

ALBUQUERQUE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Small Learning Communities Program Evaluation

West Mesa High School 2002-2003

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Debra Heath



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Executive Summary

West Mesa High School Freshman Academy 2002-2003 Small Learning Communities Program Evaluation Report

As part of a district-wide evaluation of small learning community reforms, Research, Development and Accountability (RDA) evaluated the implementation and preliminary outcomes of West Mesa High School's 2002-2003 freshman academy. West Mesa piloted the freshman academy with one team of four teachers and about 120 students. Students shared classes and teachers. Teachers met daily during a common preparatory period and collaborated in monitoring students, integrating curricula and providing academic and social support. School administrators hoped the academy would increase ninth graders' engagement and attachment to school and ultimately compel students to complete their high school education.

Despite enthusiastic reviews from students and staff, this evaluation found that West Mesa's implementation of the small learning community concept departed significantly from the research-based model:

- Academy instruction differed little from instruction in non-academy ninth grade classes, and was no more rigorous.
- The academy lacked a distinctive theme and curricular focus.
- Teachers did not have autonomy or flexibility for personalizing the academy's instructional agenda and methods.
- The academy did not have a separate space within the school for cultivating a physical sense of home, identity and community.

The evaluation revealed two important outcomes. Compared to their non-academy ninth grade counterparts, freshman academy students demonstrated:

1. Higher levels of social and academic support among peers.
 - Freshman academy students were more likely to report positive attitudes about homework, paying attention in class, attending class and getting good grades ($p < .01$).
 - Academy students were more likely to report mutual respect, caring about each other, collaborating, and getting along well together ($p < .05$).
2. Better attendance.
 - 81.6% of academy students met the state attendance standard of 94% compared to 58.5% of non-academy 9th graders.

Evaluation results suggest that during its pilot year the academy had little or no measurable impact on other aspects of school climate and student performance.

Recommendations include providing the freshman academy with: (1) more autonomy, (2) a common space, (3) frequent team meetings, (4) more SLC-related professional development opportunities, (5) instructional coaching, and (6) a 0.5 FTE administrator.

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 identifies the following ingredients as crucial for success:

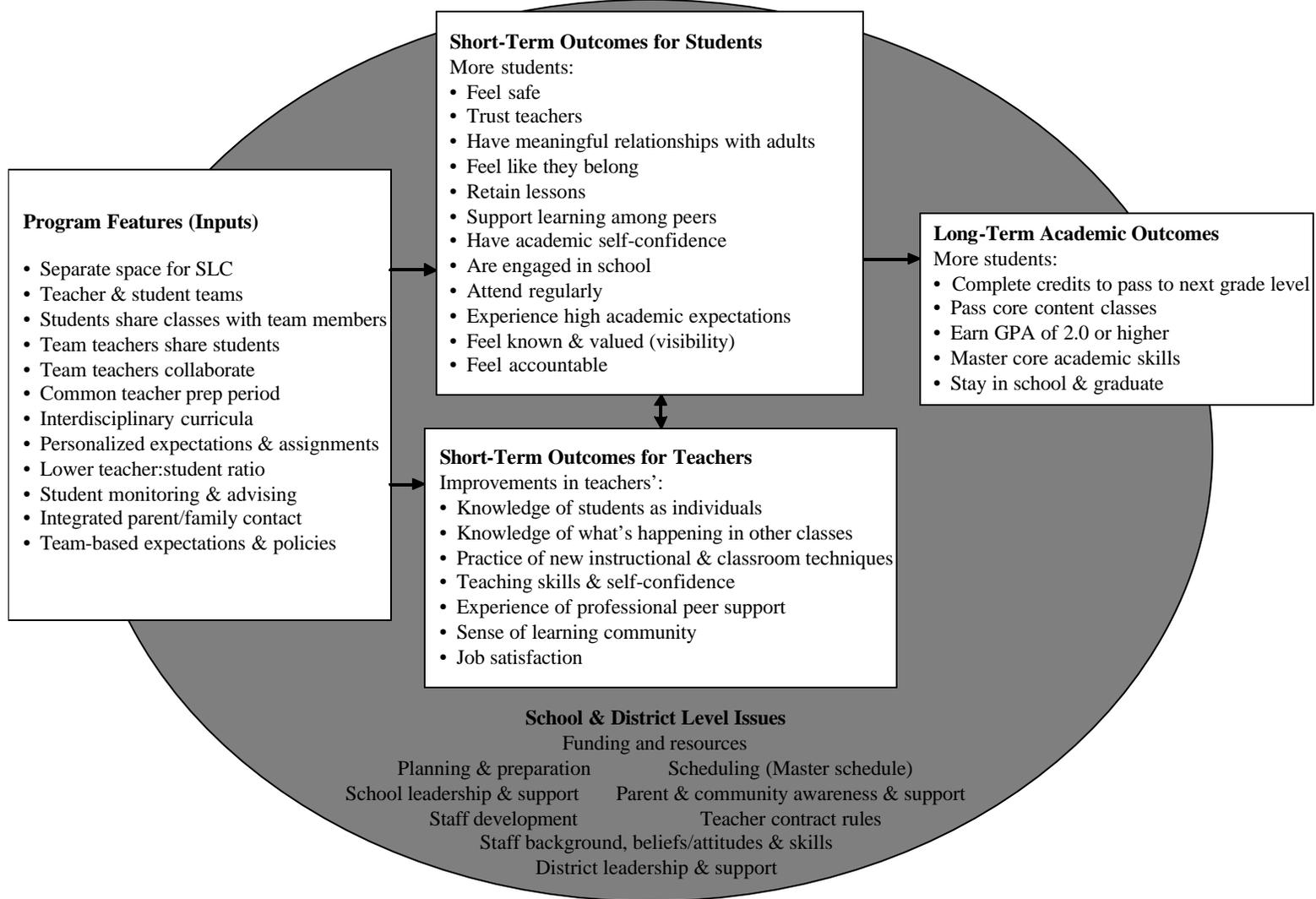
1. *Student and Teacher Teams*: Students and teachers are scheduled together in interdisciplinary teams.
2. *Teacher Collaboration and Integrated Curricula*: Teachers meet regularly to discuss students and plan integrated curricula during common preparatory periods.
3. *Separate Space*: SLC staff and students share a common space, separate from the rest of the school.
4. *Distinctive Thematic or Curricular Focus*: The SLC has a theme and/or curriculum that distinguishes it from the rest of the school.
5. *Autonomy and Flexibility*: The SLC has autonomy and the flexibility to adjust scheduling, curricula, budget, personnel, and other operational factors.

