability. Finally, withdrawal records suggest that the dropout rate among first-time ninth graders worsened from 2001-02 to 2002-03. It is important to keep in mind that most reform efforts take more than one year to manifest positive results.

Standardized Test Scores

The ultimate goal of small learning communities is to facilitate student learning and academic success. One measure of success is the degree to which students meet typical 8th to 9th grade growth rates on standardized achievement tests. Growth rates tend to be stronger measures than status scores, because they try to look beyond students' individual characteristics to capture the school's effect on students.

- Academy students were more likely than 9th graders in 2001-02 to meet or exceed typical academic growth rates from 8th to 9th grade as measured by the TerraNova exam (see Figure 10).
- Many other APS high schools improved on this same measure. However Albuquerque High improved by 11.5 percentage points, compared to an average of 4.1 percentage points among schools without freshman academies.

Figure 10. Percent 9th Graders Meeting or Exceeding Typical 8th to 9th Grade Growth on the Terra Nova Exam: Academy (2002-03) Compared to Pre-Academy (2001-02).

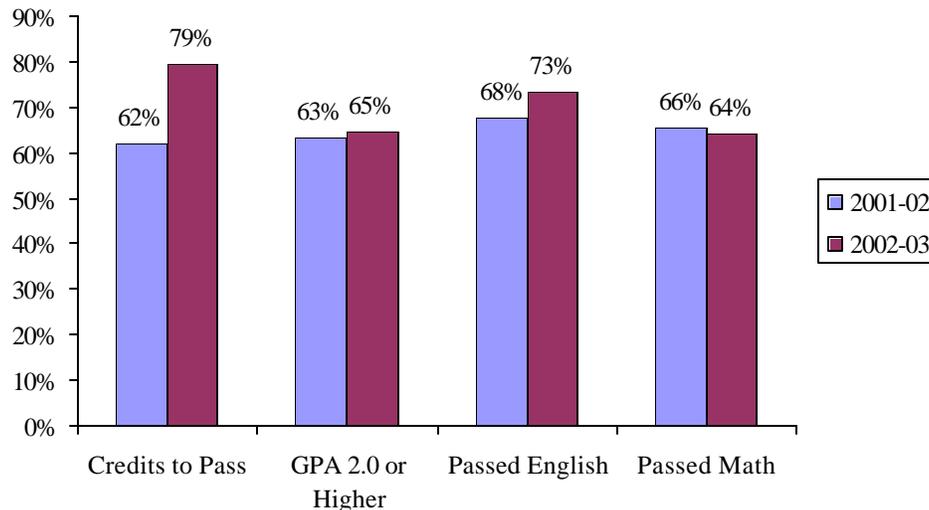


Grades and Credits Earned

Freshman academy students were more likely than their non-academy 9th grade predecessors to matriculate to the 10th grade but generally were not more likely to have better grades.

- A majority of freshman academy students earned enough credits to pass to the next grade level, surpassing the previous year's record.¹²
- In both school years, just under two-thirds of 9th graders earned a grade-point-average of 2.0 or higher.
- The proportion of 9th graders earning passing grades in English and Math changed only slightly from 2001-02 to 2002-03.

Figure 11. Percent 9th Graders Earning Enough Credits to Pass, GPA of C or Higher and Passing English and Math: Pre-Academy (2001-02) Compared to Academy (2002-03).



The experience of at least one individual student indicates that the freshman academy holds promise for improving academic performance by facilitating communication among teachers. The student explained:

“I know that my grade was starting to drop in one class. And another teacher said ‘it’s because of this’ and ‘he doesn’t understand this.’ And that teacher said ‘okay’ and she taught me that thing and then I got my grade back up.” [sfg]

¹² All were first-time freshmen who had completed the entire school year at AHS.

Attendance

One of the freshman academy’s main short-term objectives was to improve student attendance. Students and teachers alike said the academy increased attendance and reduced truancy. Teachers reported that phone calling, primarily by counselors, made the difference. Students explained that they tended to behave better in general because they felt more visible and accountable. Specifically, they attributed better attendance to teacher collaboration and having a separate, shared space within the larger school.

“All your classes are close together so you’re not having to go from one side of the school to the other and all the way back.” “Yeah, it eliminates tardiness.”

“It’s kind of hard to go [from one class to another] without the other teachers seeing you too. Like you’re trying to pass this class, and thinking, oh I’m going to ditch this class later. But she sees you.”

