

Baseline Report: High School Renewal in Boston

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INTRODUCTION

The Boston Public Schools (BPS), along with its partners, The Boston Plan for Excellence in the Public Schools (BPE), Jobs for the Future (JFF), the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE), and the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC), have designed an approach to high school renewal that attends to the major challenges these schools face: low literacy achievement, high absenteeism and dropout rates, and high student alienation from curriculum, instruction, and, too often, school personnel. Boston's approach adapts the district's strong, extant theory of action for whole-school improvement by adding to this basic theory the following postulate:

If the interwoven problems of alienation and poor literacy skills are acknowledged as the root problems and addressed intensively, then growth in students' reading comprehension will accelerate, and there will be fundamental changes in the relationships between teachers and students, students and students, and students and the adult world beyond school. (Proposal to the Carnegie Corporation, p. 10)

Boston is addressing these interwoven problems of alienation and poor literacy skills by creating small high schools and/or small learning communities (SLCs) in which the small size and school organization work in combination with effective, high quality instructional strategies to simultaneously reduce alienation and increase achievement.

Education Matters, Inc. is evaluating the process and progress of Boston's high school renewal efforts by focusing on the issues identified as essential to whole-school improvement in a sample of the district's high schools. This report presents our baseline data. As such, it a) establishes the SLC/small school conditions in place in the sample at the end of the 2003-2004 school year, and b) provides the data against which to consider growth at the end of the 2.5 year evaluation.

Before presenting our baseline findings, we want to review the assumptions that undergird high school renewal in Boston. These assumptions provide the rationale for the work going on at the schools and, as such, frame the focus of the evaluation study. Following this review, we discuss features of the district context that may have influenced teachers' and headmasters' perspectives on high school renewal during the 2003-2004 school year. Next, we present an overview of our baseline findings, extending those presented in our preliminary report (June 7, 2004), as well as a review of the evaluation design. We then explore further each of the findings, concluding the report with some suggestions of areas that may need additional consideration as the high school renewal work continues.

Assumptions Undergirding High School Renewal. High school renewal in Boston rests on a commitment to creating SLCs and small schools that combine small size with powerful instructional strategies. This evaluation study focuses on literacy instruction, in particular, but the district recognizes the need to insure that instruction in all content areas engages students in high level teaching and learning.

Small Learning Communities/Small Schools. Boston's reform posits that while smallness, in and of itself, can benefit students and teachers, the virtues of smallness can be increased by creating organizational structures that have a "distinct and compelling vision, mission statement, [and] goals" and a range of activities that focus adults' attention on the needs of their students. To this end, SLCs and small schools in Boston should attend to organizing students so that they are part of a school community of learners a) in which adults take students' individuality seriously and, as a result, b) for which they develop a significant commitment. This can be accomplished through the development of, for example, teams, clusters, and/or Pathways that include the integration of bilingual and special education students, mentors for each student, and the development of interdisciplinary approaches to teaching academic course content. SLCs and small schools, reformers posit, should also provide contexts in which teachers will feel a greater sense of belonging as their traditional isolation from one another is reduced by the new organizational arrangements.

The ongoing implementation of Boston's Essentials which emphasize the development of collegial learning and distributed leadership should, in principle, create school communities where teachers work together frequently and become more committed to their schools. Small size, organizational arrangements, and collaboration alone, however, will not address the interwoven problems of alienation and poor literacy skills. Therefore, Boston's approach to high school renewal also includes a specific focus on literacy instruction.

Literacy-Focused Instructional Practices. To address poor literacy skills, small size must be accompanied by instructional practices that engage students in high quality instruction that sustains the virtue of small size – the opportunity to get to know students well – while accelerating their development of high quality literacy skills. Such instruction is known as *ambitious* or *constructivist* teaching (Cohen, 1989). In Boston, ambitious literacy practices are embedded in the Workshop model of instruction.

Ambitious literacy teaching, embedded in the structure of Workshop, is central to the literacy focus of the SLCs and small schools because researchers and policy makers stress that learning involves more than remembering and repeating information. Learning needed for the world in which we live requires students to gain a deep knowledge of a subject so that they can use that knowledge, and bring it to bear on problems and questions that matter. Learning involves making connections between new knowledge and old. It occurs as teachers pose questions, challenge students' thinking, and guide them in examining ideas and relationships. These instructional strategies are deemed essential because "what students learn has to do fundamentally with how they learn it" (Cohen, 1989). Schools that use these strategies a) engage students and teachers in challenging one another about facts as well as opinions, b) have students approach academic content through assignments that involve problem solving, critical analysis, or higher order thinking, and c) support students in engaging in focused conversations with one another as well as with teachers.

Such teaching meshes well with Boston's theory of action for high schools. If teachers are to

know their students well as part of the effort to reduce alienation, then ambitious teaching can help because it requires teachers and students to understand each other's thinking (Cohen, Raudenbush, and Ball, 1999; Cohen and Ball, 2001). Greater understanding will likely be coupled with greater personalization and will, thereby, help reduce student alienation.

But, this kind of teaching is also very demanding. To teach this way, a teacher first has to create a classroom culture in which students know that a) they and their learning will be taken seriously, b) challenges to their knowledge are legitimate parts of learning, c) they are required to present arguments based on data, and d) they must learn from, comment on, and question each other's presentations. Second, the teacher must have the knowledge and skill with which to pose appropriate questions; challenge without intimidating; and trust students to have the capacity to carry on such dialogues. Third, teachers must know how to manage new and different kinds of classroom routines, new and different kinds of relationships between themselves and their students, and between themselves, their students, and the content. They must learn to be comfortable in challenging students' knowledge and in having students challenge their own knowledge. For many teachers, especially for those who are not confident in their own content knowledge, this can be intimidating, if not impossible. Most teachers never experienced such teaching when they were students and were not taught to use these strategies in their teacher education programs. In Boston, teachers learn to use ambitious instruction largely through participating in a range of professional development activities which include school-based coaching organized into the district's Collaborative Coaching and Learning (CCL) model.

Students, too, must learn how to operate in such classroom environments with new sets of interactional expectations. While some students may have experienced the Workshop approach to literacy in their middle schools, we expect that, for most, the demands of ambitious instruction will be as new and challenging as they are for teachers. Thus, teachers' success with ambitious instruction will depend, in part, on students' opportunities to acquire new learning strategies coupled with their willingness to engage in the requisite teaching and learning demands.

The District Context. The 2003-2004 school year was challenging for all of Boston's schools. High schools, as a result, had to cope with a number of challenges in the context of developing their small schools and small learning communities.

- The district had to deal with a very large budget cut that resulted in the loss of teaching positions in many of the district's schools. The loss of teachers had an impact on the staffing flexibility available to the district's high school headmasters.
- As the result of a referendum passed in the prior year's election, bi-lingual services were greatly reduced and more students who were English Language Learners (ELL) were placed in mainstream classes. New Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) classes were developed and staffed. These changes led to considerable staff changes in some of the small high schools and SLCs in our sample.
- Teachers began the school year without a negotiated agreement between the BPS and the

Boston Teachers Union (BTU). As a result, in mid-autumn, they began an action known as “work-to-fairness.” Under this action, teachers did not engage in activities that were a) outside of the contract’s provisions and, b) caused no harm to students by their absence. In some schools, this meant that teachers no longer volunteered their time for school-based committees such as Instructional Leadership Teams, for example.

- Toward the end of the 2002-2003 school year, the superintendent mandated the establishment of one new set of small schools. These schools were forged out of extant programs that had been parts of a large, comprehensive high school. As a result, one of the small schools in our sample began the school year without having had much time to plan for their new organization and size. The process and speed of restructuring, according to district-level administrators as well as those in the school in our sample, had left teachers without much, if any, role in the design and focus of their new, small school. Even though this school was developed from an extant program, changes in staffing, student population, and organization were significant enough that the 2003-2004 school year effectively represented the beginning of what will likely be a multi-year process of development for this small school.¹
- During the second half of the 2003-2004 school year, high schools that had created SLCs that included some grade-level communities learned that they faced what amounted to a forced choice situation. The Superintendent noted that the terms of the Gates Foundation grant required the creation of six more small high schools. And, with the agreement of the School Committee, he revised district policy to require all SLCs to include grades 9-12. Some district high schools that had created SLCs included one or more that was grade-level only. Now, high schools needed to choose to restructure into small schools or to restructure into SLCs without grade-level units. The schools in our sample were disappointed by the changes they would have to make, which they saw as unrelated to what they considered the demonstrable benefits of the grade-level academies they had in place.² Nonetheless, by the end of the 2003-2004 school year, high schools had to choose which option they would plan during the 2004-2005 school year for implementation at the start of the 2005-2006 school year.

Without question, the district context during the 2003-2004 school year influenced teachers’ and headmasters’ views of high school renewal. Reductions in staff allocations contributed to the challenge of creating workable schedules in which teachers had, for example, common planning time. The requirement to eliminate grade-level SLCs disappointed teachers and headmasters

¹Another small high school in our sample had also been created when the Superintendent mandated the reorganization of a comprehensive high school into small schools three years earlier. Interviews suggest that teachers continue to experience frustration about their absence from the process at the outset and during subsequent years.

²In describing schools’ reactions to the forced choice, we are not concluding that the grade-level SLCs were uniformly successful. We are reporting teachers’ and headmasters’ perceptions of these SLCs. We will discuss their organization and teachers’ reasons for valuing them as part of the findings of this report.

who supported that organization. Although they theoretically had a choice about how to restructure themselves, teachers and administrators in such schools experienced the choice as a mandate to eliminate what they considered their high-functioning SLCs. Work-to-fairness, no doubt, created some tensions between administrators and teachers.

However, we also want to note that only some of these contextual factors, in our view and after careful analysis, influenced the findings we present. The factors that mattered most, according to teachers and administrators, were a) the mandated approach to high school renewal and its concomitants, and b) the challenges presented by small size that neither teachers nor headmasters knew how to eliminate. When teachers took issue with administrative practices, they focused on uneven implementation of policies and practices related to students' tardiness and discipline, for example. They did not mention issues that related to the contract that was under negotiation.

Therefore, although the context may well have constrained some activities at the schools and lessened the pace of progress, overall we think that the findings we present have less to do with the particular context of the 2003-2004 school year and more to do with the district's overall approach to high school renewal during that and previous school years.

With the context in mind, we turn next to the questions that are guiding this evaluation study.

Evaluation Questions. It is with the understanding of Boston's approach to high school renewal as an approach that unites the district's whole-school improvement Essentials with the specific challenges posed by high schools – low student literacy and high student alienation – that Education Matters designed the evaluation and focused on the following broad question.

How well and to what extent is Boston creating small schools and small learning communities that establish a) high quality, personalized human relationships and b) high quality literacy instructional practices that engage students in their secondary school education and accelerate their progress?

This core question led to a number of sub-questions that further focus attention on concrete aspects of whole-school improvement given the interwoven problems of student alienation and poor literacy skills.

With respect to small size:

- How and to what extent does implementation of small schools and SLCs reflect the intentions of the reform?
- How do the organization and associated policies and practices of each SLC or small school contribute to increasing student engagement and reducing student alienation?
- How do the organization and associated policies influence teachers' engagement with students and the larger school organization?

- What are the school-based organizational arrangements that support teachers in learning to teach ambitiously? What are the school-based organizational arrangements that support students as they learn to engage with ambitious instruction?
- What aspects of working/learning in the SLC or small school setting challenge students, teachers, and school leaders?

With respect to ambitious instruction:

- How do coaches and the CCL model help teachers a) deepen their content knowledge, and b) increase their pedagogical strategies so that they are better able to understand and implement ambitious, workshop teaching strategies?
- How do SLCs and small schools use what they learn to address the alienation and literacy skills of students whose reading comprehension and writing skills are much below grade level? How do teachers deal with the need to accelerate learning for such students? How do the SLC and small school structures facilitate ambitious instruction?
- What kinds of learning opportunities/experiences characterize students' classroom learning experiences? How well do they reflect the conceptions of ambitious instruction? How well do they reflect students' learning needs? How do students learn to work in the context of ambitious teaching? What do students report about the work they are asked to do and their engagement with it?

To implement the evaluation, beginning in January 2004, Education Matters researchers interviewed seven high school headmasters as well as members of their leadership teams and their literacy coaches as part of selecting the sample of small schools/SLCs we would follow for two and one-half years. With the agreement of the High School Renewal Group (HSRG) we selected two small schools that were developed out of two different comprehensive high schools, and four small learning communities developed out of two other comprehensive high schools. The SLCs include two ninth grade SLCs, one tenth grade SLC, and the tenth grade of one cross-grade SLC. Given the importance of students' first two years of high school and the focus on literacy, for the most part, the teachers in our sample come from the ninth and tenth grades and teach English Language Arts (ELA).

