

**Small Learning Communities
and Tracking:**

EVIDENCE

**from Five High Schools
Divided into
Schools-within-Schools**

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Introduction

The comprehensive curriculum is a defining feature of U.S. public high schools. With the aim of “meeting students’ needs,” most schools offer a wide array of academic courses intended to accommodate students’ interests, abilities and levels of educational commitment. Such schools see offering courses that vary in content and rigor as a logical response to students’ social and academic diversity. However, research has demonstrated that expansive curricula are associated with reduced learning and with learning that is more strongly related to students’ race and social class (Gamoran 1987; Lee and Bryk 1989; Lee et al. 1998; Oakes 1985). This link between students’ learning and their social backgrounds is strongest in schools with broad, diversified curricula (Gamoran and Mare 1989; Lee and Bryk 1989; Lee et al. 1997). Put simply, a more differentiated curriculum leads to more varied academic experiences; schools organized to teach different students different material induce social stratification in their students’ learning.

In the past several decades, student curricular choice has replaced traditional tracking. The “shopping mall high school” offers some courses that push students academically and others that make few demands on students’ time and effort (Powell et al. 1985). Although the aim is to match student interest with curricular offerings, curricular choice is a central mechanism through which public high schools become internally segregated and stratified. Replacing tracking’s rigid determinism with student curricular choice eliminates ability grouping (how students are placed in courses) but does not change underlying tracking structures (what courses are offered) (Yonezawa et al. 2002). As a result, hierarchical curricula still characterize public comprehensive high schools. However, students now track *themselves* through their curricular choices, resulting in minority and socially disadvantaged students disproportionately enrolled in low-level, low-status courses (Grant 1988; Wells and Crain 1997).

The fact that high-achieving, motivated students (or their parents) generally seek the most demanding teachers and courses further allows curricular choice to increase social and academic differences in student learning (Grant 1988). Moreover, teachers also vary in the amount of effort *they* wish to exert. In some classrooms, when low levels of student and teacher expectations coincide, “treaties” result. Teachers agree to pass students if they are not disruptive; students cooperate if teachers demand little effort from them (Cusick 1983; Powell et al. 1985; Sedlak et al. 1986). Sizer (1984) refers to this system as the “conspiracy for the least,” meaning “the least hassle for anyone” (p. 156).

Unlike the curricular structures that characterize comprehensive public high schools, most Catholic high schools maintain a belief that a rigorous, narrow academic program should be followed by all students (Bryk et al. 1993). This “constrained academic curriculum” lessens the relationship between student characteristics and academic achievement, because students generally complete challenging courses of study regardless of their academic or socioeconomic backgrounds (Bryk et al. 1993; Coleman et al. 1982; Lee 2001; Lee and Bryk 1988, 1989). Such curricula reflect a general consensus that students’ occupational plans for the future (which change regularly) should not dictate their academic and intellectual experiences in high school.

Differentiation and the SWS structure

Advocates contend that one advantage of the schools-within-schools (SWS) reform is its potential to induce a more equitable distribution of student achievement by race or social class (e.g., Fine 1994). Logic suggests that it is more difficult for the small learning communities (SLCs) within SWS high schools, either by design or because they enroll fewer students, to respond to students’ social and academic diversity with a wide variety of academic programs. It would make sense for SLCs to offer a core curriculum and few specialized academic courses; in turn, the social and academic stratification resulting from differentiated curricular structures may be reduced. A common curriculum within a single SLC, with a relatively small number of courses that are taken by almost all students, would be a logical response to the small numbers of teachers and students.

Despite the potential for the SWS structure to reduce social stratification, authors have cautioned that students may sort themselves into SLCs based on their individual preferences and attraction to SLC themes and offerings (Lee et al. 2001; McPartland et al. 1996; Ready 2004). Allowing students to choose which SLCs they join is logical, considering the commitment-building aims of the SWS design. However, choice in this context raises the same concerns as those expressed about curricular choice in the comprehensive high school. The danger is that SLCs may stratify students by academic ability. In commenting on the small-school (charter) movement in Philadelphia high schools, McMullan (1994) warned: “The greatest concern is that charters do not become thinly disguised tracks into which students are placed based on some arbitrary standard of performance or expectation” (p. 69). Some SLCs may either be designed to attract certain types of students or they may develop reputations that attract students

who share particular characteristics. Oxley (1994) cautioned, “[SLCs] must not intentionally screen out particular students or inadvertently attract only certain groups of students” (p. 256). Several authors share the concern that SLCs may produce stratification similar to that found within diversified high school curricula: the allocation of students with different social and academic backgrounds to different classes and programs.

Specific Issues

In this paper we describe and analyze how curriculum differentiation—defined in terms of both coursework and SLC themes—plays out in five public high schools that were divided into schools-within-schools. Drawing on data collected over several years in a sustained field-based study of these five schools, we explore how students’ social and academic backgrounds are linked with their academic experiences. On what criteria do students choose SLCs, and to what degree are these choices associated with their social and academic backgrounds? How do these schools’ policies and practices influence students’ choices? Most important, to what extent do particular elements of the schools-within-schools structure reduce or exacerbate social and academic stratification in these five settings? Clear parallels exist between comprehensive high schools and SWS high schools in terms of their philosophies and beliefs supporting differentiation; their rationales for choice-driven academic structures; and the outcomes associated with students’ choices.

All five SWS high schools we studied functioned as choice-driven educational marketplaces, where students acted as consumers who were able to select among theme-based SLCs that varied in both rigor and content. The “shopping mall” metaphor was often literal rather than merely symbolic; many SLCs advertised, actively recruited new members, and discussed their missions and themes in terms of “market share” and “target audience.” Although students ostensibly chose their SLCs based on how well the themes reflected their current interests, perceived abilities and future educational and occupational plans, social and structural pressures influenced students’ SLC selections more than career plans.