In the late fall of 2000, West Mesa High School was one of six Albuquerque Public School (APS) high schools that received three years of funding from the U.S. Department of Education to implement Small Learning Community reforms. West Mesa used its first two years of funding to support programs for high-risk students (BRNCOS and Nova Net). In the third year of funding, West Mesa launched a pilot freshman academy with one team of teachers and students. West Mesa administrators hoped the academy would bolster existing school-wide efforts to personalize education and thereby increase students' engagement and attachment to school. The ultimate goal was to compel the full range of students to complete their high school education.

Theory of Change

Figure 1 depicts APS' theory of change for small learning communities. 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 short-term 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 meant 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 APS Small Learning Community 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 West Mesa High School freshman academy, during its first year of implementation in 2002-2003.

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

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

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

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

Limitations

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

West Mesa High School piloted the freshman academy with one team of 120 ninth graders in the 2002-03 school year. This allowed RDA to compare academy student outcomes with non-academy student outcomes. The comparison group included only first-time freshmen, and excluded students enrolled in another team-based program called BRONCOS. One limitation to the comparisons of academy and non-academy student results is that the two groups of 9th graders were dissimilar both demographically and academically. Freshmen academy students entered high school with higher standardized test scores than non-academy 9th graders and were less likely to be English Language Learners and less likely to be in special education.¹ It is possible that these intrinsic differences were responsible for some of the evaluation's significant findings. It is also possible that differences between the two groups obscured real SLC effects. Employing a wide range of methods and gathering data from many different sources helped RDA triangulate and confirm findings.

¹ See Table 2.

Freshman Academy Program Implementation

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

Overall, this evaluation found that West Mesa's implementation of the small learning community concept deviated significantly from the research-based SLC model, despite enthusiastic reviews from students and staff. The most significant differences between an academy education and a non-academy education at West Mesa were structural: the grouping of students together in four classes and with four common teachers who shared a common meeting time, and the low pupil-teacher ratio. Teachers collaborated in monitoring students and providing individualized academic attention and some interdisciplinary lessons. Students and teachers came to know each other well and shared common experiences. Students received ample social and academic support.

For the most part, however, there was little that distinguished academy instruction from instruction in non-academy ninth grade classes. Interdisciplinary activity occurred infrequently and students complained about a lack of academic rigor and distinctiveness. The academy lacked a distinctive theme and curricular focus and did not have autonomy or flexibility for developing its own instructional agenda and methods. Nor did it have a separate space within the school for cultivating a physical sense of home and community. This evaluation found that the absence of these key SLC ingredients was a product of the academy's original design rather than a product of poorly implemented plans. As described later in this report, limited implementation produced predictably limited effects.

Academy Development

The West Mesa High School freshman academy was launched in the fall of 2002 with one team of 4 teachers and about 120 students, supported part-time by the Ninth Grade Dean of Students and one counselor. Academy students took their four core classes – English, Math, Science and Health – within the academy. A subset of students was enrolled in only 2 or 3 academy classes. To be included in this study, students must have been enrolled in 4 academy classes on the final day of the fall semester 2002. Ninety-five students met this criterion.

Table 1. WMHS Freshman Academy Program Features 2002 - 2003

Program Features	WMHS Freshman Academy
1 st Year of Operation	2002-2003
Total Student Enrollment 2002-03	95 (enrolled in all 4 academy classes on final day of the fall semester 2002)
Percent of Total Grade Level Enrollment	11%
# Teams	1
# Teachers per Team	4
# Prep Periods Per Day (common preps)	2 (1 common)
Teacher Caseload	95
SLC Administration & Support	Program Director (also 9 th Grade Dean) Counselor
Separate Space	No
Teacher Course Load	4 classes, 1-2 curricula per semester
Mentoring	Each teacher had primary responsibility for homeroom group of about 30 students.
Special Education Inclusion	A & B levels and Gifted

Student Body Profile

West Mesa selected academy students mainly through recommendations from 8th grade teachers. School officials aimed to create a representative sub-population of the larger incoming 9th grade class. Ethnically, academy students were similar to non-academy 9th graders. However the academy enrolled lower proportions of English-language-learners and special education students. Academy students also entered ninth grade as a relatively high achieving group compared to non-academy 9th graders (Table 2).

