ALBUQUERQUE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Small Learning Communities Program Evaluation

Cibola High School
1998-2003

Research,
Development &
Accountability

ALBUQUERQUE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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Executive Summary
Cibola High School Freshman Academy 1998-2003
Smaller Learning Communities Program Evaluation

As part of a district-wide evaluation of small learning community (SLC) reforms, RDA conducted an extensive evaluation of the implementation and outcomes of Cibola High School's freshman academy from its pilot phase in 1998-99 through its third year of full implementation in 2002-2003.

Cibola High implemented key components of the research-based small learning community (SLC) model, organizing almost all first-time ninth graders into five teams, each with its own interdisciplinary group of teachers. All core 9th grade classes except science were held in one wing of the school, and teaching teams met regularly during common preparatory periods.

Facilitating the success of CHS' small learning community were:
- Frequent teacher collaboration during common preparatory periods;
- A high level of team exclusivity;
- Incremental, multi-year roll-out;
- Explicit teacher commitments to 9th grade and team-based instruction; and
- SLC-specific administrative and teaching staff.

This evaluation found that Cibola's freshman academy achieved a cultural shift in instructional organization and practice, from the traditional format centered in departments to interdisciplinary learning communities organized around student teams. These changes yielded the following outcomes:
- Enhanced school climate, including the degree to which students were known, felt safe, trusted teachers, and experienced high academic expectations;
- Increased parental involvement;
- Improved teacher satisfaction;
- Reduced the ninth grade dropout rate to 0.05% in 2001-02 and 1.0% in 2002-03;
- Improved student attendance, eliminating absenteeism as a precursor to dropout; and
- Increased the proportion of students earning enough credits to pass to the tenth grade.

SLC benefits were particularly strong for students at high risk for academic failure. Impacts were greatest in the first two years of full academy implementation, when teams averaged 120 students, classes had 25 students or fewer, teams had 4 to 5 core teachers, and teachers had scheduled time to mentor students. Academy effects appeared to diminish in 2002-03 when key SLC structures were compromised due to budget shortfalls.

Recommendations to strengthen CHS' freshman academy include:
1. Sustain core SLC structures, including exclusive student and teacher teams, common preparatory periods, and a separate space within the larger school.
2. Create teams of no more than 120 students and at least 4 core teachers.
3. Expand professional development related to collaboration, interdisciplinary instruction, special education inclusion, and mentoring/advising.

Introduction

<u>What is a Small Learning Community?</u>

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. *Common, 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.
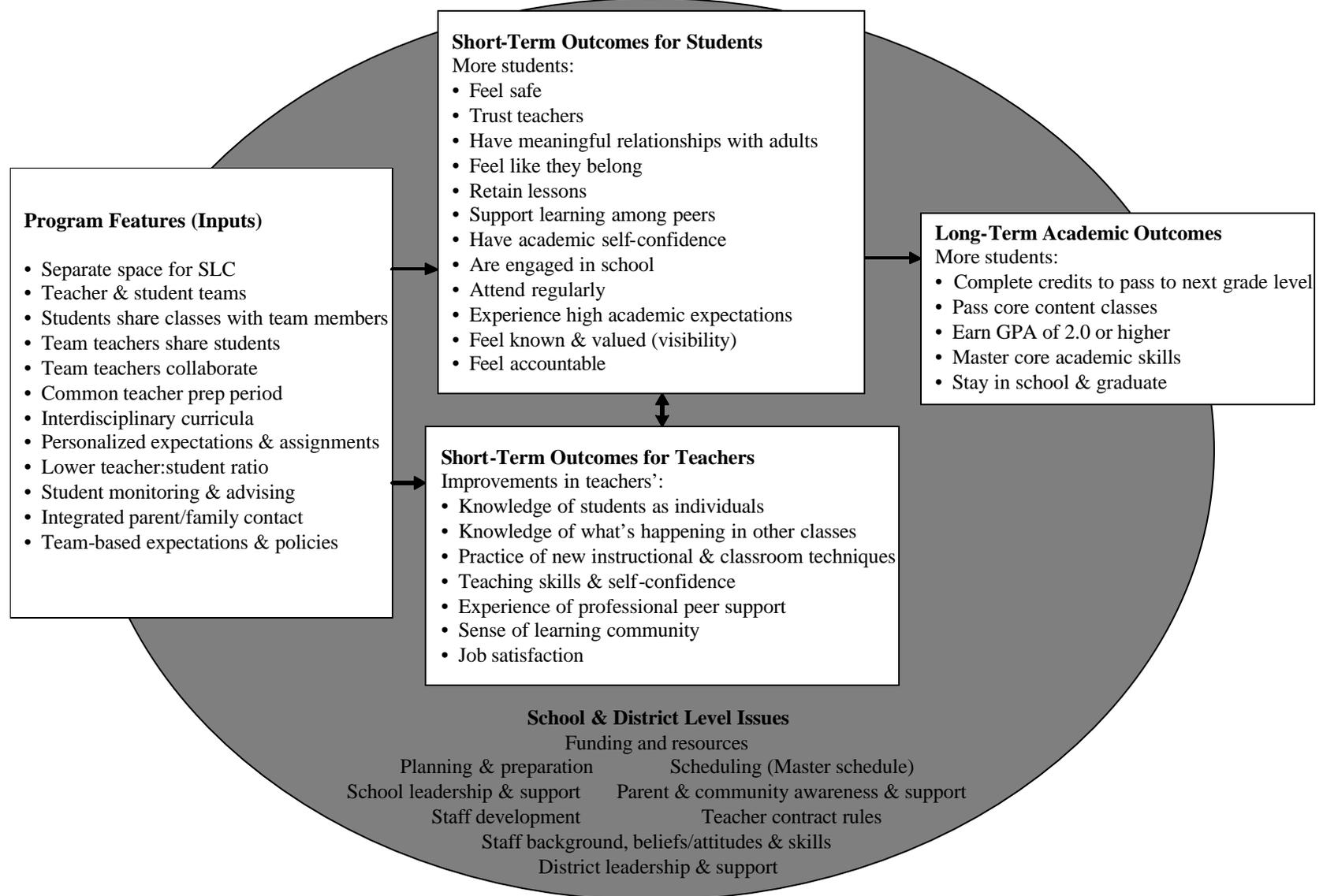
<u>SLC Grant Goals</u>

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. Cibola High School used the funds to expand its existing small learning community initiatives into a freshman academy. Administrators hoped the academy would fulfill the following goals:
- Decrease student absenteeism.
- Reduce ninth grade drop-out.
- Improve students' grade point averages.
- Expand the number of students earning 5 or more credits by the end of their ninth grade year.
- Increase the number of students who view education as relevant to their futures.

<u>SLC Theory of Change</u>

Figure 1 depicts APS' small learning community theory of change. Inputs such as teaming, interdisciplinary curricula, smaller classes and mentoring were expected to improve students' engagement in school, their sense of belonging, the level of academic expectations, and other aspects of school climate. These intermediate outcomes, in turn, were expected to enhance student performance and prevent drop-out. This sequence of SLC inputs and outcomes was to be supported by resources, policies and practices at both the school and district levels.

Albuquerque Public Schools SLC/Academy Logic Model

Program Features (Inputs)

- Separate space for SLC
- Teacher & student teams
- Students share classes with team members
- Team teachers share students
- Team teachers collaborate
- Common teacher prep period
- Interdisciplinary curricula
- Personalized expectations & assignments
- Lower teacher:student ratio
- Student monitoring & advising
- Integrated parent/family contact
- Team-based expectations & policies

Short-Term Outcomes for Students
More students:
- Feel safe
- Trust teachers
- Have meaningful relationships with adults
- Feel like they belong
- Retain lessons
- Support learning among peers
- Have academic self-confidence
- Are engaged in school
- Attend regularly
- Experience high academic expectations
- Feel known & valued (visibility)
- Feel accountable

Long-Term Academic Outcomes
More students:
- Complete credits to pass to next grade level
- Pass core content classes
- Earn GPA of 2.0 or higher
- Master core academic skills
- Stay in school & graduate

Short-Term Outcomes for Teachers
Improvements in teachers':
- Knowledge of students as individuals
- Knowledge of what's happening in other classes
- Practice of new instructional & classroom techniques
- Teaching skills & self-confidence
- Experience of professional peer support
- Sense of learning community
- Job satisfaction

School & District Level Issues
Funding and resources
Planning & preparation   Scheduling (Master schedule)
School leadership & support   Parent & community awareness & support
Staff development   Teacher contract rules
Staff background, beliefs/attitudes & skills
District leadership & support

Evaluation Purpose and Methods

Background

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 Cibola High School freshman academy.

Purpose

The purpose of the SLC Program Evaluation was to describe schools' SLC reforms and outcomes, compare them to expectations, and identify the factors that supported SLC successes. 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.

