

Preface

Let us put our heads together and see what life we will make for our children.

—Tatanka Iotanks (Sitting Bull, Lakota)

Welcome to an adventure in effective school redesign. Whether you are a district leader, school board member, school administrator, teacher, guidance counselor, school improvement facilitator, member of a school improvement team, business or community partner, or consultant, this book will lead you through the steps necessary to developing and sustaining small learning communities (SLC) within large high schools that lead to improvements in school climate, more effective professional practice, and academic achievement for all students. Creating your SLC and bringing them to scale successfully will be a long journey and a great adventure. It will require a comprehensive reform of the entire school, and a complete overhaul of the way we have done the business of educating our youth. It is a journey that will take years, and it begins with vision, commitment, understanding, and collaboration. The good news is that, even at the very start, you are not alone. There are many traveling with you. Educators across the nation are already committed to recreating, reforming, and revitalizing their large, comprehensive high schools by creating smaller, more personalized learning environments for their students. These are your fellow journeyers—those working in high schools who feel the necessary urgency to be restless for both the structures and the practices that lead to a high school culture committed to continuous improvement.

Several pivotal works highlight the growing focus on high school reform. Breaking Ranks I and II (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996, 2004); the American Youth Policy Forum's 2000 "High School of the Millennium"; and the best thinking of representatives from the U.S. Department of Education, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), Bill Daggett's International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE), the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the American Federation of Teachers all outline the following as necessary key elements for schools to best prepare our students for the future:

- High academic standards that meet the community's definition of meaningful knowledge
- Learning opportunities that prepare youth for lifelong learning, civic involvement, and leadership
- Caring and competent adults who help students through the challenges of adolescence

- A laser-like focus on data
- Ongoing, varied assessments of student learning
- Opportunities for learning situations with adults, including work or volunteer activities
- Small, personalized learning settings
- Accountability to the community
- An environment where general and vocational tracks do not exist; instead, high academic achievement and a goal of postsecondary education are expected for every student
- Ninth and twelfth grade experiences that are focused on effective transition into and out of high school
- Shared and collaborative leadership.

For over thirty years, American educators have been weaving these elements into a process of reforming their high schools with the goal of establishing an atmosphere of challenge and support for students. A critical part of the reform—especially for urban schools—has centered on the reorganization of schools into small units to dispel the alienating effects of large schools, student apathy, falling test scores, disengaged school administrations, and unrelated curricular approaches. These smaller units within the large comprehensive high schools create structures for a more coordinated and concentrated approach to instruction, develop a personalized school climate for students, increase opportunities for communication between families and schools, and allow teachers a greater role in school leadership. The challenge for educators across the nation now is how to design and develop a teacher corps and a school culture that allow for a school to operate in a completely different manner than the classrooms we experienced during our own education.

Significant relevant research indicates that education is most effective when a true community of learners and leaders emerges in a high school. Increasingly, the research supports that this community is most effective when it exists in a small school environment with students engaged with teachers in a school-within-school setting of approximately 400 students. When educators, parents, students, and business/community and postsecondary partners join together in this manner, they make the high school experience one where excellence in teaching and nurturing each child to success are the focal points. In these settings, instructional practice is honed and the curriculum is integrated, is career related, and targets high standards. Here, the job of education is shared by supportive partners. Here, students find their own voice, build their skills, and develop a sense of community with their fellow students and their adult teachers. Teachers take on new roles as leaders in the school improvement process and commit to an introspective, data-driven process of reflecting on their shared practice. Community stakeholders demonstrate a vested interest in the success of students and the long-term success of the community. And families—however defined—find their own voice in a structure that welcomes and engages them as it also relies on their involvement to support student success.

Over the past three decades, we have seen a move from pockets of excellence for some students toward “whole-school reform,” where all students have the opportunity to excel. We have seen that the move to implement SLC is as viable in our largest cities as it is in our smallest rural communities. There is a wide range of approaches to creating small learning environments for teaching and learning. For some, magnet schools, public charters, and learning “houses” have met the challenge successfully.

For others, the creation of school-within-a-school career academies has been the desired approach. Our nation is once again at a turning point, with a growing urgency to make whole-school reform statewide and to implement whole-district reform. Increasingly, the educational strategy used to raise the bar for all students is the creation of SLC, not because the creation of an SLC in and of itself leads to improvement, but rather because the effective implementation of an SLC creates the environment for a focus on data, students, and professional practice that leads to the improvements we seek to make.

I first wrote *Creating and Sustaining Small Learning Communities* in 2000. The near-decade of work that has intervened has necessitated an important shift in the emphasis of this completely revised book. The focus on school improvement has been altered dramatically as the educational and political landscape has continued to shift under foot. The changes brought about by research and legislation, as well as those reaped through the hard work of educators in the trenches, has brought a new perspective to the implementation of smaller learning communities and a need to update that work and the myriad of tools contained in the accompanying CD-ROM Tool Kit. We have moved into an era where structures and instruction must be addressed—not in separate or even parallel implementations, but in one seamless data-driven design. It can no longer be (if it ever could) about the simple creation of SLC. It must be about using SLC as a vehicle for creating high-performing high schools.

