

# **Creating Small Learning Communities**



**International Center for Leadership in Education**

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# Contents

<b>To the Change Agent .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Aspirations, Issues, and Opportunities .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Connection between Small Learning Communities and Successful School Reform .....	1
Why Consider Small Learning Communities? .....	5
Some Cautions in Establishing Small Learning Communities .....	10
Obstacles to Creating Small Learning Communities .....	13
Research Shows Small Learning Communities Make a Difference .....	15
Defining Small Learning Communities .....	22
Characteristics of Small Learning Communities .....	32
Common Strategies Found in Small Learning Communities .....	43
Small Learning Community Initiatives and Resources .....	45
References .....	53
<b>Chapter 2 Staff, Students, and Stakeholders .....</b>	<b>55</b>
Leadership in Small Learning Communities .....	55
Teams .....	60
Socialization of Staff .....	70
Recruiting Staff .....	73
Developing Staff .....	78
Business-Education Partnerships .....	94
Student Body: Composition and Recruiting .....	101
Planning a Small Learning Community Checklist .....	109
References .....	112
<b>Chapter 3 Teaching and Learning .....</b>	<b>113</b>
A Goal of Rigor and Relevance .....	113
Rigor/Relevance Framework .....	119
Selection of Curriculum Themes .....	135
Planning Curriculum .....	138
Interdisciplinary Instruction .....	158
Schedules to Support Small Learning Communities .....	168
References .....	180
<b>Chapter 4 Logistics .....</b>	<b>181</b>
Shared Facilities .....	181
Finance .....	184
Sports and Other Extracurricular Activities .....	187
Activities Common to All Organizational Structures .....	190
Activities Linked to Curriculum .....	190
Social Events and Celebrations .....	191
<b>Chapter 5 Learning from Others – Case Studies and Resources .....</b>	<b>193</b>
Kennesaw Mountain High School .....	193
Excelsior Education Center .....	200
Kenwood Academy High School .....	209
High School for International Business and Finance .....	216
Proctor High School .....	221
International Center for Leadership in Education Resources .....	227

*continued*

**Appendix—Tools ..... 237**

***Chapter 1***

Rubric for 10 Key Components of School Reform ..... 238  
 Parent Survey on Learning Communities ..... 249  
 Need for Small Learning Communities Checklist ..... 252  
 Health Science Academy Typical Four-year Sequence ..... 253  
 Engineering Technology Academy Typical Four-year Sequence ..... 254  
 Arts Academy Typical Four-year Sequence ..... 255  
 Business Academy Typical Four-year Sequence ..... 256  
 Information Technology Academy Typical Four-year Sequence ..... 257  
 Finance Academy Typical Four-year Sequence ..... 258  
 Biotechnology Academy Typical Four-year Sequence ..... 259  
 Parent Questions and Answers about Career Academies ..... 260  
 Schools that Say “Welcome” Checklist ..... 262

***Chapter 2***

Team Roles ..... 265  
 Team Problem-solving Form ..... 266  
 Effective Decision-making Checklist ..... 267  
 Effective Meetings Checklist ..... 268  
 Meeting Roadmap ..... 269  
 Sample Meeting Ground Rules ..... 270  
 Minutes of Meeting Sample Format ..... 271  
 Teacher Questions and Answers on Small Learning Communities ..... 272  
 Teacher Application for Academies/Small Learning Communities ..... 275  
 Indicators of High-quality Professional Development ..... 276  
 Personal Growth Plan ..... 277  
 Answering the Question: Why Business Involvement? ..... 280  
 Planning a Small Learning Community Checklist ..... 281

