

GETTING READY, WILLING and ABLE:

Critical Steps Toward Successful
Implementation of Small Learning
Communities in Large High Schools

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Introduction

As high schools take center stage on the national education reform agenda, federal, state and local educators are expressing growing interest in the “how” of improving high schools. There is widespread agreement that effective high schools combine rigorous academic preparation for all students with personalized, engaging, flexible, and responsive learning environments (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2004). Far less is understood, however, about the process of transformation that is required to create that experience for all students in a school, or at scale with equity across an entire school system.

The past decade has seen growing experimentation and investment in the creation of small learning communities as a primary vehicle for achieving more personalized, responsive and successful educational experiences for high school students. In contrast to the long-standing use of single small learning communities serving small populations of students within a larger high school (e.g., magnet programs), small learning communities are now central features of whole-school reform efforts. Three applications of the small learning community approach dominate the present landscape of these comprehensive initiatives—new small and medium-size schools, multiplexes (autonomous schools-within-a-school housed in the same school building), and conversions of existing large high schools into wall-to-wall, semi-autonomous, small learning communities.

Variations exist in degrees of both autonomy and selectivity among and within these three strategies, and those variations have implications for equity and scalability. These approaches have not yet been systematically studied across enough cases, for long enough periods of time, with similar enough research outcomes or powerful enough research designs to draw any firm conclusions about their relative efficacy at this point. Case studies have revealed that each—when well implemented—shows promise (NCREST 2004; Toch 2003; AIR and SRI 2003; Legters et al. 2002). We have argued elsewhere that a thoughtful mix of these strategies within an overarching set of shared expectations around personalization and rigor in all high school settings is the most pragmatic approach to breaking free from bureaucratic inertia *and* effecting equitable systemwide change within a reasonable time frame (Balfanz and Legters 2004; IRRE 2005).

“When well implemented” is the operative phrase that requires deeper understanding, particularly with respect to the large school conversion strategy. Greater

autonomy and (often) selectivity of students and teachers can afford new small schools and multiplexes a higher degree of control over variables that enable or impede quality implementation, at some cost in terms of equity and feasible scalability across entire systems of high schools. Large school conversions are attractive because they counter the fantasy aspect of total autonomy and assert the reality and benefits of interdependence when mounting reform efforts that truly embrace all students. However, conversions have struggled in the face of seemingly less control over key variables such as staffing, student motivation and preparation, funding, scheduling, curriculum and facilities. While successful conversions have been documented, a decade of reform has produced high schools that have started down the path to small learning communities only to turn back. A few consciously turn back, unable to translate the vision of small learning communities into a viable action plan for their school or district. More often, a school achieves partial implementation with a freshman academy, or a single small learning community created by a group of energized upstarts, but stalls out before completing the transformation schoolwide. Others make a schoolwide effort and may achieve the guise of small learning communities, but for a variety of human and technical reasons, quietly continue with business as usual—tracking students, undereducating too many, and graduating too few.

Why aren't these restructuring attempts more successful?

There is an abundance of manuals, guidebooks and tools for restructuring high schools—most of them from comprehensive reform models (Cross 2004; Oxley 2004; NCREST 2005). According to this growing body of literature, several aspects of the planning process can either buttress or derail reform efforts. For instance, a more deliberative, informed and unhurried process increases the likelihood of implementation success by allowing schools to consider whether a reform model matches their culture (Datnow and Stringfield 2000; Bodilly 1996) while providing time for staff to fully understand the personal and professional demands of the reform (Hall and Hord 1987). However, other sources argue that planning for longer than a school year without significant action can undermine the reform process. Support and commitment often develop after people have successful experiences with change rather than before (Huberman and Miles 1984).

The perceived legitimacy of the planning process, and ultimately the chances of successful implementation, are undermined when the process does not include all constituencies (district, school administrator, school staff, commu-

nity) (Desimone 2002; Bodilly and Berends 1999; Stringfield, Datnow, and Ross 1998; Louis and Miles 1990). All change agents need to understand planning as an ongoing, evolutionary process in which data on implementation progress are used to inform modifications in the original plans (Louis and Miles 1990). Significant numbers of schools achieve no more than partial implementation of complex reform models even after three or four years (Berends, Bodilly, and Kirby 2002). This is particularly true of SLC structural elements such as the availability of common planning time, equitable distribution of students across SLCs, and teachers teaching students from their own SLC (Oxley 2001). Thus, it is essential that reform be seen as an ongoing process, and that it is initially done correctly, enabling schools to move on to other aspects of the reform.

Finally, resources—or the lack thereof—are a key factor in a school’s decision to opt out of a reform before it is fully implemented (Berends, Bodilly, and Kirby 2002; Ross et al. 1997). For instance, when an add-on grant is used to support planning, or faculty members are asked to volunteer their time to plan, the message is sent that the reform is of temporary importance (Louis and Miles 1990). Schools fall into these “planning” traps for many reasons. In some cases, school leaders are asked to be change managers without any knowledge or training about how such change should be organized or accomplished (Louis and Miles 1990). In other cases, the district hasn’t demonstrated its commitment to the reform initiative by supporting the work of the schools while simultaneously holding them accountable for change (Huberman and Miles 1984).

While researchers have examined aspects of the planning process associated with higher quality implementation of whole school restructuring, very little data have been brought to bear on the process for restructuring these comprehensive high schools into SLCs. Syntheses of the literature on effective SLCs clarify which research-based SLC practices are linked to improved student outcomes (Oxley 2005; Steinberg 2002), but quantitative research does not yet provide guidance on how to navigate the challenges inherent in the SLC restructuring process.

In this paper, we argue and present initial evidence that high schools are much more likely to accomplish successful transformation into multiple small learning communities if they invest in a structured and systemic planning process that focuses building and district staff on key decisions and important prerequisite skills for initial implementation of their small learning communities; if that process is limited from the outset by a firm commitment to full implementation by a certain date; and if they partner with technical assistance providers who have

experience doing this work successfully. Our experience strongly suggests that a successful planning process actually begins where most traditional planning processes end—with the articulation of a clear picture of what the converted school will look like, deep awareness of the critical components of that picture and strong and widespread support—particularly by key leaders—for the changes that must be made to bring that picture to life in the school. Schools and systems that conceive and enact “planning” and capacity-building that move beyond the visioning and constituency-building phase to collaboratively engage in the social and technical nuts and bolts of building their small learning communities and their own capacity to make them work, are more likely to create a sound foundation for positive schoolwide and, ultimately, systemwide change.

To pursue this argument, we draw on the combined experience of two national high school reform organizations to investigate and articulate the conditions under which high schools are most likely to achieve successful and full conversion into small learning communities. First Things First (FTF) and Talent Development High Schools (TDHS) have more than a decade of experience working with large high schools to implement comprehensive change in their structures and functions. Both First Things First and Talent Development High Schools use schoolwide conversion into small learning communities as a key element of their more comprehensive reforms. In this paper we focus on three primary questions:

1. Are there necessary and known preconditions that must be in place for a large high school to implement successful SLCs schoolwide?
2. What are the essential components and phases of a planning and capacity-building process that creates the greatest chance for successful schoolwide conversion?
3. To what extent do these planning and capacity-building processes make a difference for SLC implementation in large high schools?

In the following section, we detail the readiness assessment, planning and capacity-building processes that we argue are essential to successful schoolwide conversion. We then present evidence from our own and independent evaluators’ analyses that speaks to the effects of planning and capacity-building activities on the quality and sustainability of small learning communities. These data cover reform efforts in more than 50 high schools and are drawn from multiple sources, including qualitative case studies, quantitative analyses of teacher and administrator survey data, and analyses of student engagement and achievement outcomes. We conclude with six lessons that our experience and these initial

data have generated about better and worse ways to launch the transformation of large high schools into small learning communities. We close with the current edge of our work and that of the high school reform movement as we face issues related to scaling-up high school reform and building capacity with schools and systems to institutionalize, sustain and continuously improve effective educational practice for high school youth.

Critical Processes: Assessing Readiness, Building Awareness and Planning

Assessing Readiness: The Initial Conditions for Change

There is growing consensus that small learning communities are a promising strategy with the potential to reverse the corrosive effects of large, impersonal high schools on student and teacher motivation and performance. Transforming large high schools into small learning communities that serve all students well is a formidable task, however, and not one that all systems or schools may be ready to undertake. In our experience, at least three conditions need to be present for change to occur—a sense of urgency, commitment to change at multiple levels, and reallocation and availability of resources to support the change process.

Schools, systems and communities that have examined their data and engaged in a serious assessment of the quality and effectiveness of the education experiences they are providing high school students are better positioned for school- and systemwide transformation into small learning communities. New reporting requirements instituted through state and federal accountability systems have made data much more readily available and are generating increased awareness about the poor performance of many high schools. Improved measures of graduation and dropout rates have also provided a clearer, and typically more troubling, picture of high school effectiveness in many cases. The extent to which such data have been analyzed, publicized and used to establish the level of need and to help generate the sense of urgency and momentum required for a major change effort is a sign of readiness. This external “press” from sources inside and outside school districts to do *something* about low-performing high schools and high schools with low-performing subgroups of students can be a critical factor in moving forward even when the going gets tough.

Energy and support for change at multiple levels must also be palpable for successful whole-school conversions into SLCs to occur. Our approaches promote a dual top-down/bottom-up approach that acknowledges the power of decision makers to determine the direction of change but articulates the necessity of building-level awareness, buy-in and participation in determining the details of the reform effort. District leaders remaining on the sidelines, “waiting and seeing,” passively undermining grassroots efforts will trump even strong school staff (administrator and teacher) buy-in every time. Top district leaders and those running key central office functions must be on board from the get-go. Teacher buy-in is important but comes *after* leadership buy-in (district and building) and for many staff only comes after implementation and early successes. Ultimately, a critical mass of leaders with energy, knowledge and support for schoolwide change at each level is needed to ensure that the challenging work of conversion will occur. With the release of recent third-party evaluations of ours and others’ efforts to partner with schools to form effective small learning communities, and with the growing body of literature on the promise of going small, building and district leaders have more fuel to mobilize and energize efforts to convert their high schools to SLCs. Evidence that such campaigning is underway and that constituents are responding with interest is a clear sign of readiness for next steps.