Table 2. Student Body Characteristics: Freshman Academy Compared to Non-Academy Ninth Graders.

	Freshman Academy	Non-Academy Freshmen
8 th Grade TerraNova Mean NCE	49	41
Percent Scoring At or Above 40 th Percentile on 8 th Grade TerraNova	61%	40%
Percent English Language Learners	12%	26%
Percent Special Education	5%	26%

Student and Teacher Teams

Ninety-five academy students shared the same four core content area teachers and one counselor. This meant that students shared classes with many of the same students throughout the school day and over the course of the school year. Each teacher taught four class periods per day but only 1 or 2 different curricula, which minimized his/her

preparatory load. Each teacher also served as the primary contact person for approximately 30 homeroom students [ti].

The four members of the academy's first teaching team self-selected, electing to work with each other. Even so, conflicts erupted among team members. Administrators brought in an APS Service Center mediator who helped resolve communication problems. Reflecting back over the year, the Ninth Grade Dean said the teachers "moved into the house before they framed it." As dean of the entire freshman class, she was not able to provide the level of attention and support that the nascent freshman academy required. One of the lessons she gleaned from the academy's pilot year was that new teams require regular support and guidance to help them develop effective structures and systems of working together [pdi]. Teachers reported that they relied on trial and error to develop their team structures and systems. They recommended providing professional development in teaming and interdisciplinary instruction for future academy teachers [ti].

Teacher Collaboration and Interdisciplinary Activity

Teachers had one individual preparatory period as well as one common preparatory period each day. Having two preparatory periods, one of which was scheduled at a common time, allowed the teachers to meet as a team on a daily basis without infringing on their individual class preparations.

Especially in the first half of the year, the teaching team devoted a large amount of time to building its team structure and operating procedures. The team maintained meeting records; student, teacher and parent commitment forms; behavior referral bulletins; a Choose to Be Responsible form for student self-evaluation and commitment; and student tracking forms. Team members had visited the freshman academy at Eldorado High School and had worked with an APS facilitator to develop team norms and a contract of responsibilities before the school year began. However, they said that most of their policies, procedures and rules evolved and changed over the course of the year, responding to needs and problems as they emerged. Overall, teachers said they spent the majority of their team meeting time monitoring student attendance, grades and behavior [ti].

Most freshman academy students experienced consistency and clarity in rules and expectations, reporting on the student survey that the rules for behavior were easy to learn and understand (72%) and were the same in all 4 academy classes (68%) [ss].

Two-thirds of survey respondents said they benefited from having a team of teachers who worked together to coordinate lessons and handle student concerns (67%). Students interviewed in a focus group confirmed and elaborated on this point:

"Our teachers – it's kind of cool because they can talk to us more on a personal level, because they can talk about us, because we have four of the same teachers and they kind of know us better."

“They have meetings like everyday, not every day, like every other day. And they’re always congregating.” “They know all their students on a more personal level.” [sfg]

Interdisciplinary Activity

Interdisciplinary activity in West Mesa’s freshman academy was limited, as is typical of first-year teaching teams.² Teachers reported that they found it difficult to carve out time for creating and implementing interdisciplinary projects. They described three interdisciplinary projects, two of which involved two teachers and one of which involved all four [ti]. Students responded with great enthusiasm and with a desire for more interdisciplinary experiences, as evidenced in the following focus group conversation:

“We just finished a big World’s Fair project, but we had to choose a country. And whatever country we did, for biology we had to get an organism that was from that country and we had to do research on it. And for English we had to do mythology of that country. And in math we had to do the currency of the country.”

“That was an awesome thing.”

“I think it should happen more often...It was really, really fun.” [sfg]

About half of the student survey respondents (51%) reported that their academy teachers knew what was being taught in other classes and talked to them about how the lessons connected. Students explained, in focus groups, that their team teachers provided many hands-on activities that made learning fun and productive. They also said teachers made references to each other’s lessons, adding content, reinforcing concepts and enhancing their relevance [sfg]. Additional years of team collaboration would likely expand the frequency, range and depth of interdisciplinary activity.

Separate Space

Small learning communities that have a common space for their activities, separate from the rest of the school, enable teachers and students to create a home within the larger school and to interact on an ongoing basis. Having a separate space fosters teacher collaboration, a sense of community and a climate of academic and social support.

The West Mesa freshman academy did not have a common or separate space. Like other ninth grade classes, academy classrooms and lockers were scattered throughout the school. The lack of a separate space undercut efforts to create the climate and identity of a small learning community.

Distinctive Thematic or Curricular Focus

Small learning community research shows that SLC’s need a distinctive thematic or curricular focus in order to convey a clear sense of identity and purpose. Interviews with freshman academy teachers revealed intentions to create a distinctive sense of family

² See the APS Small Learning Communities Program Evaluation district-level report.

among students and teachers. Teachers made efforts to foster a unique academy identity by creating a team name (Equus) and logo, as well as by hosting team field trips and implementing thematic lessons [ti]. However, the freshman academy curriculum paralleled that of the larger 9th grade, and teachers received the same professional development as non-academy teachers. Students knew that they were part of an academy, but did not report any distinctiveness in instructional theme or curricular focus [sfg].