Methods

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

Limitations

Cibola's freshman academy was the most veteran of the eight programs included in the APS Small Learning Communities Program Evaluation. It therefore offered fertile ground for understanding SLC dynamics and impacts. However, because Cibola's freshman academy pre-dated the federally funded evaluation, RDA did not collect pre-academy measures of teacher practice, student attitudes and school climate. As a result, there were no baseline data against which to compare the survey, interview and implementation data collected in 2001-02 and 2002-03. RDA used two strategies to compensate for the lack of comparative data. First, RDA used student survey results from ninth graders at four other APS high schools to provide context for interpreting Cibola's survey results. Second, RDA triangulated and confirmed findings by employing a wide range of methods and gathering data from many different sources.

Table 1. Data Collection Methods Used to Evaluate SLC's at Cibola High School.

Method	Code	Purpose	Date
Program Logic Model	lm	Delineate key program activities/strategies, anticipated outcomes & presumed mechanisms of change.	Fall 2001
Student Survey	ss	Identify student perspectives, attitudes & short-term outcomes. Assess school climate.	April 2002 April 2003
Teacher Recall Sheets	rs	Define frequency & nature of team activities, collaboration & student visibility practices.	February – March 2002
Teaching Team Reports	tr	Define level & nature of teaming, collaboration & instructional activities. Identify implementation facilitators & constraints and perceived student, teacher & school outcomes.	April 2003
Teacher & Staff Interviews	ti	Define academy and team structures & processes, identify perceived impacts on teachers & students and lessons learned.	May 2002 April 2003
Student Focus Groups	sfg	Define nature & level of SLC implementation from students' perspectives. Identify perceived outcomes.	May 2002 April 2003
Administrator Interviews (principals, SLC coordinators)	ai	Identify SLC features, school's vision & goals for the SLC, district-level & school-level facilitators & constraints, perceived outcomes & benefits, sustainability issues and lessons learned.	August 2001 February 2002 May 2003
Student Records (Information Technology Services)	its	Compare SLC attendance, test scores and dropout rates to school goals & prior performance.	June 2002 June 2003
Activity Logs	al	Define frequency & nature of team meetings, parent contact, student contact & professional development.	Monthly, February 2002 – March 2003
Quality of Education Survey	qed	Compare academy parent attitudes about their child's schooling to non-academy ninth grade parent attitudes.	April 2002

Freshman Academy Program Implementation

This section describes Cibola High School's implementation of small learning community (SLC) reforms between 1998-99 and 2002-03. First is a synopsis of key implementation evaluation findings. Next is a brief overview of the development and principal features of CHS' freshman academy. The majority of this section is devoted to in-depth descriptions of SLC implementation according to five research-based components deemed crucial for SLC success.

Key Implementation Evaluation Findings

1. Cibola High implemented key components of the research-based small learning community (SLC) model, including student and teacher teams, teacher collaboration and a separate space for academy activities.

2. Cibola's freshman academy achieved a cultural shift in instructional organization and practice, from the traditional format centered in departments to interdisciplinary learning communities organized around student teams.

3. Almost all academy teachers collaborated on a daily basis, often multiple times per day.

4. The freshman academy maintained a high level of team "purity" or exclusivity, in which all students on each team shared the same core teachers, and teachers taught students on their teams almost exclusively.

5. All teams provided students with interdisciplinary instruction. The degree of formality and complexity of each team's interdisciplinary activities varied.

6. Many teachers found their mentoring role frustrating and uncomfortable, mainly because they did not understand exactly what was expected and did not feel well trained.

7. Teacher teaming increased the frequency, efficiency and perceived effectiveness of parent involvement activities.

8. Students' perceptions of a distinct freshman academy identity appeared to diminish in 2002-03 compared to 2001-02. Pilot SLC endeavors at the tenth grade level as well as modifications to the freshman academy in 2002-03 may have been responsible.

Freshman Academy Development

Cibola High School experimented with small learning community type reforms starting in the 1997-98 school year. In 1998-99, CHS created its first teaching team. It added another team the following year. Funded by the City of Albuquerque, these teams focused on high-risk students as part of what the school called its "Integrated Curricular Education Team" (ICE BLOCK). In 2000-2001, Cibola used the APS Small Learning Community grant to expand the team teaching, mentoring and interdisciplinary curriculum components of its ICE BLOCK program to all first-time 9th grade students, thus forming the freshman academy. Academy features, by year, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. CHS Freshman Academy Program Features By Year, 1998-2003

	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003
SLC Grant Year			1	2	3
Number of Teams	1	2	5	5	5
Number Students on Teams	147	299	679	647	706
Total 9th Grade Enrollment	666	704	759	752	829
Students Per Team (average)	147	150	120	129	140
Teachers per Team*	NA	NA	4**	4**	3
Eligibility	High risk for dropout	High risk for dropout	All students except D-level special ed	All students except D-level special ed	All students except D-level special ed
Special Education Inclusion	No	No	Yes, on 3 teams	Yes, on all teams	45 included 60 excluded
Mentoring Period	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Separate Space			Yes	Yes	Yes
Administration	NA	0.2 FTE coordinator	0.2 FTE coordinator	0.8 FTE coordinator	0.8 FTE coordinator

* Each team had a special education inclusion teacher in addition to the 3 or 4 core content teachers.
** 3 full-year teachers plus 2 half-year teachers.

<u>Student and Teacher Teams</u>

Student and teacher teams are the foundation of small learning communities. Students on the same team share a common set of teachers, and share multiple classes with their peers. Teamed teachers share a common group of students.

In 2000-01 and 2001-02, the SLC grant provided enough funds for five teaching teams, each with approximately 120 students. Teams integrated special education, high-risk, general education and honors students. Each team had 5 core content teachers, in English, Math, Science, Computers (one-semester) and Health (one-semester), plus special education teachers. All were recruited specifically for their experience with interdisciplinary instruction and team teaching, as well as for their desire to work with 9th grade students.

Class sizes ranged from a high of 25 to as low as 17. Another important feature of Cibola's freshman academy was that counselors were assigned by team, rather than by alphabet. This allowed each counselor to work closely with teams to support students and facilitate parent contact. To develop students' sense of team identity and camaraderie, teachers coordinated various team events, including Team Days and field trips. [tr]

Cibola administrators emphasized the importance of maintaining team "purity" in which all students on a team shared the same core teachers, and all teachers on a team taught only the students on that same team. Placing students in classes of teachers from more than one team was considered a last option.

In 2002-03 SLC grant funding shortfalls paired with a spike in 9th grade student enrollment caused school administrators to change the composition of academy teams. Each team started the year with at least 140 students instead of 120. Also, Health and Computer teachers were left off the teams, decreasing the number of core teachers on each team from 4 to 3. According to teachers and administrators alike, this was an experiment that failed. The 3 teamed teachers missed having a 4th teacher to share the team's workload. The Health and Computer teachers felt left out. All interviewees agreed that the teams were unable to deliver the same level of services that students had received in previous years. In an end-of-year interview, the school's principal reported that teams would have four teachers again starting in 2003-04 [ai].

Professional Development
In 2000-01, academy teachers spent two full days working together on team building, goal setting and curriculum development. CHS also provided teachers with four technical support sessions related to personalization strategies, teaming, interdisciplinary planning and other SLC topics. In the 2001-02 and 2002-03 school years, Cibola offered one main SLC-specific professional development opportunity, a summer team-building workshop facilitated by an outside consultant. [ti]

Mentoring
Teachers on Cibola's 1998-1999 academy team established mentoring relationships with students as a natural by-product of teaming. Administrators made mentoring a formal, structured activity in the 2000-2001 school year. They asked teachers to use Channel One time for

mentoring groups of 12 to 30 students and they paid an annual $1,000 stipend per teacher. [ti, tr] Teachers said they had between 15 and 40 minutes, 3 to 4 times per month, for mentoring. Mentoring during the 2000-2001 and 2001-02 school years included the following kinds of activities:

- small and large group discussions of academic and social issues during Channel One time;
- one-on-one conversations related to academic performance and social or personal concerns during Channel One time, during the school day, at lunch, during passing periods, and in class; and
- community building activities for the entire team. [ti]

Teachers reported that having an assigned group of students and a formal mentoring period helped ensure that all students, even those who tended to be quiet or introverted, received focused adult attention. However in 2002-03 the mentoring period was eliminated from the school schedule [ai, ti]. Teachers still had assigned groups of "mentees," but teachers reported that they met with fewer students one-on-one and spent less time with each. [ti]

With or without structured mentoring time, many teachers found their mentoring role frustrating and uncomfortable. In particular, teachers struggled to define the line between mentoring and counseling. The school did not provide professional development in mentoring, so teams were on their own to define the focus of mentoring and the strategies they used [ti]. As one teacher explained:

> "Nobody knows what mentoring really means. To one person it's one thing, to another person it's another thing. You talk to some counselors, they say go ahead and talk to students, let them tell you their problems but refer them down to us. Some people will say, no, only worry about their grades. And so it depends [ti]".

Teacher Collaboration and Interdisciplinary Activity

Teacher collaboration is another foundational component of small learning communities. Teachers use common planning periods to meet regularly to discuss students, meet with parents, and plan integrated curricula and team events.

