The term that is used to refer to the practice of organizing secondary schools into smaller units has undergone many changes during the last four decades. *Houses and schools-within-schools* appeared in the 1960s; *magnet programs, career academies, and minischools*, in the 1970s; *charters*, in the late 1980s and 1990s; and *small learning communities*, today. The evolution in terms parallels the development in thinking about the important ingredients of effective education. The earlier terms emphasized small structure and curricular specialization and choice. Both elements are key to improved teaching, yet do not tell the complete story. *Small learning community* (SLC), in contrast, encompasses these elements as well as a focus on the learner and learning, and in particular, the active and collaborative nature of teachers’ and students’ work.

Concurrent with the reorganization of comprehensive schools into small learning communities are initiatives to create new small schools. The small schools networks emphasize the importance of autonomy and flexibility in functioning within large, rigid education bureaucracies (Cotton, 2001). The small schools movement, however, also speaks to student-centered curriculum and instruction and collaboration among all members of the community (Fine & Somerville, 1998; Wasley, et al., 2000).
Research and experience have led advocates of SLCs and small schools to a shared, basic tenet of small unit schooling: An interdisciplinary team of teachers instructs no more than a few hundred students, assumes responsibility for their educational progress across years of school, and exercises maximum flexibility to act on knowledge of students’ needs.

Just as small learning community research and practice have evolved, so has professional consensus on secondary school redesign. Policy guidelines for middle level schools began to incorporate recommendations for creating SLCs in the 1980s and ’90s and have sustained these guidelines to the present. The National Middle School Association (NMSA) has long advocated teacher teams and organization of large middle schools into small learning communities. Their most recent position paper states, “The interdisciplinary team...working with a common group of students is the signature component of high-performing schools, literally the heart of the school from which other desirable programs and experiences evolve” (2003, p. 29).

NASSP (1996) called for the creation of “small units in which anonymity is banished” (p. 45). Breaking Ranks II identifies seven cornerstone strategies for improving student performance, one of which is to “increase the quantity and improve the quality of interactions between students, teachers, and other school personnel by reducing the number of students for which any adult or group of adults is responsible” (NASSP, 2004, p. 6). The other cornerstone strategies complement this reduction in the scale of schooling by establishing “the essential learnings a student is required to master” and by implementing “schedules flexible enough to accommodate teaching strategies consistent with the ways student learn most effectively” (p. 6). Taken together, the strategies describe a form of school organization that diverges sharply from the traditional, comprehensive high school.

**Best Practices**

A review of SLC research identifies on-the-ground strategies that are associated with positive student outcomes (Oxley, 2004). The research base from which these best practices are drawn encompasses studies of small schools and career academies; houses; and schools-within-schools, which tend to be organized around curriculum themes. This body of research helps answer the question “What constitutes optimal SLC practice?”

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Five interrelated spheres of activities are key to transforming traditional comprehensive high schools into effective SLCs. A tree illustrates the nature of the relationships among the five domains (see figure 1). The tree trunk is the structural support for the entire tree. In like fashion, SLCs depend on building- and district-level policies and practices to support their growth and sustain their operation. The branches stem from the trunk and are the structural support for the tree's foliage. In SLCs, teaching and learning teams—the interdisciplinary teams of teachers and the students they instruct—are the basic structure for SLC work that results in student learning. Each branch supports three clusters of leaves, the oxygen-generating element of the tree. One leaf cluster includes rigorous, relevant curriculum and instruction practices; a second, inclusive program practices; and a third, continuous program improvement strategies.

Building- and District-Level Support
All practices in the SLC must be supported by building- and district-level structures and policies. Building and district practices constrain what teachers and students are able to do. For SLCs to flourish, the larger school and district must operate by the same principles of organization as SLCs. For example, bureaucratic means of operating schools cannot be expected to facilitate SLC personalization, flexibility, and autonomy.

SLCs that have the most success with their students are the ones that serve as the building blocks of school organization and the center of school activities, not as add-ons to the existing school organization. Restructuring schools in this manner depends on aligning policies and practices across all organizational units. School and district improvement plans—including their provisions for professional development—serve the goals and objectives of SLC programs. Academic areas operate to advance SLC program development.

Successful SLCs also depended on the district’s and the school’s adoption of new principles of organizing and governing staff members and students. Most centralized functions and resources, including staff members, are shifted to SLCs to empower teacher cadres with extensive knowledge of students to respond effectively to students’ learning needs. Administrators and content-area leaders function as supportive adjuncts to SLCs. SLC program needs drive class scheduling.

Staff members restructure or eliminate at-risk and honors programs so student achievement level is not a de facto determinant of SLC membership, and high standards are a feature of all programs.

Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning Teams
SLC practice begins with interdisciplinary teaching and learning teams, the fundamental building blocks of 21st century schooling. Interdisciplinary teams are organized around the students the team shares in common. The student group is kept small by design, never exceeding more than a few hundred members.

