

ALBUQUERQUE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Small Learning Communities Program Evaluation

Eldorado High School 1999-2003

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Debra Heath



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Executive Summary

Eldorado High School Freshman Academy 1999-2003 Small Learning Communities Program Evaluation Report

As part of a district-wide evaluation of small learning community (SLC) reforms, Research, Development and Accountability (RDA) evaluated the implementation and outcomes of Eldorado High School's freshman academy. Eldorado piloted its freshman academy in 1999-2000 with one team of teachers and students and gradually expanded the academy to include all first-time ninth graders and about 20 teachers. School administrators hoped the academy would increase the number of students successfully completing ninth grade, decrease the ninth grade dropout rate, and enhance students' academic performance.

Eldorado's freshman academy embodied most features of the research-based small learning community model:

- The freshman academy was separated, physically and functionally, from the rest of the school.
- Three teaching teams of 5 teachers each shared the same 110 students and two teams shared 170 students.
- Teachers on each team had a common preparatory period every day in addition to their individual preparatory periods.
- Teachers met regularly to monitor students, coordinate instruction and plan interdisciplinary activities.
- The academy had a distinctive focus and a small measure of autonomy.

Evaluation findings suggest that Eldorado's freshman academy strengthened an already high achieving school, providing students with a smooth transition into high school, a safe and supportive environment, heightened visibility, high academic expectations and increased parent involvement. Teaming strengthened teachers' morale, self-confidence and job satisfaction.

Associated results included:

- Increased instructional innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration, which, in turn, fueled an increase in students' school and academic engagement.
- Decrease in student dropout, from 3.1% in 1999-2000 to 1.9% in 2002-03.
- High standardized test scores (83% scored at or above the 40th percentile).
- High proportion of students earning enough credits to pass to the tenth grade (86%).
- Improved class attendance (95.5%), exceeding the state standard.

This evaluation of Eldorado's freshman academy demonstrates that schools can influence teaching and learning through structural reforms and resource allocations. At the same time, it is clear that students reap benefits only if teachers use SLC resources in intended ways. With this in mind, RDA offers the following recommendations: (1) hold academy goal-setting retreats, (2) develop consistent team expectations, (3) provide teams with instructional coaching, (4) provide more frequent "pats on the back" to recognize extraordinary staff efforts, (5) maximize team purity, (6) continue providing teachers with 2 prep periods, (7) provide more SLC-specific professional development, and (8) publicize the freshman academy to gain active community support.

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.

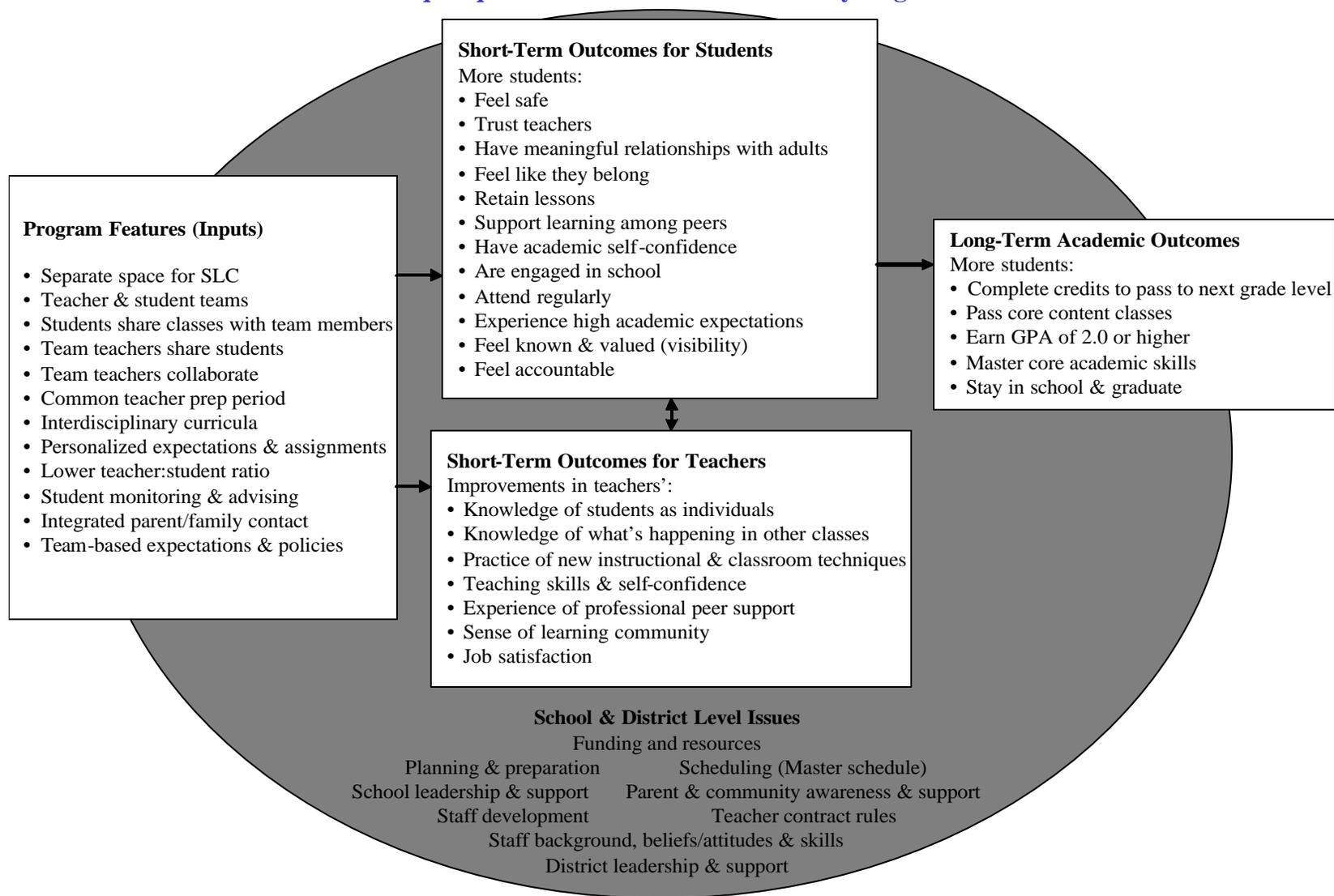
Between October 1, 2000 and September 30, 2003, Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) received funding from the U.S. Department of Education to implement small learning community programs in six high schools. Eldorado High School used the funds to expand the freshman academy it had started in 1999. Administrators hoped the academy would foster students' sense of belonging to the high school community, build their study skills, personalize their educational experience, and ease their transition into high school. They expressed concerns that while special education, college-bound and gifted students were being well served, non-college-bound students were dropping out in 9th grade. Ultimately, Eldorado aimed to accomplish the following goals:

- Increase the number of students successfully completing ninth grade;
- Decrease the number of students dropping out of high school; and
- Enhance students' academic performance.

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 Eldorado High School freshman academy.

The purpose of the SLC Program Evaluation was to describe schools' SLC reforms and outcomes compared to the theory of change 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 Eldorado 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.

Table 1. Data Collection Methods Used to Evaluate the Eldorado High School Freshman Academy.