Findings from teacher interviews and activity reports show that almost all academy teachers collaborated on a daily basis, often multiple times per day. Cibola provided academy teams with one common preparatory period per day. Teams convened formal meetings about twice per week in 2000-01, and an average of once per week in 2001-02 and 2002-03, with some teams continuing to meet twice per week [rs, ti, al]. Team meetings often included the team's Special Education Inclusion teacher and counselor. Most often teachers discussed individual student attendance, grades and academic progress, behavior and personal circumstances; class lessons, projects and assignments; parent contact; team rules and strategies; and field trips and other team events [rs, al, ti].

Interdisciplinary Activity

The academy's team structure and common preparatory period encouraged teachers to coordinate instruction across content areas. Most teams conducted brief interdisciplinary activities involving 2 or 3 subjects. For example, they collected plants for biology class and graphed the results in math class, or they studied rocks in biology, went on a field trip to the Natural History Museum and then wrote a report using similes and metaphors for English class.

One team conducted year-long interdisciplinary units involving all four core subjects, field trips, and multiple assignments. One unit, called Integrated Life Skills, gave students a scenario of having just graduated from college with a salaries based on their grade-point-averages. Students had to budget, set goals and pay for a car, house, monthly bills and other expenses, manage a checkbook, pay taxes and deal with real-life situations such as car accidents and burglaries. The unit involved an array of assignments and field trips that integrated English, Math, Health and Science [tr, sfg].

The degree of formality and complexity of each team's interdisciplinary activities varied. Teachers reported that interdisciplinary activity depended on:
- the amount of time teachers were willing and able to invest beyond the regular work day, and
- teachers' perceptions of what was possible within the mandated high school curriculum. One teacher said her team chose not to create formal interdisciplinary units because they found the high school curriculum restrictive. In contrast, another teacher recounted her discovery that interdisciplinary activities did not need to be elaborate to have impact:

  "I thought this interdisciplinary stuff was going to be a nightmare. Well it's not. I'm still doing my curriculum. And some things are as simple as we write a paper about viruses for Biology but we use the computer lab to do it. That's interdisciplinary. The kids see that it's important. We do little things. Some teams do grandiose, wonderful things [ti]."

Parent Outreach

Counselors, administrators and teachers alike reported that teacher teaming and collaboration with team-based counselors increased the frequency, effectiveness and efficiency of parent outreach. Teaming also shifted the focus of parent communications from negative to positive.

- Freshman academy activity logs show that teams accomplished an average of 57 parent contacts per month, consisting of 42 phone discussions and messages, 7 mailed and emailed communications, and 8 parent conferences and informal face-to-face contacts.

- In contrast, one teacher reported calling "3 kids' parents my first 2 years." [ti]

The academy's approach to parent involvement included the following activities:
- Teachers collaborated to make sure that parents were contacted regularly and to address multiple subjects with a single call.
- Teams held parent conferences during their common preparatory period, thus ensuring the presence of all 4 core subject teachers rather than just one or two.
- Counselors attended parent conferences and served as family liaisons.

- Academy teachers posted grades on a weekly basis and some sent parents daily or weekly progress reports.
- Some teams held open houses to inform parents of expectations, tutoring opportunities and procedures for contacting teachers.

Results from the 2001-02 Quality of Education survey suggest that parents of freshman academy students were much more likely than parents of upper-grade students to feel informed about and encouraged to participate in their child's education (see Table 3). For example, three-quarters of freshman academy parents were satisfied with the information their children's teachers provided about academic progress, compared to two-thirds of parents of students in $10^{th} - 12^{th}$ grades.

Table 3. Percent 2001-02 Parents Reporting Parent Outreach and Education: Parents of CHS Freshman Academy Students Compared to Parents of CHS Upper-Grade Students.

Quality of Education Parent Survey Items	% Agree Freshman Academy (n = 329)	% Agree Upper-Grade (n = 479)
My child's teacher provides sufficient and appropriate information regarding my child's academic progress.	75%	66%
School personnel encourage me to participate in my child's education.	52%	39%

Students explained that academy teachers reached out to their parents, involved them and remained accessible to them [sfg]. One counselor described the academy teams as "hens hovering over little eggs" and "aunts and uncles working together for kids." The team approach, she said, reassured parents that teachers had their child's best interest in mind and lessened accusations that individual teachers were being unfair, as illustrated in the following comment:

> "And when parents hear a faculty that's consistent and expectations are the same, it's not confusing to them. Then they have to start checking their own responsibility and accountability to their child. So if the kid wants to blame, it's hard because we're a unit." [ti]

Common, 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 community, visibility, collaboration and safety. Cibola High School located all ninth grade classes, teachers and lockers in one wing of the school and scheduled a separate ninth grade lunch. The academy administrator kept an office within the ninth grade wing or nearby, allowing her to provide support to teachers and students as needed. Staff explained that these arrangements facilitated academy teacher collaboration and a sense of community. One teacher commented:

> "We all have a sense of community, because we're all in the freshman academy and we're all together in the same place. And I talk to the Biology teachers and the Math teachers on the other teams quite a bit more than I do the other people in my department. I mean we have freshman academy English meetings, where I talk to the other English

teachers. But there's just a sense of community within the academy that I don't think the other teachers [in upper grade levels] have because they're scattered everywhere [ti]."

Encroaching somewhat on the academy's physical separateness were the school's science laboratories, as well as some upper-class student lockers. These brought non-academy students into the ninth grade hall on a regular basis. One school administrator expressed concern that the upper-class student presence undermined ninth graders' sense of safety and their sense of ownership over the space. [ai]

Students were divided in their opinions about academy separateness. Just over half of surveyed ninth graders said they liked having a separate lunch and a separate hall in the school. Students explained that having most of their classes as well as their lockers in the same area was convenient and more secure [sfg]. Staff agreed that the division protected ninth graders from harassment. The main disadvantage was that having lunch at a different time from non-academy students excluded ninth graders from some clubs, activities and social opportunities. It also limited opportunities for teachers to attend department meetings and collaborate with non-academy teachers [ti, sfg].

Table 4. Percent Ninth Graders in Favor of Separate Space and Separate Lunch Period: 2001-02 and 2002-03.

Survey Item	2001-2002	2002-2003
I like having a separate lunch period for 9th graders.	52%	54%
I like having a separate hall for 9th graders.	53%	60%

Distinctive Thematic or Curricular Focus

Small learning community research shows that SLC's need a distinctive thematic or curricular focus in order to develop a clear sense of identity and purpose. Cibola's freshman academy had a clearly defined student population, enrolling all the school's freshmen and excluding students who were repeating the 9th grade. Its distinctive focus was to ease the transition from middle school to high school and to provide individualized attention to keep ninth graders enrolled in school and help them progress academically. The academy's team structure with interdisciplinary collaboration, mentoring and student groupings was unique in the school. Other programs, such as after-school tutoring and pull-out interventions, provided extra support when needed.

Focus group results suggest that students' perception of a distinct academy identity diminished in 2002-03 compared to 2001-02. In the spring of 2002, ninth graders were able to describe a number of components that distinguished the freshman academy from the rest of the school and from traditional ninth grade formats, and they spoke about them with appreciation. In the spring of 2003, by contrast, interviewees were not able to name distinguishing academy features, nor did they convey any sense that the freshman academy had its own identity [sfg]. It is possible that pilot SLC endeavors at the tenth grade level in 2002-03 blurred contrasts between the ninth and tenth grade programs. It is also possible that modifications to the freshman academy in 2002-

03, such as eliminating the mentoring period and reducing teams from 4 to 3 teachers, diminished students' experience of a distinctive academy program.

Autonomy and Flexibility

Autonomy was not a stated goal of the Cibola 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 and experience significant risks on the road to developing autonomy.[1]

In addition to providing a separate space for core freshman academy classrooms, Cibola's freshman academy had its own administrator, counselors and teachers, which provided the academy with a focused staff. From 1998-99 through 2000-01, a counselor provided part-time (0.2 full-time equivalent) administrative coordination and direction for the academy, with substantial involvement of the school's principals. A veteran science teacher assumed the freshman academy director role in 2001-02 and provided close to full-time administrative direction. The academy director managed academy operations, coordinated professional development, provided instructional guidance and support to the teaching teams and helped develop and pilot other educational initiatives such as after-school tutoring and tenth grade teams. Two counselors were assigned exclusively to ninth grade teams.

Staff reported that Cibola's administrators gave the freshman academy sufficient autonomy to make timely, case-by-case adjustments to student schedules. "Everything we do is the right thing for *kids*," one academy coordinator explained. Constraints to autonomy were related to budget and curricula.

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

Freshman Academy Program Results

Freshman academy program 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 surveys and focus groups administered in the spring of 2002 and 2003. Teacher opinions were gathered through teacher and team interviews. The third section summarizes the academy's impacts on school climate and student attitudes. Results are drawn from two student surveys, two student focus groups, teacher and program director interviews, and teaching team interviews. The fourth part 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

According to both survey and focus group findings, students were highly satisfied with Cibola's freshman academy. Over two-thirds of students surveyed expressed satisfaction and nearly two-thirds said they felt fortunate to be in Cibola's freshman academy.

Table 5. Student Satisfaction with the CHS Freshman Academy: 2001-02 and 2002-03.

