

Final Evaluation Report: High School Renewal
in the
Boston Public Schools, 2003-2006

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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), designed an approach to high school renewal that attended to the major challenges these schools faced: low literacy achievement, high absenteeism and dropout rates, and high student alienation from curriculum, instruction, and, too often, school personnel. Boston's approach adapted the district's strong, extant theory of action for whole-school improvement by adding to the theory the following postulate:¹

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 has been 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 are to work as settings that will provide students with effective, high quality instructional strategies that will simultaneously reduce alienation and increase achievement.

Evaluation Design and Sample of Schools. Education Matters, Inc. has been evaluating the process and progress of Boston's high school renewal efforts since the late fall of 2003 by focusing on the issues identified as essential to whole-school improvement in a sample of the district's high schools. With the understanding of Boston's approach to high school renewal as one that unites the district's whole-school improvement Essentials with the specific challenges posed by high schools, Education Matters designed the evaluation to focus 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 focused attention on concrete aspects of whole-school improvement given the interwoven problems of student alienation and poor literacy skills.

¹Boston's 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.

With respect to small size we asked:

- *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 we asked:

- *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?

While our school-based work focused on these questions, we also collected data about the ways in which the district organized its work with the schools so that they would have the support and resources they needed to achieve the district's goals for high schools and their students.

In consultation with the Office of Research and Evaluation and with the agreement of the High School Renewal Group (HSRG) and the Superintendent, 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 for our evaluation sample. The SLCs included two ninth grade SLCs, one tenth grade SLC, and the thematically-focused tenth grade of one grade 10-12 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 came from the ninth and tenth grades and taught English Language Arts (ELA) or one of the thematic courses associated with their school. Students in our focus groups were drawn from the classes of teachers in our sample and represented ninth and tenth grades.

Our first report, completed in September 2004, presented our baseline findings which a) highlighted the SLC/small school conditions in place in the sample of schools at the end of the 2003-2004 school year, and b) provided the data against which to consider growth at the end of the 2004-2005 school year. Our second report, completed in October 2005, focused on a) the organization and leadership of high school renewal at the partner and district office levels, and b) students' views of teaching and learning and school climate and culture in their small high schools or SLCs. This third and final report a) presents our findings regarding progress in the small high schools and SLCs during the 2005-2006 school year, and b) challenges that remain for the district and the schools as they continue to develop.

Data on Which These Reports are Based. 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 the classes of 17 language arts teachers and teachers who taught courses associated with the themes of their small schools/SLCs.² And, we interviewed a sample of HSRG members once or twice during the school year.

During the 2004-2005 school year, Education Matters continued to collect qualitative interview and observation data. Our school-based sample included ELA teachers and teachers of courses related to school/SLC themes, ninth and tenth grade students, school administrators, coaches, and support staff from the same two small high schools and four SLCs. We also observed ILT meetings, CCL sessions, x-ray visits, and meetings designed to forward the development of SLC proposals. In all, we conducted 94 teacher, administrator and coach interviews, 12 classroom observations, and 14 student focus group interviews at the four schools. We interviewed partners twice during this year, observed High School Renewal Group and High School Coordinating Group Sessions, and interviewed the Deputy Superintendents, the Deputy for Teaching and Learning, and other central office administrators whose work involved supporting high school renewal.

During the third year of the evaluation, the 2005-2006 school year, we interviewed the same set of teachers, administrators, coaches and focus groups at the schools during the first half of the school year and conducted classroom observations and follow-up focus group interviews when the teachers and the students in our sample were still in the schools. We interviewed headmasters and assistant headmasters twice during the year. And we interviewed central office administrators and the partners during the second half of the school year.

