

University of California at Berkeley



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Small Learning Communities

Lessons from the Field



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A Guide to Implementing Small Learning Communities and Career Academies

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Small Learning Communities: Lessons from the Field

Preface

In 2006 the U.S. Department of Education awarded a sixth round of Small Learning Community (SLC) grants, and has now spent nearly \$1 billion over the last half-decade on this approach. Evaluation is a required component of these grants, including a third party evaluator and annual narrative report, as well as school-wide student data sent by each grantee to the U.S. Department of Education.

Because of its history of working with SLCs in general and Career Academies in particular, the Career Academy Support Network (CASN) in the Graduate School of Education at UC Berkeley has been hired by a number of districts receiving these SLC grants as their third party evaluator. CASN has served in this role now for the past five years, and across those years in 25 high schools in ten districts in five states (as well as a technical assistance provider in a different set of high schools). While each high school is somewhat unique, there are many commonalities across these sites, and we find ourselves grappling with the same issues time after time.

Consequently we have decided to try to summarize what we have learned over the past five years in these efforts. We have grouped the topics for this summary into four chapters:

- SLC Features—The components of an SLC
- System Needs—The role of districts and high schools
- Support Structures—How to strengthen SLCs
- Evaluation—How to assess progress

The first chapter is primarily descriptive. It sketches the elements that comprise SLCs in most high schools. Embedded in these sketches are thoughts about what make these components more or less successful.

The three remaining chapters cover those features outside the SLC elements themselves that affect success. These include matters that every high school faces in implementing SLCs. Each chapter covers several topics, and for each topic we describe what seem to us to be central issues. In most cases, we follow these discussions with suggested “best practices” for effectively dealing with these issues, drawing on what we have seen in the high schools in which we have worked.

There are of course some judgments involved in all this, but for the most part we don’t pretend to shrewd insights or brilliant analyses. This is pretty straightforward stuff. We offer these thoughts to any districts and high schools moving in this direction, as what we hope will be a useful road map of the issues to be encountered and suggestions for handling them.

Chapter 1: SLC Features

Formation of teacher teams. The fundamental difference between a traditional high school and an SLC structured one, from the teacher's perspective, is that he or she will work as part of a team with teachers from other departments. This rarely happens in a traditional high school. Rather, courses are taught in "silos": English in one vertical silo, math in another, science in a third, and social studies in a fourth. SLCs require teachers from across whatever subjects are included in the SLC (at least two to meet the definition, often three, sometimes all four) to mesh into a team.

This is a whole new experience for most, and entails considerable adaptation. Personalities must dovetail. Leaders must be selected. Curriculum must be compared and points of commonality found. Time must be allocated for meetings. Discussions of students must occur for common strategies to be developed to respond to problems. Many of the strengths to be gained from an SLC emerge from the teamwork that results. But as with any new approach this works better if done carefully and thoughtfully, orientation and training are provided, and systems are in place for making adjustments when problems occur.

Shared leadership structure. One of the implications of SLC teams is that they take on certain functions traditionally left to others. For example, they play a role in defining curriculum, as teacher teams figure out ways to show students the relationships among their various subjects. They help to counsel students, as teachers learn from their discussions with each other which students are having problems and figure out how to help them. They meet with parents to discuss problems and evolve strategies that parents can support at home. They play a role in scheduling students, to ensure that the students in their SLC are placed in the right classes.

SLC teachers also take on what have usually been thought of as administrative responsibilities. They help to develop the master schedule, develop agendas for faculty meetings and lead discussions there, and interact with department chairs. They also

organize speaker and field trip programs, and in career academies, mentor and internship programs. In short, teachers working in SLCs do a lot more than just teach their own classes. This has many benefits for most high schools, as teachers take on ownership for a host of “management” responsibilities and thereby become more invested in the entire high school’s success, not just that of their own classes or department. But it also has implications for administrators, counselors, unions, and budgets. All must adjust to these new roles and this realignment of responsibilities.

Teacher common planning time. To handle all these new responsibilities, SLC teachers need time to work together. The ideal solution is a common planning period, and most high schools try to provide this for as many SLC teams as possible. But this isn’t always possible, given the realities of scheduling and competing responsibilities. Thus teams often find other times to meet, such as before school starts, after it ends, during lunch, on student late arrival or early departure days, or less frequently, on district and/or state allocated professional development days. Whatever the system, it is critical that this occur. Teams with no regular time to meet aren’t really teams, and don’t function as such. Also, if it isn’t made part of the regular schedule, the time involved often needs to be reimbursed, with the SLC grant when it exists, or through other sources when it doesn’t.

Bridge program from 8th grade. Beginning high school is often a scary event for students, as they move from what is usually a smaller and more localized middle school to a larger more centralized setting, being mixed with students from different neighborhoods, taking more difficult courses, and knowing this is the last stop before either college or work arrives. Summer programs that orient students to high school, and to their SLC, have generally had good success. These can be one or two days, or several weeks, with the longer ones having a greater impact but even the short ones helping. Freshmen teachers consistently remark that students arrive for the fall semester less overwhelmed, more attuned to the culture/ policies/ practices of the high school, and are less disruptive.