Awareness and Constituency Building: Engaging the Vision

The beginning of SLC implementation is to know and embrace what these communities should look like in the end—what experiences and supports every SLC should provide to all students, teachers and families when they are fully implemented. Ways to get to this “vision” include starting with a blank sheet of paper and having multiple constituencies dream together about what “going small” could and should look like in this school or this district; or starting with such a vision and engaging multiple constituencies in discussing this vision’s promise, evidence base and feasibility in their local context. The latter is what our experience tells us most reliably leads to the goal of effective SLC implementation and helps schools and districts avoid committing themselves to quixotic or even wrong-headed approaches. Appendix B provides an example of a vision that we have used to guide and fuel these precommitment conversations about what all students, staff and families deserve from their high schools.

Getting ready also means that principals, other school-based leaders and district decision makers know what, beyond the vision itself, they're getting into. Making sure the financial resources exist or can be obtained is only one aspect of getting ready. Finding human and political resources to do this work is equally, if not more important. How much of each is needed will depend on two factors: where and how fast the district wants to go with the SLCs and what the starting points are in each school involved. For example, creating SLCs with equal distribution of qualified teachers, students with equally heterogeneous achievement profiles and fair allocation of space and materials will require strong political support and highly effective school and district leadership. If there are existing programs that do not reflect these "new" equity standards, then this task becomes even more formidable, but possible when district and building leaders are aware it is needed and are committed to making it happen.

With district and building leaders willing to implement SLCs in their high school(s) and aware of what it will take to do so, conversations need to spread to other key constituencies. The pacing, sequencing and intensity of these "constituency-building" activities depend on the political landscape of the district, the particular schools involved and the broader community. We have spent weeks in some districts and months in others meeting with business leaders, parent groups, union representatives, boards of education, religious groups and student representatives delivering the same information on the whys and whats of forming effective small learning communities and the associated components of our reform frameworks. We have found that these discussions bring out deeper issues and concerns and move more quickly toward their resolution when:

- The superintendent or a credible designee is present for all, or the bulk of, the several-hour meetings
- Our bona fides as technical assistance providers are presented by this district leader showing that they've done due diligence and a relationship is being built
- The conditions of the district leading to the adoption of SLCs as a reform strategy are forthrightly and fully presented by this district leader
- Building principals are also present to validate the district leader's perspective
- Dialogue among participants and questions and answers between participants and presenters (district and TA providers) occupy most of the time

- Presentations and dialogue at the individual school site(s) among school leadership, staff and TA providers ensure indepth understanding at the school level about the reform components and process, and offer TA providers a chance to take the “pulse” of the school to determine the level of skill and energy for reform tasks and identify red flags
- TA providers are honestly and fully briefed on each constituency’s historical and current role and sets of issues
- Information presented by TA providers effectively conveys:
 - Passion for the work
 - Evidence of its success
 - Openness to local situations but commitment not to capitulate to them as we move toward effective SLC implementation
 - Demonstrated experience and expertise solving nitty-gritty implementation challenges

Awareness-building activities are critical to developing deep understandings of not only the potential of small learning communities but also the technical, social and political challenges schools and systems face in establishing them equitably and effectively. These understandings must be deep and widespread among those at the school site who will be leading the transformation, and those who will be providing system support. Once fully aware, schools and systems may back off and take more time to “get ready.” Some launch voluntary pilot programs with a few SLCs in a school or with one school trying it out. Others target a particular group of students to start with, for example, an advisory system or teaming of ninth-grade teachers in the school. Later in the paper we discuss the risks associated with these start-up strategies. Others see what they’re getting into and proceed more ambitiously.

When do these activities reach sufficient numbers of constituencies with sufficiently effective information and dialogue to call for resource commitment and move into the next stages of the planning process? *First*, constituency building and creating broader awareness of the reform doesn’t stop. We remain “on call” to the superintendent and building leaders to engage in constituency-building activities well into the planning/capacity-building period and beyond. *Second*, the calendar will and should drive the launch point. As the reader will see in the next section, to open a large high school with SLCs implemented “wall-to-wall,” staff members should be in place and in training, full-day events planned and orga-

nized and information gathered by early fall of the year before implementation. *Third*, these constituency-building activities are not meant to convince all participants to vote in favor of the reform. The district (board and superintendent) and building leaders (principals) are the key decision makers; therefore, the calendar can be the arbiter of when to move once these leaders are prepared to sign on the bottom line. Finally, the next phase of the work, constituency building, continues, but at a different level. Here, every faculty member, central office and building administrator and larger numbers of students, families and community members have the opportunity to spend time seeing and participating in moving toward SLC implementation.

Planning and Building Capacity at the School Site: Making the Vision Real

High schools that have made the commitment to implement small learning communities schoolwide face substantial changes on many fronts—from the structure of the physical plant, to curriculum and professional development, to the process of resource allocation, to the very attitudes, orientations and job descriptions of faculty and administrators. We have learned that schools are much more likely to succeed if they engage in a structured, guided planning process spanning up to a full school year.

This planning process differs dramatically from planning processes driven by accountability and compliance approaches that typically involve a few school leaders participating in a day of training and then spending long nights producing a heavy tome called the “School Improvement Plan.” Such plans tend to be long on goals and benchmarks, short on viable strategies and even shorter on the understanding, buy-in and capacity needed among school staff to bring the strategies off the page and into daily practice. The planning process we describe here does not culminate in a written document (although written plans and tools are often generated), but rather in a transformed school that opens its doors to students and staff reorganized and ready to engage in more effective and authentic practices.

The planning processes that support implementation of First Things First (FTF) and Talent Development High Schools (TDHS) differ in their details, but embrace five common principles. They are:

1. **Inclusive**—involve at various steps all faculty, staff and representatives from other stakeholder groups
2. **Participatory**—engage participants in the actual hands-on work of school transformation
3. **Transparent**—reveal to all participants up front and along the way the steps that need to be taken, the decisions that need to be made and the problems that need to be solved to move forward
4. **Concrete and Adaptive**—enact steps, decisions and solutions according to a timeline that ensures progress while balancing commitment to the model and timeline with flexibility and necessary adaptations to local circumstances.
5. **Supported**—facilitated by an on-site change coach and other technical assistants and networks of schools with experience and expertise in high school transformation

Both models also call for similar steps that support schools to achieve full and equitable conversion into small learning communities. What follows outlines these common steps in chronological sequence and describes the structures and processes required to complete each step. Figure 1 summarizes the key steps and timing of each during the planning year. While FTF and TDHS are strikingly similar with respect to the steps, structures and processes of their planning year, the models diverge somewhat on the specifics of their timelines. Moreover, the steps overlap considerably in real time. We have addressed these issues by using ranges and specifying, when necessary, where the models diverge. Note that these steps come after the readiness assessment and awareness- and constituency-building phases described above.

Step 1: Planning Team and Study Group Formation, Start-Up Training and Timeline Agreement

In both models, the whole-school conversion planning process begins with the identification of 10 to 15 individuals from the school who are designated to help lead the faculty in the initial stages of the planning process. In the TDHS model, this group typically includes the principal and representatives from school administration, faculty, staff, union, student body and involved parents and com-

munity members. The actual make-up of this group should depend not only on position and authority in the school, but also considerations of an individual's energy, leadership capacity, informal authority and interest in participating in the change process. (Note: TDHS stimulates early identification of individuals interested in change during the latter part of the awareness-building phase by encouraging faculty to submit preliminary proposals for career academies).

FTF refers to this group as study group facilitators. They are faculty trained by IRRE to lead discussions among the entire faculty and many of the same constituencies just listed in small groups (12–15). These study groups are supported logistically by building administrators and overseen by the FTF school improvement facilitator. The faculty members facilitate study groups and discuss, in sequence, key decisions and options—for example, how many SLCs and what themes they adopt.

The Steering Committee in TDHS and the Study Group Facilitators in FTF receive indepth training in the respective reform model and planning process during the summer before or at the beginning of the school year. Members are presented with national, district and school data that demonstrate linkages between students' high school performance and future prospects. Dialogue around these data and participants' experiences in their school generate a sense of urgency about the importance of reform. Training also provides planning team members with an opportunity to hear about schools that have implemented the reform model and significantly improved school climate and student attendance, behavior, persistence to graduation and academic performance in circumstances similar to their own. This part of the training, often supported by teachers, administrators and students from experienced schools, creates a sense of possibility among planning team members. This helps generate excitement and faith in the process; this is especially important in districts where weary staff and parents have seen many reforms come and go. It is also important to sustain the energy and momentum needed to move through the difficult decisions that constitute the remainder of the planning process.

Figure 1: High School Conversion Planning Process Steps and Sample 18-Month Timeline

PLANNING STEPS	DESCRIPTION	SAMPLE TIMELINE MAR–AUG 2006
Readiness Assessment Awareness/Constituency-Building Phase	District- and school-level awareness sessions; information sharing about school/district (e.g., community, students, staff, space, policies, programs, politics); joint decision to move forward; MOU and contract developed; facilitators and point persons identified and initial training	Mar–July 2005
System Leadership Training and Supports	Training and supports for building and district leadership	Ongoing
Step 1	School-based planning/facilitation team formation, start-up training, and timeline agreement	May–Aug 2005
Step 2	School kick-off; working groups formed and activated	Oct 2005
Step 3	SLC concept development	Oct 2005–Jan 2006
Step 4	SLC teams formed and activated	Jan–Feb 2006 (TD) Mar–Apr 2006 (FTF)
Step 5	Student recruitment and placement	Feb–Mar 2006 (TD) Apr–May 2006 (FTF)
Step 6	Facilities plan developed and finalized	Dec 2005–Apr 2006
Step 7	Scheduling	Feb–Aug 2006
Step 8	Baseline data collection and report development	May–June 2006
Step 9	Capacity-building in curriculum and instruction, teaming, leadership	Mar–Summer 2006
Step 10	Summer work to ensure strong opening	June–Aug 2006

The planning team helps kick off the planning process in the school and leads the ad hoc working groups needed to carry out detailed aspects of the conversion process. The planning team is generally understood as a transitional structure, however. As the planning year progresses, leading and decision making become increasingly distributed and decentralized into the newly organized SLC teams.

