



EVALUATION BRIEF



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SEPTEMBER 2007

APS SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES PROGRAM MID-YEAR-THREE EVALUATION UPDATE

BACKGROUND

The Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) received a three year grant in October 2004 to implement small learning communities (SLCs) at Highland, Manzano, and Valley high schools. To fulfill grant requirements, APS hired an external consultant to collaborate with RDA in evaluating SLC program implementation and outcomes. This evaluation brief covers the second half of Grant Year 2 (spring 2006) through the first half of Grant Year 3 (fall 2006).

MID-YEAR-THREE EVALUATION FINDINGS

1. Schools made substantial progress toward implementing SLCs, especially in Grant Year 3:
 - Manzano and Valley implemented freshman academies consisting of teams of 90 students and three core teachers.
 - The freshman academies replicated many of the research-based best practices for small learning communities including: small teams, common planning time for teachers, a three-period block of instructional time, and rigorous standards-based curricula with some interdisciplinary connections. Teachers taught just over half their classes within their academy. At neither school did the SLC have space separate from the rest of the school.
 - Valley established the Law, Public Safety and Security career academy.
 - Plans were created for fall 2007 implementation of three career academies at Manzano and Valley, and a freshman academy and five career academies at Highland.
2. APS' Grant Manager worked with the Associate Superintendent and Instructional Manager for Secondary Standards and Redesign to link and align professional development, career education, high school redesign and other district initiatives so they support SLCs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

- Ensure that schools' SLC plans are well implemented in 2007-08, after which time grant funds and the potential to evaluate effectiveness will be gone.
- Create truly heterogeneous student teams and provide weekly common planning time for interdisciplinary teams of teachers.
- Establish adequate time and venues for team planning prior to the beginning of each school year.

- Provide teachers with the structures and supports necessary to increase their practice of differentiated instruction, interdisciplinary collaboration, authentic inquiry, and action research.
- Fine-tune advisory programs so that teachers meet with small groups of students on a daily to weekly basis. Establish clear expectations and strategies for the advisory role.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

- Institutionalize a district-level FTE dedicated to SLC program development, implementation and coordination, at least until SLC philosophies and practices are well established. Contracting with a local SLC expert to manage the grant and provide guidance to schools resulted in significant implementation gains in Year Three.
- Develop a formal knowledge transfer strategy so current SLC implementers can learn from previous implementation efforts. The current cohort of schools has struggled with many of the same implementation challenges as Cohort 1 schools. More expedient and effective implementation could result from formal knowledge transfer.
- Develop a protocol for ensuring that grant expectations are understood by schools, departments and executive leaders, and deploy processes for monitoring compliance. Valuable implementation time was lost in the first two years of the grant. Efforts to fully adhere to SLC tenants were motivated by the possibility of returning funds.