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. Compare academy and non-academy 9 th grade results.	April 2002 April 2003
Teaching Team Reports	tr	Define level & nature of teaming/collaborative activities & instructional activities. Identify implementation facilitators & constraints and perceived student, teacher & school outcomes.	January 2003
Teacher Interviews	ti	Define academy and team structures & processes, identify perceived impacts on teachers & students, & lessons learned.	January 2002 May 2002 May 2003
Student Focus Groups	sfg	Define nature & level of SLC implementation from students' perspectives. Identify perceived outcomes.	May 2002 May 2003
Administrator Interviews (principals, deans)	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 Sept. 2001 January 2002 June 2002 June 2003

Method	Code	Purpose	Date
Student Records (Information Technology Services)	its	Compare SLC attendance, test scores and dropout rates to school goals & prior performance.	June 2002 June 2003
Teacher Recall Sheet	rs	Define frequency & nature of team activities, collaboration & student visibility practices.	May 2002
Activity Logs	al	Define frequency & nature of team meetings, parent contact & professional development.	Jan – May 2002
Quality of Education Survey	qed	Compare academy parent attitudes about their child's schooling to non-academy ninth grade parent attitudes.	April 2002

Limitations

Among the eight programs included in the APS Small Learning Communities Program Evaluation, Eldorado's freshman academy was one of the most veteran. It therefore offered one of APS' most fertile opportunities for understanding SLC dynamics and impacts. However, because Eldorado started its freshman academy before RDA launched the SLC program evaluation, RDA could 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. To provide context for interpreting Eldorado's student survey results, RDA compared Eldorado results to results from ninth graders at four other APS high schools. Employing a wide range of methods and gathering data from many different sources also permitted RDA to triangulate and confirm findings.

Freshman Academy Program Implementation

This section will describe small learning community (SLC) reforms implemented by Eldorado High School (EHS) between 1999-2000 and 2002-2003. A brief overview of the main features of the EHS freshman academy and its development is followed by a more detailed description according to five research-based components deemed crucial for SLC success.

Eldorado's freshman academy embodied most features of the research-based small learning community model. Students and teachers were scheduled into teams. Teachers met regularly to discuss students and plan interdisciplinary activities 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. Eldorado's implementation of each of these SLC components is detailed below.

Academy Development

The freshman academy at Eldorado began in the fall of 1999 with one team of 4 teachers and 32 students. Upon receiving federal SLC funds in the fall of 2000, Eldorado progressively expanded the academy to include all but 70 first-time 9th graders in the 2001-02 school year,¹ and all first-time 9th graders in 2002-03. Academy features, by year, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. EHS Freshman Academy Program Features By Year, 1999-2003

	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003
SLC Grant Year		1	2	3
Number of Teams	1	2	4	4
Number Students on Teams	40	162 - 180	440	584
Students Per Team (average)	39	80-90	110	110 (1 team had 170)
Teachers per Team	3	3	5	5
Total 9 th Grade Enrollment	575	553	510	584
Prep Periods Per Day	1	1	2	2
Special Education Inclusion	None	None	A & B	A & B
Separate Space	Separate 9 th grade building			
Schedule			Modified Block	Modified Block
Administration	9 th Grade Success Advocate			

¹ 70 students were not on teams due to scheduling problems.

Planning

School administrators introduced the SLC concept to teachers through in-services, presentations, a Town Hall and involvement in a “high school redesign” planning process. They gave teachers the opportunity to visit freshman and career academies at Rio Rancho and Cibola high schools. Eldorado’s administrators involved parents in planning the freshman academy through the school’s Parent Advisory Group [ai].

Professional Development

Many teachers entered the freshman academy without skills related to thematic, interdisciplinary units and collaborative teaming [tr]. EHS administrators and teachers reported that professional development was very important to the academy’s success [ai, ti]. In the 1999-2000 school year, the first teaching team received intensive training in interdisciplinary teaching skills, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Professional development was weaker in subsequent years, according to the EHS principal. Freshman academy teachers received four days of professional development per year, one day of which was devoted to interdisciplinary skills [ai]. In addition, teachers saw their team meetings as an important forum for professional development. Teams supported an ongoing process of experimentation and learning and provided structure for regular peer discussions of professional topics [ti, tr].

Student and Teacher Teams

During the 2001-02 and 2002-03 school years, the freshman academy consisted of four teams of between 110 and 123 students. Special education students were integrated into each team. Teamed students shared the same teachers and, according to administrators, any one student shared multiple classes with approximately 10 other students [ai]. Each team had 3 full-year teachers and 2 half-year teachers (Geography and Health), plus a special education teacher. The half-year and special education teachers each worked with two different teams.

In 2001-02, EHS was unable to schedule about 70 students onto teams. “Overflow” students were included on teams in 2002-03 by creating an auxiliary team attached to one of the regular teams. The regular team had five teachers and about 100 students, and the “auxiliary” team had 3 teachers and about 70 students. Largely due to scheduling difficulties, the “auxiliary” teachers taught upper-class students as well as ninth graders and did not have a common preparatory period for collaboration (they met weekly for an average of 35 minutes during lunch). Teachers called this configuration “impure” in that Team C and auxiliary teachers shared some but not all the same students. Impurity complicated efforts to provide all students with the full benefits of participating in a team, such as interdisciplinary lessons & projects, consistent rules & expectations, and field trips & other events.

Eldorado administrators established a strict policy that prohibited teachers from “selling” their common preparatory period.² Teachers who had additional responsibilities, like coaching, were paid 1.2 FTE so they could do extra work during 7th period rather than during their common preparatory time [ai]. This policy was followed except in the cases of auxiliary teachers and one teacher on a regular team who taught a specialized class.

In forming a freshman academy, Eldorado decreased the number of core staff teaching ninth grade students from 88 to about 20. Consequently, Eldorado maximized the probability that students would have teachers who liked teaching ninth graders. The school also eliminated “Enriched” and “Basic” courses, leaving just two class levels: honors and regular [pi].

Teacher Collaboration and Interdisciplinary Activity

Eldorado gave academy teachers (except three auxiliary teachers) a common preparatory period for team collaboration in addition to their individual preparatory period. Teacher interviews and team activity reports show that almost all teachers in Eldorado’s freshman academy collaborated on a daily basis and often multiple times per day. Teachers reported that they convened formal meetings an average of 3 times per week in 2001-02 [rs] and twice per week in 2002-03³[al]. Teachers also met outside their scheduled team meetings. Teacher collaboration most often revolved around 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]. Teachers emphasized that their cross-curricular collaboration was unusual within the school and sometimes was envied, as highlighted in the following statement:

“I think you get blinders if you just stay in your own department. And you really forget about what’s going on in other disciplines, not only with other teachers but with what kids are doing in other disciplines. In fact, it’s kind of funny to listen to the people in our English department. I don’t think they would come right out and say that they’re sort of jealous of all that interaction, but you really do see their eyes widen a little bit when you talk about what you know about what’s going on in other departments.” [ti]

The focus of teacher collaboration and the strategies used varied greatly by team. Some teams devoted a major portion of their collaboration time to developing and coordinating interdisciplinary activities. Teachers on these teams used innovative projects and assignments to engage students. Other teams focused the majority of their efforts on monitoring student attendance, grades and behavior. Some teams used their common preparatory periods to meet with individual students. Others were more likely to hold parent conferences or collaborate on measures to recognize student accomplishments. [tr].

² Teachers could choose to assume a fifth class in place of their individual preparatory period but not in place of their common preparatory period.

³ Actual meetings ranged by team, from once a week (auxiliary team) to 3 times per week.

Teachers explained that the reasons teams varied in how they used team meeting time included teacher personality, experience, interest, and skill, as well as team longevity and academy leadership. Some teachers were reticent to engage in interdisciplinary activity, possibly because they didn't have experience with it or because they didn't want to devote the additional time. Teachers reported that team longevity was important because, in their first year, most teams tended to spend a majority of time on attendance and behavioral problems, while in subsequent years they devoted more time to cross-curricular planning. Finally, teachers reported that the academy's expectations regarding field trips and interdisciplinary activity were not specific enough to encourage all teams to participate at the same level [tr, ti].