While the planning team is trained, FTF and TDHS staff meet with school leaders to ensure that they understand the full planning process and commit to the dates, training and technical assistance necessary to ensure that it is completed within the established timeframe.

Step 2: Study and Working Groups Formed and Activated

The on-site facilitator and planning team members kick off the planning process in the school during a schoolwide meeting attended by all faculty and staff. During this meeting, the vision for change is presented, all participants are acquainted (or reacquainted) with key features of the model, and the planning process steps and timeline are outlined. Participants then break into working groups facilitated by members of the planning team. Initial working groups typically discuss the following focus areas:

SLC Themes: This group (and subgroups) reviews research and collects and analyzes data to review and choose among options around the appropriate number of SLCs for the school, the most viable themes and necessary staffing model.

Transition Structures/Ninth-Grade Academy: This group analyzes data on key transition points (ninth and 12th grades) and studies strategies to promote success for students as they enter and leave high school. In schools adopting TDHS, this group focuses on the goals and structure of the ninth-grade academy.

Facilities: This group must determine how the school will be physically converted into small learning communities. It considers the locations of existing facilities, including offices, classrooms, laboratories, lavatories, potential entrances and travel paths to common areas such as the cafeteria and gymnasium. It then generates a plan for change that will best accommodate schoolwide conversion into multiple, self-contained small learning communities. Architec-

tural assistance from an outside partner (ideally pro bono) can support the work of this group.

Curriculum/Instruction/Assessment: Groups study, plan for and support professional development in curriculum/instruction components of the models, including teaching in the extended 80- to 90-minute block, TDHS/FTF curriculum, and instructional strategies that promote active engagement of students in learning. These groups also address the need for a common core curriculum for all students, alignment of core and TDHS/FTF curriculum with state and district standards, and how supports for special education and LEP students will be provided within the SLC structure.

Advisory/Teaming/Family Advocate System: Groups study, plan for and support schoolwide professional development around supporting student success and advancement by developing strong, sustained relationships between adults and students. These groups learn about the components that support such relationships (FTF Family Advocate System; TDHS Advisory and Teaming processes), assess existing student supports and family/community strengths and challenges, and (with outside technical assistance) promote indepth awareness building and begin training for all SLC staff.

Step 3: SLC Concept Development (number, themes, staffing model)

Carefully planning the number, themes and preliminary staffing model for schoolwide SLCs is a critical step in a successful conversion. Determining the appropriate number of SLCs for a given school adopting TDHS or FTF is, on the surface, a fairly straightforward calculation, as both models identify 250–350 students as an ideal size (small enough to be personal and large enough to sustain at least two teachers in each subject to reduce number of preparations and provide within-SLC subject-area support). However, the presence of preexisting SLCs that are typically much smaller than the recommended range and target a particular student population (e.g., magnet programs, programs for at-risk youth, career academies), often complicates the picture. Hence, the process of identifying the number of SLCs requires that the status of these programs be discussed to determine whether they will continue and, if so, whether within a larger SLC or distributed across SLCs. Because this discussion necessarily engages the school's vested interests and historical/political terrain, it is much more easily negotiated with support from an external facilitator and the disci-

pline imposed by the school's clearly established commitment to a comprehensive reform model.

Determining the most viable themes for wall-to-wall SLCs in a school requires assessment of information from several sources. Both models survey students and faculty to determine interests, perceived strengths of the school around which an SLC might be developed and individual talents or strengths in particular areas. TDHS and FTF support analysis of the local labor market and emergent industries to help align career academy and SLC themes with potential partnerships and work-based learning opportunities. Reforming schools also are encouraged to ensure that every student is able to find a home in one of the SLCs by making the themes distinct from one another. For example, a school with four SLCs might use the arts, health/science, business, and leadership/social science as guiding themes. In the TDHS approach, if not already in play, proposals for different SLC concepts are solicited from faculty and considered by the working group. IRRE develops options for numbers and themes based on student and staff input from surveys and study group discussions; and from its own feasibility analysis in collaboration with building and district leaders. These options are then presented to the entire staff through the facilitated study groups where they are discussed and consensus sought on the most viable and promising option. The study groups are presented only those options that the district and building leaders have signed off on regarding the numbers and types of staff needed to make them viable. Ultimately, the building and district leaders take the input from the study groups and IRRE and decide.

A viable staffing model must also be generated in this step. This model does not yet include actual staff assignments into SLCs. Rather, it determines what staff in each subject area is needed in each SLC once the ideal number and themes are determined. Existing staffing allotments for the school must then be mapped onto the model to identify gaps so that the building and district leadership (in FTF) and the planning committee (in TDHS) can determine whether and how gaps could be addressed. In FTF, this is part of the feasibility analysis that is conducted before presenting the SLC options to the faculty for discussion.

In TDHS, the SLC theme working group addresses these issues and makes a recommendation to the planning committee on SLC themes; in FTF, using the teacher and student surveys, study group discussions and the feasibility analysis, themes and numbers of SLCs are part of the "package" of options presented by IRRE to the study groups for final discussion.

Step 4: SLC Teams Formed and Activated—Staff Selection, Provisional Placement and Start-Up Activities

Once the number and themes of the SLCs are determined, all faculty and staff submit a rank ordering of their preferred placement with rationale supporting their first choice. In TDHS, on-site change coaches then facilitate a process whereby the planning team (or a subgroup that includes the school principal, emerging SLC leaders and the union representative) matches the staffing needs of each SLC with faculty preferences. In addition to faculty choice, subject area, teaching experience and dual certification, other criteria are used to establish preliminary SLC assignments. In FTF, the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) takes these same issues into account and develops an initial staffing plan for discussion with building leadership including, in some cases, teacher leaders. In our experience, when this process is done well, and because the planning has been inclusive and participatory up to this point, most faculty receive either their first or second choice of SLC placement. The few faculty members who do not receive either their first or second choice are invited to a one-on-one meeting with the principal to discuss their placement. Leadership, counselors and support staff for the SLCs are also established at this time. In most cases, leadership for the SLCs has emerged during the working group process.

Provisional placements are shared with anticipation and celebration in a full staff meeting and new working groups (SLC teams) are formed around each SLC concept. SLC leaders have received training and preparation to facilitate initial activities within their group. These activities include initial team building, but then move right into refinement of the SLC concept; articulation of the mission, values and codes guiding the SLC operation; and discussion of curriculum and instructional approaches (the planning team has determined which curriculum/instruction and discipline decisions will be determined schoolwide and which at the SLC level). The SLC teams also develop materials and tools needed to market the SLCs to students in preparation for the student selection process.

Step 5: Student Selection and Placement

One of the main reasons to engage in the intensive planning process described here is to ensure that students make an informed choice of an SLC program. Students simply assigned to a small learning community over the summer or fol-

lowing an abbreviated orientation are unlikely to be invested in their SLC. Both FTF and TDHS offer opportunities for current and incoming students to become aware of their talents and interests, and extensive opportunities for students to learn about each of the SLCs before making their choice. Applications invite students to rank their preferences. Then the school staff, supported by the change coach, places students in their SLCs. Students typically receive their first or second choice.

Step 6: Facilities Plan Developed and Finalized

Once the number and themes of SLCs have been identified, the facilities working group can proceed with developing a detailed plan for reorganizing the physical plant to accommodate them. The plan will specify each SLC space and account for any expenses involved, such as the construction of new dividers and doors or the installation of utilities for science and computer labs. The plan is shared with the entire staff and arrangements are made for SLC teams to move (with support) into their new spaces during a designated time period. SLC teams may host an end-of-year welcoming activity for students in their new locations, though the move may not be completed until the end of the summer.

Step 7: Scheduling

Scheduling can make or break a whole-school conversion. Access to technical support and a network of schools that have undergone successful conversions is especially important in this stage of the planning process. Schedulers must be trained in the principles of scheduling a wall-to-wall SLC school and work closely with SLC leaders to develop accurate course files, student course selection data, and teaching assignments. Commitments to extended class periods, common planning time for teachers and SLC purity (e.g., whether students from different SLCs may participate in the same class) must be discussed and determined collectively.

Step 8: Baseline Data Collection

On-site change coaches also facilitate collection of data during the planning process to establish a baseline on outcome indicators such as climate, attendance, achievement, promotion, and graduation. Tools, including climate surveys, data

surveys, and implementation checklists help SLC and whole-school leaders use data to provide continuous feedback and guide decision making.

Step 9: Capacity-Building in Curriculum/Instruction, Teaming, Leadership

The planning year provides ample opportunity to train in numerous areas before opening the new SLCs. This enables faculty and SLC leaders to gain confidence in the new roles, practices, and materials associated with the reforms. Training, for example, in curriculum that TDHS and FTF provide to help schools close learning gaps, lays the groundwork for a smooth opening and makes the most of job-embedded professional development in the newly organized school.

Step 10: Opening Strong

Planning work continues throughout the summer as the newly configured planning team (now made up of whole-school and SLC leadership) ensures that necessary changes to the physical plant, the schedule, schoolwide and SLC policies and procedures and any other details are addressed. A faculty retreat helps welcome newly hired faculty, clarify governance and solidify SLC identity and plans for operation. SLC teams also establish detailed plans for welcoming students and setting a positive tone with clear expectations and support systems to ensure a strong opening. FTF requires that at least two days before school opens all SLC staff participate in full-day trainings in SLC functioning, family advocacy and the use of common planning time for instructional improvement.

Initial Evidence of Importance and Efficacy of First Steps Toward SLC Implementation

In asking whether the proposed activities and timeframes just described embody important conditions for successful start-up and ultimate success of SLCs, we looked to diverse sources of evidence. We have found:

1. There are compelling cases where the presence of these conditions was followed by relatively strong SLC implementation and where absence of these conditions was followed by weak, delayed and unstable implementation.
2. Analyses of survey data from more than 40 high schools demonstrate:
 - a. Meaningful change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs about the reform effort immediately following these activities
 - b. Consistent associations across field-based reports of the extent to which planning activities occur and the presence and quality of SLC implementation
3. Independent evaluations that show — when significant numbers of these activities are conducted on the timelines described earlier — meaningful improvements at high schools with these SLCs, particularly in student attitudes and beliefs, attendance, promotion rates, graduation rates and test scores.

The remainder of this section presents data on each of these points.