During the winter and spring of 2004, we completed 49 teacher interviews, and 13 school-based administrator, coach and support staff interviews. In addition, we observed 17 language arts teachers and teachers who teach signature courses in these high schools.³ And, we interviewed a sample of HSRG members once or twice during the school year.

³We observed 17 teachers during the spring of 2004. Each of these teachers were interviewed twice. In addition, we interviewed all but one of the headmasters twice.

Overview of the Findings. The findings we report here focus on: school organization, school community, and instructional approaches. They reflect, for the schools in our sample, the early stages of becoming small during the initial phase of high school renewal in Boston. The findings highlight the organizational and professional challenges these schools encountered and the dominant instructional strategies in use during the first year of Education Matters’ evaluation. Teachers and headmasters understand the potential value of small schools and SLCs. However, they also reported the struggles they encountered on the way to becoming the small schools and SLCs they envision for themselves and their students. As such, these baseline findings are important because they reveal where the schools are currently as well as the context in which the next steps to high school improvement in these schools will take place. The data analysis strongly suggest that:

- *The district’s high schools, regardless of whether they were reconfigured into small schools or cross-grade SLCs, for the most part, were struggling with the same organizational and cultural issues.* They were having difficulty a) providing teachers in the same content area and/or units with common planning time, and b) bringing teachers together for collaborative conversations, planning, and case management.
- *Headmasters, teachers and coaches reported that it was difficult to organize Collaborative Coaching and Learning (CCL) cycles in the small schools and cross-grade SLCs.* They reported that the main obstacle to creating viable CCL groups was scheduling. Some small schools and cross-grade SLCs wanted ELA-focused CCL cycles, but were often unable to arrange them. Some tried to develop cross-content area CCL cycles that focused on reading strategies across the curriculum. Although these cross-content area cycles have potential, coaches and teachers reported that it was especially difficult to make the demonstration component of the cycles useful for all teachers. Teachers and coaches who worked with grade-level SLCs reported more success in implementing ELA-focused CCL cycles.
- *Teachers who worked in small schools and cross-grade SLCs reported that they were quite alienated and frustrated by a) the process of reorganizing their schools as well as b) the resulting organizational structures.* The sentiments they reported were a result of a) teachers having had little or no voice in the reorganization of their schools, b) an organization that isolated them from colleagues, and, in some cases, c) the requirement that they teach courses out of their area of competence in order for the school to “cover” those courses.
- *Headmasters reported that budget cuts and other staffing constraints left them unable to fulfill the promise of cross-grade SLCs and small schools.* With respect to cross-grade SLCs, headmasters spoke about the impossibility of keeping them “pure.” They spoke of having teachers who had to spend less than 85 percent of their time in their home SLC and of students who had to take a few of their core and signature courses outside of their assigned SLC. The headmasters of small schools spoke about large class sizes and the limitations posed by having only one teacher available to students in, for example, ELA,

at each grade level.

- *We observed that the organization of SLCs by grade-level appeared to provide a context in which these SLCs could address students' instructional and social needs.* This finding may be related to several factors. First, these grade-level units may have been functioning longer than the small schools and cross-grade SLCs. Second, they may have been able to use their grade-level focus to develop student-directed services. Third, size may have provided them with more flexibility in the context of budget cuts. And, fourth, leadership for these grade-level SLCs may have been quite strong. We pose these hypotheses as part of the baseline findings, but we do not know which are, in fact, related to the finding.
- *Small schools cross-grade SLCs are still developing their thematic foci and the "signature courses" designed to help students explore the theme of their small school or cross-grade SLC.* Due to small size and staff reductions linked to budget cuts, schools reported that they found it difficult to schedule students in cross-grade SLCs into their SLC signature course. As a result, some students were scheduled into signature courses in an SLC which was not their home organizational unit. Small schools, regardless of their longevity, were still struggling to create a thematic focus that would focus the school's work and engage students.
- *The teacher data we collected about student alienation strongly suggests that teachers distinguish between two aspects of alienation: a) alienation that reflects students' lack of connection to adults and students, and b) student engagement that reflects the extent of students' participation in the school's academic and extra-curricular program.* We were unable to interview students about alienation or connections to their schools during the 2003-2004 school year due to the fact that data collection was delayed until early March. However, we are conducting student focus groups to collect data during the 2004-2005 school year.
- *We observed little Workshop-based instruction. Rather, most of the instruction we observed was teacher-directed.* Four of the thirteen ELA teachers used a Workshop format for their classes when we observed. A few teachers in our sample implemented a mix of teacher-directed and student-centered instructional approaches within the same class period. All of the classes we observed demonstrated that teachers had planned a number of varied activities for their ELA blocks.

We turn next to an exploration of these findings in the spirit of helping the HSRCG and the BPS fully understand the basis of Education Matters' conclusions. We begin with the findings related to school organization. Then we turn to school community as it is associated with teachers' sense of alienation from their small schools and cross-grade SLCs. We follow this section with findings related to teachers' views of schools as communities for students. We conclude with a discussion of the baseline data that relates to the instructional practices we observed. Following these sections, we review our conclusions and offer suggestions for further consideration.

SCHOOL ORGANIZATION: SMALL SCHOOLS AND SLCs

Small size is not the district's goal for high school renewal. It is the starting point, a means to school-based conditions in which other student-focused improvements can take place. Small size, in other words, sets the stage for high school renewal. The high schools in our sample represent the two approaches to smallness that existed in the BPS at the start of the 2003-2004 school year: multi-grade (9-12) small schools and cross-grade (10-12) SLCs, and single grade-level SLCs.⁴ Both approaches created small units out of what were once large, comprehensive high schools. And both, our baseline data suggest, have potential strengths and weaknesses with respect to achieving the goals of Boston's high school renewal effort.

At the end of the first year of evaluation, our data lead us to conclude that the small high schools and cross-grade SLCs face a considerable array of challenges that stand in the way of achieving the district's goals of creating high schools that reduce student alienation and increase students' literacy skills. In contrast, the three grade-level SLCs in our sample demonstrate the ways in which small units of school organization may be conducive to achieving these goals.⁵

More specifically, the grade-level SLCs have created instructionally-focused, collaborative cultures in which teachers work together to improve their own instruction with the goal of, thereby, improving students' achievement. As such, they have created the conditions that ground Boston's theory of action, the theory that guides the district's whole-school improvement effort. More specifically, the theory of action begins with the straightforward hypothesis that improved instruction will improve student achievement. Then it postulates that the way to achieve improved instruction is to support teachers at their school sites as they learn in collaboration with one another. Collaborative learning is to be facilitated by asking teachers and principals to engage in specific activities, called Essentials, which, when undertaken with skillful support, help to change the social structure of each school. The goal is to have educators work together in such a way that they come to share common language, common practices, and common goals for their students. The activities associated with the Essentials help school staff a) recognize their own learning needs as well as those of their students, b) learn to reorganize time, student groupings, staff, and resources, and c) direct their attention to the measurement of student progress. High school renewal is guided by the district's theory of action. At the high school level, however, reorganizing size is an additional essential aspect of the theory.

In reporting our findings and situating them in Boston's theory of action, we are not concluding that small high schools and cross-grade SLCs cannot be successful. Nor are we concluding that grade-level SLCs will always be successful. Our data confirm that other factors, most

⁴This evaluation study does not include attention to the district's Pilot high schools, an alternate approach to small high schools.

⁵As we noted in presenting our findings, several factors, in addition to size and organization, may be associated with these findings. These include headmaster leadership and the length of time that the units have been functioning. We will explore these factors during the next phases of data collection and analysis.

particularly resources and leadership, influence the success or failure of any organizational arrangement. However, we are suggesting that at the end of the 2003-2004 school year the grade-level SLCs appeared to have developed the kind of instructionally-focused collaborative SLC culture that is a goal of the district's whole-school improvement effort. Therefore, we suggest that there are important lessons to be learned from the grade-level SLCs with the goal of considering how those lessons can inform the progress of the small schools and cross-grade SLCs.⁶

Therefore, this section of the report focuses on how the organization of size in the small high schools and SLCs influences teachers' work and their ability to form collaborative, instructionally-focused communities. We begin with Boston's premise that, although the ultimate purpose of creating small high schools and SLCs is to provide students with supportive learning environments, such schools must also become supportive environments for teachers. In other words, in order for teachers to work together to create successful, student-focused small high schools and SLCs, they must also belong to small, focused learning communities of adult professionals. Smallness, in other words, must benefit teachers if teachers are to use small size to benefit students.

With these assumptions guiding our analysis, we turn to a consideration of the ways in which small size is associated with teachers' opportunities to develop and work in collaborative, instructionally focused communities.

1. Teachers reported that in the redesigned small schools and cross-grade SLCs they encountered significant obstacles to working in collegial, instructionally-focused communities. In contrast, teachers in the three grade-level SLCs reported that they had been able to create or were working toward creating collaborative, instructionally-focused collegial communities for themselves.

How do these differences manifest themselves in the schools? First, almost all of the teachers we interviewed in the small schools/cross-grade SLCs reported that they were without scheduled planning time in which they could work with colleagues who taught the same students and/or taught in the same content areas.

One of the challenges was not being able to meet with the group of teachers [who were] working with the same students. That was one of the big challenges. In the past [when the school was larger], we had opportunities to meet like that, and that's always very helpful because you can discuss student work, student behavior. Is the student the same in the different classes? Is the student work the same in the different classes? That's always very helpful. How can we help the student? What other needs should be addressed? Teacher A

⁶We are aware that the BPS has initiated a process to insure the development of cross-grade SLCs and that, as a result, these grade-level SLCs will not function beyond the 2004-2005 school year.

[Meetings with other teachers in the SLC] are once a week since the second part of the year, since January. It's a small group, whoever has the period off. Two years ago, you know, we were focused and planned things for the better of the community. Now, it's basically like, we can't even get the chaos out of the halls. We can't even get kids to class. What do you mean planning all this? You know, if the school can't be organized enough or disciplined enough to take care of all that's going on. So, it's been hard to really rally this year. [Meetings are] done haphazardly, not with, not organized with a purposeful period. Teacher C

Administrators⁷ agreed with their teachers' and reported that given school size and staffing allocations, the schools or cross-grade SLC could not be scheduled to provide teachers with common meeting time. In addition, administrators reported that the small schools that had developed teams that enabled teachers to meet regularly as a grade-level were discontinued due to budget cuts that made it impossible to organize such time for teachers.

Basically, the budget cut at the end of last year meant that our small learning communities were kind of put on hold. We kept it in ninth grade. In grades ten through twelve we did not have small learning communities this year. We had them last year and the year before but not this year. They gave teachers a greater chance to connect and talk about students and stuff like that, so I think that's been a real loss this year. Administrator C

This administrator went on to note that restoring some common planning time for the 2004-2005 school year seemed possible in light of a somewhat increased budget.

Our hiring for next year reflects our preoccupation with getting common planning time back. This means we need an elective that students can go to while there's common planning time. We hired a teacher that will allow us to put students in a class so teachers have common planning time. Administrator C

Administrators of the cross-grade SLC reported similar obstacles that stood in the way of their ability to provide teachers with common planning time that would be devoted to strengthening the SLC.

We used to meet to develop curriculum. To make sure that the SLC idea was infused in all the subject matters. We haven't done it [this year]. I've put up some memos this year, just in case teachers want to find some connection [for their course with the signature courses]. Our vision of signature courses is not that they are alone by themselves. We wanted those ideas to be adapted by the content area teachers. We have met [a bit]. We tried to do some common

⁷We are using the term "administrator" to refer to headmasters, assistant headmasters, directors of instruction, and program directors. Given the small size of the sample, we have established this convention to avoid identifying individuals. In addition, we refer to all administrators and teachers as "she."

practices in writing, and to plan some common events for the whole community. We planned a couple of field trips, discussed how to write a 5 paragraph essay in a way we'd all agree with, but it hasn't been very substantial. Administrator D

Teachers in small schools and cross-grade SLCs also reported that they had few colleagues with whom to discuss instruction, even if informally. This was because small size led to grade-level staff allocations in which, fundamentally, only one mainstream teacher taught each core course at a grade-level.⁸

There's no department collaboration. BPS has a new system where we can look at our class data and decide where we're going from there. We have the data to help us with what the kids need to know. I'm a ninth grade teacher in my school, but who do I discuss that with? I went to a meeting a couple of weeks ago and they said, "Have you discussed this with other ninth grade teachers?" "No, because we're a separate small school." So it's very difficult to be data driven. I actually believe in it. But who do I have a meeting with? Teacher U

[The end of the year] was the first time the whole department had a chance to hear from each other about what they were doing in their own classes. If I'm teaching the [tenth grade signature course], I have no idea what the person doing [the ninth grade signature course] is teaching. But, you want to make sure you aren't duplicating efforts, and you also need to have a better sense of the whole program. What are people learning here? What should the sequence be? Administrator H

Many teachers reported that they missed the feeling of being part of a subject matter department and the opportunities they had to sit together as a group and talk about what each of them was doing and how it was going. Such teachers reported that when they met as a department, it was usually to participate in conversations or professional development required by the district, or to discuss pressing student discipline issues.