“Like I’ll be honest. Sometimes I go to 5th period and I like my math class. But then I don’t want to go to 6th because I just don’t like my 6th period teacher. But I’m like, well I can’t ditch, the other teachers are going to tell her that I was here, and then she’ll get mad. And so, it’s stopped me a couple times from ditching.” [sfg]

In contrast, data from APS Computer Services suggest that the academy fell short of both the school’s goal and of the state attendance standard (94%). Official records show that academy students attended an average of 89.7% of their classes, similar to ninth graders in 2001-02.

Table 5. Average Daily Attendance Among First-Time Freshmen: Freshman Academy Compared to Non-Academy (2001-02).

School Year	Average Daily Attendance Rate
2001-02	90.1%
2002-03	89.7%

Ultimately, data collection and management problems limit RDA’s ability to speak with certainty about the Freshman Academy’s impact on attendance. Attendance figures may be unreliable because:

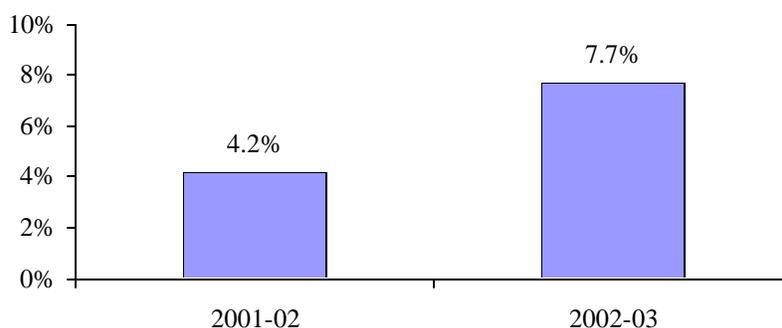
- (1) AHS initiated ‘flex’ scheduling in 2002-03, with 2 days per week of 4 classes instead of the standard 6; and
- (2) Methods of reporting attendance may fluctuate from year to year, perhaps to compensate for program changes such as flex scheduling. Fluctuations may undermine the validity of comparing one year’s results to another’s.

Dropout

Teachers reported that the academy structure prevented students from dropping out of school. Through sharing the same students and communicating regularly, teachers said they identified student needs quickly and provided appropriate and timely referrals. Teachers on one team said at least 2 of their students would have dropped out of school if they hadn't been transferred to alternative educational settings [tr].

The perceived improvements in student dropout were not reflected in the school's withdrawal records. Compared to first time ninth graders in 2001-02, a higher proportion of freshman academy students dropped out of high school during the 2002-03 school year. Thirty-nine (7.7%) academy students dropped out compared to 23 (4.2%) ninth graders the previous year.¹³ Most (92%) of the dropouts were related to excessive absences.

Figure 12. Ninth Grade Dropout: Freshman Academy (2002-03) Compared to Non-Academy (2001-02).



While these results may disappoint school leaders, it is important to keep in mind that the differences between two years may reflect inherent differences in the two student groups, that most reform efforts take more than one year to manifest positive results, and that sometimes the process of change makes things worse before making them better.

Still, the results provide useful information for improving Albuquerque High School's freshman academy. Finding that most dropouts were related to absences underscores the importance of AHS' efforts to motivate students to attend school. It also emphasizes the value of teaching team collaboration and the importance of providing every student with an exclusive team of teachers.

¹³ The "SLC dropout formula" differs from the state formula. The state dropout formula defines a "dropout" as a student who drops out of school and does not reenroll in an approved educational program by the 40th day of the following school year. The state formula uses cumulative enrollment and includes students repeating ninth grade. The ninth grade dropout rate using the state formula was 4.5% in 2002-03. The SLC formula: (1) includes only students enrolled on the 40th day of each school year, (2) includes only first-time ninth graders; and (3) excludes the possibility that students reenrolled the following school year.

Facilitators and Constraints to Success

The evaluation revealed a range of factors facilitating and constraining the successful implementation of Albuquerque High School's freshman academy.

Facilitators of Success

Teachers had a common preparatory period to use for team meetings.

Most but not all academy teachers had a common preparatory period, which gave them a regular opportunity to meet in teams.

Freshmen classes and lockers were in a separate wing of the school.

The separate space shared by all freshmen students and teachers (except science) created a physical community within the larger school and minimized anonymity by making it natural for students and teachers to see each other repeatedly throughout each school day.