Autonomy and Flexibility

Autonomy was not a stated goal of the West Mesa High School freshman academy, however it is one of the key features of highly successful small learning communities. Autonomy and flexibility in the areas of budget, schedule, staffing, curriculum, leadership and governance, assessment and space maximize the ability of a SLC to “personalize” education to meet the particular needs of its student body, and to make changes throughout the year as needed. Most small learning communities take multiple years to develop autonomy.³

West Mesa administrators designed the freshman academy as one of many strategies to support the school’s “systems approach.” They did not intend the academy to be a separate or self-contained program. The school’s principal explained, “It was never like okay you guys do your thing and report back to us and we’ll decide whether we like you or not. They were always part of the staff, always part of everything else going on” [pdi 2002, 2003]. In other words, administrators never intended to give the freshman academy the autonomy or flexibility that research showed it would need in order to produce typical SLC outcomes.

The freshman academy was highly connected and accountable to the larger school. The Ninth Grade Dean of Students provided leadership under the direction of the high school principal and with input from the school’s Instructional Council. The academy’s budget, space and staffing, curricula, schedules and assessments were determined by the high school’s administration. Teachers had authority over more minor issues such as how they would collaborate, what kinds of events they would offer students over and above the regular 9th grade curriculum, and how they would communicate with parents.

Without the ability to tailor curricula, assessments, scheduling and other key educational components, freshman academy teachers had little opportunity to cultivate a true “small learning community” with its attendant benefits.

³ *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 three sections. The first section describes students' satisfaction with the freshman academy. Students provided their opinions about the freshman academy through a survey and a focus group, both administered in May 2003. The second section summarizes the academy's impacts on school climate and student attitudes. Results are drawn from a student survey, student focus group, and teaching team interviews. The third 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

Freshman academy students were moderately positive about the academy. Over half of the academy's survey respondents said they would recommend the academy to other students (59%). About two-thirds said being in the academy helped them make a smooth transition to high school (64%) [ss].

Students were most enthusiastic about the academy's field trips. Almost all survey respondents said they liked going on field trips as team (89%). Trips during the first semester included a visit to the Chicano Now art exhibit at the Hispanic Cultural Center and attendance at a play [ti]. Some students were extremely passionate about the field trips, as evidenced in the following exchange:

“Oh my gosh, the trips are fun!”

“The art one was awesome...I was actually paying attention because there were some beautiful paintings. Like you look at them and you can feel it. But the field trips, they're so fun. I wouldn't change anything about them.” [sfg]

Other students underscored the importance of conducting field trips as a team, explaining that it felt socially safe and also academically practical:

“Because you know everybody there. And you don't have to worry about missing class because all your teachers are there.”

“Yeah, that too, because if it wasn't like that we'd be worrying about trying to catch up with the classes that didn't go.” [sfg]

Students were least satisfied with the academic rigor of the freshman academy. They had expected the academy to be “more advanced” and to provide more opportunities for learning compared to the traditional curriculum. Students worried that they were behind other students at West Mesa and other schools in covering core curriculum content [sfg].

Student Attitudes & School Climate

The SLC theory of change expects reforms to impact student attitudes and school climate as intermediate steps toward improving student attendance and academic outcomes.

Research has shown that school climate has a profound impact on student attitudes and behavior. When students feel supported by their peers and teachers they gain motivation and self-confidence. A supportive environment also provides role models and psychological safety for academic success. When students experience social support and high academic expectations simultaneously, they are most likely to make academic gains.⁴ They are also less likely to drop out.⁵

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

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

Survey, focus group and interview findings suggest that the freshman academy increased the level of social and academic support that ninth graders experienced *from peers* at West Mesa High School. Comparisons with non-academy survey results suggest that the academy may have had little or no impact on other SLC short-term goals. Students reported receiving personal attention and support from teachers, for example, but no more than non-academy ninth graders. Nor did students feel more engaged at school or attached to school as a result of being in the academy. Furthermore, academy students did not report experiencing higher academic expectations than non-academy students. This was not surprising given West Mesa's limited implementation compared to the research-based model, and the fact that 2002-03 was the freshman academy's pilot year.

Peer Support for Academic Work

Results from the student survey suggest that the freshman academy improved West Mesa's weak climate of support for academic work among students. Freshman academy students reported a more supportive culture for academic work compared to the rest of the ninth grade ($p < .01$).⁶ They were more likely to report that a majority of their classmates thought it was important to do homework, pay attention in class, attend class

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

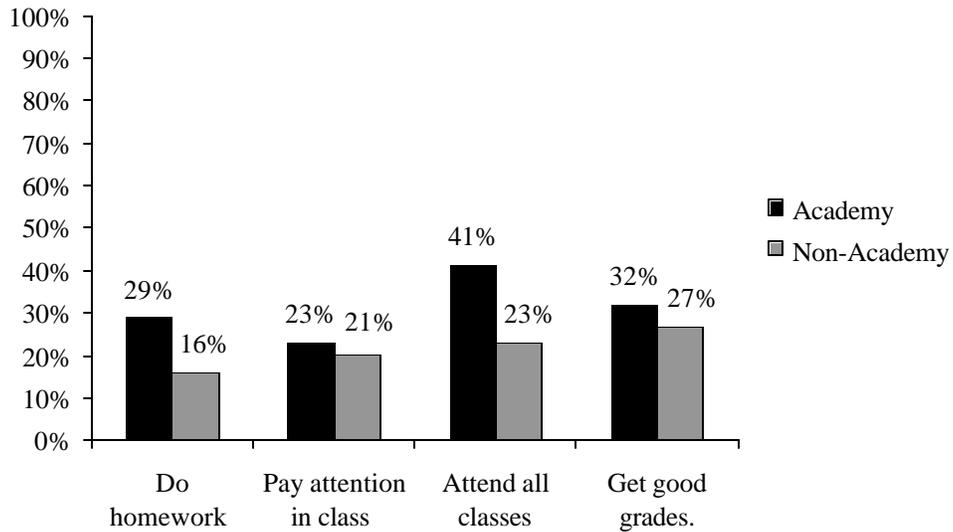
⁵ Darling-Hammond, L, et.al. (2002) Reinventing High School: Outcomes of the Coalition Campus Schools Project, *American Educational Research Journal*, 39(3), pp. 639-673.

