

Excerpted from:
**Small Learning Communities and Tracking:
EVIDENCE from Five High Schools Divided
into Schools-within-Schools**

http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sslc/issue_papers/issue_paper_7_evidence.pdf

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Four Recommendations for Changing Practice

Our final recommendations here build on the recommendations above, where we suggested that the constrained academic curriculum was preferable, that SLC themes are themselves a form of curricular differentiation, and that allowing students to choose their SLCs, supposedly based on themes, exacerbates the stratification that many such schools hoped to ameliorate by moving their schools to the SWS design. We offer four specific recommendations:

1. If SLCs have themes, then all should be high-status

If SWS schools feel that offering theme-based SLCs is crucial, supposedly to reflect students' interests, then all themes should have equal status. To us, this suggests academic themes (e.g., math, science or humanities) or high-status professions (medicine, law). Of course, the problem here is that such themes may not actually appeal to all students.

2. A solid core curriculum across SLCs

SWS high schools should develop a narrow set of academic courses taken by all students in the school, regardless of SLC membership. Although it would be possible to organize such courses to some extent around SLC themes (e.g., select readings related to particular academic areas), the rigor and content of the courses should be common across SLCs. Courses with the same content and rigor should be taken by all students in any SLC. Quite simply, we recommend that the SWS/SLC structure be subservient to the constrained academic curriculum.

3. Integrate curriculum across disciplines

SWS high schools should capitalize on the small membership of SLCs (in terms of both faculty and students) to push toward integration of the core courses across disciplines. There is emerging evidence that curriculum integration produces a more meaningful and authentic set of academic experiences for students. Although we did not observe numerous instances of curriculum integration within the SLCs in the schools we studied, we did see some. It would seem that opportunity for such integration is expanded with the SWS organizational form. We suggest that schools capitalize on such opportunities. However, SLCs should not undertake such integration at the expense of diminishing the academic demands of the cross-SLC constrained academic curriculum.

4. Responsibility of cross-SLC administrators

In all the schools we studied, there was a desire for SLC autonomy. Although many decisions and responsibilities in these five schools were SLC-specific, it was not always clear what responsibility school-level administrators actually held. We recommend a major role of a school's central administration: to make sure that the constrained academic curriculum retains its high-level commonality across time. It should not be diminished to respond to different themes or to different types of students in the SLCs (something we think would be very common with considerable SLC autonomy). In our small sample of schools, we observed that the longer schools offered the SWS structure, the more differentiated individual SLCs within the schools became. This tendency suggests the need for school-level administrators to resist too much autonomy and resulting stratification. Of course, central administrators need to be committed themselves to the constrained academic curriculum and reduced stratification to be effective in carrying out this undertaking.

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