We describe the results of this study around four broad findings. *First*, we discuss the themes around which each school organized its SLCs, and the extent to which these themes emphasized either students’ disparate occupational and educational futures or their common social and academic needs. The *second* finding focuses on curriculum, describing how the schools altered their academic structures with the implementation of SLCs. The *third* section focuses on students, their rationales for their SLC selections and how their SLC choices reflected their interests, motivations, social backgrounds and academic abilities. The *fourth* and final section considers the consequences for students of being schooled in these educational free markets.

Before presenting our results, however, we offer brief portraits of these five SWS schools and their SLCs. We selected the schools based on the considerable variability among them in terms of their SLC organizing rationales, SLC allocation processes, the social and academic backgrounds of their students, and the histories behind their SWS structures. However, another selection criterion was that the schools had been engaged in the SWS organizational form for at least three years prior to our study. Throughout this paper we use school and SLC pseudonyms to protect informants' confidentiality, although the descriptive information is as accurate as possible. Details of our methodology for this study are located in the Appendix.

School Descriptions and Contexts

John Quincy Adams High School, the only public high school in a New England city committed to school choice, was among the first SWS high schools in the nation. It was formed in the 1970s when the city's two mostly segregated high schools were reformed into a single comprehensive high school enrolling 1,900 students. Among the five schools we studied, Adams enrolled the most racially, economically and academically diverse student body. Many students were from affluent professional families, although other students received public assistance and lived in public housing. Every year dozens of Adams graduates attended elite colleges and universities, but an equal number left Adams (and formal education) after ninth grade. Adams enrolled substantial numbers of Caribbean, European and Central American immigrants, as well as American-born blacks, whites, Asians and Hispanics. Adams' SWS structure was unique, in that five of its six SLCs (Alternative, College Prep, Community, Core Curriculum, and International Cooperative Learning [ICL]) were organized around pedagogical rather than career themes. One Adams SLC offered a traditional vocational curriculum (Vocational).

Ulysses S. Grant High School, an all-black high school enrolling 2,600 students, had more than a decade's experience with the SWS structure. Grant was both a neighborhood and a "selective" high school, in that it enrolled students from its catchment area, but its five SLCs (African American Studies, Arts, Business, Communications, and Health) also attracted students from across the city. Students in this mid-Atlantic city could apply to any public high school (or SLC) in the district, which made recruiting (and SLC reputation) important; application rates were higher (and acceptance rates thus lower) for Business and Communications,

which were selective magnet programs. Among the five SWS high schools in the study, Grant's student body had the least variability in terms of race, social class, academic achievement and future educational plans. Although Grant's reputation had improved considerably in the several years before we began our study, it continued to be plagued by problems common to inner-city high schools. Each year it enrolled roughly 1,000 ninth-graders and graduated fewer than 250 seniors; course failure rates approached 40 percent. Students attending either of Grant's two feeder middle schools were guaranteed admission to any of Grant's SLCs. However, students from these middle schools, which were quite small and located in one of the most blighted neighborhoods in the city (as was Grant), constituted only 10–15 percent of Grant's enrollment at the time of our study.

Benjamin Harrison High School, which enrolled 1,300 students in grades 10–12, was the only SWS high school in its mostly working-class Pacific Northwest city. Harrison had implemented four career-based SLCs a decade earlier: Arts/Humanities, Health/Human Services, International Business, and Science/Technology. Among the city's four high schools, Harrison had the lowest test scores and enrolled the most socially and racially diverse student body, which led to its reputation as the "urban school." Although the district's minority enrollment increased 5 percent between 1994 and 1998, Harrison's minority population grew by 11.5 percent during the same period, adding to the negative public perception. This reputation belied the fact that Harrison's enrollment remained two-thirds white. Its lower test scores led district-level administrators to think Harrison needed to change. When this research began, the long-term viability of Harrison's SWS structure was in question.

James Monroe High School, a relatively new school, was built around the SWS structure with serious commitment to the idea from district leaders who were influenced by the writings of Goodlad (1984) and Sizer (1984). Monroe's 1,400 mostly Hispanic students were organized into four classroom "pods" that were connected to a central area containing the library, computer center, and administrative offices. In this fast-growing southwestern school district not far from the Mexican border, some students came from professional families living in elegant homes that surrounded the school. Other students came from poor families whose homes in the surrounding desert often had dirt floors and were without electricity or running water. Thus, the school evinced great social but little racial diversity. Monroe's SLC structure was unusual, with two magnet school SLCs (Math/Science Magnet and International Business) and two non-thematic SLCs into which students who did not select one of the magnet programs were ran-

domly placed. These non-magnet “Generics” (as they were labeled by students and staff) offered “regular” high school programs without explicit themes or organizing rationales.

Zachary Taylor High School was a large “zoned” high school that enrolled 2,300 students who were not admitted to (or did not select) one of the city’s several selective public high schools. Taylor’s enrollment—two-thirds black, one-quarter white, with small numbers of Asian and Native American students—was the most racially integrated regular high school in this mid-Atlantic city whose public school enrollments were overwhelmingly black. As recently as 1975, Taylor was almost all white. These changes in the school’s racial makeup were associated with a decline in both reputation and community support.

As part of a major restructuring effort in the early 1990s, Taylor had created six SLCs, four of which were “career academies”: Business, Arts/Humanities, Health/Human Services, and Mechanical. A unique component of Taylor’s SWS structure was that ninth-graders did not participate in the career academies. Rather, they were enrolled in one of two “freshmen academies” without career themes, then chose among the four career academies for 10th grade.

Findings

Finding 1: A central motivation for adopting the SWS structure was to better accommodate students' interests, academic backgrounds and future occupational plans. With this goal in mind, each school created SLCs with themes intended to attract different types of students.

Each of the schools we studied organized their SLCs around career or pedagogical themes. Support for these differentiated SWS structures was rooted in the desire to “meet the needs of the students.” Meeting these diverse needs meant that different types of students experienced different curricula and pedagogical approaches. Although each school was engaged in fundamental structural reform, (i.e., SWS) staff retained their views regarding the value of differentiation, as well as the belief that students’ intellectual needs should be tailored to their past academic performance and future occupational plans. The schools’ commitment to differentiation was evident in both SLCs (with varied themes) and curriculum (with courses that varied in content and rigor). In fact, we were surprised to find that the philosophical components of the comprehensive high school were alive and well in these five SWS schools. The SWS structure allowed an additional layer of differentiation typically not present in comprehensive high schools, delivering different skills and knowledge to different types of students who were separated into SLCs.