Survey Items	Percent Agreeing	
	2001-2002	2002-2003
I am satisfied with Cibola's Freshman Academy.	66.9	70.5
I feel fortunate to be in the Freshman Academy.	63.7	63.4

Students particularly liked the size of academy classes, the field trips, and the fact that teachers collaborated. Over half liked having a separate hall for ninth graders.

Table 6. Student Satisfaction with Selected CHS Freshman Academy Components: 2001-02 and 2002-03.

Freshman Academy Components	Percent Agreeing	
I liked…	2001-02	2002-03
The size of classes	100	68.5
Field trips	82.9	82.3
Having a group of teachers who work together and are involved with each student	72.8	76.8
Having teachers coordinate lessons and assignments	na	73.5
Having a separate hall for 9th graders	53.0	60.0

Students' satisfaction with the freshman academy was colored somewhat by school-wide factors. While 2001-02 freshman academy students were overwhelmingly positive about Cibola High School, students from the 2002-03 academy reported that their ninth grade experience was diminished by perceived overcrowding, funding problems, school building disrepair, and low academic standards, as illustrated in the following comments:

> "I'd probably give Cibola like a B or a C [grade], because we're not that great of a school, I guess, like standards wise."
> "We're not the best-funded school. There are a lot of people who aren't really doing well."
> "I'd also give Cibola a B, because our school was gross when I first came in here, but now we're getting new tile in the classrooms. I think it's getting much better. You can take credit classes if you wish, but some people choose to take the easy classes." [sfg]

Students offered various suggestions for improving the freshman academy. Some students suggested expanding opportunities for team interaction, partly to share lessons and partly to facilitate social connections. The following comment illustrates this point:

> "I think that we should have had interactions with other teams instead of just our team. Cause I would like to get to know some of the other kids in the freshman academy, other than just my team. I know that I've met some other people who are on other teams who seem really interesting to me. And I know that they could really help me a lot, with all the things they learn on their team." [sfg]

Almost three-quarters of survey respondents wished for more career-path activities. Over half said their ninth grade year would have been better with more opportunities to participate in clubs and other extracurricular activities. Only one-quarter of students surveyed wished for more scheduled time with a teacher-mentor.

Table 7. Student Recommendations for Improving the CHS Freshman Academy: 2001-02 and 2002-03.

Student Recommendations	Percent Agreeing	
	2001-02	2002-03
More career-path activities	67.4	72.6
More opportunities to participate in clubs and other extracurricular activities	58.2	60.1
More challenging curriculum within courses	31.3	30.1
(More) scheduled time with a teacher-mentor	29.2	25.0

Teacher Satisfaction

Teachers reported a high level of satisfaction with the freshman academy. Many teachers were recruited into the academy based on their experience with teaming, often at the middle school level, or because they expressed interest in teaming. Others joined reluctantly at first, concerned about giving up autonomy, subjecting their teaching to greater scrutiny, sacrificing their individual preparatory periods for team meetings and parent conferences, and adjusting their curricula to create interdisciplinary lessons. Reluctance faded quickly, as teachers experienced the benefits of team collaboration.[ti]

Teachers said the team structure and common preparatory period allowed them to support each other, providing a professional mentoring effect that enhanced classroom skills and instructional effectiveness. One teacher explained as follows:

> "I like being able to talk about common problems we're having with the kids and common good points about the kids. I think it really helped me to improve my management and teaching a little bit more quickly than I would have. Because that was my third year teaching. With the other people's help and just getting to see how other teachers do things, it really helped me to do better more quickly." [ti]

Another teacher illustrated this same point by explaining her sense of isolation before joining the freshman academy:

> "I didn't like [being a ninth grade teacher before joining the academy] because I was out there by myself. And I had 150 students -- more than I had ever had except early, early in my career. And I felt overwhelmed with curriculum. I felt overwhelmed with trying to get a hold of parents and trying to set up conferences with parents and because I was new I didn't know the procedures. So it was hard because it was me and 150 students. And that's how I felt. It was not me against them necessarily, but it was me trying to do all of this stuff alone, where the responsibility had always been shared with a team of other people who had the same children. I felt very lonely." [ti]

Another teacher explained that academy staff developed a unique sense of community, as a result of frequent interactions and sharing a common space within the larger building:

> "We all have a sense of community, because we're all in the freshman academy and we're all together in the same place. And I talk to the Biology teachers and the Math teachers on the other teams quite a bit more than I do the other people in my department. I mean we have freshman academy English meetings, where I talk to the other English teachers. But there's just a sense of community within the academy that I don't think the other teachers [in upper grade levels] have because they're scattered everywhere [ti]."

Others teachers noted that team collaboration widened their understanding of and influence on students' lives, which in turn intensified their job satisfaction.

"Since we meet together at least once a week we get to know one another real, real well. And we get to know who seems to be having trouble with what student, and why, and whether other people are having the same kinds of difficulties and if they're not, what are you doing differently from what I'm doing. It's a sharing process so that you can deal more with the entire child rather than just, 'why are you failing English' or 'why are you failing Math.'"

"I really feel now being in the academy that I play a larger role in the lives of the kids. And that has made me feel much better about my job, because I'm not just there teaching. I feel that I do a better job in the academy. And that makes me feel better as a teacher." [ti]

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.[2] When teachers have time to collaborate and spend time with students one-on-one, they come to know their students well, 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.[3] They are also less likely to drop out.[4]

School Climate refers to the overall culture, mood, attitudes and norms in a school. The APS Small Learning Communities Program Evaluation studied the following dimensions of school climate:

> Sense of Safety
> Teacher Trust
> Student Visibility (Personalization)
> Academic Expectations
> School Attachment & Sense of Belonging
> School and Academic Engagement
> Peer Relations
> Peer Support for Academic Work

Results from student surveys,[5] student focus groups, teacher interviews and team reports, and a parent survey indicate that Cibola's freshman academy was successful at building a positive school climate in the following ways:

- eased students' transition into high school,
- provided a safe and supportive environment,
- created trusting relationships between students and teachers,
- raised students' visibility,
- held students to high academic standards, and
- cultivated positive peer relations.

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[2] 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.

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

[4] 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.

[5] Student survey results from 2001-02 and 2002-03 are similar unless noted otherwise.

Student focus group and survey results suggest that 2001-02 academy students felt more visible and had more trusting relationships with teachers than their 2002-03 counterparts The differences may be explained by the following more favorable conditions in 2001-02:

- More generous SLC grant expenditures[6]
- Lower pupil-teacher ratio (1:129 compared to 1:140)
- Smaller class sizes
- 4 teachers per team, compared to 3
- Smaller student body (752 compared to 829)
- Formal mentoring period
- More teacher professional development.

Student survey results raise questions about the academy's success at cultivating positive attitudes toward school. A large proportion of ninth grade survey respondents denied feeling engaged in their class-work. Many said they did not feel a sense of belonging to Cibola High School. Only about one-quarter reported experiencing a culture of support for academic work among their peers. These survey findings require additional study.

Detailed findings are described in the paragraphs below.

Smooth Transition to High School

Results from surveys and interviews of students, teachers and parents suggest that Cibola's freshman academy helped students make a smooth transition from middle school to high school.

- Almost two-thirds (62%) of students surveyed in the spring of 2003 said the freshman academy eased their transition to high school.

- Most freshman academy parents surveyed in the spring of 2002 (71%) agreed that their student's transition from middle school to high school was positive and successful [qed].

Sense of Safety

Small learning communities aim to foster students' sense of safety by creating micro-environments in which students are known and supported. When students feel safe they are more able to focus on learning. Freshman students commented that they were intimidated initially by the sheer number of students at Cibola [sfg]. Student survey results indicate that the freshman academy helped them feel safe in their new surroundings.

- Most Cibola ninth graders in both 2001-02 and 2002-03 reported a high level of safety in classes, passing between classes and during lunch – the parts of the school most directly affected by SLC reforms (Figure 2).

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[6] Cibola High School used the majority of its SLC grant funding in the first two years of SLC implementation, leaving very little for the third year (2002-03).

- Fewer ninth graders felt completely safe outside around the school and in the school's bathrooms and hallways (Figure 2). In focus groups, students explained that gang activity, drug use and intimidating student behavior occurred occasionally outside around the school. In the hallways students sometimes observed fighting and locker theft.

Comparisons with results from upper grade levels suggest that the academy helped ninth grader feel just as safe as more veteran students:

- Freshmen were just as likely to feel safe as 10th grade students surveyed in the spring of 2003.[7]

- The 2001-02 cohort felt just as safe in 9th grade as they did in the following year in 10th grade.[8]

- Parents of freshman academy students were as likely as parents of upper-grade students to feel that their child was safe at school (79% compared to 80%) [qed].

Figure 2. Percent 2002-03 CHS Ninth Graders Reporting Sense of Safety.

