REDESIGNING SCHOOLS FOR SUCCESS
Implementing Small Learning Communities and Teacher Collaboration
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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with Nancy A. Clarke, Frances A. Kayona, Shirley B. Stow
A Vision for 21st Century Schools in America

Schools of the 21st Century in America will have increasingly higher expectations of ALL students, with ALL students achieving increasingly higher learning results. Schools will do this by redesigning themselves into Small Learning Communities of teachers, students, and parents who work collaboratively using the processes of planning, development, implementation, and evaluation focused on improving instruction, curriculum, assessment, and professional practice.
Redesigning Schools for Success: Implementing Small Learning Communities and Teacher Collaboration

Executive Summary

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Introduction

Schools in America need to get better results. The high school dropout rate stands at about 30 percent. Higher education and employers lament the poor quality of candidates coming out of high schools. It can be argued that children are being left behind, not only in reading and math, but also in science, civics, health, personal financial stewardship, and career preparation. And, we should not forget the fine arts, technology, and second languages where children are also being left behind.

The motivation for writing Redesigning Schools for Success came from an observation that we (and others) had made: There are many research-based practices which have been advocated and promoted by educational experts and organizations for years that are not being sustainably implemented in most schools. Our investigation of this observation led us to five references that we used as major sources for the practices included in the redesign illustration of the book:

1. *New Small Learning Communities: Findings from Recent Literature* (Cotton, 2004),
3. Effective Schools Research (Edmonds, 1979 and Taylor, 2002),
4. *Effects of High School Restructuring: Ten Schools at Work* (Cawelti, 1997), and
5. *Balanced leadership: What 30 years of research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement* (Waters, Marzano, and McNulty, 2003).

In addition to these references, other prominent writers in the education and leadership fields were used. Selected references are listed in the Reference section.

From our exploration of the problems of unsatisfactory learning results and the low use of research-based and advocated educational practices, two issues surfaced:

- The organization and operation of schools have not changed much over the last century (Burney, 2004). The current design inhibits the sustainable implementation of more effective educational practices. Therefore, the school organization and structure must be redesigned in such a way as to support these practices.
- Leadership for redesigning schools is not in place. If it were, schools would be redesigned. Therefore, leadership development is an issue.
The Foundation for School Redesign

The school redesign illustrated in *Redesigning Schools for Success* is built on a foundation of three components: Small Learning Community, Teacher Collaboration, and honoring the principle of Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.

**Small Learning Community** is defined as an interdisciplinary team of teachers, a group of students, and the students’ parents. Small Learning Community is the first of nine school level instructional practices recommended in the design illustrated in this book. These practices are implemented by the principal of the school because they address organizational structure issues related to teachers, students, and time or require policies that are established by the school (or district) leadership. The nine school level practices work together: **Small learning communities** are created by forming **schools-within-a-school** featuring **interdisciplinary teaching teams** with **differentiated staff** and **teacher leaders**. The teaching teams work exclusively with a relatively small, **heterogeneous group of students** over several school years (looping); have **autonomy** for decisions related to instruction and professional development; and have **common preparation time** each school day.

**Teacher Collaboration** increases student achievement using the processes of planning, development, implementation, and evaluation focused on improving instruction, curriculum, assessment, and professional practice. Principals will need to lead Teacher Collaboration early in its implementation. Teacher Collaboration is the first of eight recommended practices implemented by teachers working in teams. These practices address teacher collaboration and personalizing education for students. The eight practices work together: Through **teacher collaboration**, teachers develop **personal learning plans** that focus their own **continuous professional development** on the needs of the team and students. Teaching teams **personalize students’ programs** by **flexible scheduling and grouping**, identifying **personal adult advocates** to collaborate with students and **their families** to establish, implement, and monitor students’ **personal plans for progress**.

**Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment** is critical to the effective redesign of a school. The alignment is facilitated and accomplished by establishing curriculum and assessment frameworks that are used for all subject areas at all grade levels. The curriculum development
process ensures that the curriculum is aligned with state and/or national content standards and that there is sufficient detail in curriculum documents to effectively guide teachers doing instructional and assessment development. The curriculum defines high expectations of all students. The assessment framework is focused at the course level to ensure that teachers have the data they need to frequently monitor student achievement. The assessment framework provides for both external (when available) and internal measures that establish performance standards for each course; that is, the operational definition of success in the course. The framework also ensures that teachers have data from formative measures to determine whether or not students are on-track for meeting the end-of-course performance standards. When students are off-track, teachers work collaboratively to solve the problem immediately.

Creating Small Learning Communities

A Interdisciplinary Teaching Team is a group of teachers who (1) have common goals (the curriculum assigned to the team), (2) accept shared, mutual responsibility and accountability for goal achievement, and (3) have diverse knowledge and skill relevant to achieving the goals. Grouping subject areas together creates Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams. Figure 1 gives the subject area groupings used in the redesign illustration of this book. Other groupings of subject areas are possible, and schools may have other subject areas.

**Figure 1. Subject Areas Assigned to Teaching Teams**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Personal Decision-Making</th>
<th>Fine Arts/Technology/World Languages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language Arts</td>
<td>Health/Physical Education</td>
<td>Fine Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Family and Consumer Sciences</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>World Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Small Learning Communities have Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams with teachers representing the subject areas in the group. In *Redesigning Schools for Success*, we placed two teachers from each subject area on a team. By doing so, each subject area teacher has a colleague from the subject area with whom to collaborate when working on subject area specific issues, such as curriculum and
assessment development or a particular instructional problem within the subject area. The benefit is providing for both interdisciplinary and disciplinary collaboration.

Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams have special education teachers, English language learner teachers, and/or gifted/talented teachers depending on the student make-up of the school. Instructional aides are assigned to Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams.

Students can be assigned to Small Learning Communities by grade level or student groups can be multi-grade/age. The literature suggests about 200 students per Small Learning Community. The Academic teaching teams in this illustration have about 200 students. The Personal Decision-Making and the Fine Arts/Technology/World Languages teams have larger numbers of students assigned to them.

A critical practice for effective Teacher Collaboration is Common Preparation Time. For the illustration in *Redesigning Schools for Success*, we created a school schedule that provides each teaching team with one third of the school day (two hours in a six hour student school day) for Common Preparation Time. In this block of time, teaching teams work collaboratively as a whole group, may work on projects or tasks in ad hoc subgroups, and do their own individual preparation.

Figure 2 shows one option for a schedule for a four-year high school with a six period day. The schedule can also be applied to elementary and middle schools. Other options exist. Note that school scheduling becomes a simple process. Student scheduling is no longer a *school* function; it is a *teaching team* function.

**Figure 2. School Schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Periods</th>
<th>Grade 9</th>
<th>Grade 10</th>
<th>Grade 11</th>
<th>Grade 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>PDM – FA/T/WL*</td>
<td>PDM – FA/T/WL</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>PDM – FA/T/WL</td>
<td>PDM – FA/T/WL</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*PDM = Personal Decision-Making, FA = Fine Arts, T = Technology, WL = World Languages

Academic Teams for Grades 9 and 10 have preparation time during Periods 1 and 2. Academic Teams for Grades 11 and 12 have preparation time during Periods 5 and 6. PDM and FA/T/WL Teams have preparation time during Periods 3 and 4.
Teaching teams will need leadership from the principal in developing student schedules early in the establishment of Small Learning Communities. But they will quickly learn to use flexible scheduling and grouping to better meet the needs of curriculum, instruction, and student learning problems.

In *Redesigning Schools for Success*, illustrations for the organization of teachers, students, and time have been created for schools at all levels. The illustrations use schools with different grade level organizations, different enrollments, and variations in student-to-teacher ratio.