Ninth grade SLCs. Most high schools moving to school-wide SLCs use some type of SLC structure in ninth grade. This seems to be the easiest grade level at which to initiate SLCs school-wide, for several reasons: students are new and have less preformed attitudes toward SLCs; freshmen most need the extra support and closer teacher ties that SLCs bring; freshmen houses provide a safe haven for those students who need it, and freshmen (of both sexes) tend to need it the most. These SLCs also allow a pattern of consistent policies and enforcement procedures to be established.

Most freshmen teachers comment on how they see fewer tardies and truancies, as well as better deportment and more focus on studies among new students (who, everyone agrees, can be difficult) when in an SLC; upper class teachers also often comment on the less disruptive halls and passing periods. While freshmen SLCs have various names (houses, centers, academies, teams), they all split students into several groups, usually of somewhere between 100 and 200 per group, each with a team of teachers who cover the common freshmen courses (English, science, perhaps math, and/or a common freshman course such as health or geography).

Defined themes. SLCs vary on this dimension: some have themes, some don't. Such themes may be broadly defined academic topics (e.g., humanities, science and technology, society and culture), or more specific (e.g., performing arts, environmental studies, social justice in America). Some may be career related: e.g., communications and media, health, public safety. Usually upper class SLCs are more likely to have career themes than lower class ones (e.g., grade 10-12 or 11-12 Career Academies).

Our experience suggests that themes usually strengthen an SLC, for several reasons. First, they give the SLC an identity, for both teachers and students. Second, they provide topics for projects that let teachers show the relationships of their subject to the others in the SLC, which students usually like. Third, they provide opportunities for community involvement, such as bringing in speakers, participating in field trips, and encouraging community service projects. While it may take several years for such themes to become fully realized, even this can be an advantage, as it gives teachers an

opportunity to expand on the previous years' efforts and lessons to strengthen the theme year after year.

Student scheduling. Issues related to scheduling students into SLCs are the most frequent challenge that schools report. First, it raises the question of whether students should simply be assigned to their SLC, or be allowed to choose. In our experience, it seems to work best to assign them in grades nine and perhaps ten (especially if there is teacher looping—staying with the same students across these two grades), and let them choose at the upper levels.

If there is a choice system, it requires informing students, and their families, about the options, which is a big job in itself. It also works best if there is some flexibility built into the system. That is, not all students will necessarily get their first choice if there is to be balance across the SLCs in terms of size and demography. Thus students are usually asked to rank order two or three options, with a written explanation in their selection form that they may not get their first choice.

Whatever the decision in terms of offering options, placing a given cluster of students together into several classes complicates the development of the master schedule. Giving the team of teachers in an SLC the same prep period also adds complications. But without these two features—a group of students together in two or more classes, and a team of teachers working together—there is no SLC. Yet high schools stumble over this fundamental feature more often than any other.

Scheduling is a complex issue, and rather than wading through all the details here, we refer you to our 50-page manual on this topic, *Scheduling Guide for Small Learning Communities/ Career Academies*. This draws on the lessons of veterans who have been grappling with this task in high schools across the country, provides an annual schedule of tasks defining who needs to do what when, offers a host of best practices, and is available free in the “Resources” section of our website: <http://casn.berkeley.edu>.

Balance across SLCs. Intent behind most SLCs is to increase fairness in high schools by opening options to all students. As opposed to the traditional structure where certain students are “tracked” into college prep/ honors/ advanced placement courses, while others are steered away from these, even at the beginning of high school, SLCs usually try to democratize the curriculum. In fact, this is a requirement of the federal grants. Research shows student performance correlates strongly with teacher expectations. Where teacher expectations are high, performance usually follows, and vice versa.

This idea runs counter to having “college prep” or “non-college prep” SLCs. Thus SLCs usually avoid entry requirements and are open to all students. With freshmen SLCs, students are often randomly placed in the available options. Where choice is offered, particularly at higher grade levels, it becomes important to balance the various SLCs so that one doesn’t become elitist and another low end, with both stigmatized accordingly.

Optimal student grouping. While heterogeneous student grouping has advantages, it runs counter to much of what has occurred in high schools in the past. It also raises certain questions. Will honors, Advanced Placement (AP), and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses still be offered? Will there be different levels of English, math, and science? What will happen to special education students? To English language learners? Is it possible to group all these heterogeneously?

Every high school has to sort these questions out for itself, but the overriding principle needs to be to increase opportunities for all. Statistically speaking, our high schools are not entirely democratic. Certain subgroups in the past have typically been more heavily represented in lower level, non-college prep tracks. Thus those high schools moving toward SLCs are typically reducing or eliminating course levels that do not meet college entrance requirements. Where feasible English language learners and special education students are being mainstreamed. These are useful trends.

This approach often raises objections, however, some not without validity. Competitive colleges look at honors/AP/IB courses as one criterion for entrance. Students interested in attending such colleges need these courses. Teachers who teach primarily upper grade level subjects to selective groups of students often resist SLCs, pointing out that high performing students are an at-risk group themselves and need to be challenged in creative ways. Some special education and ESL teachers resist mainstreaming at least some their students, arguing this can be done too soon or too much. In our experience there are no pat answers to what constitutes the perfect balance in these regards, and local judgments need to be made. The simple underlying rule should be to find the solution that provides the best opportunities for all.