In contrast, teachers in two of the three grade-level SLCS reported multiple opportunities to meet in order to discuss SLC issues, student issues, and teaching and learning. Teacher D below, noted how teachers focus their instructional work within one grade-level SLC. Her colleague, Teacher E, described the ways in which two different grade-level SLCs worked together to create alignment across grade-levels.

⁸Depending on enrollment, these small units might have a second teacher who had one section of, for example, ninth-grade English and taught English at a higher grade level for the rest of her schedule. Small schools and cross-grade SLCs might also have a) special education teachers who work with students whose day is substantially separate from those of students in mainstream classes, and b) ESL teachers who work with students across grade-levels and SLCs.

Within that [grade-level] structure, we can work a lot on more instructional things. We're talking a lot in our small learning community meetings about our curriculum, our approach to our subject matter, what are we doing around procedural knowledge versus content knowledge, that sort of thing, and how we can make that happen. We were able to schedule a lot of the English teachers with the same free period so that we could do CCLs that were really fruitful. We did one on nonfiction this year, which was helpful. And that all transfers down to the students. MCAS is a big anchor, and we have a lot of time because of our meeting times as a 10th grade to work together on strategies, action plans, how we're going to support students, not just academically but socially, surrounding the MCAS. What are we going to do to alleviate fears, to provide strategies, to get information out there. Teacher D

We sat down as 9th and 10th grade English teachers, both special ed and mainstream, and we talked about: What are we teaching in the 9th grade as far as strategies? What's our focus and what do we feel we should be teaching the 10th grade as a focus? And we came up with the fact that 9th grade teachers would teach questioning, but we were just going to stick to inferential and literal [questions], and the 10th grade teachers would pick up and they'd move on [from that]. So, you develop your curriculum. But, what happens is we all end up sharing everything. You know like one teacher likes the way I do my outlines so she takes my outlines, and then I liked that chart another teacher made, so I took that and modified that... So, we all share. Teacher E

Within the grade-level SLC arrangement, teachers reported that they were able to collaborate with partner organizations as well as with other schools with the goal of developing programs that would address their students' needs.

Some [outside] sources come in to help us, and we developed some of our own things, but it took a while to decide amongst ourselves what's going to work for us at [this high school]. And the folks from [our partner college] were on board right away. And we got together with them and also another high school would join us and [our partner college] folks to set up programs [to address student's questions: Who am I? Where am I going? What is the world of work? What are barriers? What can help me, what can hinder me? Things of that sort. So we sat down and we gave our perspective as urban teachers. We listened to their perspective as persons in testing and guidance and psychology. So we've put it together not just as a packet to give to kids, but almost as an intervention. And that's made all the difference, I think. Teacher I

Teachers in the third grade-level SLC did not have formal schedules that enabled them to spend time on subject-focused instructional topics such as those described by these three teachers. They met with their SLC administrator in groups that came together because teachers shared a common planning time, not necessarily the same students. During those meetings, teachers

discussed SLC issues and, occasionally, were able to develop SLC-wide activities for students. When they could, teachers met informally with colleagues to discuss issues of teaching and learning.

We get together once a week, teachers in the 9th grade SLC. We're broken up into five groups [according to] whoever has a free period. We talk about students that are in trouble, that are emotionally or literally in trouble. But that's really the only time we ever do. If we could get together, another teacher who teaches social studies and I could get together... We have some of the same students. If we could get together and discuss it as a unit, it would be more effective. ...There's never been a time, with the exception of maybe like five minutes or 20 minutes that I've begged for in a professional development after school that I've worked with like ninth grade English teachers. Instead, with the luck of the draw, there's a ninth grade English teacher that I meet after school or on our own a lot and plan units on our own professionally. I see so much potential, but the schedule seems to constrain it. Teacher F

We discuss students or field trips or what we can do to get parents more involved. We discuss problems with failure issues. We planned a holiday dinner. It was all the 9th grade SLC and all the 9th grade teachers got involved. We all cooked something and brought it. Planning for field trips has come out of [those meetings] and a mentoring program is in the process right now. Teacher J

Whether or not they had sufficient time to meet, however, teachers in the grade-level SLCs expressed the feeling that they were a community of teachers working together for the benefit of the students.

We're a very tight community, meaning that we all get along with each other, we all like each other. We talk to each other in the mornings. We meet with the administrator for the 9th grade who does an excellent job of communicating among all of us and keeping the communication going amongst the teachers. We have our own detention setup; we have one teacher from the grade-level proctoring detention every day. All the same rules are standard. It's very, very structured, and I think that for a community that's important, and it's also extremely important for 9th graders. Teacher J

Because we're a grade-level SLC and we have a really big group of teachers who understand each other, it's like we developed a little culture. We got to know each other. We have our own discipline coordinator, we have our own guidance counselor who we don't share with anyone and I think that's huge. Teacher E

But now with these structures, when we sit in a case management meeting, a given student has four teachers, and all four teachers are there. And it's much more productive. We can talk about issues as a grade-level. At this stage of

development, this grade is often a troubling time [for students]. We have a lot of kids here who seem to be investigating gangs. We have girls who are having children. As a grade-level, we can deal with those things as a community.

Teacher D

Administrators responsible for these grade-level SLCs reported that they, too, had greater difficulty scheduling common meeting times for their teachers as a result of budget cuts and staffing allocations. But, having more than one core subject matter teacher at each grade level, gave them greater flexibility. As Administrator F notes, this flexibility may disappear if the school reorganizes into 9-12 SLCs.

It's pretty easy to see, who's in the 9th grade, and then put together that group of teachers to meet after school. The same is true academically; if the parents come up to meet with the kids' teachers, we know who the four 9th grade teachers are. I think it's a lot easier dealing with it that way. I'm very concerned about going from 9 -12 in terms of course offerings and how you deal with things at the upper level like advanced placement courses. If you offer one calculus course and you have three separate houses, where do you put that AP course? Do you say that it's separate, so anyone from the three houses can take it? Administrator F

Administrators noted that yet another factor limited their flexibility: block scheduling. As a result of longer teaching blocks, it took considerable creativity for administrators with grade-level SLCs to develop schedules in which teachers could meet.

I guess to me what makes an SLC is the fact that the same teachers see the same students and the teachers have common planning time. This year it's after school. It doesn't work out [during the school day] That's one thing about block scheduling. It really constrains your ability to get teachers out of the classroom to meet during the day time – And our common planning time is pretty focused on either case management or instructional practice, and by case management I mean teachers talking about concerns they have around issues of mental health or at risk students, with either the SPED department head or counselors or some outside mental health professionals that we have available. So there's a high level of buy-in for these teachers, with the students they're working with. So to me that's what makes it an SLC. Administrator A

What is clear from these administrators' and teachers' comments, is their conviction that an SLC cannot achieve its goals without time for teachers to meet and discuss the various issues that influence them and their students. Administrators of grade-level SLCs who created schedules that worked, demonstrated their understanding and commitment to the success of their SLCs.

In contrast, we learned that in some SLCs, the absence of common meeting times for grade-level SLC teachers was the result of challenges related to budget cuts accompanied by the lack of attention to this aspect of scheduling as Administrator E notes.

Twenty-five percent of the school is not teaching each period, and I've been fighting now about this issue for two years. We need to be able to prioritize who is off for which period. Now, it's totally random. So teachers are meeting with random groups of teachers who happen to be available. And it seems to me, and this is something I'm fighting strongly for, that when we build the schedule for next year, hopefully we'll know what we're building for, that we prioritize something. Either we say half of the English department will be off periods one and two and the other half three and four, that we do something that makes sense. Administrator E

Teachers in small schools also reported that administrators' decisions could leave grade-level teachers with common periods for administrative duties but not for planning time.

For a small school we have absolutely no common planning time....The comment from the administration is that logistically they couldn't do it. But, for my tenth grade group there are four of us who have the same period off. The history teacher doesn't have that period off, but two other teachers and I had that period off. And I think it just got lost in the beginning of the year as a priority to require teachers to meet together. And instead they gave us all administrative duties: watching the bathroom, doing hallway monitoring, doing a variety of other things. When we bring this up, the fact that we didn't have common meeting time, the excuse from the administration is constantly, "Oh, logistically it couldn't happen." But there are core groups of teachers, and in particular this tenth grade there are three of us that have that time off, and if it was a priority, if they saw that common planning time was necessary, it could have happened. It wasn't a priority and they didn't see how it could happen, when it was pretty clear to me how it could happen. They gave us duties instead of planning time. Teacher G

We do not have the expertise with which to assess what is and is not possible with respect to scheduling teachers to have common times in which to meet. What is clear, however, is that such time is necessary and that for most teachers in the small schools and cross-grade SLCs it was not available. In contrast, administrators of schools that include grade-level SLCs had, for the most part, been able to create some times in which teachers could regularly meet.

2. Teachers and administrators reported that small size and the understandable focus on core content courses in the context of block scheduling led to conditions in which a) students had to take courses outside of their cross-grade SLC, and b) some teachers in cross-grade SLCs and small schools had teaching schedules they considered undesirable for themselves and for their students. These realities, coupled with the absence of common meeting times, added to teachers' sense that they were not part of a viable cross-grade SLC.

The strength of SLCs is that it's a good idea to divide up a big school and have teachers and administrators focusing on a certain group of students. I think that serves students very well. The weakness is that we don't have enough staff to

really be able to focus all their attention on that one group of students. So, it falls apart in terms of staffing. Teacher O

These learning communities are not autonomous in any way. For example, we have teachers that may teach one or two of their [cross-grade SLC] students and the rest are from a different SLC. So, we have not been able to successfully create a sense of community. I think it's because of scheduling. And that's our number one problem. So, it's [a cross-grade SLC] in name only. And we do have a signature course. But we don't have interdisciplinary courses. All that really hasn't happened. So, it's in name only. Teacher C

Administrators of the cross-grade SLCs share teachers' concerns. Like their teachers, they fundamentally support the idea of a cross-grade SLC. What they report, however, is that resource and staffing constraints have created conditions in which they cannot successfully organize these small school units.

One of the fundamental aspects [of SLCs] is to have kids take their classes within these small learning communities. The SLCs ranged from 54% to 83% of kids taking courses within the small learning community. By the second year, we did block scheduling and a couple of other adjustments, growing and learning from our first year, and I think we were somewhere about 85% of kids [taking all courses in their SLC] – And that allowed us to really start building connectedness in the small learning community, individual and personalized attention. We tried to reduce alienation... This year, having lost [so many] teachers, I would venture to guess, and it's probably a conservative guess, that we are back to where we started the first year. Administrator B

As a result of these staffing and scheduling issues, teachers and administrators reported that some students had to be scheduled for signature courses that were outside of their selected SLC. As a result, these students missed the central academic course that was designed to help them understand their SLC's focus, and participated in a signature course that was unconnected to their chosen area of interest.

Small schools made scheduling and assignment decisions that troubled their teachers. For example, a few teachers in the small schools reported having students enrolled from multiple grades as a result of budget cuts that reduced the size of the faculty and limited scheduling options. One teacher reported being required to teach all four classes out of her area of certification due to curriculum changes and the school's inability to hire another teacher. She felt that the school did her a disservice by giving her this assignment and, in turn, that she was doing the students a disservice by teaching content about which she wasn't knowledgeable. Other teachers reported teaching at least one class out of their area of expertise and certification. And, yet another teacher in our sample reported moving with her students from ninth, to tenth, to eleventh grade as a result of staffing changes. With only one content area teacher per grade level, she expressed her concern that students would have the same teacher for a core content

area for three of their high school years.

These scheduling decisions, brought about by small school and cross-grade SLC size, coupled with teachers' limited ability to have scheduled time in which to work together, contributed to teachers' sense that they did not belong to a community despite the small size of the high school unit in which they worked.

3. School-based professional development could have provided a context in which teachers worked together to a) strengthen their own community of instructionally-focused learners, and b) improve their instructional skills. Our data strongly suggest that scheduling and staffing constraints in the small schools and cross-grade SLCs prevented CCL from achieving these goals. CCL was more successful in the grade-level SLCs although none of the cycles described to us included a clear focus, related lab-sites, and debrief sessions.

There were multiple challenges to implementing CCL in small schools and cross-grade SLCs during the 2003-2004 school year.