Many teachers we spoke with, aware of the negative connotations associated with differentiation, were anxious that their schools not be perceived as supporting “tracking.” Indeed, many *denied* that their SWS structures resembled traditional tracking, mainly because students were permitted to select their SLCs. One Taylor teacher described her dilemma: “I think it’s not really tracking, it’s just meeting their needs. I think in education we’re so afraid of saying these kids are tracked that we forget about meeting everybody’s needs.”

At the root of such beliefs lay the need to serve the wide range of abilities these schools had to accommodate; staff repeatedly told us that certain students were simply less able than others. In the three schools with traditional vocational SLCs (Adams, Harrison, and Taylor), teachers and SLC administrators portrayed low-achieving students—especially special education students—as being “good with their hands” and better suited for hands-on, practical work than higher level

intellectual pursuits. Teachers in Adams' feeder schools steered lower-achieving students toward its Vocational SLC. One Adams teacher described the process: "Well, he's good with his hands, so we should probably put him in [Vocational] so he can do *something*. You know—shop class." Staff in Taylor's Mechanical SLC also claimed that students chose that SLC because of its "hands-on" nature: "Mechanical is not as academically oriented as the others," remarked one Taylor teacher. "It [enrolls] students who are not interested in college; students who would have in the past been in carpentry [or] auto mechanics."

Other teachers told us that providing only traditional academic courses denied certain students coursework more relevant to their occupational futures. This view was applied to the SWS structure, with the suggestion that vocational SLCs made sense for students headed directly to work after graduation. Moreover, these teachers argued that structures that include both academic and vocational SLCs increased the odds that unmotivated students would remain in school and graduate. They thought academically oriented SLCs would drive certain students out of high school. A teacher in Harrison's Arts and Humanities SLC, which enrolled many non-traditional students, reflected this view, offered in light of the district's threat to remove the SWS structure:

If we drop the schools-within-schools we would lose those ten percent of kids who are here for reasons other than straight academics or even to graduate. We have kids who flunk every class and they love us. They say this is the greatest place in the world.

Many students in the vocational SLCs did indeed express a desire to "work with their hands" and to "do practical work." Some students echoed these teachers' views. In explaining why he chose Harrison's Science and Technology (ST) SLC, one student noted, "ST seemed to be the most appealing because I like to work with my hands. And they told us we'd get to build go-carts and stuff, and that's the kind of stuff I like to do." When another ST student was deciding which SLC to pick, she reported that students from other SLCs told her, "It's so boring. All we do is sit there and write papers." She was happy with ST, which was "better than sitting in a classroom 'cause you actually got to do hands-on things." The ability to choose vocational SLCs permitted many students to bridge the gulf between the *adult* worlds in which many already labored and the *adolescent* worlds they experienced in school. Some students wanted to work on their cars or become better welders—activities they often did during their spare time for pay or for pleasure.

Although not as common as the views supporting differentiation, some teachers and administrators expressed concern about some SLCs' differentiated themes. A few questioned students' ability to make good decisions about careers at such a young age; some questioned the wisdom of allowing students to choose among SLCs with disparate levels of academic and behavioral expectations; and others noted the disconnect between SLC career themes and the vocations students ultimately pursued. For example, few graduates of Grant's Arts SLC became artists, dancers or musicians; Communications graduates were not "doing newscasts for Channel Four," as its director noted. Taylor's Health and Human Services SLC director expressed similar concerns, asserting that her SLC's sports-related career pathway had little relevance to the jobs her students ultimately attained:

They (do) coaching, officiating, and weight training, but there's nothing viable that comes out of that. There's no entry-level position that you can get when you walk out of here. Coaching and officiating—great part-time jobs, extra money—but it's not a career. As a coach you can make a lot of money, but that's after you've gone to college. I don't see our kids as defensive coaches for the Steelers or anything.

Finding 2: Despite considerable structural change, the actual curriculum within these SWS high schools largely resembled that offered in traditional comprehensive high schools.

Although the implementation of SLCs fundamentally altered many aspects of these schools, the SWS structure was more additive than transformative. Contrary to our hypothesis that the smaller size of instructional units would naturally lead to more constrained curriculum, each school offered a full complement of academic courses and co- and extracurricular activities. Such offerings reflected the common notion that "real" high schools organize their days into periods lasting between 40 and 55 minutes; and have football teams, marching bands, academic departments, and offer a wide array of academic and non-academic courses. Because each of these SWS high schools served communities that also embraced such traditional visions of what high schools should be, limiting the scope of the comprehensive high school was politically untenable, even within the SWS structure.

The perceived need to reap the benefits of both small schools and large comprehensive high schools created many tensions. In particular, the hybrid structure

adopted by each school—part small school, part comprehensive high school—made it difficult to sustain many desirable aspects of the SWS structure. Students’ curricular choices trumped attempts to keep classes “pure” (i.e., classes that enrolled only students from a single SLC). Indeed, in the conflict between small and comprehensive, comprehensive was “winning.” One indicator was that students often took classes outside their SLCs. Providing courses with small enrollments in each SLC—such as Calculus, AP Physics, or French IV—would have required many more faculty members and thus be prohibitively expensive. An exception occurred in Monroe, whose Math/Science Magnet was allowed to offer SLC-specific AP and honors courses with very low enrollments. This policy of unequal class sizes, however, fostered considerable animosity among students and teachers in the school’s other SLCs. Across these five SWS high schools, in addition to advanced academic courses, such elective and cocurricular courses as band, journalism and drama were usually meant to be schoolwide activities that enrolled students from every SLC. Such courses were offered in whatever SLC their teachers were located, but such courses enrolled students from most or all SLCs.