⁶ A "p-value" of less than 0.05 provides confidence that the differences between groups were real rather than due to chance.

and get good grades (see Figure 2). Academy students also were more likely to say that their peers thought getting good grades was cool (38.3%) compared to non-academy 9th graders (27.2%). Nonetheless, both academy and non-academy reports of peer support for academic work were low. Cultivating a culture of support for academic work among students warrants additional attention.

Figure 2. Percent Ninth Graders Reporting Peer Support for Academic Work: Academy Compared to Non-Academy.

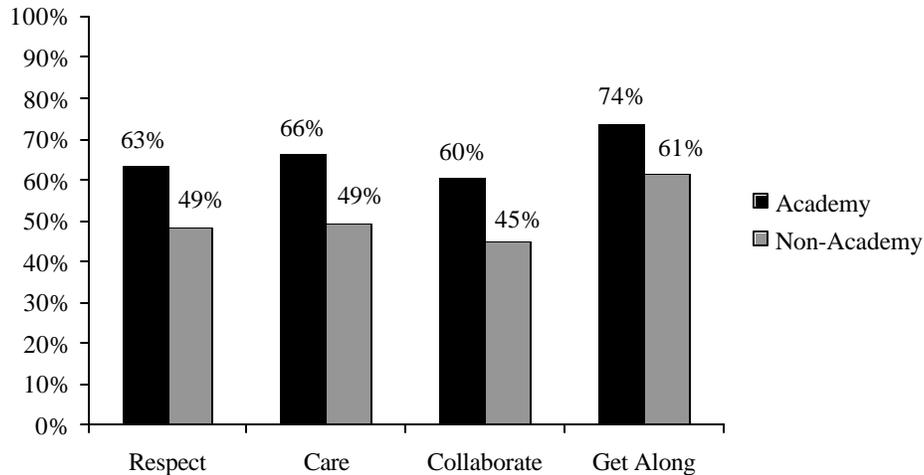
Most or All students think it's important to:



Peer Relations

Results from the student survey suggest that freshman academy students felt better about how students treated each other at school compared to non-academy 9th graders at West Mesa ($p < .05$).⁷ For example, academy students were more likely to report that most students treated each other with respect, cared about each other, collaborated to solve problems, and got along well together.

Figure 3. Percent 9th Graders Reporting Positive Peer Relations: Academy Compared to Non-Academy.



While most academy survey respondents did not consider the academy to be “like a family” (67% disagreed), they did agree that being in the academy helped them build strong friendships (65%) and social support. The following student comments illustrate this point:

“Everyone knows everyone in the academy.”

“The academy is good because I met a *lot* of new people. It’s an awesome thing. You’re never left out of activities. Like we go on a field trip and you’re never left out because you have friends there.”

“And if you notice someone’s left out you’re going to try to make them feel good. You’re not going to just leave them there.” [sfg]

⁷ All comparisons between freshman academy students and non-academy students exclude students enrolled in the BRONCOS program; these were high-risk students who received personalized team-based instruction.

Adult Connection, Personal Attention and Support

Students reported that one of the best things about being in the academy was getting personal attention from teachers, for both academic and personal issues. Students explained as follows:

“You can communicate with your teachers...They take time for each student, no matter what it is, even if it doesn’t have to do with work or anything.”

“Like if a student is struggling in one of their classes, if their behavior has shown some noticeable changes they’ll try to sit down with that student, or they’ll try to compensate for it. They’ll try to fix it.”

“They pay attention to every student. There’s not one student that they leave out. They keep an eye on all of us, pretty good.”

“She’s like if you don’t get it you better come after school. Until you get it. It kind of gets frustrating, like I don’t want to go, but then yet she bugs you, bugs you until you go. And that’s not bad.”

“If you miss a day she will give you notes and she will let you copy them down and she’ll give you whatever you missed and she’ll fill you in on everything.”
[sfg]

Almost all academy survey respondents said their academy teachers were available to them for tutoring if and when they needed it (80%). Two-thirds (66%) 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, non-academy freshmen reported the same level of adult connection (67%), indicating that the freshman academy had limited additional benefit [ss].

Teacher Trust

Survey and interview findings suggest that the freshman academy cultivated trust in teachers among many students but not a majority.

Academy students who were interviewed in a focus group setting characterized their teachers as helpful, caring, collaborative and open to students’ ideas, as evidenced in the following comments:

“They take your opinion. It’s really nice. The teachers are nice.”

