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The Journey Begins

There are risks and costs to a program of action. But they are far less than the long-range risks and costs of comfortable inaction.

—John F. Kennedy

Chapter 1 Road Map

Purpose	To focus on the use of SLC as a critical tool for improving high schools. To arm the practitioner with the history, research, and current practices surrounding the use of SLC as the vehicle for high school improvement. To outline a framework for successful SLC implementation. To identify benefits and types of SLC.
Stage of Implementation	Formation—focus on data, personalization, and creating a climate for success.
Process and Action Steps	Review chapter. Review entire book and Tool Kit. Review Tool 1.1, add your own school/district data.
Tool Kit	1.1 Creating SLC Presentation
Reflective Practice	What are the reasons and resources motivating a move to SLC? What design best suits our improvement needs?
Outcome	Practitioner will be able to articulate the necessity for addressing school improvement needs through creation of SLC, will have developed thinking around appropriate terminology, and will be able to make initial presentation to fellow educators.

Welcome to a journey focused on high school improvement and school redesign. Over the course of these pages, through use of the electronic Tool Kit that accompanies this book, and through your own hard work as a facilitator and practitioner, you will find a map for improving the culture, climate, and educational outcomes for your school and district through the creation of small learning communities (SLC) within the large high school. This book is part educational research and best practice, with the goal of equipping you with the theory and background you need to effectively communicate and make decisions, and part technical tool kit to speed you on your journey—providing shortcuts with electronic files that will help you motivate, plan, implement, assess, and document. As you move into the formative stage of your work, you will gain background knowledge on school reform, research-based strategies, national trends, and best practices. You will assess and value the strengths already in existence in your school, and identify the colleagues with whom you will work most closely. You will move through the stages of formation, study and awareness, establishing structures, community engagement and commitment, and evaluation. You will work through over one hundred items for decision and possible action in a long "Punch List" of implementation strategies. You will pay attention to both structure and instruction, and you will become increasingly data driven. This is essential in that it is not the simple creation of the school-within-a-school small learning communities that makes the difference in student achievement and school climate, but rather the attention to a clear mission and reflective practice. Along the way, you will have the opportunity to define and refine your work and tailor it to your specific educational mission, objectives, and needs. Your work, motivated by an urgency and commitment to improving your school, will not be as straightforward or linear as working through a book in ten chapters and thirty-plus tools. With that in mind, you will want to preview the Tool Kit early on and become familiar with each section of this book in order that you may turn to relevant sections as the need arises. At the end, you will have a school or schools redesigned into SLC. This, however, will be just the beginning because the creation of SLC simply sets the stage for establishing practices focused on *continuous improvement.*

If you have been in education for more than a few years, you are already familiar with the cycles of "school improvements" that ebb and flow through our schools. In an era that calls for us to radically rethink high schools, it is important to reflect on where we have been in the last forty years, learn the lessons from the work of researchers and educators, and position ourselves for creating *effective* schools. Rather than seeking the silver bullet, we must focus on mission and purpose: equity for all students, and clear and measurable outcomes. Without these at the core of our work in school redesign, we are likely to miss the mark, creating hollow structures that meet SLC design elements but do not result in higher performing schools. In short, without reflective practice we miss the warning issued by the White Rabbit to Alice in Wonderland—"if you do not know where you are going, anywhere will do"—and we wind up back at the beginning, having worked very hard and having not met with the anticipated goal of the journey.

Throughout this book, you will note that the words *continuous improvement* are always presented in italic. This is to continually reinforce that any school redesign, reform, or program implementation's sole goal should be to make an improvement

in the climate and results focused on teaching and learning. Viewed in any other manner, you help create a "been there, done that, waiting for the next thing to happen" attitude amongst your faculty. Begin now to frame your thinking not around "reform," and not simply about the creation of SLC, but rather on building a commitment to *continuous improvement.*