A district-level administrator offered a metaphor to describe Harrison’s desire to operate SLCs within a larger comprehensive high school: “It almost reminds me of having one foot here in a little bit of glue, and one foot over here, and you don’t understand why you can’t be here, but you haven’t let go of this foot and brought it over.” She noted that elective courses were the primary obstacle to creating SLC-specific classes, but that electives were one of the ways parents and the community judged the quality (and even legitimacy) of high schools. External perception was especially important for this high school, whose reputation in the district was weak. Were Harrison to lose the traditional trappings of the comprehensive high school, she added, its image in the community might be damaged even further. Harrison’s principal, new to the school in the year after our main study, claimed that Harrison’s SWS structure had slowly devolved back into a comprehensive high school:

The staff had come to realize that the school-within-school process had failed, was failing. It deteriorated. You’re running a small schools concept that was a bastardized form of what it was supposed to be. Then you’re running a comprehensive high school, *and you can’t run both.*

Adams, the only public high school in its district, suffered from problems of reputation only in relation to the city’s several private high schools. This resulted

in a similar tension. Staff at Adams told us that the parents of academically successful students often saw little need for reform. In their view, the traditional comprehensive high school with its extensive curriculum *already* worked for their children. One Adams administrator described where the push to maintain a wide array of course offerings generally came from:

The high-achieving population wants comprehensive. It works well for them in most cases. They were always the ones who could navigate the school no matter how big. They were the ones who could read the 80-page college-like course catalog we have, and they would be able to negotiate it. They would target the teachers that they wanted [for their children], the courses that they wanted, and quite honestly, it worked well because we satisfied their needs. We looked great.

Finding 3: With the aim of increasing engagement and commitment, these five schools saw choice as the best way to match students to SLCs.

The argument that students are more likely to learn material in which they are interested and which they find relevant has a long history and a loyal following. Regardless of the assertion's validity, its realization within consumer-driven SWS structures deserves scrutiny, particularly when standards and expectations vary across SLCs. In each school, a few students did assert that their SLC choices were based on SLC career themes or pedagogies. For example, one student chose Grant's Health SLC because she wanted to be a nurse; a Harrison student liked to draw and selected Arts and Humanities; and a Monroe Math/Science Magnet (MSM) student stated that she planned to attend medical school. However, such statements from students were unusual. This lack of theme-based motivation for students' SLC choices is important, as the schools' rationales depended heavily on matching students' interests and future plans to SLC themes.

SLC choice was intended to increase commitment by letting students select among SLC themes. However, students' SLC choices often reflected the extent to which they were willing to let high school make demands on their time and effort. The differentiated SWS structures in each school provided options for students who wished to be challenged academically, as well as options for students who simply wanted to be left alone. In short, students were left to decide how deeply they would engage in the academic content of schooling. Social and

institutional pressures directed high-achieving students toward SLCs with reputations for academic rigor and toward other students like themselves, who were willing to be challenged and to work hard. Other influences led academically weak or less-motivated students to select low-status SLCs with less-productive academic climates. This laissez-faire approach to students' choices was generally viewed by school staff as an appropriate way to actualize two major goals of most public high schools: teaching students' to take responsibility for their actions, and accommodating differences in students' social and academic backgrounds.

Students who were generally dissatisfied with school often chose SLCs they believed would demand little of them. For example, although Monroe administrators claimed that Generic 1 and 2 were simply the default placements for students who did not select either magnet SLC, some students consciously chose the Generics. For example, one Generic 2 student told us, "I just wanted regular classes." Other Generic students claimed that SLC choices reflected students' commitment to school; what distinguished Math/Science Magnet (MSM) students was their willingness to devote time and effort to schoolwork. "It's not that they are smarter than us," one Generic 1 student remarked, "they just work harder." Several Generic 2 students were annoyed when MSM students complained about the extensive amount of academic effort their SLC required. One claimed that when she heard such "whining" from MSM students she told them, "Hello! You chose to be in that [SLC]. You can get out any time you want!" Why did she not select MSM? "I chose this [SLC] because I don't want to do a lot of work."

In contrast to the SLCs selected by many low-achieving students, academically motivated students tended to choose SLCs with reputations for academic rigor and high expectations. This search for quality differed markedly from the wishes of many low-achieving students to lessen the demands school placed on their lives. Students who chose challenging SLCs claimed that they did so because they were "harder," "more advanced," and had environments in which they could "learn more." Academically motivated students typically chose SLCs that simply enrolled other motivated students, sometimes regardless of the SLC's theme. For example, several Monroe students claimed that middle school guidance counselors suggested MSM to them, not because they were particularly interested in math or science, but because they were good students. "There's a lot of people who don't pick an [SLC] because of what they are going to do," one MSM student told us. "There are some people who do so just to get ahead, and to

get more experience for college.” One student, who claimed that she was actually interested in attending law school, asserted,

A guidance counselor said to me, “Your science and math grades are really high. Would you like to go into [MSM]?” And I personally don’t like science and math. “Well,” she’s like, “it’s advanced learning.” So that’s why I selected it.

Our results suggest that simply providing more information to students and parents about their school’s SLCs is unlikely to alter the relationship between students’ backgrounds and their SLC choices. Within these schools, students appeared to understand the SLC options available to them; students who selected less-demanding SLCs rarely did so under the false impression that they were choosing a high-quality product. Moreover, we found little evidence that SLC choice increased student engagement. Motivated students did not require the additional allure of academically oriented SLCs; such students (or their parents) were already invested in their education and sought SLCs known for high academic and behavioral standards. Conversely, through the availability of SLCs with less academic pressure, less-motivated students could *reduce* their investment in school. Within each school, students were well aware of the demands each SLC placed on students’ time and effort. This knowledge permitted students to *match* their willingness to work to SLCs’ expectations. In short, SLC choice did not appear to influence student engagement. Rather, the causal order was reversed: students’ willingness to engage in school influenced their SLC selections.

Regardless of their support for curricular differentiation, staff in these five schools agreed that the SWS structure *strengthened* an academic/non-academic dichotomy by permitting students to sort themselves into SLCs based on their educational and occupational futures. Creating SLCs that varied in academic rigor allowed students to match their level of academic commitment to the expectations held by particular SLCs. This arrangement, possible only through student choice within differentiated SWS structures, narrowed the gap between what students were willing to do, and what teachers demanded.