- First, as we have discussed above, teachers in the same content area and/or grade level did not always have common planning periods in which they could participate in a coaching cycle.
- Second, small schools and cross-grade SLCs often had only one core content area teacher at a grade level. This made it impossible for coaches to create grade-level, content-focused CCL cycles.
- Third, the negotiation of a new teacher contract was coupled with a "Work to Fairness" action by teachers. Work to Fairness was a further challenge to coaches and headmasters who tried to put CCL groups together. Since teachers were not required to participate in CCL, some did not.
- Fourth, the CCL groups that were constructed in the small schools and cross-grade SLCs, in particular, included teachers from multiple subject areas. Not surprisingly, it was difficult for coaches to create cycles that met all of the teachers' learning needs.
- Fifth, there were a number of teachers who objected to CCL as a form of professional development and/or Workshop as the dominant form of literacy instruction. When they participated in a CCL cycle, coaches and teachers reported that they interfered with the progress of the cycle. (These teachers worked in grade-level SLCs as well as in small schools and cross-grade SLCs.)
- Sixth, due to school-based conditions and headmasters' priorities, some ELA teachers were not scheduled to participate in CCL cycles.

As a result of these factors, CCL groups in the small schools and cross-grade SLCs included teachers from two or three content areas. Coaches were left with the challenging task of developing professional development cycles given these constraints. One approach they took was to address each teachers' learning preferences on the week that the lab-site was to be in that teacher's classroom. The result of this arrangement, teachers reported, was professional development that was not focused over the eight weeks of a cycle but rather addressed the needs

of each week's host-teacher. For example, one ELA teacher reported that the coach was going to demonstrate a lesson related to *Of Mice and Men* in her class in a few days. She pointed out that this lesson, while of value to her, might not be of value to the physics teacher in her group. Indeed, her comment about observing in the physics teacher's class was, "What do I care about physics?" From the perspective of developing an instructionally-focused, collaborative culture, this adaption of CCL did not look promising.

Some coaches who worked with groups of cross-content area teachers tried to focus CCL cycles on a reading strategy that could be used across content areas. In this design, either the coach demonstrated the strategy in a different teacher's class each week or, as in one cycle, each teacher demonstrated and was observed two or three times.⁹ Such arrangements provided the cycle with an instructional focus, and several social studies teachers, for example, reported that they learned strategies they could use to help students read their texts. However, this approach did not convince all of the participants that spending their time this way was worthwhile. As one such teacher reported, "I know what I'm doing. If I'm that good that they bring in people, why am I doing CCL?" Teacher N¹⁰

A few teachers in the small schools reported that they had not had an opportunity to participate in CCL because it was not yet a priority in their schools.

If you're asking, do I know about CCL, yes. Is it used in this place as much as it should be? No. Other schools have been doing it for a couple of years and we've kind of been on the back burner, not really doing it. I think there needs to be a whole school [discussion of] what is CCL? Why is it here? What does it do? I don't think we had that discussion. That professional development piece has not been put forth to the faculty as much as I think it should be. And why we are doing it. Teacher K

Still others reported that CCL had become a priority of sorts due to pressure from "downtown." CCL under such circumstances was not successful chiefly because the CCL groups included teachers who were pressed into participation by their headmaster.

We did a CCL. I did it, and it was a failure. It was a terrible thing. The principal was under pressure from downtown and was told that she had to have so many CCL's happening in that quarter. So, she came to us and she said you, you, you, and you, you will be in this CCL. We have had two CCL's. One was for non-fiction. And it was a complete failure...I think there were six or eight of us. The

⁹These teachers agreed to demonstrate for colleagues even though they were not required to do so. The observations occurred prior to Work to Fairness.

¹⁰ Some teachers do not understand that the purpose of lab-site observations is for teachers to be part of a learning opportunity with colleagues. The purpose is not to observe and then copy something defined as excellent teaching.

person who was coaching actually was pretty good because she said, “What is it that we’re going to do? What do you want to do?” I said we wanted to know about Workshop. We really need to learn. So that was our goal. But, it just didn’t work. The teachers did not want to be there. Teacher S

Our data strongly suggest that, given all of these confounding factors, CCL was not yet successful in these small organizational units.

Coaches had a difficult time getting content-focused CCLs established in the grade-level SLCs as well. However, teachers in these grade-level SLCs reported that they appreciated the opportunities to work together. What stands out in their comments is their attention to learning specific strategies, and, for a few, trying to use what they learned with their students. What is not present in their discussions, nor in that of their coaches, is a description of a CCL cycle that included an inquiry focus as well as demonstration teaching and a debrief.

Teachers in these collaborative, grade-level, content-focused groups met together for the eight week cycle and focused on instructional issues that mattered to them.¹¹ The outcomes were positive for ELA and for the other subject matter teachers who joined the group. For example, teachers who were a bit leery of what they called CCL became advocates of collaborative professional development, as teacher Teacher E notes.

I didn’t think I was going to like it, but I really liked it.....It got me to really think about a memoir and take a more in-depth look at memoir. What is it? I do memoir and narrative. Isn’t it all the same? It really is in some respects. How do you teach that to the kids? So CCL is really neat. Teacher E

Teachers of a content area other than ELA, who were part of these cycles, reported that the conversations were helpful to them.

It certainly got my wheels turning for different ways I could approach tough material....They gave me some ideas for addressing some very, very tough reading....They gave me some ideas that would be helpful in addressing them. And the literacy coach, who’s really, really good, has certainly availed herself – if you ever need anything. Teacher V

And, teachers reported that the CCL time enabled them to share strategies pertinent to all of their classes. The cycles provided them with the opportunity to try new strategies and report to colleagues on their successes and failures. Coaches facilitated what some teachers called these “best practices” sessions.

¹¹Occasionally, a teacher from another content area joined a CCL group. Some of these teachers reported that the experience was valuable for them given the cycle’s focus on reading strategies that could be used in the content areas.

We first divided things into pre-reading, during reading and post-reading, and then we went through a lot of books that our literacy coach had, and talked about the things we were doing already. [One teacher] uses an above-the-line writing strategy as a pre-reading strategy. . .the strategy she uses for activating prior knowledge, which I guess is the lingo they'd use. I use a question ladder strategy during and after-reading to talk about author's purpose. Another teacher uses a tea-party approach, pre-reading, to talk about character relationships, and we talked about how that might be useful in nonfiction. A couple of us use what was called lesson-board making, but we do it in a personal way. The students create pages in their notebook to organize information during readings, timelines, character webs, things like that that could translate well into nonfiction, especially the timelines and key players in a historical article and how they connect. . . . I tried the personal bulletin board, and it worked well. I tried the Socratic circle, and that did not work well, and I was able to report back and talk to my colleagues about why I thought it didn't work so well and what were the frustrations about it and if I thought it was worth trying again. Teacher D

Teachers in these grade-level CCL groups even suggested that they would enjoy the opportunity to do "real" CCL cycles in which they observed one another.

Basically we've done group planning, I think is very helpful. It was good to spend the time working with other teachers and getting their perspective and planning together. I thought that was nice. What I'd like to see more of is observing each other and being more critical. I think oftentimes there's a lot of validation – oh, that's great, you're great, but we're very reluctant to delve into, OK, let's talk about what didn't work in the lesson, not in a punitive way, but to get at the meat of what's going on. Teacher T

A few teachers reported that they participated in full CCL cycles during the 2002-2003 school year when Work to Fairness was not in place. For example, Teacher F describes a cycle that was broadly focused on a range of Workshop strategies that teachers wanted to improve. Within the cycle, each teacher was able to get help on an area of particular interest to her as Teacher F described.

The focus was: What are effective Readers' Workshop practices? And we would meet after school, after we had observed a teacher that had picked what they wanted us to observe or help with. For example, when we went into the ESL room, we each paired up with an ESL student and they had three books. And they would read a little bit of each book to us. And then they would put into order what they thought was like their level and interest at the same time, so to see what they would be able to read. And that really helped the ESL teacher, and it helped us to figure out if we ever wanted to do that. I've actually done that with my own English students. Another time, I had them come in and watch student engagement as I modeled a reading strategy from my book. Another teacher had

us go in and observe her conferring -- because conferring is really hard and it was a new thing for most of us -- and then set us out and we conferred with some of her students. And then we video taped it, and watched it, and discussed it.

Teacher F

While CCL could theoretically support and sustain instructionally-focused collaborative communities in the district's small high schools and SLCs, scheduling and staffing challenges stood in the way of establishing CCL as a viable professional development opportunity for teachers. This finding has implications for the formation of collaborative teacher communities in the high schools as well as for the improvement of literacy teaching and learning.

4. Teachers in small schools and cross-grade SLCs reported that they had been told and/or had thought that class sizes would decrease when they reorganized into small units. They had also been told that they would have adequate physical space for their schools.¹² Teachers reported that they had looked forward to these aspects of working in smaller units. However, the teachers with whom we spoke were disappointed that the creation of small schools and cross-grade SLCs did not lead to smaller class size.

They talk about making it small schools because they want a small teacher to student ratio. But the regular ed classes are still 30 students to a teacher, and I thought the whole concept was to have 15 to 20 with a teacher, so I think that kind of takes away from the small school concept. Teacher H

Small schools are fine; in theory they look perfect. Small learning community, smaller classes, some of those things didn't necessarily translate [into reality]. I heard teachers, especially in the first half of the year saying, "They sold us a dream. My class is overcrowded. This is an issue, that's an issue." I really think the problem is the facility. A school needs to be its own school [building].

Teacher L

SLCs are not smaller. We still have 31 kids in a class on a good day. Teacher B

In reality, it is the creation of longer blocks of teaching time that have an impact on the total number of students a teacher has on her roster. Any individual class may be as large as it was in the past.

Teachers in the small schools were extremely disappointed in class size, their teaching assignments and in the physical space in which they worked.

¹²Small high schools were established by creating three small schools in buildings that once housed a comprehensive high school. To define a physical home for the new small schools, each was assigned to one floor of the building.

This is a small space; it's not a small school. The ratio is the same [as when the school was larger]. So when people put down on paperwork that this is a small school, it's not. It's not. It's not a small school. You talk about this physical space; it's ridiculous. This physical space is not at all conducive to a school.
Teacher Q

The logistics of space are really difficult. Teachers are coming and going, and you have to pick up all of your stuff, get all the computers and laptops and roll them down to another class, and it's tough when you're sharing classes to have board space and file space and stuff like that. I'm in three classrooms during the day. It's very hard to keep the momentum going. In terms of personal space and planning, you just go wherever you can find. Teacher R

My classes are still large, I don't get to meet with people, there's inequity in space. Our teacher's room is negligible and yet on other floors they're quite big and they have soda machines and vending machines and we don't. We're lucky to get a refrigerator in there. We have two computers, a table, two Xerox machines. So that doesn't make for cohesive faculty. And when a parent comes in, we have no place to meet with them. Teacher U

We don't have enough space. When the school was divided up into three, we got the short end of the deal. We don't have any media space. We have no teacher's area.... I think that's really no one's fault, but it hurts. It hurts every day, when you come in here you don't have the space that you need,...we have ongoing difficulties with space. Teacher K

Administrators seemed more clear about the links between small school/SLC size and small class size. They were able to articulate the issue and, in some schools, reported that changes in budget allocations for the 2004-2005 school year would allow them to increase staffing in core content areas which would lead to smaller class sizes.

Small school doesn't mean small class sizes. It means the overall size of your school is small. So that's the challenge. I think we will address that with the English and math, being able to hire those two positions will mean we will have smaller classes in English and math. English teachers are not going to have to correct as many papers, or they'll be able to correct more papers for fewer kids. And the math teachers will be able to give the kids attention they need. So we'll deal with it in English and math. We won't be able to do as much with the other classes. Administrator H

But teachers, it seems, did not fully understand what "smallness" would mean for them and the total number of students they would teach. Coupled with the other challenges presented by size and organization, teachers were disappointed and frustrated by the reality of being in a small school or cross-grade SLC.

In presenting these data, we want to note that the teachers in our sample were not against the concept of teaching in small schools or SLCs. They recognized the potential value for themselves and for their students of working together in small units so that they could collaborate for the benefit of students and students could be well-known by their teachers. Those teachers who work in small schools and cross-grade SLCs and voice concerns about the school organizations in which they work correctly identify organizational structures and patterns that push against the creation of instructionally-focused, collaborative cultures. Those teachers who work in grade-level SLCs, in comparison, have more positive views of their small units.

The data we have presented clearly identify the ways in which teachers experience the two forms of small school organization. The data lead us to conclude that at the end of the 2003-2004 school year, Boston's efforts to create small high schools and cross-grade SLC was extremely challenging for these smaller units. They had not yet achieved the goal of creating small high school units in which teachers worked collaboratively for the benefit of their students. In contrast, the grade-level SLCs demonstrated greater teacher collaboration and satisfaction, and, as a result, seemed to have greater potential for achieving the school-based community in which the goals of high school renewal could flourish.

Summary: Small Organization as a Context for High School Renewal. We have presented the data in this section by comparing small schools and cross-grade SLCs to grade-level SLCs with respect to organizational factors and their influences on teachers. We have done this because the patterns in the data led us to conclude that the two approaches to small high schools have led to different outcomes for teachers. While we cannot develop a causal explanation for these differences, we have identified several factors that seem strongly associated with them.

