

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Five School Study: Restructuring Philadelphia's Comprehensive High Schools

Research for Action

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In 1988 only half of Philadelphia ninth graders in comprehensive high schools moved into tenth grade; the rest repeated or left school. In the same year, The Pew Charitable Trusts funded the Philadelphia Schools Collaborative to restructure the city's 22 comprehensive high schools in an effort to turn the tide of adolescents dropping out of school. The Collaborative's seven year reform effort (1988-1995) had two principal components: the creation of small learning communities (SLCs) so that intimacy and instructional coherence and consistency might make good education possible; and school-based management/shared decision-making (SBM/SDM) aimed at moving the locus of decision making closer to the site of teaching and learning. Professional development for teachers was the primary means for making these major changes. It aimed to reinvigorate teaching, thereby ratcheting up standards for student achievement. SLCs would be the context for a new accountability framework: shared collegial responsibility for shared students. The Five School Study assesses how these reforms fared in five high schools by examining the questions:

- How are schools reinventing teaching and learning, so that all students have access to an intellectually rigorous and engaging education?
- How are schools moving towards shared governance that makes parents, students, administrators, teachers, and community members into active participants in the creation of school mission and implementation of mission?
- How are schools becoming communities that critically examine what they are doing and why they are doing it in order to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for all students?

Over the course of the 1994-95 academic year Research for Action staff conducted qualitative case study research in five high schools. They interviewed more than 300 students individually and in focus groups and shadowed 22 students over course of a school day, observing 122 classes. They interviewed 17 administrators, 111 teachers and attended more than 30 meetings and school activities.

Findings and Recommendations

Small Learning Communities

Small learning communities (SLCs) work. Students want teachers who care about and respect them. According to them, teachers who care expect a lot and hold them accountable for producing work of which they are capable. Over time in SLCs that have sufficient boundaries of roster, space, and shared students, teachers have developed shared responsibility for building program and for developing relationships through which students invest in their learning. In order to work most effectively SLCs need:

- Sufficient boundaries of time and space (rosters in which SLC students attend classes taught by SLC teachers over four years and adjacent classrooms) so that educational intimacy and consistency become possible;
- Shared educational approach that is coherent and considers students' educational needs, interests, and abilities;
- Decentralized decision making so that SLCs have the authority to make and implement decisions about curriculum and instruction, professional development, scheduling;
- Professional development opportunities that are custom-tailored to the SLC's educational approach, students, and developmental stage.
- Information about how their efforts are working in order make informed decisions about program improvement. Collectively examining and assessing student work needs to become common practice in SLCs. It is the critical link for helping students meet standards for performance.

SLCs' impact on students remains preliminary because in many cases decentralization of decision making has been uneven and unclear, sufficient boundaries have not been created, and a coherent educational approach has not been forged.

Teaching and Learning

Students are more likely to invest in their school work when they are actively engaged in problem solving, when they see connections between what they're doing in school and what will help them in their futures, when they have opportunities to discuss and explore ideas and feelings, and when they understand and respect the standards used for assessment. Educational approaches and strategies that have created the conditions for student engagement include:

- Learning activities that build on students' experience and interest and in which they solve problems with teachers guiding their explorations;
- Multi-disciplinary projects that involve teachers in collaboratively planning student activities and students in working toward concrete products;
- SLC partnerships with outsiders (e.g. industry, universities, community agencies) that generate innovative curriculum and instruction relevant to students' present and future lives;
- Student support activities such as Peer Mentoring, Family Group, and Peer Mediation that encourage lively discussion and produce articulate and thoughtful students.

Professional development works. In classrooms where we observed students actively engaged and where they said that they were learning, their teachers had participated in long-term, intensive professional development. Schools and SLCs need to be important sites for adult and student learning. Guiding principles for professional development ought to include:

- Professional development ought to be long-term and intensive and custom-tailored to the setting. Teachers ought to participate in the planning and implementation of professional development.
- Reflection is a critical component of professional development.
- Attention to curriculum, educational approach and strategies, and assessment as well as to relationships with students are crucial elements for all professional development.
- Teachers, parents, and administrators ought to participate in some professional development activities together. This puts stakeholders on an equal footing and also builds community investment in reform strategies.

Governance

Reform needs real partnerships around shared goals. In order for reform to take hold, new relationships characterized by trust and respect must be built inside and outside schools. Critical partners include the District, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, administrators, parents, students, city leaders, the business community, the foundation community, university faculty, and taxpayers. All these players need to commit to a reform plan that they have formulated together and move forward with it. Strategies for broadening participation at the school and SLC levels include:

- There must be many avenues for participation in developing, implementing, and assessing the educational program. Governance councils alone have proved to be an inadequate strategy for democratizing schools. Committees, networks, planning teams, study groups all offer forums for people to learn how to deliberate and decide.
- As invested partners, students and their parents, have much to offer reform efforts. Students can be articulate spokespeople, but they need practice in reflection and opportunities to be responsible for what goes on in schools.
- School leaders need to create contexts and processes for multiple constituencies to participate in critical discussions about the evolution of reform. Administrative, teacher, parent and student leaders need skills that emphasize facilitation and mediation, question-posing, listening, and reflection. Outsiders can be helpful in providing data and facilitating discussions about reform efforts.

