

U.S. Department of Education

**Policy and Program Studies Service
Report Highlights**

Implementation Study of Smaller Learning Communities: Final Report

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Implementation Study of Smaller Learning Communities: Final Report

The Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) program was established in response to growing national concerns about students too often lost and alienated in large, impersonal high schools, as well as concerns about school safety and low levels of achievement and graduation for many students. Authorized under the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (Title V, Part D, Subpart 4, Section 5441(b)), the SLC program was designed to provide local educational agencies with funds to plan, implement, or expand SLCs in large high schools of 1,000 students or more. The SLC legislation allows local educational agencies to implement the most suitable structure or combination of structures and strategies to meet their needs.

Study Design

The U.S. Department of Education contracted with Abt Associates to conduct the Implementation Study of Smaller Learning Communities. The primary purpose of the study was to evaluate the implementation of the federal education law that authorizes funding for the SLC program, by describing the strategies and practices used in implementing SLCs. The report is based on findings from the first group (first cohort) of grantee schools funded under this program in 2000. This first cohort of 119 SLC schools was surveyed at two points in time (spring 2002 and fall 2003). From among those freshman and career academies with the highest student participation and degree of SLC implementation, 18 schools were purposively selected for case studies.¹ The study addresses three major research questions:

- How are schools implementing SLCs—what are the principal strategies, models, and practices implemented?
- What are the factors facilitating and inhibiting implementation in SLC schools?
- How do outcomes for SLC schools, as measured by student achievement and school behavior, change over time?

This study relied on three major sources of data: (1) Annual Performance Reports (APRs), completed by all grantees/schools funded through the SLC program, (2) a Periodic Implementation Survey (PIS), and (3) in-depth case studies of 18 SLC schools that intended to implement a freshman or career academy.

Major Study Findings

The study findings primarily concern the status of SLC implementation in the Cohort 1 schools and factors facilitating and inhibiting implementation. The study also examined in a limited manner how outcomes as self-reported in the APR data changed for Cohort 1 schools over time.

¹ This report does not include findings from the second cohort of 222 SLC schools funded in 2002. These schools were surveyed at only one time and did not have any case study visits. Findings for this cohort of SLC schools are summarized in the unpublished *Cohort 2 Follow-up Report* (Bernstein, Millsap, & Schimmenti, 2005) available upon request.

Implementation Findings

How are schools implementing SLCs—what are the principal strategies, models, and practices implemented?

- **The most prevalent structures were freshman and career academies.** Schools changed over time, in both the number and types of SLC structures they were implementing. Freshman academies showed the most growth. In 2001–02, 38 percent of SLC schools had freshman academies; by 2002–03, the number had risen to 55 percent. Career academies showed some growth (from 38 percent of schools to 42 percent).
- Schools chose to implement one or more SLC strategies, with block scheduling (58 percent of schools) and teacher teams (52 percent) the most popular choices. **However, schools over time were gradually shifting from the use of SLC strategies to a greater use of SLC structures.**
- **Schools with freshman academies reported a high level of participation** (78 percent on average) among their 9th-grade students. For house plans, average student participation was 77 percent during the 2002–03 school year.
- **All but two schools reported undertaking efforts to increase personalization.** The most popular mechanisms for enhancing personalization were school or classroom-based and involved providing individual assessments (76 percent), a cooperative learning focus (63 percent) or formal mentoring programs (47 percent).
- **SLC-related professional development, although provided by nearly all schools, was not very extensive.** SLC teachers received a little more than three days of professional development per year. In close to half of Cohort 1 schools (45 percent) teachers received less than 16 hours of SLC-specific professional development during the 2002–03 school year.
- **Schools reported success in involving community representatives in their SLC activities, with four-fifths of schools (82 percent) working with an external partner in 2002–03, up from two-thirds of schools (65 percent) in the previous year.** Partners included businesses, institutions of higher education, and community based organizations. Most schools used partners on advisory committees and as in-school volunteers. Those schools engaging external partners with their SLCs reported that they derived specific benefits for their students, including a range of career-related opportunities such as community service learning, internships, and job shadowing.
- **The demographics of career and freshman academies often did not match the demographics of the school or freshman class.** The law authorizing SLCs mandates that the “method of placing students in the smaller learning community or communities [shall be] such that students are not placed according to ability or any other measure, but are placed at random or by their own choice, and not pursuant to testing or other judgments” (P.L. 107-110, Section 4441). **About half of the schools with either career or freshman academies had their enrollments in each academy match the racial composition of the school as a whole (for career academies) or the freshman class (for the freshman academies).** About half the schools with freshman academies had matched enrollments for limited English proficient (LEP) students and 38 percent of schools had similar LEP demographics for career academies. Three-quarters of the freshman academies had matched enrollments by gender, compared with 29 percent of schools with career academies. Because the data reported in the APR do not distinguish between enrollments based on school random assignment or student’s choices, it is not possible to ascertain the extent to which the differences in demographics are based on student choice rather than school assignment; however these comparisons suggest that schools are clearly challenged to create academies that match the population from which the

academies are drawn. As the data reveal, schools find it less difficult to have freshman academy groupings similar to the freshman class than to have career academies that mirror the demographics of the school.

