SMALLER LEARNING COMMUNITIES (SLC) PROGRAM:
A CASE STUDY OF EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

Public education in the United States struggles to prepare all students for success in postsecondary education and careers. One reason attributed to dropouts, student-disconnect, and low levels of achievement is that too many students attend large, impersonal schools where they are not engaged in learning. Many policy makers view the reconstruction of high schools through the creation of Smaller Learning Communities (SLCs) as a step toward personalizing education and establishing the right conditions for enhanced student achievement. The purpose of this case study was to investigate which aspects of the high school SLC program educators deemed critical and how SLC practices can be improved. This qualitative descriptive single-case study was designed to analyze teacher, counselor and administrator perceptions around SLC practices in a large suburban southeastern New England school district. Data was obtained through historical quantitative analysis, document analysis and a semi-structured focus group interview.

The research was guided by Coleman’s (1988) theoretical concept of social capital with three primary questions:

- In what ways did high school attendance, suspension, retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data change from 2004 to 2012 for the school district under study?
- How have changes to existing practices been implemented since the inception of the SLC program?
- How did educators perceive the effectiveness of the SLC program?

Key words: smaller learning communities, school size, small schools movement, high school reform, social capital theory, personalized learning, college readiness, academic rigor
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research Problem Statement

Public education in the United States struggles to prepare all students for success in postsecondary education and careers. Though many students achieve success, there are still many students who are left behind, struggling with failure in high school and beyond. One reason attributed to dropouts, student-disconnect, and low levels of achievement is that too many students attend large, impersonal schools where they are not engaged in learning (Murray, 2008). They often fail to develop any meaningful relationships with adults and many feel increasingly alienated from school curricula and their real world needs (Murray, 2008).

An example of where this problem prevails is in a large suburban public school district in southeastern New England where there are two high schools implementing Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) initiatives as reform efforts to increase academic rigor and enhance student personalization. The district implemented the SLC program to create a personalized, supportive learning experience that ensures all students are motivated, inspired, and prepared for success in and beyond high school. This SLC initiative began eight years ago with district and building level leadership recognizing the need to improve student achievement outcomes within their large high school constructs. Shortly thereafter, the district designed and implemented some initial SLC structures (freshman academies) and strategies (teacher common planning time, student advisories) in the two high schools.

The SLC change process was amplified five years ago when the district was awarded a large federal multi-year grant to support SLC initiatives. The program was designed to achieve SLC priorities as defined by the federal government and to prepare all students to succeed in postsecondary education and careers. The four main goals of this project were:

1. To increase student achievement for all while closing existing achievement gaps.
2. To prepare all students for success in post-secondary education and employment.

3. To provide all students with a rigorous, relevant program of studies.

4. To create a school climate that provides a personalized learning environment for every student, built on a foundation of student, staff, family, business and community partnerships.

The SLC school change process requires continual professional development around SLC structures and strategies. This includes a focus on improved instructional practices, as well as identifying and improving school, family, business, and community resources and supports. It also includes evaluation of school climate, culture, and student outcomes. Though many students in these two high schools achieve success, there are still many students who are left behind - struggling with failure in high school and beyond. Thus, the problem of practice can be defined as improving college and career readiness skills for all students through increasing academic rigor and creating a personalized student learning environment that builds a school culture where higher education is valued.

Significance of the Problem

It is critical that the United States finds a way to improve its educational system so that all students attending large public high schools are college and career ready. As a result of the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), educators and policymakers in the United States have endeavored to improve the education of children. Since then, pressure has mounted on the public educational system through the legislation of stricter standards and greater accountability. Important examples include the 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), the 2008 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, the 2010 adoption of national common core standards, and President Obama’s call to improve the system through the 2010 *Race to the Top* initiative.
The significance of this problem cannot be overstated. A majority of the 14 million students in public schools continue to fare poorly on national and statewide performance assessments and many eventually tune out or drop out of school (Wise, 2008). Dropout rates continue to climb each year, reaching 50% and higher in some urban areas (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2008). Large school enrollment figures have added stress to the educational system. Approximately 70% of American teens attend schools enrolling 1,000 or more students (Murray, 2008). This has resulted in a critical need for school improvement (Lee & Freidrich, 2007). If this problem is not addressed, the United States will continue to have growing numbers of people who do not possess the necessary reading, writing, speaking, listening, and mathematical application skills to succeed in work, college and careers.

Statistics on dropouts, failure rates, and low student achievement all underscore the poor conditions of most large urban high schools. For students, such schools commonly offer impersonal environments and irrelevant, watered-down courses. Advocates for smaller learning communities argue that these problems cannot be solved without fundamentally restructuring the schools. Drawing on the history of small alternative schools, and schools within schools, which have succeeded in creating more nurturing environments for students and their teachers, the notion of breaking large high schools into smaller units has found favor as a way to increase personalization, relevance and rigor of coursework, and teacher collaboration (Evan et al., 2006).

Smaller learning communities can be autonomous small schools; however, most SLCs operate within larger comprehensive high schools (Cater, 2005). Many policy makers view the reconstruction of high schools through the creation of SLCs as a step toward personalizing education and establishing the right conditions for enhanced student achievement (Wise, 2008).
According to Page, Layzer, Schimmenti, Bernstein and Horst (2002) the movement to develop smaller learning communities has emerged from a body of research and practice that seems to indicate, by a number of measures, the superiority of smaller schools. In 1996, the National Association of Secondary School Principals endorsed the SLC approach by publishing *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*, a manifesto calling for a greater level of personalization in education. In the absence of the resources necessary to build new, smaller schools, a variety of approaches have been developed to make large schools seem smaller (Felner, Seitsinger, Brand, Burns, & Bolton, 2007). According to Lee and Freidrich (2007) in many large U.S. high schools, SLCs have emerged as a reform measure purported to raise overall student achievement, to close the racial achievement gap and to personalize learning.

Over the last 20 years, one of the most consistent lessons learned is that the creation of a small learning environment at the secondary level is more complex than simply putting fewer students in the building (Felner et al., 2007). The structural and organizational changes found to be associated with the creation of effective SLCs are school/grade enrollments, class size, student–teacher ratios on teams or grades, number of students a teacher is responsible for across the day, instructional tracking/grouping, block scheduling, common planning time for teachers, strategic planning time for staff, span of classes covered by a team, and length of class periods and of the school day (Felner et al., 2007). As the creation of SLCs leads teachers to feel more effective, experience the climate of the school more positively, and raise their expectations of students, Felner et al. have found clear gains in a range of factors relating to student motivation, achievement, and adjustment.

**Purpose of Study**
The purpose of this descriptive case study was to understand the changes that have taken place as a result of implementation of SLC initiatives at the high school level within a particular school district in southeastern New England; and, more importantly, a better understanding of the process by which these changes have occurred. This was achieved by gaining an in-depth understanding of these processes from the different educators involved. The central phenomenon of this study was the SLC school change process, studied through the theoretical lens of social capital theory. The ultimate goal was to utilize this information to improve future SLC operations, certainly within the district under study, and, hopefully, through the sharing of research, beyond it.

Although the district’s SLC program had been an agent of high school change during recent years, this process was difficult and complex. This researcher sought to define the changes that took place and to understand how these changes occurred. This researcher evaluated the SLC high school reform process, through case study research, with the goal of developing future programmatic improvements.

Research Questions

- In what ways did high school attendance, suspension, retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data change from 2004 to 2012 for the school district under study?
- How have changes to existing practices been implemented since the inception of the SLC program?
- How do educators perceive the effectiveness of the SLC program?

Theoretical Framework
The SLC movement is a contemporary progressive educational reform strategy that has its theoretical foundation rooted in social capital theory, which has shown that social ties play a key role in both educational outcomes and school reforms (Coleman, 1988). Social capital theorists posit that school size has considerable impact on how students form social ties. Social capital refers to the intangible resources embedded within interpersonal relationships or social institutions.

Very broadly, social capital refers to the social relationships among people that enable productive outcomes (Szreter as cited in Schuller, Baron & Field, 2000). Social networks are the foundation of social capital. Social networks simultaneously capture individuals and social structure, thus serving as a vital conceptual link between actions and structural constraints, between micro- and macro-level analyses, and between relational and collective dynamic processes (Lin, Cook & Burt, 2001). One needs to be cognizant of the dual significance of the structural features of the social networks and the resources embedded in the networks as defining elements of social capital. The term social capital refers to those stocks of social trust, norms, and networks that people can draw upon to solve common problems.

There are many possible representations of social capital. Social capital can be seen in terms of five dimensions: first, networks-lateral associations that vary in density and size, and occur among both individuals and groups; second, reciprocity-expectation that in short or long term kindness and services will be returned; third, trust-willingness to take initiatives (or risk) in a social context based on assumption that others will respond as expected; fourth, social norms-the unwritten shared values that direct behavior and interaction; and fifth, personal and collective efficacy-the active and willing engagement of citizens within participative community (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Paxton, 2002). These five dimensions
manifest themselves in various combinations and shape the interaction amongst the members of
a group, organization, community, society or simply network and can be studied through various
perspectives.

Social capital resides in the relations and not in the individuals themselves (Coleman,
1988). Social capital is context dependent and takes many different interrelated forms, including
obligations within a group, trust, intergenerational closure, norms, and sanctions with underlying
assumption that the relationships between individuals are durable and subjectively felt
(Bourdieu, 1986). The relationships themselves form the complex web of interactions and
communications (Fukuyama, 1995; Lin, 2001; Putnam, 1995).

Social capital generally takes the form of trust, social norms and networks of civic
engagement (Putnam, 1995). Putnam contends that social organization (including trust, norms
and networks) can facilitate coordinated action, and thereby improve a member’s quality of life
or the quality of programs meant to serve the social good. Coleman (1990) considers social
capital to be productive, in the sense that it enables people to achieve certain ends that they
would not be able to achieve independently.

Trust, a moral resource and an asset that increases rather than decreases with use and
time, tends to increase when agreements and activities are embedded within larger structures of
personal relations and social networks (Granovetter, 1985). Structures of personal relations are
similar to Putnam’s norms of reciprocity, as they include organizational and communication
norms explicitly established among colleagues and inculcated through socialization and
education. Examples of norms which build trust are: collaboration, flexibility, respect for the
community, attention to process, dialogue, reflection and relationship-building. They can also
include unspoken expectations between community members, and/or colleagues.
Networks signify patterns of communication among actors within systems and they connect actors in relationships (Knoke, 1990). Generally, the stronger networks are in a society or organization, the more likely that citizens or members will cooperate for mutual benefit. This positive result of social networks emerges because networks foster reciprocity, facilitate communication, increase the cost to defectors, and increase trust and willingness to collaborate (Putnam, 1995). It is helpful to recognize the distinction between horizontal networks, those formed between people of equivalent status or power, and vertical networks, those formed between people of unequal status of power (Putnam, 1995). Both are necessary to make social change, but they influence the change process in different ways. The former usually increases the breadth of support among constituents, and the latter connects those with less power (e.g., local community members) to those with more power to make change (e.g., policymakers).

It is also important to recognize the relationship of networks to learning communities, which might be described as a progression from loose interactions among people to networks as formalized, trusting relationships based on common interests. The ideal state of which can be described as formalized learning communities. Formalized learning communities are structured networks of people based on common interests, with trust and commitment to working together; using shared and agreed upon norms to meet established goals, which may require third party facilitation (Putnam, 1995).

In the context of education, social capital in the forms of parental expectations, obligations, and social networks that exist within the family, school, and community are important for student success. These variations in academic success can be attributed to parents' expectations and obligations for educating their children; to the network and connections among families whom the school serves; to the disciplinary and academic climate at school; and to the
cultural norms and values that promote student efforts (Coleman, 1988). The concept of social capital is a useful theoretical construct for explaining the disparities in students' educational performance among different schools, communities, states or even nations.

Coleman (1988) examined and utilized the theoretical concept of social capital in an analysis of dropouts from high school. He pointed out that the concept of social capital as a resource for action is one way of introducing social structure into the rational action paradigm. He examined three forms of social capital: obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms. Obligations and expectations can be conceived of as credit that people hold that can be cashed when necessary. This form of social capital depends on two elements, trustworthiness of the social environment, which means that obligations will be repaid, and the actual extent of obligations held. Information channels provide appropriate information as an important basis for action. Social norms provide the criteria for rewarding or sanctioning individual actions.

Coleman (1988) described the role of closure in the social structure in facilitating the first and third of these forms of social capital and provided an analysis of the effect of the lack of social capital available to high school sophomores on dropping out of school before graduation. He discovered that social capital within and outside the family, as well as in the adult community surrounding the school showed evidence of considerable value in reducing the probability of students dropping out of high school. Coleman’s study highlights the importance of social capital in educating youth.

At the institutional level, disciplinary climate and academic norms established by the school community and the mutual trust between home and school are major forms of social capital. These forms of social capital have been shown to have a significant impact, not only on
creating a learning and caring school climate, but also on improving the quality of schooling and reducing inequality of learning outcomes between social-class groups. SLC efforts are all geared toward personalizing education, grounded in social capital theory, to help establish the right conditions for enhanced student achievement. This case study describes the ways and extent to which the SLC organizational culture and structure contribute (or does not contribute) to social capital-building.
Chapter 2: Review of Selected Literature

The literature review is broken into three main subsections that trace the Smaller Learning Communities movement back to earlier research on school size: (1) background on the argument for smaller schools, (2) research concerning the implementation of SLCs as a high school reform measure, and (3) the major challenges that typically accompany this type of reform and suggestions for future study.

Small Schools

Throughout the course of the 20th century American public secondary schools have become progressively larger. This change would seem to suggest that educational researchers have found that larger schools convey beneficial effects upon students. In fact, they have found precisely the opposite. The selected literature in this section will summarize many of the key empirical studies regarding student outcomes in attitude, achievement, and voluntary participation that demonstrate positive impact of smaller school size.

The historical trend toward larger organizational units for schooling in the United States has been described by Guthrie (1979) as a result of arguments for economic efficiency, fiscal equity, and the provision of enhanced educational benefits for students. From 1930-1970 mean school size increased fivefold, from less than 100 students to 550, and the average secondary school increased to 1,000 students. After enrollments peaked in 1970, consolidation was a mechanism for reducing the cost of schools which were operating below capacity and as a means of achieving more fiscal equity for school districts, and by extension, schools (Fowler & Wahlberg, 1991). Vastly larger high schools are now the common experience of urban and suburban students who compose the majority of high school students in public education.
During the past 40 years, as the average size of high schools has continued to increase dramatically, the arguments in favor of smaller school settings have grown more numerous (Bernstein, Millsap, Schimmenti, & Page, 2008). Although definitions of large and small high schools vary from study to study, existing research suggests that small schools are more effective than large schools on a variety of outcomes including student academic achievement and student personalization. A progression of studies beginning in the late 1980s and continuing to date strongly suggests that small schools are more productive and effective than large ones. Moreover, school size is suggested to exert a unique influence on students' academic accomplishments, with a strong inverse relationship linking the two: the larger the school, the lower the students' achievement levels. The research on various indicators of student achievement, involving large numbers of students, schools, and districts, indicates that students may learn more and better in small schools. (Lee & Smith, 1995).

There is significant evidence to demonstrate that large comprehensive high schools do not serve the needs of a growing number of students (Legters, 1999; Murray, 2008) and often exacerbate discipline and attendance issues. Several large-scale studies have compared student performance in large and small schools (Fowler & Wahlberg, 1991; Heck & Mayor, 1993; Huang & Howley, 1993; Lee & Smith, 1997). Their findings reveal that students at all grade levels learn more in smaller schools than in large schools. Several researchers have also examined middle-grades schools with interdisciplinary teams and found that students in this type of small learning community outperform similar students in schools without such organizational arrangements (Felner et al., 2007; Lee & Smith, 1993; Lee & Smith, 2000; Mertens & Flowers, 2003).
Research conducted over the past 25 years has demonstrated that students who attend smaller schools often receive a better education compared to students attending large ones (Raywid, 1999). Mary Anne Raywid, a noted small school researcher, points out that the superiority of smaller school environments has been established with clarity and at a level of confidence rare in the annals of education research. Strong evidence that smaller schools can narrow the achievement gap between white, middle-class/affluent students and ethnic minority and poor students has led to the creation of hundreds of smaller schools in large cities around the United States, including Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Seattle, Dallas, and others (Murray, 2008). Many of these schools have been in operation long enough that they have been the focus of research projects. The findings have led to the planning, creation and implementation of many more of these small, urban and suburban learning communities.

Raywid (1999) argues that many find instructional reform of virtually any sort to be contingent upon small school size. In some cities, small schools have also come to be associated with a powerful form of accountability, as large failing schools are phased out and replaced by several separate and independent small schools. As the research attests, smallness has been interwoven with many of today's reform themes, and with other features and conditions currently recommended for schools (Raywid, 1999).

Another noted small school researcher, Kathleen Cotton, found that all ten of the studies exploring this topic that she reviewed in 1990’s reveal differences either favoring or greatly favoring small schools. She noted the following in her review of this literature (Cotton, 1996):

- Children and teens who attend personalized schools have a higher rate of school attendance. Not only do students in smaller schools have higher attendance rates than
students in large schools, but students who change from large to small schools generally exhibit improvement in attendance.

- Children and teens who attend personalized secondary schools drop out at a lower rate than in large, impersonal schools. Measured either as dropout rates or graduation rates, the holding power of small schools is considerably greater than that of large schools.
- Children and teens who attend personalized schools display wiser and better behavior and get in less trouble.
- Small schools have lower rates of negative social behavior, including classroom disruptions, vandalism, fights, theft, substance abuse, and gang membership.
- The social behavior of students from low income families and students of color is even more positively impacted by small schools than that of other students.
- Students from low incomes families and students of color in particular have considerably more positive attitudes about school and learning in small schools.
- Levels of extracurricular participation are significantly higher in small schools. Students in small schools are much more likely to participate in extracurricular activities, which boost confidence levels. In a large high school, only a relatively few students get to take part. Students in small schools are involved in a greater variety of activities, and they derive more satisfaction from their participation than do students in large schools. In small schools there were few students who did not participate in at least one activity.

Lee and Smith conducted a significant study (cited 466 times in the literature) in 1995 titled *Effects of High School Restructuring and Size on Early Gains in Achievement and Engagement*. This study assessed the impact on tenth grade students of attending high schools whose practices are consistent with the school restructuring movement. The general purpose was
to investigate how reform practices that are consistent with the school-restructuring movement
are taking hold in the nation's high schools and to evaluate how these organizational practices
affect students' learning. The authors used base-year NELS (National Educational Longitudinal
Study of 1988) data (Lee and Smith, 1993) which resulted in a sample of 11,794 sophomores in
820 high schools.

The results from Lee and Smith’s studies revealed that students' gains in achievement and
engagement were significantly higher in schools with restructuring practices and lower in
schools without reforms. Higher and more socially equitable engagement and achievement were
consistently associated with smaller high schools. Results provided empirical support for a broad
policy of school reform that would move schools toward a communal organizational form and
away from the bureaucratic form that has characterized the comprehensive high school for over a
century. They also suggested that schools should target their reform efforts to a modest number
of communal practices - practices that probably should be adopted neither singly, nor serially,
nor in large number to showcase a school's superficial commitment to reform. Most importantly,
the results from this selection of small school research, including Lee and Smith’s seminal
article, provided solid support for the movement toward SLCs.

Smaller Learning Communities

The movement to develop SLCs has emerged from a body of advocacy research and
practice that seems to indicate, by a number of measures, the superiority of smaller schools. At
least since the 1950s, there has been a debate about school size with both larger and smaller
school proponents advancing social and economic arguments to support their views. For
example, larger schools have been hypothesized to provide more opportunities for advanced
courses and to be more cost-efficient, whereas smaller schools have been expected to offer
greater individualized learning for each student.

Articles about the impressive benefits of smaller schools continue to be written, however,
for many people in and outside the education profession, the concept of SLCs is nothing new
(Murray, 2008). As a result, many education reformers strongly support creating smaller schools.
Still, as Raywid (1998) points out, although research does support the benefits of smaller
schools, there are also a considerable number of large schools that are already functioning.
Consequently, schools turn toward the creation of within-school subunits. By breaking large
schools into smaller subunits, practitioners hope to reduce the experienced size of school, despite
the actual building size.

Lee and Smith’s seminal 1995 study provides significant empirical evidence in support of
SLCs. Lee and Smith’s (1997) continued research suggests that the ideal high school, defined in
terms of effectiveness (i.e., learning), enrolls between 600 and 900 students. This, coupled with
some of the other prior research conducted on school size, attracted the attention of the United
States Department of Education, who started awarding sizable grants to large high schools across
the country who were implementing SLCs during the early 2000s.

The US Department of Education’s Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) Grants
Program assists large high schools, of more than 1,000 students with funding to implement and
enhance SLCs. Although the need for SLCs has been established in the literature, what
accurately defines an SLC? Cotton (2001) defines a small learning community as “any
separately defined, individualized learning unit within a larger school setting … [wherein]
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” (p. 7). SLCs are sometimes referred to schools-within-
a school (SWAS), schools-within-a-building (SWAB), clusters, pods, academies, or houses (Cotton, 2001). Raywid (1999) noted ambiguity in identifying specific elements of SLCs, as the organizational structures vary among schools, depending on districts’ configurations. Regardless of the terminology, small instructional settings are conducive to fostering a sense of connectedness to school.

Authorized in 2001 under the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, the SLC program was designed to provide local education agencies with funds to plan, implement, or expand SLCs in large high schools of 1,000 students or more (Bernstein et al., 2008). The SLC legislation allows local education agencies to implement the most suitable structure or combination of structures and strategies to meet their needs. SLC structures include career academies, freshman academies, house plans, schools-within-a-school structures and magnet schools.

- **Career Academies** are one type of school-within-a-school that organizes curricula around one or more careers or occupations. They integrate academic and occupation-related classes.

- **Freshman Academies** (also called *Ninth Grade Academies*) are designed to bridge middle and high school. They respond to the high ninth-grade dropout rate in some high schools.

- **House Plans** are composed of students assembled across all grades or by grade level (e.g., all eleventh and twelfth graders) with their own disciplinary policy, student activity program, student government, and social activities.
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{Schools-Within-a-School} break large schools into individual schools, which are multiage and may be theme-oriented; they are separate and autonomous units with their own personnel, budgets, and programs.
  \item \textbf{Magnet Schools} generally have a core focus (e.g., math and science, the arts). They usually draw their students from the entire district.