Due to our evaluation of Boston's School Leadership Institute (SLI) and the School-Based Administrator Program (SBA), we also interviewed a number of new headmasters, assistant headmasters, and senior curriculum access specialists who were leading the district's newest set of small high schools and SLCs during the 2005-2006 school year and again during the 2006-2007 school year. While these interviews focused primarily on a) headmasters' preparation for their roles while in the Boston Principal Fellows (BPF) Program and b) the support provided to

²We 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.

new headmasters and SBAs by the New Principal Support System (NPSS), they gave us additional insight into the supports and challenges encountered in leading and developing the new small high schools and SLCs. These findings inform this report. Finally, when interviewing Deputy Superintendents for Schools and Clusters about high school renewal and the NPSS, we inquired about the schools in our samples for both evaluations – high school renewal and the SLI programs – and we asked about progress in the other high schools that were supervised by the deputies. As a result, this final report is based on data from a larger sample of schools than those selected for the original evaluation.

Organization of This Report. We begin this report with a review of the major findings identified in our baseline and second year reports. Then we turn to a summary of the findings from our third year of evaluation which includes data collected from headmasters of several of the newest small high schools during the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 school years. We follow this section with a discussion of the findings in light of the goals of high school renewal, identifying challenges that remain for the district and the high schools as they continue to develop.

Baseline Report Findings: In presenting our baseline findings, we included pertinent information about the district context during the 2003-2004 school year that likely had a significant impact on the development of the district’s new small high schools and SLCs. The context included the fact that 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 and that, 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. In addition, teachers began the 2003-2004 school year without a negotiated agreement between the BPS and the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) and, in mid-autumn, began an action known as “work-to-fairness” in which 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.

Just prior to the end of the 2002-2003 school year, the superintendent had mandated the establishment of a second 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 2003-2004 school year without having had much time to plan for its new organization and independent status. 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.³

Finally, during the second half of the 2003-2004 school year, high schools that had created grade-level as well as cross-grade SLCs learned that, in light of the Gates Foundation grant and revised

³Another 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 continued to experience frustration about their absence from the process at the outset and during subsequent years.

district policy, they would have to choose to restructure into small high schools or 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.⁴

Without question, the district context during the 2003-2004 school year influenced teachers' and headmasters' views of high school renewal as a district enterprise. However, we noted in our analysis of the baseline data that only some of these contextual factors influenced the findings we presented. 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. Therefore, although the context may well have constrained some activities at the schools and lessened the pace of progress, we concluded that the findings we presented had 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.

Education Matters presented the following baseline findings in its first 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 had 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

⁴In 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 discussed their organization and teachers' reasons for valuing them as part of the findings of this baseline report.

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 and cross-grade SLCs were 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 distinguished 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.
- *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.

Year II Evaluation Report Findings

In our second year report, data analysis led us to the conclusion that weaknesses in the organization and leadership of high school renewal were linked to the conditions in the schools we described in the baseline and year two reports and to what we concluded was the limited progress of high school renewal. We described the role of the Deputies for Schools and Clusters with respect to high school renewal and the ways in which curriculum and instruction were being addressed in the context of high school renewal. We also considered how the organization and leadership of high school renewal were linked to the continuation of problematic conditions in the schools in our sample that, in our view, were standing in the way of their making further progress toward the district's goals.

In this second year report we also focused on students by attending to their reported experiences in their small high schools and SLCs. We reported their views on a) personalized relationships with adults in the school/SLC and the developing climates and cultures in these settings, b) the role/centrality of the schools'/SLCs' thematic focus on students' experiences in their schools/SLCs, and c) their views of the status of instruction in our sample schools/SLCs. As part of the discussion of instruction, we reviewed our findings with respect to the status of Workshop instruction and the development of the schools' signature/thematic courses that are meant to interest students and engage them in the academic focus of their high schools/SLCs. Throughout the discussion of instruction and signature courses, we linked our findings to the data we had collected about the organization and leadership of high school renewal.

Based on our '04-'05 school year data collection and analysis, we stressed in our second evaluation report that the findings related to school organization, teacher culture, and instruction, fundamentally, remained the same as in the baseline report.