BACKGROUND

The move to "small" has grown steadily since the late 1960s, with the start of the first career academies in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. National momentum was brought on by the U.S. Department of Education's redesign of Perkins II, and the May 1994 passage by the United States Congress of the National School-to-Work Opportunities Act (NSTWOA), also known as the School-to-Work Act. The Act called for a sweeping change in American education. Building on the work already completed by Goals 2000 and the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), the School-to-Work Act invited all states and school systems to apply for funds to develop the required school-based and work-based learning systems that would:

- Address the school-to-career needs of *all* youth
- Create the opportunity to learn in a school-based educational setting that provides in-depth career awareness no later than the seventh grade
- Provide specific opportunities to interact with business and community leaders in a work-based career-focused program no later than the tenth grade, and
- Develop a sustained means of connecting these experiences through curricular innovations and supporting community structures.

The goal of the School-to-Work Act was to raise academic standards to provide *all* children with the opportunity to succeed in both the workplace and postsecondary educational opportunities. It was intended to increase young people's awareness of the variety of career opportunities open to them, to raise understanding and expectations about what students should *know and be able to do* in preparation for their future as lifelong learners and contributing members of society, and to develop a community of support that would change the way children learn and teachers teach through linkages with the educational, business, government, nonprofit, labor, and postsecondary communities.

Many schools and school districts chose to approach the move to school-to-work—known later as school-to-careers—by creating career academies within their high schools. Pragmatically, it was easier for large comprehensive high schools to deal with implementing such sweeping reforms if the changes could be addressed in smaller units rather than addressing the entire body of students, teachers, and programs of studies. Later in this text, we will draw a distinction between career academies, houses, and other types of SLC. For now, at their heart each comprises a small group of students, scheduled together, working with a small group of adults over a period of two to four years. Frequently, students are drawn to the program

because of a career or academic theme or because of the special opportunities afforded them for internships or college experiences. Always, there is a commitment from the start that the smaller unit of teachers, students, families, and partners will create an atmosphere of support for each other's success. These school-within-a-school programs showed early signs of success in changing school climate, increasing student attendance rates, and raising high school completion rates. More often than not, these programs exist separately from the rest of the school, and they were originally implemented for just *some* students. They were known as stand-alone or "pocket" academies. The next generation of high school reform called for *all* students to be engaged in SLC throughout the school—"wall-to-wall."

As the NSTWOA legislation began to sunset, and the all-important supportive funding came to an end, we witnessed the emergence of two other federal initiatives: the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Act (CSRD) legislation of 1998, and the Smaller Learning Community (SLC) grants that began to be issued by the U.S. Department of Education in 2000. At the same time, major foundations such as Carnegie, Annenberg, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, as well as hundreds of other smaller regional funders, pumped significant money into large comprehensive high schools in an effort to make them small, more personalized environments for teaching and learning. Many of the mandates of NSTWOA were kept, but the emphasis began to shift subtly to a more solid "academic" base. And, while the intent of the NSTWOA was "*all* students," the terms of these newer initiatives' funding streams were and are far more prescriptive. Add to this mandate mix those created by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) for highly qualified teachers, students that pass state exit tests, and schools that must reach and maintain annual yearly progress (AYP), and we begin to feel rumblings to the foundation of education as we know it in this country.

Despite the trend to create smaller learning units—or sometimes even true, fully autonomous small schools—student enrollments are at an all-time high, and large, comprehensive high schools are still in vogue. This growth in student numbers is expected to continue for the next decade. Alaska, Idaho, Nevada, and New Mexico will see enrollments grow by more than 10 percent. By 2010, California will add 278,000 students to its rolls, while Texas will gain 219,000 students even before the mass transplantation of tens of thousands of students transported from flood-ravaged New Orleans. Across the country, it is now common to have high schools of 2,000 and 3,000 youths. In Los Angeles, Miami, and other cities, school populations can top 5,000. And in more rural communities, where it is unusual to have large groups of people together, even the large regional high school—small by city standards—can feel like a very big place. These schools exist at a time when the research points out that many of our schools are too large to effectively educate our youth; there is convergent research that supports a move to small, high-standards environments for teaching and learning.

