

Innovation Creates Range of Smaller Learning Communities

Re-thinking how schools can best maximize student achievement is at the heart of the school redesign movement in APS.

While every school is undergoing change, at the secondary level school redesign in APS often includes the creation of a Smaller Learning Community (SLC) and/or freshmen academy. While the SLC concept isn't new---it initially started in the Chicago public school system about 20 years ago---introducing smaller schools-within-schools or academies is a relatively new phenomenon in APS.

Is there evidence to support the district's emphasis on smaller learning communities? The answer is yes.

Chicago's efforts to improve student achievement through smaller schools was launched by the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988. This massive effort to downsize large schools resulted in improved student achievement and attendance (Klonsky and Klonsky 1999, Wasley et al, 2000).

Education researchers Lee and Smith (1997) found a curvilinear relationship between student achievement and high school size. In fact, multiple studies have shown that small schools have an equalizing effect on student achievement, closing the achievement gap for ethnic minority students and students of low socio-economic status (Cotton, 1996).

A comprehensive study of schools done by Goodlad (1984) found that top-performing schools tend to be smaller schools. Goodlad recommends that elementary schools enroll no more than 300 students and secondary schools no more than 600.

Thanks to pioneering work at **Cibola HS** done by former Cibola Principal **Linda Sink**, Assistant Principal **Karen Sanchez-Griego** and teams of teachers there, APS high schools have a successful SLC model close to home to refer to when developing or expanding their own 9th grade academy or SLC.

"When I went to Cibola in 1997," explained Sink recently, "I learned they had tried an 'ice block'—team of teachers at the 10th grade level where teachers were more involved with each other and their students through interdisciplinary work. When I saw the results of their efforts, I knew it was time to expand the SLC concept. I combined their experience with some ideas of my own to help create the SLC at Cibola. Karen Sanchez-Griego was excellent at figuring out the actual scheduling—her talent helped us organize the vision and make it come true. It took many people to make this work"

Based on the success of the experience, the school's School Restructuring Council approved teaming every 9th grader two years later.

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The results have been spectacular. In 1997, Cibola's dropout rate was above 9 percent. It fell to 1.85 percent for the 2000-01 school year. The school also received an 'exemplary' rating for the 2000-01 school year, the highest possible rating from the New Mexico State Dept. of Education, leapfrogging from its former 'meets standards' rating.

"It wasn't easy," Linda said. "But in effect we lowered our pupil-to-teacher ratio, provided professional development on interdisciplinary teaching and developed thematic units throughout."

About midway through this process Sink said, she and former associate superintendent Sue Griffith learned of federal grants available to create SLCs. After the two visited St. Louis to gather more information, APS hired grant writer Gary DeFrancesco, who applied for SLC funds on behalf of the district.

APS was subsequently awarded \$2.4 million by the U. S. Dept. of Education over 36 months (2000-03) to 'develop, implement or expand smaller, more personalized learning communities in large high schools.' **Tom Savage** is program director of the SLC initiative in APS.

Now, Sink and her new team of teachers and administrators are hoping to repeat the success of her experience at Cibola in the different school environment at Albuquerque High.

When Sink arrived as principal this fall, Albuquerque High had already started work creating a more personalized learning environment through the development of an Advanced Technology Academy, available to students grades 9-12. To maximize efforts underway, Sink appointed **Michael Stanton** director of the academy based on his leadership role in the academy and in the school's career exploration research and community work.

Stanton, who started his career at Polk MS in 1976, said the Advanced Technology Academy boosts teacher involvement and morale because, "Teachers talk to each other. They're spending three-four hours a week on professional development together in a program called 'Teacher Talk.' They connect and problem solve within the small community created by the academy."

Each teacher is an advisor to 12-14 students, meeting with them once a month in a conference setting where they set goals and problem solve which is a way for them to connect with a caring adult, he said.

"We also develop a PGP-Personal Growth Plan- for every student. In January or February, we'll meet with their parents and advisor to formalize their PGP. It's an inventory of their learning style, their personal interests and what they want to learn and achieve," Michael said.

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The career academy approach means all students will take classes based on pathways. Each pathway is a foundation of core classes that all students need to take, combined with a theme such as technology, plus elective classes chosen by the student (and approved by the academy).

Genuine employment readiness and the real job opportunities created through the Advanced Technology Academy's community links are a great part of its appeal. Stanton cleverly established links with the city of Albuquerque's 'Next Generation Economy' project which researches five key areas for job growth in Albuquerque. He also established links with TVI and Sandia National Labs, which provide mentorships, internships and apprenticeship programs. Each academy student will have at least one mentorship and job shadow experience, about 90 hours at a work site, by the time he or she graduates.

Stanton says the Middle Rio Grande Business Education Compact (MRGBEC) provided him with a valuable School-to-Careers model for the academy, plus additional support.

Sink's hopes for the future include creating three or four more career academies that will provide career pathways for students in grades 10-12. She is also asking the School Restructuring Council to extend its current single teacher team at the 9th grade level to a full 9th grade academy comprised of five teacher teams. AHS will likely apply for a federal grant or may use some of its magnet school or bilingual funds to do so.

The career academy approach has the full support of SLC evaluator **Debra Heath**, a Research, Development and Accountability (RDA) employee working directly with schools on their redesign planning, implementation, and evaluation, providing guidance and resources.

"Academies boost academic success across all levels of student achievement including the middle two quartiles," Heath said recently.

"A freshmen academy has certain features in common such as fully dedicated teachers teaching the core curriculum," Deborah said. "You have teacher teams attached to student teams---the whole idea is personalization, increasing student visibility; interdisciplinary instruction. It's very important that all schools engage in SLCs, and expanding the concept to every grade level is essential. It needs to be a fully implemented program," she said.

"Research shows at-risk students are doing much better and that represents a high proportion of students at some APS high schools," Debra noted. "Some schools with SLCs have designated a separate facility for the 9th grade academy, with a separate lunch which creates a sense of smaller community, a sense of safety, helping to foster adult-child relationships."

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Other specific features of SLCs include:

- teacher teams and teacher collaboration
- smaller groups of students
- administrative decision-making powers
- increased bonds between teachers

“We can collect all kinds of data on the outcomes of student achievement but the central issue is, ‘can we explain how the difference impacted student A, to explain the differences between two groups of students,’ Heath stated. “The question for me is what information should we produce to help guide these initiatives.”

Questions about the district’s SLC initiative may be directed to Tom Savage, 256-4466.

Photo caption

Michael Stanton, director of the Advanced Technology Academy at Albuquerque High, says new collaborations with Sandia National Labs, TVI, businesses and with feeder middle schools, provides students with technology, career education opportunities and smoother transitions to post-secondary and career opportunities.