- Headmasters reported that, with respect to small high schools and cross-grade SLCs, they still had difficulty a) providing teachers in the same content areas and/or units with common planning time, b) bringing teachers together for collaborative conversations, planning, and case management, and, as a result, c) creating a sense of whole-school identity and purpose. Headmasters reported that their budgets coupled with staffing constraints related to their special education populations continued to make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to fulfill the promise of cross-grade SLCs and small schools.⁵ Headmasters spoke about the challenge of keeping cross-grade SLCs "pure" with respect to teacher and student assignment.

⁵Two headmasters reported that, due to reductions in their budgets, they lost teaching positions for the '05-'06 school year. Although we were told by Deputy Superintendents that schools should not have to lose teachers as a result of the budgets, the schools, indeed, have let teachers go. Despite several conversations with district administrators, we have not been able to explain this finding.

- Small schools and cross-grade SLCs were still struggling to develop their thematic foci and the “signature courses” designed to engage students and help them explore the theme of their small school or cross-grade SLC.
- We continued to observe little Workshop-based instruction. Three teachers were employing workshop instruction; two of them who were in our sample in the 2003-2004 school year appeared to have made improvements in this area of instructional practice. However, these teachers represent isolated examples of improvement within our sample. A few teachers in our sample implemented a mix of teacher-directed and student-centered instructional approaches within the same class period. Most teachers reported that they continued to find it difficult to keep students on-task when they were involved in small group or individual work.
- The main obstacles to creating viable CCL groups, in small high schools and cross-grade SLCs, remained scheduling, lack of administrator support, and, to some extent, lack of teacher support for this approach to professional development. Schools/SLCs developed some cross-content area CCL cycles that focused on reading strategies across the curriculum, an approach that was slightly more successful this year than last in one of the small schools. And, one SLC-organized high school used creative scheduling, video-taping of teachers’ demonstration lessons, and after-school CCL professional development to implement a set of productive CCL cycles.

In analyzing the data from focus group discussions with students in each of the small schools, cross-grade SLCs and grade-level SLCs, we concluded that students were not yet experiencing the hoped-for benefits of small schools and SLCs.

- In each of the small schools and SLCs, students identified teachers and/or other adults whom they thought cared about them and who could offer them support. Our data suggested, however, that students did not see nurturing and supportive school- and SLC-wide climates and cultures developing in their small schools and SLCs with one exception.
- Approximately one-quarter of the students in our sample reported that they participated in interesting, engaging thematic/signature courses. Three-quarters of the students in our sample reported little knowledge of or involvement with the thematic identities of their small high schools/SLCs. The signature/thematic courses, for the most part, were not well-developed and/or available to these students. Data from teachers and administrators confirmed that signature/thematic courses had not received much support.
- Most of the students in our sample reported that they were minimally engaged in the majority of their classes and that they were not truly interested in what they were supposed to be learning. A few students described teachers, however, who were able to make the content relevant by a) helping students connect it to their lives, and b) demonstrating that they cared for the students by planning their lessons carefully.

- Students reported that their classes did not demand much work from them and it was fairly easy to get an A or a B. However, they also reported that, for the most part, they were content with passing rather than excelling in their classes.

These findings led us to conclude at the end of two years of study that the schools in our sample had not moved closer to reaping the benefits the district hoped would be derived by small size, high quality literacy instruction, and a thematic focus.

Finally, in our second year report we presented the results of an analysis of the organization and leadership of high school renewal and concluded that its organization and leadership were not adequate for achieving the initiative's goals. We wrote:

- As the complexity and scope of high school renewal increased over the last few years, the district did not put in place a well-functioning organizational system with which to guide the work.⁶ The district did not insure that the internal and external partners to the work developed a set of agreements about a) the nature, priorities, and goals of their work, b) how they would implement it, and c) how they would share responsibility for its outcomes. The district did not insure that within the BPS, the various units and divisions shared a) a common vision about the work, b) an agreed upon set of benchmarks by which its progress would be judged, and c) a process by which to assess that progress and, if necessary, make mid-course corrections. Key individuals from each of the partners associated with high school renewal, including the BPS, acknowledged that its organization and leadership were fragmented with respect to the process of designing and implementing the work.
- The absence of such an organizational structure led to a situation in which the internal and external partners often pursued competing goals and used incompatible processes as they conducted their work and accomplished specific tasks. They did not work as a well-functioning team. They did not have a systematic approach to dealing with the extant conditions in the schools converted during the last few years and they appeared unable to attend to the big picture of high school renewal, specifically, a) the conditions that still undermine high school renewal, and b) the need to improve instruction so that students' literacy skills greatly improved and schools became places in which students felt engaged rather than alienated.
- The absence of a high functioning organizational system led to a situation in which the work of high school renewal proceeded quickly without a careful and sufficient assessment of a) what conditions the schools would need to have in place if they were to succeed, b) the likely conditions that would result from the conversions, c) the relationship

⁶We stress the role of the school district, meaning the senior, line leadership, rather than the district along with its partners because, in the end, it is the district that is accountable for the status of its schools and their students' achievement. It is the district that has the authority to accomplish the necessary coordination and oversight.

between high school renewal and, for example, the policies and practices of Unified Student Services and the Office of Curriculum and Instruction, and d) a defined strategy for moving forward in light of those conditions. As a result, the small high school conversions in which the two schools in our sample participated, as well as the development and implementation of the cross-grade SLCs proceeded in contexts that could not support their development. These small schools and SLCs, in other words, did not have the initial conditions they needed to thrive. At the end of the 2004-2005 school year, they still lacked those conditions.

Year III Evaluation Report Findings

Our third year of data collection continued to focus on the broad evaluation question guiding Education Matters' work.

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?

And, we paid attention to insuring that we had the data with which to answer the sub-questions associated with this broad question. (See p. 2) What did we learn from the third year of our inquiry?

We found a few positive changes in light of the district's goals for high school renewal, specifically, more attention to instruction at the schools and greater deputy knowledge of and involvement with the goals of high school renewal. However, we also learned that the challenges to the success of the initiative we identified in our first two reports remained and others surfaced. These challenges must be addressed if high school renewal is to result in the desired and deserved outcomes for the district's students.

1. We found increased attention to instruction in all of the schools. This was not yet seen in the implementation of higher quality teaching or increased rigor, but in attention to a) developing a clear focus for lessons, b) developing curricula for signature/thematic courses where none had existed, c) forming teacher study groups/book clubs related to instruction, and d) developing new courses and programs to address the learning needs of special populations of students, for example those whose reading skill and comprehension were several years below grade-level, and those who needed to recover credits from courses they failed in order to graduate. Schools that had been able to develop these specialized programs reported that they were pleased with their initial impact on students. However, adding additional course slots to the school schedule, we were told, reduced what little flexibility had been present. Coupled with what headmasters reported were too few teachers, the additional courses, meant that teachers were not available to teach, in particular, thematic courses. This resulted in increased difficulty for the schools in developing schedules for some students, particularly students in the eleventh

and twelfth grades. Headmasters reported, for example, that they now had juniors and seniors with two unscheduled blocks.⁷ And, courses such as the two mentioned led to other scheduling challenges when students completed their credit recovery and/or achieved a high enough level in reading to drop the credit recovery course and/or move out of the reading course. Headmasters reported that they lacked sufficient flexibility in their schedules to meet these students' needs.

2. Teachers and administrators across the schools lamented the loss of the department structure as a vehicle for improving teaching and learning.⁸ This loss was particularly challenging in the 2005-2006 school year when, we were told, more department-based, centralized demands were coming from central office.