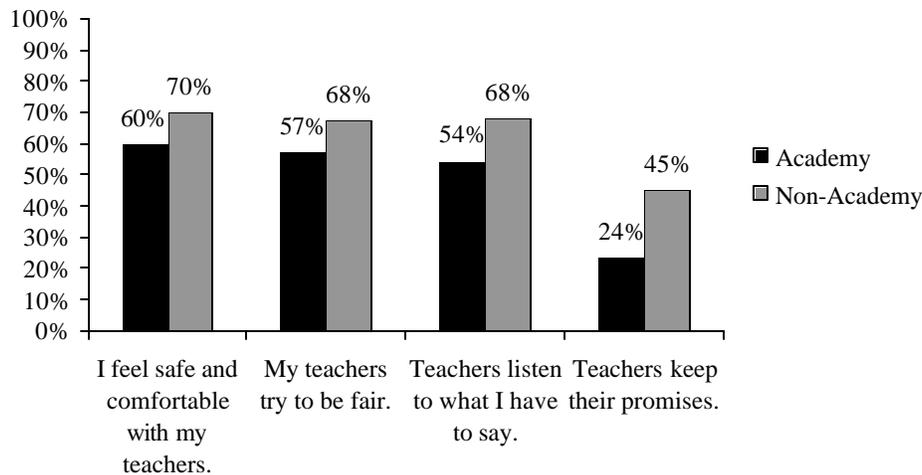
“If they can’t explain it, then they’ll get a teacher, like one of the academy teachers that *can* explain it to you. We have a one-on-one relationship with our teachers.”

“Like if you have a problem with one academy teacher and you want to work it out, you can, it’s cool, you can go to another teacher and then they’ll fix it.”

“They’re like our friends. But yet we take them serious.” [sfg]

On the other hand, survey results suggest that non-academy students were more likely than academy students to trust their teachers ($p < 0.05$). A higher proportion of non-academy students felt safe and comfortable with their teachers and said teachers kept their promises, were fair, and listened to what students' had to say.

Figure 4. Percent Ninth Graders Reporting Trust in Teachers: Academy Compared to Non-Academy.



Large proportions of ninth graders, both in the academy and outside it, expressed low levels of trust in their teachers. West Mesa could benefit from investigating the factors that promote trust and doing more to extend the experience of teacher trust to more students.

Academic Expectations, Engagement, Self-Confidence and Safety

Evaluation results indicate that the academy had little effect on students' experience of academic rigor, engagement in school, academic self-confidence and sense of safety during its pilot year. Academy survey respondents were just as likely as non-academy 9th graders to report that teachers expected them to reach high levels of academic performance.⁸ Students passionately critiqued the academy as being less academically challenging than they had expected and wanted. In particular, they worried that they were behind other 9th graders in addressing core English content, as depicted in this comment:

“Because if you compare ours to other people that are not in the academy...they’re doing more...and you’d expect us to be more advanced. Because when I look at my friend’s work – she shows me how they’re going – and they’re learning more than us.” “Especially English.” [sfg]

When asked what would make the academy better, focus group students said simply, “stronger discipline and harder work.” They explained that the academy teachers provided ample opportunities for learning and extra support when needed, and they

⁸ Both groups reported that teachers held relatively high expectations for their academic work.

volunteered that the student held ultimate responsibility for success. However, they requested stronger behavioral management and more rigorous academic standards.

“Like she’ll ask us, did you do this? She’ll be like I’m going to trust you that you did. And of course kids are going to say, oh I did it. Obviously you can’t trust a lot of kids.

“If there’s anything I would change about the academy is if we would learn more. Make it more challenging.” [sfg]

Overall freshman academy students felt no more, and no less, engaged by school and academics than other ninth graders at West Mesa High School. They also reported similar levels of academic self-confidence and attachment to their school. Academy and non-academy ninth graders reported similar levels of school safety. This lack of differences was not surprising. Since the freshman academy was a small program without a separate space within the larger school, the academy could not be expected to impact larger environmental factors.

Student Performance

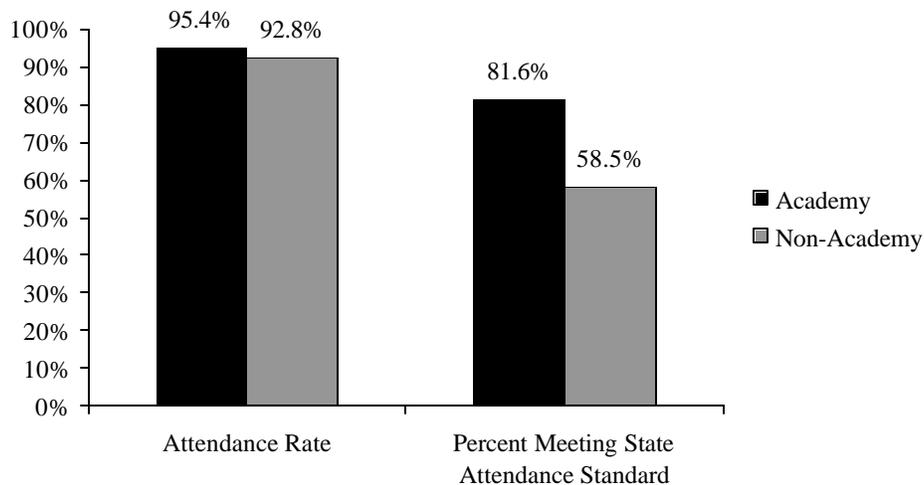
Academy students demonstrated higher rates of attendance compared to non-academy ninth graders at West Mesa High School. However, analyses of grades, credits earned and dropout figures suggest that the academy had little or no effect on other student performance measures during the 2002-2003 school year. These results were predictable for a number of reasons. First of all, it would not be realistic to expect significant gains in student achievement after only one year of reform. Secondly, some SLC objectives undermine the achievement of others. Overall grades and test scores may decrease, for example, as SLC’s help schools prevent lower performing students from dropping out. Thirdly, West Mesa’s implementation data indicate that the freshman academy’s instructional strategies did not differ significantly from strategies employed by other ninth grade teachers. Finally, academy effects would be hard to measure at West Mesa because academy students started the year with inherent advantages. They had higher 8th grade attendance rates compared to non-academy students, as well as higher 8th grade test scores and grade-point-averages.