Interdisciplinary Activities

Findings from teaching team reports and teacher interviews suggest that the freshman academy's structure of teacher teams, common schedules and reduced student caseloads increased interdisciplinary activity at the classroom level. Teachers had two preparatory periods per day instead of one, taught four classes instead of six, and shared a common schedule with team members. According to teacher interviews, these conditions permitted instructional initiatives that would have been unthinkable under traditional circumstances.

Out of fifteen teachers surveyed about their activities during the previous week, 14 reported delivering interdisciplinary lessons or assignments and 15 reported connecting their lessons to another teacher's class through reference, content or skills [rs]. Interdisciplinary strategies ranged broadly from team to team. Some implemented interdisciplinary units spanning days, weeks, or a full semester. As an example, one teacher described the following interdisciplinary unit:

“We did a whole unit on evolution, where the Biology teacher was talking about the evolution of humans, trees, animals and plants, and how things come about. While he was doing that the health teacher was doing selections, choices, things like that. The English teacher was doing the book, *Inherit the Wind*. And in math we were doing exponential growth and decay, carbon dating and population models. So when the Biology teacher talked about how old this particular bone is, they could come back to math class and we could say, if there's this much Carbon 14 and it has this half-life, how old is this. So they got to see the connection between math class and Biology class and English class.”

The same teacher contrasted this kind of interdisciplinary collaboration with traditional high school instruction:

“That has really set us apart from being traditional teachers, because in a traditional classroom they would say: here are these 30 problems, these are exponential growth models, you do these exponential growths and you do these exponential decays and then you're done. And it doesn't stick with the kid as much.” [ti]

Teachers on another team said they encouraged literacy across all core subjects. For example, students wrote math poetry in math class, kept journals in Geography and Math, applied manuscript conventions learned in English to Geography research projects, and read nonfiction that supported Biology lessons in English classes [tr].

Teachers also collaborated with their team members to provide interdisciplinary extracurricular events, such as a World Hunger banquet, field trip to see a Southern Poverty Law Center speaker, poetry coffee-houses, and a World Fair.

Teachers and administrators reported that teaching and learning processes changed significantly as a result of interdisciplinary teaming. Teachers said that they used cooperative group instructional strategies more often. They also reported that students were more likely to study together and collaborate on projects. Almost two-thirds of student survey respondents (63%) said that teachers helped them see connections between different classes and subjects [ss].⁴ One administrator commented:

“The nice thing is when you go into [academy teachers’] classrooms you can tell the kids are starting to make connections between classes...you can see the cogs turning, ‘we’re doing this [in Biology] in order to collect the data to write this [in English].” [ai]

Teachers and students also reported that teacher collaboration made education more efficient because students could learn skills relevant to multiple subjects in one class. One student gave the following example:

“Like if we’re in Biology and she’s telling us to write in MLA format, we’re not wasting our time talking about that. We’re talking about the subject we need to write about, and then we can go to English and understand what MLA means.” [sfg]

Parent Outreach

Teachers reported that having fewer classes, fewer students and a team structure allowed them to involve parents regularly, systematically and in innovative and meaningful ways. They recruited parents to chaperone field trips, to serve as guest instructors and to participate in reflective and interactive activities at home, open houses and special events. They used email and websites to keep parents informed of class activities and assignments. During their common planning time teams met with parents [ti].

Teachers collaborated to make sure that parents were contacted regularly. Teams reported between 75 and 120 parent calls per semester, in addition to written correspondence via email and postcards [tr]. Teachers not only alerted parents of problems but also acknowledged student achievements. One teacher described her team’s in-depth effort to advise parents of their children’s academic, attendance or behavioral struggles early in the school year:

⁴ Item only included on Spring 2003 student survey.

“We crafted a letter and each teacher who had a concern about a particular student ran a real individualized progress report and then wrote a hand-written comment on it. We mailed it directly to the parent, rather than waiting for the bubble sheet progress report. I think we sent about 50 of those home.” [ti]

Parents of academy students felt more encouraged to participate in their child’s education compared to parents of upper-class students, according to results from the April 2002 Quality of Education parent survey. Over half (56%) of academy parents agreed that they were encouraged to participate, compared to 45% of parents of upper-class students at Eldorado High School [qed].

Teachers reported that the academy structure lessened the work-load of each individual teacher because team members divided up responsibility for contacting parents and shared information. In summary, more parents were contacted, more regularly, with less effort [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. Starting with the academy’s pilot year, all Eldorado ninth graders had their own building on campus, separate from the rest of the school. Almost all classrooms were in the ninth grade building as were all student lockers and a teachers’ lounge. At the same time, Eldorado’s administrators aimed to cultivate a sense of belonging to Eldorado High School as a whole, not just to the freshman academy. To this end, ninth graders took electives and physical education classes and shared lunch with upper-class students. Science classes and administrative offices, also, were located in different buildings, partly because science teachers wanted access to updated facilities and partly because the freshman academy building had limited space. One administrator explained as follows:

“The thing we didn’t account for from the front was you have more teachers you need more classrooms. Because we were thinking: same number of students, same number of classes.” [ai]

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. Eldorado’s freshman academy began with 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 prepare ninth graders for the upper grade curriculum.

Autonomy and Flexibility

Autonomy was not a stated goal of the Eldorado 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 significant risks on the road to developing autonomy.⁵

In addition to providing a separate space for most freshman academy classrooms, Eldorado’s freshman academy had its own administrators, counselor, teachers and support staff. It also had its own set of curricular standards. However its budget, scheduling and curricula were inextricably tied to the needs, constraints and traditions of the larger school.

The Ninth Grade Student Success Advocate served as the full-time freshman academy director and a full-time clerk provided full-time support. The freshman academy director managed academy operations, coordinated professional development, provided instructional guidance and support to the teaching teams, communicated with parents, and handled student discipline, attendance and referrals, among other tasks. A ninth grade counselor coordinated student scheduling. Eldorado administrators emphasized that having a full-time administrator was necessary for managing daily operations, citing for example, that the academy director “made 111 calls in one month – attendance and discipline referrals and all that.” To underscore the importance of the academy director position, administrators used city and operational funds rather than grant funds to pay the director’s salary. As one administrator said: “If we pay for the director out of soft money there’s an implication that it’s not necessary.”

⁵ *The Learning Network* (2003), Small Schools Project, University of Washington College of Education, 4(2).

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 surveys and focus groups, administered in the spring of 2002 and 2003. RDA gathered teachers' opinions through individual and team report 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 report interviews. The fourth section outlines impacts on student performance, including attendance, test scores, grades, credits earned and drop-out. 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 overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the freshman academy in 2002-03, and moderately satisfied in 2001-02. About three-quarters of 2002-03 ninth graders were satisfied with the freshman academy and felt fortunate to be in it, compared to just over half of 2001-02 ninth graders [ss]. Eldorado's principal attributed the discrepancy to inherent differences between the two groups of students [ai].

Table 3. Student Satisfaction with the EHS Freshman Academy: 2001-02 and 2002-03.

Survey Items	Percent Agreeing	
	2001-2002	2002-2003
I am satisfied with the Freshman Academy.	58.0	74.2
I feel fortunate to be in the Freshman Academy.	56.9	73.2

A majority of survey respondents liked key features of the freshman academy, including the field trips, teacher collaboration, and having a separate space. Again 2002-03 respondents tended to be more positive than 2001-02 respondents.