3. Teachers, headmasters and coaches continued to describe CCL as difficult to implement in light of teachers' schedules and varied needs. CCL groups were developed based on which teachers had common planning time and not on teachers' involvement with teaching similar content or needing professional development with similar aspects of teaching. Two challenges arose out of this reality. First, teachers reported that their CCL cycles were unfocused because of teachers' different interests and learning goals and the coaches' efforts to meet their diverse needs.⁹ Second, experienced teachers who had been involved in multiple CCL cycles continued to participate in cycles that included many new teachers due to high teacher turnover in their schools. As a result, they reported that they had no opportunity to go deeper with their learning and felt they were constantly "rehashing" the basics of workshop instruction, for example. Teachers and headmasters also suggested that there were additional approaches to professional development that needed to be included in the scant time available and that CCL should not continue to dominate the professional development available to teachers.¹⁰

4. Scheduling challenges left most SLC teachers in our sample without common planning time. As a result, teachers and administrators reported they had scant opportunity to meet together and discuss their students' progress and challenges. On the other hand, these teachers and administrators pointed out that, given the lack of purity in the SLCs, they rarely taught the same

⁷Education Matters confirmed this finding by talking with central office administrators and educators in the HSR office.

⁸In our Year II report, we noted that deputies and other central office administrators also were concerned about subject matter leadership and expertise in the newly configured high schools and also worried about the loss of department/academic content leadership.

⁹See Donaldson, M. and Neufeld, B. (January 2006) *Collaborative Coaching and Learning in Literacy: Implementation at Four Boston Schools*, for additional information about CCL in the district's high schools.

¹⁰For a more detailed discussion of professional development in the district's high schools, see Neufeld, B. *Instructional Improvement in the Boston Public Schools: The Limits of Focus and Stability* in Paul Reville (ed) *A Decade of Urban School Reform: Persistence and Progress in the Boston Public Schools*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard Education Press, (pp 149-150).

students on the same grade level. Therefore, even if they had time to meet together, they would not be able to talk about the same students across classes.

5. Teachers and administrators in newly formed grade 9-12 SLCs described potential benefits to the new structure but envisioned realizing them only if they received the requisite human and material resources. During the 2005-2006 school year, they reported significant obstacles to a) creating more than 50% purity in thematic SLCs, b) implementing SLC-based high interest activities in light of the low purity level, c) appropriately providing education for students with special needs in the cross-grade SLCs, and d) hiring well-qualified staff and providing equipment necessary to implement their thematic focus.

6. Teachers and administrators continued to struggle with meeting the needs of their students with special needs given the constraints of small size and staffing allocations. Some challenges were related to staffing allocations in light of students' diverse needs. For example, a school with SLCs might want to divide its students across the SLCs, thereby giving students a choice of theme, but given the diversity of their special education needs, they could not provide them with appropriate teachers in all SLCs. Indeed, given the diversity of their special education populations, some schools could not provide students with special needs with appropriate teachers even if they scheduled them into only two of three or four SLCs. When the needs of these students could not be met in their "home" SLC, they were scheduled for classes across SLCs thus minimizing the potentially beneficial aspect of the SLC organization. Small high schools, for similar reasons, continued to struggle with how to educate large numbers of students with special needs given schedule and staffing constraints. Finally, as we reported previously, some schools continued to have high proportions of students with special needs assigned to them despite changes in district policy related to student assignment. Some small schools, as a result of their physical facilities, lacked adequate classroom space for their regular education students when their special education population increased.

7. Teachers and administrators in the small high schools and thematic SLCs in our sample reported continuing challenges with finding appropriate teachers for thematically-based core courses. Schools with a science and/or engineering focus needed, for example, teachers for specific physics or chemistry classes, and teachers who were eager to teach the project-based units developed with the schools' partners. Administrators reported great difficulty in finding such teachers and in finding teachers who were certified to teach across subjects given that they could not provide all such science teachers with a full science schedule. The hiring process was complicated when such teachers were needed to replace a teacher on long-term sick leave, for example, or one who was retiring mid-year. It may be that headmasters should know how to overcome these challenges, but those in our sample reported being at a loss. And they reported that they did not get help from Human Resources or any central office administrator when they asked for it. We know that key thematic courses in at least two schools were ineffectively staffed in the 2005-2006 school year as a result of these challenges. Headmasters were not sure that the situation would improve in the 2006-2007 school year. They do not know how to develop their thematic courses if the district cannot insure them the teachers they need.