  The most common SLC strategies include block/alternate scheduling, career clusters, pathways and majors, adult advocates/mentors, teacher advisory programs, teacher teams and teacher common planning time.

  \item \textbf{Block Scheduling:} Class time is extended to blocks of 80–90 minutes, allowing teachers to provide individual attention and to work together in an interdisciplinary fashion on a greater variety of learning activities.
  \item \textbf{Career Clusters, Pathways and Majors:} These are broad areas that identify academic and technical skills students need as they transition from high school to postsecondary education and employment.
  \item \textbf{Adult Advocates or Mentors:} Trained adult advocates meet with students individually or in small groups on a regular basis over several years, providing support and academic and personal guidance.
  \item \textbf{Teacher Advisory Program:} The homeroom period is changed to a teacher advisory period, assigning teachers to a small number of students for whom they are responsible over three or four years of high school.
  \item \textbf{Teacher Teams:} Academic teaming organizes teachers across subjects so that teacher teams share responsibility for curriculum, instruction, evaluation, and discipline for the same group of 100 to 150 students.
\end{itemize}
These SLC strategies can complement SLC structures or stand-alone (Bernstein et al., 2008). Although SLCs can take a variety of forms like the ones described above, it is important to remember that they all share the common goal of making the high school experience for all students more personalized.

The SLC movement has only emerged in the last 15 years, and research on it is far more limited than the literature on small schools. Much of the literature consists of case studies and evaluations of individual schools. Fewer studies focus on large numbers of schools, and very few focus on a whole-school model in which all students are included in some form of SLC, rather than the more limited model in which only a subset of students participate in an SLC. In the 2008 U.S. Department of Education’s Implementation Study of Smaller Learning Communities Final Report, the authors grouped SLC-related studies according to the type of SLC strategy employed. Certain strategies, such as freshman transition programs and academic teaming, are typically used in combination with other strategies, which means that no published research is available addressing these strategies in isolation. Findings by type of SLC strategy are as follows (Berntsein et al., 2008):

- **Career Academies**: Academies organize curricula around one or more careers or occupations. The most rigorous research using an experimental design has been conducted on this strategy. Studies found moderate positive economic outcomes. For example, career academy graduates exhibit better employment outcomes, including earnings, work attendance, and work performance, than other graduates.

- **Houses**: House plans assign students within the high school to groups of a few hundred each across grades. Each house has its own discipline policies, student activity program, student government, and social activities. Individual houses, however, are less
autonomous than school-within-a-school programs. Research on this strategy, unfortunately, has been quite limited.

- **Schools-within-a-school (SWAS/SWS):** These are multi-grade, separate, autonomous individual subunits organized around a theme, each with its own personnel, budget and program. Less rigorous non-experimental studies have found modest improvement in academic, behavioral, attitudinal and process outcomes for school-within-a-school students.

- **Magnet schools:** These have a core focus (e.g., math and science, or arts), are typically selective, and usually draw students from the entire district. Consequently, study findings of improvement in outcomes are potentially confounded by selection bias. Much of the research on magnet schools has focused on their effectiveness as a desegregation tool, but some of it has focused on outcomes of interest for SLCs. Some studies did find indications of greater student achievement and greater educational equity in magnet schools.

- **Alternative scheduling:** This is a strategy for changing the way time is used in school by lengthening class periods and altering daily and/or annual schedules. Studies reviewed yielded insufficient evidence to support generalizations about effects on students. For example, a study of North Carolina’s implementation of block scheduling yielded very modest effect sizes on student test scores.

The U.S. Department of Education has clearly outlined its criteria for schools seeking SLC grant funds, and has contracted with Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) to provide technical assistance to schools in receipt of its funding. NWREL works closely with several regional educational laboratories and one comprehensive center, ensuring
national capacity in providing services to SLC Grant funded schools. The Education Alliance at Brown University (currently the Center for Secondary School Redesign - CSSR) is the technical assistance provider in the Northeast, and provided assistance to the district of this study in the design and implementation of its SLC structures and strategies. As previously stated, SLC Grant funding was awarded to the district under study prior to the start of the 2007-08 school year.

Transforming a traditionally structured large high school into a SLC requires more than funding and reallocation of district resources. According to Diana Oxley (2008) the following five domains of practice are essential in transforming high schools into SLCs: interdisciplinary teaching and learning teams; rigorous, relevant curriculum and instruction; inclusive program and instructional practices; SLC-based continuous program improvement; and building and district support for SLCs.

The literature of SLC movement, from 1984 to present substantiates the validity of SLCs in secondary school redesign. Hundreds of SLCs have been created in urban areas, including Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Ohio. Smaller environments facilitate the opportunities for collegiality among teachers, personalized teacher-student relationships, and curricula redesign (Cotton, 1998; Cotton, 2001; Raywid, 1999). The numerous recommendations and essential components prescribed to effectively transform high schools into SLCs requires ongoing reevaluation of each SLCs problematic areas and best practices, to ensure forward momentum in transforming schools into viable, constructive learning environments that will prepare students for lifelong active participation in an ever-changing global society.

The research articles described in this review of selected literature can be characterized as a progression of studies that built upon Lee and Smith’s (1995) work and are a representative
sample of some of the key research that has been conducted on SLCs. Much of these peer-reviewed research articles on SLCs come in the form of quantitative or mixed methods research that attempts to look at school size in relation to student academic achievement. There is also some interesting and relevant qualitative research on small high schools that provides some provides significant reason for interest in this reform strategy.

Several studies have found that SLCs are associated with improved student achievement (Lee & Friedrich, 2007; Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Ort, 2002; Lee & Smith, 1995). There is also evidence that small schools promote more equitable access to academically demanding courses, more equitable gains in achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Lee & Smith, 1995), and lower dropout rates (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). Other studies have also found that smaller schools are associated with personally supportive and trusting contexts for students (Kahne, Sporte, de la Torre & Easton, 2008; Shear et al., 2008). Many quantitative studies have used national or state survey and academic achievement data sources to evaluate different aspects or outcomes of SLC-related practices (Armstead, Bessell, Sembiante, & Plaza, 2010; Coldarci, 2006; Felner et al., 2007; Howley & Howley, 2004; Kahne et al., 2008; Lee & Friedrich, 2007; Lee & Smith, 1995; Lee & Smith, 1997). The studies that utilized national or state survey and/or academic achievement data sources were significant in their depth and scope and have been an important part of the emergence of the SLC movement as a reform strategy. The study by Shear et al. (2008) was part of a national mixed-methods evaluation of SLCs that included student and educator surveys, case studies, collection of classroom student work artifacts, teacher assignment data and district academic achievement data. There were also two quantitative field-based studies that utilized convenience samples to study the impact of SLC reforms in certain schools (Davis, Chang, Andrzejewski, & Poirier, 2010; Ready & Lee, 2008).
Results from many of these studies show that SLC strategies have the potential to promote learning environments that are more personalized and that encourage students to work to higher standards; however they must be taken in the context of the typically slow pace of significant educational reform (Darling-Hammond at al., 2002; Felner et al., 2007; Lee & Friedrich, 2007; Oxley & Kassisieh, 2008; Ready & Lee, 2008). Despite the many tasks facing large high schools and the challenges posed by limited budgets and incompatibilities with district systems, many SLC schools are quickly able to establish strong and supportive school climates with a focus on improving student academic achievement (Honig, 2009; Levine, 2011). The Gates Foundation study tells us that more evidence is needed concerning the long-term outcomes for students in SLCs and the feasibility of creating small schools at scale, and therefore the degree to which this strategy is likely to support the ultimate goal of promoting educational excellence and equity for all high school students (Shear et al., 2008).

Not all findings regarding the impact of SLCs are positive, however. Armstead et al. (2010) in their study of SLC high schools in Florida found that the freshman academy was inconsistent and did not provide a personalized learning experience for ninth graders and that the structure of high-stakes testing severely restricts remedial students from participating in SLCs. Wasley et al. (2000), as well as Kahne et al. (2008), studied small schools in Chicago and found enhanced engagement, but no consistent impact on student achievement. Similarly, results from the national evaluation of the Bill and Melinda Gates small schools initiative are mixed. In this study, Shear et al. (2008) found evidence of a positive school climate, especially in terms of increased personalization for students and increased common focus for teachers; they also found continuing shortcomings related to instruction two and three years into the SLC reform. In addition, Davis et al. (2010) found that structural change does not guarantee classrooms will be
learner centered. Without changing pedagogy and curricula, the benefits of behavioral engagement and supportive relationships erode.

Overall, the most recent research on the implementation of SLCs tentatively points to some modest positive findings in terms of academic, behavioral, and attitudinal outcomes (Ready & Lee, 2008). Because of the potentially confounding effects of factors such as student self-selection and maturation, more rigorous studies employing carefully chosen comparison groups using longitudinal data are needed (Armstead et al., 2010; Felner et al., 2007; Kahne et al., 2008). Moreover, there is a need for more systematic studies of the processes underlying school change; these will shed more light on the changes in proximal outcomes responsible for subsequent changes in student performance and behavior (Lee & Friedrich, 2007; Lee & Smith, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1995).

There are many quantitative research studies both within and outside of this review that study the differences between large and small schools. The topic of small high school reform through the formation of SLCs has also been studied in a similar fashion from a quantitative standpoint. Some of the mixed method studies on this topic have proven to be quite helpful, as they brought some aspects of qualitative research into the discussion. Of particular focus from a qualitative standpoint have been the ways in which ecological changes that create smaller schools within large ones (teacher and student teams and other personalization strategies) may engage diverse, socially and economically disadvantaged students in middle and high schools, to improve academic performance, reduce dropout rates, enhance developmental outcomes, and close equity gaps (Galletta & Ayayla, 2008; Honig, 2009; Jaffe-Walter, 2008; Lee et al., 2000).

A significant challenge for researchers in this area is to demonstrate that students achieve positive gains through participation in an SLC compared to what would have happened if they
had not been in the program (Armstead et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2010; Felner et al., 2007). This challenge demands careful statistical and design controls to rule out alternative explanations to changes in student outcomes (Ready & Lee, 2008; Shear et al., 2008). Carefully designed impact studies of this type, coupled with intensive examination of the factors underlying potential changes, are needed to help districts and schools make difficult decisions about school restructuring efforts, especially in the context of dwindling economic resources (Levine, 2011).

Challenges & Implications for Further Study

The SLC movement has resulted in a number of strategies for making schools smaller or, at least, feel smaller. For example, smaller can mean freestanding small schools in their own buildings with their own principals, schools within larger schools, or redesigned large schools containing several smaller, independent schools. More specifically, SLC teams can facilitate opportunities for students, teachers, parents, and community members to build the relationships needed to ensure the successful academic and social development of all students (Davis et al., 2010). As part of the SLC ethos, students are encouraged to make connections with their teachers and their peers and to develop a sense of school belonging. In this way, SLC reform is also aimed at enhancing students’ relational engagement. The theoretical framework of social capital theory, within the context of SLCs, portrays the mechanisms through which various features of small school reform are thought to promote desired contexts for students and teachers. It also details how these contexts, in the presence of district, state, and federal influence, can promote curricular change and desired outcomes.

The SLC model calls for substantial changes in how schools do their work. In SLC schools, problems can arise from conflicting needs with respect to many issues including enrollment, principal support and administrative turnover, staff conflict and teacher turnover, bell
schedules and cafeteria space. Other challenging issues include the possibility of inadvertently creating hierarchies and power-struggles, as well as effectively segregating students as, over time, students choose some units over others, based on academic demand or existing membership.

As previously discussed throughout this literature review, research on the factors that contribute to effective implementation of SLCs consists of different types of evidence, relying heavily on a body of research around small schools. For example, Raywid (1999) attributes the success of small schools to strong commitment on the part of teachers, a coherent mission on the part of school administrators, and a relative level of autonomy for the smaller school units. Ancess (1997), in a report offering strategies on how to launch small schools, cites commitment on the part of staff, students, and parents and sufficient financial resources, among others, as important components critical to their success.

In her 2001 review of literature on smaller learning communities, Kathleen Cotton, of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, cites several factors, in addition to broad community support, that are critical to successful SLC implementation. Among factors mentioned are autonomy, programmatic separateness and distinctiveness, and the self-selection of students and teachers. Other key factors identified include a mission or vision supported by careful planning; schools - both students and staff - need to know where they are going, why, and how they are going to get there. Implementation must be accompanied by professional development to support teachers in the transition to SLCs and in developing skills of collaboration. Finally, efforts to sustain support over a period of time are critical so that implementation may be thorough rather than shallow (Cotton, 2001).
Challenges to creating SLCs arise from both districts and schools. District reluctance to change can undermine schools’ efforts. In schools, problems can arise from logistical issues such as bell schedules or cafeteria space. Wasley and Lear (2001) cite several other issues, including enrollment or student assignment procedures, principal support and turnover, and staff conflict and turnover. If principals are reluctant to share power, there is likely to be conflict with teachers and sub-unit heads (Raywid, 2002). Another challenge is the possibility of inadvertently creating hierarchies that segregate or resegregate students as they gradually choose some units over others, based on academic demand or existing membership (Ready & Lee, 2008). It has also been noted that implementation of SLCs may require increases in budget, planning time, or staff in order to be successful (Lee & Friedrich, 2007; Oxley, 2007; Page et al., 2002).

The research reviewed in these studies also suggests an exciting possibility: in spite of the multiple obstacles, SLCs may create sufficiently different conditions that they improve graduation and drop-out rates and improve students’ sense of being cared for in schools. One of the most pressing needs is for research that demonstrates impact on students over a longer time frame (Felner et al., 2007; Kahne et al., 2008; Lee & Friedrich, 2007). If policymakers and stakeholders were to remain focused on the theories of action underlying SLCs, and if research could further illuminate the possibilities, pitfalls, and pathways to improvement associated with those theories, both policymakers and educators might be able to improve on the emerging results from the earlier rounds of SLC studies (Levine, 2010). There should be continued research on whether, or how high, SLCs can lift students’ standardized test scores and other valued outcomes, including closing the achievement gap. Given the significant investment of human and financial resources into this reform, and signs of progress shown to date, it would be a shame if researchers did not continue this as a focus of further study.
It is critical that the United States finds a way to improve the educational system so that all students attending large public high schools are college and career ready. An example of where this problem prevails is in a large suburban public school district in southeastern New England where there are two high schools implementing SLC initiatives as reform efforts to increase academic rigor and enhance student personalization. Evaluating the effectiveness of these programs will add to the growing body of research that can help to inform practice around SLCs. This literature review has focused on SLCs by examining the purpose and historical context of their implementation. Ultimately this researcher would like to continue to expand the body of qualitative research around SLC reform.

This case study approach is most useful for this practice based researcher as it is a study that has practical and immediate significance for the school district under study. Some examples from the selected literature review seem particularly relevant when considering this approach. Levine (2010) conducted a longitudinal, comparative case study that identified four potential advantages of interdependent SLCs. Honig’s (2009) study was particularly meaningful in that it was a multi-year, qualitative, comparative case study that looked at how central office administrators participate in the implementation of SLCs. Given the nascent stage of research in this area, empirical elaborations of central office administrators’ participation can help future researchers better determine whether learning outcomes stem from the design of the initiatives or from how central office administrators participate in their implementation. Recognizing the value of this, this researcher has included central office administrators as part of the purposeful selection of focus group participants. Lee, Smerdon, Alfed-Liro, & Brown (2000) studied curriculum and social relations in large and small high schools. Their research questions around social relations are fruitful and compelling: What are school members' views about why social
relationships (particularly between teachers and students) develop as they do in large and small schools? How do various school members see these relationships as influencing students' academic development? These questions are closely related to this study, particularly in light of all of the challenges surrounding SLC implementation.

This research project is positioned to add to the body of literature around SLC practices. With the data gathered from this qualitative, single-case study, the researcher analyzed perceptions of educators around their SLC practices in a large public high school setting with the eventual aim of improving educational methodologies and approaches. Looking toward the future, the expectations of America’s educators must change in both theory and practice. Although moving in uncharted directions can certainly cause angst, this new direction may also lead to success and achievement for students. These are only some of the potential gains that learning more about SLC practices can provide for both the students and educators of this nation.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

Restatement of research questions:

- In what ways did high school attendance, suspension, retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data change from 2004 to 2012 for the school district under study?
- How have changes to existing practices been implemented since the inception of the SLC program?
- How do educators perceive the effectiveness of the SLC program?

The goal in asking these research questions, and moving toward a qualitative research approach, was to develop a better understanding of the specificity and particularity of SLC program implementation. These process questions were related to one another and sought to determine the actual changes brought about by the SLC program, and beyond that, to explain the process, perspectives, and problems associated with the implementation of these changes. This researcher was concerned with the perspectives of those involved with the program and the meaning of the experience to them; therefore this qualitative analyst provided narrative chronicles, quotations and diagrams (a visual representation of the district’s SLC process and relationships among stakeholders). Another significant goal in using this approach was to ultimately be able to make improvements and recommendations as the implementation process continues.

Research Tradition

The basic principles of a case study evaluation were relevant to this project to analyze the development and actual implementation of the SLC program in the real-world setting of a public
school district. According to Yin (2012) the case study method is a useful way of evaluating an important initiative, particularly when it takes place in a real-world setting. This involved elements of case study research such as describing the objectives and planned activities around them, training and interaction among participants, the extent of participation, and problems encountered in implementing objectives. As a qualitative evaluator, this researcher aimed to look at the program holistically, seeing each aspect within the context of the whole, and was concerned about the influence of social context to better understand prior history as it influenced current events.

The researcher utilized a descriptive single case study design (Yin, 2009, p. 50). According to Yin (2012) this type of case study is used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real life context in which it occurred. The rationale for this design was derived directly from the fact that both of the two large high schools in the district were implementing the same SLC interventions. By narrowing the study down to one case, the qualitative evaluator was able to bring into focus all the details, idiosyncrasies, and complexities of it. The following process occurred over a six month period during the 2013-14 school year: (a) initial archival document and data analysis, (b) selection of purposeful sample, (b) focus group interview, (c) transcription of data, (d) coding and transfer of data to matrices, (e) data analysis, (f) identifying results, and (g) asserting conclusions.

**Research Procedures**

**Participants.** This study included a purposeful selection, with voluntary participation of teachers and administrators. This qualitative evaluation looked at small subsets of these groups from both high schools as well as central office. Participants included ten educators (teachers and administrators) who have been involved in the SLC process with the purpose of understanding
their perceptions of it. Participants included two central office administrators including the superintendent and assistant superintendent. High school participants included two principals, two assistant principals, three teachers and a guidance counselor. The following describes the participants with a brief background on each to reflect the reasons for their purposeful selection:

- The superintendent has been in the district for over fourteen years as a Technology Director, a Middle School Principal and as Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Administration. He was a key contributor to the creation of SLCs in the district and wrote a good portion of the grant.

- The assistant superintendent has been in the district for five years and has had significant involvement in SLC project support.

- One high school principal has been in the district for eight years in this position and was involved in writing the SLC grant and creating the Freshman Academies at the high schools.

- The other high school principal has been in the district for twenty years and is the Technical Studies Administrator for the district. He has experience in the district as a teacher and Freshman Academy Housemaster.

- One assistant principal has been in the district for twenty years as a health teacher, Freshman Academy Housemaster and now Assistant Principal. He has experience working in both high schools.

- The other assistant principal has been a Freshman Academy Housemaster for seven years.
All three of the teachers have worked in the district prior to the creation of SLCs. Two of the teachers were SLC Site Coordinators for the last five years. The other teacher has taught both in the Freshman Academy and outside of it.

The guidance counselor has been in the district for over 20 years and has been a Freshman Academy counselor since the inception of the SLC program.

**Recruitment and access.** The setting of this research was a suburban school district with two large high schools in southeastern New England; the participants of the study were high school staff, administrators, and central office administrators (with IRB approval prior to engaging the participants). Mills (2007) summarizes quite aptly, that ethical considerations in research basically involve doing the right thing through the entirety of the project. Creswell (2009) describes this as “the researchers need to protect research participants; develop trust with them; promote the integrity of the research; guard against misconduct and impropriety that might reflect on the organizations and institutions; and cope with new challenging problems” (p. 87).

Ethical considerations for this study included securing school district permission to conduct the research and making certain to include a comprehensive signed informed consent of all research participants.

Mertens (2007) calls attention to the importance of social and cultural sensitivity in relation to the ethics of research. This manifested itself in SLC case study evaluation interviews regarding decisions around which voices were to be included and excluded. It also required consideration of the social relationships and power inequities in the processes of planning, conducting and reporting research. This required sensitivity to the researcher’s role within the district and with regard to the SLC program. Also, in the interpretation of data, the researcher was certain to provide an accurate account of the information, including the debriefing of
participants as well as checking the accuracy of the data across data sources. While writing and disseminating the research it was important for the researcher to remain unbiased and to ensure that the results of the research would not be misused to the advantage of one group or another.

Data collection. Primary qualitative data collection was centered on key educators’ perceptions regarding the climate of the high school as it relates to the SLC program goals through interviews and document analysis. There were three main sources of data: historical quantitative statistical analysis, historical qualitative document analysis, and a focus group interview. The primary dataset was the information gleaned from the focus group. This qualitative evaluator began analysis early in the data collection phase; analysis was an ongoing process. Initial data collection was the historical quantitative statistical analysis and the historical qualitative document analysis. The historical quantitative statistical analysis included pre and post SLC intervention data points collected from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, including attendance, suspension, retention, graduation, drop-out, and post high school plan rates. The historical qualitative document analysis included five years of independent evaluations of the district’s SLC program conducted for the federally mandated Annual Performance Report. Data from these two sources informed the interview questions for the primary data source, the focus group.

The primary data collection source was information garnered from focus group interviews with school district personnel (teachers, counselors and administrators) involved in the SLC process. Interviews were designed to answer research questions regarding the specifics of the SLC process including the attitudes, opinions, positions and values displayed by these different groups of participants regarding the SLC program’s key topics, as well as the main
contradictions and obstacles met during SLC implementation. Focus group questions were rooted in concepts developed from social capital theory (see Appendix D).

Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended to help elicit stories about how the participants understood their SLC experiences. Interview data from the focus group was coded into themes. The researcher generated an initial list of coding categories from the SLC model and theoretical framework; this was modified within the course of the analysis as new categories emerged inductively (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First-cycle descriptive coding (or topic coding) was utilized to break down the data into discrete parts, closely examine them, and compare them for similarities and differences (Saldana, 2013). Second-cycle coding utilized pattern coding, or explanatory or inferential codes, to develop major themes from the data and reduce it into more meaningful units of analysis. MAXQDA 11 software was utilized to help code and analyze this qualitative data.

Data storage. Archival data was stored digitally, with appropriate disc back-up, and in hard-copy form. Focus group interviews were audio-recorded with permission of the participants. Transcriptions were saved electronically, with appropriate disc back-up, and in separate hard copy folders. Naming conventions were utilized to maintain participant confidentiality. Hard copy documentation also included: informed consent agreements, research notes from focus groups and any subsequent field notes, data analysis notes and documentation, and communications between the researcher and participants. Draft transcription and analysis of focus groups were presented to participants for validation. All hard copy files, notes, tapes and transcripts were kept in locked storage to protect and ensure confidentiality. All data will be maintained for the minimum data storage period of five years.
Data analysis. A conventional linear logic model was used to describe the events within this research project to link outcomes of this research to predicted events, which is appropriate, according to Yin (2009), for a program-level logic model. This linear model served to corroborate the theoretical framework and literature with teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of the SLC program. Initial anticipated themes included personalization, communication, collaboration, administrative supports and professional development. These were significant themes throughout the review of literature and supported by the theoretical framework of social capital theory. During each phase of data collection, the researcher compared findings to the existing theoretical framework and literature by aligning these paradigms. Through data analysis the researcher developed suggested improvements to current SLC practices.

*Figure 1 Linear Logic Model (Adapted from Yin, 2009)*

This figure is used to illustrate the linear progression “of matching empirically observed events (data collection) to theoretically predicted events” (Yin, 2009, p. 149). Through the theoretical lens of social capital theory, this logic model served to guide the researcher, while existing literature served to bolster the research. By triangulating data, the outcomes and conclusions were both sound and influential in improving SLC practices in the school district under research. In the “interaction of theory and data” there are clusters of meaning (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.248). The clusters or classifications of themes that emerged through
descriptive coding directly connected to the research questions and theoretical framework. For example, the researcher desired to know how changes to existing practices have been implemented since the inception of the SLC program and how educators perceive the effectiveness of the SLC program. Inherent in the research questions, one had to find out how leaders of the school manage this educational model and how teachers are supported. One also had to look to the habits of mind teachers employ, drawing from social capital theory.

Coding was conducted in a grounded approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994) whereby the researcher collected data first though archival document analysis (historical quantitative statistical analysis and historical qualitative document analysis) and then determined emergent themes. Basic demographic data on the school district under study was presented as a way to systematically describe the context of the study, both prior to SLC interventions (2004) and after them (2012). The researcher then analyzed the pre and post SLC student data, presenting it in both line graph and narrative form so the data was clearly presented and easy to understand; looking for patterns and/or differences in attendance, suspension, retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data. Each of these indicators (represented by percentages on the y-axis) was plotted on a line graph for each school year from 1997 through 2012 (represented by school years on the x-axis). This provided an excellent visual display of key SLC outcomes over a significant time period. According to Bernhardt (2004) line graphs give a lot of flexibility and are exceptionally good for showing a series of numbers over time. This type of descriptive analysis provided useful information about the entire high school age population over a fourteen year period.

The researcher then followed-up with a thorough document analysis of the last four independent evaluations of the district SLC program. These archival data documents represented
an excellent source for text data for this study; these were available to the researcher and ready for analysis without the necessary transcription that is required with observational or interview data (Creswell, 2012). The researcher recorded information, through note-taking, of all four years of the SLC independent evaluations with a narrative of overall and specific results.

The researcher then conducted, transcribed and coded semi-structured interviews through a focus group. Focus group questions were rooted in concepts developed from social capital theory (see Appendix D). The themes that emerged through the first two modes of data collection also informed the interview questions for the focus group. The anticipated themes included personalization, communication, collaboration, administrative supports and professional development. This single-category design focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2009) was structured around the information retrieved in the first two data collection measures. By bringing the themes to the surface, the researcher sought clarification and/or confirmation about the themes that arose through member checking. This researcher asked participants to judge the analysis and interpretation themselves by providing them with a summary of the analysis and asking them to critically comment upon the adequacy of the findings. Finally, from this information, the researcher was able to analyze the findings and validate the perceptions of educators’ experiences. The researcher was also able to determine educators’ needs and make suggestions for programmatic improvements in practice.

Trustworthiness and Credibility. Trustworthiness was addressed through the choice of research questions used to inform data collection efforts, explicit disclosure of researcher assumptions about the study and its merits toward filling in literature gaps on this subject and its potentially significant contributions to secondary education (Creswell, 2009). Provisions were made to address trustworthiness in this study by considering Guba’s (1981) four criteria:
credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. As a basic foundation to achieve trustworthiness this researcher ensured that: (a) the case study research questions were clearly written, propositions were provided, and the questions were substantiated; (b) case study design was appropriate for the research questions; (c) purposeful sampling strategies appropriate for case study were applied; (d) data was collected and managed systematically; and (e) the data was analyzed correctly. Triangulation of data sources and member checking also enhanced trustworthiness.

Credibility ascertains how confident the researcher is with the truth of the findings based on the research design, participants and context. Credibility of the research was addressed through multiple means. Researcher bias and familiarity were important considerations in this study. The nature of the researcher’s relationship with the participants varied. That is, the amount and the kind of rapport the researcher had with different people involved in the SLC process varied. However, given the researcher’s role as Director of Student Support Services and the SLC Project Director, it was likely that all of the participants understood that the researcher had a vested interest in improving the program. The researcher’s role also helped to gain access to the setting and participants (Maxwell, 2005).

There was the potential for participants to view the researcher as having a bias toward the program. The relationship was structured in a way that participants, through purposeful selection, understood that they were partners in the production of useful material (Maxwell, 2005). In addition, the researcher had already had a prolonged and intense exposure to the phenomenon under study in its context which contributes to credibility. Within that framework, rapport with participants had been established and multiple perspectives were collected and understood. This
also helped to reduce potential for social desirability responses in interviews. In addition, in this study the following strategies for credibility were employed:

**Reflexivity.** The researcher utilized a field journal to reflect on behavior and experience. The researcher also used a field journal to jot down observations during the interview.

**Member checking.** The researcher checked information gathered from the focus group to confirm its accuracy. Member checking involved sharing the researcher’s interpretations of data obtained from various sources with the participants from whom they were gathered and determining if they felt that the results were credible (Creswell, 2009). This check assisted the researcher in ensuring the validation as to the accuracy and credibility of the narratives. The researcher also used an audio recorder to capture the focus group interview information verbatim.

**Authority of the researcher.** The researcher carried out extensive research on conducting a proper and effective focus group to ensure the quality of the data. Applicability refers to the degree to which the findings can be applied to other contexts and settings or with other groups (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher paid careful attention to selecting a design appropriate to answer the research questions, and sought the same assurance of rigor in conducting the research and interpreting the results as is required in quantitative studies. With these issues being systematically addressed, this researcher had a solid basis for judging both the accuracy and the applicability of research findings.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) present the perspective of applicability in qualitative research by referring to transferability as the criterion against which applicability of qualitative data is assessed. The researcher presented sufficient descriptive data to allow comparison for future researchers, thereby addressing the issue of applicability.
According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), consistency refers to whether the findings would be consistent if the study were replicated with the same informants or in a similar context. The key to qualitative research is to learn from informants rather than control them. Variability is expected in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure consistency, the researcher conducted an in-depth semi-structured focus group, which was audio tape-recorded to ensure an audit trail. In addition, a dense description of all method of data collection and analysis will be explained. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that the emphasis of neutrality in qualitative research is shifted from the researcher to the data, so that rather than looking at the neutrality of the investigator, the neutrality of the data is considered.

**Ethical Considerations.** As this researcher collected data, the need to respect the participants was crucial. Ethical issues can arise during the focus group interviewing process of qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). As such, the researcher was sensitive to his interactions with the participants, how their statements were interpreted, how the interviewees were questioned, and how the information was shared.

Prior to conducting the focus, a letter of request was sent to each participant (Appendix B). The purpose of the study was explained to the prospective participants in the letter. Participants were asked to read and sign a consent form, which indicated that participation is voluntary, that participants may withdraw at any time, and that participants have the right to decline to answer any parts of the interview questions during the focus group. To assure confidentiality, participants were also told that their names and the names of their school will be changed.

The researcher also recognized that interpreting others’ stories brings with it an ethical responsibility to stay close to the participants’ meanings (Creswell, 2009). As the data analysis
proceeded, each participant was provided a narrative summary, as well as an interpretive retelling of their stories and was asked to review them to assure that the researcher accurately captured their experiences and individual stories. Participants were provided a copy of the focus group transcripts.

In order to ensure ethical research, this researcher made use of informed consent (Appendix C). Based on Creswell’s (2009, p. 89) recommended items, this researcher developed a specific informed consent form for participants to sign before engaging in the research. The form acknowledged that the participants’ rights will be protected during data collection. Elements of the consent form included: identification of the researcher, identification of the sponsoring institution, identification of how the participants were selected, purpose of the research, identification of the benefits for participating, identification of the level and type of participant involvement, guarantee of confidentiality to the participant, assurance that the participant can withdraw at any time and provision of names of persons to contact if questions arise.

Conclusions

The goal of this study was to encapsulate the perceptions of educators involved in the SLC program in a suburban New England school district with two large high schools; and, ultimately to use this data to inform changes aimed at improving educator practice. Using a variety of data collection procedures, the researcher probed three primary research questions: In what ways did high school attendance, suspension, retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data change from 2004 to 2012 for the school district under study? How have changes to existing practices been implemented since the inception of the SLC program? How do educators perceive the effectiveness of the SLC program? Guided by the
theoretical framework of social capital theory, data was obtained through historical quantitative analysis, document analysis and a semi-structured focus group interview. The researcher hoped to yield valuable information to the district, the high schools as well as the administrators and educators working in them. The ultimate goal was to improve educator practice and enhance student outcomes while adding to the body of educational research on the efficacy of the SLC program.
Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings

Overview

The purpose of this case study is to investigate which aspects of the high school SLC program educators deem critical and how SLC practices can be improved. This qualitative descriptive single-case study is designed to analyze teacher, counselor and administrator perceptions around SLC practices in a large suburban southeastern New England school district. Data was obtained through document analysis, historical quantitative data analysis, and a semi-structured focus group interview. The research was guided by Coleman’s (1988) theoretical concept of social capital with three primary questions:

- In what ways did high school attendance, suspension, retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data change from 2004 to 2012 for the school district under study?

- How have changes to existing practices been implemented since the inception of the SLC program?

- How do educators perceive the effectiveness of the SLC program?

Primary qualitative data collection centers on key educators’ perceptions regarding the climate of the high school as it relates to the SLC program goals through a focus group interview and document analysis. There are three main sources of data: historical qualitative document analysis, historical quantitative statistical analysis, and the focus group interview. The primary dataset is the information gleaned from the focus group.

Logic Model. A conventional linear logic model was used to describe the events within this research project to link outcomes of this research to predicted events, which is appropriate,
according to Yin (2009), for a program-level logic model. This linear model served to corroborate the theoretical framework and literature with teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of the SLC program. Initial anticipated themes included personalization, communication, collaboration, administrative supports and professional development. These were significant themes throughout the review of literature and supported by the theoretical framework of social capital theory. During each phase of data collection, the researcher compared findings to the existing theoretical framework and literature by aligning these paradigms. Through data analysis the researcher developed suggested improvements to current SLC practices.

Figure 1 Linear Logic Model (Adapted from Yin, 2009)

This figure is used to illustrate the linear progression “of matching empirically observed events (data collection) to theoretically predicted events” (Yin, 2009, p. 149). Through the theoretical lens of social capital theory, this logic model served to guide the researcher, while existing literature served to bolster the research. By triangulating data, the outcomes and conclusions were both sound and influential in improving SLC practices in the school district under research. In the “interaction of theory and data” there are clusters of meaning (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.248). The clusters or classifications of themes that emerged through descriptive coding directly connected to the research questions and theoretical framework. For
example, the researcher desired to know how changes to existing practices have been implemented since the inception of the SLC program and how educators perceive the effectiveness of the SLC program. Inherent in the research questions, one had to find out how leaders of the school manage this educational model and how teachers are supported. One also had to look to the habits of mind teachers employ drawing from social capital theory.

**Document Analysis**

**Background.** In March 2004, the school department under study contracted with the Education Alliance at Brown University to conduct a climate review at one of the high schools due to concerns about culture and climate at the secondary school level. The findings from the report confirmed the district’s trepidations. The executive summary of this report can be found in Appendix E.

It was noted that there were several findings from this climate review study that could be used to the school’s advantage: (1) many of the staff and students expressed positive feelings about the school and its potential, (2) students and staff agree on many of the problem diagnoses (i.e. the discipline is not fair, that students need to be more respectful, and that something needs to change), (3) administrators and most staff encountered during the study expressed a sincere desire to identify key problems so that they can begin to address these proactively (Bockrath & Greene, 2004).

Building on students’ and staff’s desire to improve the high school climate and recognizing the most acute issues highlighted during the climate review, the Education Alliance made the following recommendations: (1) engage students, staff, and families in a process of redefining and then enacting a feasible, graduated discipline policy, (2) engage staff in professional development activities concerning accommodating socioeconomic diversity and
racial diversity, (3) engage staff in professional development activities to better address gender equity issues both for female and male students, and (4) create opportunities to ensure that all students are known well by at least one staff member, so that these personal relationships can support the efforts to address concerns regarding discipline and accommodating diversity. (Bockrath & Greene, 2004).

The school department’s initial response to this climate review was to pilot the Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) Freshman Academy model at both high schools during the 2004-2005 school year as a measure to help ease the challenges facing grade nine students through support from and collaboration among teachers, parents, counselors, and administrators. In addition, district-level administrators, high school administrators and other key educators worked together to begin writing and applying for the U.S. Department of Education’s competitive SLC grant. Pursuing the grant was a priority because the district felt strongly that the additional resources could help support and enhance the work of the Freshman Academies while also expanding SLC strategies to the other high school grade levels. After consecutive years of unsuccessful grant writing, the district was finally awarded a five-year $2,514,312 in the summer of 2008.

The four major SLC Grant goals for the district are: to increase student achievement for all while closing existing achievement gaps (low-income and special needs students); to prepare all students for success in post-secondary education and employment; to provide all students with a rigorous, relevant program of studies; and to create a school climate that provides a personalized learning environment for every student, built on a foundation of student, staff, family, business and community partnerships. The district mapped out key activities for all five
years of the grant program to achieve these goals (Appendix F). The ultimate goal of the SLC Program is to prepare all district students to succeed in postsecondary education and careers. Independent external evaluations and Annual Performance Reviews (APRs) of the SLC Program were conducted on an annual basis beginning with the first year (2008-09) of the grant. The purpose of these evaluations was, in addition to meeting mandated federal grant requirements, to provide information to the project director, district administration, high school administration and design teams that will be useful in measuring the progress of the project and identify areas for ongoing improvement. Information and evidence for these evaluations was gathered through a variety of methods utilizing student, family and staff survey results, interviews of staff and students, classroom observations, and review of school performance data.

During the year 1 (2008-09) evaluation, staff attended design team meetings at both schools on a monthly basis. In addition, during years one through five, evaluation team staff members conducted on-site visits twice annually, as a minimum, at both high schools. During site visits evaluation staff observed classrooms and interviewed teachers and staff who were involved in and/or impacted by the SLC grant initiatives. Evaluation staff utilized a set of common questions to conduct their interviews with staff, specifically keyed to each of the four SLC program goals.

The SLC Grant’s targeted growth goals and results from years 1-4 are indicated in Table 1 on page 58. Table 1 shows the performance indicators, their measurements and the statistical growth benchmarks for the first four years of the SLC program. It also summarizes the performance of each high school on these nine annual performance indicators for each school year from 2008 through 2012. Shaded cells in the “Was Target Met?” column indicate growth for that particular performance indicator. The darker grey-scale cells indicate that the target for
that year was met, while the lighter grey-scale cells indicate improvement below the target. Performance targets for all five years of the SLC program can be found in Appendix H. There were 70 measurable areas: 21 met the target, 23 showed growth without meeting the target and 14 did not meet the target. There were 12 areas where data was not available to measure the indicators.
## Table 1 Years 1-4 SLC Performance Indicators

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<tr>
<td>Students will achieve proficient or better status on the MCAS exam</td>
<td>MCAS Proficiency</td>
<td>+3%</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO*</td>
<td>NO*</td>
<td>+8%</td>
<td>NO*</td>
<td>+15%</td>
<td>NO*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Achievement gaps for all subgroups, measured by MCAS reading and math, will be closed</td>
<td>MCAS Proficiency</td>
<td>-15%</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO*</td>
<td>NO*</td>
<td>-15%</td>
<td>NO*</td>
<td>-15%</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students will be successful in 9th grade and move to the 10th grade on time</td>
<td>Student Retention Data</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>YES</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students will complete one AP or dual credit course</td>
<td>Graduation Rate</td>
<td>+3%</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students will graduate within five years</td>
<td>Student Data</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO*</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students will take the SAT and be eligible for entrance into the college of their choice</td>
<td>Student Data</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO*</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of students entering postsecondary education will increase</td>
<td>Senior Plans Data</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>NO*</td>
<td>NO*</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO*</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students will indicate they have at least one adult in the school who knows their interests and aspirations well</td>
<td>Survey Data</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and family partnerships will increase</td>
<td>School Data</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>+15%</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* indicates improvement below target
Year 1 (2008-09). The district was a late recipient of the SLC Grant (August 2008) and the professional development schedule for the 2008-09 school year had already been established. This required the school district to quickly develop an organizational structure (Appendix G) and a plan to move forward with the Year 1 SLC Grant goals. Upon receipt of the grant award, the original SLC Project Director, the Assistant Superintendent, was hired as Superintendent. The district re-assigned the Director of Guidance and Remediation Services as the SLC Project Director and appointed the new Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Administration, as the Central Office SLC contact person. Classroom teachers were hired as SLC site coordinators at each building with reduced teaching loads. Each high school was also assigned three SLC Transition Coaches from their staffs to help with SLC efforts. School Change Coaches from the Center for Secondary School Redesign (CSSR) were also assigned to work with each buildings administration and staff. In addition, a new district Business Manager and a new Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources were hired during the 2008-09 school year.

There are two high schools in the district, both of which have been involved in the SLC Project. Overall, Year 1 (2008-09) of the SLC Program was successful. Six of the seven original key activities for SLC Year 1 were completed at both high schools, including all ninth grade students being placed in smaller learning communities, or Freshman Academies with academic supports in place, including staff training. The ninth grade curriculum was revised to ensure rigor for all students. The Academic support lab program and personalized progress plans were implemented for ninth graders. SLC transition coaches and special education teachers were added to grade 9. Curriculum development and planning for advisories began. Credit recovery and academic intervention programs were developed in science and expanded in English
language arts and math. Strategies to increase parental and community involvement were developed and implemented.

The one key activity for Year 1 that was not completed was the planning for implementation of the tenth grade academy during Year 2. The tenth grade academy had actually been piloted in prior years, but the district withdrew this activity from the proposal due the student scheduling constraints that it caused. This modification was accepted by the U.S. Department of Education Program Officer in January of 2009.

There were eight statistical performance indicators to track SLC progress in Year 1. The district established baseline data for three of these (all students will graduate within five years, all students will indicate they have at least one adult in the school who knows their interests and aspirations well and helps them work towards success, and business and family partnerships will increase in number and scope, as measured by actual contact). Both High School 1 (HS1) and High School 2 (HS2) showed growth in four of the remaining five outcome measures. HS1 met three of outcomes measures, while HS2 met only one. HS1’s state testing proficiency scores improved, achievement gaps were closed, and ninth to tenth grade promotion targets were met. Specifically, HS1’s state testing Composite Score Index (CPI: a measure of the extent to which students are progressing toward proficiency in ELA and mathematics on a 100-point index) results rose 4.6 points in English Language Arts (ELA), 7.1 in mathematics, and 7.4 points in science. HS1’s CPI achievement gaps decreased by 23% in ELA, and by 45% in mathematics for students with disabilities and by 46% in ELA, and by 43% in mathematics for low income students. HS1’s ninth to tenth grade promotion rate increased by 9%. HS1’s postsecondary placement rate increased by 4%. HS2 failed to achieve the 3% CPI growth goal for Year 1 of the grant: the aggregate CPI for ELA rose by 1.4 points; it rose for science by 1.5 points; and it
remained stable in math. HS2 CPI achievement gaps decreased by 1% in ELA and increased 55% in mathematics for students with disabilities. Gaps decreased by 41% in ELA and 24% in mathematics for low income students. HS2’s Advanced Placement/Dual-Credit enrollment increased by 28%. HS2’s postsecondary placement rate increased by 3%. In summary, state testing data showed improvement at both high schools through increased proficiency levels and decreased achievement gaps. Both high schools also improved postsecondary placement rates, although neither met the target of a 5% increase.

Overall, the district met Year 1 of the SLC Grant with success, particularly as defined by completing the key activities that were outlined in the original grant proposal. This was due to the fact that six of the seven original key activities for SLC Year 1 were completed at both high schools. Results from the Year 1 performance indicators were mixed due to the fact that even though most targets were not met, many showed growth. The district communicated concerns with the sustainability of current reforms and initiatives and stressed the desire to focus time and efforts on them to continue to move forward with the grant. This dynamic was described in the APR as the district needing to be mindful, and in a way, careful of the timing of introducing any new initiatives so that they are not at the expense of the current ones. Due to operational budgetary concerns as well as changes in key leadership positions, the district expressed unease about the added stress that the development of new programs could cause. District leadership was confident to continue a sustained focus on SLC goals, including student achievement, academic rigor, postsecondary success, and student personalization.

**Year 2 (2009-10).** The SLC Project Director, Central Office Liaison, Site Coordinators, and School Change Coach remained consistent since the inception of the grant which helped to move forward successfully with many aspects of the grant during Year 2. There were some key
personnel changes that occurred in 2010, a new building principal and two new assistant
principals were hired at one of the high schools. Also, the teacher’s union voted in a new
president. This was significant because the out-going president was considered contentious,
bringing a case to the Labor Relations Board with respect to the high schools schedules and the
advisory program. The new teachers’ union president did not consider these issues to be
significant and worked collaboratively with administration in support of SLC strategies.