Table 4. Student Satisfaction with Selected EHS Freshman Academy Components: 2001-02 and 2002-03.

Freshman Academy Components <i>I liked...</i>	Percent Agreeing	
	2001-02	2002-03
Field trips	79.4	88.0
Having teachers coordinate lessons and assignments	NA	81.6
Having a core group of teachers who work together and are involved with each student	69.6	79.4
Having a separate hall for 9 th graders	59.5	73.5

Students had two principal recommendations for making the academy better: improve the cleanliness and functionality of bathrooms, and provide more career-path activities. About half of the survey respondents wished for more opportunities to participate in

clubs and other extracurricular activities. A minority of students wanted more challenging courses and a mentor or advisor they could meet with regularly.

Teacher Satisfaction

Overall, teachers were pleased with the Freshman Academy. In particular, they appreciated the professional benefits of collaborating with other teachers and having a reduced caseload with two preparatory periods. Team collaboration allowed teachers to learn from each other, receive professional support, know students better and support students' progress as a team.

One of the academy's most cited consequences was improved morale among teachers. This alone made the reforms and hard work "worth it," according to one top administrator [ai]. In interviews, teachers attributed their strong morale to resource allocations that permitted them two prep periods per day and a student load of 120 instead of the traditional 150 or more. Teaching 30 fewer students and one fewer class period per day allowed teachers to accomplish more creative activities and tailor their instruction to the individuals in their classrooms. Teachers reported that they had time and energy to develop new curricula, to integrate instruction, to attend to students' individual concerns and to do innovative activities with parents [ti, tr]

The main complaint voiced by teachers was team impurity which, they said, compromised the amount and quality of collaboration they could accomplish.

Teachers reported feeling well supported by the school's administration. They appreciated that the freshman academy director attended one to two meetings per team each week. They said the academy director was an important liaison with the school administration and provided critical support for parent conferences and student discipline.

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.⁶ 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

⁶ 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.

expectations simultaneously, their likelihood of making academic gains increases.⁷ They are also less likely to drop out.⁸

Eldorado administrators theorized that they could prevent ninth graders from dropping out by enhancing school climate. In their words, they aimed to ease students' transition into high school, improve students' sense of belonging, personalize students' educational experience, and build students' academic skills and self-confidence.

School Climate refers to the overall culture, mood, attitudes and expectations in a school. The APS Small Learning Communities Program Evaluation studied the following dimensions of school climate (Related EHS goals are in parentheses):

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

Results from student surveys, student focus groups, teacher interviews and team reports suggest that Eldorado's freshman academy eased students' transition to high school, provided a safe and supportive environment, raised student visibility, and held students to high academic standards. Further, it appears that the freshman academy elements of teaming and interdisciplinary instruction improved students' engagement at school. On the other hand, evaluation findings indicate that many ninth graders did not develop a sense of belonging or attachment to Eldorado High School. Students also reported mediocre levels of peer respect, collaboration and support for academic work. Key findings are described in detail in the paragraphs below.

Smooth Transition to High School

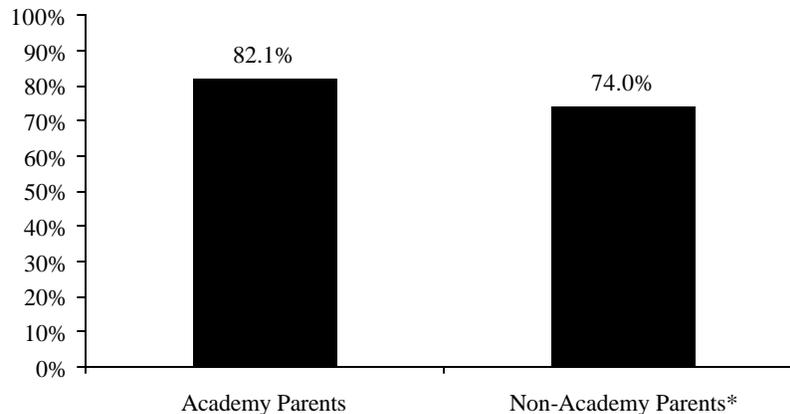
Results from surveys and interviews of students, teachers and parents suggest that Eldorado's freshman academy helped students make a smooth transition from middle school to high school. Three-quarters (74%) of students surveyed said the academy eased their transition to high school [ss]. In focus group interviews students confirmed this,

⁷ Lee, VE, et.al. (1999) Social Support, Academic Press, and Student Achievement: A View from the Middle Grades in Chicago, p. 2.

⁸ 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.

adding that the transition into high school was easier than had been their transition into middle school [sfg]. Most freshman academy parents surveyed in the spring of 2002 agreed that their student’s transition from middle school to high school was positive and successful. They were more likely to agree than were parents of students who had experienced ninth grade at Eldorado without freshman academy teams⁹ [qed].

Figure 2. Percent of 2001-02 EHS Parents Agreeing That Their Child’s Transition to High School Was Positive & Successful: Academy Compared to Non-Academy.



Students and teachers both reported that the consistency in rules and procedures across classes, made possible through teacher teaming, smoothed students’ transition to high school [sfg, ti].¹⁰ They also said that having a separate building and classes just for 9th graders created an instantly secure and familiar social environment, as evidenced in the following student comments:

“You’re not put in a place where you haven’t seen these people since first grade. You’re put in a place where you know most of the people and you’re meeting new people.”
“Socially it was a really easy transition...and you end up having a lot more friends.” [sfg]

For students who were new to the district, the team structure provided an immediate community, as explained by one teacher:

“I must have had 5 kids move in the middle of the year from out of town. I think this was great for them in their transition. Because there was this whole community already established and they just dropped into it, they didn’t have to develop their own circle; it was in place.” [ti]

⁹ * RDA compared responses from parents of ninth grade students and parents of upper-class students. A fraction of upper-class students had been on freshman academy teams in their ninth grade year.

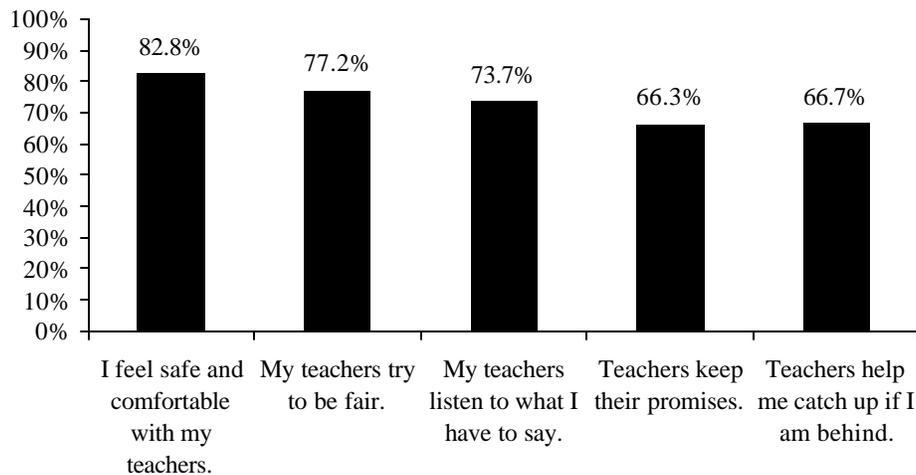
¹⁰ Confirmed by external evaluation conducted Spring 2003, documented in SLC Site Report 2002, Abt Associates, Inc.

Teacher Trust

Student survey and focus group results indicate that the 2002-03 freshman academy fostered trusting relationships between students and their teachers.