Attendance

District attendance records show that, on average, freshman academy students had better attendance than non-academy ninth graders in the 2002-03 school year. Academy students attended 95.4% of their classes, while non-academy freshmen attended 92.8% of their classes.⁹ However, it was not clear whether the academy's higher rate of attendance was a function of the academy or was related to intrinsic differences between the two groups.

By another measure, academy students appear to have been much more likely to attend classes regularly. Over three-quarters of academy students met the state attendance standard of 94% compared to just over half of non-academy 9th graders.

Figure 5. Attendance Rates and Proportions Meeting State Attendance Standard of 94%: Academy Students Compared to Non-Academy Students.



Academy students confirmed these findings. They volunteered that attendance was noticeably good in academy classes, as illustrated in the following exchange:

“We have good attendance.”
“Yeah. Nobody really ditches in the academy.”
“Every class is full.” [sfg]

Academy students indicated that the team structure motivated them to attend class. They said they enjoyed going to class partly because their friends were there, and partly because the teachers made class fun:

“Because we like it. I like it.”
“The classes are good.”
“You go to class and you have your friends and if the teacher doesn’t explain it your friends do.”
“And the teachers make it fun, too.”

⁹ Excludes reclassified 9th graders and BRONCOS students.

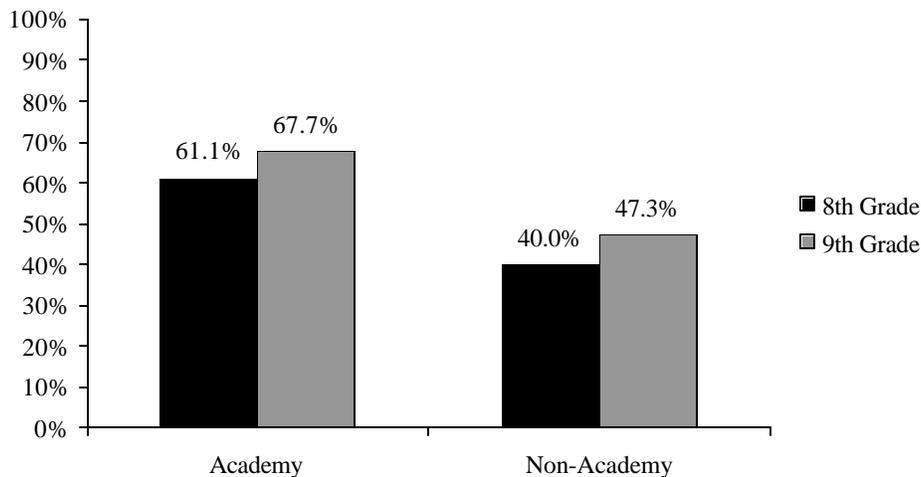
Students also said that having friends in class was an important source of academic support and that this support motivated them to attend. As one student commented:

“Like me and Eve have each other for math, and if [our teacher] is too busy we’ll help each other and if she’s not there, there’s always someone in that class who you can communicate with.”

Standardized Test Scores

Test scores suggest that the freshman academy had little or no effect on student achievement. Freshman academy students scored significantly higher on the 9th grade New Mexico Achievement Assessment (TerraNova CAT) than their non-academy 9th grade counterparts.¹⁰ Over two-thirds of academy students scored above the 40th percentile compared to less than half of non-academy 9th graders. As depicted in Figure 6 however, academy students started the year with higher test scores, and both groups improved their performance at about the same pace.

Figure 6. Proportion of West Mesa Ninth Graders Scoring At or Above the 40th Percentile on the 8th and 9th Grade Terra Nova Exams: Academy Compared to Non-Academy.

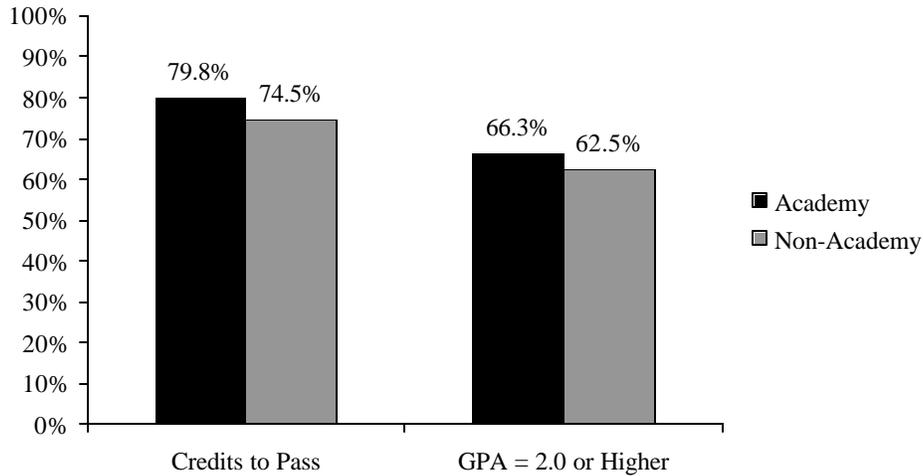


¹⁰ Average academy Normal Curve Equivalent scores were 10.6 points higher than non-academy scores.