Compelling Cases

Talent Development High Schools and First Things First each have more than a decade of experience supporting high school conversion into small learning communities. Talent Development High Schools serves more than 80 high schools in 30 districts and 15 states, and First Things First is being implemented in 23 high schools in eight school districts. These implementation efforts have produced a wealth of field experience that we have only begun to document. The following cases drawn from this experience speak to the importance of the conditions and planning processes described in the previous section for SLC implementation in large high schools. Though limited in their application to all schools, these examples illustrate valuable lessons that we summarize in our concluding discussion.

CASE 1: CONSTITUENCY BUILDING AND PARTICIPATORY PLANNING SUPPORTS DEEPER AND MORE SUSTAINED IMPLEMENTATION OF SCHOOLWIDE SLCs

TDHS experiences with Baltimore high schools as part of an early scale-up effort in the mid to late 1990s, and subsequent scale-up of the program in Philadelphia offer a salient contrast that argues for investments in the kind of planning processes described above. Patterson High School in Baltimore was the first high school to partner with Johns Hopkins University and became the site where TDHS was born. The school underwent 18 months of planning before the school opened wall-to-wall SLCs. The process engaged and energized a large number of school staff members, allowed time to identify and involve emergent leaders and enabled planning teams to tend to and own the details of the conversion. The work paid off. Patterson saw immediate improvements and quickly became known as a turn-around high school in Baltimore (see Legters 2002 for full case description).

After the striking improvements at Patterson, several other low-performing Baltimore high schools were identified as “reconstitution eligible” by the state. These schools contacted the staff at TDHS to support implementation of the same model that was producing results at Patterson. The three schools under the greatest pressure to improve attempted to reorganize into wall-to-wall small learning communities over a three-month period during the summer. School administrators, in consultation with TDHS staff, divided their building, put up signs marking the new SLCs, and hurriedly attempted to develop a schedule. They developed a faculty handbook modeled after Patterson’s, which they distributed at an August retreat, offering what for many faculty was the first glimpse of the SLC concepts and reorganized school plan just two weeks before the opening of school.

The results were disastrous. The schools opened to a great deal of confusion, porous schedules, many students without schedules, and little sense of ownership or team spirit among SLC staff. In spite of efforts to conduct mid-course corrections over the first implementation year, these schools never developed a strong schoolwide SLC structure. While some students demonstrated academic gains resulting from TDHS acceleration courses and ninth-grade transition supports, these schools did not achieve the dramatic improvements in school climate or measurable and sustained improvements in student attendance and grade promotion seen at Patterson.

TDHS learned from the Baltimore experience the perils of circumventing an inclusive, detailed planning process involving all staff, and applied this lesson to its next opportunity for expanding the model in Philadelphia. Each of the seven Philadelphia high schools to adopt the TDHS model underwent extensive awareness building and planning to prepare for reorganization. This planning was especially critical because these schools were already operating under a nominal SLC configuration that, in spite of its initial intentions, had become de facto tracks, many of which sustained little focus, personalization or motivation for students. These schools are still “works in progress.” Variation exists among them due in part to factors unrelated to their adherence to a rigorous planning process per se (see Lesson 4 below). In contrast to Baltimore schools, however, program evaluations and results from a recent independent evaluation suggest that TDHS reforms have taken hold and are producing results, particularly in the schools that have been implementing them the longest (Kemple, Herlihy, and Smith 2005).

CASE 2: UP-FRONT AWARENESS AND CONSTITUENCY BUILDING CAN UNCOVER BARRIERS TO SCHOOLWIDE CHANGE AND FORESTALL WASTED EFFORT AND WEAK IMPLEMENTATION

The leadership of a large high school invited TDHS to become the school’s reform partner as required by a grant opportunity. TDHS conducted several awareness-building sessions in the school over a three-month period, providing faculty and staff the opportunity to ask questions and become familiar with all aspects of the model. It became clear through this process that a chasm existed between the school administration and powerful faculty members fueled by both historical tensions and the absence of a teachers’ contract. The lack of goodwill and trust in this school made it impossible for faculty to buy into the program and embrace the difficult changes that would be required of them to implement the reforms. This was asserted in a union-required vote against schoolwide SLCs, at which point TDHS withdrew, realizing that the school was not ready to make the collective effort necessary for successful conversion.

CASE 3: SYSTEM LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT AND INVOLVEMENT IN PLANNING PROCESS ENSURES RESOURCES FOR SCHOOLWIDE CONVERSION INTO SLCs

During the planning and capacity-building year of one FTF district, IRRE worked closely with system leaders to ensure that the resources necessary to staff SLCs were in place before implementation. To do this, IRRE created staffing scenarios

that informed district and building leaders of the “cost” of FTF implementation in each building—how many and what kinds of positions would be needed to allow teachers and students to stay together across the school day. With this information, IRRE and leaders in the buildings and district worked through the feasibility and the mechanics of each of these options before presenting the staffing plan to the entire faculty. This process helped ensure that concerns about staffing the SLCs would not disrupt initial implementation.

To further support the work of the reform, this district “transformed” 80 percent of central office curriculum coordinators into school improvement facilitators who were based in the buildings and responsible for supporting implementation. As budget cuts occurred over time, these positions were protected to ensure the schools had the support they needed to maintain the reform. District commitment to resource reallocation as well as protection of those reallocated resources to support successful implementation is critical to maintaining momentum and commitment at the building level.

CASE 4: LACK OF SYSTEM LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT IN THE PLANNING PROCESS CAN DERAIL THE REFORM PROCESS EVEN WITH BUILDING-LEVEL COMMITMENT

The superintendent of a large urban district invited IRRE to support implementation of FTF in several secondary schools. Regional area superintendents were asked to identify schools and IRRE began working with secondary schools in various regions of the district.

High School A had a history of providing a small group of upper-middle class, non-minority, high-achieving students with a disproportionate share of the school’s resources. More specifically, the students performing at higher levels were taught by teachers who had proven track records with regard to student outcomes and were more innovative and motivated. The larger population, predominantly low-SES, minority students performing at grade level or below, received their instruction from teachers who did not necessarily have established track records for improving student outcomes or were not perceived as top-rated teachers. As part of the FTF framework, IRRE worked with staff in the school to create a more equitable distribution of resources.

Initially, the faculty and administration resisted these changes; individual staff members, as well as union representatives, spread misinformation about the reform being bad for students and teachers being “stomped on.”

During the planning year, the staff eventually began to realize the value of the reform for their students, as IRRE worked to help them understand what changes would actually take place and how those changes could better support everyone. It appeared the planning process might overcome any initial resistance. However, powerful forces within the community—predominantly led by the parents of the upper-middle class, non-minority students—preferred the status quo and began a campaign to oust FTF. They convinced a board member who had supported FTF not only to publicly denounce the reform model but also to attempt to expel FTF from all schools in the district. Fortunately, the other regional superintendent and principals of the other schools implementing FTF in the district—including two middle schools in the district in which High School A was located—were committed to FTF. As a result, a behind-the-scenes deal was struck that FTF would remain in all the schools except High School A. This decision led to additional strife at High School A, where the faculty members who had engaged in the reform process and worked hard to put changes into place were informed they were returning to business as usual.

The obvious question is where was the school and district leadership during this battle? Unfortunately, not one leader—superintendent, regional superintendent, board members, or principal—stepped up to counter the attack against FTF in High School A. In fact, the final decision to withdraw High School A from the reform initiative was made by a deputy district administrator who had not participated in any of the knowledge- or constituency-building sessions during the planning year, becoming involved only when the issue went public. From this experience, IRRE learned that FTF can withstand lack of support at one level of system leadership but not at multiple levels. Schools in the same district that did have support from key leaders continued through the planning year and into implementation of FTF. We also learned that the private commitment of system leaders is necessary but not enough to support the reform initiative. A common public message also needs to be conveyed by all levels of leadership within a district. IRRE now works with system leaders to craft this message at the beginning of the planning year.

Survey Data Analyses

Survey data from FTF and TDHS schools provide further evidence that speaks to meaningful linkages between planning activities and schoolwide SLC implementation in large high schools. An independent study of FTF schools offers evidence that planning activities produced meaningful change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs about SLC reforms. Analyses of climate survey data from TDHS schools draw direct connections between principals' and teachers' experiences of planning activities and SLC implementation. As we pointed out above, it is the adults in the school building who must embrace and enact SLCs through their daily practice. The findings from these studies support our argument that a planning process that energizes them for the hard work of implementing SLCs likely supports quality and sustained implementation.

Change in teacher perceptions following planning year activities: Findings from evaluation of FTF

As part of the YDSI evaluation of First Things First in Kansas City, Kansas (Gambone 2004),¹ teacher survey data were collected before and after the planning year during which many of the activities described in the earlier sections of the paper were conducted. The teacher survey measures included:

- **Knowledge:** A single item assessing general knowledge of the FTF Initiative and nine items assessing knowledge of each of the critical components of the initiative (e.g., Based on the information you have seen and heard, how well do you feel you understand the initiative?).
- **Commitment:** Examined as two distinct subconstructs, *personal commitment* examining how enthusiastic each staff member feels about implementing the reform components; and *collective commitment* examining staff members' perceptions of how well other staff members in their school would work toward implementing the reform components.

¹ The evaluation tracked a wide range of staff, student and implementation outcomes in a single district over six years; however, only data from the early outcomes research study will be presented (Gambone et al. 2002). In addition, only staff survey data from the first two clusters of schools in the district (two high schools and their four feeder middle schools) are included in this report because of the district phase-in of FTF. Data on early outcomes are examined pre- and post-planning year as well as after one year of implementation.

- **Readiness:** A single item asking about the extent to which the respondent feels ready to participate in the FTF initiative.
- **Possibility:** A single item measuring the extent to which the respondent believes that it is possible to implement the reform in the particular school where the respondent works.

Staff members responded to survey items using a four- to seven-point Likert scale, depending on the question. For example, collective commitment was measured by asking how strongly the staff members at the school support or oppose implementing the reform and answering whether most staff would actively oppose it; passively oppose it; not stand in the way; support other staff members' efforts; do what is necessary to make it happen. Knowledge was answered on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 = Understand very little to 7 = Understand very well.