- A majority of ninth grade survey respondents in the spring of 2003 said that they felt safe and comfortable with their teachers, and that teachers were fair and listened to students.
- About two-thirds of 2002-03 ninth graders reported that teachers kept their promises and helped them catch up if they got behind in their schoolwork.
- Eldorado ninth graders reported significantly higher levels of trust in their teachers compared to the other four APS academies studied in 2002-03 ($F = 17.595$, $p < .0001$).

Figure 3. Percent 2002-03 EHS Ninth Graders Reporting Trust in Teachers.



Students described a warm relationship with their teachers that involved playful humor and mutual trust and respect. Being able to tease their teachers made students feel trusted and humanized their view of teachers [sfg]. An outside evaluation confirmed these findings and added that students were more likely to get counseling from their teachers than from the guidance counselors.¹¹ Teachers attributed these findings partly to the academy's team structure, which helped them develop and provide consistent classroom rules and standards.

Fewer students in Eldorado's 2001-02 academy expressed trust of teachers compared to 2002-03 academy students. This may be related to teacher reports that the consistency with which they implemented and enforced team and school policies increased from 2001-02 to 2002-03, as they gained more experience working as teams [tr].

⁹ Student focus group conducted Spring 2003, documented in SLC Site Report 2002, Abt Associates, Inc.

Adult Connection

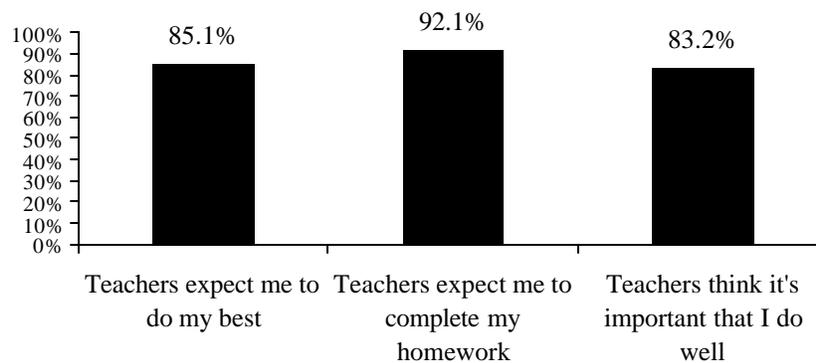
About two-thirds of Eldorado’s ninth graders surveyed in 2001-02 and 2002-03 said they knew at least one adult in the school who they would go to for help, advice or support if they needed it. However almost half said they did not have an adult at school with whom they would share their problems. This finding may signal a need for Eldorado administrators to establish formal opportunities for teachers to mentor or advise designated groups of ninth graders.

High Academic Expectations

Academy students reported experiencing high academic expectations in both 2001-02 and 2002-03. In 2002-03, the vast majority of survey respondents said teachers:

- expected students to complete homework every night (92%);
- expected students to do their best all the time (85%); and
- thought it was important that students do well (83%).

Figure 4. Percent 2002-2003 EHS Ninth Graders Reporting High Academic Expectations.



Eldorado ninth graders were significantly more likely than ninth graders at other high schools to report high academic expectations in 2002-03 ($p < .05$)¹². Students in one focus group explained that their freshman year was more challenging than middle school, with lots of homework, research papers and essays, but not necessarily more difficult [sfg].

Parents of freshman academy students also were more likely than parents of upper-class students to report that the school held high expectations for academic achievement (89% compared to 77%) [qed].

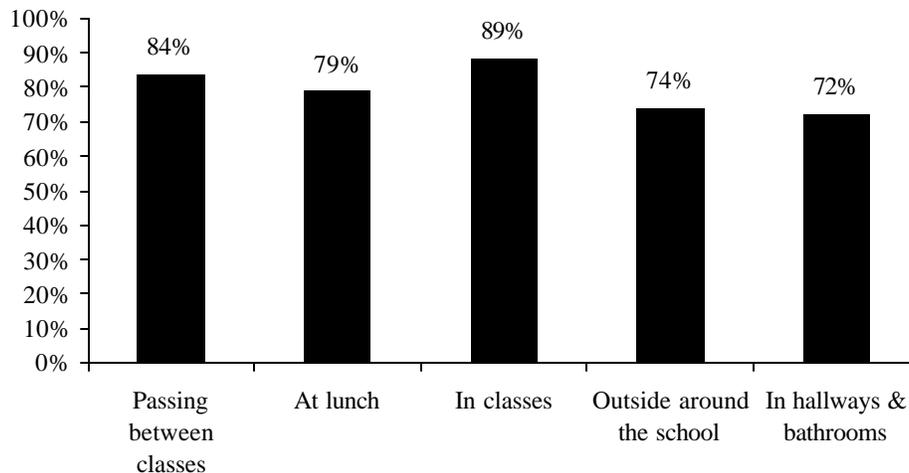
Sense of Safety

Small learning communities aim to foster safety and security by creating micro-environments in which students are well known and supported. When students feel safe they are more able to focus on learning. Eldorado ninth graders reported a high level of safety in both 2001-02 and 2002-03, particularly within the freshman academy building

¹² A “p-value” of less than .05 provides confidence that the differences between groups were real rather than due to chance.

and classrooms. Fewer students, but still a majority, felt completely safe outside around the school and in the school's bathrooms and hallways.

Figure 5. Percent 2002-2003 EHS Ninth Graders Reporting Sense of Safety.



In spite of Eldorado's vast, college-like campus, freshmen felt significantly safer than ninth graders in the other four freshman academies studied in 2002-03.¹³ Students explained that the separate and shared freshman academy space helped them build social connections which created a feeling of security. One student said he felt safe because "It's kind of like everyone's there [in the same building]. You're never without someone. You're always with a friend." [sfg]. In other words, increased student visibility enhanced students' sense of safety.

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.

Student survey results indicate that the freshman academy was relatively successful at making students feel known, but not as successful at making students feel recognized for their efforts (Figure 6). Slightly fewer than two-thirds of ninth graders surveyed in the spring of 2003 thought most people at school knew who they were. One teacher emphasized that the separate ninth grade building helped students know each other better than ninth graders had in prior years.

"From my observation as an adult, it seems that they've gotten to know each other a whole lot better than being dispersed over all the different classes and all over campus... In previous years, they would come to the English/Humanities building

¹³ F = 9.094, p < .0001 (2002-03 results)

and be in one class with one set of kids and they often didn't know each other's names." [ti]

Students said teachers took a personal interest in them. Most said at least one teacher knew their interests and talents and just over half thought at least two teachers did (see Figure 6). When asked why they liked their school, students explained that teachers got to know them in personal ways and gave them opportunities to share non-academic aspects of themselves, as illustrated in the following comments:

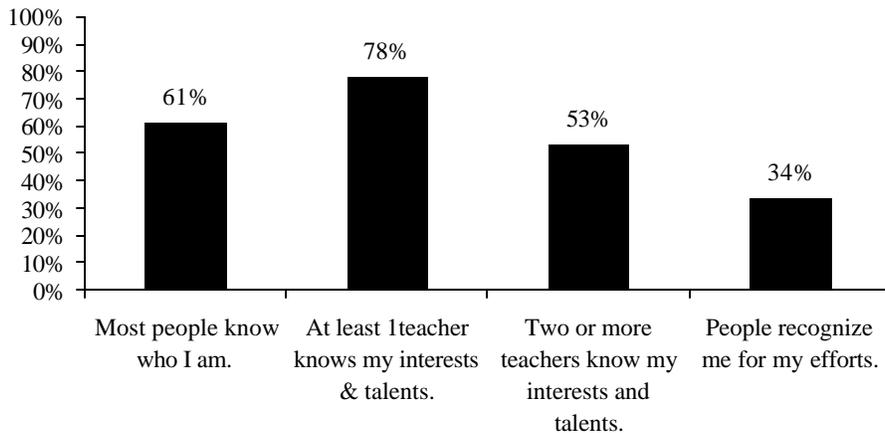
"I think it's the teachers, because they really, they improved a lot from middle school."