Yet there are those who continue the argument for large schools. The rationale falls on the side of the plethora of courses and extracurricular offerings made possible when student numbers are high. While the numbers may breed increased services, they also have the potential to create an atmosphere that is the worst of what we are coming to know about American high schools. A U.S. Department of Education posting from the late 1990s noted that schools of 1,000 or more students experience 825 percent more violent crime, 270 percent more vandalism, and 1,000 percent more

weapons incidents, compared with those which have fewer than 300 students. More recent studies point to the frightening statistic that, as a nation, we now graduate only 50 percent of African Americans, 51 percent of American Indians, and 53 percent of Latino and Hispanic students. For white and Asian students, the figures are 75 percent and 77 percent, respectively. Can we be satisfied that even our best results leave nearly 25 percent of the population behind?

The creation of *effective* smaller learning units *within the large, comprehensive high school* may, then, be the nation's best answer to combat these trends and the history of underachievement and alienation experienced by so many students in our high schools. These small learning units, by their very design, nurture a positive relationship between teachers, students, and the community. Those who seek to create them must begin with the understanding that providing a personalized, respectful, caring, high-expectations learning environment that leads to postsecondary success should be the birthright of all those attending public schools in the United States.

Mary Anne Raywid writes in her review of more than 100 studies on school size that the relationship between small schools and positive education outcomes has been "confirmed with a clarity and at a level of confidence rare in the annals of education research" (Raywid, 1999). Increases in standardized test scores are not necessarily a part of the research-based listing of student outcomes, although there are studies that reflect increases in grade point averages for academy students. It is unlikely that you will see academic gains through a structure that, in some cases, simply "rearranges the deck chairs." An SLC implementation that commits to working on structure and instruction at the same time will serve as a catalyst for school improvement. It is time to roll up our sleeves and begin in earnest to reform our schools around the key elements, principles, and practices that will successfully propel our students into the classrooms and workplaces of tomorrow.

THE MANDATE FOR SCHOOL REFORM

We have already noted the fact that, across the country, there are major reform initiatives being funded by state, local, and federal grants. Goals 2000, SCANS (discussed in Chapter 6), NSTWOA, CSRD, SLC, and Breaking Ranks I and II all fueled a revolution in funding for the revamping of schools. Yet, almost forty years into reform, the national data tell us that we are woefully unskilled as an educational community to meet the ever-demanding needs of a culturally diverse student population which must be prepared to take its place in a global economy. We are familiar with the staggering dropout rates—particularly of non-white students—but we sometimes fail to make the connection between those data and the impact on the broader community or nation. Indeed, in a recent Teachers College–Columbia University Week article we learned from researcher Alan Richard (2005) that "the United States could recoup nearly $200 billion a year in economic losses and secure its place as the world's future economic and educational leader by raising the quality of schooling, investing more money and other resources in education, and lowering dropout rates."

In the same article, economist Enrico Moretti states that a "one percent increase in graduation rates nationally would correlate with about 100,000 fewer crimes annually in the United States. Such a step would save the nation $1.4 billion a year

in law-enforcement and incarceration costs." The article continues, "An increase in graduation rates by 10 percentage points would correlate with a 20 percent reduction in murder and assault arrest rates. It is hard to think of a better reason for investing in public schooling" (Richard, 2005).

And, while the data are clear that SLC positively impact dropout rates, this is not the only important data point. Students who remain in school must be taught to high standards in an increasingly information age–driven economy. We must, as educators, commit to creating a high-expectations learning environment for all students and to creating a "college-ready culture" in our schools. At the same time, we must not veer too far from the intent of the NSTWOA. We must be aware that not all of our students will seek or attain college entrance. At this midpoint in the first decade of the twenty-first century, record numbers of students are applying to colleges and universities, and the "pool" of college-aged students will continue to grow for the balance of the decade. The *CBS Evening New*s recently reported that

> of the three million students graduating from high school this year, a record two thirds applied to college. That has forced universities nationwide to reject more students than ever. At the University of Virginia, the acceptance of applicants rate fell from 38 percent last year to 36 percent this year. At Northwestern, only 28 percent of students got in, while Yale accepted about just 8.5 percent of all applicants. The University of Pennsylvania had the largest admission drop, 21 percent accepted last year to less than 18 percent this time around. (Solorzano, 2006)

A majority of those who attend college will need some remediation; a significant proportion will not return for a second year of schooling. Add this to a labor market that is crying out for a skilled workforce and we must, as a nation, understand the need, and undertake a commitment, to prepare youth with a variety of valued postsecondary success plans.