**Leadership for Redesigning Schools**

Leadership does make a difference in student achievement in schools. (Cotton, 2003; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, et al., 2005) For *Redesigning Schools for Success*, we chose seven leadership practices that can be developed in school leaders. Leithwood and his colleagues (2004) identify three basics of successful leadership: *setting direction*, *developing people*, and *redesigning the organization*. Reeves (2005b) discussed leadership in the context of leader decision-making, identifying four essential leadership decisions. Leaders decide (1) what they will *inquire* about (what they will talk with teachers about), (2) what their *focus* will be, (3) what they will *monitor*, and (4) what they will *recognize* (both positively and negatively). These seven practices align well with the leadership responsibilities that Marzano, et al. (2005) found in their meta-analysis of school leadership and student achievement.

**Planning to Redesign a School**

Redesigning a school is a major reform undertaking. It requires careful planning and effective execution of the plan. In *Redesigning Schools for Success*, we chose a simple, but powerful planning model based on The One Page Business Plan® developed by Jim Horan (Horan, 2004). The One Page® Plan has five components that fit on one page: *vision*, *mission*, *objectives*, *strategies*, and *action plans*. Among the benefits of this planning process and tool are (1) plans are
brief, changeable, and easy to monitor, (2) plans are focused on student learning, (3) plans are in alignment at all levels, (4) participation in the planning process in 100 percent, with participants writing one page plans that specifically address their responsibilities for achieving learning results, and (5) each individual’s plan fits on one page. This planning model can be used at some levels or all levels in the school organization: superintendent, district office leaders, principals, assistant principals, team leaders, teachers, and students (Personal Plans for Progress).

Summary and Concluding Remarks

Two practices and one principle create the foundation for the school redesign illustrated in this book: Small Learning Community and Teacher Collaboration and the principle of alignment of the school design elements; instruction, curriculum, and assessment. Other practices used in this redesign illustration include Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams, Common Preparation Time, Personalizing the educational program and school environment for students, Curriculum Framework, Curriculum Integration, Course Level Assessment Framework, and Frequently Monitoring Student Achievement.

Redesigning Schools for Success identifies the importance of leadership development, planning, and effective execution and monitoring of plan implementation. Specific leadership practices and a planning model are presented.

Redesigning Schools for Success gives an illustration of a comprehensive approach to redesigning schools. There are many variations of the school design illustrated in this book, and there are other designs that can be successful in promoting higher student achievement. But, a comprehensive approach to school redesign is necessary to obtain the impact required to realize the magnitude of growth that is needed in student achievement (Cotton, 2004; NASSP, 2004; Cawelti, 1997). Mere tinkering around the edges of the organization will not do. Leaders must be bold. They must feel a sense of urgency. They must be willing to lead large-scale changes in schools that have enough magnitude and power to make a significant, positive difference in student achievement.
Appendix

Practices Recommended in Redesigning Schools for Success

**School Level Instructional Practices**

1. Small Learning Community  
2. School-Within-a-School  
3. Interdisciplinary Teaching Team  
4. Common Preparation Time  
5. Teacher Leadership  
6. Autonomy  
7. Diverse/Heterogeneous Student Groups  
8. Looping  
9. Differentiated Staff

**Teacher Level Instructional Practices**

1. Teacher Collaboration  
2. Continuous Professional Development  
3. Personal Learning Plans (for teachers)  
4. Flexible Scheduling/Grouping  
5. Personalizing Students’ Programs  
6. Personal Plans for Progress  
7. Personal Adult Advocate  
8. Family Involvement

**Curriculum Practices**

1. Curriculum Framework  
2. Curriculum Development  
3. Curriculum Alignment with Content Standards  
4. Clearly Stated Vision and Mission Focused on Student Learning  
5. Essential Learnings and High Expectations  
6. Career Focus in All Subject Areas  
7. Continuous Engagement in All Subject Areas  
8. Curriculum Integration

**Assessment Practices**

1. Course Assessment Program  
2. Assessment Development  
3. Alignment With Curriculum  
4. Accountability  
5. Frequently Monitoring Student Achievement  
6. Reporting Assessment Results
Selected References