- First, the small schools and cross-grade SLCs often have only one, full-time teacher at each grade-level for the core subjects. This leads to problems for teachers who, quite literally, have no one else at their grade level with whom to talk about instruction.
- Second, each of the grade-level SLCs has developed a collaborative approach to their work and common knowledge about the students with whom they are working. Grade-level, in other words, provides teachers with a common starting point for discussions. The small schools and cross-grade SLC in our sample do not have such a focus, in practice, despite the fact that they may have a focus in their school or SLC name. In other words, while the small schools and cross-grade SLCs may have themes and courses designed to address that theme, the fact that teachers do not have time to meet together does not enable teachers to use that common focus to create a collaborative, instructionally focused school culture for themselves and for their students.
- Third, teachers talk about the ways in which administrators who lead the grade-level SLCs overtly support the development of collaborative, instructionally focused cultures. In contrast, teachers in the small schools and cross-grade SLCs report that their leaders have other issues that take their attention.
- Fourth, small size does, in fact, stymie some administrators who report that scarce resources coupled with small size tie their hands and lead them to make decisions that are not in the best interest of teachers and students.

- Fifth, with respect to small schools, in particular, the reality of small schools does not match teachers' vision of a small school. As a result, teachers do not yet see the advantages of the district's approach to high school renewal even if they understand how small schools could, theoretically, benefit them and their students.

SCHOOL COMMUNITY: Focus on Teachers

In theory, small size should enable teachers to work together as a team to address their students' needs. With a maximum of 400 students in a school or cross-grade SLC, teachers should be able to get to know their students well. And, with a smaller faculty, they should be able to get to know one another well and, as a result, feel part of a small, focused work group. As we have shown above, our baseline data lead us to conclude that, at this point in time, the organizational concomitants of small high schools and cross-grade SLCs do not yet exist. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that teachers in these small high schools and cross-grade SLCs do not feel part of a community of educators. On the contrary, those who taught in the larger high schools prior to reorganization report feeling isolated and alienated in their schools. Teachers new to the schools report that they do not encounter a sense of "schoolness" in their buildings.

Teachers in the grade-level SLCs, in contrast, report feeling part of a strong unit, a unit that can address teaching and learning as well as some of students' personal/social needs. And, teachers new to two of the three grade-level units report that they have come into communities of teachers where they have genuine opportunities to make a difference for students. The contrast we drew between the findings from the small schools and cross-grade SLCs with respect to organization, not surprisingly, manifests itself in the cultures of these small units.

We begin with a brief discussion of the history of these schools and SLCs before turning to a consideration of the impact of smallness on teachers' sentiments about their day-to-day work in these high schools.

1. The organizational approach to developing small schools and SLCs left many teachers feeling that they had no role or voice in the process. Rather, they experienced the process as one that treated them as interchangeable parts. Administrators agreed that teachers had little say in the restructuring of their schools. In addition, several teachers reported that they had no choice about their placement in the new small school or cross-grade SLC. Regardless of the formal process that may have been in place and may have started, most of the teachers in our small school sample, in particular, reported that the reorganization was a mandate as was their placement.¹³ Headmasters chosen for the new small schools, we were told, followed a top-down

¹³Our interviews with central office administrators who are involved with high school renewal confirm that the restructuring of comprehensive high schools into small schools was done by mandate. While mandates can be effective tools, as our data reveal, they can also lead professionals to feel that they are merely interchangeable parts to be placed in the new organizations. We understand that the restructuring of the next set of comprehensive high schools into small schools will involve a more collaborative process.

approach to the next steps of school organization.

What happened was, there was a design team put together of faculty, and they were very pro-active and involved. All of us who weren't on the team would meet with them and talk with them about what we wanted, give input. And they would meet with them, and this whole really rich program [was developed], and then it sort of never happened. It was done the way it was done, without really using the input from the teachers. Which made a lot of people upset. Teacher H

No one came to me and asked what I wanted to be, and I was not recruited; I heard there was some recruitment of teachers, but I was not. I wouldn't even know who to go and ask how I was placed there. I asked my coordinator last year who said basically that I was placed there. I don't know the criteria for that. I was never asked. I guess I'm not that good; I wasn't recruited. I had little input. And you know, quite honestly, when it all came down this year, I had another fellow teacher come to me, and ask me about it. She was a little upset about what happened, and I was a little skeptical of the process already. Teacher Q

And the other thing that's happened is now with communities we never choose what to do or how to go about getting things done. Everything is pushed down [to us]. We are never allowed to talk about the issues teachers have.... Before we were able as a community to talk about the problems.... Those conversations are not taking place. So in a way, I see that some of the changes that we have been making here are based on the very superficial. There is not a space to talk about possibilities. I'm not saying that they have to adopt it, but...As I said, I don't know the particulars about a lot of things that take place. There is no communication. Teacher S

When we first divided into and made this community, we had a group and were very focused. There were four of us who were going to be teaching it. We came in the summer and we developed it. And two of the teachers weren't allowed to teach it in the fall. This is the craziness that happens here. We were furious. And so two people who didn't know what in the world they were doing came in, and that's very hard. Teacher C

Many of the teachers in the small schools and cross-grade SLCs in our sample reported that the mandates and subsequent decisions about the smaller units have left them thinking that no one in the district has fully thought through the redesign of high schools and, instead, the district is responding to the desires of outside funders whose resources come with their own set of mandates.

Yesterday it was just kind of odd. We had a half day yesterday so we walked in and [the administrator] started talking about projects. It was kind of funny; it came across as if it was a new idea. I'm thinking, why do we want to have a

project for each grade when we only have six weeks of school left?But then I got a call last night from a friend of mine who was at the meeting yesterday, and she says, "[somebody] at the Carnegie Foundation has a report suggesting that we do projects." So evidently the Carnegie Foundation has suggested it and these people are now jumping through hoops to please them. Teacher P

In a similar vein, one teacher in a grade-level SLC spoke for many when she said:

I think the [Gates Foundation] grant was applied for because the district sees a need for major high school reform and this presents possible options. I think for some schools, this [cross-grade SLC idea] might be really great. It's just disappointing that it's a mandate, and that if we have something that's working so well, we're not allowed to follow it through a little bit and see if we can get even more success from it. So it's upsetting. Teacher D

These experiences, as well as teachers' knowledge that the district is going to create six more small schools because it is a requirement of the Gates Foundation grant, contributed to their sense of being left out of decisions that affect them. In such a context, at least some teachers are becoming cynical about the possibilities for genuine high school renewal in Boston. Few feel that they are being treated as professionals who belong to a community of teachers within the context of a small school or cross-grade SLC.

2. Many of the teachers in our sample reported feeling isolated and alienated in their new small schools and cross-grade SLCs. Their reasons included the fact that in the small schools they a) no longer had opportunities to associate with teacher colleagues on other floors, b) felt that they did not legitimately belong on any floor in the building other than the one on which they taught, and c) did not feel ownership for students on other floors in the building. Feelings of isolation bothered experienced as well as new teachers. Experienced teachers felt that they were cut off from former colleagues and had no way to meet teachers who were new to the other small schools in the building.

The biggest [negative] thing that I can see is the fact that you don't know anybody else in the school. So if I have to walk from the third floor to the gymnasium, which is in the basement, or even here to the library, if I get to the second floor, and there's a fight brewing, I just walk right by it. Because I have no idea who these kids are and they don't know who I am. So if it was an active fight going, I might try to help break it up, but I certainly, if I was by myself, even if the kids were fighting, I would just continue to walk by because I don't know who these kids are. And the same thing in the cafeteria. You walk through the cafeteria and you'll hear the foul language, and you want to turn around and correct the child, but you say, "This kid doesn't know me from a hole in the wall and he's not going to pay any attention to me because according to him, I have no authority. I'm not in his school. Teacher P

In particular, special education and ESL/bilingual teachers often found themselves divided between small schools or cross-grade SLCs. They might, in fact, be in different small units yet teach the same students. The new organizational divisions in the schools kept them apart and made it virtually impossible for them to feel a part of their “official” schools or a part of a focused department. These findings suggests that, at the end of the 2003-2004 school year, high school renewal was leading to a lack of community rather than its having the opposite, desirable impact.

In these school contexts, new teachers reported that they lacked a school-based support structure to help them get started. As Teacher R notes, no teacher or administrator helped her feel welcome. A new teacher in this context experienced the isolation that smallness was designed to overcome.

Once I was hired, I spent the first six months trying to find my way. I realized the school, while being small in size, still lacked the structure and support to make students' experience very successful and to empower teachers. [As a new teacher] I was surprised by the lack of responsiveness regarding books and resource distribution. There were no department heads. And it seems like such a simple oversight that would solve problems. [Someone to say] what books do you need? What have you taught? Where are they? Not a whole lot of communication happened. Teacher R

In contrast, new teachers in the grade-level SLCs reported feeling immediately that they were part of a community.

There's a sense of community between the teachers and students. It's a pretty tight group. I was impressed when I came. People are pretty helpful about sharing best practices. The whole first year, I piggybacked on [another teacher]. They shared lesson plans and things like that. I've done the same for other teachers within the [grade-level SLC]. There are a lot of ways to connect with students inside and outside the classroom. By the end of the year, you know, at least visually, all of the kids – I know them.” Teacher M

Teachers acknowledged that this sense of community was a result of teachers and the administrators working collaboratively. And, they realized that it would not have developed if their principal had not chosen to distribute leadership to teachers and engage them in the process of developing their school.

We have the opportunity to make a lot of our own decisions. But again, a lot of that comes from our principal and the way she runs the school. There are principals that will dictate what's going to happen, who don't think what the teacher has to say is important, and part of why I love it here is because of the people I work with. Teacher E

Our data make it clear that the small schools and cross-grade SLCs provided contrasting community contexts for teachers during the 2003-2004 school year. Teachers in small high schools and cross-grade SLCs described the absence of community; teachers in grade-level SLCs described the presence of community and the ways in which it strengthened their work. Absent community, teachers reported feeling isolated and alienated. With community as a context, teachers in the grade-level SLCs reported feeling part of a productive work group.

These findings about small schools and cross-grade SLCs and their relationship to teachers' dissatisfaction with their schools as communities will, no doubt disappoint the district and the members of the HSRCG. However, it is important to keep in mind that teachers' desire for collaborative, instructionally-focused communities indicates the success of the district's whole-school improvement effort. The teachers in these schools had experienced the value of working in a community of teachers and they regret, even resent, its loss. This is good news because it reminds the district that, if it can create the organizational contexts in which community can thrive, then teachers will work together for the benefit of their students.

SCHOOL COMMUNITY: Focus on Students

As part of our baseline data collection strategy, we wanted to learn how the small schools and SLCs were organizing to create feelings of community among students. Boston's high school renewal effort posits that students will engage in school work when schools are able to develop as communities, as places that are safe and friendly and in which students know that the adults take a personal interest in them and in their academic progress. Small size should enhance the possibility of creating caring, educational communities.

We began by asking teachers to tell us how their small schools or SLCs were organized to address the issues of student alienation that are prominent in the Carnegie proposal and in discussions of high school renewal. We did not expect to find fully-developed programs and strategies in place given the early developmental stage of high school renewal. But, we wanted to understand this aspect of the work in order to follow its trajectory and shape the focus of our data collection efforts with students.

Teachers and administrators responded to our use of the term "student alienation" by talking about two distinct circumstances. They used "lack of student engagement" to refer to students' minimal involvement with academic work, and "alienation" to refer to the absence and/or weak quality of students' relationships with peers and/or adults. We begin this section of the report by describing teachers' understandings of engagement and alienation. Then, we turn to the efforts underway in the schools to create a sense of community that will help increase students' commitments to their schools and to their academic work.

Low student engagement. With respect to engagement, teachers across the small schools and SLCs in our sample reported that many students appeared apathetic toward education and seemed not to value academic course work. Teachers noted that the great majority of such students were functioning at low academic skill levels. Many, according to teachers,

effectively failed eighth grade.¹⁴ Regardless of their school's ninth grade organization, teachers reported that many of these students continued to remain unengaged and failed again.

I think 50%[of our ninth graders] fail ninth grade....The majority of them are eighth graders who failed the eighth grade MCAS. So they didn't pass eighth grade. And we tell them, "If you have any problems, come." I have a couple of students who just sit in class and don't do anything. Teacher W

While absenteeism and tardiness were prevalent among disengaged students, teachers like Teacher W reported that even students who attended quite regularly often chose not to participate in class and failed to submit homework.

A few teachers suggested that students did not engage with their academic work because they seemed to lack the organizational and study skills they needed.