The task is great. The research, and our own experience in school systems, tells us that the large school experience simply makes it too easy for students to fall though the cracks, and for teachers and administrators who are not *yet* up to the task of leading in a high-expectations culture to hide.

We will talk more about change and reform efforts in later chapters. For now, it is important to understand that, across the country, the mandate is clear—there is no turning back. There is a growing national commitment to reforming high schools, as evidenced in part by the commitment of the National Governors Association (NGA) to high school reform.

BENEFITS OF SLC

Research conducted by RAND, the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), and Will Daggett's International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE) all points to smaller learning environments bringing about improvements in student and school outcomes. Large school size adversely affects student involvement in school activities, attendance, and school climate. In addition, schools with large student numbers demonstrate evidence of increased school dropout rates, vandalism, and violence. The expectation for schools that transition

from traditional large comprehensive schools to academies and SLC is that they will provide a nurturing environment, career-focused curriculum, access to adult role models, and work-based experiences for students. The anticipated result is higher expectations for student outcomes, increased achievement, increased numbers of students staying in school, and more positive postsecondary experiences. SLC, when done well and comprehensively, build in the rigor, relevance, and relationships that lead to the all-important *results* we seek in school improvement. Indeed, according to Dr. Michelle Fine of the City University of New York Graduate Center, "Small learning communities are the single most powerful intervention for young people" (Fine, 2000).

The 2006 MDRC report offers lessons from interventions in place in over 2,500 high schools across the country. They relate to:

- Creating personalized and orderly learning environments
- Assisting students who enter high school with poor academic skills
- Improving instructional content and practice
- Preparing students for the world beyond high school, and
- Stimulating change in overstressed high schools.

The report asserts that structural changes and instructional improvement are the twin pillars of high school reform. The MDRC research suggests that transforming schools into SLC and assigning students to faculty advisors can increase students' feelings of connectedness to their teachers. Extended class periods, special catch-up courses, high-quality curricula, and training on these curricula for teachers can improve student achievement. Furthermore, school/employer partnerships that involve career awareness activities and work internships can help students attain higher earnings after high school (MDRC, 2006).

Schools also report a myriad of positive results when they engage in SLC designs. Teachers report a sense of increased professionalism. In addition, schools report increased resources and commitment from business/community partners, increased student *and* staff attendance, fewer incidences of school disruptions, and increased graduation rates. Communities, too, register marked increases in appreciation for the benefits of SLC. Parents and guardians find it easier to be engaged in the high school life of their child and with their child's teachers. Business, labor, professional associations, and CBO all value the clear educational benefit of students staying in school and the opportunity to serve as good "corporate" citizens. They also see the benefit of establishing a more prepared and effective citizenry and workforce, and note the positive impacts on a community when youth are nontruant and engaged in fewer high-risk activities. Principals and teachers, in partnership with other designated practitioners, seek these improvements and are charged with enacting reforms and furthering a *continuous improvement* mandate.

WHO MAKES IT HAPPEN? THE PRACTITIONER'S ROLE

In every district, in every school, there must be champions for *effective* reform. They must battle the tide and the constant spinning of a wheel that too often keeps them from meeting the mission they set. These are the change agents by job description, by