"They're more personal about it. They kind of get to know you."

"It's nice to know that they're thinking about you after class and that they talk with the other teachers to find out more about you." [sfg]

"If you're on a sports team you can ask people to come to your events. Teachers will come and you'll be able to talk about that in class and that will get people to know you better: like you're an athletic person." [sfg]

Figure 6. Percent 2002-2003 EHS Ninth Graders Reporting Visibility.



Teachers said the lighter student caseload, extra preparatory period, shared space and common planning time helped them get to know their students better and gave them more time to acknowledge and recognize individual students. Teachers shared information with team members as a way of enhancing their understanding of individual students. All teams organized social events and at least one field trip. They greeted students in the hallways during passing periods, displayed student work in the classroom, and celebrated individual student accomplishments [rs]. One team recognized every student's birthday, attended many of their students' athletic events, drama performances and musical concerts, and used parent postcards and student certificates to acknowledge the progress of four students each month [tr]. A teacher used the following example to illustrate the extra attention given to acknowledging and making contact with students:

“One of the things that the English teacher is really focusing on is making the kids make eye contact with the teachers in the halls and during passing periods at different times. We’re all out in the halls. And if they pass us, they have to make eye contact and they have to speak. We can identify the kids in the halls and talk to them and speak to them...they can’t just walk down the hall and be anonymous...because we know the kids...and a lot of them have their lockers right around our classrooms.” [ti]

Some students and teachers described specific activities that helped students get to know each other, cultivating team spirit and visibility of individual talents. One was a poetry coffee house in which a health-challenged, shy and quiet student was able to share his skills on the guitar. The teacher described it thus:

“He went from just sort of being this wall-flower kid that not too many people knew, to being very admired. We didn’t even know -- none of the teachers, none of the kids, nobody knew -- how talented this kid was, and how important and huge it was for him to perform in front of his peers... The other students were also made more aware of this kid’s diabetes. When he comes up and asks to go to the nurse, my students will say, ‘do you want me to follow him and make sure he gets there?’ and so on. None of the students would have been so protective, had they not been made very aware of this kid through his ability to do this big thing in these poetry coffee houses.” [ti]

Sense of Belonging & School Attachment

One of Eldorado’s main goals in establishing the freshman academy was to increase students’ sense of belonging to school. National research has linked higher levels of school attachment to reductions in student violence and substance use as well as improvements in academic performance.¹⁴ Results from surveys, interviews and focus groups indicate that Eldorado’s freshman academy cultivated a sense of community and belonging for many students but not all.

As a whole, Eldorado’s ninth graders reported moderate levels of school attachment.

- Almost two-thirds of students surveyed in both 2001-02 and 2002-03 reported they felt a sense of belonging to Eldorado’s freshman academy [ss].
- About half the survey respondents said that they felt close to people at school (57.7%), were happy to be at their school (53.9%), and felt part of their school (45.9%).¹⁵
- Eldorado responses generally mirrored responses from a national sample.¹⁶

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ School attachment items were included in the Spring 2003 survey only.

¹⁶ 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.

Many students felt that the academy fostered a sense of family and community, as evidenced in the following student discussion:

“It makes it feel kind more like a family, because it’s like you all know each other because you see pretty much the same kids the whole year and everything, so you know everyone.”

“Yeah, you get closer. You get better friends.”

“You get to know people a lot better because you don’t just see them for one class. You may see them for three classes out of the day, instead of just one. Plus you usually have the same lunch, and it just makes it a lot easier, and you’re more a part of everything because you know people better.” [sfg]

The academy may have benefited shy and quiet students the most, helping them develop relationships with other students. One teacher explained:

“I think those kids that are shy and quiet and tend to get lost, I think the academy was really good for them. I can think of real specific kids -- really quiet, real retiring -- I did see that they were interacting with kids, and I suspect if they had just been moving from class to class of different kids all the time throughout the year, across the campus, I really think they would have been lost in terms of developing relationships.” [ti]

School and Academic Engagement

Findings from the student survey, interviews and teaching team reports indicate that Eldorado’s freshman academy impacted teacher practice and ultimately enhanced students’ engagement in learning.

Students interviewed in a spring 2003 focus group used the word “fun” repeatedly to describe their school experience and to distinguish it from “regular school”. They credited their teachers for working together to organize activities like community service projects, field trips, poetry-coffee houses and ice cream socials [sfg]. Students expressed enthusiasm about academic projects that integrated curricula from multiple content areas and flowed across multiple class periods. They gave examples of a World’s Fair project that used 3 class periods, and a civil rights theme that was addressed in Geography and English [sfg].

According to structured interviews with each team, the frequency, breadth and depth of interdisciplinary activity varied greatly by team. All academy teachers reported referencing content addressed in other subject areas to some degree. However, one team delivered 7 major interdisciplinary units during the first semester of 2002-03 (high level of interdisciplinary activity), while two teams did one or two formal units (medium) and one team did no formal units (low).

Evaluation findings suggest a direct relationship between interdisciplinary activity and student engagement. As shown in Table 5, higher levels of interdisciplinary practice were associated with higher levels of student engagement. Students on those teams were more

likely to say they looked forward to class and school and more likely to say they were interested in their schoolwork. The lowest level of interdisciplinary practice was associated with the lowest level of engagement.

Table 5. Association between Level of Interdisciplinary Activity and Student Reports of School and Academic Engagement

Interdisciplinary Activity Level	School & Academic Engagement (Mean)
Low	2.30
Medium	2.43
High	2.56

Confirming this finding, teachers reported visible “night and day” differences in the attitudes and participation of students on different teams. Students on teams with high levels of interdisciplinary activity, they said, were more highly involved in school, as demonstrated by the number of students running for school senate. These students also appeared more engaged and enthusiastic about learning and demanded creative assignments. [ti].

The link between interdisciplinary activity and student engagement is important for at least two reasons. First, it highlights the importance of interdisciplinary activity as a strategy for enhancing student engagement, which was shown to be mediocre overall among Eldorado freshmen. Secondly, it substantiates arguments for continuing to invest in dual preparatory periods and teacher skills development.

Student Performance

Findings from the APS Student Information System, student focus groups and teacher interviews suggest that the freshman academy achieved the following student performance outcomes:

- reduced ninth grade dropout,
- supported academic growth,
- increased the proportion of students earning enough credits to pass to the tenth grade,
- improved student attendance, and
- improved student conduct.

School staff attributed these gains to SLC reforms. In particular, they credited teacher teaming, interdisciplinary instruction, smaller caseloads, and increased contact between staff and students promoted by sharing a common space. The following paragraphs describe student performance results in detail.