Both high schools in the district continued to be involved in SLC during 2009-10.
Overall, Year 2 was successful. Eight of the nine original key activities were completed at both
high schools. Ninth grade students were placed in academies. The tenth grade curriculum was
refined as needed to ensure rigor for all students. Advisories were implemented for ninth and
tenth grade students. A new schedule was implemented at both high schools. Tenth grade
academic support programs in reading and math were implemented, while credit recovery and
academic intervention programs were implemented in science and developed in social studies.
The process of developing curricula for senior projects began, including the establishment of
community-based career advisory boards. The lone key activity for Year 2 that was not
completed at either high school was the establishment of community service hours as a
graduation requirement.

Of the nine annual statistical performance indicators to track SLC progress, HS1 met
three of these outcome measures and HS2 met one. HS2’s Advanced Placement/Dual-Credit
enrollment increased by 15%. HS1’s graduation rate increased by 8%. HS1’s business and
family partnerships increased by 25%. HS2’s business and family partnerships also increased by
25%. Results from the Year 2 performance indicators were mixed at best. However, in many of
the areas where the schools did not meet the percentage targets, there were improvements. HS1
showed improvement on state testing proficiency levels, AP/Dual Credit course participation, the graduation rate and business and family partnerships. HS2 showed improvement on state testing proficiency levels, tenth grade promotion rate, the graduation rate, postsecondary placement rates, business and community partnerships as well as a reduction in state testing achievement gaps.

In summary, the district met Year 2 of the SLC Grant with success, particularly as defined by completing the key activities. At the end of Year 2 the district was still concerned with the sustainability of current reforms and initiatives from Year 1 of the SLC Program. District administrators again remained mindful and careful of the timing of introducing any new initiatives so these would not be implemented at the expense of the current ones. Also, operational budgetary concerns as well as changes in key leadership positions put additional stress on the development of new programs. District leadership remained confident to continue a sustained focus on SLC goals including student achievement, academic rigor, postsecondary success, and student personalization.

**Year 3 (2010-11).** The SLC Project Director, Central Office Liaison, Site Coordinators, and School Change Coach remained consistent during 2010-11. The consistency since the inception of the grant in these key positions has helped the district to successfully move forward with many aspects of the program. Overall, Year 3 (2010-11) of the SLC Program was successful. Three of the six original key activities for SLC Year 3 were complete or partially completed at both high schools by the end of the 2010-11 school year. Completed activities included the implementation of the following: advisories for eleventh grade, senior projects with eleventh grade students beginning the process, and strategies to increase parental and community involvement. The following activities were not completed: the placement of all ninth and tenth
grade students in academies and the planning for twelfth grade academies, the implementation of eleventh grade academies at both high schools, and the implementation of credit recovery programs in social studies.

During Year 3 both high schools continued to work toward developing the current larger SLC initiatives rather than introducing new ones. Therefore, the Freshman Academies, a new schedule, advisories, and literacy continued to be top concerns during the 2010-11 school year. Professional development time was added during the 2010-11 school year for Freshman Academy, the Advisory Program and the SLC literacy initiative. Both high schools implemented advisories for all ninth and tenth grade students, but because of union involvement, advisory meeting time dropped from twice to once a week for 25 minutes. An adjustment was made during the 2010-11 school year to the new high school schedule (longer classes within a 6-period day) that was implemented in 2009-10 school year. The teacher’s union voted on reinstating the old schedule and both high schools moved back to a traditional 7-period day. Professional development that focused on a district wide literacy initiative continued during the 2010-11 school year during a number of in-services. A lesson learned was that even when the district includes the union in discussing and planning initiatives, it is difficult to predict the impact of labor issues on school change efforts. The Year 3 APR summarized the 2010-11 grant year, stating:

Quite frankly, it has been difficult to move forward with all of the key activities for Year 3 of our SLC Grant. The district put many new high school reform efforts (Freshman Academies, Advisories, Literacy) into Years 1 (2008-09) and 2 (2009-10) of the SLC Program. We are still working on sustainability of these earlier goals and activities during the current school year. This will continue to be a challenge as we move forward to Years
4 and 5 of our SLC Program. We are committed to working toward successful completion of the goals of this grant; however we have to be mindful to pay attention to the ‘foundation’ of this movement which was set forth in the early years of this grant (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p.2).

**Year 4 (2011-12).** The organizational structure and plan to move forward with the SLC Grant goals remained consistent since its inception in 2008. The SLC Project Director, Central Office Liaison, Site Coordinators, and School Change Coach remained consistent in 2011-12. There were also no administrative changes at the high school during 2011-12. This consistency helped to move forward successfully with many aspects of the grant during the 2011-12 school year.

Overall, Year 4 (2011-12) of the SLC Program was successful. Four of the five original key activities for SLC Year 4 were completed, or partially completed, at both high schools by the end of the 2011-12 school year. Both high schools reviewed and refined 12th grade curriculum and ensured rigor and relevance in coursework and community-based learning experiences, implemented advisories for all students grades 9-12, reviewed and refined academic support programs, and introduced family support programs for the postsecondary application and financial aid processes. The one activity for year four that was not completed was that not all grade 9-12 students were placed in academies; this was the one activity that was rescinded from the grant proposal by mutual agreement between the school district and the U.S. Department of Education. The district put many new high school reform efforts (Freshman Academies, Advisories, Literacy) into Years 1 (2008-09), 2 (2009-10) and 3 (2010-11) of the SLC Program, and worked on sustainability of these earlier goals and activities during the 2011-12 school year.
Initial review of the data would suggest that the district was not successful in meeting the performance indicators of the program. Simply put, this is true. However, upon closer inspection, many of the indicators actually either met the standard, or showed improvement toward the standard. In fact, school administrators referred to this portion of the grant narrative as the “heartburn page” of the proposal, as they admitted that the performance indicators, benchmarks and outcomes were set at such a high standard that they felt as though the targets might have been unattainable.

Although both high schools indicated significant improvement on the standard of increasing family and business partnerships, survey data collection around teacher/student personalization was not collected. State testing (MCAS) showed growth in proficiency scores as well as closing achievement gaps. Advanced Placement (AP) course participation and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) participation rates showed improvement. ninth grade promotion and five-year graduation rates also showed improvement. In the next section the researcher will take a closer look at some of the key statistical SLC indicators over a much longer period of time spanning across pre and post-SLC program implementation.

**Quantitative Analysis**

**School District Demographic Data.** The schools selected to serve as the study site are located in a suburban town of lower middle socioeconomic status in southeastern New England. The town has had a population of approximately 56,000 since 2004 following a slight population increase of about 5,000 from 2000 to 2004. The current median household income is $63,266. The median price of a home is $342,900. Train and bus services offer commuting to more metropolitan areas, and the town is home to many small businesses and large commercial chain stores.
The total student population in the district, which includes two high schools, two middle schools, eight elementary schools and a pre-school, was 7,998 in 2012 with more than 1,000 students attending private schools. Student population has ranged from 8,000-9,000 students since 1997. The apex of total student population was 9,133 in 2002 and has been declining by about 100 students per year since that time. It is expected that student enrollment figures may begin to rise in the future. A significant amount of new-home construction is underway including one of the largest housing developments in the history of New England which is comprised of more than 2400 homes; another new development is expected to add another 1100 homes. The construction explosion is due partially to the town being very large, covering many square miles of land. The school district receives federal Title I assistance funding for targeted supplemental services and programs in reading and math at the elementary level in certain schools. Students on free and reduced lunch represent 30% of the district population, while the number of English Language Learners is less than 1%.

The student population has been steady over the last 16 years averaging about 93% white, 2.5% African American, 1% Asian, 2% Hispanic, 3% Multi-Racial and less than 1% Native-American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. The district has averaged a 95% stability rate (which measures how many students remain in the district throughout the school year) over the last 5 years. During 2012, 99.3% of the faculty was identified as highly qualified under the guidelines established by the U.S. Department of Education. The remaining 0.7% were either on waiver or pending licensure. The student-to-teacher ratio was 13.3:1, which is just below the state average. The district supports a special education population of 20.1%, compared to 17.3 % for the state.
Students are currently districted geographically, creating neighborhood schools. The district has struggled to keep the neighborhood school model despite a shifting of students from the north to the south section of town. Population movement has led to a redistricting of neighborhood boundaries to adjust for school overcrowding. In a recent debit-exclusion vote, the town successfully supported a $200 million maximum expenditure for the renovation and construction of the two high schools to address overcrowding. In 2012 one new high school opened. During the 2013-14 school year a feasibility study will be conducted on the other high school.

The two high schools selected for this study have averaged a combined population of about 2,400-2,500 since 1997, servicing students in grades 9 through 12. One of the high schools has typically averaged about 1,400-1,500 students from 2000 through 2012, while the other high school averaged about 1,000 students during the same time period. Recent redistricting has created more of a balance where now both high schools house about 1,200 students per building.

The high schools include a comprehensive vocational technical program with 14 approved Chapter 74 programs. Most of these programs are housed within one of the high schools. Both high schools are accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

**Historical Quantitative Data Analysis.** Pre and post-SLC student data is presented in both line graph and narrative form, highlighting patterns and/or differences in attendance, suspension, retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data. Data definitions for each of these categories can be found in Appendix I. Table 2 captures all of the data points and includes data for the years when it was available from 1997 through 2012. Table 2 stands as a reference point for all of the data points that are isolated into line graphs in Figures 2-9. Each of the indicators (represented by percentages on the y-axis) is plotted on a
graph for the selected school years between 1997 and 2012 (represented by school years on the x-axis).

**Table 2: Key SLC Data Points 1997-2012**

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<th>%GRAD</th>
<th>%DROP OUT</th>
<th>%ATT</th>
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<th>%OSS</th>
<th>%RET</th>
<th>%ATT COLL</th>
<th>%PROF ELA</th>
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**Key**

- %GRAD: 4 year graduation rate
- %DROP OUT: dropout rate
- %ATT: attendance rate
- %ISS: in-school-suspension rate
- %OSS: out-of-school suspension rate
- %RET: retention rate
- %ATT COLL: percent attending college
- %PROF ELA: percent proficient on high school ELA state assessment
- %PROF MTH: percent proficient on high school mathematics state assessment
- %POST SEC: percent of students with post-graduate intentions
Figures 2 and 3 highlight the dropout and graduation rates. Figure 2 highlights a decreasing dropout rate from years 2003-2012, while Figure 3 shows an improving graduation rate from the years 2006-2012. Figures 2 shows that the percentage of students who dropped out of high school decreased from 3.5% to 1.6%. Figure 3 shows that the percentage of students who graduated from high school increased from 81.8% to 86.5% from 2006 to 2012. The dropout percentage rate dropped steadily and the graduation percentage rate, while fluctuating, showed improvement. This may reflect that fact that the district is keeping more students in school and perhaps finding alternative pathways to graduation for some.

*Figure 2 Dropout Percentage Rate*

*Figure 3 Graduation Percentage Rate*
Figures 4, 5 and 6 show, respectively, attendance, suspension and retention rates. Figure 4 shows a fluctuating, yet slightly improved, attendance rate from 2003-2012. The attendance rate improved from 94.7% in 2003 to 95% in 2012. Figure 5 shows a fluctuating, and slightly higher suspension rate, for both in-school suspensions (ISS) and out-of-school suspensions (OSS) from 2003-2012. The ISS rate increased from 0.6% to 1.3% and the OSS rate increased from 5.7% to 6.0% from 2003 to 2012. Figure 6 shows a fluctuating, yet slightly improved retention rate from 2003-2012. The retention rate decreased from 2.1% in 2003 to 1.9% in 2012. It is difficult to quantify the significance of the slight improvement in attendance and retention rates, although the pattern is a positive one. The suspension rates, although slightly higher, were generally flat. In effect, high school attendance and suspension rates remained relatively stable from 2003 to 2012.

*Figure 4 Attendance Percentage Rate*

*Figure 5 Suspension Percentage Rates (ISS=In School Suspension, OSS=Out of School Suspension)*
Figures 7 and 8 report postsecondary placement rates in two different ways. The data in Figure 7 is based on the post-graduate intentions of high school graduates at the end of their senior year in high school. The percentage of students planning to attend college is reported from 1997-2012 and fluctuated between 67% and 76% with an average of 71.44% for those 16 years. Figure 8 includes the actual percentage of students who enrolled in any postsecondary institution 4 months after graduation from high school from the years 2001-2011. Data for 2012 was not yet available. It was noteworthy that the intended enrollment in college showed modest fluctuations, but never changed greatly, while the actual enrollment steadily increased. The data in Figure 8 represent more accurate postsecondary rates and showed significant improvement, moving from 50% in 2001 to 69% in 2011. This is important as the ultimate goal of the SLC Program is to prepare all district students to succeed in postsecondary education and careers.
Figure 7 Percent Attending College

![Figure 7 Percent Attending College](image_url)

Figure 8 Percent Enrolled in College

![Figure 8 Percent Enrolled in College](image_url)
Figure 9 indicates the percentage of students scoring Proficient or better in high school state testing in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics from 1998-2012. This data show a consistent growth pattern in both of these high-stakes, graduation requirement standardized tests.

Figure 9 ELA and Math Proficiency

Conclusions. Taking a longitudinal look at many of the key SLC data points (attendance, suspension, retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data) provided insight into some of the patterns that have developed both prior to, and after, SLC implementation. While suspension and attendance rates generally stayed the same, many of the key SLC data points showed differing levels of improvement. Positive growth was found in the graduation rate, postsecondary enrollment rate, proficiency rates in state testing scores, as well as the lowering of both the dropout rate and retention rate. It was noteworthy that the intended enrollment in college showed modest fluctuations, but never changed greatly, yet the actual enrollment steadily increased. In summary, although none of these data patterns can be considered correlational with respect to student outcomes and the SLC Program, there is still much to be gained from looking at this descriptive data.
Focus Group

**Rationale.** Utilizing the focus group as the primary source of data collection for this study enabled this researcher to capture the impact that the SLC program had on each individual educator as well as how these educators perceived its effectiveness. The theoretical lens of social capital theory was used during the analysis of the focus group data. This researcher was looking for educator responses to echo SLC themes of personalization, small student groupings, matching resources and instruction to student needs, and relationship building. This researcher was also looking for statements on communication, collaboration, and professional development. An original code system was developed based on anticipated responses and further defined based on participants’ responses during the analysis of the transcripts. Questions that align with the theoretical lens of social capital theory were embedded in the interview questions as well as questions that developed from program goals and themes that emerged as a result of the initial quantitative and qualitative data analyses (Appendix D). This provided the researcher with an opportunity to understand teacher, counselor and administrator perceptions of the SLC process and the changes that have occurred as a result.

**Protocols.** This researcher received the signed consent forms and then consulted with the participants in order to schedule the focus group. The focus group interview was scheduled for a one hour and a half block of time, and the actual focus group lasted for 1 hour and 6 minutes. A quiet location was secured to ensure privacy, which allowed participants to answer questions openly. The interview began with an introduction script and an explanation of the high quality H4N Zoom Handy Recorder digital audio recording device that was being used. This researcher shared the focus group protocol and interview questions with all participants a number of days prior to the focus group. This researcher also noted that time would be provided at the end of the
interview during which participants would be able to share additional information that was not requested during the interview. Participants were informed that they would receive a copy of the transcript so that they could ensure the accuracy of interview data collected. The participants were also given the opportunity to address and restate anything that was transcribed that conflicted with what they truly meant. Participants were instructed to highlight any information that they wanted deleted in red and add any information in green and return the document at their earliest convenience via e-mail. This researcher was also available for person-to-person meetings or phone calls if any participant desired. The participants did not make any additions or corrections to the script that was provided to them. Each participant was pleased with the transcription and no changes were made.

Eight of the ten invited participants were present at the meeting and appeared relaxed and eager to participate in the focus group. Both participants who did not attend were out of district at the time of the focus group and communicated apologies to the researcher. All the focus group questions were asked and additional probes were included for the purpose of clarification or expansion of a discussed topic. The meeting was recorded and transcribed. When all data analysis was complete, the results were shared via e-mail with the participants. The participants were given ample time to read and respond to the data analysis results. Lastly, the participants were given an additional opportunity to meet with the researcher to discuss their reactions to the focus group data, the document analysis, the data analysis data and the overall triangulation of the data. None of the participants changed or added to the prior collected data.

**Initial analysis.** Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended to help elicit stories about how the participants understood their SLC experiences. Interview data from the focus group was coded into themes. The researcher generated an initial list of coding categories from
the SLC model and theoretical framework; this was modified within the course of the analysis as new categories emerged inductively (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First-cycle descriptive coding (or topic coding) was utilized to break down the data into discrete parts, closely examine them, and compare them for similarities and differences (Saldana, 2013). Second-cycle coding utilized pattern coding, or explanatory or inferential codes, to develop major themes from the data and reduce it into more meaningful units of analysis. MAXQDA 11 software was utilized to help code and analyze this qualitative data.

During and immediately after the focus group, this researcher quickly noted any salient points that surfaced during the interview. These points were also reviewed after the initial transcription process was completed. The focus group interview transcript was downloaded into the MAXQDA 11 program which allowed this researcher to code the transcripts. An initial code system was utilized and additional codes were added as new themes surfaced. This code system was created based on themes that emerged from the first two modes of data collection as well as the theoretical framework. It was further refined and reduced to reflect a clearer picture of the themes that emerged. The abbreviated alpha coding system that was originally developed is displayed in Table 3. These codes were entered into the MAXQDA 11 software program.
Table 3 Alpha Coding System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Code</th>
<th>Code Abbreviation</th>
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<td>Common Planning Time</td>
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<td>Communication</td>
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<td>Community Involvement</td>
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<td>Team</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>TRU</td>
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</table>

Upon analysis of the data, Table 4 shows how many times responses aligned with the first-cycle codes and were then noted in the focus group transcription. High frequency codes included Communication, Relationships, Collaboration, Support, Personalization, Team, Trust and Parental Involvement. This researcher found it interesting that certain codes were not mentioned at all during the focus group interview.
Table 4 Summary of Transcription Coding Frequency

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<td>Team</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
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</table>

Table 5 depicts the original first-cycle code system and the strategic reduction of themes that was created. Second-cycle coding utilized pattern coding, or explanatory or inferential codes, to develop major themes from the data and reduce it into more meaningful units of analysis (Saldana, 2013). The thematic reduction was generated as the original codes were found to be subsets of the new themes that were developed.
<table>
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<th>Thematic Reduction Code</th>
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<td>Parental Involvement</td>
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The following section will delve deeper into the four themes gleaned from the focus group: collaboration, communication, personalization and relationship-building. In addition, Appendix J contains key focus group quotations for each of the four themes.

**Collaboration.** The focus group discussion provided much insight into the practices and beliefs around collaboration as an SLC method. All of the participants including teachers, counselors and administrators discussed the theme of collaboration particularly as it relates to the team teaching model of the Freshman Academy, with Common Planning Time built in to the schedule. Members of the focus group articulated that the networks that were established through this collaboration, as well as the professional development for it, helped to make it effective and helpful for students.
There were some significant comments that were made by a variety of educators in the group that support the positive impact of collaboration. Participant 8 summarized, “With Freshman Academy I think that it was more, versus me individually giving advice, it was more of a team approach.” Administrators, teachers and counselors commented how everybody in the team model would work together, particularly with struggling students. Team meetings were set up so that the student and the parent could hear what the viable options were and be given specific strategies for the student to be more successful. Participant 8 added, “This…was encouraging…and, for the most part, the vast majority of students could turn it around and be more successful in their sophomore year.”

The common thread among participant comments was that the design of Freshman Academy incorporates, fosters and supports collaboration among the team of teachers, counselors and administrators. Participants felt as though Freshman Academy teachers are looking out for students and that the student knows that they meet to discuss them. Some participants concluded that many students feel like they can continue to reach out to teachers as they move on through high school because they have had that positive experience in Freshman Academy. Participant 4 stated, “Freshman Academy teachers…actually can bring up concerns about a kid, and they can, (find the) best strategy that worked in one classroom with a kid that’s having difficulty and they can apply that strategy in the classroom.” Teachers agreed that during common planning team meetings and student team meetings, they can learn the best strategies to use with particular students from their colleagues. Educators commented that within the Freshman Academy teams there is a lot of room for teachers to have new ideas. Exploration of these ideas has led to new programs like the senior mentor program (to help grade 9 students) and the mathematics lab (for students to receive additional math tutoring from certified teachers).
Participants commented that the students actually see these new ideas being implemented, which helps to promote an improved, effective and supportive learning environment for kids.

Participants also commented that the collaboration fostered a greater sense of accountability for both the teachers and students. Regarding teacher accountability, participants credited the team model with encouraging them to challenge each other. They explained that there is more accountability on the teachers to perform and have solid lessons within their cohort of team teachers, because they know what each other is doing, and because of what the students will say. Regarding students, the collaborative team approach helped to identify useful strategies to better help the struggling student, as well as “raise the bar” (Participant 2) academically for all students. Participant 2 also commented that “… kids say that they know the teachers have common planning time, and so they’re going to talk about me, or that they know that people are focused.” The freshman teams of teachers have the ability to work as an interdisciplinary team with more structured conversations about curriculum and assessment to address some key standards that students might all be struggling with, as a whole.

The SLC program also provided professional development for teachers in three main areas: Freshman Academy Training, Advisory training and literacy training. Teachers, counselors and administrators were allowed to formally visit and see other schools that were also implementing SLC strategies. This collaboration was helpful in revising and refining strategies for teacher common planning time and advisory planning. Teachers were also provided annual professional development, including summer training for Freshman Academy, Advisory and Literacy.

**Communication.** Communication as a single code had the highest coding frequency of the focus group transcript MAXQDA 11 analysis. Because of this, it required no thematic
reduction and could stand on its own as a theme. Participants were in agreement that communication has been a central tenet of the SLC Program. Where communication between and among educators (teachers, counselors and administrators) was covered in the previous section within the theme of collaboration, the focus on this section is on school-to-student, and school-to-family, communication. Participants commented that the Freshman Academy and the Advisory Program were significant contributors to improving and increasing communications from school to students and families. The schools also targeted families through other SLC outreach strategies, including mailings, technology (school websites, teacher blogs, group e-mails, Twitter, Facebook and a new student information system with teacher electronic grade books), and an increased number of informational parent evening programs.