***Chapter 3***

Rigor/Relevance Framework ..... 285  
 Knowledge Taxonomy Verb List ..... 286  
 Application Model Decision Tree ..... 287  
 Rigor/Relevance Framework Worksheet ..... 289  
 Rigor/Relevance Lesson Planning ..... 290  
 Rigor/Relevance Lesson Template ..... 291  
 Rigor/Relevance Lesson Example ..... 294  
 Rigor-Relevance Learning Model ..... 297  
 Planning Steps for Rigorous and Relevant Instruction ..... 298  
 Data-driven Curriculum Checklist ..... 299  
 Characteristics of Standards Alignment Checklist ..... 300  
 Brainstorming Student Performance ..... 303  
 Defining the Rigor/Relevance of Student Work ..... 308  
 Examples of Student Work for Real-world Instruction ..... 309  
 Scoring Guide Worksheet ..... 310  
 Checklist Scoring Guide Sample ..... 314  
 Holistic Scoring Guide Sample ..... 315  
 Analytic Scoring Guide Sample ..... 316  
 Writing Rubric for Cross-Curriculum Assessment Sample ..... 317  
 Readiness for Interdisciplinary Instruction Checklist ..... 325  
 Interdisciplinary Curriculum Worksheet #1 ..... 326  
 Interdisciplinary Curriculum Worksheet #2 ..... 327  
 Questions and Answers on Block Scheduling ..... 330

*All items in the Appendix are also on the CD-ROM.*

## To the Change Agent

We hope the idea of small learning communities captures your imagination as a place of learning where every student achieves at high levels and teachers are passionate about their work. Many secondary schools fall short of our aspirations of what good schools should be. Often, the less-than-effective schools are large and impersonal.

At the same time, numerous large schools have made remarkable progress by redesigning themselves into smaller learning communities. They offer inspiration that this innovation may be the route to achieve the schools of our dreams. There is no question that small learning communities can be successful. However, as with most innovations, adopting the small learning community model does not guarantee success, nor does it become reality without hard work.

*Creating Small Learning Communities* provides practical tips and tools to create successful small learning communities.

**Chapter 1 – Aspirations, Issues, and Opportunities** provides an overview of the research, best practices, and obstacles to achieving small learning communities. The most important point when undertaking an initiative to create small learning communities is to have specific learning goals. A small learning community is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end. You must be clear about the goals you wish to accomplish by creating a smaller school.

**Chapter 2 – Staff, Students, and Stakeholders** provides suggestions on dealing with the essential people issues. Everyone must work together to make the transition to a small school successful.

**Chapter 3 – Teaching and Learning** is at the heart of the small learning community. A conversion to a small learning community that does not take advantage of the opportunity to make changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment will likely be a disappointment, since it will retain the lower-than-desired student achievement of the larger school. Included in this chapter are recommendations and tools to create a more rigorous and relevant interdisciplinary curriculum to challenge students.

**Chapter 4 – Logistics** provides suggestions on campuswide issues that arise when several small schools are created on a common campus.

**Chapter 5 – Learning from Others: Case Studies and Resources** has descriptions of five high schools in diverse communities that have been successful in creating small learning communities. Also included is information about publications and research from the International Center for Leadership in Education that can assist small learning communities with teaching and learning.

Throughout the text and in the Appendix are tools, such as questions and answers to prepare for those many meetings, forms to modify and use in planning processes, and checklists to keep track of progress and measure your success. For your convenience, electronic versions of all tools are included on the CD-ROM.

Small learning communities are not the solution for every large school. However, they can be a powerful and rewarding way to improve student achievement in your school. If you are considering creating or expanding one or more small learning communities, follow these suggestions and build on the experience of others to make the change successful.

*Helen M. Branigan  
Richard D. Jones, Ph.D.*

# Chapter 1 Aspirations, Issues, and Opportunities

## Need for Small Learning Communities Checklist

Small learning communities offer several advantages in creating successful schools. The following checklist identifies several challenges that could be addressed by creating a small learning community. If you check “yes” to the majority of these items, one or more small learning communities may be an option worth considering at your school.

**Yes No**

- You tried to implement such initiatives as shared decision-making or a student advisor program but with little success.
- Your high school has more than 1,600 students (800 students for middle schools).
- You have an annual dropout rate of more than 2%.
- You have a daily attendance rate of less than 95%.
- You have had several years of substandard student performance on state tests.
- A frequent complaint from teachers is that students lack motivation.
- Many students seem to “fall through the cracks” and never take advantage of the all the courses and programs that the school has to offer.
- You have a high number of students failing and repeating courses.
- You have an unsatisfactory number of discipline incidents.
- The faculty is fragmented, with several cliques and few examples of collaboration in instruction.
- Curriculum initiatives have been unsuccessful because not all teachers have fully implemented the concepts.
- Few parents are involved or take an interest in the school program.