The evaluators considered meaningful change to have occurred when they saw movement of 10 percentage points or more (either upward or downward) in the proportion of staff who exhibited the most positive levels on the early outcomes. The most positive level was defined as the top two categories on the Likert scale. The evaluators also identified two-thirds of the staff exhibiting these positive levels as the target for each set of attitudes and beliefs.

Results

Knowledge. Staff survey data suggest that the strategies used to inform participants about the reform were effective in increasing the level of knowledge reported by the staff. Meaningful gains in the proportion of staff who felt they understood the initiative well were seen—well over 10 percent gains—with approximately 50–60 percent of staff feeling knowledgeable by the end of the planning year. These levels continued to increase through the first year of implementation so that by the end of the first year, all of the secondary schools had more than two-thirds of the staff reporting high levels of understanding.

Commitment. This construct was more complicated than the “knowledge” construct, because staff members perceived differences in their own levels of commitment relative to their colleagues, consistently perceiving themselves as being more committed and ready to do what it takes than their colleagues. There was also a great deal of variation in levels of commitment to different components of

the reform initiative (e.g., higher standards, improved instruction, small learning communities, etc.). In this summary, we focus specifically on commitment to implementation of SLC structural changes that included reallocation of staff to lower student/adult ratios, block scheduling and staying with the same group of students throughout secondary school.

Overall results showed increased commitment to these changes as planning activities continued. Results diverged across clusters, however, which had different experiences during the planning year. In the first planning cluster where the secondary schools gravitated toward the current implementation standards for SLCs included in the FTF model—with guidance and support from IRRE and district leaders—the increase in commitment was greater and achieved threshold levels of two-thirds of staff in all schools. In the second, while there were significant gains in both personal and collective commitment to the structural changes, no staff reached the two-thirds threshold feeling personally committed to, or believing their colleagues supported the structural reform. The evaluators suggest that this divergence may have been due to initial staff resistance to adhering to the same set of implementation standards present in the first cluster and district personnel stepping in and insisting that it go in that direction—this being viewed by staff as a shift in expectations (see Lessons Learned discussion).

Readiness. It comes as no surprise that very few staff members felt they were prepared to implement the reform at the beginning of the planning year. There were, however, steady and meaningful gains in both the planning year and first year of implementation in the percentage of staff feeling very ready to implement FTF. By the end of the planning year the percentage of staff feeling up to the task of implementing FTF increased from approximately 15 percent to 50 percent (with one high school staff reporting more than 60 percent levels of readiness). This percentage continued to climb in the first implementing cluster such that more than two-thirds of the staff felt they were very prepared; in the second cluster there were also increases in the proportion feeling prepared, but this percentage still hadn't reached 66 percent by the end of the first year of implementation.

Possibility. While both clusters showed steady gains over the course of the planning year in feeling prepared for the process, it appears that as the staff became more aware of what was coming, they became less confident that the changes were possible in their building. However, this trend was reversed for the most part after the first year of implementation when staff had an opportunity to put the changes in place and see what it actually took and how their students would respond to the

changes. Staff in neither cluster reached threshold levels of confidence that the full reform was possible in their school. This may reflect staff members' lack of confidence in their colleagues' commitment and follow-through as suggested by the collective commitment results being weaker than the personal commitment.

While there was variation in the systemic pattern of early outcome results, the evaluators could conclude that the strategies put into place during the planning year led to meaningful improvements in the early outcomes that were expected to lay the foundation for high-quality implementation.

Planning Activities and Supports Linked to SLC Implementation: Findings from TDHS Administrator and Teacher Surveys

Results from two analyses of TDHS survey data show significant relationships between planning activities and SLC implementation. The first analysis is based on data from 106 administrators across 44 high schools surveyed in 2003, and 92 administrators across 33 high schools surveyed in 2004. Administrators were asked to rate various factors influencing their reform efforts along a 10-point Likert scale ranging from negative to positive. Items capture many of the readiness, awareness building and planning support conditions described in the previous section. The five used in this analysis are: *time available for planning*, *time to prepare and support teachers*, *district support*, *union support*, and *support from an external technical assistance team*. Administrators also were asked to indicate whether SLCs were being implemented at their school and to respond to other items assessing the quality of SLC implementation, e.g., scheduling and staffing purity, physical proximity of SLC classrooms and whether faculty work together on interdisciplinary teams. From these items, we constructed two measures: *Baseline SLC Implementation*, which indicates the existence of SLCs in the school, and *Optimal SLC Implementation*, where administrators describe SLC implementation that approximates the ideal of self-contained, semi-autonomous small learning communities advocated by TDHS.²

Our second analysis is based on data from two waves of teacher surveys administered in spring 2004 ($n = 2,009$) and spring 2005 ($n = 1,451$). Teachers were asked

² Administrators' responses on the five planning items were coded as negative or positive and then cross-tabulated with their responses on the SLC measures for each survey year. Cell values were then averaged across the two survey years. Further description of items and constructs is provided in footnotes on Table 1.

to respond to a number of items that tap into the principles of planning and capacity-building outlined earlier. We included five items in this analysis; two addressing start-up conditions (adequate resources, clear goals and priorities), and three addressing inclusiveness and buy-in (teacher participation in planning for reforms, whether teachers voted for the reforms, whether they had a choice in their SLC assignment). Teachers also were asked to respond to the same items described above on the administrators' survey indicating the presence and quality of SLC implementation. In addition, we analyzed teachers' responses to questions about levels of faculty morale and commitment to reform as potential outcomes related to initial planning activities and important forces in implementing and sustaining the reforms.³

Results from TDHS Administrator Survey

Of the administrators who gave positive ratings on the five planning conditions, a consistently higher proportion reported both baseline and optimal levels of SLC implementation, compared with those who gave negative ratings to the planning conditions. Analysis of these relationships is summarized in Table 1. The conditions that had strong and significant influence on SLC implementation were time to prepare and support teachers and time available to plan for the reforms. Among administrators who identified time to prepare and support teachers as a positive influence on their reform efforts, for example, more than half (55 percent) reported baseline SLC implementation in their schools, compared with just 27 percent who gave this item a negative rating. A fifth of the administrators who rated time to prepare and support teachers positively reported optimal SLC implementation, compared with only 5 percent among the negative raters. External technical assistance, school district support and teacher union also appear to influence SLC implementation, though less dramatically. An exception is the apparent strong influence of the teacher union representative on optimal SLC implementation. This bears further investigation as it suggests that factors critical to successful conversion, such as staffing, scheduling and teaming, may be particularly sensitive to the level of buy-in of the local union and building representative.

³ Teachers' responses on the six planning items were coded as true or not true. Responses were then cross-tabulated with teachers' responses on the SLC measures and the commitment and morale measures for each survey year. Cell values were then averaged across the two survey years. Further description of items and constructs is provided in footnotes on Table 2. Further description of items and constructs is provided in footnotes on Table 1.

Table 1. Cross-Tabulated Percentages of Administrator Assessments of SLC Implementation by Reform Planning Processes and Conditions

	OPTIMAL SLC IMPLEMENTATION ¹	BASELINE SLC IMPLEMENTATION ²
Factor Influencing Reforms		
1. Time Available to Plan Reforms		
Negative	.05	.38
Positive	.18	.52
Sig. ³	*	
2. Time to Prepare and Support Teachers		
Negative	.05	.27
Positive	.20	.55
Sig.	*	*
3. External Technical Assistance Team for This School		
Negative	.08	.44
Positive	.15	.48
Sig.		
4. School District Authorities Closest to This School		
Negative	.08	.41
Positive	.16	.57
Sig.		
5. Teacher Union Representative at This School		
Negative	.02	.48
Positive	.22	.56
Sig.	**	

¹Optimal SLC Implementation = Composite variable of five items. Administrators responded “Yes, this is the first year” or “Yes, it was implemented more than a year ago” to each of the following items: a) Has your school been subdivided into distinct organizational components, such as schools-within-a-school, academies, or small learning communities? b) Do faculty teach only students who are members of the same school-within-a-school, academy or small learning community? c) Are many faculty members on small interdisciplinary teams of teachers that meet regularly in a common planning period? d) Are classrooms grouped to serve students in the same academy or small learning community across major subjects instead of by teachers from the same subject department? and e) Are all or almost all of your courses in extended class periods (70–90 minutes)?

²Baseline SLC Implementation = Administrators responded “Yes, this is the first year” or “Yes, it was implemented more than a year ago” to a) Has your school been subdivided into distinct organizational components, such as schools-within-a-school, academies, or small learning communities?

³Significance differences determined through two-tailed *t*-test; * *t* <= .05; ***t* <= .01

Table 2. Cross-Tabulated Percentages of Teacher Assessments of SLC Implementation, Commitment and Morale by Reform Planning Processes and Conditions

	OPTIMAL SLC IMPLEMENTATION ¹	BASELINE SLC IMPLEMENTATION ²	COMMITMENT ³	MORALE ⁴
1. Teacher participation in school planning and decisions.				
Same/Worse	.16	.76	.72	.47
Better	.22	.78	.89	.74
Sig. ⁵	***		***	***
2. Goals and priorities for school are clear.				
Not True	.16	.74	.51	.23
True	.20	.78	.85	.67
Sig.	**	*	***	***
3. When new initiatives are introduced at this school, teachers are provided adequate resources to implement them.				
Not True	.15	.76	.57	.31
True	.21	.78	.89	.72
Sig.	***		***	***
4. A majority of teachers actually voted for the reforms planned at this school.				
Not True	.17	.78	.66	.40
True	.20	.75	.84	.67
Sig.			***	***
5. Did you have a choice of the school-within-a-school, academy or SLC in which you teach?				
No	.13	.70	.74	.51
Yes	.33	.89	.81	.63
Sig.	***	***	***	***

¹ Optimal SLC Implementation = Composite variable of five items. Teachers responded “Yes, this is the first year” or “Yes, it was implemented more than a year ago” to each of the following items: a) Has your school been subdivided into distinct organizational components, such as schools-within-a-school, academies or small learning communities? b) Do you teach only students who are members of the same school-within-a-school, academy or small learning community? c) Are you a member of an interdisciplinary team of teachers that meets regularly in a common planning period? d) Are classrooms grouped to serve students in the same academy or small learning community across major subjects instead of by teachers from the same subject department? and e) Are all or almost all your courses in extended class periods (70–90 minutes)?

