

LBUSD Small Learning Communities – Year 3 Interim Evaluation Report Polytechnic High School 2007-2008

Overview of the evaluation:

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.

There are five general areas where we are collecting and/or analyzing data:

1. SLC Development and Implementation
 - a. Leadership Capacity
 - b. Teacher to teacher interaction
2. Personalization
 - a. Student to teacher interaction
 - b. Student to student interaction
3. Equity and Access
4. Student Attitudes towards Achievement
 - a. Academic
 - b. Post Secondary
5. Collaboration (with parents and/or community)

Data will be collected and analyzed using multiple methods, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Evaluation Results: Year 2 (2006-07) Summary

In this second year of implementation, the SLCs at Cabrillo, Jordan, and Polytechnic High Schools are well on their way to being developed or further supported. As evidenced by the logic models, the leadership team at each school has thoughtfully considered what activities are to be conducted and what outputs and outcomes should be evident as a result of these activities. However, the results of the student survey indicated that awareness of SLCs and their identities will need to continue to be developed, particularly at Jordan and Cabrillo.

When looking at academic behavior, the student survey results seem to indicate that academic behavior is not reflective of college knowledge. Students at Poly High School, specifically, seem to be more aware of college issues. However, while academic behavior across schools is relatively the same, there is some variation in college knowledge. For example, although Poly High School students seem to have more college knowledge, their academic behavior is similar to students at the two other schools.

While most students indicated they participate in making decisions about their schools, a high percentage of students also reported not partaking in similar processes within their SLCs. However, students are feeling comfortable in their SLCs, and the majority of students like participating in their SLC activities.

Survey results about student-teacher communication reflect the fact that though students in general do not feel as though their recommendations for instructional changes are considered, they reported feeling academically challenged and supported by their teachers. Also, a small percentage of students across the three sites feel comfortable discussing academic as well as personal problems with their instructors. Results from the student survey pertaining to student-student interaction show little variation in terms of students' respect for each other and no clear affinity for peers enrolled in the same SLC over those who are not, with the exception of students at Poly who reported feeling closer to peers within their SLC. Additionally, while survey results indicated that students do not frequently speak with their peers about academically-oriented issues, most feel their peers support and encourage them to do well and to value educational opportunities that are available.

In general, the staff members at each school understand the purpose and vision behind implementing SLCs and they strongly 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 for the staff seems to be the increase in collaboration and better relationships with both teachers and students.

The biggest challenge to implementation appears to be finding time for the staff to share ideas and instructional strategies, and opportunities for collaboration. Another challenge is to make sure that the staff becomes comfortable with how SLCs are being implemented and that there is full staff buy-in. A third challenge is the need to make sure that all student groups are being adequately served.

Interim Evaluation Results: Year 3 (2007-08)

The following are results from a mid-year survey administered to the staff. At Poly, a total of 105 staff members returned their survey (88 – teachers, 7 – counselors, 3 – administrator, and 7 – did not indicate a position). Of the 105 staff members, 61 indicated that 'yes' they are part of an SLC, 32 stated 'no' they are not, 8 did not know whether they were part of an SLC, and 4 did not respond to the question. Table 1, below, shows the distribution of staff members by SLC who responded to the fall survey.

Table 1. SLC distribution at Polytechnic High School, LBUSD SLC Staff Survey, Fall 2007.

SLC	SLC Affiliation			Total
	Yes	No	Don't know/No response	
Business	6	0	0	6
CIC	7	0	0	7
Humanities	9	0	0	9
Communications	2	0	0	2
PAAL	5	0	0	5
PACE	12	1	0	13
Pac Rim	7	0	0	7
Beach	8	0	0	8
Multiple	7	0	1	8
No response	4	31	9	44
Total	66	32	12	109

SLC Implementation:

On the survey, staff members were also asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements asking about SLC implementation. The Poly staff responses are in Table 2.

Table 2. Percent agreement on statements by staff members at Poly High School, Fall 2007.

	Strongly Disagree			Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree		Not App.	N
1. I understand the vision and goals for implementing small learning communities at this school.	5%	10%	43%	40%	3%	106					
2. I understand the vision and goals for my SLC.	4%	7%	24%	39%	26%	107					
3. I am comfortable with how my school is implementing small learning communities.	5%	13%	43%	31%	8%	106					
4. I am comfortable with how my SLC is being implemented.	4%	5%	36%	28%	28%	108					
5. I believe that forming small learning communities will help this school raise student achievement.	5%	4%	39%	48%	5%	105					
6. The school provides time on a regular basis for the sharing of information, ideas, and instructional strategies.	9%	20%	41%	28%	2%	106					
7. I am able to navigate through the district's administrative procedures.	7%	19%	59%	10%	6%	102					
8. I am able to navigate through the school's administrative procedures.	4%	10%	57%	26%	3%	103					
My SLC provides teachers with opportunities to collaborate on decisions that will:											
9. improve student achievement.	4%	9%	28%	32%	27%	107					
10. improve systems and processes at the school level.	4%	17%	30%	23%	27%	105					
11. improve systems and processes at the department level.	5%	15%	29%	25%	26%	106					
12. identify areas for professional development.	4%	14%	32%	23%	27%	106					

Staff members were also asked: 1) What has been most rewarding, so far, when it comes to Small Learning Communities?, 2) What has been the biggest challenge, so far, in implementing Small Learning Communities?, and 3) What additional resources do you feel you will need to successfully implement SLCs?

Of the 109 staff members who took the survey, 58 shared what they perceived as the most rewarding about SLCs. By far, the most rewarding aspects for staff members when it comes to SLCs have been the connections made with colleagues. Approximately 57% of the 58 indicated that collaborating with fellow teachers and working with others to develop strategies for cross-curricular activities have been particularly rewarding. Being able to share information with other teachers who share the same students has also been important. Other rewarding aspects of SLC implementation have been building relationships with a small group of students, and seeing the students feel like they belong to a group and motivated to succeed.

One of the biggest challenges to SLC implementation, so far, according to the Poly staff has been time factors. This includes finding time to collaborate and work with one another and for meetings. A second challenge to implementation, as reported by the Poly staff, is making sure that students are appropriately scheduled in their SLC. Related to scheduling may also be the challenge of keeping the SLC/classes small. Another challenge, mentioned by several staff members, is making sure that students still have a sense of belonging to their SLC as they move to the upper grades (11th/12th) or are late additions to the SLC.

Some additional resources needed for successful implementation, as suggested by the staff, include: time (for planning and collaboration - some suggest that this time should be paid time or take the place of other meetings); technology support; and professional development, particularly to increase teacher buy-in.

Changes in Culture and Climate:

Staff members were also asked whether or not in their opinion, the culture and climate of the school has changed with the implementation of SLCs. At Poly, 66% of those who responded said 'yes' and 31% said 'no.' Amongst those who said yes, the primary positive change seems to be with an increased sense of belonging and pride in the school/SLC, beyond just those students who are in a magnet program. Similarly, teachers are better able to get to know their students and work more closely with colleagues.

Points of Reflection:

- There have been positive connections made between staff members and staff and students. How can this be sustained? Further utilized?
- One of the biggest challenges for the staff at Poly for implementation has been finding time. How can this challenge be addressed?
- Another challenge mentioned by the staff is to ensure a sense of belonging or relevance by the students to their SLC as they move to the 11th/12th grades. What are some ideas for expanding the positive impact?

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