In referencing the significance of communication as one of the primary SLC strategies for educators with their students’, one high school administrator said, “It’s about having a conversation with them.” It was noted that as part of the Freshman Academy model the staff are responsible for call logs and communicating home to parents. Letters home are generating through the Freshman Academy counseling office to any student who may be struggling at frequent intervals throughout the school year. Consequently, teacher team meetings, including the student, parent(s), counselor and administrator, are set up with the families and designed to address specific student needs and concerns. Participant 2 stated, “The communication is immediate with the freshmen” through “repetitious reaching out” (Participant 8). It was also noted that often times, student concerns can be addressed through the advisory program which reaches beyond the ninth grade. One educator commented, “Communication? Absolutely. In Advisory we talk to our students when progress reports come out, when report cards come out… I meet individually with my students out in the hallway during that time, and I know a lot of
advisors do, so yes, definitely” (Participant 5). It was noted that the school does need to continue to find additional ways to encourage more communication, beyond Advisory, to grades 10-12 students and families.

It was also noted that improved communication practices have helped to establish a culture of expectation around communications which has led to increasing teacher and student accountability. Participant 6 noted that educators “have communication logs that we have to turn in every month and are counted, and it’s put on our evaluation. So I think more teachers are communicating on a regular basis, positive and negative.” Participant 3 stated, “I think, the Freshman Academy model has made students more accountable for specific things, because the conversations that staff have with each other about student work. And one teacher may have more of a positive influence on that student that’s helping in another class, so I think that would be, and through the student learning it would be the accountability to get work done and turn things in on time.” One high school administrator commented that a significantly at-risk student stated that it was obvious that the high school staff was “killing themselves” trying to communicate to families to try to help students to stay invested in school.

**Personalization.** Looking back to the culture and climate study that was completed in 2004 it was obvious that the district needed to find more ways to personalize the student experience at the secondary schools. Educators who were part of the school district at that time commented on how dire the situation really was. The number of student fights and infractions was alarming, teacher morale was low, and there was a pervasive culture of negativity that was practically palpable in the hallways. During the focus group educators reflected on the SLC efforts to increase student personalization and agreed that there is a different, more positive climate in the high schools than there was eight to ten years ago. Educators agreed that prior to
the SLC Program hallways were more boisterous and student behavior in the cafeterias was unruly. Student disciplinary infractions had become very difficult for school administrators to handle, and some educators even questioned whether or not students felt safe getting on the school bus or coming to school. In the years that have followed, with an intense focus on student personalization, the group agreed that there is an extremely improved environment where students actually feel a sense of belonging and ownership in the high schools.

Administrators stressed the importance of doing all of the work around SLC strategies because it “is good for kids” and not because the district was awarded a large grant. They also acknowledged that even after the district was awarded the SLC grant, which they resolutely and aggressively pursued, they purposefully did not refer to it specifically as the “SLC Program.” It was approached in this manner so that staff would truly see that the district was interested in developing effective ways to personalize the educational experience of their students because it was the right thing to do, not because the district received a sizeable grant.

Educators in the focus group commented that they have generally been able to get to know many of their students more thoroughly throughout the years during SLC implementation. One educator commented that the primary means of personalization is through the Freshman Academy, and that personalization begins right away as students transition from the middle school, and it is “just that more intensive focus, you know, the kids, the students know that teachers are looking out for them.” A number of participants noted that they are more involved in the students post-secondary planning as they continue to work with students, particularly through the Advisory Program, as they advance through high school. Participant 8 stated, “There wasn’t one team parent meeting that went by in Freshman Academy where your future goals weren’t addressed by teachers.” Participant 5 noted, “We also have a lot of advisors that may or may not
have had that student academically, but they’re writing college recommendations, which I think really is a good testament to the relationship that has been established between them.” In referencing the Advisory Program educators agreed that advisors have been able to establish great relationships with many students and that the students within the advisory groups were in many cases even able to form a family-like unit as well.

Participants agreed that the SLC Program has put the focus on personalizing the educational experience of the high school students. This has been obvious because of the number of difficult conversations that staff members are having with students who are having a hard time being successful in school. Participants reported that in the past, teachers and administrators did not really get to know the students and had no idea what was going on in their personal lives. Now, educators are spending more time getting to know their students and have found more creative, personalized and effective ways of intervening. Participant 1 commented that SLC personalization efforts have been a conscious effort to get the whole high school staff involved and have been like “retraining people to care.”

**Relationships.** Relationships and its related codes had the highest coding frequency sum of the focus group transcript MAXQDA 11 analysis. Participants were in agreement that the topic of relationship-building has been a central tenet of the SLC Program. Prior to SLC implementation there were significant concerns: “I can tell you that there were a number of disconnects, and a lot of it had to do with relationship building between staff and student and between student and administration and also transition from middle school to high school” (Participant 1).

Much of the focus group discussion on the topic of relationship-building centered on the positive impact that SLC structures and strategies have had in this area. Administrators, teachers
and counselors described a collective sense that there has been an overall improvement in school culture at both high schools that was catalyzed by a focus on relationship-building. Many different participants shared student-specific stories that described and emphasized this as an emerging quality of the school district that has been developed in recent years. Participants noted that the focus on relationship-building has been positive and that it is clear that the district not only wants strong educator-to-student/family relationships, but also emphasizes the importance of productive educator-to-educator relationships.

Participants commented that both Freshman Academy and the Advisory Program have been instrumental in helping to forge better connections between educators and students. Participants noted that the Freshman Academy can help to develop strong bonds between students and educators that help the students feel connected to their school and often last for all four years. Participant 7 stated, “I think the relationship in ninth grade becomes so…connected that they continue to come in when, as upper classmen, because they have developed that very trusting relationship in ninth grade.” Participants also commented that relationship-building is a key part of the Advisory Program and that the advisors viewed the relationship as something that was going to be built, maintained and continued for four years. Community-building activities were stressed early on, during the ninth and tenth grade years, to establish a positive relationship from the very start. Participants agreed that the advisor-student relationship in most cases grew stronger over the four years.

Participants agreed that the SLC Program has focused on student interventions that highlight the importance of relationship-building in the high school. Much of the focus group discussion centered on the importance of building positive teacher/student relationships. Often times, participants would continually bring the conversation back to the significance of
relationship-building. Participants agreed that the ninth grade students have definitely connected with the teachers, staff members, counselors and administrators that were on their team. Many focus group participants commented that even though this was a ninth grade model, the relationships would often continue on for the four years that a student was in high school. Participant 5 commented, “I think one of the things that I think is the most successful about (the SLC Program) is the relationship-building, and that can be either in the classroom or advisory.” Educators described a climate of relationship building that exists now in the high schools. It was clear to members of the focus group that students are more receptive to adults if a positive relationship has been established and that SLC Program has created many more opportunities for this to take place.

Part of the focus on relationship-building has been trying to help students develop better relationships with the adults in their high school building. Participants explained that developmentally students have a fear, especially in ninth grade, to talk to teachers about how they are feeling and, in particular, about their academic challenges. Advisories have been able to help students learn how to advocate for themselves, to help coach students with the right language and appropriate strategies on how to approach teachers. There have been many cases where, in an effort to help problem-solve for a student, the school has been able to have the teacher, the student and the advisor in a room together to collaborate. This suggests that personalization approaches have moved beyond the formal advisory period to become part of the school-wide culture.

Many of the focus group participants referred to trust and norms as important factors in relationship-building between educators and students (and parents). Multiple participants noted that many students do not hesitate to go to their advisory teacher, team teacher, guidance
counselor or administrator to discuss a concern because the norm of a trusting relationship has been established. Participants commented that these staff members have been trained in strategies to help make the students feel safe to share information, so that the educator can follow through with implementing plans that are in the best interest of the students. Participants provided evidence of this by sharing that most students are comfortable going to their classroom teacher, advisory teacher, guidance counselor, adjustment counselor or school nurse when unsafe situations arise or a student is upset about another student or about something they are going through. These students do not hesitate to go to these educators who then feel safe “coming forward to the administration so we can handle it very quickly and as healthy and safe as possible for kids” (Participant 2). In addition, school counselors also regularly provide advice on personal, health, emotional and safety issues to students. Many students are comfortable with this because “they have developed that very trusting relationship in ninth grade” (Participant 7). Participant 8 also shared, “the students know that teachers are looking out for them, we meet on them, and I think that continues through the years, so that they feel like they can reach out to teachers because they’ve had that experience in Freshman Academy.”

Participants commented that they are seeing positive relationship being forged between staff and students quite regularly. Relationship-building, many commented, has been a district focus and has been part and parcel of the SLC Program. One administrator shared that students can start trusting many of the different adults that are in the high schools; this includes teachers, administrators, counselors, secretaries, support personnel, and custodians. Students see these various school personnel at different types of school functions, from theater or band and choral presentations to sporting events, and feel supported. Participants agreed, that this type of
relationship-building leads more students to develop an attitude of trust toward people in the school.

Some of the educators in the focus group commented that they have seen many positive relationships between teachers and parents develop as a result of SLC strategies to help support struggling students. Some participants reiterated that the freshman teachers, in particular, know their students very well because they have developed the relationship and worked with the teacher team on effective, personalized instructional strategies. Participant 4 shared, “They (the teachers) know what’s going on with this kid, and it’s because they see them, they talk to the other teachers on their team about that student when they have an issue, and they’re able to bring in a parent, when needed.” Participant 2 summed up what educators hope to gain as one of the main outcomes of all of their work on relationship-building: “I think it’s made parents believe a little bit in schools. Like they get so scared to go to the big high school, and then they get, it is excellent communication.”

It seems that the norms that have been established through positive relationship-building improved the culture of both high schools. Administrators pointed out the new direction that SLC strategies have taken the high schools. One of the concepts that was discussed when the SLC Program was put together was student time on task and time on learning. Prior to the SLC Program, the amount of time that was not being directed towards education was considered to be extremely disruptive to the educational process. Administrators agreed that it was difficult to measure the amount of disruptions that plagued the high schools prior the SLC Program, but that it seemed alarming. Many of the educators who participated in the focus group worked in the district prior to SLC interventions and agreed that students are much more focused and engaged on their school activities than they were in the past.
**Concerns.** The concerns that participants of the focus group expressed all had to do with sustainability of SLC initiatives upon completion of the grant (August 2013). Participants expressed an interest in continued Freshman Academy and Advisory professional development during the summers, as well as an allowance for more advisory curriculum development and a greater administrative oversight and presence in Advisories. Administrators confirmed that this would be possible moving forward, although there will be no further money available for SLC program management. District administrators did put a financial sustainability plan into place to insure that the Freshman Academy (including two special education teachers) and Advisory Program will continue. A district administrator commented that he does not know what else the district could try to do to make the SLC Program work any better; he added that the district has managed tens of millions of dollars’ worth of grants each year and that this is the only grant work that will continue without the grant funding. The administrators in the focus group view the program as a success because even though the grant money has gone away, the model has stayed.

**Theoretical Framework**

Social capital generally takes the form of trust, social norms and networks of civic engagement (Putnam, 1995). Putnam contends that social organization (including trust, norms and networks) can facilitate coordinated action, and thereby improve a member’s quality of life or the quality of programs meant to serve the social good. Coleman (1990) considers social capital to be productive, in the sense that it enables people to achieve certain ends that they would not be able to achieve without it on their own as individuals. Examples of norms which build trust are: collaboration, flexibility, respect for the community, attention to process, dialogue, reflection and relationship-building. They can also include unspoken expectations between community members, and/or colleagues.
The four themes that emerged from the focus group analysis – Collaboration, Communication, Personalization and Relationships – are rooted in social capital theory. The use of this theoretical lens was valuable in that it helped to amplify some of the most useful conditions for students to be successful in a large high school. These conditions can be achieved through the implementation of SLC strategies that seek to break the large school down into smaller units. The stronger the networks are in an organization, the more likely it is that the members will cooperate for mutual benefit. The learning communities that develop in schools can progress from loose interactions of people to networks as formalized, trusting relationships based on common goals and interests. When looked at within the context of the SLC Program of the district under study, social capital can be seen in the form of student and parent expectations, obligations, and social networks that exist within the family, school and community that are important for student success. The concept of social capital is a useful theoretical construct for explaining the disparities in students’ educational performance. At these particular high schools the disciplinary climate, the academic norms established by the school community, and the mutual trust between home and school are major forms of social capital. This district’s SLC efforts have been geared toward personalizing education, grounded in social capital theory, to help establish the right conditions for enhanced student achievement.

The information that was gleaned from the focus group interview was imperative to this study. Through detailed transcription of the interview and analysis of the final document through MAXQDA 11 four key themes emerged. The themes were Collaboration, Communication, Personalization and Relationships. Using the document analysis and the historical quantitative data to inform the focus group meeting data analysis, the following section will summarize the results of this research study.
Research Findings Summary/Triangulation of Data

This researcher used three varied data sets to research the SLC practices at the two high schools in the school district under study. Data was obtained through document analysis, historical quantitative data analysis, and a semi-structured focus group interview. The primary data set was gleaned from the focus group interview. In addition, the document analysis and the historical quantitative data analysis were used to inform this researcher and delve deeper into the focus group transcript. The research was guided by Coleman’s (1988) theoretical concept of social capital with three primary questions:

1. In what ways did high school attendance, suspension, retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data change from 2004 to 2012 for the school district under study?

Based on this researcher's findings, it is evident that there were positive trends in high school retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data from 1997 to 2012. Specifically, graduation rates increased by 4.75% from 2006 to 2012, the dropout rate decreased by 2.75% from 2004 to 2012, the retention rate decreased by 1.6% from 2007 to 2012, the postsecondary attendance rate increased by 19% from 2001 to 2012, high school state testing proficiency data increased by 54% in English Language Arts and 57% in mathematics from 1998 to 2012. High school attendance and suspension rates remained relatively stable from 2003 to 2012. It is important to note that this quantitative data analysis was not a correlational study. There were likely many confounding factors contributing to the patterns and trends across these key SLC data points.

2. How have changes to existing practices been implemented since the inception of the SLC program?
Based on this researcher’s findings, it is evident that there have been some key changes to existing practices that have been implemented since the inception of the SLC program. The two key changes were the establishment of Freshman Academies (with teacher Common Planning Time) and Student Advisories. The Freshman Academy has become ingrained in the school structure and is viewed as a best practice in the district. Other changes include establishing credit recovery and academic intervention programs in core subjects, adding special education support personnel (two per school), implementing strategies to increase parental and community involvement, establishing Senior Projects curriculum and program, and introducing family support programs for postsecondary application and the financial aid processes.

3. How do educators perceive the effectiveness of the SLC program?

Based on this researcher’s findings, it is evident that the educators find many aspects of the SLC program to be effective. Focus group analysis determined four key themes - Collaboration, Communication, Personalization and Relationships – that were central to the effectiveness of the SLC program. These four themes that emerged from the focus group analysis are rooted in the theoretical framework of social capital theory. The Freshman Academy Model and the Advisory Program were the two key SLC programs that were deemed most effective by educators in the focus group. Document analysis corroborates focus group findings related to educator perceptions regarding SLC program effectiveness.

Seven key findings were culled from the analysis and triangulation of the data sets:

1. *It is evident that there were positive trends in high school retention, graduation, dropout, post high school plan rates and state testing data from 1997 to 2012.* Specifically, graduation rates increased by 4.75% from 2006 to 2012, the dropout rate decreased by 2.75% from 2004 to 2012, the retention rate decreased by 1.6% from 2007 to 2012, the postsecondary attendance rate increased by 19% from 2001 to 2012, high school state
testing proficiency data increased by 54% in English Language Arts and 57% in mathematics from 1998 to 2012. High school attendance and suspension rates remained relatively stable from 2003 to 2012. It is important to note that this quantitative data analysis was not a correlational study. There were likely many confounding factors contributing to the patterns and trends across these key SLC data points.

2. Changes to existing practices since the inception of the SLC program have been implemented through on-going professional development around two key SLC changes: the establishment of Freshman Academies (with teacher Common Planning Time) and Student Advisories. The Freshman Academy has become ingrained in the school structure and is viewed as a best practice in the district. Other changes include establishing credit recovery and academic intervention programs in core subjects, adding special education support personnel (two per school), implementing strategies to increase parental and community involvement, establishing Senior Projects curriculum and program, and introducing family support programs for postsecondary application and financial aid processes.

3. Four major themes (collaboration, communication, personalization, and relationships) of Social Capital Theory emerged as significant components of the SLC Program.

   a. Educators articulated that the networks that were established through collaboration and the professional development provided to build collaboration skills, helped to make it effective and helpful for students. This was primarily achieved through Teacher Common Planning Time in the Freshman Academy. The design of the Freshman Academy incorporates, fosters and supports collaboration among the team of teachers, counselors and administrators.
b. *Educators believed that school-to-student and school-to-family communication was enhanced through SLC strategies.* The Freshman Academy and the Advisory Program were significant contributors to improving and increasing communications from school to student and families. The schools also targeted families through other SLC outreach strategies, including mailings, technology (school websites, teacher blogs, group e-mails, Twitter, Facebook and a new student information system with teacher grade books), and an increased number of informational parent evening programs.

c. *Educators believe there has been a strong focus on personalizing the students’ educational experience and that they have generally been able to get to know many of their students more thoroughly throughout the years during SLC implementation.* The Freshman Academy and the Advisory Program have been the cornerstone of personalization efforts in the high schools.

d. *Advisory was noted by educators as a significant component of building trusting relationships between teachers and students.* The Student Advisory program implemented by the high schools is seen as a way to strengthen connectedness between adults and students while helping to foster a personalized and supportive school culture. Administrators noted that it has not been necessary to convince anyone about the value of advisories and that both teachers and students have seen the positive impact and benefits.

4. *A supportive transition from middle to high school assists students in getting off to a strong start in high school.* The Freshman Academy structure with its built-in student interventions has demonstrated a positive impact on student achievement. The team
teaching structure, common planning time and additional academic supports and interventions were effective built-in structures of the Freshman Academy.

5. *A challenge facing schools utilizing the Freshman Academy model is replicating the successful structures and conditions in place for freshmen, seeking ways to provide better support for all students*. It is difficult to replicate the team teaching structure, common planning time and academic supports and interventions for students in grades 10 through 12, primarily because of scheduling constraints.

6. *Overall, increases have been seen in students achieving proficient and advanced status, and decreases in the number of students in warning/failing status on state testing*. Although there is no direct correlation between SLC strategies and state test scores, it is important to note that the positive trend of this important data point.

7. *Achievement gaps persist in special education and low-income subgroups despite SLC interventions*. School administrators and faculty expressed the feeling that these students are not pushed far enough or held to high expectations, and with support could achieve more. This is perceived as a challenge to educators as they continue to move forward with SLC efforts.

This researcher used three varied data sets to research SLC practices at the two high schools in the school district under study. Data was obtained through document analysis, historical quantitative data analysis, and a semi-structured focus group interview. Based on this researcher’s findings, it is evident that there were positive trends in high school retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data from 1997 to 2012 (although this quantitative data analysis was not a correlational study). It is also evident that there have been some key changes to existing practices that have been implemented since the
inception of the SLC program. The two most significant changes were the establishment of Freshman Academies (with teacher Common Planning Time) and Student Advisories. In addition, four major themes (collaboration, communication, personalization, and relationships) of social capital theory emerged as significant components of the SLC Program. Discussion of these findings and the implications of these findings will be discussed in Chapter Five.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

Chapter Five provides a summary of the key findings of this study and highlights implications for the literature and the theoretical framework relative to these findings. Chapter 5 also provides implications for educational practice and implications for research. The purpose of this case study was to investigate which aspects of the high school SLC program educators deem critical and how SLC practices can be improved. This qualitative descriptive single-case study was designed to analyze teacher, counselor, and administrator perceptions around SLC practices in a large suburban southeastern New England school district. Data was obtained through document analysis, historical quantitative data analysis, and a semi-structured focus group interview (the primary data source).

Although the district’s SLC program has been an agent of high school change during recent years, this process has been difficult and complex. This researcher sought to define the changes that took place and to understand how these changes occurred. The purpose of this descriptive case study was to understand the changes that have taken place through implementation of SLC initiatives at the high school level within this particular school district; and, more importantly, a better understanding of the process by which these changes have occurred. This was achieved by gaining an in-depth understanding of these processes from the different educators involved. The central phenomenon of this study was the SLC school change process, studied through the theoretical lens of social capital theory. This researcher evaluated the SLC high school reform process, through case study research, with the goal of developing future programmatic improvements. The ultimate goal was to utilize this information to improve future SLC operations, certainly within the district under study, and hopefully, through the
sharing of research, beyond it. The research was guided by Coleman’s (1988) theoretical concept of social capital with three primary questions:

- In what ways did high school attendance, suspension, retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data change from 2004 to 2012 for the school district under study?
- How have changes to existing practices been implemented since the inception of the SLC program?
- How do educators perceive the effectiveness of the SLC program?

Table 6 summarizes the research findings by research question and provides a visual display highlighting the connections to some of the significant related literature as well as the theoretical framework. Each research question reflected key findings that were grounded in the literature. In addition, the findings from the second and third research questions show a significant relationship to the theoretical framework of social capital.
## Table 6 Summary of Research Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Finding</th>
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<th>Theoretical Framework</th>
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| In what ways did high school attendance, suspension, retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data change from 2004 to 2012 for the school district under study? | #1: There were positive trends in high school retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data from 1997 to 2012.  
#6: Overall, increases have been seen in students achieving proficient and advanced status, and decreases in the number of students in warning/failing status on state testing.  
#7: Achievement gaps persist in special education and low-income subgroups despite SLC interventions. | Fowler & Wahlberg (1991)  
Heck & Mayor (1993)  
Huang & Howley (1993)  
Legters (1999)  
Murray (2008)  
Coleman (1988)  
Onyx and Bullen (2000)  
Paxton (2002)  
Knoke (1990)  
Lin, Cook & Burt (2001) |
| How have changes to existing practices been implemented since the inception of the SLC program? | #2: Changes to existing practices since the inception of the SLC program have been implemented through on-going professional development around key SLC changes. The two key changes that have been implemented since the inception of the SLC program were the establishment of Freshman Academies (with teacher Common Planning Time) and Student Advisories. | Bernstein, et al. (2008)  
Cotton (2001)  
Raywid (1999)  
Coleman (1988)  
Onyx and Bullen (2000)  
Paxton (2002)  
Knoke (1990)  
Lin, Cook & Burt (2001) |
| How do educators perceive the effectiveness of the SLC program?                    | #3: Four major themes (collaboration, communication, personalization, and relationships) of Social Capital Theory emerged as significant components of the SLC Program.  
#4: A supportive transition from middle to high school assists students in getting off to a strong start in high school.  
#5: A challenge facing schools utilizing the Freshman Academy model is replicating the successful structures and conditions in place for freshmen, seeking ways to provide better support for all students. | Cotton (1998, 2001)  
Darling-Hammond at al. (2002)  
Felner et al. (2007)  
Honig (2009)  
Lee & Friedrich (2007)  
Levine (2011)  
Oxley (2008)  
Oxley & Kassieh (2008)  
Raywid (1999)  
Granovetter (1985)  
Knoke (1990)  
Putnam (1995) |
Research Question 1

In what ways did high school attendance, suspension, retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data change from 2004 to 2012 for the school district under study?