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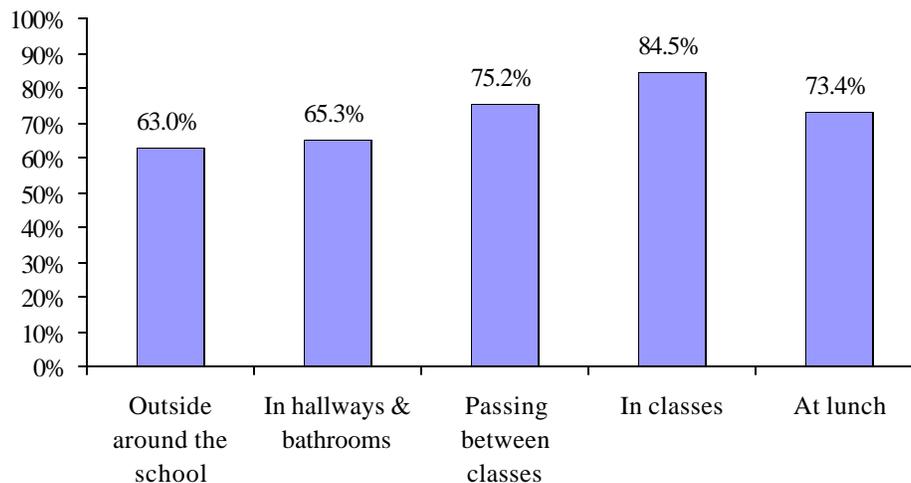
[7] F= 4.292, p = .832
[8] p = .975. This comparison is only available for the 2001-02 cohort.

Teacher Trust

Student survey, interview and focus group results indicate that Cibola's freshman academy fostered trust and connection between students and their teachers. This was especially true in the SLC grant's second year (2001-02), before the student-teacher ratio on each team increased.

- About three-quarters of students surveyed in 2001-02 said that they felt comfortable and safe with their teachers, that teachers tried to be fair, and that teachers cared about them and listened to them. Two-thirds said teachers kept their promises.

- Cibola freshmen reported higher levels of teacher trust than ninth graders at all 3 of the other APS high schools surveyed in 2001-02 ($p < .01$).

- The quality of relationships between students and teachers seemed to deteriorate somewhat in 2002-03, both compared to 2001-02 academy students, and compared to ninth graders at other high school freshman academies.[9]

Figure 3. Percent CHS Ninth Graders Reporting Trust in Teachers: 2001-02 and 2002-03.
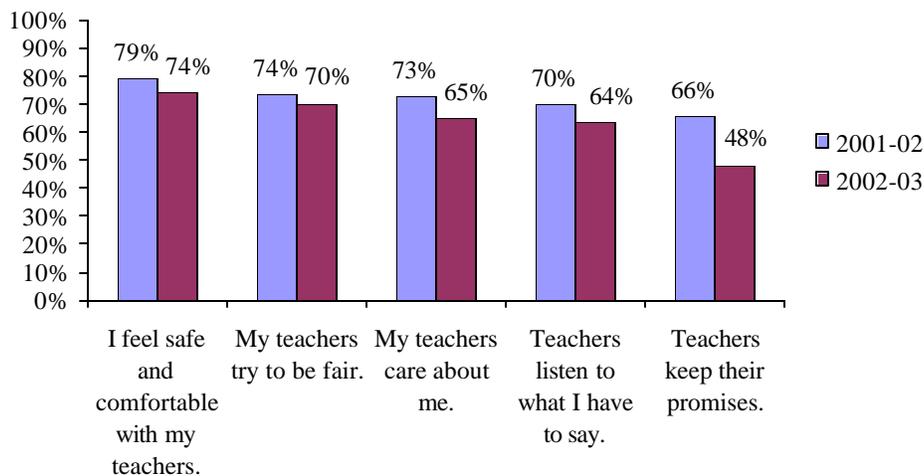
Teachers attributed the development of trusting relationships to the team structure. Teaming allowed teachers to provide consistent direction, expectations and support across classes and helped them understand and address the needs of individual students. [ti]

Students could tell that teachers thought about them and discussed their well-being as a team, partly because their teachers approached them with concerns and suggestions for improving their grades. Students also said they felt comfortable approaching their teachers to talk about personal matters, as evidenced in the following comments:

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[9] Differences between 2001-02 and 2002-03 Cibola ninth graders was not significant statistically. Cibola ninth graders reported lower levels of teacher trust compared to ninth graders at 2 of the 4 freshman academies surveyed.

"I always go to my health teacher for personal issues. [Because of the academy's team structure] she knows me, so I can talk to her." [sfg]

I think if there was anything that I needed to talk about I could go to at least one of my teachers and they would get it. And I think that helps a lot, that you can go to them and that they're going to be there." [sfg]

Student Visibility & Personalization

Student 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. Small learning communities are designed to increase the visibility of individual students among peers and with teachers. As students become more visible, staff can personalize education to individual needs, circumstances and interests.

Evaluation findings suggest that the freshman academy's team structure enhanced student visibility and personalized students' educational experience, particularly in the first two years of full SLC implementation. Freshman academy teachers explained that teaming facilitated an ongoing exchange of information that helped ensure appropriate and timely responses to student needs and behaviors. Often one teacher had a particularly close relationship with a student or had information and perspectives to enhance the entire team's approach, as illustrated in the following teacher comment:

"[Before the academy] if I was having a problem with a kid, or just worried about a child -- if they seemed depressed or if they were just struggling with school, it was very difficult to find the time to go look up their schedule, track down another teacher, find that individual and talk with them about what was going on. Sometimes I wouldn't really be able to help that kid out, or ever figure out what was going on. Now somebody knows what's going on with almost every kid. And it's so easy, if you see a student's depressed, or you think somebody might have a problem with smoking pot or something like that, you can immediately go talk to another teacher and see if they've had the same feelings, see if they've been in contact with the parents, see if they have any information that might be pertinent to helping the kid get back on the right track." [ti]

Another teacher explained that teaming required extra effort compared to traditional high school instruction but said its impact on student visibility was significant:

"When I was not a team [at Cibola] there were certain things I liked about it. Because I didn't have to go to team meetings. I didn't really have to go to as many parent conferences. But when the year had gone by and I looked back over my roster, I thought, 'really how many of these students did I really, really know?' And I didn't know very many of them. And there wasn't that closeness that there had been with all the students I'd had when I taught on middle school teams. Now, I feel that closeness again." [ti]

Students reported that their teachers knew each student individually. They said teachers adjusted instruction to meet individual abilities and learning styles, which helped students comprehend new material. Students also appreciated that their teachers worked together to identify and resolve academic problems before they mushroomed into larger problems with less possibility of resolution. Students explained as follows:

> "They know your abilities, they know how you learn so they can adjust their teaching to help you. You comprehend things better."

> "The way they explain it to you, they'll explain it differently to someone else. But since they know how you learn they'll teach you differently."

> "They talk to other teachers so if they notice a pattern of not turning in homework, they'll get together and work it out with you." [sfg]

Parents agreed that the freshman academy personalized education to meet the individual and diverse needs of their children. According to results from the spring 2001 Quality of Education parent survey (Figure 4), parents of freshman academy students were more likely than parents of upper-grade students to say that Cibola High School employed a variety of instructional methods and strategies to meet needs, modified class techniques and assignments based on individual needs, and designed curricula to meet the needs of all segments of the school community [qed].

Figure 4. Percent 2001-02 Parents Agreeing that CHS Personalizes Education: Freshman Academy Parents (n = 329) Compared to Upper-Grade Parents (n = 479) [qed].
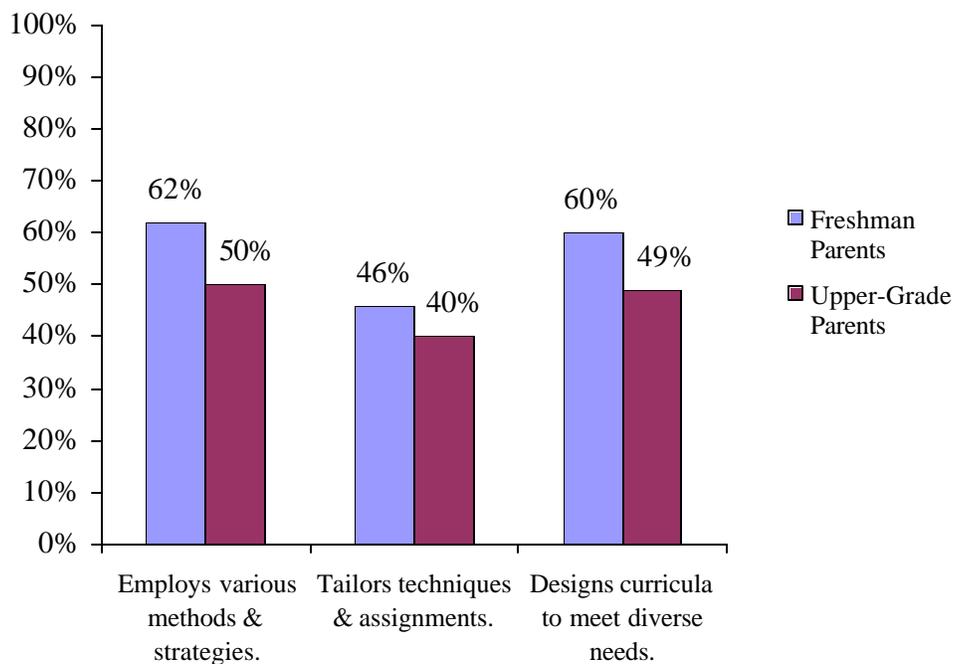
Teachers said the freshman academy also helped students develop visibility with their peers. The team structure, in which 120 – 140 students shared teachers, classes, field trips and team events, as well as the separate academy space, helped students who were normally quiet, shy and "school-phobic" to feel comfortable within the large high school setting and population. A teacher described the impact on one student this way:

> "Being on the team allowed him to fit in with the other students and it allowed them to learn to appreciate his differences. And where he was fairly isolated I think in middle school and probably would have remained fairly isolated, I think the team drew him out, encouraged him to do things that he probably wouldn't have done." [ti]

Cibola's teachers and administrators linked the increases in visibility and personalization with a number of important student outcomes:

- Improved comprehension and mastery of academic material;
- Early and effective interventions that prevented the escalation of problems;
- Improved socialization, especially among shy, quiet and underachieving students; and
- Increased accountability, which improved student attendance and classroom behavior.