consulting assignment, or by passion. Regardless of whether you are a state-level leader, superintendent, principal, member of a school improvement team, or one designated to marshal school improvement through SLC, the key practitioner role will be the primary force in partnering other administrators, faculty, and stakeholders to build school and community commitment to a data-driven process aimed *not at reform* but at *continuous improvement.* The practitioner—sometimes working in isolation, but more often with a team—will ensure that the effort to create SLC succeeds through a developed and coordinated effort of planning, staff development training, and program development. Practitioners help create school or district high-quality environments for teaching and learning. In addition, they are the individuals who help sustain improvements by seeking to make sense of the cycle of reforms and district mandates. They help seek appropriate grant funds and community resources, and they must be hold the rest of the stakeholders' feet collectively to the fire of accountability—helping all to stay the course in creating what we know is best for students. Let us be clear, however, that whole-school and whole-district reform is about a shared level of accountability. As we will see in subsequent chapters, it means everyone's roles and responsibilities are on the table of change. Individual principals have the primary responsibility for developing a school climate and the conditions that enable the school to meet the tenets and mandates that their state and district have set out to increase student performance as well as to prepare students to take an active role in the future of the community. The principals will share this authority with a cadre of professionals, and some version of a school restructuring team that will include parents, partners, and, where applicable, teacher union representatives. This work is not for the faint of heart. You will have to have many "messy" conversations. You will have to take risks and understand that some will meet with failure. The goal is *effective* SLC that embody a respectful, high-expectations climate for teaching and learning. To not take the risks is something this nation cannot afford. In Chapter 10, we review the practitioner's role as we look back and forward at how effective we were and need to be in improving school culture and outcomes through implementation of key elements for effective redesign.

KEY ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE REDESIGN EFFORTS

At the high school level, the transformation to SLC begins with the creation of a school climate that changes the way schools operate and the way communities address the continued educational needs of their youth. This change in climate demands:

- Developing a mission and commitment framework to which all can ascribe
- Establishing practices that change the school management structure to one of shared leadership and that keep students at the center
- Focusing on curriculum and instruction that is "high standard" for all students
- Creating school and community partnerships that are truly collaborative working arrangements with shared vision and responsibility, and
- (For career academies) engaging students in a career-focused curriculum and continuously complex series of work-based experiences that are as equally valued by the school as the "academic" education components.

LOOKING AT DESIGN OPTIONS

As the number of SLC and career academies grows, spurred on by government and foundation funds, and as the new research on adolescents continues to highlight their specific developmental needs, we have new tools and solid research to guide our work in redesigning high schools. Nationally, there is no one model for the creation of SLC. Their variety is as individual as the schools and school systems in which they are housed. While the terms "academy," "career academy," "house," and "schools of" are sometimes used interchangeably, researchers and national practitioners tend to differentiate them as distinct, one from another. There are some shared elements, of course, the most common of which is cohort student schedules that keep students and teachers together for a period of years, thus creating familiarity and a common set of experiences. The design you choose will be based on what you want to accomplish in your schools to create the ideal graduate and what you believe to be true in regard to your students' ability to handle transitions between middle school, ninth grade, and the upper levels of high school. Regardless of the design or term upon which you decide, a commitment to common language is important in order that all stakeholders understand the design elements and the goals that design seeks to achieve. There is no convergent research on which approach meets with the greatest success for students. It is not the design, primarily, that contributes to effectiveness but rather engaging in a thoughtful process that requires a strong focus and commitment to quality implementation of what we refer to as the "big five" or "bins of work" that transforms high schools. These "bins" include:

- Personalization
- Data-driven management
- A curriculum- and instruction-centric approach
- Community partnerships, and
- Creating a climate for success.

In our work with schools, we explain the bins as follows.

Personalization

Successful high schools create personalized, flexible, and challenging learning environments that meet the needs of all students, regardless of race, gender identification, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or educational need. Personalization goes beyond simply creating small structures; it means providing true support for each child. Personalization goes beyond the needs of students; it includes the development of professional learning communities (PLC) for educators as well.

Data-Driven Management

Successful high schools ensure that decision making is tied to analysis, and the understanding of meaningful data, and they are aware that data are used effectively at the district, school, and classroom levels to guide reforms, instruction, and student outcomes.

Curriculum- and Instruction-Centric

Successful high schools ultimately know that what happens in the classroom is the most powerful determinant of student success. Interventions in planning and coaching are designed to help district- and school-level administrators, department chairs, literacy and data coaches, and teachers to improve curricula and instructional methods.