I also have kids in there for whom organization and getting things in is a real struggle. Last term about 40% of them ended up failing; this term will be better. I think they're learning more than their grades reflect, because they're not turning in major projects. We'll work on a five-paragraph essay for three or four days in class and then they'll never turn in the final draft. I'll hound them for the final draft and I'll never see it. I know they've written it, or I know they've written most of it and they've gone through the process with me, so I know they're learning how to write. They're just not being responsible about turning in the work. We also have a notebook and they have to write the first ten minutes of every class. It's a warmup. And a lot of kids miss those ten minutes. They're supposed to be responsible for making that up, but very few do. The notebook brings a lot of grades down, but I don't want to remove it because I think it's important, it keeps them accountable for being on time. Teacher T

Others explained students' lack of engagement with references to challenges that students faced because of an absence of background knowledge that would help them make connections to what they were learning and upon which they might build new knowledge and skills.

Just understanding the concept of drama and how it's played out, the idea that it's not written as a novel [is new to them]. We've read so many novels this year. Maybe 10% of the kids had ever seen a drama. They've just never been. They don't know when to clap, they don't know what to expect. So how things are played out in a drama is new. I had to say, "She leaves. She comes back." They wouldn't have understood that. Teacher F

¹⁴We know that the district has policies that relate to promotion and retention. Nonetheless, quite a number of teachers in the sample suggest that the students who are least engaged in their class-work are those who have been passed without meeting the promotion benchmarks and those who have learned that they will be passed regardless of the amount or quality of work they produce.

If I ask, “How many of you have been to the Science Museum and seen an exhibit there?” Nobody. Almost every time I ask a question like that about some place in Boston that you can use as a reference point to something, you're talking about, nobody has ever been there and nobody has ever seen it. If you don't take them there yourself, they are not going to go. So, just that kind of common experiences, we don't have those [among the students]. Teacher O

Teachers suggested that all of these factors, coupled with repeated failures when they attempted academic work, may have led students to give up on school and set low expectations for themselves by the time they reached high school.

I can't quite put my finger on it, and it's not everybody. But in general, the feeling that I get is an apathy towards education. It doesn't feel to me like they're as motivated as I want the students to be. [They say,] “Oh, I didn't do my homework. Oh, I didn't study for the test. Oh, I'm not doing this work.” No self-motivation. I gave a practice test, three days before the regular test, and then the regular test, and I didn't change anything, and I had a whole class saying, “I'm not ready for this, I'm going to fail.” I said, “You had this for three days, the same exact test!” I can't quite understand how that could occur repeatedly throughout the year. That's been tough for me to deal with. Teacher L

I think the sad thing is that so many of these kids have failed for so long that it's such a norm for them that they don't know what it feels like to do well and they just, they're apathetic. They really are. And it's sad because it's something that you work with. As a teacher, you don't want to fail kids. And I tell them that: “I'm not here to fail you, but you've got to meet the expectations. I'm not lowering my expectations.” Teacher G

The sad part is they are asking me what it will take for them to go to summer school instead of being kept back. [They don't ask about passing.] That has never happened to me before. Teacher U

Teachers made reference to a peer culture among male students, especially, that discouraged academic success and effort. And, they described how outside factors such as family and job responsibilities as well as the allure of gangs might also stand in the way of students' engagement with academic work.

With respect to ninth graders, in particular, teachers across the small schools, cross-grade SLC, and grade-level SLCs thought that some lack of engagement might be related to the fact that students had no electives in their schedule. While they understood the importance of stressing academic subjects and signature courses, these teachers worried that ninth graders were being turned-off to school by the absence of courses that interested them and among which they could choose.

What I don't like about the small schools is that there are no electives. When we were all in high school, nobody ever liked school. I came to school because I liked art and I liked gym. Those were the two things....So that's something that I find is a big drawback. It's all academic, and especially when you're dealing with an urban, at-risk population you can't have pure academics and wonder why the drop-out rate is so high. There's no reason for the kids to want to come. To be honest with you, I think the biggest reason kids are being turned off is they've taken anything fun out of high school. There's nothing fun. If I was a kid, I would drop out. Teacher H

I think a lot of teachers are on the same wavelength about having electives, having gym, and having music and art, you know, a full curriculum. I think we're pushed by the MCAS, but the kids need outlets. Teacher Q

Teachers also reported that in each of the small schools and SLCs, some students stood out for the high interest and effort they exerted in school. These students appeared to value their high school experiences and held aspirations for further education and/or career success beyond high school. However, the majority of students did not have these characteristics.

The students who teachers described as apathetic about their academic work might be absent a great deal, they might not do their work, and they might fail. But, at the same time, they often had good relations with other students and with teachers.

Student Alienation. In contrast, when teachers spoke about student alienation, they talked about students who seemed to have no friends and no personal relations with adults in the school. These students were, for example, those who might always sit alone in the cafeteria. Alienated students were also those who appeared to lack the skills or ability to relate positively to their peers. Such students argued frequently with other students and might be the source of disruptive behavior in classes and in the corridors. Teachers considered these students' lack of respect for adults and other students as a sign of personal alienation. While teachers considered alienation to be a significant problem, they also noted that most students had friends in school, and in some cases, attended school primarily to socialize with these friends. But, they worried most about the ones who stood out because of their lack of personal connections. And, they felt such students needed the kinds of support not yet available in their schools and SLCs.¹⁵

We turn next to the ways in which teachers in these schools are creating opportunities for students to become engaged with their academic work and with the school or SLC as a whole.

¹⁵We do not have more detailed information about the students teachers describe as most alienated. However, during the 2004-2005 school year we will pay attention to these students, to their needs, and to the ways in which the small schools and SLCs are trying to address them. We will also consider the ways in which special populations, for example students recently released from the juvenile justice system, provide the schools with additional challenges.

Efforts to engage students in academic work and in the school as a community. We learned about multiple strategies designed to increase student engagement. The two we focus on in this report are a) high interest school/SLC thematic identities, and b) grade-level communities.

1. High Interest Themes. Each of the small schools and the cross-grade SLC in our sample had cultivated a thematic focus and a set of signature courses or projects designed to interest students. Signature courses focused on developing the school/SLC's theme as did interdisciplinary projects that were integrated into core academic courses. To enhance these courses and projects, small schools and cross-grade SLCs have, for instance, a) worked with university and corporate partners to bring their expertise and resources to bear on the development of interdisciplinary projects, and b) invited community leaders into signature courses as guest speakers in order to highlight connections between the themes and the speakers' real-world experiences.

Despite the fact that each of these schools/cross-grade SLCs had developed its theme carefully over several years, teachers reported that they were not yet well enough developed as a public presence to entice many students. As a result, teachers in the small schools were not sure that students had a clear sense of what was special or unique academically about the school they were attending; indeed, teachers were not sure of the criteria students used to choose their schools. In cross-grade SLCs, teachers were better able to describe what they told students at the end of ninth grade to encourage them to choose a particular SLC. Teachers in grade-level SLCs reported that most students identified with and chose the four-year high school, not one of the smaller, cross-grade SLCs.

We do not yet know why it has been difficult for the schools to establish their themes and create a set of theme-focused activities that will increase student engagement.¹⁶ However, teachers and administrators agree that they have not yet done this; they have not yet established activities that enable students, from the first day of school, to experience what it means to be in a small high school with a focus. Indeed, as the following headmaster notes, the schools have not yet established what it means to be an adult in these thematically-focused schools.

So one of our challenges as a faculty is to define: What does it mean to be faculty at [this school] if you're a science teacher, a math teacher, an English teacher? We need to figure out what that means, so that everyone's a part of what it means to be here. Administrator H

Furthermore, although students chose their high schools, teachers report they did not necessarily choose them for reasons that reflect the school's focus nor did they have a clear idea of how that focus would play out for them over a four-year period.

They get [to this small school] and what I hear back from my kids, the ninth

¹⁶No doubt, the challenges associated with having common times for teachers to work together influence the development of each school's/cross-grade SLC's focus.

graders is, "Well, what the heck is all this project stuff?" They say, "We picked this school because we thought there were a lot of field trips." And I'll say to them, "Yes, well, with the ninth graders we do two field trips." They do a lot of choosing because they think there's a lot of field trips, when in fact I don't think most of them will get to do too many field trips until their junior year. Teacher P

While field trips may interest these students, teachers do not report that they have an interest in the content and focus of the field trips, along with interest in the trips as trips.

The cross-grade SLC in our sample also had a thematic focus. However, teachers and administrators reported that they were unable to fully develop it due to the scheduling and staffing constraints discussed earlier in this report.

I really feel like it hasn't been successful. It had a lot of potential. We were all enthusiastic....But, our SLC lost [a lot of] teachers. And it was extremely destructive, I mean, to just our morale....after all our efforts we ended up having a lot of teachers that may teach one or two [name of SLC] students and the rest are from another community. So, we have not been able to successfully create a sense of community. And that's our number one problem. So, there is – I mean the SLC is in name only, really....All the plans we made, interdisciplinary courses, all that, it hasn't really happened at all. Teacher C

And, teachers at one of the small schools talked about the ways in which scheduling constraints led the school to provide the school's full thematic program only to a group of students chosen for their high interest in the content and their high-level engagement with academic work. In effect, this school created an "honors" program for those students who already demonstrated high interest in the school's theme. Scheduling challenges left students who did not initially manifest high levels of engagement with a weaker version of the school's theme. Thus, even if the themes could be used to interest students and increase their engagement with academic work, numerous organizational factors seem to be blocking that achievement.

While each school's and cross-grade SLC's thematic focus may well prove successful in drawing students with high interest in the theme, our baseline data lead us to conclude that the themes are not yet well enough developed and known to lead to this goal just yet. And, teachers' comments suggest that it will take additional efforts to engage students in academic work even if the school's theme interests them.

2. Grade-Level Communities. The grade-level SLCs in our sample took a different approach to engaging students with high school than did the small schools and cross-grade SLC. Rather than attract students to their SLCs through a specific thematic focus, they attempted to support students by developing nurturing communities with well-established norms and expectations that were communicated clearly to students. Through these communities, they hoped to help students acclimate to the high school experience and to develop the study habits

and social skills that would allow them to be successful in high school.

The intent was to create an academy where it could be more touchy-feely and nurturing for students, and also to help them transition by being able to keep a better eye on them, being that they're new, keeping them away from older influences....Overall, it was to create an environment where it would help them transition into the ninth grade. It's a social transition and it's also an academic transition. Administrator J

I think ninth grade students need all the support that they can get. They need not to be distracted. And I would say that having support is a very, very important thing. It's like a twelve-year-old or a thirteen-year-old having Mom telling you you've got to be home by nine o'clock to get your homework done. You can go out, you can see your friends, but you're going to be here and do your work. We're the ones that say that to these kids. We make the suggestions for the things they should do with the rest of the school at a later date. They miss mixing with the [students in the upper grades]. They'll say that. But usually at the end of the year they'll say it was a pretty positive experience. Teacher I

How did they do this? First, grade-level SLCs were just as interested as the thematically based small schools and SLCs in attracting students to be a part of their small units. Teachers and administrators reported going out to the middle schools in the spring of the 2002-2003 school year to interest eighth graders in joining their units. Once students selected the schools with grade-level SLCs, teachers and administrators in the ninth grade SLCs provided further orientations.

In the spring, before they become 9th graders, while they're still 8th graders, they're invited with their parents to come and visit the school. The first year we had, I'm going to say, about 50-60 kids and parents, and last year we had 150. So it's getting so that we're getting a much better turnout over time with doing orientation. We give them an orientation in the spring, and they can come with their guidance counselors, their teachers, whatever, to kind of see what the school's like, a day in the school, see some classes, talk to the guidance counselor or myself. Then I do another one in the summertime, a bigger one, where we invite parents and students – I realize that when I say food will be served, I've gotten a much better turnout, so now I do the multicultural lunches to go with it, and activities with [a partnering organization]. [Prospective ninth graders] also get to hear from freshmen that are going into the 10th grade.... Administrator J

In another school, while the grade-level orientation was described as a brief program, teachers took up the charge of introducing the common rules and expectations to their individual homeroom classes early in the year.

We usually have an opening assembly, where we introduce the kids to the

different coaches and introduce them to the rules of the school. That's one thing. Most of it goes on in the classrooms. Teachers let the kids know what the 9th grade SLC is all about, how it was created, how it differs from a traditional high school. Teacher T

Throughout the year, teachers in the grade-level SLCs made it their responsibility to reinforce the norms and expectations they had laid out initially and to continue working with students to develop their study habits and social skills.

Another thing that makes us so successful is that we try to be really consistent across the 9th grade academy – we have a bathroom policy, a locker policy, and we've sat down in our 9th grade SLC meetings and hammered these things out. They're consistent across the SLC. Teachers here are on top of their game and kids see things consistently in the school – posters and stuff that list the qualities that the school values: responsibility, trust, respect. We try to put that forward in the classroom. Teacher M

In the ninth grade SLCs in particular, teachers report viewing the role of teaching social skills as a significant part of their teaching assignments. As Teacher F noted, she frequently had conversations with her students that specifically addressed their behavior and misbehavior in social situations.