Finding 4: Choice among SLCs whose themes varied in status and rigor resulted in considerable stratification among SLCs.

Although technically not engaged in curriculum tracking, an equivalent mechanism operated in each of the five SWS schools we studied. SLCs within these schools had diverse themes that were *intended* to attract students with disparate interests and abilities. However, due to a widely acknowledged phenomenon that links academic achievement and student social background, the SWS structures within these five schools also ended up sorting students by their race, social class and a host of other characteristics beyond performance, interest or motivation. Parallels to the well-documented stratification that accompanies curriculum differentiation were striking. As with the “shopping mall high school,” the catalyst for such stratification was consumer choice among offerings with differential appeal.

Segregation and stratification

Resulting in part from the complex relationship between race and academic achievement, the schools serving racially diverse populations—particularly Adams and Taylor—suffered substantial racial segregation between SLCs. Although Taylor’s Mechanical SLC was almost 80 percent black, its Arts and Humanities SLC—seen as the school’s most academically rigorous—was only 44 percent black. Students from other Taylor SLCs sometimes called Arts and Humanities “The County,” referring to the surrounding suburban school district that was more affluent, largely white and perceived as enrolling academically motivated students. The relatively small number of white students at Monroe tended to select its Math/Science Magnet. Several Monroe teachers expressed unease that in a school with an almost 90 percent Hispanic enrollment, seven of the school’s top 10 students in the year of our study were white, and all were enrolled in a single SLC: MSM. Adams High School was unusual, in that it employed a “controlled choice” plan that sought to keep SLC racial enrollments within 5 percent of overall school averages. Despite these efforts, considerable racial imbalances between SLCs developed. Only 29 percent of Alternative’s students were black, compared to more than 40 percent of Community and Core Curriculum’s students.

Racial composition both *reflected* and *influenced* an SLC’s status and reputation. As we discussed in the previous section, academically motivated students usu-

ally selected SLCs known for academic rigor and orderly behavioral climates. At Adams and Taylor, the academic and behavioral reputations of SLCs that enrolled high proportions of minority students were low. As such, the poor social and academic standing of high-minority enrollment SLCs negatively affected their ability to attract high-achieving students. For some students, moreover, SLC racial compositions were sufficient to sway their SLC choices. For example, a white Taylor student who had initially wanted to select Mechanical justified his decision to go to another SLC: “I really didn’t want to go down there because I probably would be the only white boy, and I’d stick out like a sore thumb.”

Beyond race/ethnicity, considerable variation in student socioeconomic background was also evident between SLCs. Almost one-third of students in Adams’ Vocational and Community SLCs received free or reduced-price lunches, compared to only 6 percent of Alternative students. “They’ll be the neediest kids” is how Community’s director described his students. Not coincidentally, Vocational and Community were considered Adams’ weakest SLCs, whereas Alternative enjoyed a high-status reputation. Although administrators at Monroe did not disaggregate student data by SLC, social class differences between SLCs were quite apparent—notably between MSM and the Generics. For example, compared to MSM, twice as many Generic 1 and 2 students were eligible for need-based fee waivers for college admissions tests. MSM students were also more likely to reside in the expensive housing developments neighboring Monroe. Conversely, students living in homes in the surrounding desert—many of which lacked electricity and running water—were very often enrolled in the Generics.

Despite considerable racial and social difference across SLCs, even more glaring disparities occurred in students’ academic backgrounds. Considering that the SWS structures in several schools were *created* to attract students based on their demonstrated academic abilities, the academic stratification that resulted is perhaps unsurprising. For example, 100 percent of Monroe’s MSM students in our study year passed their state’s standardized assessment, compared to only 70 percent schoolwide. Similar academic stratification existed at Adams, where more than half of College Prep and Alternative students achieved Honor Roll, compared to less than one-quarter of students in Vocational, Community and Core Curriculum. More than 60 percent of Alternative and College Prep students scored “Advanced” or “Proficient” on the English portion of the state-mandated test, compared to fewer than one-quarter of Core Curriculum and Community students.

Similar to the purpose of low-level courses in U.S. comprehensive high schools, the vocational SLCs at Adams, Harrison and Taylor attracted many students who struggled academically. A teacher in Taylor’s Mechanical SLC lamented, “We teach the most difficult children; it’s just a larger percentage of slow learners here.” An Adams student reported that he was told in the eighth grade, “[Vocational] gets all the dumb kids who are becoming plumbers.” Indeed, Vocational was Adams’ lowest-performing SLC; *none* of Vocational’s students passed either portion of the state’s standardized assessment. The history of low academic achievement among Vocational students led Adams administrators to close the SLC during the year of our study. The SLC’s weaknesses were so evident that virtually no one—not even Vocational staff—protested the SLC’s closure. As the director of another Adams SLC told us, “They closed [Vocational], which was a good move from my perspective. As an [SLC] I think it was a dumping ground.” The former Vocational students had to choose among Adams’ other offerings, and few chose Adams’ demanding SLCs.

Status hierarchies

To varying degrees within each school, these acute disparities produced and perpetuated sharply defined status hierarchies among SLCs. These hierarchies were defined by many characteristics, including the types of students each SLC enrolled. Due to the links between SLC themes and the societal prestige associated with various professions, SLC status often reflected the socioeconomic status students in these professions would enjoy or be denied as adults. One Monroe staff member recalled a saying among students she believed accurately described Monroe’s SLC hierarchy: “MSM kids will design houses. IBM kids will sell houses. Generic 1 kids will fix things in houses. And Generic 2 kids will steal things from houses.” Another teacher described Monroe’s SLC hierarchy as reflecting contemporary social and economic class structures:

It’s just like in normal society—you have your rich group and you have your middle class and then you have your lower class. I guess that’s how you can characterize the system here. MSM would be like the rich kids or the snobs, and then Generic 1 and 2 would be your lower class. You could say they’re getting ready for society because they’ll all fit into the upper class or the higher echelon, the middle class, and so on.