8. Teachers, administrators, and some central office administrators voiced increasing concerns about what they described as the district's incompatible teaching and learning goals.

On the one hand, they explained, the district required teachers to use a workshop set of strategies and ambitious instruction to insure that students master the curriculum at a high level. On the other hand, they reported facing increasing numbers of pacing guides which required teachers to implement the curriculum at a standardized pace regardless of students' learning needs. Related to this point, schools that were attempting to infuse their theme into a number of core academic courses found themselves struggling with the tension between accomplishing this goal while preparing their students for the district's mid year and final assessments that were based on other curricula content taught in a specified sequence. These issues were raised at the small high schools and SLCs in our original sample of schools and at the small high schools and SLCs that were in our sample for the evaluation of the SLI and SBA programs.

9. Administrators also voiced concerns about the district's incompatible messages about alternative routes to graduation, in particular with respect to Pathway III.¹¹ At least one of the schools in our sample, and several others involved through the SLI evaluation, indicated that they would like to pursue Pathway III. However, they indicated that they would not take this route as long as the district itself was sending conflicting messages about the option. We were told that while the School Committee adopted the Pathways as viable options for graduation, high level administrators within the districts were urging schools not to take this route. Interested schools, we were told, were informed that the approval process would be quite rigorous and that they would likely not meet the required standards. This message, coupled with the incompatible policies described above in #8 and the challenges of developing appropriate schedules and courses for students left headmasters and teachers frustrated about their attempts to create high quality, engaging, meaningful curricula for their students.

10. The quality of headmaster leadership with respect to instruction, in particular, varied in our sample of schools. We have no evidence to suggest that the district, either through the support of the deputies, assistant superintendents, or others provided headmasters with professional development focused on developing their instructional leadership when they needed it. Indeed, we have considerable evidence that headmasters were left to lead their schools as they preferred regardless of the challenges they faced and regardless of students' learning outcomes. Teachers' frustration with headmaster whole-school and instructional leadership, coupled with their schools' lack of attention to creating an instructionally-focused, collaborative culture in particular, was cited as the main reason some of the strongest teachers in our sample left their

¹¹ The Boston School Committee adopted a policy that permitted schools to select one of three Pathways to graduation. Pathway I was the traditional route that required successful completion of a series of discipline-based courses; Pathway II provided schools with the opportunity to develop thematically-focused Humanities classes that would replace the traditional English and History sequence required for high school graduation; and Pathway III enabled schools to develop their own sequence of courses, in light of the state standards and with rigor comparable to what should be seen in Pathway I and II courses.

schools for other Boston schools they determined would provide them with better professional cultures.

11. Year-long planning for the new small high schools led to greater teacher buy-in for them than we found in the small high schools that went through a much more rapid transformation.

This was true even if teachers did not want their school to be divided into new small schools. Teachers appreciated the opportunity to a) develop the themes of the new schools and b) work with their new headmasters prior to the end of the 2004-2005 school year. These opportunities allowed them to become part of their new small high school prior to the start of the 2005-2006 school year.

12. The benefits of this year-long planning and teacher involvement, however, were diminished when teachers found themselves challenged by conditions in the new schools. Challenges with respect to a) establishing autonomy for their schools, b) chronic conditions related to district and union policies and practices cited in earlier Education Matters' reports, and c) the inability of the schools to gain needed human and material resources continued to frustrate teachers and administrators.

13. Year-long planning for the 9-12 SLCs laid the ground work for teacher buy-in. Although not all teachers saw the benefits of ending their grade-level SLCs and replacing them with 9-12 SLCs, they reported that they appreciated having a voice in how the new organization would function and support, in particular, the ninth graders. Some teachers who had the opportunity to develop a thematic SLC reported that they were excited by the chance to create something entirely new that they hoped would engage their students.