Results from TDHS Faculty Survey

Teachers' reports of the presence of reform readiness and planning activities were significantly associated with SLC implementation and faculty commitment and morale (Table 2). The condition that had the strongest influence on SLC implementation was whether teachers had a choice of the SLC in which they taught. Of the teachers who were given a choice, for example, a full third (33 percent) reported optimal SLC implementation and 89 percent reported baseline SLC implementation. Of those not given a choice, only 13 percent reported optimal SLC implementation, and 70 percent reported baseline SLC implementation. SLC choice may have a particularly strong influence on SLC implementation that more closely approximates the TDHS ideal because it indicates that facilitated planning was enacted at the school and that teachers were meaningfully involved. In contrast to a vote that typically occurs at the outset, SLC choice occurs about midway through the TDHS planning year and is a better indicator of the successful progress of planning activities that result in deep structural change in the school. Other conditions included in this analysis—teachers' reports of participation in planning, clear goals and priorities, adequate resources and buy-in—were not strongly associated with baseline SLC implementation, but did influence optimal SLC implementation and were strongly and significantly related to faculty commitment and morale. Further analyses are needed to assess the relative and cumulative influence of different planning conditions on SLC implementation and the more general commitment and morale boosts necessary to deepen and sustain SLC reforms.

² Baseline SLC Implementation = Teachers responded "Yes, this is the first year" or "Yes, it was implemented more than a year ago" to a) Has your school been subdivided into distinct organizational components, such as schools-within-a-school, academies or small learning communities?

³ Commitment = "Our faculty tries to go the extra mile to get behind changes to make our school better" Percent True or Very True

⁴ Morale = "In general, morale among staff at this school is positive" Percent True or Very True

⁵ Significance differences determined through two-tailed t-test; * $t \leq .05$; ** $t \leq .01$; *** $t \leq .001$

Independent Evaluations

Independent evaluations of both FTF and TDHS offer evidence that guided conversion of large, low-performing, comprehensive high schools into small learning communities has resulted in meaningful, and in some cases dramatic, improvements in student attendance, grade promotion, graduation rates and test scores.

Independent evaluation of FTF

Using diverse and rigorous statistical strategies, Gambone (2004) and Quint et al. (2005) have confirmed that, with consistent and focused supports from their districts and IRRE, secondary schools serving large numbers of minority and economically disadvantaged students can produce positive results. Results suggest that the implementation of FTF, including its formation of SLCs, in all the Kansas City, Kansas, (KCK) Public School District high schools led to dramatically improved attendance and graduation rates and test scores when compared both to trends in overall state results and to other urban schools in the state.

For instance, estimated effects on student test scores on the Kansas State Assessment—the KCK district’s high-stakes assessment—indicate double-digit increases in the percentage of students scoring at proficient or above and double-digit reductions in the percentage of students scoring at unsatisfactory levels.

Independent evaluation of TDHS

An independent third-party evaluation of TDHS conducted by MDRC uses rigorous longitudinal interrupted time series analysis comparing student academic achievement outcomes in five high schools implementing TDHS with match control schools (Kemple, Herlihy, and Smith 2005). The TDHS schools studied all participated in planning at least one year before implementation that involved many of the activities described in the previous section and outlined above in Case 1. Planning resulted in implementation of a freshman academy and career academies for 10th- to 12th-graders in each school.

MDRC found that for first-time ninth-grade students, Talent Development produced substantial gains in attendance, academic course credits earned and promotion rates during their first year of high school. The improvements in credits

earned and promotion rates were sustained as first-time ninth-graders moved through high school. The impact was especially strong on the number of students passing algebra, a standard gatekeeper course for grade promotion, and the program produced modest improvements in student performance on the state standards assessment in math. Based on evidence from the first two schools to implement the model, Talent Development also produced positive impacts on high school graduation rates and more robust improvements in test scores for later cohorts of students.

Lessons Learned

Though preliminary, the evidence presented in the previous section offers support for our argument that high schools that invest in readiness assessment, awareness/constituency building and meaningful time for inclusive and participatory planning will increase their chances of successful conversion into small learning communities that produce positive achievement and attainment outcomes for students.

In this section, we elaborate on key lessons that we think can shape future efforts at converting large high schools in positive ways. These lessons are drawn from the foregoing presentation of data linking planning activities with successful conversion efforts. They also reach beyond the formal data analyses to incorporate insights based on our collective two decades of work in this field. Though not yet systematically documented, these experiences are grounded in implementation reviews and field reports. As such, they can offer guidance to a high school reform movement whose growth is rapidly outpacing efforts to research its conditions and progress.⁴

Lesson 1: System and school level awareness, commitment to and involvement in the planning process is critical.

Case study and survey data suggest that when district and school staffs fully engage in the activities and processes described above good things happen. Our experience suggests that this is largely because system- and school-level commitment and involvement tend to dissipate both principled and defensive objections and concerns around implementing the reform frameworks. When constituencies get a chance to hear about and discuss the upcoming implementation, when clear and sensible expectations for what SLCs will need to look like and why, and when all staff involved with the participating schools (district and school) have opportunities to engage in discussion of a few important decisions, make them and move on to the next one, a sense of progress and buy-in grows, even among early resisters and hesitators. But when system leaders provide “get out of going to meeting cards” to key staff—especially if they are hesitant or resistant; or when these activities are compressed and fewer staff members participate, problems result. Without all staff members having heard about and been given

⁴Sample implementation review tools for each model are provided in Appendix B.

opportunities (exercised or not) to weigh in on those decisions that bear on their future work life, pockets of resistors form and are difficult, if not impossible, to dislodge. One of their most powerful weapons is “we didn’t know about this and/or didn’t agree to do that!”

Lesson 2: Moving forward based on unarticulated or false assumptions can result in wasted effort and weak implementation.

The foregoing data also suggest that assessing district and school readiness through intensive study and conversation among district and school staff and technical assistance providers results in more informed decisions by all parties. These phases are critical to revealing weaknesses in capacity, policy barriers and resource gaps that can severely limit a school’s chances for successful conversion.

The main resource barriers to whole-school conversion are leadership and teaching staff, adequate professional development and release time for planning, and funds for technical assistance and facilities changes. TDHS and FTF use the readiness assessment and awareness-building phases of the planning process to determine whether there is sufficient talent, energy and financial support for the conversion. Both have worked with schools to redistribute existing resources to create needed leadership and teaching positions. In one district, for example, schools eliminated administrative positions focused on a single function (e.g., discipline, attendance monitoring) to free up resources for SLC and team leader positions. In another school, physical education positions were exchanged for additional math and English teachers.

Lesson 3: Clear and defensible implementation standards, decision-making processes and timeframes promote progress toward implementation with little or no risk for losing “buy-in” to the reform.

“Prescriptive” has been used to describe both FTF and TDHS in our approaches to forming and supporting SLCs. Both frameworks specify what and why specific attributes of SLCs are important for their success; both provide opportunities for district, building, staff and student decision making on some issues but not others; and both provide timeframes (how long it should take) and agendas (what happens when) for the initial awareness and planning year activities.

We have found, however, that without these supports and structures for “getting off the dime” toward wall-to-wall implementation of SLCs the process can either drag on and diminish into meaningless and unfocused conversations having little bearing on effective SLC practices; or as the negative cases presented in the previous section suggest, can result in compromise agreements on how good is good enough implementation, producing diluted forms of SLCs with little chance of truly making a difference in either relationships or teaching and learning.

Lesson 4: Schools that phase in their SLCs run the risk of weak or incomplete implementation.

We have found that when district and school staffs are made aware of the depth of change the conversion into SLCs requires, there is a strong temptation to adopt a phase-in strategy rather than endure the challenge of schoolwide transformation all at once. Experience within our own programs, and observations of other efforts, strongly argues against phasing in except under certain circumstances. Phasing in SLCs over several years has several drawbacks. First, initial SLCs typically draw the most motivated and often most talented staff and students. This tendency for energetic early adopters to be concentrated in the first-phase SLCs virtually ensures structural inequity if the school completes its conversion process. We say “if” because loss of momentum for change is another tendency among schools that choose a phase-in approach.

Creating SLCs is hard, tense work. Schools that spend a year or two bringing a couple of SLCs on-line lose energy for further reform, particularly if grant funding begins to dry up, community pressure ebbs, politicians focus elsewhere, and the school’s sparkplug faculty and leaders are busy running the initial SLCs and have diminished investment in schoolwide change. Phase one SLC claims on space also can interfere with the carefully designed facilities plan that a fully converted high school requires. Finally, there’s an old adage that when leaders take too much time to make an important change, it organizes the enemies of the reform and scatters its friends. Both of our organizations can testify to the truth of this statement.

For these reasons, TDHS and FTF encourage high schools to plan for full conversion during the planning year. TDHS may support accelerated phase-in of its ninth-grade academy (particularly if the school is building on an already existing transition program), while the school is planning for upper-grade SLCs. But the

program has had enough experience with high schools losing steam following implementation of the ninth-grade academy that it now requires clear up-front commitments and timelines for upper-grade SLC planning as part of its initial contracting process with schools intending full conversion. IRRE requires that its four-year thematic communities be implemented at a single time in the fall following the completion of the planning and capacity-building activities described above.

Lesson 5: Constituency building, focused planning and initial capacity building are necessary, but not sufficient to ensure high-quality and sustained implementation.

We have found that failing to plan adequately virtually condemns a whole-school conversion effort and that adequate planning greatly strengthens the potential for success. We also have found that planning does not guarantee successful implementation of schoolwide SLCs, particularly over time. In our experience, numerous variables can impede both planning and implementation of a whole-school conversion process. These include the political courage of school and district leadership to stand up to vested interests and distribute resources equitably across SLCs; the capacity of the building principal to truly delegate decision making and empower SLC leaders; the quality of individual technical assistance providers; and the unique chemistry between on-site change facilitators and school leadership. Not all of these factors are easily determined ahead of time; some only reveal themselves during the planning and capacity-building process. Unanticipated policy shifts or leadership change in districts and schools also have thrown off schoolwide SLC efforts.