Grades and Credits to Pass

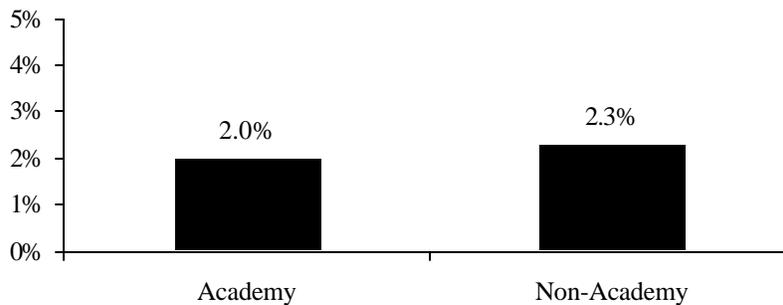
Freshman academy students were slightly more likely to earn enough credits to pass to 10th grade and to earn good grades. As explained above, however, academy students started their ninth grade year as comparatively high achieving students.

Figure 7. Proportion of Ninth Graders Earning Enough Credits to Pass to the Next Grade Level and Grade Point Average of C or Higher: Academy Compared to Non-Academy.



Drop-Out

School withdrawal records suggest that the freshman academy did not decrease the number of students dropping out of school. Of the 98 freshman academy students included in this study, 2.0% (n = 2) dropped out during the 2002-03 school year, compared to 2.3% (n = 14) of first-time non-academy freshmen.¹¹



¹¹ The “SLC dropout formula” differs from the state formula. The state dropout formula defines a “dropout” as a student who drops out of school and does not reenroll in an approved educational program by the 40th day of the following school year. The state formula uses cumulative enrollment and includes students repeating ninth grade. The ninth grade dropout rate using the state formula was 4.85% in 2002-03. The SLC formula: (1) includes only students enrolled on the 40th day of each school year, (2) includes only first-time ninth graders; and (3) excludes the possibility that students reenrolled the following school year.

Facilitators and Constraints to Success

A range of factors created the potential for positive outcomes at West Mesa High School's freshman academy. These include the following:

1. Teachers had 2 preparatory periods daily, one of which was used for team meetings.
2. Teachers shared almost all the same students.
3. The teaching team had authority to develop its own ways of operating as a team.
4. Teachers had reduced caseloads and smaller class sizes compared to the traditional ninth grade program.

Constraints to academy success included the following:

1. The school's emphasis on centralized, school-wide reforms constrained the development of a separate, small and distinctive learning community.
2. The academy did not have its own space separate from the rest of the school.
3. Teachers lacked experience with teaming and interdisciplinary instruction and professional development opportunities were few.
4. The SLC administrator was stretched too thin to play a consistently active coaching and leadership role with the academy.

Conclusions

This evaluation revealed that the most significant difference between a 9th grade academy education and a non-academy education at West Mesa was the teaming structure, which grouped students together with four common teachers and classes. This created a strong environment of social and academic support among and between ninth grade students. Compared to non-academy ninth graders, freshman academy students described a more supportive climate for academic work and more respectful, collaborative and caring relations among students. Evaluation findings also suggest that the academy's team structure contributed to comparatively high rates of class attendance.

On the other hand, the evaluation found little evidence that academy students received higher quality or more innovative instruction than non-academy students. It also revealed that West Mesa's freshman academy lacked key ingredients of the research-based SLC model, including a separate space, a distinctive curricular focus, and the autonomy or flexibility for developing its own instructional agenda and methods. Importantly, the absence of these ingredients was a product of the academy's original design rather than the result of poorly implemented plans.

It may not be surprising, therefore, that the academy appeared to have little or no measurable impact on many important aspects of school climate and student performance. Students reported receiving personal attention and support from teachers, for example, but no more than non-academy ninth graders. Nor did students feel more engaged at school or more attached to school as a result of being in the academy. Furthermore, academy students reported a lack of academic rigor. Effects on grades, achievement scores, credits earned and dropout rates were negligible or undetectable.¹²

¹² All student performance outcomes were difficult to ascertain given intrinsic differences between academy and non-academy students.

Recommendations

West Mesa High School planned to expand the freshman academy to two teams of students and teachers in the 2003-2004 school year. Administrators said they intended to provide more structure for the teaching teams but, due to budget constraints, also planned to eliminate the second preparatory period that teachers had used for common planning [pdi]. Based on evaluation results from the 2002-2003 school year, RDA recommends the following actions:

1. Provide the academy with more autonomy and flexibility for developing a personalized instructional agenda and distinctive identity.
2. Ensure that all teachers on each team meet at least two times per week for a minimum of 50 minutes each time, and preferably longer and more frequently.
3. Provide the academy teams with a common space with separateness from the larger school.
4. Provide structured professional development opportunities for new teams, before or early in the school year. Professional development should help teams build rapport and develop common expectations, concrete goals, policies and procedures, and activity plans.
5. Harness the expertise and support of the school's Instructional Coach to help teams develop formal interdisciplinary lesson plans and to help teachers hone their interdisciplinary teaching skills.¹³
6. Provide a dedicated administrator at a minimum of 0.5 FTE to provide leadership and instructional guidance to academy teachers and teams (1.0 FTE for more than 2 teams).

¹³ The school's instructional coach attended many team meetings and was seen as a supportive resource for expanding interdisciplinary activities in the future.