The size of the learning community affects the quality of students’ relationships with their peers and teachers and ultimately students’ educational outcomes. In small schools, students are more likely to form relationships that bind them to school, and teachers are better able to identify and respond to students’ needs. Small learning communities are most effective when interdisciplinary team members share students and are able to pool their knowledge of students, communicate consistent messages, and create coherent instructional programs. Common planning time is essential for team collaboration. Team collaboration heightens teachers’ shared sense of responsibility for students’ learning. Teams that instruct most of their classes in the SLC avoid conflicts with teaching responsibilities that are outside the team and might make team collaboration and the scheduling of common planning time difficult. Dedicated building space also facilitates team collaboration and reinforces students’ identification with the SLC.

Rigorous, Relevant Curriculum and Instruction
Teaching and learning teams position teachers to form meaningful relationships with students as well as to facilitate a more authentic, active form of student learning. Without the autonomy and flexibility that teaching and learning teams bestow, it is extremely difficult for teachers to design student work that is both challenging and personally meaningful to students. Given a large block of time, an interdisciplinary team can organize fieldwork, involve community partners, and allow students to go where their questions lead them. Teams can integrate discipline-based content into
Figure 1: FIVE DOMAINS OF SLC PRACTICE
learning activities to create program coherence, opportunities for learning content in different contexts, and connection to real-world issues.

Successful SLCs have created engaging interdisciplinary curricula through collaboration with community-based partners and at the same time established high standards for student proficiency in key discipline-based content areas. The most powerful programs encompass at least half the student’s instructional day and more than one year of study. Interdisciplinary teacher collaboration on curriculum and instruction increases the program’s coherence and opportunities to reinforce essential skills and knowledge across multiple contexts.

**Inclusive Programs and Practices**
Small learning community practice offers a student-centered approach to reducing the achievement gap that exists among students of different educational, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Students choose to enter a particular SLC on the basis of their curricular interests and irrespective of their history of achievement and are able to pursue honors as well as remedial options within their SLC. Unless SLCs are designed in this manner, however, they can replicate or even exacerbate existing inequities in educational opportunities. Regional educational laboratory staff members who monitor implementation of federally funded SLC projects found that schools often form SLCs around existing honors and AP courses for high-achieving students and programs for at-risk students. They seldom include special education students in SLC classes. For this reason, implementation of inclusive SLC programs and practices demands special attention.

Practices associated with success in serving diverse students in SLCs include student advisement; parent collaboration; and interdisciplinary teams that have special education teachers and English language learning teachers, subject-area teachers, and counseling staff members. Teachers combine these collaborative arrangements with instruction that is tailored to students’ diverse needs in high-functioning SLCs. Adapting instruction to students’ needs includes using the flexibility afforded by SLC organization to make multiple, varied arrangements for learning, including double and single periods of instruction; increasing instructional time for the core curriculum; and reducing student-teacher ratios.

**Continuous Program Improvement**
Integral to SLC teaching and learning is the interdisciplinary team members’ inquiry into the effectiveness of their practices. The descriptions of the best practices identified here are abstractions of the activities and routines that teams and students actually follow in schools. The actual activities are a product of the unique conditions and needs of the particular teams and students involved. Consequently, an integral part of the work of teacher teams is disciplined reflection on their practice to ensure that all students are learning. Teams’ reflection on practice is never-ending: The implementation of curricula and learning activities requires long-term refinement and adjustment as conditions and needs are continually changing.

In successful SLCs, teams engage in a continuous cycle of program improvement efforts. Teams assess their practice by analyzing student work and soliciting feedback from students, parents, and SLC partners. Teams also develop their own professional development plans and are better able to apply their training to program needs.

**Final Facts**
Small size is not an end in itself. Innovation in curriculum and instruction alone is also not sufficient to increase student learning. Implementation of the structural elements of SLCs is often incomplete, and SLC lack such necessary elements as common planning time, classes that are taught in the SLC, and a heterogeneous group of students. The gaps in SLC structure then limit the implementation and effectiveness of active and collaborative instructional practices. Likewise, schools that choose to improve themselves through an exclusive focus on curriculum and instruction seldom achieve the programwide coherence and curricular relevance that enhance student mastery of academic subjects.

Although the route to improved student performance may be found in transforming schools, finding the means to do so is difficult. An inconvenient fact of SLCs is that they cannot be simply added on to the existing school organization. Traditional building-level practices often compete with effective SLC practices. When administrators, counselors, and special education staff members continue to operate at the school level, rather than in SLCs, they do so without the knowledge of students that SLC staff members have. In turn, SLC staff members are unable to engage in decision making and student support that maximize their responsiveness to student needs. But when SLC practices can grow in teaching and learning teams that are supported at the building and district levels, they are mutually supportive and depend on one another to realize positive effects on student learning.

**References**