Dropout

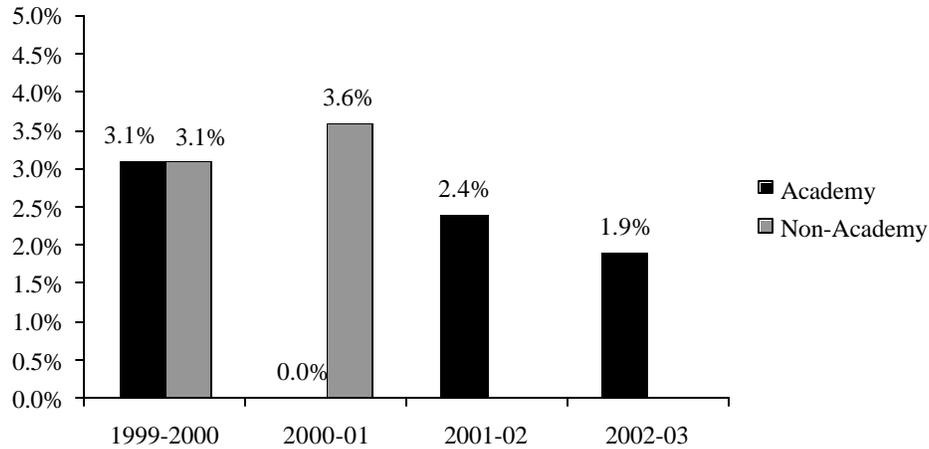
School withdrawal records between 1999-2000 and 2002-2003 suggest that the freshman academy decreased the number of students dropping out of school.

- Academy students were less likely to drop out of 9th grade than non-academy students during the 2000-2001 school year. No academy student dropped out, while 14 (3.6%) non-academy ninth graders did.¹⁷
- The proportion of freshman academy students leaving school declined in a relatively consistent pattern, from 3.1% in 1999-2000 to 1.9% in 2002-2003.¹⁸

¹⁷ 2000-01 was the only year that provided a good opportunity to compare academy and non-academy students. The academy advantage remained even when special education students, who were underrepresented in the academy sample, were excluded from analysis.

¹⁸ 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 3.35% 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.

Figure 7. Ninth Grade Dropout at EHS, 1999-2000 to 2002-2003: Freshman Academy Compared to Non-Academy.



Lower dropout rates may have been fueled by higher levels of teacher trust, student engagement and visibility. One teacher said her teaching team prevented multiple students from dropping out. She theorized that the students stayed in school because they were given personal attention from the whole team of teachers. She illustrated her point with the following example:

“There was a girl who was basically dropping out, I mean she wasn’t coming to class, she was ditching all the time, failing all of our classes. And just by each one of us coming and talking to her and saying, ‘look, we need you to come here, we need you to do this and this, we need to know what’s wrong so we can help you out,’ she’s turned around. She’s got a B in my class, I know she’s passing Health and Biology and she’s got an A in English. And there are others that aren’t so obvious, but that one stands right out.” [ti]

Academic Performance

The ultimate goal of small learning communities is to facilitate student learning and academic success. Both students and teachers said the interdisciplinary approach to teaching helped students understand material better and learn and retain more information. One teacher explained:

“Students are getting a lot more out of my program than they would have before. It seems like I’m not working as hard to present ten times more information, because it’s sticking with them more.” [ti]

Students interviewed in a focus group agreed:

“If you’re in Biology and they’re teaching you about like a disease and then you go to English and you actually read the background of the disease, it helps you understand more about it.”

“Or literature on how it affected people’s lives. Not only what the disease did to the people but then how it actually affected the culture and how the people reacted to it.” [sfg]

When asked if grades had improved as a result of interdisciplinary instruction, one student quickly agreed, and gave the following explanation:

“You learn twice as much as you would in the one class. I think more sinks into you so when you’re back in the original class you’re like, I know that, but she’s not the one that told me but I know that from this.” [sfg]

Qualitative findings indicate that the academy helped students improve their academic performance, however the lack of comparison groups makes it difficult to quantify the impact on student grades and test scores. One teacher said grades were better “without a doubt,” and illustrated this point with the following evidence:

“I probably have 4 or 5 that are failing. And that’s across the 120 students. I mean it’s not 4 or 5 out of each class anymore. I may have one algebra student that’s failing but it’s mainly in pre-algebra, the lower performing group, and in a normal pre-algebra class, that used to be 17, 18, 19 percent of the class would be failing.” [ti]

Another teacher explained how the smaller student-teacher ratio gave her time to focus on individual students and reinforce their academic successes:

“I had one little girl whose grades were really, really low at the beginning of the year. And as she improved I made a big deal out of that, about how well she was doing. And you could just see her brighten up every time. Because she had a low, low F and she pulled it up to a C. It was a big deal.” [ti]

Teachers did not expect the impacts of interdisciplinary instruction to be reflected in test scores, and they were correct. Eldorado's average freshman scores and growth rates on the state-mandated standardized TerraNova exam did not appear to increase as the freshman academy developed and expanded.

- Academy and non-academy ninth graders showed similar 8th to 9th grade growth rates on the math, reading and science portions of the TerraNova-CAT exam.¹⁹
- The percentage of 2002-03 academy students scoring at or above the 40th percentile on the TerraNova-CAT exam in 8th grade stayed the same in 9th grade (83%).

Given the school's historically high level of performance, the apparent lack of impact on standardized achievement scores should not be interpreted as surprising or troublesome. High performing students have less room for growth than lower performing students. The majority of ninth graders entered Eldorado High School with above-average scores and by the end of ninth grade they still had above-average scores.

Ninth Grade Completion

Data indicate that the freshman academy helped students earn enough credits to pass to the tenth grade. This is critical because research has shown that students who have to repeat a grade level are more likely to drop out of school.²⁰

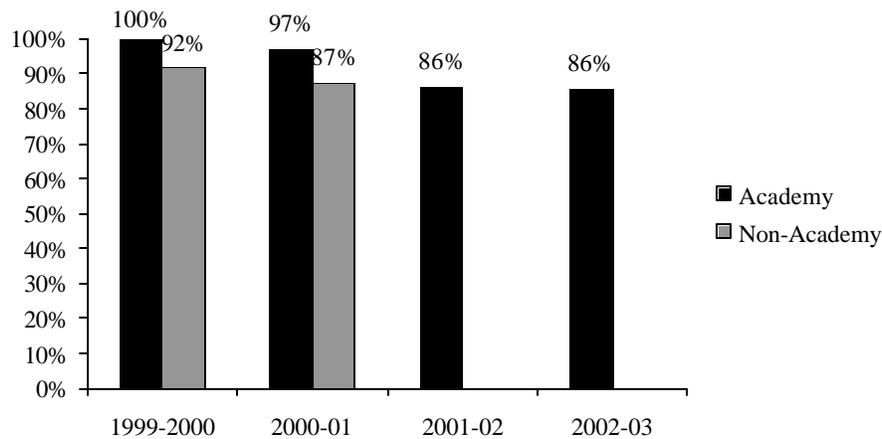
- Academy students were more likely than non-academy students to earn enough credits to pass to the 10th grade during the 2000-01 school year. 97% of academy students earned 5 or more credits, compared to 87% of regular students.²¹
- Majorities of Eldorado ninth graders completed enough credits to pass onto the tenth grade in all four years studied. The apparent decline in ninth grade completion rates, from 1999-2000 to 2001-02 and 2002-03, may be due in part to successes in preventing low performing students from dropping out.

¹⁹ 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 ninth graders only, since these were the only 2 years in which EHS had both academy and non-academy ninth graders. Differences were statistically insignificant.

²⁰ Thompson, CL & Cunningham, EK (2000). *Retention and Social Promotion: Research and Implications for Policy*. ERIC Digest Number 161.

²¹ 2000-01 was the only year that provided a good opportunity to compare academy and non-academy students. The academy advantage remained even when special education students, who were underrepresented in the academy sample, were excluded from analysis, and when the effects of previous academic performance (8th grade TerraNova scores) were controlled.