Peer Support for Academic Work and Peer Relations

SLC research shows that supportive peer environments provide role models and psychological safety that are critical to fostering academic success. Interview and focus group results suggest that the freshman academy's team structure fostered positive peer relations. The team structure gave students a set of teachers, classes and curricula they shared in common with a small group of peers. As a result, students on the same team were able to share information about homework assignments and help each other understand course material. The fact that students shared multiple classes with one another also helped them develop strong peer relationships that helped them with academic work, as evidenced in the following comment:

> "We get to know a lot of our classmates really well, especially this one girl, if I don't get something she'll explain it to me and if she doesn't get something I'll explain it her." [sfg]

Student survey results also indicate that Cibola High School's freshman academy cultivated a reasonably solid climate of peer relations.[10]

- Most ninth graders reported that students got along well together (74%).[11]

- More than half said students cared about each other (60%), treated each other with respect (54%) and worked together to solve problems (52%).

- 9th graders were more likely to report positive peer relations than 10th grade students in 2002-03 (p < .01).

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

[11] Figures are from the 2002-03 survey.

High Academic Expectations

Research has shown that holding students to high standards of academic performance helps them do better in school. Staff explained that the freshman academy's team structure promoted high expectations, high standards of student conduct and accountability among teachers. Teams developed common classroom standards and expectations, and they monitored student progress collectively and regularly [ti].

Survey results suggest that the freshman academy succeeded in communicating high academic expectations. For example:

- Almost all 9th graders in both 2001-02 and 2002-03 said teachers expected them to complete their homework every night and to do their best all the time.

- 2002-03 freshman academy students were more likely than 10th graders that same year to report experiencing high academic expectations ($p < .01$).

Strong evidence of the academy's impact on academic expectations comes from a cohort analysis comparing students' ninth grade perceptions, while in the SLC setting, to their perceptions in tenth grade, after leaving SLC conditions (see Figure 5).

- While most 9th graders reported high academic expectations in their freshman academy year (2001-02), the same students were less likely to report high expectations the following year when they were in the traditional 10th grade program ($n = 250$; $p < .001$).

Figure 5. Cohort Analysis: Students More Likely to Report High Academic Expectations in their Freshman Academy Year (2001-02) than their Non-Academy 10th Grade Year (2002-03).[12]


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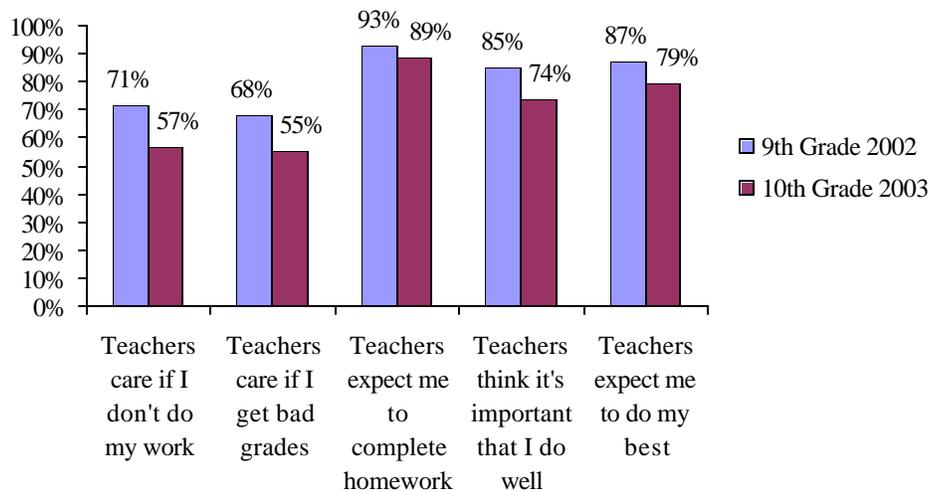
[12] This chart represents the 250 students who completed the student survey twice: once while they were in the freshman academy (2001-02), and again the following year, when they were in the traditional 10th grade setting (2002-03).

Parents agreed that the freshman academy held students to higher standards than did Cibola's upper grades. Results from the 2001-02 Quality of Education parent survey (Figure 6) show that:

- Three-quarters of freshman academy parents believed CHS held high expectations for academic achievement, compared to two-thirds of upper-grade parents.

- Two-thirds of freshman academy parents said CHS staff maintained consistent discipline conducive to learning, compared to about half of parents of upper-grade students [qed].

Figure 6. Percent CHS Parents Reporting High Academic Expectations: Freshman Academy Compared to Upper Grades, Spring 2002 Quality of Education Survey.
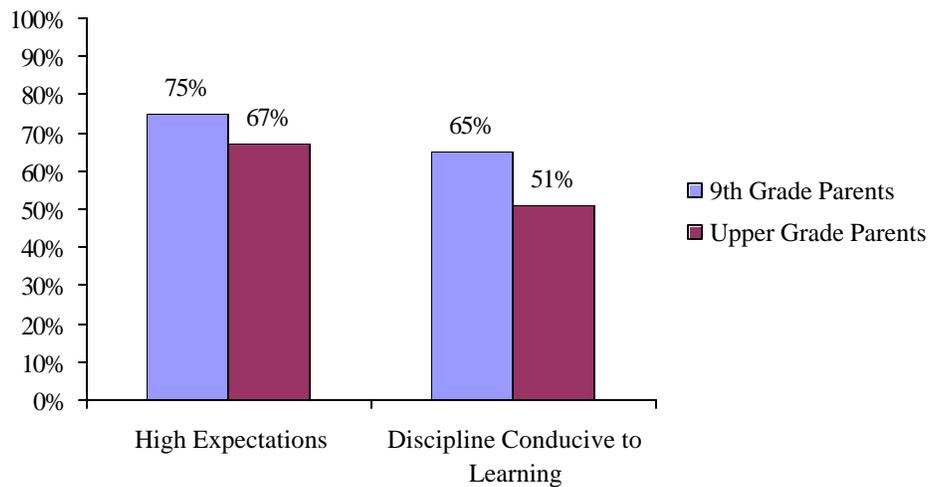
Student Attitudes

The freshman academy's impact on student attitudes was difficult to interpret. Student survey results indicate that many freshman academy students did not develop a sense of belonging, did not feel academically engaged and did not experience peer support for academic work.

- *Belonging/Attachment:* Only half of freshman academy students said they felt close to people at school (50.7%), under half said they were happy to be at Cibola High School (42.7%), and about one-third said they felt part of their school (33.7%). These results compare poorly to national results.[13]

- *Engagement:* Only about one-third of ninth graders expressed interest in their class work (35.2%), and under half said they looked forward to class (47.6%).

- *Peer Support for Academic Work:* Only about one-quarter of students reported that most of their classmates thought it was important to do homework (23.6%), pay attention in class (21.2%), and get good grades (27.6%).

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[13] 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.

At the same time, CHS ninth graders were slightly more positive as a group than CHS tenth graders. Further investigations would need to be conducted in order to verify and explain the survey results.

Student Performance

The ultimate goal of small learning communities is to facilitate student learning and academic success. Multiple years of quantitative and qualitative results from the APS Student Information System, student focus groups and staff interviews provide strong evidence that Cibola's freshman academy improved students' academic *persistence*.[14] Particularly striking are results showing the academy's preventive effect on student dropout. In addition, comparisons between teamed and unteamed students in the SLC's two pilot years suggest particularly strong benefits for students at high risk of academic failure. Qualitative results suggest that the academy also had a positive influence on student learning. However, academic achievement data were inadequate for evaluating the freshman academy's impact on academic *performance*.[15] Overall, evaluation results suggest that the academy achieved the following student performance outcomes:

- The dropout rate among first-time ninth graders fell to 0.05% in 2001-02 and 1.0% in 2002-03.

- Student attendance improved.

- The rate of completing enough credits to pass to the tenth grade increased among students at high risk of academic failure, thus improving their chances of graduation.

School staff attributed these accomplishments to SLC reforms. In particular, they credited teacher teaming, smaller class sizes, and heightened student visibility. The following pages describe student performance results in detail.