14. Planning for SLCs, however, did not necessarily lead to high quality SLC implementation due to a failure on the part of some headmasters and/or the district to provide the schools with the support they needed and/or indicate during the planning year that some thematic SLC proposals could not be implemented. In such schools, teachers and SLC leaders reported considerable disappointment in the district's lack of support for their work. They were frustrated by their inability to put in place the SLC themes they had developed during the planning year. Related to this finding, schools that did not try to develop thematic SLCs seemed to fare better, in terms of teacher satisfaction, than did schools that spent time developing a thematic focus during the 2004-2005 school year.

15. Headmasters of schools with SLCs varied enormously in a) how they supported and evaluated their SLC leaders, b) how and to what extent they forged them into a leadership team,¹² and, ultimately c) how effective they were as school leaders in developing a supportive, instructionally-focused climate and culture. For example, we learned that some headmasters rarely met with SLC leaders while others met with them in frequent and focused sessions. Still other headmasters met individually with SLC leaders but not with the set of them as a team.

¹²Most of this information that led to this point was provided by the deputies.

These data correlate with what we learned about teacher satisfaction with the development and implementation of their SLCs. Teachers in schools where the headmaster was forging a leadership team reported that they anticipated progress in meeting the goals of the SLC structures for students. Teachers in schools without headmaster attention to leadership of the SLCs were less likely to envision a positive future for the restructuring effort. This finding suggests that headmasters, in some schools, might not know how to work effectively to forge new leadership capacity in their schools' new organizational structure.

16. *As a result of participating in the PELP, the Public Education Leadership Project¹³, the deputies for schools and clusters became more connected to the work of the High School Renewal office.* In earlier reports we noted that deputies were not particularly involved in the work of high school renewal. This situation changed, we were told, during the 2005-2006 school year. Deputies met often with the HSR office and participated in discussions of the office's ongoing work with the schools. As a result, deputies were more knowledgeable about the work and headmasters reported getting fewer mixed messages from the deputies and others involved in high school renewal. However, we were told that unclear lines of authority with respect to high school renewal, coupled with the absence of any strategic, collaborative plan to improve the schools' attention to teaching and learning, continued to hamper the level of progress needed.

17. *The quality of the collaboration among partners and between partners and the district's central office showed no change from what we reported in October 2005 according to those involved in the work of high school renewal.* During the 2006-2007 school year, we were told, there was no improvement, and perhaps deterioration, in the partners' ability to jointly organize and target their expertise with respect to high school renewal.

18. *Some small high schools remain rarely chosen by students which leaves them far below preferred enrollment. Some rarely chosen schools are over-enrolled, we were told due to district assignment practices for high school students new to the district, special education assignments, and safety transfers.* Central office administrators as well as headmasters attributed under-enrollment to a) schools' past reputations and b) students' and parents' fears about neighborhood safety when walking students must walk almost two miles to school through high crime areas of the city. We did not get any central office explanation for the over-assignment to other small schools. These findings are troubling in light of the challenges they create for such small schools. They also raise two questions: *Can and should small high schools that are consistently not chosen survive? Can the district avoid turning under-selected schools into dumping grounds for students who present schools with significant challenges?*

Conclusions

High school renewal in the Boston Public Schools is an essential enterprise. The district began the work of improving its high schools in light of data that revealed low student achievement, high

¹³See <http://www.hbs.edu/pelp/> for a complete description of this project, a joint initiative of the Harvard Business and Education Schools.

alienation, and high drop-out rates. Education Matters began its evaluation of high school renewal with the goal of providing the district with valid, usable data and analysis that could inform and improve its work. Our findings to this point have been formative in nature. Now, we are ready to draw some conclusions based on the three years of work we have completed.

Before doing this, however, we want to highlight the efforts of the teachers and administrators who work in the Boston's high schools. We have been impressed with teachers' dedication to their students and to one another. We have been impressed with their willingness to try new strategies and develop new courses. Of course, some teachers have resisted the emphasis on more ambitious teaching strategies. Many have remained angry about the district's approach to improving its high schools. But, many of these same teachers have been willing to try something new for the sake of their students. Even if they never understood the need for massive organizational change in the schools, and even if almost nothing that followed the reorganization has convinced them of its value, they want to work within the system to help its students. As they confront daily challenges to their work, rightly or wrongly, they attribute them to the district's approach to high school renewal. The district has not done much to disabuse teachers of their conclusions.