In each school, one SLC—and by association, its students—languished at the bottom of a hierarchical status structure. Across all five schools, staff described these low-status SLCs as “dumping grounds.” “We get a lot of the below-average type kid,” claimed a Monroe Generic 2 teacher, “because we’re the dumping ground.” In describing his own SLC’s location in the status hierarchy, the director of Adams’s Community SLC argued that status differentials were an inevitable result of the SWS structure: “There’s going to be a good [SLC] and there’s going to be a dumping ground.” Adams staff and students agreed that Community was, in fact, a “dumping ground.” “Community is where everyone gets put who doesn’t get in somewhere else,” claimed an Adams student not in that SLC. Many former Vocational students found themselves in Community.

Staff and students in low-status SLCs were well aware of their SLC’s place in the school’s hierarchy. When asked to describe the students in each SLC, a student in Grant’s African-American Studies SLC said, “Business students are the best. On a scale of one to 10, we might be a five.” Students in Monroe’s Generic SLCs claimed that they were looked down upon by MSM students. “They call us the idiot SLC,” asserted one Generic 2 student. In describing MSM, another Generic 2 student reported, “That’s where they get the top 10 people. We’re trying our hardest to prove to them that we’re just as good, but it’s kind of hard.”

Despite complicated origins, the development of these status hierarchies might be traced to two primary causes, both of which are associated with SLC differentiation. First, by creating SLCs whose themes differed in prestige and academic rigor, the schools planted the seeds of their social and academic stratification. Several staff members claimed that market-driven, theme-based SWS structures *inevitably* sorted students based on their academic backgrounds and future educational plans. Indeed, this was an expressed goal in several schools. Second, several social and systemic factors exacerbated between-SLC stratification. In particular, students’ SLC choices sustained and further delineated SLC hierarchies, as high-achieving (high-status) students almost always selected high-status SLCs. Indeed, the most substantial difference between SLCs lay in the types of students they enrolled. Perhaps the stratification in these SWS high schools was natural, considering the highly stratified occupational structure these students were preparing to enter. Perhaps an argument could be made that high schools should prepare students to function well in our capitalist society. Monroe’s principal was generally unconcerned by his school’s stratified SWS structure; students were simply sorting themselves into their rightful places in

the school's—and ultimately, society's—hierarchy. Other schools, notably Adams, attempted to walk a fine line between losing academically motivated students and their parents to other schools and ignoring the educational needs of low-achieving students.

Recommendations to Improve Practice

The Context for Our Recommendations

A substantial body of research (ours and others) supports a high school curriculum structure that is quite narrow, containing mostly academic courses. Such a curriculum contains few (if any) low-level courses. If students enter high school needing help to be able to succeed in such a curriculum, remediation would typically take the form of a double-dose of coursework in core areas early in high school. The double dose in mathematics, for example, would include one skill-building course to develop computational facility, taken simultaneously with a regular ninth-grade math course, such as Algebra I. This curriculum structure would extend across the basic high school disciplines: language arts, science, mathematics, and social studies. This structure reflects a core curriculum, in that it is followed by all students, regardless of their academic ability or future plans. There is solid empirical evidence that when schools offer a curriculum with this structure, their students learn more (i.e., the schools are more effective) and learning is more equitably distributed by students' social background (i.e., the schools are more equitable). In our extended study of five full-model SWS high schools, we did not observe this type of schoolwide curriculum in any school.

Our recommendations for improving practice in SWS high schools draw upon our many studies in high schools that focused on curriculum structure, as well as what we have learned about the five SWS high schools we studied. We recommend that in the area of the curriculum, all high schools—and especially SWS high schools—move toward a constrained academic curriculum. This suggestion logically extends to SLC themes as well. Just as low-level courses have no place in the high school curriculum, SLCs with reduced expectations—either by design or unintentionally—have no place in SWS high schools.

Organizing Rationales for SLCs and Student Matching

Theme-based SLCs

As reported, the vast majority of the SLCs in the five schools we studied organized themselves around themes. The rationales driving these themes were based on careers in four of the schools; in the fifth school, SLC themes centered on pedagogical approaches. Only a small number of SLCs in these schools were theme-less: Taylor's two ninth-grade SLCs and Monroe's two Generic SLCs. In theory, it may be possible to construct a set of SLCs that are not inherently hierarchical. However, the theme-based SLCs in the five schools we studied had obvious hierarchical structures. In one school (Monroe), the stratification between the selective Math/Science SLC and two Generic SLCs was not only obvious but deliberate. In fact, the status differentiation in themes across all five schools we studied seemed to be intentional; the purpose of theme-based SLCs was to offer easily identifiable options for students. Although none of the schools stated that they wanted to differentiate their SLCs by students' social background, they were comfortable with differentiating by students' ability and motivation. Of course, such differentiation in themes resulted in increasing stratification in academic programs and rigor.

Our recommendations here center around efforts to reduce the obviously hierarchical nature of the themes around which the SLCs we observed were organized. It may be difficult—perhaps impossible—to offer SLCs with career-based themes that do not carry status connotations, in that in U.S. society, careers and occupations do have differential status. Although we in the United States give lip service to the nobility of occupations that involve manual labor or service, most people consider occupations that use mental rather than physical abilities (e.g., medical or engineering professions) as having higher occupational status. Thus, basing SLC themes on careers almost certainly ensures stratification in educational programs.

Matching students to SLCs

In the five SWS high schools we studied (and in the larger number of SWS schools we know of), students were almost always matched to SLCs by choice. The few exceptions include Taylor, where all incoming students were

placed in one or the other ninth-grade success academies. Monroe students who didn't choose one of the higher-status magnet SLCs (or who were unqualified for them) were randomly placed into one of the Generic SLCs. With these few exceptions, all students at the five schools we studied chose their SLCs (although occasionally they got their second rather than their first choice). SLC choice was a quality the schools proudly proclaimed.