Partnership Focused

Successful high schools create effective partnerships between all members of a school community, including district personnel, students, families, business and community leaders, unions, postsecondary education, and other stakeholders.

Creating a Climate for Success

Successful high schools commit to building continuous improvement efforts, creating a climate that will sustain teacher and student success. This involves attention to the many interrelated elements that comprise the operation of schools and districts, including alignment of policies and resources and creating effective professional development plans. At its core, a climate for success means honing a definition of effective high schools and a set of practices and policies that support them.

As a way of beginning your thinking about "design," it is helpful to use the "bins" to form reflective questions about what you need to know and to be able to address each of these areas of work. It also helps to begin to line up in your mind what you already have in place and where you will need to expand. Along the way, we will arm you with many tools that are examined through these lenses. Many U.S. high schools are seeking to address these issues through a reconfiguration of the traditional high schools noted below. Each of these are distinct from true *small schools* such as The Met in Rhode Island, the Julia Richmond multiplex school in New York, and several of Baltimore City's small high schools. The independent, stand-alone schools have answered the question of how we deliver high-quality, personalized instruction for students by creating independent schools that are small in size and number. For the traditionally large high schools, the answer is more frequently one of the following design options.

Academy

This tends to be a very general term that usually follows the same definition as an SLC (see below). It is sometimes interchanged with the more specific term "career academy."

Career Academy

This is an SLC that enrolls students and teachers who self-select to be part of the academy. Each academy has a broad-based career theme, an integrated sequence of courses, work-based experiences, and strong alliances with business and community

partners. While these designs include a career theme, and may lead toward industry certifications, it is essential to understand that they are not intended either to force students into an early career choice or to churn out students who will necessarily pursue careers in the themed academy area. Rather, the career theme is used as a catalyst to garner student interest, focus learning, and build a coherent and relevant curricular experience. The additional payoff is a more informed postsecondary choice. Unlike the other terms in this section, there is a nationally approved "standards of practice" for career academies that was agreed to in the spring of 2005 by leading organizations including the Career Academy Support Network (CASN), the National Academy Foundation (NAF), the National Career Academy Coalition (NCAC), the National Center for Education and the Economy (NCEE), America's Choice, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) High Schools That Work, and Johns Hopkins University's Talent Development High Schools. The link to those ten key elements of successful practice can be found in the Resources section.

House

The term usually follows the same definition as an SLC (see below).

Magnet Schools

Magnet schools were begun as specialty and theme-based schools or schools-within-schools for purposes of desegregation without forced busing. They were the natural progression from the specialty schools of early America, such as the Boston Latin School and small focused alternative schools. A common theme or instructional strategy and a small group of committed, talented, career-interested students became the means to motivate families and students to leave their neighborhood school and attend magnets. The federally funded Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP), begun in 1984, is still a national program today. Funds are disbursed from the U.S. Department of Education directly to school districts through a competitive grant process. In many communities, it has become commonplace for the "magnet" programs to be elitist, serving only the best students. This was not the intent and should be discouraged: cultural diversity, common purpose, and building on student interest and abilities make magnets especially well suited for SLC and career academies.

Major, Pathway, or Cluster

These terms usually refer not to a true school-within-a-school, like SLC, but to a sequence of career-related and/or academic courses that lead toward graduation. Students in a major, pathway, or cluster may or may not be scheduled together in a manner that creates an SLC; however, most SLC have some sort of pathway sequence. Often thought of as similar to a major in college, these sequences build knowledge and skills. In larger SLC, they are frequently used to define subteams of students and teachers. For example, in an SLC of 400 students focused on health and human services, you might further define the student's experience for those students who are interested in deeper study around medical issues as opposed to education and training.

