The Case for Restructuring the Ninth Grade

Recent research reveals that smaller learning communities can have a tremendous impact on student achievement. The result has been a much needed restructuring of American high schools, beginning with the ninth grade.

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In 1996, a groundbreaking report was published that has had a profound impact on discussions about the American high school. Entitled Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution, the work was two years in the making and based on proposals coming from principals, other administrators, teachers and students and supported by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. This comprehensive study cites anonymity and apathy as the leading causes of problems in the typical large high school and suggests several solutions. It proposes that "high schools will create small units in which anonymity is banished" and that they will "reorganize the traditional departmental structure to meet the needs of a more integrated curriculum."  

In his annual Back-to-School Address in September of 1999, United States Secretary of Education Richard Riley echoed these sentiments. In his remarks, the Secretary recommended that high schools consider creating smaller, more personal learning environments for students where it will be less likely that students will "slip through the cracks." Mr. Riley stated,

"I've talked to many honest and caring principals, who admit that they just lose students because their school is too big. They couldn't reach the students before they became disconnected or dropped out. I think the big idea for the future is this...think smaller."

These words began a national dialogue on the state of the American high school and challenged the education community to focus on its renewal. Under Secretary Riley's leadership, the United States Department of Education, with congressional support, created the Smaller Learning Communities Program. The purpose of the program is to support the development of smaller and more personal learning communities in large high schools.

The Need for Change
Change is a difficult thing for many people to accept. Even if problems with existing practices are identified, those who are asked to change often feel that they would rather keep the problems that they are familiar with than inherit potential new ones. However, this mentality usually discourages improvement instead of encouraging it. Clearly, Secretary Riley, as well as reports such as Breaking Ranks, has challenged Americans to consider changing the traditional high school in order to create more opportunities for success. But why the shift to smaller schools and learning communities? The U.S. Department of Education offers these reasons:

- The tragic events at high schools across the country have reinforced what many educational practitioners already know- the impersonal nature of large high schools leaves too many young people feeling apathetic, isolated, and alienated from their peers, schools and communities.
- Students have a better chance to be known and respected as individuals by adults in the school building
- Research has found that:
  - Small learning environments are a condition for boosting student achievement (Williams, 1990)
  - School size has positive effects on student outcomes as evidenced by students’ attendance rates, frequency of disciplinary actions, school loyalty, use of alcohol or drugs, satisfaction with school and self-esteem (Raywid (1995) and Klonsky (1995))
  - Research ultimately confirms what parents intuitively believe: that smaller learning communities are safer and more productive because students feel less alienated, more nurtured and more
connected to caring adults, and teachers feel that they have more opportunity to get to know and support their students (Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Gregory, 1992; Stockard & Mayberry, 1992).

Creating a sense of community is a vital part of establishing an environment in which students and teachers work together toward accomplishing both individual and school-wide goals. Thomas Sergiovanni, a leading figure in promoting successful learning communities, suggests that people have a basic human need to belong to others and a need to feel a part of a group that works toward a common goal. Communities can provide this sense of belonging and feeling that collectively, people will work toward agreed-upon and shared goals. Otherwise, people feel alienated or removed from others. To help develop this sense of community among school staff and a better learning environment for children, numerous districts across the nation have reorganized their large high schools into one or more schools within one building. One such small school that is meeting with tremendous success is the Freshman Academy.

The Academy Concept
The Freshman Academy, based solidly on current research, is a comprehensive program that strives to provide each ninth grade student with a nurturing and academic environment for the successful transition from middle school to high school. The Academy strives to ensure the academic success of all students, reduce the achievement gap between minority and majority students, improve attendance rates of students, reduce discipline problems and increase participation of all constituencies in the total school program. These schools seek to create a safe and orderly learning environment that more intentionally addresses the social, emotional, and academic needs of ninth grade students.

James McPartland, Principal Research Scientist at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk argues that, "We give college freshman support as they make their transition from high school to the university but we have done very little to do the same for high school freshman." The Freshman Academy concept attempts to reverse this practice.

The Academy is typically located in a separate building or in a separate part of the same building used by the rest of the student body. An administrator and guidance counselor is assigned to work closely with the students, while the faculty is divided into five teams with four teachers to a team. The teams of teachers represent the core curriculum areas, (English, math, science, social studies and foreign language). Each team shares the same students and the entire team helps individual students with their problems when needed.

The teams also establish a common system of class rules, procedures and expectations. Darryl Dean, principal of Troup High School in LaGrange Georgia, says that the common systems used in their Freshman Academy help even in small ways. Students don't have to remember which teacher wants papers turned in, folded with their names on the outside and which want the student's name at the top left corner. "Uniformity in small things bring uniformity in big things," Dean said. An essential component for the Academy is the use of an interdisciplinary curriculum that allows students to make connections between subjects that have traditionally stood alone. The idea is to increase students' engagement by putting subject matter in a broader context and showing them how one subject can be used to understand another. Complementing the curriculum in many Academies are skill labs in reading, math, and/or writing. These labs reinforce basic skills and help prepare students for standardized achievement tests. Another important piece of the Academy is the establishment of after-school programs that include homework centers and tutoring sessions. These programs are essentially supervised study halls, with a teacher and/or counselor on hand to answer questions and give advice.