- Finding #1: There were positive trends in high school retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data from 1997 to 2012.
- Finding #6: Overall, increases have been seen in students achieving proficient and advanced status, and decreases in the number of students in warning/failing status on state testing.
- Finding #7: Achievement gaps persist in special education and low-income subgroups despite SLC interventions.

Literature. There is significant evidence to demonstrate that large comprehensive high schools do not serve the needs of a growing number of students (Legters, 1999; Murray, 2008) and often exacerbate discipline and attendance issues. Several large-scale studies have compared student performance in large and small schools (Fowler & Wahlberg, 1991; Heck & Mayor, 1993; Huang & Howley, 1993; Lee & Smith, 1997). Their findings reveal that students at all grade levels learn more in smaller schools than in large schools.

Lee and Smith conducted a significant study (cited 466 times in the literature) in 1995 titled Effects of High School Restructuring and Size on Early Gains in Achievement and Engagement. This study assessed the impact on tenth grade students of attending high schools whose practices are consistent with the school restructuring movement. The general purpose was to investigate how reform practices that are consistent with the school-restructuring movement are taking hold in the nation's high schools and to evaluate how these organizational practices
affect students' learning. The authors used base-year NELS (National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988) data which resulted in a sample of 11,794 sophomores in 820 high schools (Lee and Smith, 1993).

The results from Lee and Smith’s studies revealed that students' gains in achievement and engagement were significantly higher in schools with restructuring practices and lower in schools without reforms. Higher and more socially equitable engagement and achievement were consistently associated with smaller high schools. Results provided empirical support for a broad policy of school reform that would move schools toward a communal organizational form and away from the bureaucratic form that has characterized the comprehensive high school for over a century. They also suggested that schools should target their reform efforts to a modest number of communal practices - practices that probably should be adopted neither singly, nor serially, nor in large numbers to showcase a school's superficial commitment to reform. Most importantly, the results from this selection of small school research, including Lee and Smith’s seminal article, provided solid support for the movement toward SLCs.

As a result, many education reformers strongly support creating smaller schools. Still, as Raywid (1998) points out, although research does support the benefits of smaller schools, there are also a considerable number of large schools that are already functioning. Consequently, schools turn toward the creation of within-school subunits. By breaking large schools into smaller subunits, practitioners hope to reduce the experienced size of school, despite the actual building size.

Based on this researcher’s findings, it is evident that there were positive trends in high school retention, graduation, drop-out, post high school plan rates and state testing data from 1997 to 2012. Specifically, graduation rates increased by 4.75% from 2006 to 2012, the dropout
rate decreased by 2.75% from 2004 to 2012, the retention rate decreased by 1.6% from 2007 to 2012, the postsecondary attendance rate increased by 19% from 2001 to 2012, high school state testing proficiency data increased by 54% in English Language Arts and 57% in mathematics from 1998 to 2012. Overall increases have been seen in students achieving proficient and advanced status and in decreases in the number of students in the warning/failing status on state testing. High school attendance and suspension rates remained relatively stable from 2003 to 2012. It is important to note that this quantitative data analysis was not a correlational study. There were likely many confounding factors contributing to the patterns and trends across these key SLC data points.

Strong evidence that smaller schools can narrow the achievement gap among white, middle-class/affluent students and ethnic minority and poor students has led to the creation of hundreds of smaller schools in large cities around the United States, including Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Seattle, Dallas, and others (Murray, 2008). Many of these schools have been in operation long enough that they have been the focus of research projects. The findings have led to the planning, creation and implementation of many more of these small, urban and suburban learning communities.

The district under study did not see a reduction in achievement gaps for low-income and special needs students that were set as part of the SLC Program goals. In fact, achievement gaps persisted in special education and low-income subgroups despite SLC interventions. School administrators and faculty expressed the feeling that these students are not pushed far enough or held to high expectations, and that with support students could achieve more. This is perceived as a challenge to educators as they continue to move forward with SLC efforts.
Research Question 2

*How have changes to existing practices been implemented since the inception of the SLC program?*

- Finding #2: Changes to existing practices since the inception of the SLC program have been implemented through on-going professional development around key SLC changes. The two key changes that have been implemented since the inception of the SLC program were the establishment of Freshman Academies (with teacher Common Planning Time) and Student Advisories.

**Literature.** The US Department of Education’s Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) Grants Program assists high schools of more than 1,000 students with funding to implement and enhance SLCs. Although the need for SLCs has been established in the literature, what accurately defines an SLC? Cotton (2001) defines a small learning community as “any separately defined, individualized learning unit within a larger school setting … [wherein] 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” (p. 7). SLCs are sometimes referred to schools-within-a school (SWAS), schools-within-a-building (SWAB), clusters, pods, academies, or houses (Cotton, 2001). Raywid (1999) noted ambiguity in identifying specific elements of SLCs, as the organizational structures vary among schools, depending on districts’ configurations. Regardless of the terminology, small instructional settings are conducive to fostering a sense of connectedness to school.

Authorized in 2001 under the No Child Left Behind Act, the SLC program was designed to provide local education agencies with funds to plan, implement, or expand SLCs in large high schools of 1,000 students or more (Bernstein et al., 2008). The SLC legislation allows local
education agencies to implement the most suitable structure or combination of structures and strategies to meet their needs. SLC structures include career academies, freshman academies, house plans, schools-within-a-school structures, teacher-student advisory programs and magnet schools.

According to document review and focus group analysis, the Freshman Academy and the Student Advisory program were the two most significant SLC structures in the district under study. The Freshman Academy with its team teaching model, teacher common planning time and academic supports and interventions provides a supportive transition from middle to high school and assists students in getting off to a strong start in high school. Student advisories are a significant component of building trusting relationships between teachers and students and help to continue personalization beyond the ninth grade year. The collaboration, communication, personalization and relationship-building that is fostered through these two SLC structures are perceived by educators as being highly beneficial to students. This is rooted in social capital theory and is explained in further detail in the section below as well as in the findings for research question 3.

**Theoretical Framework.** Broadly, social capital refers to the social relationships among people that enable productive outcomes (Szreter as cited in Schuller, Baron & Field, 2000). Social networks are the foundation of social capital. Social networks simultaneously capture individuals and social structure, thus serving as a vital conceptual link between actions and structural constraints, between micro- and macro-level analyses, and between relational and collective dynamic processes (Lin, Cook & Burt, 2001). One needs to be cognizant of the dual significance of the structural features of the social networks and the resources embedded in the
networks as defining elements of social capital. The term social capital refers to those stocks of social trust, norms, and networks that people can draw upon to solve common problems.

The structural features of the Freshman Academy and the Student Advisory program, coupled with the social networks embedded within these structures, are defining elements of social capital in the SLC program. There are many possible representations of social capital. Social capital can be seen in terms of five dimensions: first, networks - lateral associations that vary in density and size, and occur among both individuals and groups; second, reciprocity - expectation that in short or long term kindness and services will be returned; third, trust-willingness to take initiatives (or risk) in a social context based on assumption that others will respond as expected; fourth, social norms - the unwritten shared values that direct behavior and interaction; and fifth, personal and collective efficacy - the active and willing engagement of citizens within participative community (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Paxton, 2002). These five dimensions manifested themselves in various combinations and shaped the interaction amongst students, teachers, counselors, administrators, parents and community members during the SLC implementation process. Through the networks established through the Freshman Academy and the Student Advisory program, social capital can be seen to reside in the relations and not in the individuals themselves (Coleman, 1988).

Research Question 3

*How do educators perceive the effectiveness of the SLC program?*

- Finding #3: Four major themes (collaboration, communication, personalization, and relationships) of Social Capital Theory emerged as significant components of the SLC Program.
a. Educators articulated that the networks that were established through collaboration and the professional development provided to build collaboration skills, helped to make it effective and helpful for students.

b. Educators believed that school to student and school to family communication was enhanced through SLC strategies.

c. Educators believe there has been a strong focus on personalizing the students’ educational experience and that they have generally been able to get to know many of their students more thoroughly throughout the years during SLC implementation.

d. Advisory was noted by educators as a significant component of building trusting relationships between teachers and students.

- Finding #4: A supportive transition from middle to high school assists students in getting off to a strong start in high school.

- Finding #5: A challenge facing schools utilizing the Freshman Academy model is replicating the successful structures and conditions in place for freshmen, seeking ways to provide better support for all students.

**Literature.** Transforming a traditionally structured large high school into an SLC requires more than funding and reallocation of district resources. According to Diana Oxley (2008) of Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, the following five domains of practice are essential in transforming high schools into SLCs: interdisciplinary teaching and learning teams; rigorous, relevant curriculum and instruction; inclusive program and instructional practices; SLC-based continuous program improvement; and building and district support for SLCs.
The literature of SLC movement from 1984 to present substantiates the validity of SLCs in secondary school redesign. Smaller environments facilitate the opportunities for collegiality among teachers, personalized teacher-student relationships, and curricula redesign (Cotton, 1998; Cotton, 2001; Raywid, 1999). The numerous recommendations and essential components prescribed to effectively transform high schools into SLCs requires ongoing reevaluation of each SLCs problematic areas and best practices, to ensure forward momentum in transforming schools into viable, constructive learning environments that will prepare students for lifelong active participation in an ever-changing global society.

SLC strategies have the potential to promote learning environments that are more personalized and that encourage students to work to higher standards; however, they must be taken in the context of the typically slow pace of significant educational reform (Darling-Hammond at al., 2002; Felner et al., 2007; Lee & Friedrich, 2007; Oxley & Kassisieh, 2008; Ready & Lee, 2008). Despite the many tasks facing large high schools and the challenges posed by limited budgets and incompatibilities with district systems, many SLC schools are quickly able to establish strong and supportive school climates with a focus on improving student academic achievement (Honig, 2009; Levine, 2011).

A key finding of this case study was that a supportive transition from middle to high school assists students in getting off to a strong start in high school. This adds to the literature around the positive effects of SLC academy models. The Freshman Academy structure, with its built-in student interventions, has demonstrated a positive impact on student achievement. The team teaching structure, common planning time and additional academic supports and interventions were effective built-in structures of the Freshman Academy.
Increasing student achievement and creating a school climate that fosters a personalized learning environment for every student (built on a foundation of student, staff, family, business and community partnerships) were two of the key SLC goals for the district under study. The focus group data and document analysis corroborate the finding that collaboration, communication, personalization and relationship-building were significant components of the SLC Program. Educators find these aspects of the SLC Program contributed to its effectiveness. Moreover, while the quantitative data analysis could not be considered correlational, it is important to note the positive patterns and trends in high school retention, graduation, drop-out, post high-school plan rates and state testing data from 1998-2012.

Another challenge facing schools utilizing the Freshman Academy model is replicating the successful structures and conditions in place for freshmen, seeking ways to provide better support for all students. It is difficult to replicate the team teaching structure, common planning time and academic supports and interventions for students in grades 10 through 12, primarily because of scheduling constraints. Interestingly, one of the high schools involved in this study piloted a Sophomore Academy for two years, but found that it had a detrimental effect on student schedules and was forced to discontinue it. Scheduling tenth grade students with a team of core academic teachers put too many restrictions on other aspects of the high school master schedule. This resulted in students at all high school grade levels having difficulty being scheduled into their optimal courses of choice. Due to these scheduling limitations the Sophomore Academy was discontinued.

**Theoretical Framework.** The SLC movement is a contemporary progressive educational reform strategy that has its theoretical foundation rooted in social capital theory, which has shown that social ties play a key role in both educational outcomes and school reforms
Theorists of this framework posit that school size has considerable impact on how students form social ties. Social capital refers to the intangible resources embedded within interpersonal relationships of social institutions. Social capital refers to the social relationships among people that enable productive outcomes (Szreter as cited in Schuller, Baron & Field, 2000). Social networks are the foundation of social capital. Social networks simultaneously capture individuals and social structure, thus serving as a vital conceptual link between actions and structural constraints, between micro- and macro-level analyses, and between relational and collective dynamic processes (Lin, Cook & Burt, 2001).

Social networks and structures and the development of trusting relationships played a significant role in the SLC Program of the school district under study. Trust, a moral resource and an asset that increases rather than decreases with use and time, tends to increase when agreements and activities are embedded within larger structures of personal relations and social networks (Granovetter, 1985). Examples of norms which build trust are: collaboration, flexibility, respect for the community, attention to process, dialogue, reflection and relationship-building.

Four major themes (collaboration, communication, personalization, and relationships) of social capital theory emerged as significant components of the SLC Program. The two key SLC structures that contributed to this were the establishment of Freshman Academies (with teacher Common Planning Time) and Student Advisories. The Freshman Academy has become ingrained in the high school structure and is viewed as a best practice in the district. The Freshman Academy structure with its built-in student interventions has demonstrated a positive impact on student achievement. The team teaching structure, common planning time and additional academic supports and interventions were effective built-in structures of the Freshman
Academy. The Student Advisory program was noted by educators as a significant component of building trusting relationships between teachers and students. The Student Advisory program implemented by the high schools is seen as a way to strengthen connectedness between adults and students while helping to foster a personalized and supportive school culture.

Social capital theory posits that generally, the stronger networks are in a society or organization, the more likely that citizens or members will cooperate for mutual benefit. This positive result of social networks emerges because networks foster reciprocity, facilitate communication, increase the cost to defectors, and increase trust and willingness to collaborate (Putnam, 1995). The SLC Program in the district under study has established strong networks in the high schools through the Freshman Academy, the Student Advisory program and additional academic supports and interventions. These included the establishment of credit recovery and academic intervention programs in core subjects, adding special education support personnel (two per school), implementing strategies to increase parental and community involvement, establishing Senior Projects curriculum and program, and introducing family support programs for postsecondary application and financial aid processes.

In the context of education, social capital in the forms of parental expectations, obligations, and social networks that exist within the family, school, and community are important for student success. These variations in academic success can be attributed to parents' expectations and obligations for educating their children; to the network and connections among families whom the school serves; to the disciplinary and academic climate at school; and to the cultural norms and values that promote student efforts. The concept of social capital is a useful theoretical construct for explaining the disparities in students' educational performance among different schools, school districts and communities.
Based on this researcher's findings, it is evident that the educators find many aspects of the SLC program to be effective. Focus group analysis determined four key themes - *Collaboration, Communication, Personalization* and *Relationships* – that were central to the effectiveness of the SLC program. These four themes that emerged from the focus group analysis are rooted in the theoretical framework of social capital theory. The Freshman Academy Model and the Advisory Program were the two key SLC programs that were deemed most effective by educators in the focus group. Document analysis corroborates focus group findings related to educator perceptions regarding SLC program effectiveness.

Educators articulated that the networks that were established through collaboration and the professional development provided to build collaboration skills, helped to make it effective and helpful for students. This was primarily achieved through Teacher Common Planning Time in the Freshman Academy. The design of the Freshman Academy incorporates, fosters and supports collaboration among the team of teachers, counselors and administrators.

Educators believed that school-to-student and school-to-family communications were enhanced through SLC strategies. The Freshman Academy and the Advisory Program were significant contributors to improving and increasing communications from school to student and families. The schools also targeted families through other SLC outreach strategies, including mailings, technology (school websites, teacher blogs, group e-mails, Twitter, Facebook and a new student information system with electronic teacher grade books), and an increased number of informational parent evening programs. It was also noted that improved communication practices have helped to establish a culture of expectation around communications, which has led to increasing teacher and student accountability.
Educators believe there has been a strong focus on personalizing the students’ educational experience and that they have generally been able to get to know many of their students more thoroughly throughout the years during SLC implementation. The Freshman Academy and the Advisory Program have been the cornerstone of personalization efforts in the high schools.

Advisory was noted by educators as a significant component of building trusting relationships between teachers and students. The Student Advisory program implemented by the high schools is seen as a way to strengthen connectedness between adults and students while helping to foster a personalized and supportive school culture. Administrators noted that it has not been necessary to convince anyone about the value of advisories and that both teachers and students have seen the positive impact and benefits.

Networks signify patterns of communication among actors within systems and they connect actors in relationships (Knoke, 1990). Generally, the stronger networks are in an organization, the more likely it is that members will cooperate for mutual benefit. This positive result of social networks emerges because networks foster reciprocity, facilitate communication, increase the cost to defectors, and increase trust and willingness to collaborate (Putnam, 1995). It is helpful to recognize the distinction between horizontal networks, those formed between people of equivalent status or power, and vertical networks, those formed between people of unequal status of power (Putnam, 1995). Both are necessary to make social change but they influence the change process in different ways, with the former usually increasing breadth of support among constituents, and the latter connecting those with less power (e.g., students) to those with more power to make change (e.g., school faculty and administration). Both horizontal and vertical networks were established through SLC strategies. The Freshman Academy model helped to
establish vertical student to faculty networks, while the Student Advisory program helped to establish both vertical and horizontal (student-to-student) networks.

It is also important to recognize the relationship of networks to learning communities, which might be described as a progression from loose interactions among people to networks as formalized, trusting relationships based on common interests. The ideal state of which can be described as formalized learning communities, broken down into structured networks of people based on common interests, with trust and commitment to working together, using shared and agreed upon norms to meet established goals (Putnam, 1995). Both the Freshman Academy and the Student Advisory program were described by educators as having the characteristics of formalized learning communities based on trusting relationships and common interests.

This researcher examined and utilized the concept of social capital in a case study analysis of the high school SLC Program in a suburban public school district in the northeast United States. This study highlights the importance of social capital in educating youth. Social capital within and around the adult community of the school showed evidence of considerable value to students. Specifically, the social capital that can be built though SLC strategies related to collaboration, communication, personalization and relationship-building helps contribute to a climate of respect and trust which may help to enhance student academic outcomes.

**Implications of Findings for Educational Practice**

The ability to allocate resources in accordance with the particular needs of SLCs appears crucial to realizing the full potential. Just as existing patterns of resource allocation have evolved to support comprehensive school organization, so too do resources need to be reallocated to support SLC practices, such as lower student/staff ratios, more instructional time devoted to the
core curriculum, and greater integration of special needs instruction with general education instruction. This appears to be true at the district level as well as at the building level.

In looking ahead, a key question arises concerns the extent to which SLC schools expect to sustain the changes they have made at both the school and classroom levels after their SLC funding has run out. The implication for this site is that the district must work on sustainability of current SLC initiatives despite the disappearance of federal funding in support of the program. Evidence from the document analysis and focus group suggests that through the operational budget the district has put in place a sustainability plan that includes a significant amount of continued funding of major SLC initiatives, such as the Freshman Academy, the Student Advisory program and other key SLC staff positions, including credit recovery and special needs personnel.

The district must also work in a creative fashion in order to find the much needed time that teachers desire in order for collaboration to occur. The people working in the district have spent many years developing some of the key features of SLCs. Although time was set aside for teachers at this site to collaborate within the Freshman Academy model, all teachers echoed that they needed additional time to communicate with one another at the other high school grade levels. As this site moves forward in its efforts to reach all learners, it will be imperative that structures are put in place to support all teachers through collaboration.

District support for SLCs, particularly instructional innovation, is most effective when it takes the form of a professional development strategy that strengthens the effectiveness of collaboration among SLC team members (Supovitz & Christman, 2005). Such a strategy legitimizes SLC leadership, creates opportunities for SLC teachers to meet as a team, and helps teams secure professional development tailored to their needs. Achievement gaps persist in
special education and low-income subgroups despite SLC interventions for the district under study. School administrators and faculty expressed the feeling that these students are not pushed far enough or held to high expectations, and with support could achieve more. This is perceived as a challenge to educators as they continue to move forward with SLC efforts. It would be prudent for the site to develop an effective district professional development strategy that further builds SLC teams’ capacities to improve their practices by helping teams develop data on their students’ achievement. At a minimum, the district support teams’ should examine their practice in relation to student outcomes by disaggregating school-level student data by low-income and special needs sub-groups and by making these data available on a timely basis.

Districts and schools need to assess their own managerial relationships. Where the district and the high schools were in agreement on SLC goals and strategies, and where the district assisted schools in implementation rather than mandated changes, implementation was more likely to have been reported as successful. In pursuing SLCs, districts and schools need to be mindful of what they are requesting teachers and other staff to undertake, because restructuring high schools occurs on top of the regular school day. At a minimum, districts need to coordinate other district and state-mandated reform efforts with schools’ SLC reform efforts.

Implications of Findings for Research

High school reform is a continual exploration and a never-ending process, which requires educators to constantly examine processes for improving student achievement. The purpose of this descriptive case study was to understand the changes that have taken place through implementation of SLC initiatives at the high school level within this particular school district; and, more importantly, a better understanding of the process by which these changes have
occurred. This was the initial stage of research and the following are this researcher's recommendations for further research:

1. A more detailed study of the implementation of SLCs within the school district under study should be done with inputs and feedback from more teachers, students, parents and community members to determine the effectiveness of the model. Perspectives of all of the different stakeholders within the high school community would provide the school district with more reliable information on whether or not the SLC model had been properly implemented. This type of study could be strongly grounded in the theoretical framework of social capital theory.

2. Further research should be conducted to examine the relationship between SLC implementation and attendance, suspension, retention, graduation, drop-out, and post high school plan rates, including scores on state tests as disaggregated by low-income and special needs sub-groups.

3. A study should be done to assess the effect of the principal as the instructional leader in the success of the SLCs. The role of the principal is central to the success of any high school and its SLC implementation.

4. Further research should be conducted focusing on leadership changes and how the dynamics of these changes impact SLC interventions.