Curricular integration among academic subjects. As previously discussed, one central feature of an SLC is that it shows students relationships among their subjects. One of the reasons for the boredom that often pervades high school classes is that students see no relevance to what they're being asked to learn. Illustrating how their subjects fit together in the real world often helps to address this. Thus teachers from the various subjects in the SLC need to share the topics they cover with each other and look for points of commonality.

One useful approach we have seen used effectively is the "curriculum on the wall" approach. Each teacher on an SLC team lists the major topics covered during each month of the school year on post-it notes, then places these in parallel rows, one above the other, on a big piece of butcher block paper or large whiteboard (or electronically). Teachers can then as a team study all the topics they collectively cover. Usually they will see commonalities, and opportunities for projects that can apply knowledge and skills from different subjects. By moving topics around during the year it's usually possible to place those that relate to each other at common times. In this way each subject is still included as it always was, just in a different order, while students can see relationships among their subjects.

Curricular integration between academic and CTE themes. In an SLC with a career theme, like a Career Academy, academic courses are related to a broadly defined career theme. There are many such possible themes, often grouped around the 16 defined in the national career clusters project (www.careerclusters.org). Usually the theme is selected locally to fit with industries and employers, who can be approached to help support the program. Examples include health, media and communications, information technology, education, legal and protective services, and business/ finance/ marketing.

In Career Academies a career/ technical teacher joins the academic team and teaches a CTE course in concert with the academic courses. The CTE teacher shows how academic skills are important to careers in the field, and the academic teachers show how the career theme relates to their academic subject. Thematic projects are common. Academics are reinforced and relevance is added. In our experience career themes work particularly well as SLC themes because they naturally relate to real world applications, promote local community involvement, and start students thinking about future careers and postsecondary plans.

One important point in this regard is that students be exposed to the whole vertical range of occupations in a given field, and encouraged to aim as high as possible. Unlike much of traditional vocational education, our experience suggests that it works better to treat college and careers not as opposing goals but common ones. A recent report by ACT entitled *Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?* reinforces this point.

Personalization, support. One of the advantages found in most SLCs is that they provide a supportive atmosphere for students. This derives in part from the fact that students are together as a group in several classes. Thus they come to know each other well, and to form strong bonds of friendship and mutual support for each other. In addition, they have a team of teachers working together to understand and meet their needs. The fact that several teachers are discussing students with particular needs and

agreeing on strategies they can use in concert to meet those needs usually results in stronger support.

Surveys consistently show this to be one of the most dependable outcomes of SLCs, for both students and teachers. Students like the stronger support they receive from their teachers and fellow students, and teachers like the support they receive from being part of a team. A survey done of students involved in career academies (MDRC, 1997) showed students to be happier than their non-academy counterparts in the same high schools on almost every dimension examined, including teacher support, peer support, motivation, and relevance of school work. Teachers involved in those same academies were also happier than their non-academy counterparts on virtually every dimension queried, including teacher collaboration, influence over work, personalization and attention to students, and overall effectiveness and job satisfaction.

Advisory programs. One feature of SLCs being employed by many high schools is advisories. These are programs in which teachers, and sometimes classified staff, agree to work as a kind of mentor with a group of students to provide a variety of supports. Usually there is a designated time for this in the school schedule, anywhere from a partial period each day to a period each week or every other week.

Advisories typically cover such topics as good study habits, goal setting, values clarification, meeting high school graduation and college entrance requirements, career counseling, after school activities, and personal relationship skills. Sometimes they include just freshmen students, or freshmen and sophomores, and sometimes all four grade levels. They may require an agreement from the teachers' union, as the advisory time may be viewed as an additional preparation. While an advisory program is not technically an SLC, and is not a requirement of federal grants, it often dovetails well with them.

In our experience advisories can be effective, but this can't be assumed. Important features include careful planning, orientation for the involved teachers, and a

strong curriculum. Some teachers naturally fall into the role of advisors with their students and like advisories for that reason, but some do not and find themselves uncomfortable when asked to play this role. Professional development that prepares teachers for such a role can make a significant difference. Another strategy is to involve only those teachers who volunteer to be advisors.

Successful advisories have curriculum with clear goals and sufficient activities to fill the allotted time. Often high schools try to create this on their own, out of whole cloth, with varied results. While this can work with creative and energetic teachers, there are also established curricula that can be helpful. Such curricula are available either free or for purchase.

Additional factors that often influence the success of advisory programs include whether they are required for graduation (when they lack this students and teachers take them less seriously), limiting the number of students each teacher advises to no more than 20-25 (preferably from their own classes), and allowing changes in teacher-student matches where personalities conflict.

Chapter 2: System Needs

Clear and consistent policy direction. When supported by district and high school leaders SLCs tend to thrive. When not, they usually don't. When administrators change, there are often policy shifts. These may be driven by educational beliefs and principles, or they may be based on "political" considerations. That is, often superintendents leave under a cloud of some sort, and boards of education seek replacements that will change directions. In addition, superintendents and principals have their own agendas, and may want to put their own stamp on the institution they now lead. Whatever the reason, if SLCs aren't given consistent support by district boards and administrators, and high school leaders, over a substantial period of time (e.g., five years), they are unlikely to succeed.