Headmasters, too, face enormous challenges as they strive to develop their small schools and small learning communities into exciting, effective schools for their students. Sometimes they wonder whether all the fuss about organizational change will yield positive results. We have written about the conditions in place in the district and in the schools that stymie headmasters' efforts every day. We had little to say about conditions that facilitate their work.

In response to our conclusions about the progress of high school renewal, some have suggested that the problem is just that the wrong people are heading the schools. If so, then it behooves the district to replace those school leaders. But, for the most part, we disagree with this analysis. We have written that the superintendent at the time of our evaluation of high school renewal, Tom Payzant, operated on a staffing principle that stressed hiring smart people and letting them do their jobs. This, in our view, is an insufficient approach to leadership development especially in a context in which success will be difficult to achieve.

Many of the headmasters in the new small high schools were hired because they were smart and dedicated. Some had been trained for their roles by the district in the BPF program; others had been hired because of excellent performance in other leadership positions in Boston or elsewhere. They are frustrated by the demands on them absent the resources they need. They are frustrated by not knowing how to accomplish the myriad and competing demands on their time and by the absence of expert guidance. If they knew how to better schedule teachers and students, they would do it. But, they don't know, they are not helped, and, what is required of them, indeed, may be undoable. As a result, they will either stay and fail or leave the district for schools and districts that can provide them with the resources and supports they need to accomplish their goals.

The district needs to demonstrate a greater sense of urgency with respect to achieving the goals of high school renewal and that urgency needs to be coupled with high level support and resources for headmasters and their schools.

We turn now to our conclusions about high school renewal in the BPS in light of the goals the district chose for itself and the evaluation questions we wrote to focus our inquiry.

With respect to the evaluation sub-questions concerning small size, we considered the organization, policies and practices of the small schools and whether they contributed to increasing student engagement and reducing student alienation. We considered how the organization and policies of these small units influenced teachers engagement with students and with the overall school organization. We considered teachers' opportunities to learn to use ambitious instruction in the new organizational units. Finally, we collected data about whether and to what extent working and learning in the SLC or small school settings challenges students, teachers, and school leaders.

In every report we have written we have stressed the limits of organizational structure, of small size, to improve teaching, learning, and student engagement. We have stressed the need for the district and its partners to work strategically and consistently to insure that the schools can overcome the conditions and challenges that, at times, appear to be crippling their progress.

With respect to the evaluation sub-questions concerning ambitious instruction, we reviewed CCL implementation and described the limited amount of workshop-like or ambitious instruction in use by the teachers in our sample who we observed. We looked for evidence that the small schools and SLCs were using what they learned to address alienation and the literacy skills of students, but we found scant examples of real attention to these issues. Finally, we reported what students had to say about their class work and their engagement with it.

These findings, detailed in our Year II report, led us to conclude that teachers, overall, were not deepening their content knowledge and sufficiently increasing their pedagogical strategies. They were not yet encouraging students to do rigorous work, work in which they could become deeply engaged. We have no evidence that the smaller structures facilitated ambitious instruction

Boston does not yet appear to be on a clear path to high school renewal. It may be that the hypothesis guiding the district's work – *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* – is correct. But we have not seen the district take steps over the last three years to test it. The district has focused on establishing new organizational structures rather than looking to the “interwoven problems of alienation and poor literacy skills.”

Education Matters does not have new recommendations for the district based on our third year of data collection. We stand by the recommendations we included in prior reports. We think the district would benefit from considering them carefully in light of the three-year evaluation of high school renewal and the most recent data on the rate at which students drop out of the district's schools. While we know there are many and complex reasons for students' decisions to leave high school, it is likely that the reasons include a) the absence of interesting, rigorous coursework taught in ways that engage students' minds and keep them coming each day, and b) students' doubts that the adults in the schools truly care about them.