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[14] This evaluation uses the term "academic persistence" to describe students' commitment to school as demonstrated by attending consistently, staying in school rather than dropping out, and completing credits to progress to the next grade level.

[15] The state-mandated test used to measure students' academic performance changed each year of SLC implementation. CHS lacked an adequate comparison group against which to evaluate academy performance.

Dropout

Evaluation findings show that Cibola's freshman academy significantly reduced the number of students dropping out of school. School withdrawal records over five years, staff interview results, as well as an independent study of freshman year dropout rates cross-validate and substantiate this finding.

Full SLC Implementation: 2001-02 and 2002-03

- Cibola's dropout rate among all ninth graders (first-time and repeaters) dropped to 1.83% in 2002-03, compared to 2.7% for APS ninth graders as a whole. [16]

- Cibola's dropout rate among first-time ninth graders was even lower, at 0.05% in 2001-02 and 1.0% in 2002-03 (Table 9). [17] Only one of these dropouts was the product of excessive absences; most were unconfirmed home-schooling arrangements or transfers.

Table 9. Numbers, Percentages & Types of CHS 9th Grade Dropouts: 2001-02 and 2002-03.

	Dropout Number	Dropout Percent	Dropout Types
2001-2002	3	0.5	1 excessive absences 1 unconfirmed transfer 1 unapproved transfer
2002-2003	7	1.0	7 unconfirmed home-schoolers

Comparisons with other APS high schools substantiate Cibola's success in preventing ninth graders from dropping out. An independent study of APS dropout rates[18] showed that CHS had one of the two lowest dropout rates of all APS high schools in 2001-02. Further, the study gave substantial credit for that success to small learning communities. The study revealed that CHS was one of two APS high schools with the following results:

- Significantly lower adjusted dropout rates compared to high schools without freshman academies (1.2% compared to 1.8%).[19]

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[16] APS Technical Report for 2002-03 Dropout, February 2004, p. 6.

[17] The "SLC dropout formula" differs from the state formula. The state dropout formula uses cumulative enrollment and includes students repeating ninth grade. Cibola's 2002-03 ninth grade dropout rate using the state formula was 1.83%. The SLC dropout formula includes only first-time ninth graders who were enrolled on the 40th day of each school year.

[18] Zvoch, Keith (2005). *Freshman Year Dropouts: Interactions between Student and School Characteristics and Student Dropout Status.* Department of Educational Psychology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

[19] Rates were adjusted by taking into account the proportion of students who were female, English language learners, special education, free and reduced lunch, minority, and over-age for grade level. Student achievement levels were also taken into account. Unadjusted dropout rates for non-academy schools was 8.4%. Unadjusted dropout rates for academy schools was 2.6%.

- Significantly lower dropout rates among Hispanic students compared to Anglo students. This is the reverse of typical dropout patterns.

Pilot Years: 1998-99 and 1999-2000

Figure 7 illustrates the SLC's protective effect on dropout during the academy's pilot years, 1998-99 and 1999-2000, when some but not all students were organized into teams. Teamed students had lower or equal rates of dropping out compared to unteamed students. These results are particularly striking in light of the fact that teamed students started the year at higher risk for dropout than unteamed students.[20] Comparisons between teamed and unteamed students show the following:

- In 1998-99, only 2 out of 147 teamed, higher risk students dropped out of school (1.4%) compared to 15 of the 419 unteamed, lower risk students (3.6%).

- In 1999-2000, teamed, higher risk students were no more likely to drop out of school than unteamed, lower risk students.

Figure 7. CHS Ninth Grade Dropout Percentages: Teamed (Higher Risk) Students Compared to Unteamed (Lower Risk) Students, 1998-99 and 1999-2000.

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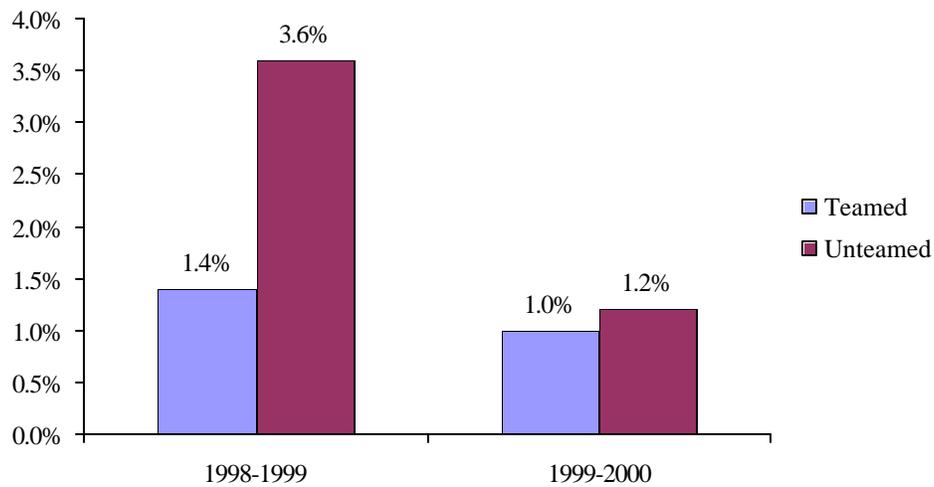
[20] In 1998-99 and 1999-2000, before federal funding began, Cibola's SLC teams focused on high-risk students.

Administrators and teachers credited the freshman academy's team structure and enhanced student visibility for reducing the ninth grade dropout rate. Team members exchanged information and coordinated their approaches to student problems, making student contracts, referrals for special services and schedule changes. Working together, teachers were better able to track student progress and intervene quickly and appropriately to keep students in school. The following teacher comment illustrates this point:

> "My first two years I had kids just disappear off, they never came back. I didn't know what the heck happened to them. I never saw sign-out sheets or if I did I never could figure out what was going on. Now I don't have any of that. The kids who have gone, I know exactly why, when, where, how, where they were going, what they were doing. We'd had conferences about it ahead of time. You can really keep track of what's going on with the kids. Some of the kids who have stayed aren't necessarily performing very well, but I know that they're not out at the mall, or ditching, or drinking. They're here, at school, and some of them have even tried to start doing better. Whereas before we'd lose some of those kids." [ti]

Attendance

Cibola's freshman academy achieved solid rates of attendance across all years studied. Analyses of attendance data from the APS Student Information System show the following results:

- The freshman academy met or exceeded the state attendance standard of 94% every year from 1999-2000 through 2002-03. This means that, on average, students attended 28 of their 30 class periods each week.

- Teamed students had better attendance than unteamed students in 1999-2000 (95% compared to 93%; p < .01).[21]

- Absenteeism was not responsible for any of the school's ninth grade dropouts in 2002-03 and only one in 2001-02.

Teachers and students credited the academy's team structure for the high rates of attendance. Teams reported using phone calls, attendance contracts and rewards to encourage consistent attendance. Teachers developed team rules in order to convey consistent expectations across all core classes. Teaming facilitated communication among teachers, helping them track students, address problems consistently and appropriately, and hold students accountable. According to teachers, these measures reduced tardiness, improved attendance and encouraged student cooperation [ti, tr]. One staff member provided the following example:

> "One particular young woman, who has an extreme huge attendance problem connected to one team member. So that team member hears her story. That team member now understands the whole thing, does the parent contact, learns more about the girl's story,

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[21] 1999-2000 is the only year there were both available attendance data as well as teamed and unteamed students to compare. Difference was statistically significant, controlling for previous year (8th grade) attendance.

shares this information with the other team members. Then they go to a parent-teacher conference. The team members understand why the girl had as many absences as she had and what needed to be done to benefit her. One cuts a little slack here and lets her do make-up work, and the other two agree also. There's consistency. This semester this girl has perfect attendance. I am not kidding you. What a turn-around. It is a huge turn-around. And she went from F's and D minuses and negative attitudes to positive, energized. She's marvelous. And we could have lost her." [ti]

Students agreed that the academy's team structure improved attendance. One student gave the following example of how one teacher's actions often improved attendance in all core classes:

"If there's a kid who's not necessarily getting something or they're not there to get it, the teachers try harder just to make sure that student is there to get everything. In one of my classes there's a kid and he's always going to study hall. So my math teacher went to study hall and asked her not to allow him in. And his attitude toward most of the teachers on the team changed because, it's almost like he had no choice but to come to class."

Ninth Grade Completion

Research shows that minimizing the number of students who have to repeat a grade level is critical to keeping students in school through to graduation.[22] Students must earn a minimum of five credits in order to pass from one grade level to the next. Figure 8 shows the percentages of ninth graders who completed at least five credits each year between 1997-98 and 2002-03.

- In 1998-99, teamed freshmen were more likely than unteamed freshmen to earn enough credits to pass to the tenth grade. In 1999-2000, the two groups had similar rates. These results are particularly favorable in light of the fact that teamed students were at high risk for academic failure.

- Majorities of Cibola ninth graders completed enough credits to pass onto the tenth grade in all six years studied. The apparent decline in ninth grade completion rates in the second 2 years of full SLC implementation (2001-02 and 2002-03) may be due to successes in preventing low performing students from dropping out.