Best practices:

- Get board support in writing from the start. Keep the board regularly informed of progress, perhaps through a presentation.
- Involve all levels of administration to maintain institutional memory and consistency as positions change.
- Use the community, including employers and parents, to reinforce support.

Supportive administrators. Administrators vary in the degree to which they wish to be in charge and make decisions vs. share this responsibility with others. This variable makes a difference in how successful SLCs will be. While an administrator needs to provide leadership and direction, he or she also needs to provide support for the staff implementing the initiative. SLCs require a shared approach to leadership, with a relatively flat hierarchy in which teachers play a role in management. A democratic attitude on the part of administrators and a desire to support those implementing SLCs are important.

Best practices:

- Hire democratically minded administrators who will share authority.
- Emphasize the advantages to administrators of sharing authority: e.g., greater understanding of the difficulties they face; help in many of their tasks.

- Define who has what responsibilities under the new structures, so roles are clear and important tasks don't fall through the cracks.
- Link administrative responsibilities to particular SLCs/ academies.
- Include administrators in professional development activities.

Stable budget/ financial support. How stable a district and high school budget is from year to year is under no one's complete control, but this too plays an important role. SLCs require some additional expenditures, such as for teacher meeting and planning time, professional development efforts, curricular integration work, selection of materials, SLC student activities, and so on. While these expenses need not be large, if support for them is inconsistent from year to year, it has a damaging effect on teacher morale and will undermine SLC implementation.

In the same vein, sustaining SLC efforts once the grant ends is a common issue. As the implementation of SLCs enters the final year of the federal grant, there are usually fears that the cessation of this funding will make continuing the SLCs difficult. While the amount of support each gets is typically not large when one breaks down the grant by school and SLC, neither is it insignificant.

Best practices:

- Allot a continuing amount for SLCs from the district budget, even if this is modest.
- Redirect other sources of support to SLCs, such as Perkins and Title I funds, or state CTE programs.

Flexibility in local implementation. High schools differ, even within a given school district. Each has its own history, character, and personnel. Often high schools within a district have a competitive relationship. If all are required to march in lockstep in implementing SLCs, it often causes problems. Where flexibility is allowed for each high school to tailor its SLCs to its own history and strengths, greater success usually results.

Best practices:

- Base the themes selected for SLCs and/or career academies on local teacher and student input, and/or neighborhood features and likely sources of community and employer support.
- Allow variation in how quickly a high school moves toward school-wide implementation of SLCs, based on the degree of initial support and whether there is a history of smaller units within the high school.
- Allow variation in which courses are included in the SLC based on differences in offerings and interested teachers among high schools.

School-wide or not? There is a debate taking place throughout the land about whether SLCs should only be implemented wall-to-wall, or whether “pocket” SLCs, with one or a few within a larger high school, also offer a viable option. Full institutional change requires school-wide SLCs, but such widespread change is more challenging, and our experience suggests that benefits can accrue from more limited applications of this approach. Also, when a high school opts for wall-to-wall SLCs, it often works best to establish these one or two at a time, letting the pilots work out the bugs before going school-wide.

There are almost always some teachers, as well as some parents and students, who prefer the more traditional structure of high schools. There are many reasons for this, some questionable and some legitimate. Whatever the reason, forcing people into structures they don't want can be counter productive, and some argue it makes more sense to break *part* of the high school into SLCs, for those who prefer this structure, and leave the rest alone. We have seen both the school-wide and partial approaches work well, and won't offer an opinion except to say that there are two legitimate sides to this debate and it is an issue that needs to be considered in the local context.

Integrating with other initiatives. SLCs are a means, not an end. They are designed to improve learning, and more specifically, student academic performance.

They affect the *structure* of a high school, as opposed to the *instruction* within that structure. Almost any instructional strategy can be modified to mesh with SLCs, often to its benefit.

SLCs will arrive in virtually any high school to a variety of existing initiatives designed to improve learning. Each will have its existing proponents and track record. For example, most high schools have English and math support programs for those needing help. Many high schools are moving toward a broad college prep curriculum with more honors and advanced placement offerings. Individual departments often have their own initiatives built around specific textbooks or computer programs. These are all examples of instructional strategies. If SLCs are seen as a way to increase their effectiveness, as opposed to needing to take precedence over them, they will have a better chance of taking hold and contributing to improved learning.

Best practices:

- Examine existing initiatives and how teacher teams working with designated subsets of students might enhance them.

Maintaining strong teacher teams. Just as administrators change positions, so do teachers. While they are often more stable than superintendents and principals, some retire, some move to other schools, some simply decide to stop teaching (particularly young teachers, 50% of whom don't last five years). In addition, sometimes teams don't mesh well, and one or more members choose to leave. Changing membership on an SLC team can be disruptive. At the same time, resisting such change is often counterproductive. Over time such changes are inevitable and need to be planned for.

Best practices:

- Allow reorganizations of teams where there are problems.
- Have teams share responsibilities for SLC functioning, so that when one or more leave remaining team members can take over and orient new members.
- Give teachers the primary choice about who is on their team.
- View losses of staff as an opportunity to hire new teachers who are supportive of SLCs.