*This checklist is also in the Appendix/CD-ROM.*

## Creating Small Learning Communities

The following chart compares various small school options.

School Characteristics	Small School Options				
	School Within a School	House	Freshman Academy	Magnet School	Career/Theme Academy
Changes Affect Entire School	No	Yes	No	No	Optional
Scheduling Changes	Significant	Significant	Minor	Minor	Significant
Creates Autonomous School	Yes	No	No	Optional	Optional
Requires Change in Curriculum	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Curriculum Taught in Context	Optional	Optional	Optional	Yes	Yes
Advisor/Advisee Program	Optional	Optional	Yes	Optional	Optional
Internships/ Job Shadowing/ Community Experience	No	No	No	Optional	Yes
Increases Number of Administrators	Yes	No	No	No	No

Analyses of the success of schools in creating small learning communities show some common essential elements and traits that appear to be associated with the success of these organizational structures. Although downsizing alone does not bring improved teaching and learning, it does provide the conditions and setting for the occurrence of higher-quality instruction and student achievement. Some of the key elements found in small school structures that enable them to become improved learning communities include autonomy, identity, personalization, instructional focus, and accountability.

### **Characteristics of Small Learning Communities**

# Creating Small Learning Communities

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## Models for Integration

There are many types and degrees of integration. These vary in how many teachers are involved. Integration may even be schoolwide. The various integration models can be grouped into one of five categories:

1. contextual
2. alignment
3. academy
4. project
5. immersion

### Contextual

Contextual integration means teaching to the core standards in a subject either in a larger context or through application of those standards. For example, a math teacher introducing geometry concepts might teach them in the context of engineering. Students would explore measurement in engineering design and examine applications of geometric shapes to building construction. Contextual integration seeks to provide additional information around the application of knowledge or a concept to give students more “hooks” to remember the learning longer and understand what they learned more fully.

### Alignment

Alignment is not technically integration; however, the result is that the student’s learning experience becomes one of integration. Teachers of two subjects can reorganize their curricula to develop the alignment. The courses set for alignment need to have some content connections. Teachers cover topics at designated times; often, the courses are taught sequentially during

## Chapter 3 Teaching and Learning

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the day. For example, in courses in physics and technology systems, the science teacher might be teaching wave theory, and the technology teacher could be teaching communication systems. Students learn the theory in one class and practice the application in the other class.

This type of integration does not require significant changes to the school curriculum or the involvement of all teachers. This type of integration can be accomplished by a couple of teachers willing to modify their courses of study. Students can elect to take one or both courses. Those students able to take both aligned courses will experience greater integration of learning.

### **Academy**

Academy models are the most popular and the most demanding to implement. In most academy programs, all courses are modified to include teaching content in the context of the academy theme. The advantage for students is that all instruction relates to their area of interest, since students in an academy typically have selected that program. For example, a school might adopt a mathematics, science, and engineering academy. All teachers would try to integrate themes from careers in those fields into their courses.

Academy programs require the involvement of all teachers and significant curriculum planning. Usually, this is not attempted all at once, but rather courses are gradually shifted to the career theme over several years.

### **Project**

Project integration can occur within a course and also outside traditional courses. A good example is the senior project requirement in high schools. In this project, students pursue an area of interest that includes learning in several disciplines. These projects usually involve real-world problems, such as a health or an environmental issue in which the student is interested.

# Creating Small Learning Communities

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## Immersion

Immersion integration is learning in the real world or close to it. Students may learn from working in a job, through an internship, or in a work-based learning initiative. Schools also create school-based enterprises that can provide immersion learning. The student is exposed to real-world problems, and there is no delineation between courses. Learning is naturally integrated.

<b>Model of Integration</b>	<b>Teachers Included</b>	<b>Extent of Integration</b>	<b>Courses</b>
<b>Contextual</b>	Single	Varies	No change
<b>Alignment</b>	Two or more	Entire course	No change
<b>Academy</b>	All	Most courses	Titles remain the same but content changes
<b>Project</b>	Varies	Varies	No change
<b>Immersion</b>	Varies	Entire curriculum	Does not affect courses

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### Readiness for Interdisciplinary Instruction Checklist

Use this checklist to evaluate your school's readiness for developing interdisciplinary instruction.