What are the factors facilitating and inhibiting implementation in SLC schools?

- **SLC respondents reported** that these factors to facilitate implementation: professional development specifically focused on SLCs; the availability of resources, including instructional materials; and a variety of teacher-related variables (e.g., attitudes toward reform, pedagogical practices, and expertise). Schools also reported a number of factors to have a negative influence on SLC implementation, including scheduling and logistical issues, physical space, and school staffing needs, especially in terms of core academic teachers and guidance counselors.
- A common set of **factors affecting academy implementation** included strong school leadership, involved and supportive districts, high levels of staff buy-in, and sufficient space to make programs separate. Inhibiting factors included staff and administrative turnover, weak school leadership, prescriptive district oversight of SLC reforms, and limited resources on the part of the school.

APR Data on Outcomes

The section below presents a comparison of the reported APR data related to key program outcomes in the period just prior to program implementation and just after program implementation. The data are based on the SLC schools' self-reported data through Annual Performance Reports (APR). **Schools first completed the APR during the 2000–01 school year, at which time they also provided retrospective data for school years 1996–97 through 1999–2000.** APR data were also collected annually for school years 2001–02 and 2002–03. The APR data includes information on academic achievement, school-related behaviors, and the achievement of academic milestones at the school level.

Limitations of the APR Outcome Analysis

While analysis of the APR data give some self-reported information on how schools were trending over time before receiving SLC funding and whether or not there was a measured shift in trends when schools received SLC funds, absent a valid comparison group, any inferences from this data about the impacts of SLC funding and implementation on those outcomes are clearly inappropriate. In addition, there are a number of very important caveats and limitations that also make use of this data for evaluation of outcomes or impact analysis inappropriate. These are summarized below.

- Many schools were engaged in implementing SLCs structures and strategies prior to receiving their federal grants, which could potentially have affected their pre-grant status on outcomes.
- In many cases the SLC feature being implemented only directly affected a subset of students in the school, while outcomes were reported for the school as a whole.
- The data collection period did not cover a sufficient period of time to adequately capture changes in end of high school outcomes where implementation activities may have focused primarily on 9th-grade students.
- The dynamics of the SLC implementation process may have affected short-term school outcomes as schools adjusted to the task of restructuring. That is, restructuring such a large institution as a high school may not only lead to no immediate changes, but there may actually be a temporary worsening of outcomes as school staff take on and become accustomed to their new roles.
- Results are based on school-reported data, which varied greatly in quality and accuracy. Specifically, there is a serious measurement issue in terms of the lack of data comparability (both between districts and states).

Keeping in mind these limitations, the APR data revealed the following:

Short-Term Outcomes

- **As measured by APR data, early changes in schoolwide reported outcomes after receiving SLC funding were modest or neutral, with a good deal of variation between schools.**
- Where there is evidence of change, trends appear to be moving in the right direction for school-related behaviors. **Specifically, the APR data suggest an upward trend in student extracurricular participation and promotion rates from 9th to 10th grades.** The trend for extracurricular involvement in SLC schools showed a substantial and statistically significant increase of five percentage points in participation after receipt of SLC funding.
- **There was a statistically significant positive trend in the percentage of 9th-grade students being promoted to 10th grade during the post-grant period.** This trend also held for SLC schools implementing freshman academies, which have as an expressed focus reducing the 9th-grade dropout rate. In addition, mean estimates were similar to the national average for large high schools by the end of data collection (85 percent).
- **There was also a downward trend in the incidence of violence in SLC schools over time.** The data suggest that, on average, SLC schools experienced a statistically significant 1.4-point drop in the number of violent incidents (per 100 students) during the post-grant period.

Longer-Term Outcomes

- **The data suggest increases in the percentage of graduating students planning to attend either two- or four-year colleges.** Between the pre- and post-grant periods, this percentage increased by about four percentage points, which is statistically significant. The absence of comparative national data, however, makes it difficult to infer whether this is due to receipt of the SLC grant rather than part of a more general national trend.
- There were **no significant trends in academic achievement**, as measured by either scores on statewide assessments or college entrance exams.

Sustainability of SLCs

The data suggest a serious commitment on the part of most SLC schools to sustain structural changes in the way their school and classrooms are organized. Specifically, close to three-quarters of those schools that report having made changes using SLC funding expect to sustain those changes after their grants end. For example, almost all (96 percent) of the schools that reported making their schoolwide core curricula more academically rigorous are committed to sustaining those changes even after their SLC funding has run out. Similarly, 94 percent of the schools that reported using more varied student assessments for grading and promotion decisions expect to sustain those changes in the future.

Although schools were less likely to report classroom-level changes with the federal SLC funding, at least 80 percent of the schools that had implemented classroom-level changes also reported that they would sustain them. One exception is reduced class size, a change that may not be within the power of the school to sustain.