Handling student mobility and misbehavior. Most urban high schools suffer from high student mobility. The makeup of students who begin the year at a given high school may change considerably by the end of the year, at times up to 50%. Typically many of those who leave move to another high school in the district, although some move out of the district, and some drop out. Regardless, such movement affects SLCs, as the enrollment of classes changes. Maintaining consistent instruction under such circumstances is a challenge.

Closely related to this problem is that of student misbehavior. Usually students who move from school to school are those who are having problems at their first school. Disruptive students will disrupt SLCs just as they will any other system. While research suggests that SLCs may exert a holding effect on students and reduce dropouts and transiency, while improving motivation and reducing delinquency, they will not by themselves entirely solve these problems. Having a system to handle student mobility and misbehavior is important to the success of SLCs.

Best practices:

- Have clearly defined policies for delinquency, explained to students at the beginning of their freshman year, and maintained school-wide.
- Place a district limit on the number of school changes a student is allowed in a given time period, where the movement is based on choice vs. a family move.
- Maintain consistent discipline policies across high schools in a district, so that students can't simply escape penalties by moving around.
- Allow students to change SLCs only between years, with written approval from the Lead Teacher, counselor, and parent or guardian.
- Encourage meetings among students having problems, their parents, and their teacher team, to articulate the problem clearly and explore solutions that all can help support.

Chapter 3: Support Structures

Professional development. Teachers working in SLCs have a very different job description from those working in traditional high school environments. Several examples have already been touched on. They operate in teams, not as “lone rangers”, and integrate their subject’s curriculum with that from other fields. They often spend more time meeting with parents, and may become advisors to students. Further, they coordinate programs that require interacting with supporters outside the school, such as employers and community representatives who serve as speakers, field trip hosts, mentors, and internship supervisors.

In our experience, depending on the teacher and the history of the high school, each of these new roles benefits from professional development. Understanding the philosophy of SLCs and how they affect the structure of a high school is a starting point. To this needs to be added working on a team, integrating curriculum, taking on management responsibilities, involving employers and community people, and so on. When high school staffs are provided good professional development opportunities, and take advantage of them, SLC implementation goes far better than when these are lacking. In many cases this makes the difference between the SLCs taking hold and not.

Best practices:

- Identify experts who can provide teachers training in these areas.
- Visit other high schools that are farther along implementing SLCs and allow teachers to talk with their more experienced counterparts.
- Follow a well planned, sequenced series of professional development seminars for the SLC teams, using researched materials and best practices from the field.

Professional learning communities. One strategy that often goes along with professional development is the professional learning community. This is usually a cross-curricular group of teachers (although it can exist within one department) that meets regularly, often weekly, to study ways to make high schools more effective, especially related to curriculum and instruction. Usually enough teams are formed to

include all teachers, each with representatives from all the larger departments, plus other departments to the degree there are enough teachers to go around. Often research studies and books on effective reform approaches are used to guide such groups.

Usually a professional learning group discusses a variety of approaches, tries out ones that seem best fitted to the setting, and shares the results with each other. Often teachers sit in on each other's classes and offer professional feedback on their colleague's instruction. They may look at each other's student work and share feedback. In our experience, this is a good way to alert teachers to the utility of professional growth, motivate them to become more interested in reforms and self improvement, and lead to improved teacher morale and instruction. The cost is the time teachers must be allotted for meetings, which is usually in addition to their own prep time, and possible related materials and training.

Best practices:

- Form a series of such groups that incorporates all teachers.
- Find a regular time in the master schedule for such groups to meet.
- Identify research based books on improving high school learning for guidance.
- Discuss curriculum and instruction best practices.
- Assess data for programmatic effectiveness.

School leadership teams. Another related approach is to bring together a team of teacher, counselor, and administrative leaders for the whole school. Usually this is comprised of the principal, director of curriculum and instruction, and perhaps other administrators; the head counselor and perhaps others; the department chairs; the SLC lead teachers; and others as appropriate, such as a teacher's union representative, a representative for classified staff, and perhaps a district representative. This body then becomes a venue for discussing issues being faced in implementing the SLCs and helps to develop policies and procedures for dealing with these.

In our experience school leadership teams are a good way to promote shared leadership, devolve the responsibility for the success of the SLCs throughout the high

school, and arrive at decisions that reflect views from across the spectrum of staff and are thereby often more widely accepted and successful. Such teams require flexibility and a democratic attitude on the part of the principal and other administrators, and a willingness on the part of teachers and other staff to step up to the plate and participate in school-wide improvement and decision making.

Best practices:

- Form a school leadership team, which meets regularly.
- Channel concerns staff members have through the representatives on this team.
- Communicate the agendas and decisions of this team to all staff.
- Present annually to the general faculty.

Counselor involvement. Counselors occupy a critical niche in implementing SLCs. They are the ones who usually handle student scheduling, and often play a role in the development of the master schedule. They are also the ones who counsel students about what courses to take, and thus influence their future plans. In our experience, too often counselors are not involved enough in the implementation of SLCs, resulting in not only their resentment at being left out of such efforts but their inability to adapt their own work to the SLC structures.

Scheduling students into SLCs, often called “cohort scheduling”, is the most common difficulty we experience in their implementation. Counselors are often the ones who handle student scheduling. Alternatively, some high schools have registrars, assistant principals, or expert computer “schedulers” handle this job. Regardless, their job is made more difficult because of cohort scheduling. Thus their need to understand the reason for this change is critical, why the additional work is worth the trouble. Likewise they need training in how to do cohort scheduling. Their roles should be viewed not as extraneous to the changes underway but essential to them.