5. Further qualitative research should be conducted to examine administrators’ perspectives regarding potential barriers to effective implementation of SLCs.

6. Further qualitative research should be conducted to examine teacher views regarding heterogeneous versus homogenous student grouping to identify potential barriers to success when developing SLCs.
7. Further research should be conducted examining the different curriculum models used in various SLC programs across the country to identify whether particular models produce better student academic outcomes.

8. Further research should be conducted on multiple school districts with successful SLC Programs to develop a best practices model. This research will aid in the understanding of what makes SLCs effective for students over an extended period of time.

9. It would be useful to assess the effectiveness of freshman academies. Is the restructuring of courses and reorganization of staff into self-contained groups adequate to improve promotion rates and reduce dropout rates? Is regular (daily or weekly) teacher common planning time sufficient for educators to address the needs of struggling students and foster curriculum improvements? Do freshman academies need other program characteristics (e.g., focused counseling for all students, not only those most at risk, extended time for core subjects, and student advisories) to overcome the limitations of the conventional organization of the freshman class?

10. It would be useful to assess the effectiveness of advisory programs. Advisories are implemented by schools as a method to bolster connectedness between adults and students and foster and adopt a more personalized and supportive school culture. Advisories are generally characterized by consistent meetings between an advisor and a student or group of students to provide academic and social support. Although surveys and self-reports show the value of these programs, there are few rigorous studies from which to determine the effects on student outcomes. Several issues make objectively evaluating advisories difficult, including: lack of pre- and post-test data or control groups; divergent goals and components that make it challenging to compare results at
different schools; difficulty distinguishing advisories from other school-based strategies for increasing personalization; and a lack of formalized curricula and/or common definitions. It would be advantageous to conduct a longitudinal study of students' perceptions of personalization, highlighting advisories as a reform strategy and their effect on students’ academic progress and outcomes.

11. Educators need professional development opportunities specifically targeted toward the principles of school restructuring for or school staff to become sufficiently acquainted with the new school culture under SLCs. It would be useful to conduct further research on the effectiveness of professional development and training for educators on SLC strategies.

12. This study was conducted in the New England region of the United States. Similar future studies should be conducted in other school districts and in other regions of the country.

13. More extensive longitudinal research should be conducted as more data becomes available to determine the effectiveness of the SLCs.

14. In general, further research on the relationship between school size and a broad range of educational outcomes is required, using both quantitative and more in-depth qualitative analyses. It is important that future research builds on existing research both substantively and methodologically.

Conclusion

The four themes that emerged from the focus group analysis – Collaboration, Communication, Personalization and Relationships – are rooted in social capital theory. The use of this theoretical lens was valuable in that it helped to amplify some of the most useful conditions for students to be successful in a large high school. Transforming public education
requires the establishment of connectedness and trust among and between students and adults in
and around the school community. These conditions can be achieved through the implementation
of SLC strategies that seek to break the large school down into smaller units. The stronger the
networks are in an organization, the more likely that the members will cooperate for mutual
benefit. The learning communities that develop in schools can progress from loose interactions
of people to networks as formalized, trusting relationships based on common goals and interests.
When looked at within the context of the SLC Program of the district under study, social capital
can be seen in the form of student and parent expectations, obligations, and social networks that
exist within the family, school and community that are important for student success. The
concept of social capital is a useful theoretical construct for explaining the disparities in students’
educational performance. At these particular high schools the disciplinary climate and the
academic norms established by the school community and the mutual trust between home and
school are major forms of social capital. This district’s SLC efforts have been geared toward
personalizing education, grounded in social capital theory, to help establish the right conditions
for enhanced student achievement.

Much of the site-specific data as well as the transferable research findings gleaned from
this study are encouraging, although there are some notable concerns, areas for improvement and
many implications for future studies. Ultimately, this research may provide a useful avenue to
promote more effective implementation of SLC models as a serious component of high school
reform efforts. SLCs are innovative and unique reform measures that can provide students with a
more personalized learning environment in order to diminish the negative effects that are often
associated with many of today’s larger public high schools. It is not cost-effective or realistic to
think that the United States will create smaller public high schools in an effort to improve student
achievement. It is more reasonable to look at creative ways to break our larger high schools into smaller units for the academic benefit of students. This may help move beyond the traditional one size fits all approach to schooling and offer more student supports and choices with expanded learning options. These types of models can be a significant factor in generating positive student outcomes.
References


Appendices

Appendix A
Permission Letter Superintendent of Schools

May 15, 2013

Dear Dr. Maestas,

As you know from recent conversations I am in the final phase of writing my doctoral thesis proposal at Northeastern University. The purpose of this letter is to request consent to conduct a case study of the Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) Program.

The purpose of this descriptive case study is to understand the changes that have taken place through implementation of SLC initiatives at the high school; and, more importantly, a better understanding of the process by which these changes have occurred. This will be achieved by gaining an in-depth understanding of it from the different educators involved. At this stage in the research, the central phenomenon of this study is the SLC school change process, studied through the theoretical lens of social capital theory. The ultimate goal is to utilize this information to improve future SLC operations, certainly within the district, and hopefully, through the sharing of research, beyond it.

I propose to use the following data sets: quantitative historical data analyses, document analysis, and an educator focus group. The primary data collection source will be information garnered from focus group interviews with school district personnel (teachers and administrators) involved in the SLC process. I plan to conduct a small focus group interview of purposefully selected, willing participants whom I feel will openly engage in discussion. The focus group will consist of 8-10 individuals, who will remain anonymous. Prior to beginning data collection, Northeastern University’s IRB will have approved all protocol cover letters, consent and assent forms, and data collection instruments.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me directly at (508) 224-5025 or via e-mail at halpin.s@husky.neu.edu, or my advisor, Dr. Margaret Dougherty at (781)-340-6996 or via e-mail at m.dougherty@neu.edu. Thank you for forwarding the district’s research approval form, which I have attached.

Sincerely,

Sean X. Halpin
Student Support Services
Appendix B
Participant Recruitment Letter (e-mail)

May 15, 2013

Dear Educators,

As many of you know, I am currently pursuing my doctorate in education from Northeastern University, and, as part of this pursuit, will be conducting a research study on the influence of the Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) Program. The purpose of this case study is to provide a theoretically framed, research-based analysis of the PPS SLC Program.

I am currently looking for teachers, counselors and administrators who have been actively involved in the SLC program and process. Participating in this study will entail engaging in a focus group interview (to gain a better understanding of educator perceptions of the SLC Program) and giving permission to the researcher to audiotape your discussions for later transcription and analysis.

Please consider this a formal request for your participation. The focus group session will last approximately one hour, and will take place at one of the high schools at a convenient location and time for those participating. Please be aware that agreeing or not agreeing to participate in this study will in no way impact your work here in the school or our relationship as colleagues. Also, any participation in the study will be completely confidential; names and other personal information will not be used; likewise the school will not be named. You can refuse to answer any question and you may discontinue your participation in this research program at any time without penalty or costs of any nature, character, or kind.

Please respond via e-mail to halpin.s@husky.neu.edu if you are interested or have any questions. Thank you in advance for your time.

Sean X. Halpin
Appendix C
Signed Informed Consent Document of School Staff Participants

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Investigator Name: Sean Halpin (Margaret Dougherty, Academic Advisor)
Title of Project: SLC – A Case Study of Educator Perceptions

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You have been asked to participate in this study because you have been actively involved in the district SLC Program.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this case study is to provide a theoretically framed, research-based analysis of the district SLC Program.

What will I be asked to do?
The researcher will be looking for you to participate in the following ways:
1. Participate in a focus group session that will be audio taped and transcribed
2. Read over transcribed audiotapes to ensure accuracy

Where will this take place and how much time will it take?
The focus group session will last approximately one hour, and will take place at one of the high schools in a convenient location for those participating, and at a convenient time for those participating.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are no significant risks involved in being a participant in this study.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. It is hoped that the results of the study may illuminate SLC best practices, while shedding light on components warranting attention to ensure the SLC process maintains forward momentum.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in the study will be completely confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for all study participants. Only the researcher will be aware of the participants' identities. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you, the school or any individual in any way. All audiotapes will be destroyed following transcription and analysis.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
You are not required to take part in this study. If you do not want to participate, you do not sign this form.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Participation in this study is voluntary, and your participation or non-participation will not in any way affect other relationships (e.g., employer, school, etc.). You can refuse to answer any question and you may discontinue your participation in this research program at any time without penalty or costs of any nature, character, or kind.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

Sean Halpin  
Northeastern University  
College of Professional Studies  
Doctor of Education Program  
Work # (774) 413-9255  
E-mail: halpin.s@husky.neu.edu

Dr. Margaret Dougherty  
Northeastern University  
College of Professional Studies  
Doctor of Education Program  
(781) 340 6996  
E-mail: m.dougherty@neu.edu

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115 tel. 617-373-4588, email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

There is no cost to participate in this study.

I have read, understood, and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I agree to participate in this study on a voluntary basis.

____________________________________     ____________________
Research Participant (Signature)     Date

____________________________________
Research Participant (Printed Name)

____________________________________     ____________________
Signature of the researcher, Sean X. Halpin     Date
Opening script:
“Good afternoon and welcome to our session. Thank you for taking the time to join me to talk about the Smaller Learning Communities Program so that I can better understand your perceptions of it. You have been asked to participate in this study because you have been actively involved in the SLC Program. I would like to know what you like, what you don't like, and how the program might be improved.

I would just like to go over the guidelines for this focus group before we start. There are no wrong answers, but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. You don't need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views. Keep in mind that I am just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful. I am tape recording the session because I do not want to miss any of your comments. Please feel free talk to each other as you respond to the questions, but try to allow one person to speak at a time. I ask that you turn off your phones or pagers. If you cannot, and if you must respond to a call, please do so as quietly as possible and rejoin us as quickly as you can. We will be on a first name basis this afternoon, but I will not use any names in my reports. You may be assured of complete confidentiality. My role as moderator will be to guide the discussion. Ultimately I hope that this research will help to strengthen our planning for future programs. Well, let's begin.”

SLC Program Goals:
1. To increase student achievement for all while closing existing achievement gaps.
2. To prepare all students for success in post-secondary education and employment.
3. To provide all students with a rigorous, relevant program of studies.
4. To create a school climate that provides a personalized learning environment for every student, built on a foundation of student, staff, family, business and community partnerships.

Staff Members’ Focus Group Questions
- Questions 1a-e were developed from social capital theory.
- Questions 2-10 were developed from program goals and emergent themes as a result of the initial quantitative and qualitative data analyses. This provided the researcher with an opportunity to understand teacher, counselor and administrator perceptions of the SLC process and the changes that have occurred as a result.

1. What changes in your relationships or your interactions with students have occurred as a result of the SLC program?
   a. Do you have trusting relationships with students in the building?
   b. Are you comfortable developing trusting relationships with students?
   c. Have you provided advice on academic or school-related issues?
   d. Have you provided advice on personal (i.e., health, emotional, safety) issues?
   e. Are you familiar enough with the school, academically and socially to be able to provide students any advice they may need?
f. How do you let students know they can feel safe seeking you out for advice on personal issues?
g. Can you tell me about a time you offered important advice - and what the outcome of the situation was?
h. Do you believe your peers enjoy the same relationships (or lack of them) as you do?

2. What changes in your relationships or interactions with other teachers have resulted from the SLC program?

3. What changes in student learning have occurred in the last 5 years in the high schools? Do you see any connections between these changes and the SLC grant?

4. How has your teaching changed as a result of the SLC grant? What strategies are you learning from other teachers to improve your teaching?

5. How do you connect what you are teaching to other subjects? To your students’ future lives and careers?

6. How do you work with people from the community to improve students’ opportunities to succeed in careers and postsecondary education? How do you work with parents? How do you work with more reluctant parents or non-English speakers?

7. Counselors: Connecting with parents – what is done to form relationships? If you email back and forth with parents, what are the topics? Increasing parental connections is grant goal – any thoughts or recommendations?

8. What are the one or two best things about the Smaller Learning Communities in your school, and why? Are these successes being measured in some way? If so, how?

9. What are the one or two aspects of the Smaller Learning Communities that have been disappointing or in need of improvement, and why? Is data being collected about these aspects in some way? If so, how?

10. What one or two recommendations do you have for the ongoing implementation of the SLC concept at the high schools?
This climate review explored the high school’s strengths and concerns related to respect, fairness, safety, interpersonal connections, engagement of various stakeholders, expectations and accommodations for diversity. In the context of this activity, diversity was broadly defined to include factors such as socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, language dominance, gender and religion. Identifying what they called a “climate of disrespect,” administrators at the school and district levels were eager to identify and address ways to improve the school experience for students and staff.

Education Alliance staff employed data gathering strategies including (1) the design and administration of two surveys – one to students and one to staff, (2) focus group with students and staff (3) walk-through observations of the school during school hours, and (4) informal conversations with several school administrators and faculty. Data from all sources indicated that many of the students and staff were happy with aspects of the school and their experiences, but that significant issues were negatively affecting the school’s climate.

Staff and students agreed that rules felt unfairly administered. On a related note, improved discipline was most often cited in student responses to the open-ended item asking “…what can staff do to make this school a better place?” Discipline was widely perceived to be inadequate, frivolous and inconsistent, and this was seen to undermine the level of respect exhibited across the school. Students and staff were frustrated both by the prevalence of behavior in classrooms and other environments that detract and/or prevent learning, as well as the inaction or inability of the school to address the problem. By not effectively addressing discipline issues the high school and its staff were frustrated and losing the support of even those students who saw themselves as well served by the school and who might most willingly engage in efforts to improve other aspects of the school’s climate. Student comments challenged staff to demand respect from students as a requisite for establishing discipline. Administrative and staff capacities and time reviewed is insufficient to allow personnel to develop, guide, and support school wide disciplinary structures that are adequate meaningful consistent and fair.

Clearly, some students, and to a lesser extent, staff were experiencing the school differently than their peers. Students of color and male students had significantly more negative perceptions of many dimensions of school climate than did their white or female peers. Shifts in the type of socioeconomic diversity at the school were severely affecting the schools climate and had manifest implications for (1) students ability to participate in activities that reinforce student engagement in and with school, (2) students’ expectations regarding whether the college is a financial possibility, and (3) students and staff perceptions about who and what was to blame for the negative aspects of school climate.

Many of the mechanisms to correct for students’ differing experiences and for accommodating diversity were insufficiently resourced or developed at the school. Similarly, structures to ensure that all students were known or engaged by school staff were not sufficient.
Thirty-eight % of all students reported that there was not one adult at the school they would turn to if they felt troubled or upset. Staff reported that not knowing students was often a reason why staff did not engage in disciplinary actions.

Connections to and understanding of students’ homes and communities, while recognized as important, were also insufficiently developed. The school staff could not show the relevance of its curriculum, the appropriateness of student engagement opportunities, or the support of families in academic and disciplinary issues at school personnel do not know well the families in academic and disciplinary issues if school personnel do not know well the families and the context (e.g. neighborhoods, socioeconomic realities) within which those families live. Students explicitly and implicitly assert that being known by staff will improve the school climate and other data support that assumption. Students assume that meaningful relationships with school staff have potential benefits for themselves and their peers’ level of academic and extracurricular engagement. Similarly, their wish for credible and responsive discipline, one that takes individual circumstances into account, requires that staff know students.

Further, the condition of the high school’s physical plant undermines the ability of the school to foster respectful interactions and develop a positive school climate. Including the fact that students had no place to congregate comfortably. It was reported that the poor condition of the building fostered negative feelings about the school and led some students to question how much the school (i.e. the people who work in it and the community it serves) care about students and their education.

Several findings from this climate review study that could be used to the schools advantage: (1) many of the staff and students expressed positive feelings about the school and its potential, (2) students and staff agree on many of the problem diagnoses (i.e. the discipline is not fair, that students need to be more respectful, and that something needs to change), and (3) administrators and most staff encountered during the study expressed a sincere desire to identify key problems so that they can begin to address them proactively.
Appendix F
SLC Grant Goals and Key Activities

The four goals of this project are:
1. To increase student achievement for all while closing existing achievement gaps.
2. To prepare all students for success in post-secondary education and employment.
3. To provide all students with a rigorous, relevant program of studies.
4. To create a school climate that provides a personalized learning environment for every student, built on a foundation of student, staff, family, business and community partnerships.

Key Activities for Year 1:
- All 9th grade students in academies. All 9th grade students will be placed in smaller learning communities (academies) with academic supports in place. Academy staff will participate in training. 9th grade curriculum will be revised, as needed, to ensure rigor for all students. The academic support lab program will be implemented for 9th and 10th graders. Personalized progress plans will be implemented for 9th graders.
- Add transition coaches to grade 9.
- Add one special education teacher to each core team (2 per school).
- Planning for implementation of the 10th grade academy during year 2 begins (this activity will be modified).
- Curriculum development and planning for advisories begins, with the possibility of piloting during the second half of year one.
- Credit recovery and academic intervention programs are developed in science and expanded in ELA and math.
- Strategies to increase parental and community involvement are developed and implemented.

Key Activities for Year 2:
- All 9th and 10th grade students in academies.
- 10th grade academies are implemented.
- 10th grade curriculum is refined as needed to ensure rigor for all students.
- Advisories are implemented for 9th and 10th grade students.
- New schedule is implemented at both high schools.
- 10th grade academic support programs in reading and math are implemented.
- Credit recovery and academic intervention programs are implemented in science, and developed in social studies.
- The process of developing curricula for senior projects begins, including the establishment of community-based career advisory boards.
- Add community service or experience hours as a graduation requirement.
Key Activities for Year 3:

- All 9th and 10th grade students in academies, all 11th grade students in themed academies.
- 11th grade academies are implemented at both high schools, including the implementation of career internship programs.
- Advisories implemented for 11th grade.
- Planning begins for 12th grade academies.
- Credit recovery programs are implemented in social studies.
- Senior projects are implemented, with students in 11th grade beginning the process.
- Strategies to increase parental and community involvement are implemented and improved.

Key Activities for Year 4:

- All students and teachers in academies.
- Review and refine 12th grade curriculum, ensuring rigor and relevance in coursework and community-based learning experiences.
- Implement advisories for all students 9-12.
- Review and refine academic support programs.
- Introduce family support programs for postsecondary application and financial aid processes.

Key Activities for Year 5:

- Review of progress towards achievement of overall goals, with program adjustments as needed.
- Planning for full sustainability of all programs and structures beyond the life of the grant.
Appendix G
SLC Grant Organizational Structure

- **UCLA School Mgmt Team**
- **USDE Program Officer**
- **Assistant Superintendent Curr/Instr**
- **District Coordinators & Directors**
- **HS2 Principal & Admin. Team**
- **SLC Program Coordinator**
- **HS1 Principal & Admin. Team**
- **PSHS SLC Site Coordinator**
- **SLC Admin Assistant**
- **HS1 SLC Site Coordinator**
- **HS2 School Change Coach**
- **SLC Transition Coach**
- **HS1 Design Team**
- **SLC Transition Coach**
- **HS2 Design Team**
- **SLC Transition Coach**
- **Staff Students/Parents**
- **Staff Students/Parents**
Appendix H
SLC 5-Year Performance Benchmarks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome Measure/Performance Indicator</th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Year 3</th>
<th>Year 4</th>
<th>Year 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All students will achieve proficient or better status on the MCAS exam</td>
<td>+3%</td>
<td>+8%</td>
<td>+8%</td>
<td>+15%</td>
<td>Reach 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement gaps for all subgroups, measured by MCAS reading and math, will be closed</td>
<td>-15%</td>
<td>-15%</td>
<td>-15%</td>
<td>-15%</td>
<td>Gap closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students will be successful in 9th grade and move to the 10th grade on time</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>Reach 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students will graduate within five years</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>Reach 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students will take the SAT and be eligible for entrance into the college of their choice</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>Reach 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students will successfully complete one AP or dual credit course</td>
<td>+3%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>Reach 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of students entering postsecondary education will increase</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students will indicate they have at least one adult in the school who knows their interests and aspirations well, and helps them work towards success, as measured by student surveys</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>Reach 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and family partnerships will increase in number and scope, as measured by actual contact</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>+15%</td>
<td>+15%</td>
<td>+15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix I
Definitions for Key SLC Data Points

Graduation Rate: Indicates the percentage of students who graduate with a regular high school diploma within 4 years.

Dropout Rate: Indicates the percentage of students in grades 9-12 who dropped out of school between July 1 and June 30 prior to the listed year and who did not return to school by the following October 1. Dropouts are defined as students who leave school prior to graduation for reasons other than transfer to another school.
data as of: End of Year, October 1

Attendance: Attendance rate indicates the average percentage of days in attendance for students enrolled in grades PK - 12.
data as of: End of Year

In-School Suspension Rate: The percentage of enrolled students in grades 1-12 (including SP) who received one or more in-school suspensions.
data as of: Oct 1

Out-of-School Suspension Rate: The percentage of enrolled students in grades 1-12 (including SP) who received one or more out-of-school suspensions.
data as of: Oct 1

Retention Rate: The percentage of enrolled students in grades 1-12 who were repeating the grade in which they were enrolled the previous year.
data as of: Oct 1

Percent Proficient in ELA and Math: The percentage of students in Grade 10 scoring proficient or better on the MCAS exam.

Percent Postsecondary: Indicates the post-graduate intentions of high school graduates.
data as of: end of year

Percent Attending College: The percentage of students who enrolled in any postsecondary institution 4 months after graduation from high school

National Student Clearinghouse (2012). Herndon, VA.

All above data points excluding Percent Attending College obtained from: Massachusetts Department of Secondary and Elementary Education Student Information Management System (2013). Retrieved June 1, 2013 from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/
Appendix J
Focus Group Samples of Thematic Quotations

Collaboration

Participant 2: “And kids say that they know the teachers have common planning time, and so they’re going to talk about me, or that they know, they know that people are focused.”

Participant 8: “They also have to want to collaborate.”

Participant 8: “Teachers are looking out for them, we meet on them, and I think that continues through the years, so that they feel like they can reach out to teachers because they’ve had that experience in Freshman Academy.”

Participant 6: “You know, they have to be able to work as a team with other teachers.”

Participant 3: “The team has also had an opportunity to meet with the administrator, the house master, and now vice principal of the academy, and then they will get information to that person, whereas an administrator can then take it to the next level for health, emotional, safety issues. So you have that nice connection.”