Over the years that have passed since the first edition of this book, a deep research base has developed, based on what works and what is essential for school improvement. Among the major changes is the unprecedented focus on data at the national, state, district, school, and classroom levels. While the first edition gave only a nod to the importance of data, this edition places the use of data front and center in a manner that borrows from a statement by Harvard's Tony Wagner: "no blame, no shame, no excuses." The emphasis on improving the instruction and educational outcomes for all of the nation's youth has grown as well with the advent of the standards movement, the "No Child Left Behind" legislation, and the simply astounding numbers of students who drop out, drift out, and leave our high schools unprepared to lead successful adult lives. While the debate about the need for reform rages in this country, and the national dialogue continues to focus on improving outcomes for youth through the structures of small schools, SLC, and redesigned, reconfigured, reformed, and converted schools, this text will lead you step by step through a process that will help you develop your own school improvement strategy. The book walks you through the five stages of effective implementation: formation, study and awareness, establishing structures, community engagement and commitment, and evaluation. It adds to the first edition's recommendation in the areas of the importance of mission, an effective planning process, professional development needs, defining roles and responsibilities, and the use of time. As in the original work, we will continue to look through the lenses of personalization, curriculum and instruction, partnership, and creating a climate for success; now we add a focus on data and reflective practice at each interval. We also provide assistance in navigating the sometimes complex political milieu that we know as American high schools. We distinguish between creating stand-alone small schools and establishing the varied types of SLC we see in the nation's high schools, including ninth grade and career academies. While the SLC you choose to create may not, for example, have a career or industry focus, you will undoubtedly want to enlist

business partners and have your students involved with some type of career exploration or job shadowing. We will discuss the pros and cons of schoolwide, all-at-once implementation. This book is part education theory and part technical manual. It contains information, research, and best practices, as well as technical tools to power your efforts to lead other educators toward creating improved schools. We will spend most of our time empowering you to make good decisions and build the capacity of the educators you work with as you learn to create and sustain SLC.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in creating the type of educational setting we have outlined so far is determining who is responsible for implementing and effecting the changes necessary to transform the high school. In the rush for implementation, teachers will look to the school administration, the administration will look to the district, and the district will look for funding to support staff and services in order to provide the resources and training necessary. The business and community partners will look to the school to take the lead, and schools will turn to partners for support. Parents will want what all parents want: what is best for their children. Students will want to get on with the process of being teenagers, and they will trust us to provide them with a high-quality education that prepares them to succeed after high school. In today's educational arena, there is no time for waiting for someone else to single-handedly make a difference in the academic lives of young people.

If you are reading this book, you are part of the process. You are a key element of reforming your school into what we believe works best for all students: a small learning environment with high standards, an engaging curriculum, and a community partnership of support. While this book is specifically written for those who are mandated, by job or consulting contract description, with leading the SLC development process within a school or district, it is in fact for all those who will work with SLC.

Creating and Sustaining Small Learning Communities is based on the premise that no one person or group can do it alone. A team approach must be established, and the individual gifts of the team members and participating organizations must be identified and maximized. We must act now. As a nation, we have been worrying that many children are "falling through the cracks"—indeed, many are falling into a chasm. We have to act now to stop the flow of our children into a future that holds little promise for those ill-prepared to meet it.

Creating and Sustaining Small Learning Communities is designed to help you do just that. While the format of this book is meant to be user-friendly and "step-by-step," the nonlinear nature of school improvement suggests that there will be times you will want to move back and forth throughout the chapters as you reflect on what you need to know and what you must be able to do to make the biggest strides. Before you begin working your way through the chapters, review the entire process of implementation and sustainment that is laid out for you here. Depending on your school's or schools' situation, there may be some activities that should be undertaken before others, committees that should be established, Tool Kit applications tried, or advisory boards that should be enhanced or put to work before they are suggested in the sequence of this work. Take stock of and value what you now have, then get to work.

The Tool Kit will help you to assess your current school design. It will also help share the message of SLC. Its built-in PowerPoint presentation walks you through the main SLC design elements and shows what it takes to effectively implement them. It will serve as a useful tool in professional learning settings. The Tool Kit also

holds over 30 electronic files or folders that will aid you in the critically necessary process of documenting your efforts. With the Tool Kit, you will be able to assess your faculty's readiness for embracing a move to SLC, chart their staff development needs, place them in teams, measure the developmental growth of the SLC, and evaluate the impact of the experience on students.

In addition to your own work, you will want to be aware of and keep abreast of national trends and current research. You will find references to useful articles, resources, and books, as well as essential Web page and Listserv listings, in the Resources section.

This book and Tool Kit are based on almost twenty years' experience in working with small and large school systems in over thirty states. The lessons shared are those developed through great collaboration and struggles with state-level administrators, superintendents, district leaders, principals, teachers, parents, students, postsecondary institutions, labor organizations, community-based organizations (CBO), government agencies, and businesses. Throughout this book, we share the lessons we have learned and the best practices we have developed in working with some of our nation's most challenged schools. From coast to coast, in urban centers, in suburban communities, and on tribal lands, the questions are the same. How do we develop a learning atmosphere for our students that encourages their individualized growth, has high standards, and prepares them to take their places on a global stage after they leave high school? How do we develop a teacher corps that is not only skilled in its own discipline, but can work across disciplines and with a variety of business and community partners? How do we share the challenge of education between business and schools? What school structures allow for this school climate to be created?

The journey of improving your school will be taxing. You will be amazed, perhaps, at the resistance you will meet from those who are holding on to a status quo that has placed only some of our students in a successful postsecondary position. You may also be amazed at the number of times you will want to give in to the ineffective spinning of the hamster wheel of reform—where we work as hard as we can but do not attain the progress we imagine—because it will seem easier to whirr than to push through to success. Be prepared. We must now commit to success for all students. From this moment forward, move away from the idea that you are “reforming” your school or district. Move away from the idea that you are “moving toward small learning communities.” Instead, commit to a practice of continuous improvement. Create effective, data-driven, personalized SLC for teaching and learning. Be restless, along with your fellow travelers, to research, establish, assess, and continually seek to improve the structures and practices that will lead to effective environments for teaching and learning. I look forward to walking part of the journey with you through the pages of this book and with the help of the Tool Kit materials.