Best practices:

- Include counselors in much of the staff development offered SLC teachers.
- Assign student caseloads around SLCs rather than alphabetically, so that each counselor has responsibility for students in one or more SLC.

- Include counselors in SLC team meetings; have them help evolve strategies for dealing with student difficulties, develop personalized plans for SLC students.
- Since they know the problems in scheduling, involve counselors in the development of the master schedule, and teach them how to cohort schedule.

Use of available organizations, conferences, and materials. A decade ago it might have been possible to argue that high schools were largely on their own in implementing SLCs. This is no longer true. There are a host of organizations, conferences, and materials on this topic today. Too often we see high schools grappling with problems that have been dealt with elsewhere, often successfully and in ways that would prove helpful in the new setting. Thus it is important for high schools implementing SLCs to be aware of the help available to them and make good use of this.

Best practices:

- Study the NWREL website (www.nwrel.org).
- Make use of the NWREL online tutorials (same website).
- Study the U.S. Department of Education’s website related to SLCs (www.ed.gov/programs/slcp/resources.html).

Visits to other SLC high schools. In our experience, one of the most effective forms of professional development for new high schools launching SLCs is a visit to another high school already moving down this path. This is true for several reasons. First, teachers working in the “trenches” often have more credibility with newcomers than “gurus” who come in to talk to them. They will present the changes in realistic terms, with all the warts and problems. When they exhibit enthusiasm for SLCs in spite of this, their endorsement has real credibility. Also, the fact newcomers hear about the problems as well as the successes lets them help avoid making the same mistakes. Finally, they will often be able to take back with them concrete plans and materials useful in their own setting, such as student selection procedures, scheduling tips, and lesson plans.

There are also cautions in this regard. First, the schools to be visited need to be carefully chosen to represent good matches with the visitors in terms of demography and specifics of SLC implementation. It helps if they are reasonably nearby. They also need to be well prepared. If they are too early in their own implementation or grappling with too many problems, the visit can backfire. Likewise, they need to be able to make enough of their staff members available that there can be real exchanges of information. Often schools that become popular visiting sites set aside certain days for such visits and alter their own schedule for this purpose. They may even host “design studios”, two- or three-day sessions designed to let visitors get an in-depth picture and formulate plans they can take back and implement.

Likewise, the visiting team needs to be prepared with enough advance information that they can ask questions and gather information that will truly inform their own work. The visit also needs to include enough school leaders so that school-wide decisions can be made based on what is learned.

Best practices:

- Study the lists of SLC grantees included on the U.S. Department of Education website (www.ed.gov/programs/slcp/awards.html).
- If interested in career academies, study the national directory at <http://casn.berkeley.edu>. Also, check statewide databases for state funded programs (e.g., California Partnership Academies, Florida Academies).
- Participate in a design studio.

Community involvement. A source of support for SLCs often overlooked is the community in which the high school is located. Public schools are perhaps the most universal institution we have, and there are many people in almost any community that care about their success. This includes parents with students attending such schools, and graduates, but also city governments, employers and business associations, community based organizations, representatives of higher education, and volunteer groups (e.g., service clubs such as Rotary, Kiwanis, etc.). While it takes work to organize and direct the involvement of such “outsiders”, the investment can pay off many times over.

Best practices:

- If the SLC has an academic theme, such as in the arts or sciences, bring in speakers working in these fields, or organize field trips, to illustrate to students how the theme manifests itself locally.
- If the SLC has a career theme, to these activities can be added job shadowing, work experience, and internships.
- Community service projects can be developed related to almost any theme, which will serve the dual purpose of bringing the theme alive to students and advancing the image of the high school in the community.
- Show students links between what they are learning and possible college majors.

Postsecondary linkages. To elaborate on the last example, postsecondary institutions can play a strong role in supporting SLCs. For historical reasons, there is a gap between grade 12 and 13 in the administration of schooling in American. The jump from high school to college represents a new venture for students. No longer are they automatically enrolled from one level to the next. They are on their own, and the initiative and expense involved in applying to and attending college can be daunting. But SLCs can help them to make this leap, and colleges can help SLCs in this regard.

Best practices:

- Seek out nearby colleges (including community colleges and technical schools) with programs related to the SLC theme, and structure the instruction so that it feeds into the college's program.
- Take students on campus tours; organize scavenger hunts on such campuses.
- Establish "dual enrollment" programs in which students receive credit toward both the high school diploma and a college degree. Such courses may be taught either at the high school or on the college campus.
- "Middle" and "Early" college programs take this a step further and allow students to complete a full year (or more) of credit while in high school[TH1]. Career themed SLCs can give students a head start on either a college major or employment credential from a community college or technical institute.

- What's required in all cases is for administrators and teachers at the two levels to meet and work out the needed arrangements. Given their interest in boosting enrollments, most colleges are open to such linkages.

Teacher supports to ease burnout. We find teacher burnout to be a common problem associated with SLCs. Teacher burnout is a problem *without* SLCs, but they often exacerbate it. This can be an Achilles heel if not anticipated and dealt with. We have seen many effective SLC teams dissolve after a year or two, and even whole high school attempts do so, because staff became too exhausted from all the new tasks and responsibilities. SLCs do require more work, especially in the initial years of implementation.