Both programs have struggled with turnover among administrators at the school and central office levels. Implementation quality can flag when key leaders leave, especially if grant dollars have been expended on planning, capacity-building and initial implementation, leaving few resources for technical assistance to hire and train new leaders in the reform framework and practices. This has led IRRE and TDHS to identify emerging leaders early in the planning process and broaden its leadership development approach so that emerging leaders can be groomed and ready to replace departing ones. IRRE also now insists on early and regular contact with the boards of education to increase retention of key leaders and to replace those who leave with emerging leaders with demonstrated commitment to the reform.

Lesson 6: Districtwide implementation of SLCs in all high schools that need them increases the likelihood of successful implementation.

Independent evaluations cited above and our experience suggest that one way to secure the sails against the winds of caprice and status quo undertow is to move beyond individual school change and focus high school transformation at the system level. In Kansas City, Kansas, all the comprehensive high schools implemented FTF's form of schoolwide conversion into SLCs. In Philadelphia, TDHS partnered with a critical mass of seven of the city's lowest-performing high schools, revising and revitalizing an earlier districtwide high school restructuring into SLCs. Significant gains in graduation rates, attendance and academic achievement have been validated by independent evaluations as a result of these efforts.

Districtwide implementation makes sense on several grounds. When district offices have to support widely varying reform efforts plus continue some schools in business-as-usual mode, their attention and resources get scattered. With a critical mass of high schools implementing SLCs, district offices are compelled to align core resources—personnel, professional development activities, curriculum supports—around a common set of priorities. In addition, district leaders have a much easier time communicating these priorities to state policy makers and private investors. This is not to say that all high schools must have identical configurations of SLCs—as discussed earlier, FTF and TDHS advocate for somewhat different configurations with each providing teachers and students choice around thematic emphases. However, with all underperforming high schools moving toward wall-to-wall SLCs, there are choices for students and staff and the greater likelihood of achieving coherence, efficiency and sustainability.

Efficiencies of scale apply to most of the activities described in this paper—where the second, third, fourth schools involved cost much less than the first. With the financial pressures affecting all our partner districts, these efficiencies matter and the lower incremental costs of additional high schools implementing SLCs becomes part of the argument for going to scale.

Recruiting and maintaining building and SLC leadership becomes more tractable when districts can focus their efforts around a common set of skill profiles required to support effective SLCs. With this larger number of leaders being developed and recognized for their achievement, leadership changes at any given school become less threatening to continuation of the reform effort.

Finally, and perhaps most important, district leaders can legitimately claim that equitable opportunities exist for all students and staff to experience the more personalized and effective learning environments that high-quality SLCs can provide. For example, implementing SLCs at scale within a district helps prevent the draining of innovative teachers and administrators into several “reforming” schools and out of equally needy schools.

Final Thoughts

The information provided in this paper about our two organizations' best thinking and experience thus far lays the groundwork for the next generation of research on this important topic. With the "intervention" more clearly defined, rigorous qualitative and quantitative studies are needed to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions to successfully launch SLCs as part of more comprehensive high school reform strategies, to make them stick and make them effective.

Toward this end, IRRE is developing tools to provide additional quantitative indicators of the presence and quality of implementation of SLCs as well as FTF's Family Advocate System and instructional improvement activities. Planning and capacity-building activities during the year before implementation are being tracked as well, and variation in the occurrence, timing and quality of these activities will be available to examine in relation to the implementation measures and ultimately to student outcomes. TDHS is refining existing instruments and developing new tools to monitor planning activities and implementation of various model components. Use of these tools over the next three to five years will produce a wealth of data about the relationship between planning efforts, SLC implementation and student outcomes. The data generated also will enable more sophisticated analysis using path modeling and regression techniques needed to more fully investigate relationships among salient aspects of whole-school conversion efforts. In separate efforts, both IRRE and Johns Hopkins are gearing up with several research partners to conduct randomized trial studies of different training and support packages and their value added to implementation and outcomes of the models.

In our six lessons learned, we embedded our recommendations for how focused and intensive preparatory activities can leave districts and high schools ready, willing and able to implement effective small learning communities for all their students and staff. Still unclear is how these lessons can be applied at scale in *all* the high schools and districts that desperately need small learning communities to help raise their students' commitment and performance. From successful scale-up efforts in education and other sectors, we know that we have to be clear what we mean by effective SLCs and narrow the number of pathways for getting there to have any hope of training enough people in any reasonable amount of time to meet the demand. We also are aware of the pitfalls in trying to reduce a terrifically complicated process—with intricate mechanical, interpersonal and systemic factors to be reckoned with—into a lockstep, overly prescribed formula.

With thousands of schools and hundreds of districts now considering or using small learning communities as vehicles for supporting their students' and staffs' success, we see less risk in over-prescription and more risk in failing to provide these schools and districts a clear focus for their work and well-grounded answers to the question "what will it take to pull it off?" We hope this report contributes to providing both.

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Appendix A: Program Descriptions

First Things First (FTF) is an education reform initiative that seeks to raise the academic achievement of all students to the levels needed for postsecondary education and high-quality employment. Developed by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), First Things First works with school districts and schools toward three goals: strengthening relationships among students, adults at school, and adults in students' homes; improving teaching and learning in every classroom every day; and allocating resources to achieve the first two goals. To achieve these conditions, FTF has three main implementation strategies:

- Creating thematic **Small Learning Communities** (10 to 20 staff; no more than 180 students at the elementary level or 350 students at the middle/high school levels) that ensure continuity for students during the school day and across multiple years. SLCs also create nurturing environments in which a diverse staff, with a wide array of expertise knows every student personally. All high school and many middle school SLCs mix grades—with students from all grade levels in the building in each SLC—making it possible to base instruction and curriculum on individual academic needs and interests, rather than grade levels alone. SLCs become a school's structural unit where staff study individual student data, take collective responsibility for every student's success, and make key decisions about discipline, staffing, time use, student scheduling and budget.
- Establishing a **Family Advocate System (FAS)** that builds on the SLC structure, pairing each staff member with 15 to 20 students and their families for the entire time each student remains in the SLC. The FAS concept focuses on creating a positive relationship among a staff member, a student and the student's family and carefully maintaining that relationship as they work together to set and meet goals on important outcomes in every aspect of the young person's life, beginning with academics and behavior and extending beyond graduation. The benefits of FAS are many, including providing a student with a strong, positive adult relationship within the school, facilitating the family's involvement in their child's academic and personal development and easing the often difficult transitions between elementary and middle school or middle and high school.
- Consistently **improving instruction** to engage students in active learning, to challenge them with rigorous expectations, to align these expectations and the

curriculum with standards and to assess student outcomes with methods that include those utilized in high-stakes testing. IRRE becomes a partner with schools and districts in implementing instructional improvement by training and supporting teachers and instructional leaders to meet these instructional goals through professional development opportunities.

The FTF model also encompasses a series of processes including reconnaissance and constituency building, planning and capacity-building, implementation supports, a system of data-based continuous improvement and leadership development.

The FTF theory of change holds that the model must continuously evolve to reflect data on progress against targeted outcomes and implementation standards, as well as new research findings from the field. IRRE has also developed a set of tools and processes that allow district leaders and teaching staff to collect data for continuous improvement through classroom observations, self-assessments, surveys and student/school records. Like No Child Left Behind, FTF requires that student outcomes be reported as percentages of students meeting thresholds for performance. These data are also used to hold adults at all levels of the system collectively responsible for improving every student's outcomes.

FTF is now up and running in nine districts and 71 schools, including 26 comprehensive high schools. FTF schools serve primarily low-income communities with large numbers of minority students and, in some urban areas, many students whose first language is not English. Independent evaluations have now confirmed that FTF can be implemented effectively in secondary schools in multiple districts and, when well implemented, FTF raises key student outcomes, including graduation rates, persistence in school, attendance and scores on state assessments.

The Talent Development High Schools (TDHS) model was designed in 1994 by educational researchers from Johns Hopkins University and Howard University under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. It is a comprehensive reform model that targets high schools with significant populations of students placed at risk for academic failure and dropout. TDHS currently assists 80 high schools in 30 districts, 15 states and the District of Columbia. Independent evaluation has confirmed substantial increases in student attendance, achievement, grade promotion and graduation resulting from strong and sustained implementation of TDHS reforms.

Talent Development features the following components:

- **Organizational Reforms:** By reorganizing large, comprehensive high schools into small learning communities, TDHS helps to alleviate the anonymity that often leads to poor school climate, chronic absenteeism and low student achievement. Entering freshmen become members of the Ninth Grade Success Academy, and all upperclassmen participate in one of several career-themed academies. Each academy is further divided into interdisciplinary teacher teams to increase the personalization of the school and to afford teachers opportunities to collaborate for the benefit of their students. The program also encourages schools to adopt a schedule organized around extended (80–90 minute) class periods and flexible learning opportunities such as Twilight School and Saturday School.
- **Accelerated Curricula:** Educators and researchers from Johns Hopkins University have designed curricula in mathematics and English language arts to address the needs of students who arrive at high school performing well below grade expectation. Our acceleration courses span ninth–11th grades and are offered in tandem with the standard high school curriculum in what we call a “double dose” in a 4 x 4 block schedule. Talent Development courses include Strategic Reading, Reading and Writing in Your Career, College Prep Reading and Writing, Transition to Advanced Mathematics, Geometry Foundations, and Algebra II Foundations. In addition, all entering ninth-graders take Freshman Seminar, an eight-component course designed to arm students with skills necessary for success in high school: high school orientation, computer literacy, college, study skills, human relations and social skills. All TDHS curricula are research-based; infuse cooperative, project-based and active learning approaches; and prepare students for high-standards work by teaching high-level thinking, comprehension and problem-solving skills with

high-interest accessible materials that help teachers scaffold student learning gaps.