Figure 8. Percent EHS Students Earning Enough Credits to Pass to 10th Grade by Year: Academy Compared to Non-Academy.



Attendance

Eldorado’s ninth graders had an average attendance rate of 95.5% in 2002-03. This compared very favorably to other APS high schools, and exceeded the New Mexico state standard by 1.5 percentage points.

Students and teachers agreed that teacher collaboration and having a shared space for ninth grade classes improved attendance. Students said they were less likely to be tardy because their classes were located close to one another and close to their lockers. They also said that teachers worked together to quickly identify and find students who skipped class [sfg, tr]. One teacher explained how this worked:

“Since we’re all in the same area, you can’t go to English class and then ditch my class, because I’ve already seen you. So ditching becomes less of an issue. There are still people that skip out, but they’re easier to catch now. Because I’ll see Arthur in a class, and I go up to Arthur and say, ‘hey Arthur, where were you?’ Well he was either sick or he was ditching. If he’s ditching then I catch him right away.” [ti]

Student Conduct

Teachers reported that they experienced a reduction in behavioral problems and made fewer disciplinary referrals to the main office. They attributed this to the teaching team structure, which (1) provided consistent and clear expectations and rules, (2) identified problem patterns more quickly than one teacher could identify alone, and (3) amplified students’ sense of accountability [tr].

Facilitators and Constraints to Success

Facilitators of Success

A range of factors facilitated the successful implementation of Eldorado High School's freshman academy. These included the following:

Separate Space

The separate freshman academy building fostered a sense of safety, community and accountability among ninth graders. Staff and students saw each other frequently throughout the school day, and teachers could easily communicate and collaborate with team members. Students and teachers also said having a separate space improved class attendance.

Two Preparatory Periods

Academy teachers had a common preparatory period for team collaboration, in addition to their individual preparatory period. The extra preparatory period almost guaranteed that all academy teachers had scheduled time for meeting and collaborating with other team members. Other APS academies scheduled the one union-mandated preparatory period at a common time for all teachers on a team, but they could not mandate how teachers used this time. Eldorado forbade teachers from "selling" their extra preparatory period and provided specific expectations for teachers to meet regularly. The extra preparatory period thereby was credited with increasing the amount of instructional collaboration and innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, parent contact, student support and extracurricular activity that teachers were able to provide and decreasing the number of disciplinary problems.

Team Purity

Most students in 2002-03 were on pure teams, meaning that all teachers on the team shared the same students, with minor exceptions. Team purity facilitated teacher collaboration and maximized the number of students who benefited from that collaboration.

Teacher Skill and Comfort with Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Teachers' skill and comfort with instructional collaboration, as well as teachers' interest in "going the extra mile" determined the degree to which teachers used their common planning time to create interdisciplinary curricula and coordinate extracurricular activities. Further, teams seemed to need a critical mass of teachers with skills, comfort and interest. One teacher's enthusiasm was not enough to propel other, more reticent, team members into interdisciplinary action [ti].

Leadership Commitment to the SLC Concept

Eldorado's current and former principals, as well as the current and former SLC program directors, provided strong leadership for the formation and expansion of the freshman academy.

Continuity in Teaching Team Composition

At least 2 teams noted the importance of time in establishing team routines, consistency, teamwork and efficiency. Teachers noted that they'd become much more effective in their second year of teaming, and they argued that having consistency in team members across years was important. This may explain the relative strength of 2002-03 student attitude and climate results compared to 2001-02. At the same time, the fact that the Geography and Health teachers served on two different teams allowed them to carry information and ideas from one team to another.

Constraints to Success

Constraints to achieving greater success in Eldorado's freshman academy centered around scheduling and resources, which were challenges in every small learning community studied by the APS SLC program evaluation.

Scheduling

Scheduling all ninth graders onto teams presented serious challenges each year. Eldorado tried a number of different strategies but still had not developed a satisfactory solution by the end of the 2002-03 school year.

Insufficient Resources

Eldorado did not have enough resources to hire the number of teachers needed for placing all incoming freshmen onto pure teams. In a few cases, the school needed academy teachers to teacher upper-level classes. This prevented those teachers from participating fully in team meetings, parent conferences, and other team activities.

Conclusions

Eldorado High School implemented key components of the research-based small learning community model and achieved many of its freshman academy goals. Evaluation findings suggest that the freshman academy strengthened an already high achieving school, providing students with a smooth transition into high school, a safe and supportive environment, heightened visibility, high academic expectations and increased parent involvement. Teaming strengthened teachers' morale, self-confidence and sense of support and reduced isolation and burnout. Student dropout rates declined and both test scores and attendance rates remained high. Students and teachers also professed significant improvements in students' knowledge acquisition, application and retention.

One of the evaluation's most significant findings was that the academy structure increased instructional innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration, and that this, in turn, was associated with an increase in students' school and academic engagement. Teaming was a source of ongoing professional development and innovation. Teachers learned from each other and received support for attempts to implement new instructional and assessment strategies.

The evaluation also highlighted weak spots in Eldorado's efforts to personalize education for all ninth grade students. One-third of ninth graders did not develop a sense of belonging to Eldorado High School. Almost half said they did not have an adult at school with whom they would share their problems. These findings may signal a need for the academy to expand team-building activities and establish formal mentoring or advisory relationships between teachers and students.

Factors supporting the success of Eldorado's freshman academy included having a separate ninth grade building, giving teachers an extra preparatory period expressly for collaboration, scheduling that allowed a high degree of team purity, employing teachers who were skilled and comfortable with interdisciplinary collaboration, and the commitment of school leaders to the small learning community concept. Challenges to fully implementing the SLC concept included the difficulty of reconciling team schedules with the master schedule and resource constraints. By end of 2002-03 Eldorado's administration was still struggling to master these challenges, so not all students had pure teams and the full associated benefits of small learning communities.

Recommendations

This evaluation of Eldorado’s freshman academy demonstrates that schools can influence teaching and learning through structural reforms and resource allocations. At the same time, it is clear that students reap benefits only if teachers use these resources in intended ways. With this in mind, RDA offers the following recommendations:

1. Convene a teacher retreat at the start of the school year to set team goals and expectations and to allow “floating” Geography, Health and Special Education teachers to help establish team goals within both of their teams.
2. Set common expectations and goals to achieve more consistency across teams, for example a minimum number of field trips or a minimum number of interdisciplinary units. This could inspire teams to expand their interdisciplinary and extracurricular activities and also prevent the development of team reputations as the “good” or “bad” team.
3. Provide teaching teams with instructional coaching (from the academy director and/or counselor) to encourage the achievement of academy and team goals, to foster interdisciplinary innovation and collaboration, and to facilitate the sharing of ideas and practices across teams.
4. Provide more frequent informal recognition (pats on the back) of teacher efforts and accomplishments.²² Most of the extracurricular and highly innovative activities were orchestrated by teachers who put in extra time and went beyond minimum expectations. These efforts are most likely to continue in the context of acknowledgement and appreciation.
5. Maximize team purity – with all teachers on a team sharing the same students and the same preparatory periods -- so all students have same opportunity to experience the benefits of small learning communities.
6. Continue the two preparatory periods for all teachers in the academy.
7. Provide professional development in the design of integrated, interdisciplinary curricula and in collaborative practices.
8. Publicize the freshman academy so that parents and community members understand it and actively support it.

²² Teachers recommended against formal or public recognition to avoid fostering resentment or competition among other teachers.