YES NO

#### Getting Ready

- Teachers have a short list of priorities for instruction.
- Everyone knows the priority needs of the community.
- Staff members know key areas of state/standardized assessments.
- District has local curriculum standards and student competencies.
- Career and technical education and arts courses have been analyzed to identify content that supports academic standards.
- Career and technical education and arts teachers have a priority to reinforce academic standards.
- Teachers use a consistent process to develop instructional plans.

#### Getting Started

- Teachers have access to curriculum resources.
- Teachers have access to resources to help develop instructional plans.
- Local assessments are developed consistent with district and school priorities.
- Teachers have access to resources to develop local assessments.
- Teachers offer a variety of instructional activities and methods.

#### Doing It

- Applied academic courses are developed and offered.
- Professional development is provided on integrating academics and career and technical education and the arts.
- Team teaching of career and technical education/arts and academic teachers is practiced in school.
- A balance is achieved between recall assessments and performance measures.
- Parents are fully informed of options for students and referrals.
- Teachers facilitate instruction that supports the standards.
- Instruction is motivating to students, and they are actively engaged.
- Teachers exhibit interest in continual improvement.

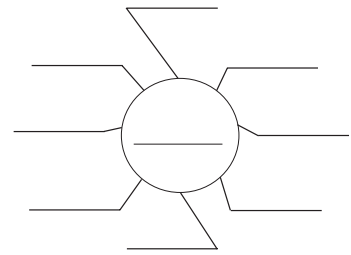
## Creating Small Learning Communities

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### Using the Planning Wheel to Develop Interdisciplinary Units

The planning wheel is useful for teachers and/or students as they begin to explore a theme from the perspectives of several disciplines. The following steps below can help teachers implement interdisciplinary instruction.

- **Select an organizing focus.** The theme, topics, unit, or concept placed in the center circle becomes the focus of the curriculum development. It will be broadened by the points of view of the disciplines involved. See Interdisciplinary Curriculum Worksheet #1– Brainstorming Student Work in Multiple Disciplines on the following page.
- **Brainstorm associations.** Each spoke is a discipline area. Brainstorm associations with the organizing focus at the hub of the wheel. The open-ended technique of brainstorming is used to generate spontaneous ideas, which are recorded on the wheel.
- **Establish student learning.** This step takes the brainstorming associations from the wheel and focuses on what students will learn. Before settling on an engaging student activity, the lesson begins to take shape, and the framework for the unit will develop naturally as student learning is established. Using the Rigor/Relevance Framework to determine the levels of cognitive skill development and relevance/application will ensure the cultivation of higher-level thought processes and real-world applications.
- **Write teaching activities for implementation.** Means for achieving student learning should be developed next. Activity design tells what the students will be doing.



This worksheet is also  
in the Appendix/  
CD-ROM.

See Interdisciplinary  
Curriculum Worksheet #2  
— Establishing Student  
Learning in the Appendix/  
CD-ROM.

# Chapter

# 4 Logistics

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## Shared Facilities

Large comprehensive high schools that create one or more small learning communities within the existing structure have a unique problem — shared facilities. Most schools are designed around functions rather than groups of students. How do several “schools” use a single science laboratory?

Generally, schools are designed for efficiency and cost effectiveness by having a single gymnasium, library, and cafeteria. When smaller learning communities are created in the existing school structure, they have a facility barrier in trying to keep students in the small learning community together and organized into a closer community.

Each small learning community is usually located in an area of a school, such as a single wing or floor. This enables students and staff to have maximum interaction and minimum distraction by coming in contact with large numbers of students. If students from small learning communities move freely about a large school building and mingle often with students in other communities, some potential benefits of small learning communities soon disappear.

Facility sharing problems should be analyzed and solutions planned before the transition to several small learning communities in a single facility. Following is a list of facilities that are often shared by multiple small learning communities.

- physical education facilities (gymnasium, weight room, pool, athletic fields)
- library/media center/computer laboratory
- cafeteria
- auditorium
- administrative office
- attendance office
- counseling office
- health facilities
- science laboratories/CTE facilities