Teachers shared almost all the same students on two of the three teams.

Sharing the same students is key to teachers' ability to integrate curricula, monitor and share information about students, and conduct team activities and events.

A full-time administrator coordinated and provided leadership for the academy.

The academy administrator worked with the school administration to engineer a schedule that supported teaming, facilitated communication between the school administration and the academy staff, planned and coordinated academy events, provided guidance to teaching teams, and handled freshman disciplinary matters, among many other duties.

The school principal had commitment to and experience with SLC's.

The AHS principal provided clear support for the freshman academy's new structure. She also knew from experience how to generate effective SLC reforms.

Most academy teachers were selected based on interest in teaching 9th graders and using collaborative methods.

Assembling a faculty interested in teaching ninth graders and in collaborating with other teachers maximized the potential for maintaining staff over time. It also reduced the likelihood that teachers would sell their preparatory period in order to teach higher level classes (a motivation expressed by some teachers on Team 3).

Constraints to Success

Resources were inadequate to support continuity in the administrator position.

The administrator's duties required much more time than one full-time position provided, and the salary was less than that of a typical administrative position. These factors interfered with the administrator's willingness to continue in her position beyond the first year.

Teachers lacked experience with teaming and interdisciplinary instruction.

Teachers' lack of experience with interdisciplinary instruction, and the limited availability of professional development opportunities on this subject were barriers to creating and implementing interdisciplinary curricula.

About half the academy's students had an "impure" team.

Teachers on Team 3 did not share the same students and did not all share a common preparatory period, which undermined their ability to collaborate. The approximately 220 Team 3 students, therefore, experienced SLC benefits on a much-reduced level compared to students on Teams 1 and 2.

Conclusions

Albuquerque High School's freshman academy implemented key components of the research-based SLC model and achieved notable improvements in school climate and student performance in its first year. Results from the student survey, teacher team interviews and student focus groups suggest that, compared to their non-academy 9th grade predecessors, freshman academy students felt more supported by adults in the school, experienced higher academic expectations, enjoyed school more, and had greater academic self-confidence. Academy students also were more likely to meet typical 8th to 9th grade academic growth rates as measured by the Terra Nova exam and more likely to earn enough credits to pass to tenth grade.

In a number of areas, Albuquerque High's efforts to improve school climate and student performance fell short of hopes. Ninth graders continued to describe a poor climate of support for academic work among students, and only 53% indicated interest in their own schoolwork. Students also reported a limited sense of belonging and closeness to people at school. Finally, ninth grade dropout did not decline during this first year of academy reform.

Incremental implementation and mixed results are typical of a school's first year of reform. Freshman academy administrators had to establish new structures and expectations as well as develop staff buy-in and skills. The academy's separate space, team structure and teacher collaboration built a supportive social climate, which made students feel more connected to teachers and more positive about attending class and school. However, teachers were only beginning to change their instructional practice.

Another constraint to academy success was that about half of the academy's students were on one large team of 220 students and 8 teachers, rather than being divided into 2 smaller teams with exclusive teacher assignments. Those students therefore did not fully experience many of the benefits of SLC's, such as teacher collaboration, team monitoring and team-based activities.

Interdisciplinary collaboration is one of the SLC features that have the potential to ignite student engagement in learning. If AHS' freshman academy can schedule all students into pure teams and also expand interdisciplinary activity, it should be able to enhance students' sense of belonging, academic engagement and academic success.

Recommendations

RDA recommends the following actions to strengthen Albuquerque High School's freshman academy:

1. Reinforce and expand existing SLC structures, including teacher and student teaming, the separate academy space, and the common preparatory period for teacher collaboration. Provide "pure" teams for all students.
2. Find a way to increase the equitable distribution of students and opportunities across teams, such that no team becomes known as the "honors team" or the "bilingual team."
3. Provide, or help teams develop, team goals and procedures related to interdisciplinary activity, cooperative learning strategies, field trips, parent outreach and mentoring (e.g., each team will conduct one field trip and 3 interdisciplinary projects per semester).
4. Provide teachers with more professional development related to interdisciplinary teaming and collaboration, cooperative learning strategies, mentoring, and other essential SLC skills.
5. Increase teacher opportunities for departmental communication and collaboration, within the academy and school-wide, as a way of supporting content-based professional development.
6. Increase compensation and/or other incentives for the freshman academy administrator in order to improve continuity in academy leadership and administration.