Our findings here were strong and consistent: Students who were highly motivated and had strong academic records chose high-status SLCs; students without such motivation and with modest performance and attendance records chose the lower-status SLCs. Moreover, not only did schools actively support this type of choice, but this social and academic differentiation between SLCs in the same school seemed to increase over time. Our recommendation here is that SWS high schools move away from choice-based placement of students into status-based SLCs. The combination of this type of structure—student choice among differentiated and hierarchical SLCs—is one that seems to automatically result in social stratification among SLCs. Even before considering the typical context for high-school tracking—individual courses—we conclude that if SWS high schools structure their SLCs around careers and themes that are inherently hierarchical, social stratification in educational outcomes will result.

Curriculum and Tracking in SWS High Schools

SLC curricula

We did not observe the type of schoolwide constrained academic curriculum that is empirically linked to both effectiveness and equity in any of the SWS high schools we studied. However, within some SLCs we observed a sort of core curriculum. That is, in several SLCs most students took the same series of courses (usually as a cohort), and some SLCs offered some form of the constrained academic curriculum described earlier. However, in a large comprehensive high school with a broad and differentiated curriculum that includes wide student choice, the types of students who typically chose the SLCs with such a curriculum would have taken such courses in any case. One of the most important aspects of the constrained academic curriculum, particularly in terms of it resulting in high levels of achievement equitably distributed, is that it must be followed by *all* students. Many lower-status SLCs also offered a set of courses to

their students that was a type of core curriculum. Thus, in the schools we studied, the notion of “core curriculum” was not absent. If there were sets of courses that all students were required to take, they were SLC-specific (i.e., taken by all students in a particular SLC). Only in the high-status SLCs, however, did the curriculum have a largely academic character.

How is tracking structured in a contemporary U.S. comprehensive high school? Historically, tracking referred to a specific curriculum differentiation into at least three different levels: the academic, general and vocational programs. Although in past decades students were typically assigned to one of these programs as they entered high school and their coursework was more or less specified based on program membership, in today’s comprehensive high school tracking works differently. Schools offer a wide array of courses with different content (not all of which is academic), with different requirements (or prerequisites) and different aims (i.e., admission to high-status colleges, low-status colleges, or directly into the workforce). Today’s high-school tracking takes the following form: the curriculum is very broad, it contains many courses without academic content and students’ course choices are linked with their social as well as their academic backgrounds. This curriculum form results in considerable social stratification in academic outcomes. The constrained academic curriculum is the antithesis of today’s comprehensive high school curriculum.

Our findings about curriculum and course taking in the SWS high schools we studied suggest that the SLC arrangement actually captures both the old and the new forms of tracking. Theme-based SLCs reflect old-style tracks. Student choice of SLCs represents the new form of tracking (i.e., curriculum differentiation through choice). In either the old or new form, tracking is still tracking. The theme-based SLCs that are chosen by students have the potential to duplicate (or even magnify) all the disadvantages of traditional curriculum tracking.

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.

Final Comments

Think big

If our own beliefs about schooling are not yet clear, we want to make them explicit here. We share the belief that no educational reform—regardless of how valuable it seems to be—should result in increasing social stratification in educational outcomes. Our extended study of these five SWS high schools has led us to believe that there is great promise in this reform. A major advantage of groups of school professionals moving their school(s) from the comprehensive model to the SWS model is that such a change forces school staffs to reconsider almost every aspect of schooling. Such fundamental thinking about bedrock assumptions of secondary schooling is almost always beneficial. We observed (or heard about) faculty and staff in the five schools we studied (and sometimes district-level administrators, parents and community members) discussing fundamental issues surrounding the education of adolescents.

Less often we observed these professionals' willingness to abandon almost anything that the comprehensive high school curriculum typically offers, especially co- and extracurricular activities such as arts electives, yearbook or the school newspaper, and AP and small-enrollment elective courses that serve particular clienteles. Perhaps more important, these schools maintained a belief in the need to respond to student diversity with a wide range of offerings with varying levels of rigor. Not only must such important issues be discussed, they must be confronted head on. With the SWS design, some things have to go so that other things can happen. What we saw, however, was that new programs and organizational structures were often added without others being disbanded.

We encourage school professionals either working in SWS schools or considering this organizational form to think big. Perhaps schools might offer the SWS structure without theme-based SLCs. Perhaps student membership in SLCs could be determined by random assignment rather than by choice. Perhaps AP courses or other courses with small enrollments could be offered before or after school, rather than in the middle of the school day. These ideas do not rise to the level of recommendations per se; rather, we wish to challenge schools that favor the SWS organizational form to confront some of the issues we raise in this paper head on.

What do students need?

The motivation for the SWS structural reform in the schools we studied, and very likely in all SWS schools, is to meet the needs of students better than typically occurs in comprehensive public high schools. In the five high schools we studied, students' needs were defined in two ways: social and academic. Our informants were quite consistent in both defining and responding to students' social needs—to have people who cared about them, to have regular contact with smaller numbers of adults and peers, to create environments where students were not out of control and could learn, and to have adults who would help guide them through the rough waters that lie between childhood and adulthood. However, our informants were much less consistent about the nature of students' academic or intellectual needs and, thus, quite inconsistent in how they met intellectual needs. Everyone who works in schools recognizes that students come to school with very different levels of interest in school, skills to succeed, and motivation to work hard.

We observed a relatively small set of schools that were consistently quite successful in meeting students' social needs. Moreover, the original motivation for moving to the SWS design in these schools was centered around students' social needs and behaviors. They seemed to assume that once these social needs were met, commitment, engagement, and achievement would be the natural result. But our focus here is mainly on students' academic needs and how these schools have met them. There seems to be considerable reluctance—in these schools and perhaps in public education more generally—for adults to work toward agreement about what students need in the academic arena. For the most part, there seemed to be wide agreement that adolescents' academic needs should be defined by the students themselves or by their parents, rather than by the schools and the professionals who work there.

The constrained academic curriculum followed by all students in a school, regardless of present abilities or future plans, is the antithesis of the differentiated curriculum that typifies comprehensive high schools—and actually characterizes the SWS schools we studied. But unless there is considerable agreement about students' academic needs, there is little consistency in how schools should meet such needs. Hence, schools offer a broad curriculum and let students choose *what* to engage in and *how deeply* to engage. This leaves weak students to choose weak courses that require very little commitment.