My first thing is we are going to be a community before we even start learning. I don't tolerate much. I don't tolerate anything that I see or hear [that is inappropriate]. I spend 60 minutes on the "getting respect" conversation with my class before I start any novel or work. And they get a lecture from me about, "Violence starts here, right here, with us." Teaching ninth grade is really teaching about how to be a person. One of our little young moms just had a baby. And she came in to get signed out. And everybody was like, "Wow! You look different. Wow! You're fat. Wow! You're sick." As soon as she left, I was like, "Let's have a conversation." They just don't know [how to interact]. Teacher F

Teachers in another grade-level SLC report paying particular attention to establishing norms within their classrooms. Teacher M noted how, during the first week, she tries to establish a level of "seriousness and sophistication" among her students. In this teacher's view, students responded quite well to her efforts and she felt a greater sense of community in her classroom this past year than in previous years. Another teacher made related comments regarding both norms and expectations.

Usually, most of the orientation stuff is done with your homeroom, so I talk to [my homeroom students] a lot about how important high school is and how the kids are at the beginning of their career for building towards college. I just sort of operate under the assumption that everybody's going to go to college, and...I constantly refer to college as if it's going to happen for them. And I would say – I

give them, you know, we go over the handbook, we talk about the 9th grade....Just try to tell them how important it is, this is their foundation, it's so important that they do well now and that the past is really behind them because this is what colleges look at, beginning in 9th grade. Teacher T

While teachers might use different language and tweak the message to fit their classroom uniquely, in this grade-level SLC, teachers reported a common awareness of the types of messages teachers were sending across the SLC and attention to reinforcing the norms and expectations they had developed together.

Teachers in the ninth-grade SLCs also developed common means for reinforcing norms and expectations outside of the individual classrooms. In one SLC, teachers developed a shared detention hall, unique to the ninth grade in their building. Teachers described this approach to discipline as a key component of their ability to create a nurturing and supportive environment for 9th graders. Through the detention, proctored each day by a different SLC teacher, teachers were able to keep a tight reign over their students and provide the structure and stability in the SLC which they thought their students needed. One teacher noted that she used this detention not only as a means to discipline students for misbehavior, but as a means to reinforce good homework habits. Students who didn't complete homework, she noted, were sent to detention: "I give them detention on their third missed homework." Teacher J

Teachers in another ninth grade SLC developed a "student of the month" program in order to reward those students who exemplified the norms and expectations of the SLC in practice. Awarded to ten new students each month, the student of the month recognition honored students with an assembly and celebration. Once named a student of the month, students became a part of a group that took part in additional special events, such as field trips, throughout the year, as well. In this way, teachers created a program that, they reported, appealed to students and created an extra impetus for students to meet the norms and expectations of the SLC.

In the tenth-grade grade-level SLC in our sample, teachers were less focused on teaching students social behaviors and general study skills. Instead, they turned their focus to the MCAS exam. Again, however, they framed their efforts around providing support and skills that would help students to succeed. Teachers noted that a community component of this program was central to the design which was intended to help students begin to support one another and to feel part of a community. Teachers believed that creating such a support community would help the students approach the MCAS successfully.¹⁷

Teachers and administrators reported that these grade-level SLC activities likely had a positive impact on some students. For instance, Administrator B noted that students who had been part of the ninth-grade SLC, as tenth graders, reported missing the structure and the nurturing relationships that the ninth grade provided.

¹⁷We are omitting the details of this effort to preserve the confidentiality of the school.

...they developed a great relationship with kids, many of our kids, when you talk to them about who some of their favorite teachers in the school [are], they reach back to their first year teachers. Administrator B

The grade-level SLCs, by helping to forge relationships between students and teachers, and, in some cases, among students themselves, may help to engage students in school by providing them with a sense of belonging. The hope is that engagement with the SLC could, potentially, translate to engagement with instruction, and to improved academic achievement.

Summary: School Community: Focus on Students. In concluding this section of the report, we want to stress that every person in our sample, every teacher, every administrator and every other support staff member with whom we spoke stressed the importance of a) engaging students with their academic work and b) insuring that they feel part of a caring, supportive community. And, they believe that this is a major part of their job. Student engagement is not someone else's work.

Teachers told many stories of the ways in which they made personal connections with students and tried to hook them up with people and activities they would find interesting and engaging. During classroom observations, we often saw teachers take the time to connect with their students as individuals. Teachers told poignant stories about their students' lives and wished they knew better how to improve both their home and school lives.

We have presented data that show there is a great deal more work to be done in this area. But, we want to be sure that we convey the deep personal commitment that teachers and other adults in these schools have for their students and the unflagging efforts they make to improve their students' chances.

INSTRUCTION

Between April and early June 2004, we observed thirteen 9th and 10th grade English Language Arts classes and four signature or other social studies-related classes.¹⁸ The observations in June were near the end of the school year and, as such, may have been atypical. However, teachers reported that although they were concerned with end of the year activities, including final exams, and knew that some students had "checked out," for the most part, their instruction reflected the approaches they used during the year. In presenting these baseline findings, nonetheless, we note that some students may well have been less engaged than had we observed mid-year and that earlier in the year we may have seen a broader array of teaching strategies.

¹⁸We were unable to observe some ELA and other subject area classes due to a) teachers' requests that we observe in the 2004-2005 school year, or b) principals' requests that we wait until 2004-2005 school year due to anticipated staffing changes.

In presenting our baseline findings about instruction, we focus primarily on the ELA classes in our sample due to the fact that one major emphasis of high school renewal is improving students' low literacy skills. High school renewal aims to improve literacy instruction primarily through attention to helping teachers use the Workshop approach in their ELA classes.¹⁹ We begin our discussion by noting that we found no differences in range of instructional strategies being used in these ELA classrooms regardless of whether they were in small schools, cross-grade SLCs or grade-level SLCs.

Presenting the findings. In this baseline data report, we present our classroom findings as summary statements that reflect the full range of what we observed. But, we do not present narrative descriptions of classes or segments of classrooms for three reasons.

- *We promised teachers confidentiality and teachers opened their doors to us knowing that we would not identify them in any of our reports.* Given the small size of the schools/SLCs in our sample as well as the fact that there is only one ELA teacher in our sample from a grade level in the small schools and cross-grade SLCs, we are concerned that those reading this baseline report, particularly headmasters or program directors, would be able to identify the teachers whose classes we observed.
- *We told teachers that we were not evaluating their teaching.* As a result, at this point in time, we cannot present vignettes that, for example, represent more and less effective uses of Workshop. Making those judgments would seem, correctly, to be evaluative. Given the promise of confidentiality coupled with the non-evaluative focus of our work, at this point, we cannot describe specific classes.
- *One goal of the evaluation is to identify and describe improvements in literacy instruction over time that are leading to the goals of high school renewal.* Therefore, at the end of the second and third years of the evaluation we will describe the dominant patterns of *changes in instruction* in the classrooms in our sample and present vignettes that demonstrate those patterns. By taking this approach, we will adhere to the agreements we made with teachers as well as to the goals of the evaluation.

We turn now to a review of the patterns of instruction and student participation that we observed in the sample of seventeen classrooms we observed. What did we conclude from our observations and from subsequent interviews with teachers?

With only a few exceptions, students appeared to take a passive role in the classes we observed.

- Between one-third and one-half of the students in most of the classes we observed appeared not to be participating at all. They did not answer teachers' questions, even when called on, did not contribute to small group work, did other subject work in class –

¹⁹We refer to data from the other four non-ELA classes when those data contribute to our discussion of teachers' efforts to engage students in subject matter.

other assignments or independent reading – and, occasionally, appeared to be resting with their heads on their tables.

- For approximately one-third of the students, passivity took the form of minimally complying with the teachers' requests by opening their books or taking out journals, answering questions, more or less, when called-on, doing some of the class-work, and not creating any disturbance. When teachers assigned small group work, these students did not seem to engage with it unless the teacher was working with their specific group.
- In contrast, in all classrooms, between four and six students participated with visible enthusiasm. They answered teachers' questions as fully as they could, asked questions of their own, and attempted to engage seriously with what teachers had structured for the block. These students were more likely to work effectively in small groups whether or not the teacher was nearby. In a small number of classrooms, these students were working against the odds in that other students were actively disruptive. In most classrooms, these students participated while their classmates remained quiet.
- Teachers reported that many students, even in classes with an honors designation, did not turn in homework assignments or copy the homework assigned for the next day.
- Absenteeism was commonly high in many of the classes we observed. Depending on the school/SLC, students were in class at the start of the block or wandered in throughout it.

Teachers encouraged students to take their work seriously, but we did not see evidence that their encouragements were effective.

- With the near-future in mind, teachers prefaced new assignments or the return of student work with reminders that students, for example, a) still had time to pass the class, b) could earn additional points by making-up assignments, c) should study for the final because it counted for 25% of their grade, d) needed to pass MCAS and/or e) would do better on the next open-response prompt or quiz if they paid attention to the day's work.
- Teachers used small group activities and independent work to encourage students to engage with their texts and with one another. In some classrooms, these small group activities were a part of a Workshop approach to instruction. In others, they were used by teachers who tended to use whole-class, direct instructional strategies for much of the block. During the classes we observed, these strategies were more and less successful in garnering student participation.
- Teachers of signature and/or social studies classes, in particular, tried to engage students by choosing topics they thought would be of great interest to their students as well as by varying whole-class and small group activities. Some teachers, as well, developed formal connections among the core courses at their grade-level to help students understand the inter-connectedness of their academic work.

We did not see much evidence of Readers' and Writers' Workshop, the district's adopted instructional strategy, in the classes we observed.

- Four out of the thirteen ELA teachers we observed used a Workshop approach on the day we observed. They implemented the components of the Workshop approach with varying degrees of skill. Other teachers told us that they used Workshop but were not using it during the observation.
- Many of the teachers in our sample, whether or not they used Workshop, reported that they taught their students the reading skills stressed in Readers' Workshop. Many of the classrooms had charts that described, for example, the kinds of connections students could make with texts (text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world), the kinds of questions students could ask themselves to make sense of text, and definitions of terms such as "inference."
- A few teachers implemented all of the components of Workshop instruction but at a somewhat superficial level. They might develop a mini-lesson, for example, but not make explicit connections between what was taught in it and the work students were to do during independent reading. The share might be a discussion of something other than the work students did during independent reading.
- A small number of teachers reported that they used the independent reading component of Workshop without regularly using mini-lessons or "shares." For example, teachers might require students to read a specific number of books at home during the year and consider that assignment to be the independent reading component of their Workshop instruction. Other teachers might think that independent reading and conferencing in class were the major components of Workshop, and, as a result, omit the mini-lessons. Among these teachers, there seemed to be some misunderstanding of how independent reading was a part of Workshop instruction and how the component parts were designed to fit together.
- A small number of teachers thought of Workshop as if it were a unit of instruction. Such teachers, for example, might report teaching several whole class novels or plays followed by a unit that was Workshop and, perhaps, oriented to independent reading.
- Most ELA teachers taught a number of whole-class texts during the school year, for example *Raisin in the Sun*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In teaching these novels and plays, teachers had students work in small groups and use specific reading strategies to understand the texts. The organization of such classes might or might not reflect Workshop instructional strategies.
- Some of the teachers in our sample did not believe that their students were ready or skillful enough as readers to learn within the Workshop structure. They did not seem to think students could be taught literary terms, analysis strategies, and reading skills within

Workshop. These teachers believed that they had to teach these strategies prior to implementing the Workshop approach.

- Teachers of high school ELL students, in particular, felt that they had to develop a certain facility and fluency with English among their students before they could fully implement Workshop in their classrooms.

Teachers appeared to be working harder than their students.

- The lessons we observed, whether or not they engaged students, appeared fully planned and, for the most part, included a number of activities designed to make good use of the block of time allocated to ELA. We saw no classes in which teachers appeared to be “making it up” as they went along.
- Teachers tried to engage students by framing questions designed to prompt them to respond. When students gave brief answers, it was often the teacher who extended the students’ responses.
- Teachers asked students to make connections between the work they were doing in class and their own lives outside of class. For the most part, in the classes we observed, students were unable to do this or chose not to participate. Teachers were more likely than the students to demonstrate connections between texts and themselves.
- Teachers appeared to face considerable difficulty in teaching higher level reading skills, for example drawing inferences, to their students. At times, despite teachers’ herculean and engaging efforts, students seemed unable to grasp what the teachers were teaching.
- At times, it appeared that students’ difficulties in framing answers to teachers’ questions arose because they lacked the vocabulary with which to put the ideas “into their own words.” This apparent lack of vocabulary appeared with native speakers of English as well as with students who were ELL.