Ninth Grade or Freshman Academies

These develop students' academic and social skills by providing a strong orientation, freshman transition course, advisory support, and the opportunity to learn in teams that promote individualized supports for student success. They usually have a career-awareness component. Ninth grade is the time for students to focus on study skills, create a six-year educational plan, begin to engage in service learning, select an upper-level SLC, and start a high school portfolio. While not all schools are choosing to create "ninth grade only" units for their students, there is a growing body of research that suggests that the developmental needs of ninth graders need to include a specialized program of studies and services, regardless of the designation of a stand-alone ninth grade program within the regular school. The most widely recognized proponent of stand-alone ninth grades—and where we have learned a great deal about its students' needs—is the Johns Hopkins University's Talent Development High School Ninth Grade "Success Academy." With specific structural, interpersonal, and curricular supports, this CSRD-approved model is demonstrating student gains in reading and mathematics scores, and also showing lower instances of absenteeism and dropout rates.

Regardless of how students are placed in the overall SLC design, ninth grade must include significant interpersonal and academic support for surviving the high school years and for establishing successful habits of the mind and heart.

Ninth and Tenth Grade "Introductory Houses"

Introductory houses are designed to continue the supportive structure found in the ninth grade–only academy for a period of two years. Some schools choose to loop their teachers with students. While this design has little research basis, we are seeing an increased number of schools exploring this as a design option, perhaps because of the intense focus on students taking the high-stakes state tests in the tenth grade year. Similar to the ninth grade design, students in these "introductory houses" select an "upper house," career academy, or SLC at the midpoint of the tenth grade year. This is sometimes described as the model many of us are accustomed to from our college experience, where we studied fundamentals during the first two years of college and then selected a major that determined the course of our final school experience during the sophomore year.

PLC

PLC are sometimes confused with SLC. PLC are decidedly different. These are groups of educators working together to focus on professional practice. The best SLC incorporate PLC into their practices. The term *PLC* has become common through the work of Rick and Becky DuFour and Robert Eaker (see Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). A similar approach, made popular by the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) and the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES; see Resources section), utilizes "critical friend groups" (CFG) to improve professional practices. Regardless of the specific approach your faculty may espouse, creating a safe haven for looking at student work, teacher assignments, data, professional readings, school decisions, and classroom practices will help teachers learn to work effectively in common planning times. PLC add the "personalization" element into the school experience for the

adults. Here teachers read and study texts and materials together. PLC provide a venue for getting in and out of each other's classrooms, modeling, and giving feedback on instructional strategies and classroom management. Teachers in PLC are creating common assessments and examining results. Often, these groups operate in several rings of membership—by SLC, by department, and by grade-level teams.

Schools of . . .

These should not be confused with true, independently operated small schools. Some high schools, seeking to name their SLC efforts, create "schools of . . ." similar to what you might have experienced in college—for example, a school of fine arts or a school of engineering and architecture. This term evolved in large measure as a reaction to the school-to-work movement, when there was a concern that the career themes–tracked programs and the SLC movement were somehow only for under-performing students.

SLC

Designate any separately defined, school-within-a-school, individualized learning unit within a larger school setting. Students and teachers are scheduled together and frequently have a common area of the school in which to hold most or all of their classes. SLC may or may not have a career theme or a set sequence of courses for students. The most comprehensive SLC include: an administrative structure with a principal, lead teacher, and guidance counselor; a heterogeneous team of students and teachers (ranging in size from 350–500, with subteams of 150); a home base or specific section of the school; an academic focus or career theme; extra help for students; data to drive decisions; time used effectively, including common planning time for teachers; coaching support and focused professional development for staff; inculcated traditions, practices, and beliefs; freshman orientation and support; service learning and work-based learning opportunities; opportunities for student voice; advisory supports; postsecondary planning; and a senior project. The design of SLC have two primary formats—ninth through twelfth grade and tenth through twelfth grade, thus continuing the focus on personalization begun in the ninth grade programs described above. Ninth through twelfth grade SLC configure the high school experience into small nine to twelve silos of learning to avoid the multiple transitions faced by students coming from middle school to the high school's ninth grade program, and then transitioning again into one of the upper-level designs. Tenth through twelfth grade, or eleventh through twelfth grade, programs continue the commitment to small school environments by placing students and teachers in learning teams. Increasingly, these teams are clustered around industry areas that specifically set high standards for student performance and develop students' talents and abilities to pursue postsecondary education and employment. The Northwest Regional Education Lab (NWREL), at this writing, has extensive materials, assessments, school comparisons, and resources available on each of these elements at the Web site listed in the Resources section.

