

LBUSD Small Learning Communities – Year 2 Interim Evaluation Report

Polytechnic High School 2007

Introduction

In August 2005, LBUSD received a 5-year federal grant to implement small learning communities (SLCs) in three high schools – Poly, Cabrillo, and Jordan. The goals of the grant, which align with the districts' high school reform initiative, include a commitment to: 1) improving student achievement while at the same time attempting to close the achievement gap, 2) building the capacity of teachers to lead, and 3) improving the culture and climate of high schools. SLCs are geared towards raising student achievement through the personalization of education by developing structures and processes that encourage deeper and more meaningful relationships between teachers, teachers and students, as well as between students themselves.

The SRM Evaluation Group at UCLA was hired by LBUSD as the external evaluators for this SLC grant. There are two general purposes for this SLC evaluation: A) To understand how SLCs are being implemented so that we can develop “lessons learned,” make mid-course corrections, if needed, monitor progress, and understand what aspects may have contributed to effects and B) To understand the effects of SLCs on achievement and attitudes towards achievement, culture and climate at school(s), and structure and process of developing leadership capacity.

Evaluation Results – Year 1

The first year of the grant (2005-06) was primarily a planning year, with full implementation of SLCs occurring during the 2nd year of the grant (2006-07). Poly High School was in a bit of a unique situation in that there were already versions of SLCs at the school. Currently, every student at Poly is in one of seven SLCs. In the next section is a brief summary of the evaluation report from year 1. This is primarily base-line data. A full report is available, if interested.

- The interviews reflect the collective knowledge administrators and teachers have gained from participating in SLC workshops and collaborating with each other in developing their SLCs. An alignment exists across schools among teachers' SLC perceptions. Principals also seem to share a similar outlook on SLC implementation and expected outcomes.
- The logic model sessions helped staff focus their SLCs. These logic models will help leadership team members monitor activities and provide the evaluators a way to measure progress. Furthermore, the logic models set the stage for the second year of implementation.
- Student survey results indicate that students tend to agree that they are involved in decision-making at school. In terms of personalization, students report experiencing communication and support from teachers in their class but less so with other adults when pertaining to general academic, college, and life planning. Students have a positive perception of their peers. Students are aware of college admission requirements but are not as well versed in how to finance a postsecondary education.
- Results from the teacher survey indicate that teachers seem optimistic regarding small learning communities. Only a minority percentage at each school were in disagreement about understanding the vision and goals for implementing SLCs, feeling comfortable about how their school was preparing for SLCs, and believing that SLCs can help the school raise student achievement. Teachers with previous SLC experience were also more likely to agree

with the previous points. With regard to school site communication, teachers at all three schools agreed that the mission and goals/standards for achievement are clearly communicated, although at Cabrillo and Jordan teachers were not as strongly in agreement about feeling well-informed about decisions made at the school and the clarity of school site policies and procedures as the teachers from Poly. Teachers agree that there is a rigorous and challenging curriculum and that instruction is differentiated and adjusted according to need. In terms of personalization, teachers report high levels of communication and support with students. Teachers from Poly are more optimistic regarding 12th graders graduating from high school and attending a four-year college than are teachers from Jordan and Cabrillo.

- Teachers tend to report higher levels of support than students. For example, approximately 90% of teachers report have engaged students in mentoring after school at least ‘a little,’ compared to a high percentage of students who report having never received academic tutoring or mentoring.

Interim Evaluation Results – Year 2

The following are results from a mid-year survey administered to the staff. At Poly, a total of 96 staff members completed the survey (80-teachers, 3-counselors, 8-administrators, and 5 did not indicate a position). At the time, 59 staff members said that ‘yes’ they are a part of an SLC, 18 said ‘no,’ 14 said ‘don’t know,’ and 5 declined to answer.

Table 1. Percent agreement on statements by staff members at Poly High School.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	N
1. I understand the vision and goals for implementing small learning communities at this school.	3%	12%	47%	38%	92
2. I understand the vision and goals for my SLC.	6%	14%	45%	35%	80
3. I am comfortable with how my school is implementing small learning communities.	8%	13%	63%	16%	89
4. I am comfortable with how my SLC is being implemented.	8%	18%	51%	24%	79
5. I believe that forming small learning communities will help this school raise student achievement.	4%	8%	43%	46%	87
6. The school provides time on a regular basis for the sharing of information, ideas, and instructional strategies.	6%	26%	43%	26%	89
7. I am able to navigate through the district’s administrative procedures.	6%	25%	56%	13%	84
8. I am able to navigate through the school’s administrative procedures.	5%	8%	64%	23%	84
My SLC provides teachers with opportunities to collaborate on decisions that will:					
9. improve student achievement.	5%	11%	56%	28%	75
10. improve systems and processes at the school level.	8%	18%	57%	17%	76
11. improve systems and processes at the department level.	8%	23%	49%	20%	75
12. identify areas for professional development.	4%	17%	61%	17%	75

Staff members were also asked: What has been most rewarding, so far, when it comes to Small Learning Communities?, What has been the biggest challenge, so far, in implementing Small Learning Communities?, and What are your expectations for your SLC?

- So far, for the staff at Poly, the most rewarding aspect of implementing SLCS has been the collaboration with teachers. Other rewarding facets have been the smaller groups which have provided for more intimate interactions, student growth over time, the collaboration between students and teachers, and having a supportive and energetic team.
- Under challenges, the staff at Poly indicated that the biggest challenges were buy-in from the teachers and amount of time needed to invest in SLCs. Other challenges include a lack of organization, scheduling issues, the need for a clear purpose, and mixed student ability grouping.
- As for the expectations for SLCs, the largest expectation by the staff at Poly was that SLCs would help students' personal and academic achievement. Other responses did include helping students graduate, developing a sense of community, greater collaboration across and within teachers and students, developing a cohesive academic program, and increasing school-wide buy-in.

Things to Ponder

- In general, the staff at Poly does understand the purpose and vision behind implementing SLCs and believe that SLCs will help raise student achievement. However, there is not as strong agreement on whether SLCs will help improve the systems and processes at the school. The most rewarding aspect seems to be the increase in collaboration and better relationships with both teachers and students.
- The biggest challenges are providing time to the staff to share ideas and instructional strategies, and opportunities for collaboration. Another challenge is the need to get increased buy-in from staff members. Approximately one-third of the staff also found the district's administrative procedures difficult to navigate.
- Will need to investigate further on HOW to overcome the challenges of implementation.
- Input from all staff members will be very valuable as will input from students. Two surveys (one staff, one student) will be administered this Spring to look at some of the expected outcomes of implementing SLCs.
- Questions, comments, suggestions:
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