Finally, classes follow some type of alternative scheduling, typically in the form of a block schedule. These classes may be double-blocked for an integrated presentation of two subjects or for a double dose of one subject. The block schedule also enables each team of teachers to have the same daily planning period. Having this common planning period gives teachers an opportunity to work together to standardize expectations, develop interdisciplinary lessons, and meet with students and/or parents.
Academy Goals

Goals for the Freshman Academy vary slightly from school-to-school yet most programs strive to accomplish the following:

- Empower teachers to develop, implement, and evaluate new strategies for enhancing student success
- Develop classroom management and discipline techniques that cultivate student maturity, responsibility, and a mutual sense of respect
- Provide teachers with a better understanding of the developmental needs of ninth grade students
- Instruct and model organization, time management, and study skills
- Improve and promote teacher/parent contact
- Promote interdisciplinary instruction and employ cooperative learning strategies
- Help integrate freshmen into the collective student body
- Provide incentives for and recognition of student success

These goals are normally established by the teachers of the Academy and may vary from year to year depending upon the needs of the class. Creating a small learning community in the Freshman Academy assists in accomplishing each one.

Getting Results

Success stories abound nationwide for schools that have reformed their programs by establishing a Freshman Academy. Many districts looked at the model as a way to help their students who were classified as "at-risk" for not completing high school. However, others have decided to implement the program for all incoming freshmen. In some cases, districts selected one school to model the program and then later implemented the Academies at the other high schools within the system. Large cities that have had success with this process include Detroit, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Chicago.

The pioneer in the Academy movement, however, was Patterson High School in Baltimore, Maryland. This inner-city school was plagued with problems before they divided themselves into four Career Academies and a Freshman Academy in 1996. By the following year, success was readily apparent. Student attendance increased ten percent while no other high school in the district improved more than a point or two. As attendance increased, so did student promotion rates from the ninth grade. In 1997, 80 percent of students earned enough credits at the end of the year to reach tenth grade, compared to 35 percent before the reforms were adopted. Discipline problems decreased as well and the problems that were previously experienced with vandalism disappeared as students began to take more pride in themselves and their school. Patterson's experience shows that "students will exhibit better behavior and more respect for their teachers and school building when they become members of a smaller learning community..." (McPartland, 1997).

Similar success has been noted in Chicago, where all city schools were required to implement a Freshman Academy in 1996. Dr. Kenneth Wong of the University of Chicago recently completed a comprehensive study on the impact of the Freshman Academies in Chicago schools. As part of the research, Wong interviewed principals and teachers from four of the area high schools that contained a Freshman Academy. The results of the interviews revealed that:

- 78% reported improved attendance
- 71% reported improved testing
- 63% reported improved discipline
- 51% reported improved grades
- 41% reported improved course credit rate

Wong concludes by saying that the surveys and case studies suggest that teachers and principals believe that the Academies are achieving their identified goals of improving attendance patterns and providing students with social support.

Many districts in Georgia are also seeing the Freshman Academy work in their high schools. Troup High School in LaGrange was one of the first in the state to adopt a Freshman Academy. Since then, the school has served as a model for other schools around the state. Their program, in existence since 1996, has been very successful. Before the Academy, statistics revealed high failure rates, poor exam performance and high discipline referrals year
after year for the ninth grade. These records indicated that 39 percent of ninth graders failed English in 1993-94, 47 percent in 1994-95 and 34.9 percent in 1995-96. However, after implementation in 1996, only 12.8 percent failed English, a 63.3 percent improvement in the failure rate.

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Three other courses that comprise the core classes have also improved. There has been a 62 percent improvement in math failures, a 59.6 percent improvement in science and a 77.3 percent improvement in social studies. In-school suspension referrals have decreased 46.4 percent and attendance rates have improved an average of 60 percent in those core classes of English, math, science and social studies. Melissa Warren, a teacher in the Academy, says that the program is very beneficial for the students. "They have a strong sense of belonging now." She also adds, "Teachers are meeting the students' needs before it is too late."

Conclusions
Current research indicates that the American high school needs to undergo a transformation to encourage the creation of small communities of learners who share mutual respect for one another as they work toward accomplishing common goals. Clearly, the Freshman Academy program, in its various formats, is getting the job done at schools across the nation. As ninth grade students enter high school, they bring with them their individual problems and face a unique set of circumstances that must be handled thoughtfully if they are to succeed in the following three years. Meeting the needs of such a diverse group is often very difficult. However, at some point schools must stop rejecting difficult challenges and start finding ways to adapt their programs to meet the needs of their students. Schools must help encourage young learners to work hard and adhere to academic and behavioral goals. Beginning a Freshman Academy is a step toward accomplishing this task.

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Lincoln Park High School
2001 North Orchard St
Chicago, IL 60614
(773) 534-8130
http://www.lincolnpark.cps.k12.il.us/

Overlea High School
5401 Kenwood Avenue
Baltimore, MD 21206
(410) 887-5241
http://www.bcps.org/schools/CHS/overlea/falcon%7F.htm

Patterson High School
100 Kane Street
Baltimore, MD 21224
(410) 396-9276
http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/natspec/catalog/talentdevhs.htm

Salina High School South
730 E. Magnolia Rd
Salina, KS  67401
(785) 826-4766
http://www.usd305.com/south/academics/freshman/index.htm

Statesboro High School
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http://www.bulloch.k12.ga.us/shs/default.htm

Troup Comprehensive High School
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http://www.troup.k12.ga.us/troup/Default.htm

Valdosta High School
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http://chrion.valdosta.edu/svhandla/products.htm

Warsaw Community High School
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