Throughout this book, you will see the term "SLC" used as an abbreviated reference for a single small learning community within a comprehensive high school. You will also see the same abbreviation, rather than the sometimes used "SLCs," to reference small learning communities as a group. The word "communi*ties*"

is in and of itself a plural. While it may be difficult at first for the eye and mind to make the adjustment, we note it here and encourage similar usage as you implement your own programs.

Reflecting on the five lenses of personalization, data, instruction and curriculum, partnerships, and climate for success provides a focal point for determining the design elements that will best help you achieve the envisioned goals. To borrow from the noted author and documentarian Hedrick Smith, these implementations "cultivate hope in a sea of despair." They transform school culture and are proven to be successful catalysts—particularly in urban areas—for addressing issues of school reform and community and workforce development. They specifically offer students the opportunity to think about themselves and their futures differently. As an example, data from the MDRC, the NAF, and RAND (listed in the Resources section) tell us that students in career academies do not simply *just* finish high school. They emerge as school leaders, earn more credits toward graduation, and attend classes more than their nonacademy counterparts. Teachers report that, while they never worked harder than in an academy setting, they also feel more satisfied, more collegial, more respected, and more effective. Students demonstrate an increased interest in school, resulting in increased graduation rates.

Much of the research on SLC has been done on the early stand-alone "pocket" programs. The restlessness of the educational community to change, and the restlessness of the funding sources—be they government or foundations—to fund, has not provided an in-depth focus around the specific elements that lead to whole-school improvement. Perhaps the most specific data we have come from Daggett's (2004) work on schools meeting with improvement. He identifies nine characteristics of schools meeting with success. In his work, Daggett puts evidence of SLC at the top of his list. The challenge for the nation is how to transform the positive practices that are sometimes created in isolated units to a scale that can benefit all students. Creating and sustaining the best of what educators have learned in pocket academies and in past reform efforts—especially in an era of high-stakes testing—is the current challenge for whole-school, whole-district "reform."

At a Glance: Summing It Up and Next Steps

Practitioners, those tasked directly with the focus on school improvement, have the unique role of partnering with others and pushing the educational agenda. This push–pull must include a direct alliance with the district office, school boards, principals, and individual groups of teachers. All must serve as key resources on current district and national trends in school improvement, including creating a college- and career-ready graduate. A variety of resources are available to practitioners that will give them an excellent background on local and national initiatives. The Tool Kit CD-ROM includes [1.1 Creating SLC Presentation], which is a MS PowerPoint file. All Tool Kit file names are presented in brackets to call your attention to the file as a resource. The table of contents contains both an alphabetical reference and a chart that lets you know where the file is discussed in this text. This presentation summarizes the case for using SLC as the vehicle for high school improvement. It is designed to allow you to insert your specific school data to assist in building the case for change as you present it to other stakeholders and faculties. In addition, it lays out many of the design elements

discussed and provides you with visuals that demonstrate the various types of configuration possibilities. A listing of additional support materials is included in the Resources section at the end of this book.

The journey of creating and sustaining SLC and career academies is captured here in sequence, yet implementation is rarely a linear process. Regardless of where you begin with this book, you will want to make a commitment to engage in and model reflective practice and to continually assess your progress against the rubric for SLC. It is only through the process of looking back and looking forward that we will not only know where we have been but where we are going. This is a journey fraught with challenges. One thing we have learned over the last six years, since the first edition of this book was published, is that if we are going to really gain the commitment and engagement of others, we need to start with data and honor what we have already accomplished successfully. Next, you will assess your current level of redesign elements with the Data SLC Implementation Assessment introduced in Chapter 2 and contained as a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet in the Tool Kit. It will provide you a quick sense of the critical areas for consideration as well as a means to place those areas in the framework of your own educational setting.