Participant 4: “I think you almost have to, when we go about the process of picking teachers that should be working with freshmen, I think—I don’t think every teacher can work with freshmen. I think they have to be a specific type of individual. I don’t know if anybody agrees with that.”

Participant 5: “Someone comes to me and needs something and I can send them to guidance or to administration or whoever.”

Participant 2: “I think the freshman assistant principal has been key, because I remember my first year without that, which was an awful experience in my life, and they know that that individual is focused on their needs, and the teacher has a point person, so then it, it’s very quick, and they know they, the follow through is there and the consistency, and it’s, the person’s around all the time.”

Participant 2: “It was, it was just awful. There wasn’t the com, we put the common planning time in the first, like in November of that first year, because it was promised, and then it wasn’t put in. I shouldn’t-, you guys I think had it.”

Participant 2: “And it wasn’t put in. Teachers had duties that were supposed to; they just had the duty at the same time with 300 kids in the cafe. The discipline was out of control. Out, actually, kids skipping class, fights, smoking. I mean terrible. And then you saw an immediate shift, and the teachers felt supported, I felt.”

Participant 8: “With Freshman Academy I think that it was more, versus me individually giving advice, it was more of a team approach. And this is kind of a generic example, because it happened so many times that you would sit in a team meeting and just everybody would work together and try, especially with a failing student who could be salvaged, you know, they were still at that point. And just the student and the parent hearing what the options are and being encouraged and being given specific things that they can do to be more successful. And, you
know, for the most part, the vast majority of them could turn it around and be more successful in their sophomore year.”

Participant 5: “We all just are kind of, it’s corny to say, but a big happy family - well, sometimes happy family.”

Participant 3: “I think my observation would be relationship as an administrator working with the Freshman Academy would be because of that design, you have more conversations about curriculum, and then I observed a lot of conversations about assessment taking place amongst the teachers that were in each department in each one of the academies, each one of the teams. I think that provided them to have more time to spend to, to focus on some commonalities that they might want to try to address, some key standards that kids might all be struggling at, as a whole.”

Participant 6: “I think it’s been beneficial for the teachers to have a good relationship, also, as well as learn the school and the culture of the school and they’re ready to be advisors. Some of them are already asking for their curriculum, they’re so excited, so...”

Participant 3: “I think the Freshman Academy model has made students more accountable for specific things, because the conversations that staff have with each other about student work.”

Participant “Yeah, I think the team teachers challenge each other, too. There’s more accountability on the teachers to perform and have solid lessons for within their cohort of, of team teachers, because I think they know, they know what each other is doing, because the kids will say.”

Participant “They meet, the teachers meet here four days a week, interdisciplinary, their teams, and then one day a week all of the freshmen English teachers, all of the freshmen math, and those, those different monitors, they make, they have to update their blog, and I think all of that has been, they’ve all, we’ve had, they’ve had to update Aspen or, since it started, because they have that common planning time, and we monitor it, we check it regularly. But I think the whole focus of the building is more academic due to Freshman Academy, advisory, the culture, I mean the bar was raised.”

Participant 3: “I mean they have to work with three other people quite closely, four other people, really.”

Participant 2: “The SPED teacher. Quite close. And their guidance counselor and administrator. I mean more closely than they ever have before. And other teams, as well. I mean...”

Participant 2: “I think we’re ahead of the curve with technology integration thanks to the technology integration position, really, I know the administration worked with him, but he, we have scheduled technology meetings that we still have every month, for just the freshman teachers, and they share techniques and when he had learned the smart board thing, like he, I mean really, they were by far the most well versed in technology integration in the building.”

Participant 2: “They still do that, yeah. And so that was, and they’ve done, they did it, I’m going to go way back to the, the interdisciplinary project with the Utopia society and like they tried
stuff like that. I know right now the history and English on one team were grading papers together.”

Participant 5: “I think it’s easier too for the Academy teachers to do things like that because they have the same students all day long.”

Participant 5: “I think that freshman teachers, like I kind of answered the previous question, have that ability to do a little bit more interdisciplinary, they can, you know, really work with one another. I know that the blue team, that the history and English teachers work really closely together to write a research paper. So one teacher is going, you know, the more kind of structure of it, and another teacher is doing the content, but, you know, they’re working together to, to write that paper. So I think it’s easier for the teams to do interdisciplinary.”

Participant 8: “We also invite members from two local community colleges, Massasoit, the area colleges to sit with students, not that the students access them all that much during lunches, but hopefully that will develop over time - the military.”

Participant 8: “But, you know, it’s not just college, it’s also community college and work and military that we try to get in here.”

Participant 7: “Well, this perspective is more about the well-being of the student, and not so much future careers. But clearly, counselors spend a lot of time with collateral contacts, so with therapists, mentors, the star program, DCF.”

Participant 2: “I don’t know if it’s a community thing, but we’ve done a lot, I have a [inaudible] with the anti-bullying program at the college, and they, you know, we send kids, a train the trainer thing, but then they, you know, you have a presentation the freshman have [inaudible] on that too, constantly relearning. So that’s the big component.”

Participant 4: “Maybe that boy or girl really needed the academy but we didn’t know it, and they were just successful because they had five teachers, more than that, seven, I hope, that cared, that cared so much for them they said you know, I’m going to, I’m going to do well this year.”

Participant 4: “They’re all off at the same time and they’re able to all meet by discipline once a week or more if needed.”

Participant 2: “Yeah, that’s a, that’s a real plus that they’re all off, they’re all off together. Then they have their preps to compare…”

Participant 2: “I mean I’ve worked in a school without it, and it is intentional, it’s quick, it’s a great turnaround. The guidance, support, it is a team. I mean from the two guidance counselors to the sped, the assistant principal, and they, I mean they will have an answer on time and in a …everything is immediate. They communicate all of the time.”

Communication

Participant 4: “To be honest with you they know, you know, what’s going on with this kid, and it’s because they see them, they talk to the other teachers on their team about that student when
they have, you know, an issue, and they’re able to bring in a parent, when needed. And I think that all tends to make, hopefully, the student feel more welcome and comfortable in school.”

Participant 2: “The communication is immediate with the freshmen.”

Participant 6: “I really do see a difference with the communication and knowing the kids and what’s going on in all their other classes.”

Participant 5: “Absolutely. In Advisory we talk to our students when progress reports come out, when report cards come out. We’re, you know, I meet individually with my students out in the hallway during that time, and I know a lot of advisors do so, yes, definitely.”

Participant 8: “Outside of their team. They need to reach out to support staff and to parents and not be isolated.”

Participant 2: “They do not hesitate to go to their advisory teacher, their teacher and then the teachers feel safe coming forward to the administration so we can handle it very quickly and as healthy and safe as possible for kids.”

Participant 2: “They come in and they have, have some print outs and they’re ready to communicate.”

Participant 7: “Talk with them about my role, what they can come to me for…”

Participant 3: “I think the administration does a good job, too, of making the student feel safe to share that that information won’t then be just like broadcasted out to the other folks involved.”

Participant 8: “That’s exactly what we do here, as well. Freshmen counselors go in, you know, introduce the various players in guidance, reference the adjustment counselor, so we do highlight that.”

Participant 3: “They use a lot of strategies to make it look like having good conversations with kids so they can, they’ll know that they won’t be like well, right to the source, well, Johnny said this about you, did this.”

Participant 5: “Well, I think, going back to when I had a senior advisory, we spent a lot of time talking about post-secondary plans. I had one student who really wanted to go to Norwich and do ROTC and has since decided that is not his thing. And we had quite a few conversations in there about, you know, what that would entail and if Norwich was a good fit for him, and, you know, he transferred—but he did it and, you know, he got the experience. I think the post-secondary discussions that you’re able to have with seniors is, is huge. Because you want to do it in your classroom, but you don’t have the time to necessarily do that, so I think that’s one of the most beneficial.”

Participant 4: “I think that’s kind of a, in all honesty, kind of a hard question to answer, because I think there’s so many examples, you know, when we came up with here, or we came up with the idea of and the counselors can attest to this, when we came up with the idea of sending letters home after first term. And then after second term, hey, look, you didn’t do very well first term, but it’s only first term, so you’ve still got three terms to bring it up.”
Participant 4: “The increased communication...”

Participant 2: “The, I mean, I approve advisory field trips. They go to the inner city on the fly, we did all the first year, four years of advisory last year, and they went to the city and did a whole project together and like, you know, I approved it, central office approves it, and so it goes. And it’s not, it’s not about the curriculum in all sincerity. It’s about getting them out of our town and together and learn to communicate with each other.”

Participant 3: “I think the Freshman Academy model has made students more accountable for specific things, because the conversations that staff have with each other about student work. And one teacher may have more of a positive influence on that student that’s helping in another class, so I think that would be, and through the student learning it would be the accountability to get, you know, work done and turn things in on time.”

Participant 2: “They meet, the teachers meet here four days a week, interdisciplinary, their teams, and then one day a week all of the freshmen English teachers, all of the freshmen math, and those, those different monitors, they make, they have to update their blog, and I think all of that has been, they’ve all, we’ve had, they’ve had to update Aspen or, since it started, because they have that common planning time, and we monitor it. “

Participant 2: “It’s, to quote Miss (Anonymous’) graduation speech, it’s about having a conversation with them.”

Participant 3: “Part of the Freshman Academy model during the common planning time too is, the staff are responsible for call logs and, you know, communicating home to parents.”

Participant 8: “Right, repetitious reaching out.”

Participant 6: “Well, at HSI we have communication lots that we have to turn in every month and are counted, and it’s put on our evaluation. So I think more teachers are communicating on a regular basis, positive and negative.”

Participant 2: “And the assistant principal goes and chases down every kid who is invited on that day, and again, my constituents will go down there and re-invite them face to face...”

Participant 2: “But they, you know, kids who don’t want to come to school, you have to find something why they want to come to school at the end of the day. And a couple of years ago for one of my papers, I interviewed like the first time, second and third time freshman, and you get the best data I think out of the focus groups with the kids, because they’ll say to you, hey, you guys are killing yourselves trying. I don’t care. Like you can’t make me care, and I’m like thank you.”

Participant 2: “I think it’s made parents believe a little bit in schools. Like they get so scared to go to the big high school, and then they get, it is excellent communication.”

Participant 2: “I mean I’ve worked in a school without it, and it is intentional, it’s quick, it’s a great turnaround. The guidance, support, it is a team. I mean from the two guidance counselors to the sped, the assistant principal, and they, I mean they will have an answer on time and in a...everything is immediate. They communicate all of the time.”
Participant 4: “I found myself now in the role that I have at HS2, you know, when a teacher will come to me and say hey, I’ve got an issue with this kid, boy, girl, whatever, and I’ll say okay, what’s the issue. And they’ll tell me, and I say did you call the parents? Oh no.”

Participant 4: “Well... I don’t, I never had to say that before with the Freshman Academy student.”

Participant 2: “They’ve gotten really good at group emails summarizing, we just, we’re very positive.”

Participant 3: “I can say another thing too, I’m sorry, you know, back to the, one of the good things about aspects of small learning communities, quick response like to get immediate like, how, how’s my kid doing?”

Participant 3: “And then the counselor just shoots out an email to the team and they all get back.”

Participant 2: “I think people who don’t live it like all of us don’t value the communication of relationships.”

**Personalization**

Participant 3: “So, you have that nice connection.”

Participant 5: “...that we’ve just developed such a close relationship. One of my groups, especially, you know, they still kind of check in with me every once in a while and want, want to check in with one another, as well. So not only have I gotten to have a really great relationship with some of my students, but I think that they kind of formed a family like unit within themselves, as well.”

Participant 5: “I think we also have a lot of advisors that write college recommendations and that wouldn’t, you know, you may or may not have had that student academically, but they’re writing college recommendations, which I think really gives, is a good testament to the relationship that has been established between them.”

Participant 8: “Just that more intensive focus, you know, the kids, the students know that teachers are looking out for them.”

Participant 4: “And I’ve noticed that teachers know more about kids...”

Participant 4: “And, you know, when they’re going through something tough at home or in their personal life, teachers, especially the freshman teachers...”

Participant 2: “And kids say that they know the teachers have common planning time, and so they’re going to talk about me, or that they know, they know that people are focused.”

Participant 6: “…knowing the kids and what’s going on in all their other classes.”

Participant 1: “But if you just, from my perspective, if you walk into our buildings from, eight years ago to today, you would really realize completely different school environments. I mean
180 degrees in the opposite direction. From very boisterous hallways, cafeterias that were just loud - if you just did the data on the amount of interactions and infractions of administration and student, the numbers were through the roof. And I think, you know, comments that kids would feel uncomfortable, you know, from coming to school to leaving on the buses, I think that whole environmental piece of kids having ownership of their building and just feeling like they belonged to something. It’s very satisfying to know that, you know, I actually think we could have probably done this without the grant.”

Participant 5: “Well, I think going back to when I had a senior advisory, we spent a lot of time talking about post-secondary plans. I had one student who really wanted to go to Norwich and do ROTC and has since decided that is not his thing. And we had quite a few conversations in there about, you know, what that would entail and if Norwich was a good fit for him, and, you know, he transferred—but he did it and, you know, he got the experience. I think the post-secondary discussions that you’re able to have with seniors is, is huge. Because you want to do it in your classroom, but you don’t have the time to necessarily do that, so I think that’s one of the most beneficial.”

Participant 1: “Well, we’ve been having conversations with kids that you know are having a difficult time, and you didn’t know what that difficulty was. And you didn’t know it, because you didn’t get to know the kids. So you’re going to go suspend a kid that probably is going, their life away from school is, we can’t even imagine it. But, you know, can we learn more about it so we can look at ways of applying some kind of intervention to help the kid. And that’s, even going back to the, to the whole teacher involvement, I, it’s almost like retraining people to care.”

Participant 2: “I mean we didn’t have [inaudible] anything, that year. Then I had to go away from it, and that was to get people to care about kids. We had three meetings off if you went to a full down, because I couldn’t get people to go to…”

Participant 1: “I can give you what I’ve heard, and not, I, I have no idea. I’m in a classroom, a freshman class, but they’re really working to, you know, but I know that I’ve heard the Freshman Academy teachers where they actually can bring up concerns about a kid, and they can, best strategy that worked in one classroom with a kid that’s having kind of difficulty, they can apply that strategy in the classroom. That’s going to help that kid based on what a teacher learned about that child. So I think those conversations, again that’s hard to measure, and it’s not, you know, a score is not going to tell you that, but I think just those experiences that teachers have to be able to really turn in information about a child’s habits or they had a really difficult time over the weekend. Something might have happened. This is what I’ve learned this is what’s going to happen. So those type of things I think are really going to benefit how you actually approach the class. But that’s what I’ve heard.”

Participant 5: “I’ve had my advisory, I have a group of freshmen this year, and I had when graduation was happening and that was all, my life was consumed with—I had them write letters to themselves, and I’ll give them to them at graduation. So I think that that’s, you know, like a good way to help them start thinking about what they want to do with their lives, and you’re able to incorporate that a lot more into advisory than maybe in the classroom.”

Participant 8: “There wasn’t one team parent meeting that went by in Freshman Academy where your future goals weren’t addressed by teachers.”
Participant 5: “So Senior Project is huge for that. The kids have, we haven’t talked about senior project yet, but they have a community mentor, and you know, we invite them all in for a breakfast, so they come in to HS2 and they see, you know, the teachers who are involved and can put a name with a face. And then when we do our showcase, we bring in members of the community and ask them to come in and essentially help pass our students, you know, see what their presentation is all about. I think that that forces the kids to step it up a little bit, as well, because they’re not presenting in front of, you know, Kim and I, they’re presenting in front of people who could possibly be their future employer.”

Participant 2: “I think it’s how you look - yeah, I’m not a data expert, but it’s how you look at the data. Because if you run the numbers the grant people run, they’re very flat numbers. But the numbers we’ve brought to CCC they’re very accurate in that when a kid’s in a DYS cost of replacement, they really shouldn’t be coming in—like the, the major successes are there within those numbers of kids moving on, you know, not becoming the froshmore, not the full how you look at the failure. It is the full 7% of failures or whatever. But it, you know, I think kids are getting connected, but the data on it is hard to...”

Participant 2: “I think the freshman assistant principal has been key, because I remember my first year without that, which was an awful experience in my life, and they know that that individual is focused on their needs, and the teacher has a point person, so then it, it’s very quick, and they know they, the follow through is there and the consistency, and it’s, the person’s around all the time.”

**Relationships**

Participant 5: “I think as an advisor, I’ve had the chance to graduate two groups of seniors through Advisory, and I think that we’ve just developed such a close relationship.”

Participant 5: “So not only have I gotten to have a really great relationship with some of my students, but I think that they kind of formed a family like unit within themselves, as well.”

Participant 5: “I think we also have a lot of advisors that write college recommendations and that wouldn’t, you know, you may or may not have had that student academically, but they’re writing college recommendations, which I think really gives, is a good testament to the relationship that has been established between them.”

Participant 7: “I think as a freshman guidance counselor, it’s, the relationship I think tends to be very intimate, because it’s such a transition year that students have a multitude of issues they’re trying to balance.”

Participant 7: “And I think the relationship in 9th grade becomes so, you know, we’re so connected that they continue to come in when as upper classmen, because they have developed that very trusting relationship in 9th grade.”

Participant 5: “And I think too, that you know, one of the things that we push in Advisory is building a relationship.”

Participant 5: “And that is something that’s going to continue for four years, and you’re, only, that relationship is only going to get stronger.”
Participant 5: “So you do a lot of community building, you do a lot of, you know, getting to know you activities in the beginning, because that’s going to help you maintain the relationship for the next four years.”

Participant 1: “I can tell you that there were a number of disconnects, and a lot of it had to do with relationship building between staff and student between student administration and also transition from middle school to high school.”

Participant 7: “But even in, at the old HSI with the way we were located, you know, on the portables, I mean there’s just such a family connection. I come out in the hall, I can tell you pretty much who everybody is, they know who I am. It’s just, I think geographically it really enhances that connection.”

Participant 2: “I think that’s, relevant advice, I can give an example with (one administrator). There’s a kid here who’s a sophomore right now who got through freshman year because of (the administrator). And he was projected in his preliminary meetings as going out of district placement. I mean I can’t even imagine how this kid would have been an out of district placement. He’s connected. (Another administrator) put him in Marine Tech this year. Little (anonymous), they call him (anonymous) is his name, and, the cutest little guy, and just, they, every day he saw (the administrator) in the lunch room and talked to him, and they’d joke in the halls and, you know. And that, he got, he was on the base, the freshmen baseball team. He shouldn’t have been on the baseball team, but coach didn’t cut anyone, and he would run in with his bat and like put it in— did he hide it in your office or?”

Participant 2: “…but that kid, it was the relationship. Like he gives advice all the time. I don’t always listen to (Anonymous’) advice, but the advice, this kid made it to sophomore—his parents will tell you that. It’s the best experience he’s had in school in the past six years. And he’s now there. Like he, he does stupid things once in a while, but he’s got it.”

Participant 2: “Yeah, just lots and lots of others from all these guys of stories like that, but that was one that was, I can remember.”

Participant 6: “I think especially if you look at advisory, I think the teachers who’ve bought into advisory and who are very comfortable talking with kids do great. The ones that really want a scripted, you know, curriculum in front of them struggle a little bit more with certain students. I think it’s going, the trend is getting better.”

Participant 5: “I also will never forget we had a student focus group on advisories and relationship building with some of the evaluation people, and one of our seniors who graduated this year made a comment about how she loved the relationship that she sees her teachers having. That we’re all friends, we all get along in the hallway, we all joke with one another.”

Participant 5: “We all just are kind of, it’s corny to say, but a big happy family—well, sometimes happy family.”

Participant 5: “…[laughs], but I thought that that was really insightful of a high school student to understand, you know, that relationships are important for adults to have with one another, too.”
Participant 6: “I think it’s been beneficial for the teachers to have a good relationship, also, as well as learn the school and the culture of the school and they’re ready to be advisors. Some of them are already asking for their curriculum, they’re so excited, so...”

Participant 2: “I think that what I’ve seen change is the, I feel like advisory has been like a whole, it’s come full circle. I didn’t think I’d ever survive it, but it, I’ve seen teachers who were so against it, run a fashion, like a talent show for kids behind the stage, invite other advisors, teachers wanting to-, the looping has been key to that. Teachers going to graduation because, like our, one of our childcare teachers had the top three of the senior class, which was just unique. And they mentioned her in their graduation speeches, like their advisory teacher. So like the disbelief that you could have a relationship beyond the content has finally, I mean how many years later, really, it’s been unbelievable.”

Participant 4: “I am glad that’s happening, we were able to get it in place. I think that we’ll see it become better because I had seen it at HS2.”

Participant 8: “But like we get them right off the bat, the very beginning of their freshman year, we give them food and, you know, welcome them.”

Participant 2: “I think it’s how you look - yeah, I’m not a data expert, but it’s how you look at the data. Because if you run the numbers the grant people run, they’re very flat numbers. But the numbers we’ve brought to CCC they’re very accurate in that when a kid’s in a DYS cost of replacement, they really shouldn’t be coming in—like the, the major successes are there within those numbers of kids moving on, you know, not becoming the froshmore, not the full how you look at the failure. Is the full 7% of failures or whatever. But it, you know, I think kids are getting connected, but the data on it is hard to...”

Participant 5: “I think one of the things that, that I think is the most successful about it is the relationship building, and that can be either in the classroom or advisory. I know it more from advisory’s point of view, because I’m not a freshman teacher, but you know, we’re building relationships, and when you build a relationship with someone, you’re able to have that conversation, you’re able to look someone in the eye and tell them, you know, you’ve got to step it up! I’m expecting more from you. And I think kids are more receptive to that if you have a relationship with them.”

Participant 5: “96% if our students are in an advisory and that’s amazing, because four years ago, that was not the case. But because the teachers have bought into advisory, they’re building those relationships, and the kids want to maintain those relationships, so they stick with it.”

Participant 5: “I think that the kids have, I keep coming back to this relationship, sorry, but I think that the kids have definitely, you know, connected with the people that were on their team, and that goes through the 4 years. You’ll still hear the seniors even talking about, remember on yellow team when da, da, da, da, remember on green team, so it’s that, you know, kind of common thread that keeps that team together, and I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing, it’s just something I’ve noticed.”

Participant 2: “I think people who don’t live it like all of us don’t value the communication of relationships.”