Figure 8. Percent First-Time 9th Graders Earning Enough Credits to Pass to 10th Grade: 1997-1998 Through 2002-03.

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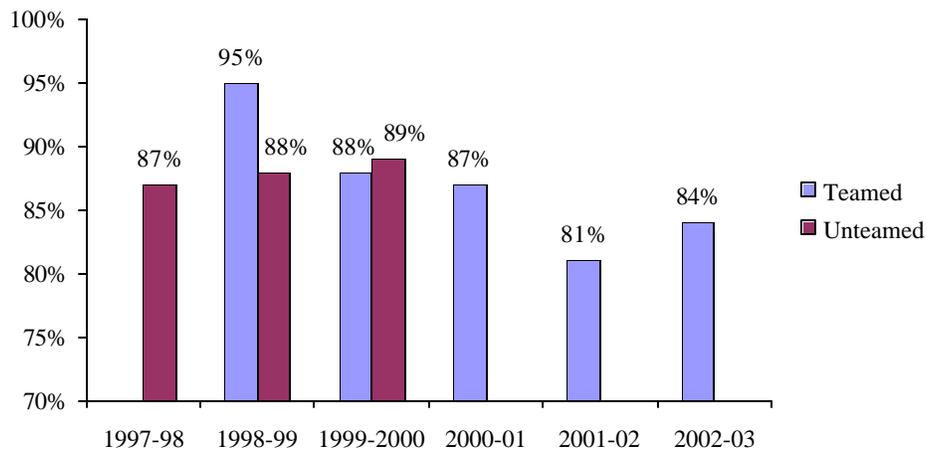
[22] Thompson, CL & Cunningham, EK (2000). *Retention and Social Promotion: Research and Implications for Policy*. ERIC Digest Number 161.

Academic Performance

The ultimate goal of small learning communities is to facilitate learning and academic success for all students. Qualitative findings suggest that Cibola's freshman academy had a positive influence on students' learning, academic performance and preparedness for tenth grade. However, most years of SLC implementation lacked a comparison group, making it difficult to confirm and quantify reported improvements.

Staff and students described many instances in which teacher collaboration and team-based parent outreach improved students' academic performance, as highlighted in the following examples:

> *Staff*: "I have a student who has literally gone from failing to C or above in all his classes because we were on him. He wasn't bringing home report cards. We got a hold of the parents early and asked them if they were aware, and they weren't. We had a conference as a team, and that grade came up, because somebody was watching him. I think we've gotten a lot of kids on track." [ti]

> *Student:* "On my team I know that my teachers are really concerned about what we're not doing and what we're not understanding or comprehending. They have conversations with each other and so they know what the student is not getting. I had trouble comprehending things in Math so it affected my Biology grade and then it affected my Health grade. When my teachers talked to each other, they realized that it was my organization that was bringing me down." [sfg]

Teachers emphasized that the academy's most important achievement was preventing low performers from dropping out. They cautioned that keeping low-achieving students in school would depress classroom averages, potentially obscuring improvements in academic performance. One teacher explained:

"I think their grades have improved. I've already talked about the decrease in disappearing kids. Now this is a whole kind of catch-22, because while I think that grades are higher it can be deceiving, because let's say three years ago I had four kids drop out of every class, or three kids. They'd be off my role sheet. Their grades would not be calculated into my overall grades. I might have those kids in class still now. They're still not passing Biology. That's bringing my grades down. But if I knock them out of there, I think my grades would be higher."

Facilitators and Constraints to Success

<u>Facilitators of Success</u>

Commitment to the Research-Based SLC Model: CHS provided the freshman academy with core research-based SLC structures, including exclusive teams of students and teachers, common preparatory periods, team-based scheduling, and a separate space within the school. These were the foundation of Cibola's freshman academy successes. Staff admitted that although small class sizes resulted in the very best outcomes, the academy still was effective when class sizes expanded because key SLC structures were in place.

Incremental Implementation: The academy developed incrementally from one team in 1998-99 to two teams in 1999-2000 and finally five teams in 2000-01. Gradual implementation allowed teachers to observe SLC processes and effects before deciding to join, which earned the academy a solid level of faculty buy-in. Incremental roll-out also gave administrators and teaching teams the opportunity to fine-tune expectations, processes and procedures on a small scale before implementing them on a large scale.

Class Size & Teacher Caseload: Teachers and students reported that small class sizes and reduced caseloads were primary factors in teachers' ability to deliver quality education to all students. Teachers were able to work with each student one-on-one and could conduct more creative and challenging instructional activities.

Teachers Committed to Ninth Grade Instruction, Teaming & Interdisciplinary Instruction: Cibola administrators recruited teachers into the academy based on their interest in and experience with teaming, integrated curricula and ninth grade issues. They also assessed teachers' commitment to collaborating during common preparatory periods.

SLC-Specific Administrators and Committed School Leadership: School leaders demonstrated clear and active commitment to small learning community principles and helped the school navigate early resistance to change. Providing the academy with its own dedicated staff, including two ninth grade counselors and a full-time academy administrator, helped CHS adhere to the research-based SLC model in practice.

Four-Member Teaching Teams: Cibola staff learned the importance of having four core teachers on each team when, in 2002-03, the school experimented with three. Staff quickly learned that four teachers were needed to handle the amount of work required to track and support students in a personalized fashion.

Teacher Stipends: CHS paid teachers a small stipend of $1000 to compensate them for the extra work required as mentors. The stipend also helped some teachers feel compensated for using their prep period to accomplish team activities, a key ingredient in the success of Cibola's freshman academy.

Constraints to Success

Overcrowding:. In 2002-03 the ninth grade population swelled to 829 students, from 752 the previous year. One student commented that it was hard to get through the halls and to class [sfg]. Teachers had to share classrooms, there were few free spaces for students to socialize and study, and the academy administrator's office and library had to double as a meeting space for team and academy meetings. [ai] These conditions created stress for teachers and students, and weakened the academy's ability to cultivate visibility and safety for all students.

Tight Resources: Cibola did not have the resources to add another teaching team to the freshman academy as the number of freshman students grew. As the numbers of students on each team increased, the amount of work required of each teacher also increased, and the level of personalization (student visibility) that was attainable diminished.

Conclusions

Between 1998-99 and 2002-03, Cibola High School implemented key components of the research-based small learning community model and achieved many of its freshman academy goals. One of the freshman academy's most striking achievements was a significant reduction in the ninth grade dropout rate, to one percent or lower. Evaluation findings also indicate that the academy improved student attendance and rates of ninth grade completion, especially among higher-risk students. Only one dropout in a 2-year period was attributed to excessive absences.

Staff and students credited the SLC structures of student and teacher teams, common preparatory periods, and the separate 9th grade hall for improvements in student persistence and attendance. Evaluation findings suggest that the freshman academy eased students' transition into high school, provided a safe and supportive environment, raised students' visibility, and cultivated positive peer relations. Evaluation results also show that the academy's team structure increased parent involvement and promoted high standards of academic performance and behavior.

SLC outcomes were strongest in the first two years of full academy implementation, when teams averaged 120 students, class sizes were kept under 25, teams had 4 to 5 core teachers, and teachers had scheduled time to mentor students.

Qualitative findings suggest that Cibola's freshman academy had a positive influence on students' learning, academic performance and preparedness for tenth grade. As found in other studies of SLC programs in APS high schools, however, analyses of grades and standardized tests scores do not reveal any clear pattern of improvement in student performance.

One of the most striking features of Cibola's freshman academy was the high level of staff commitment to and expertise in implementing core SLC structures and strategies. By 2001-02, Cibola had achieved a culture change at the freshman level in which team collaboration was the norm. Academy teachers had multiple years of experience within their teams, and school staff had fine-tuned scheduling, counseling and other systems in support of academy operations. As a result, teaching teams displayed consistently high levels of teacher collaboration, interdisciplinary instruction, parent involvement and student support.

Challenges to academy success came mainly from a decrease in available SLC grant funding and a steady increase in ninth grade enrollment, which resulted in overcrowding, increased numbers of students per team and fewer teachers per team. Cibola's administrators planned to reestablish 4 to 5 member teaching teams to help handle increased enrollment.

Recommendations

This evaluation of Cibola High School's freshman academy demonstrates that small learning community reforms can significantly improve school climate, student attendance and retention. It also highlights features and processes that if reinforced, reestablished or modified, could yield even greater benefits. RDA offers the following recommendations:

1. Sustain and expand core SLC structures, including exclusive student and teacher teams, common preparatory periods, and a separate space within the larger school.

2. Maintain teams of four or more teachers.

3. Reestablish scheduled mentoring or advisory periods, and provide clear mentoring guidelines and expectations.

4. Keep the number of students per team to 120 or less.

5. Conduct further investigations to verify and explain student survey results showing that many students did not develop positive attitudes toward school.

6. Continue and expand professional development to cover teaming, collaborative practices, the design of interdisciplinary curricula, special education inclusion, mentoring/advising and the availability of special needs resources outside the school setting.

7. Provide teachers with stipends to fuel and partially compensate teachers for the extra time and energy necessary for conducting interdisciplinary activities and mentoring.