This is true for several reasons. First, SLCs represent change, and all change takes effort. In addition, teachers are asked to take on a host of new responsibilities. While most teachers wind up liking the team collegiality and greater effectiveness they experience in SLCs, they also widely comment on how much work it takes to implement them.

Best practices:

- Administrators can show understanding and respect for the expanded teacher effort. Too often administrators, forced to see their school's operation in terms of dollars and cents, fail to recognize that for teachers it is experienced in terms of the long hours they put in. Recognizing the increased effort represented by SLCs (privately, publicly, and in terms of awards and commendations) can help.
- The most important form of such support we have seen is providing paid common planning time for SLC teachers. Without this it is almost impossible to plan enrichment activities, coordinate the involvement of those outside the school, evolve common strategies for resolving students problems, organize parent conferences, and integrate curriculum across subjects.
- Provide lead SLC teachers with an extra planning period for their additional responsibilities. In our experience, there are few teachers who don't wind up putting in more than they're compensated for with such support.

- Purchase needed equipment and materials.
- Establish a modest “slush fund”, controlled by the SLC team, to pay for extra activities (e.g., student awards, field trips, integrated projects).
- Send site and district teams to state and national conferences.

Chapter 4: Evaluation

Keep it simple. Mention program evaluation and a lot of people's eyes glaze over. Who wants to deal with questionnaires, student records, columns of data, statistical analyses? But evaluation need not be hopelessly complex and onerous. The simple theory behind high school reform in general and SLCs in particular is that if you change to a new approach, and implement it well, student performance will improve. So what do you need to assess?

- Whether you've implemented the approach well?
- Whether student performance improves?

These two questions are fundamental to assessing your progress. It's important to focus on both from the start. You can't measure student progress down the road if you don't have a baseline against which to measure it. And you can't expect such progress if you don't ensure quality implementation. In each realm it's important to define objectives, and measurable indicators that reflect progress toward them, and then to collect data on those indicators.

These two forms of evaluation are sometimes called "process" and "outcome." Another way of stating them is as "means" and "ends." Implementing an SLC is a process. Improved student performance is an outcome. The first is a means to the second. While it is important to assess both, the emphasis changes over time. Initially the most important matter is high quality implementation. Over time the focus becomes whether this leads to improved student outcomes.

Best Practices:

- Develop an evaluation plan that defines process and outcome objectives.
- Identify measurable indicators for each category.

Use available guides. Fortunately, in the case of SLCs, there is considerable guidance and help available. The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) has provided electronic forms and directions for submitting student data each year (www.slcapr.org),

and is compiling these data into a national database over time. In addition, each grantee is required to have a third party evaluator who works with the high school(s) and district. DOE also provides guidance for this role. Thus we will just add a few thoughts to this existing direction.

There are a number of guides available that can be useful in assessing the implementation of SLCs. The first to note is that developed by the Northwest Regional Education Lab (NWREL), expressly for SLCs. NWREL is the national support provider for SLC grantees. This 20-page guide, called *Essential Elements of an SLC Evaluation*, is available at their website (www.nwrel.org). It is organized around four elements: planning, implementation, data analysis, and using results. Each element includes a statement of the underlying concept, a description of how the element relates to an SLC, and action steps to implement the element.

For those implementing career academies as part of their SLC efforts, there are evaluation guides for these also. The simplest is probably that available from CASN, entitled *Self-Assessment Guide for Career Academies*. This is structured around key elements of the academy model, and provides a rating system with guidelines for assigning points. It is intended for use by the team of teachers working in an academy, usually at the end of a school year, as a way to assess their own progress and lay plans for the next year. It is available free in the Resources section of CASN's website: <http://casn.berkeley.edu>.

A more elaborate approach to evaluating a career academy is available from the National Career Academy Coalition (NCAC). Built around the Career Academy National Standards of Practice, developed by the same group of organizations that evolved the national definition of academies, this provides rubrics for assessing academies against this more detailed set of standards, with three levels of accomplishment. Its use entails hiring someone from outside the high school to make an evaluation visit, available via NCAC (www.ncaninc.org). This approach is more thorough in assessing progress and identifying needed improvements and next steps.

Best practices:

- Study the available free evaluation guides.
- Consult with experts in your locale (e.g., from the district evaluation office, local colleges, research institutes).
- Study the forms and directions from DOE for submitting annual reports.

Make it useful to implementers. A principle of the third party evaluations required of federal SLC grants, and more broadly, is that the evaluation should be useful to those implementing the program. While it is important to assess whether SLCs are impacting student performance, particularly after they are fully established, and thus whether they are worth continuing to fund, in the early stages of implementation (the first 2-3 years) the central function of evaluation is to help guide implementation. An evaluation can do this in several ways.

A first step is to develop a data collection plan that will provide useful implementation feedback. This usually includes questionnaires, interview guides, and focus group discussion guides, to systematically gather feedback from key SLC implementers, including administrators, teachers, counselors, students, and perhaps community/ employer/ higher education supporters. To these can be added observations of SLC facilities, classes and learning materials. Checklists can also be useful in keeping track of what is being accomplished, when, by whom. All of these can be related to the implementation objectives and measures defined initially.