- **School-Family-Community Partnerships:** Talent Development high schools become part of the National Network of Partnership Schools, a Johns Hopkins University initiative that trains action teams of teachers, administrators and parents to increase parental involvement in school activities. As part of the process of developing career academies, schools involve local businesses, professionals and government agencies in planning and implementing academy activities and work experiences.
- **Professional Supports for Implementation:** Talent Development offers on-site support for initial awareness-building activities that lay the foundation for a strong reform partnership and generate initial informed buy-in for reform. Once a partnership is established, a four-person facilitator team made up of an Organizational Facilitator, and Instructional Facilitators in Math, English and Freshman Seminar/Teaming works on-site to support planning and implementation. The organizational facilitator supports the school through an extensive, participatory planning process that achieves reorganization into the ninth-grade academy and wall-to-wall career academies, and continues to work with the school through initial implementation. Instructional facilitators work with subject-area leaders to align TDHS curricula with local standards. They provide initial training in all TDHS courses and, if needed, Teaching in the Extended Class Period. The same facilitators provide in-classroom support, model teaching, co-teaching and observing. In addition, Talent Development identifies and trains local teachers to act as full-time curriculum coaches in mathematics, English language arts, and Freshman Seminar/social studies.
- **Data Supports:** TDHS facilitates goal setting and data analysis of school climate, attendance, grade promotion, achievement and graduation rates using surveys, site reviews and end-of-course assessments to support data-driven decision making and continuous improvement in partner schools.

Appendix B: Supporting Materials

The Institute for Research and Reform in Education

Vision Statement 2005

What Can a High School Look Like?

High school settings can offer personalized learning environments in which all students engage in and master meaningful and rigorous academic work. To achieve these goals all high school settings need to provide students, their families and staff the following set of opportunities.

Smaller High School Settings Promoting Healthy Relationships

A personalized high school makes sure all students have opportunities to be known and respected for their talents within a smaller group of students with their own team of teachers (no more than 400 students for new small schools and no more than 350 for semi-autonomous small learning communities).

This group of students and teachers participate in these smaller high school settings by choice; they stay together in dedicated and appropriate physical space over the entire course of high school.

These smaller organizational structures act as the engines of personalization where long-standing, mutually accountable and respectful relationships among students and adults support the core work of teaching and learning. Students and adults are expected and supported to give back to this “smaller learning community” and to embrace and respect diversity of race, gender and culture within this community as well as in their broader community.

These high school settings are also the locus of adult and youth decision making about what will happen among them on a daily basis—within school- and districtwide requirements for safe and healthy learning environments and rigorous and meaningful teaching and learning. These new settings provide a

platform for reallocating human and economic resources to meet the needs of students and staff to accomplish the high school's overarching goals.

Student and Family Advocacy and Support Systems

Within these new high school settings, every student and family will be known personally—and known very well—by at least one school staff member. This adult “advocate” is connected to a group of 15–17 students for their entire career in the school. Within these even smaller personalized structures, every student will have opportunities for leadership in multi-age groups and will learn healthy group practices and effective teamwork.

In collaboration with these advocates and other qualified school personnel, both the student and family are actively engaged in setting, reviewing and seeing through a clear plan of study for that student pointed toward postsecondary training or college.

Professional staff within these smaller high school settings will be augmented by school- and community-based supports to ensure students' academic and non-academic needs are met—including working with caregivers and parents on how they can build their capacity to support their students' academic and developmental progress.

Teaching and Learning that Engages All Students in Meaningful and Rigorous Work

Classrooms and other learning settings provide all students with expectations and opportunities to actively engage with their academic work—work that is aligned with district and state standards and that prepares all students to perform at proficient or higher levels on high-stakes assessments.

Teachers and other instructional leaders examine and assess instruction through the lenses of engagement, alignment and rigor and they engage in professional development activities designed to make sure these goals are met in every classroom, every day.

Collective Responsibility for Student Success

The team of teachers in these new high school settings meets on a regular basis to review, discuss and ensure their students' progress toward successful completion of high school.

Common planning time and instructional coaching are regularly available for educators within the smaller schools and learning communities and within their content areas. This time and the coaching are used to strengthen all teachers' capacity to deliver meaningful and rigorous instruction and to develop distinctive thematic courses of study reflecting these teachers' and their students' interests.

Adults and young people in these smaller organizational structures, in partnership with building and district administrators, use data to look at what works and what doesn't and hold each other accountable for making needed changes.

Students and staff constantly strive and are recognized for higher levels of achievement; they engage in activities that celebrate their identities, values and successes, and that welcome new students, staff and families to their "community."

FTF Implementation Standards Checklist for High School SLCs

- ✓ if standard is in place
- ✘ if standard is not yet in place
- ? if insufficient information is available to rate standard

Small Learning Communities

STRUCTURAL

- Four-year SLCs
- 350 or fewer students per SLC
- Heterogeneous grouping of students
- Special education students included
- ESL students included
- 90 percent of students stay in SLC for core subjects and thematic classes
- No tracking

Transitional Community (ESL & Opportunity Center)

- One year only, then transition to thematic community
- Credit recovery
- Basic and intermediate-level ESL students only

Staffing

- Based on staff interest, certification and equity
- At least one full-time teacher in each core area
- At least one FTE elective teacher in thematic area
- Staff who can provide services to special education and ESL students
- SLC affiliates include administrators, counselors, planning lane teachers

Themes

- Developed and student enrollment based on staff and student interests
- Students choose from among all themes available
- At least 80 percent of incoming first-year students get first choice and 90 percent one of first two choices

Common Planning Time

- Scheduled for minimum of three hours a week
- Available for all SLC staff and planning lane teacher affiliates

Flexible Allocation of Resources within District Regulations

- Time
- People
- Space
- Money

Collective Responsibility

- Key indicators of student progress available at individual level and SLC level

FUNCTIONAL

Themes

- Themes infused into core academic courses
- Four-year thematic course of study available
- Culminating experience related to theme available for all seniors
- Cross-disciplinary, standards-based thematic projects

Collective Responsibility

- Five-year and annual targets on key student indicators set at SLC level
- Data used on regular basis during CPT to develop action plans at SLC and individual student levels
- SLC disciplinary policies articulated, enacted and reviewed for effectiveness
- In-school suspension replaced by SLC based and administratively supported disciplinary remedies
- System leaders provide effective training, intervention and ongoing support for strengthening SLC functioning

FTF Implementation Standards Checklist for High School SLCs

- ✓ if standard is in place
- ✘ if standard is not yet in place
- ? if insufficient information is available to rate standard

Family Advocate System

STRUCTURAL

- All students and families have advocates assigned
- All SLC staff and affiliates serve as advocates
- Same advocate for all four years (except in Transitional SLC where new advocates are assigned when student joins a thematic SLC)
- Advocates have easy computer access to academic and behavior profile for each student that is updated regularly
- FAS period in schedule at least weekly
- Regular time set aside in CPT and ER for FAS discussions among SLC staff and affiliates

FUNCTIONAL

- Monthly, effective contact with family
- At least bi-annual effective face-to-face conferences of at least 30 minutes with families, with student present
- At least weekly one-on-one effective contact with student
- Effective use of the family advocate period—engaging, aligned with FAS academic and relationship goals, rigorous and relationship centered

Common Planning Time

- Effective family advocate discussions during CPT and ER on a regular basis
- Supports for Family Advocate System are discussed, e.g., review of activities from the guide
- Gather and share information for family conferences
- Red flag/green flag process for identifying and intervening with students
- Effective action planning and follow-up based on CPT/ER FAS discussions
- System leaders provide effective training, intervention and ongoing support for strengthening FAS functioning

Instructional Improvement

STRUCTURAL

- Block schedules of at least 80 minutes at least every other day for core subjects for each year core subjects are required
- Implementation of enriched curriculum and instruction for:
 - Struggling readers
 - Struggling math learners
- Minimum of 2/3 of CPT and ER used for instructional improvement activities
- All core subject area, thematic elective and planning lane affiliated teachers available to work together on instruction during CPT
- Instructional coaches and supervisors available to work with SLC staff or content area staff during ER
- Timely and relevant student data are made available to SLC and content area teachers for instructional conversations

FUNCTIONAL

Common Planning Time

- SLCs focus on instructional improvement during CPT by using tuning protocol, peer observation protocol and lesson refining protocol
- Teachers of each core course create:
 - A curriculum map
 - Common assessments aligned with state and district standards
 - Common grading rubrics based on state performance standards
- Instructional leaders focus on instructional improvement by regular use of EAR classroom visit protocol and state of teaching and learning reports
- Instructional leaders provide effective training, intervention and ongoing support for instructional improvement based on EAR and student performance data

Implementation Status Report

High School

School District

	No	Partial	Yes
ORGANIZATION			
Ninth Grade Success Academy			
Self-Contained Space			
Dedicated Administrator			
Dedicated Teaching Staff			
Special Ed Inclusion			
LEP Inclusion			
Teacher Teams			
Team Leaders			
Common Planning Time			
Repeater Team			
Data-Driven Acad. & Team Mtgs.			
Career Academies			
“Wall to Wall”			
Self-Contained Space			
Dedicated Administrator			
Dedicated Teaching Staff			
Career Pathways & Electives & Work-Based Learning Opps.			
Special Education Inclusion			
LEP Inclusion			
Teacher Teams			
Team Leaders			
Common Planning Time			
Data-Driven Acad. & Team Mtgs.			
Twilight School			
Ninth–12th Grades			
TDHS Curriculum			
Dedicated Administrator			
Data-Driven Acad. & Team Mtgs.			
CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION			
4 x 4 Block Schedule with Extended 80–90 Minute Periods			
Common Core Curriculum-Detrack			

	No	Partial	Yes
Acceleration Curriculum:			
Freshman Seminar			
Strategic Reading			
Transition to Advanced Math			
Reading and Writing in Your Career			
Geometry Foundations			
College Prep Reading & Writing			
Algebra II Foundations			
SCHOOL, FAMILY, COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS			
National Network of Partnership			
Schools Training and Membership			
Site-Based NNPS Team Activated			
Liaison and Connecting Activities in Each Academy			
Career Partnership Development Coordinator Activated			
College/Career Awareness and Work- Based Learning Activities for All Students			
ON-SITE LEADERSHIP AND INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORTS FOR QUALITY IMPLEMENTATION AND SUSTAINED IMPROVEMENT			
Organizational Facilitator provides on-site leadership, data-driven decision making, team-building and change process support			
Curriculum Coaches provide on-site, in-classroom support for curriculum implementation and instructional improvement			
Academy/Team Leader training and monthly follow-up			
TDHS Curriculum/Instruction training and monthly follow-up			
Leadership, faculty and coach partici- pate in TDHS Network training and activities			
Totals			

Completed by _____ Date _____