Summary: Findings About Instruction. During the 1981-1982 school year, the senior author of this report studied high school organization and classroom instruction in four comprehensive American high schools. As part of that work, she conducted well over fifty classroom observations. Her data collection informed a study led by Ted Sizer that resulted in *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace*.²⁰ Using those data as a comparison with classroom data from Boston’s small schools and SLCs, collected just over twenty years later, it is clear to us that classroom instruction has not yet undergone a revolution. Ambitious instruction is not yet the norm. Teachers still appear to work harder than most students and a great deal of classroom instruction is teacher directed. Students are not yet

²⁰Powell, A.G., Farrar, E., and Cohen, D.K. (1985) *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

the “workers” that Ted Sizer envisioned in *Horace’s Compromise*.²¹ Many students are absent in body or mind much of the time. Students arrive late, take their seats, and, often, nothing is mentioned other than a reference to the page the class is reading. Teachers still accept a wide-range of behavior from students – from passivity to deep engagement, from adherence to the rules to wild flouting of them. Teachers want students to learn and to pass. No teachers then or now want their students to fail and often they go out of their way to provide students with option after option to prevent that failure.

But, there are differences between the schools in our current sample and the high schools observed twenty years ago that represent an enormous, positive change. Twenty years ago, for the most part, teachers valued their planning periods as their personal time to use as they preferred. They went to professional development sessions off-site as individuals and returned to their schools to use or not use what they learned. Often, what they learned had only slight relevance to their students and curriculum or was too complicated to implement without further assistance. School-based professional development was not yet part of the equation of teacher learning. Teachers did not, as a rule, have formal opportunities in which to plan together or discuss students’ progress as part of case management teams. Largely absent from the normal school day were discussions among teachers about how to improve teaching practice. Certainly, teachers were not working together with school-based instructional coaches.

When this context of teaching, professional culture and professional development is considered, it is clear that Boston’s small high schools, cross-grade SLCs, and grade-level SLCs represent a dramatic change in the organization and culture of high schools across the district. Our data reveal that teachers in Boston’s small high schools and SLCs work or seek to work in schools that are more collaborative and instructionally-focused than those of twenty years ago. Boston’s teachers expect to have common times to meet with grade-level and subject matter colleagues to develop their small high schools or SLCs. The teachers in our sample were frustrated and angry when they encountered school-based and district-level obstacles to creating the kinds of schools they had begun to imagine. For the most part, they wanted to work in CCL groups that were effectively constructed and implemented. Put simply, Boston has set the stage for instructional reform in the high schools by its efforts to create small, instructionally focused, collegial cultures for teachers. Teachers want to work in those cultures. The district now needs to develop policies and practices that better support this teacher culture in the schools, a culture in which teachers have the opportunity to fully address their students’ instructional needs.

CONCLUSIONS

This report is the first in a series that focus on the progress of high school renewal as it relates to creating small high schools and SLCs that can successfully address the twin problems of low student literacy skills and student alienation. As we said at the beginning of this report, they

²¹Sizer, T. R. (1984) *Horace’s Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company

reflect, for the schools in our sample, the early stages of becoming small during the initial phase of high school renewal in Boston. The findings highlight the organizational and professional challenges these schools encountered and the dominant instructional strategies in use during the first year of Education Matters' evaluation. Teachers and headmasters understand the potential value of small schools and SLCs. However, they also reported the struggles they encountered on the way to becoming the small schools and SLCs they envision for themselves and their students. As such, these baseline findings are important because they reveal where the schools are currently as well as the context in which the next steps to high school improvement in these schools will take place. Therefore, we repeat them by way of summary at the end of the report.

- *The district's high schools, regardless of whether they were reconfigured into small schools or cross-grade SLCs, for the most part, were struggling with the same organizational and cultural issues.* They were having difficulty a) providing teachers in the same content area and/or units with common planning time, and b) bringing teachers together for collaborative conversations, planning, and case management.
- *Headmasters, teachers and coaches reported that it was difficult to organize Collaborative Coaching and Learning (CCL) cycles in the small schools and cross-grade SLCs.* They reported that the main obstacle to creating viable CCL groups was scheduling. Some small schools and cross-grade SLCs wanted ELA-focused CCL cycles, but were often unable to arrange them. Some tried to develop cross-content area CCL cycles that focused on reading strategies across the curriculum. Although these cross-content area cycles have potential, coaches and teachers reported that it was especially difficult to make the demonstration component of the cycles useful for all teachers. Teachers and coaches who worked with grade-level SLCs reported more success in implementing ELA-focused CCL cycles.
- *Teachers who worked in small schools and cross-grade SLCs reported that they were quite alienated and frustrated by a) the process of reorganizing their schools as well as b) the resulting organizational structures.* The sentiments they reported were a result of a) teachers having had little or no voice in the reorganization of their schools, b) an organization that isolated them from colleagues, and, in some cases, c) the requirement that they teach courses out of their area of competence in order for the school to "cover" those courses.
- *Headmasters reported that budget cuts and other staffing constraints left them unable to fulfill the promise of cross-grade SLCs and small schools.* With respect to cross-grade SLCs, headmasters spoke about the impossibility of keeping them "pure." They spoke of having teachers who had to spend less than 85 percent of their time in their home SLC and of students who had to take a few of their core and signature courses outside of their assigned SLC. The headmasters of small schools spoke about large class sizes and the limitations posed by having only one teacher available to students in, for example, ELA, at each grade level.

- *We observed that the organization of SLCs by grade-level appeared to provide a context in which these SLCs could address students' instructional and social needs.* This finding may be related to several factors. First, these grade-level units may have been functioning longer than the small schools and cross-grade SLCs. Second, they may have been able to use their grade-level focus to develop student-directed services. Third, size may have provided them with more flexibility in the context of budget cuts. And, fourth, leadership for these grade-level SLCs may have been quite strong. We pose these hypotheses as part of the baseline findings, but we do not know which are, in fact, related to the finding.
- *Small schools cross-grade SLCs are still developing their thematic foci and the "signature courses" designed to help students explore the theme of their small school or cross-grade SLC.* Due to small size and staff reductions linked to budget cuts, schools reported that they found it difficult to schedule students in cross-grade SLCs into their SLC signature course. As a result, some students were scheduled into signature courses in an SLC which was not their home organizational unit. Small schools, regardless of their longevity, were still struggling to create a thematic focus that would focus the school's work and engage students.
- *The teacher data we collected about student alienation strongly suggests that teachers distinguish between two aspects of alienation: a) alienation that reflects students' lack of connection to adults and students, and b) student engagement that reflects the extent of students' participation in the school's academic and extra-curricular program.* We were unable to interview students about alienation or connections to their schools during the 2003-2004 school year due to the fact that data collection was delayed until early March. However, we are conducting student focus groups to collect data during the 2004-2005 school year.
- *We observed little Workshop-based instruction. Rather, most of the instruction we observed was teacher-directed.* Four of the thirteen ELA teachers used a Workshop format for their classes when we observed. A few teachers in our sample implemented a mix of teacher-directed and student-centered instructional approaches within the same class period. All of the classes we observed demonstrated that teachers had planned a number of varied activities for their ELA blocks.

We know that the district has been thoughtfully reviewing its high school renewal work and has developed new policies and practices that will apply to the next group of schools that reorganize themselves into small schools and SLCs. These policies and practices should increase teachers' engagement with the process of restructuring and, we imagine, avoid situations in which they are placed in schools they did not choose.

However, neither the small schools nor the SLCs in our sample went through the process now envisioned by the HSRCG. In addition, they were the first schools in the district to make the changes now formalized in district policy. It is not surprising, therefore, that they encountered

the kinds of difficulties described in this baseline report. Nor is it surprising that the district used what it learned from the early high school conversions to develop a different process for the next set of high schools.

Nonetheless, the findings detailed in this baseline report represent the experiences and outcomes to date of this initial set of small schools and SLCs with respect to the issues studied. Certainly, there is knowledge to be gleaned from their experiences that can inform schools that are currently planning their redesigned high schools. Our findings support the district's new process, one designed to include teachers and administrators in all stages of planning for their new small schools and cross-grade SLCs. However, the findings also suggest a need for the district and the schools to address the challenges that have arisen in the first set of schools that began high school renewal using a different process.

The district can take this opportune moment to talk with the teachers and headmasters who work in this first group of small high schools and SLCs about the challenges they face and work with them to develop viable solutions. In addition, while addressing the challenges, the district can further clarify for all of the district's teachers and headmasters the theory that undergirds the district's high school renewal policy and how it will lead to improved teaching, learning, and student achievement.

To this end, and with the understanding that the district holds firm to its small schools and cross-grade SLC policy, we urge the district to talk directly to teachers and headmasters about the issues raised in this report. Such conversations would benefit teachers and administrators in the schools in our sample as well as those who work in the rest of the district's high schools as they all move forward with their renewal plans.

More specifically, teachers would benefit from an opportunity to hear from the superintendent, deputies, and/or members of the HSRCG about the "big picture" as well as the details and rationale for the district's high school renewal policy and strategies. Although information may have been available to teachers, given their school-based experiences we believe they would value the chance to listen as well as ask questions before taking the next steps toward improving teaching and learning in their schools.

In addition, since our data reveal that many, if not most, of the teachers in our sample of small schools and cross-grade SLCs feel that they have had no voice in their school's policies and practices, it is important for the district to begin the process of giving them voice. It will also be important for the district to ensure that all headmasters learn how to foster a collaborative culture at their schools. Unless the district addresses teachers' reported lack of voice and headmasters' learning needs in these areas, high school renewal will not have the benefit of its teachers' knowledge, skill, and commitment.

Administrators and teachers in some of the small schools and cross-grade SLCs, likewise, would benefit from explicit examples of schedules they could use in their own schools to provide teachers with the time they need for common planning time, content-focused meetings, case

management meetings, and CCL. Such examples should reflect the real scheduling demands of the schools that educate large percentages of students who require special education services and/or have English language learning needs. They should represent options that result in schools/cross-grade SLCs having more than one core content teacher at each grade level.²² In addition to providing necessary time for teacher meetings and professional development, such options might help cross-grade SLCs increase the “purity” of their units for students, thereby providing them with a full SLC experience.

The two small schools in our sample, in particular, did not begin their high school renewal work in an auspicious manner. The comprehensive high schools in which they are now housed were required to change because they were deemed to be failing to meet students’ needs. While the mandate may well have been necessary, it did not create optimal conditions for generating the creativity that needs to accompany the development of a new school, whether large or small. At this point in time, we think it would be fruitful for the district to acknowledge the challenges that the schools have faced and work with them to establish relationships that support their further development.

Related to this, we believe that the district can learn from the successes teachers and administrators reported having developed in their grade-level SLCs. Specifically these small units developed among their teachers, to varying degrees, the collaborative, instructionally-focused culture the district desires. As they work to sustain this culture while developing cross-grade SLCs, it will be important for the district to attend to how they develop the structures in which to continue to meet and collaborate and then share this knowledge with the small schools and cross-grade SLCs that are striving to create similar conditions.

We could not end this report without returning to issues of instruction. Our interview and observation data lead us to conclude that teachers and headmasters vary in what they understand about Workshop instruction as a route to students’ improved literacy achievement and to CCL as professional development. Therefore, we think it would be useful to have coaches and others review these strategies for all teachers at each high school and then have an open discussion about why the district chose these instructional and professional development approaches, how they are likely to engage students in their work, and what has to be done in classrooms to teach students how to participate within the Workshop format.

In addition, it might be useful to re-introduce the ideas and strategies of “ambitious” instruction to those who teach content areas other than ELA²³. It is particularly important for those who teach the signature courses to be skillful with this form of instruction in order to increase students’ engagement with their learning in these key courses that are intended to represent the small schools’ and SLCs’ thematic focus.

²²We are thinking, here, of assignment strategies that have core content teachers teach at two rather than one grade level.

²³See page 2 of this report for a description of ambitious instruction.

Finally, to the extent that the HSRCG would value the development of more cross-disciplinary high school courses, we think it would be valuable for the group to work with the Curriculum and Instruction unit to develop strategies by which such curricula could be produced. At the present time, it seems unlikely that many teachers, individually or in small groups, would have the capacity or time to engage in this work. Yet, it is essential to help schools develop engaging, high quality curricula to accompany ambitious instruction.

We end with words of thanks to the teachers, administrators, coaches and others who contributed their insights to this report. Last year was a difficult one for the BPS as a district and for its teachers and administrators. Schools had to weather large budget cuts that affected all aspects of their work. Teachers labored almost all year without a negotiated agreement. But, in the face of these difficulties, teachers and administrators took the time to talk with us and to let us observe their classes. Their willingness to participate in this evaluation study only reiterates what we have stated throughout this report: teachers and administrators want to improve Boston's high schools and they want to create schools in which students will be engaged and learn at the highest levels.

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