When it comes to summarizing and reporting such information, one principle is to keep it brief. Few people want to read lengthy, detailed reports. Data can often be summarized in charts and graphs. A second principle is to include what is working well. Those implementing SLCs are usually doing their best, and it is discouraging to hear only criticisms. It is helpful to offer constructive suggestions for improvement, based both on an analysis of developments at the school being evaluated and on what others are doing elsewhere. Guides to improvement are generally more helpful than criticisms of mistakes, particularly when informed by solutions others have found. A third approach is

to share the compiled feedback with all, and frame discussions about how to proceed in terms of alternative strategies rather than personalities and opinions.

Another principle of evaluation is to gather only information that will be used. Any new data collection involves a certain amount of “response burden”, and minimizing this is important. Using existing data and observation can help in this regard. In the same vein, it is important to share with implementers any information that is collected. Elaborate databases that result in no reports or feedback mechanisms add work while contributing nothing.

Best practices:

- Focus on implementation feedback initially, using questionnaires, interviews, activity checklists, and observation.
- Keep reports brief, the tone positive, include constructive suggestions for improvement, and frame related discussions around issues rather than people.
- Keep it lean, collecting only data that will be used.

Use appropriate student outcome measures. Another principle of evaluation is to use student performance data sensibly. For example, it may take years to effect changes in state test scores, but usually reduced disciplinary actions and improved attendance will appear relatively quickly as SLCs take hold. Other measures that may follow include improvements in school retention (reduced dropouts), credits earned toward graduation, and grade point averages. Note that these are all available in existing databases; the less new data collected the better. Sharing even modest improvements in such measures with school staff can help to instill a sense of progress. In our experience, SLCs seem to have the most impact on factors reflecting student motivation. Such motivation and the persistence it leads to are crucial, and by some analyses a far better predictor of future success than test scores.

Best practices:

- Separate “leading indicators” of student change from longer term ones
- Use existing data where possible (e.g., student transcript data)
- Focus on measures that reflect student motivation and persistence

Use data sensitively. There are many confounding variables that can affect results and may have little or nothing to do with SLCs. New principals, counselors, and teachers are one obvious source. Changes in budgets from year to year are another. Facilities may change, as well as textbooks and other learning materials, bell schedules, and so on. Thus it is important to use thoughtful analyses in interpreting data. In our experience, quality of management is perhaps most important to success, and this is hard to measure at all.

One way to make data more sensitive is to aggregate it at meaningful levels. While the federal student data collection required of the grantees calls for school-wide student data to be collected each year, organized by grade level, this may be insensitive to individual SLCs. Thus adding a flag to the high school's database indicating in which SLC each student is enrolled can make this a more sensitive system. This allows for comparison among SLCs, perhaps providing guidance about which strategies are more or less effective if they vary among SLCs. A second suggestion is to examine the progress of each cohort (class) from one year to the next, rather than comparing one year's freshmen (or sophomore, junior, or senior) class with their counterpart from the previous year. This lets you see whether a given cohort is improving over time.

Best practices:

- Apply thoughtful judgments to all data, consider confounding factors.
- Use an available field in the database to flag (“tag”) students by their SLC; examine whether there are differences among SLCs, or between a given SLC and the rest of the high school, and if so, why.
- Follow progress not just in terms of comparing a given class level year-to-year, but whether each cohort improves over time.

Annotated Bibliography

www.careerclusters.org. This national project, supported by state directors of career-technical education (CTE), has helped to define the 16 fields now generally used to frame CTE. It's website offers brochures for all 16 fields, with related knowledge and skills for each, interest inventories, assessment/ certification protocols, a variety of teacher guides, and information on its annual conference.

<http://casn.berkeley.edu>. The "Career Academy Support Network" at UC Berkeley offers a series of guides and handbooks for implementing SLCs and career academies, related research documents, a national directory of Academies that is organized by state and searchable by career field, a Forms Bank of documents useful for implementing these approaches, and an online inquiry service.

www.ed.gov/programs/slcp/resources.html. This is the official U.S Department of Education SLC website. SLCs are housed with the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE). The website offers sections on the purpose of this program of grants, eligibility and applicant information, performance monitoring, related laws & regulations, resources, FAQs, and contacts.

www.naf.org. The "National Academy Foundation" has the largest network of career academies in the country, over 500. This business supported organization, based in NYC, offers extensive curriculum in several career fields, documents on how to start an academy and operate an internship program, and holds an annual conference each summer.

www.ncacinc.org. The "National Career Academy Coalition" supports the development of Academies via an annual conference and an evaluation service based on the *Career Academy National Standards of Practice*, as well as a variety of documents.

www.nwrel.org. The Northwest Regional Education Lab (NWREL) is the organization funded by USDOE to provide support to SLC grantees. It has a host of available products and services, among them research documents, guides, newsletters, online tutorials, and a list of upcoming events, including conferences and workshops.

<http://www.slcapr.org/>. This site provides the evaluation requirements, forms, and guidance for federal SLC grantees. It has documents related to selecting a third party evaluator, how to design a good evaluation, the required annual electronic submission of student data (Annual Performance Report—APR), and lists reporting dates for each cohort of grantees.