The SWS schools we studied appeared to offer many benefits. We were very impressed with the promise of the smaller dimensions of the SLCs and the schools' agreement about the importance of social benefits to students (and even about how to bring about these social benefits). In many ways, these schools worked well. As we have described, however, in a very basic way they did not work well—they generally used their SLCs to actually increase social stratification in students' academic experiences. We encourage school professionals—especially those committed to the SWS/SLC design—to engage in fundamental discussion about students' academic needs. We hope that once adults who are dedicated to students' present and future success think deeply about all students' needs—not just the motivated ones with socially acceptable behaviors—the basic notions of a constrained academic curriculum for all students will seem reasonable. It is easier to accept such notions when adults are willing to step up and say what students actually need. We suggest that working together to arrive at a common agreement about students' academic needs is the responsibility of adults in schools. Such important decisions should simply not be left to children.

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Appendix: Methodology

The Search for SWS High Schools

The initial phase of our work consisted of a national search for public SWS high schools. The search had three main goals. First, we sought to compile an extensive list of SWS high schools. Second, we wanted to understand the general state and prevalence of the reform in the late 1990s, and to know more about the various SWS structures in existence at that time. In short, we wanted to know about the population from which a smaller sample for intense study would be drawn. Third, we were interested in locating five SWS high schools that would represent well the larger population of SWS high schools and who were also interested in serving as sites for our research. Although we looked hard to identify a relatively affluent high school with the SWS structure, we were unable to locate even one. Schools serving high-achieving, affluent students may not see the value of the SWS reform, believing that their students are already motivated and surrounded by positive social networks.

The need to identify many high schools with the SWS structure in a short period of time suggested a telephone interview strategy. We began by contacting organizations and individuals we hoped would know of SWS high schools. These early sources included state departments of education, schools of education, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), U.S. Department of Education regional educational labs, and school district administrators. We also relied heavily on the Internet, searching websites of hundreds of school districts, many of which had links to their high schools.

As we began calling schools that were suggested to us in the initial stage of our search, we soon found Patton's (1990) "snowball" or "chain" sampling strategy to be quite valuable. We ended each of our calls by asking respondents whether they knew of any SWS high schools. As we continued calling, our list of actual and potential SWS high schools "snowballed." In this national search, we made more than 600 phone calls, sent dozens of e-mail requests, and spent hundreds of hours on the Internet. Of the hundreds of high schools we contacted through telephone interviews, only 55 actually had the full-model SWS structure that incorporates all students into the SLC structure. In choosing five of these schools to study, we used Patton's (1990) "maximum variation sampling" strategy, which seeks to maximize variability along as many dimensions as possible. We sought a

school sample that varied by region and location, history with the SWS organization, SLC themes and school social and academic composition. However, we also wanted to study schools where the SWS structure was stable, so we limited our potential sample to schools that had employed the design for at least three years.

Data Collection

The full research team of 11 members included both university faculty members and doctoral students. Two-person teams devoted two weeklong visits to “their” schools over the course of a calendar year, in spring and fall 1999. Each weeklong visit consisted of interviews with students, teachers, guidance counselors and school- and district-level administrators; shadowing of students; observations of interactions in hallways and other public locations; attending special events (including athletics) that occurred during our visit; mapping the physical layout of the building; collecting papers and documents pertinent to school life; and learning about the contexts in which the school operated. Our conversations with school members focused on the extent to which students’ social and academic experiences depended on SLC membership, and how the SWS structure influenced the development of positive relations between students and teachers. Two team members (ourselves) visited all the schools at least once (Ready) or twice (Lee). Almost all interviews and focus groups were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim (unless interviewees objected) and verified. In spring 2001, we conducted short re-visits to each school. Our goal in this third round of visits was to investigate the stability of the SWS reform by evaluating the extent to which the SWS structures in each school had changed (or survived).

Data Analysis

Our analyses of these data involved several iterative steps, in which we moved back and forth between the data and the emerging themes and conclusions. We began by reading through the entire body of data—interviews, field notes, documents—noting potential patterns and regularities. Although we began our analyses with a theoretical framework in mind, we did not utilize predetermined analytic codes or categories. Rather, our analysis was free-flowing and our analytic codes emerged from the data. Through this approach our conclusions are empirically grounded and better aligned with the data.

In the second step we again read the data, this time combing them more thoroughly and organizing relevant text using the preliminary codes created in the first step. An important component of this analytic step was recognizing disconfirming evidence in informants' words and documents.

In the third step of our analyses we organized the coded text into categories and sub-categories based on the codes created in the first two steps. This third step was both divergent and convergent, in that categories were refined and fleshed out, whereas other sub-categories or categories that "stuck together" were combined. At this stage, we eliminated several categories and sub-categories because the volume of data was simply not sufficient to support them. Quite simply, some categories "didn't work." Conversely, new categories and ideas emerged that we had not recognized during earlier stages, and subtle nuances suggested that certain categories be broken down further into subcategories. Our final stage of analyses involved integrating the data into an explanatory framework. In this paper we focused on four sets of findings from this larger framework.

Limitations

As our study of these SWS high schools was field-based and included only a small number of schools that were not selected randomly, we candidly admit to the limited generalizability of our findings. On the other hand, we did attempt to select schools that would represent the population from which our sample was drawn. Selecting only schools where the SWS structure had been in place for several years, we sought variability in region and history, as well as social and academic composition. We did not, however, sample schools based on either how students were matched to SLCs or the particular themes around which the SLCs were located. Prior to our study, we had no hypotheses about these issues in SWS high schools. Though we make no claims that the social and academic stratification we observed in the five SWS high schools we studied is generalizable either to the larger group of SWS schools from which we drew our sample or to the larger group of contemporary SWS high schools, neither do we believe that the schools we studied were somehow unique in this regard. Rather, we tell the "stratification story" in these five schools, a story that was quite consistent across the schools.