

THE COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL IN TRANSITION:
A STUDY OF SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITY REFORM

by

MARK C. DUNETZ

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
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_____	_____
Date	Dr. Nicholas Michelli Chair of Examining Committee

_____	_____
Date	Dr. Anthony G. Picciano Executive Officer

Dr. Nicholas Michelli

Dr. Anthony G. Picciano

Dr. Philip M. Anderson

Supervision Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

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Mark C. Dunetz

Advisor: Dr. Nicholas Michelli

For over forty years, the dominant secondary high school model in urban school districts was the comprehensive high school. As various attempts to turn around failing high schools in the 1970s and 1980s failed, increasing numbers of educators, researchers, and policy makers began to question whether the comprehensive high school model was viable. The history of small school reform over the last two decades represents an ambitious attempt to remedy the perceived disconnect between school structures and desired outcomes. But while hundreds of small schools have been created in New York City over the last two decades, small high school reform as an exclusive response to underperformance has increasingly been seen as untenable. As a result, there has been renewed interest in structures which allow for more personalized educational experiences while maintaining large schools intact. Small Learning Communities represent one such structure and this study examines an attempt to create semi-autonomous institutes within a comprehensive high school.

The data analyzed for this research were generated during the planning phases of this project (2005-2006) and during the first two years of implementation (2006-2008). The quantitative data analyzed included standardized exam scores, demographic

indicators, class lists and course offerings, course passing rates, credit accumulation patterns, the results of diagnostic tests, and attendance rates. In addition, this research involved an analysis of a range of qualitative data generated by the reform process including organizational charts, meeting minutes, and memos. Finally, the researcher conducted observations of a wide range of school settings and interviewed key stakeholders.

Findings indicate that the creation of semi-autonomous institutes were related to positive shifts in school culture for teachers and created the potential for increased academic performance. These shifts in faculty perceptions of school culture were related to improved communication, expanded professional opportunities, and more robust relationships between adults and students. Involving broader segments of a school's faculty in decision-making was found to generate broader investment in collective goals and more effective problem solving but was not in itself sufficient to generate consensus around contested goals or to result in changes to instructional practice.

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Over the course of this research, I had the opportunity to get to know many of the over 200 men and women who work at Valley High School, and I was consistently

impressed with the commitment of these educators to the success of their students. It is far easier to write about schools than to teach in them or lead them. For school-based staff honesty with outsiders necessarily involves vulnerability. With this in mind, I am truly thankful for the trust that Mr. Stevens and members of the faculty at Valley placed in me. I hope I have honored this trust by avoiding the temptation to craft a narrative of heroes and villains. Such tales might satisfy the appetite of graduate school audiences, but fail to appreciate the complexity of working full time in an urban public high school. I learned much from those who I met at Valley and feel privileged to have grown with them as they worked to build a better school.

Finally, I owe a great debt of gratitude to my family who tolerated me with grace and good humor during this long journey. To my parents, who encouraged me to be curious and compassionate from before I can remember and whose experiences as students and teachers in the New York City public school system clearly influenced my decision to become an educator, I thank you. To my wife Talia, who didn't choose to enter a doctoral program, but was forced to live through one, I will forever appreciate your support and understanding. My work has been informed by sharing my home with a talented and compassionate educator in ways that you will never know. I thank you for always reminding me how challenging and rewarding it is to teach high school. Finally, to my newborn son Gabriel, I thank you so much for your patience in waiting until my dissertation defense was completed to come into this world. I hope that during your long journey in schools, you always find excitement and satisfaction in learning something new about this incredible world of ours.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Problems of the American High School

More than half a century after high school attendance became a universal expectation in the United States, large numbers of students continue to drop out before earning a diploma. This is a fact with profound implications in a country where each year the economy generates fewer well-paid jobs for those without advanced educational credentials. While there is general agreement that too few students meet graduation requirements in many of the nation's schools, determining the actual rates is a complicated endeavor. Recently, there have been efforts to standardize the procedures used to calculate graduation rates, but states continue to utilize a variety of approaches, throwing into question the accuracy of many governmental data (Pinkus, 2006). The most dramatic example of these inconsistencies in recent years were the data reported by the Houston school district, where claims of a 1.6% dropout rate helped propel superintendent Roderick Paige into a national role as US Secretary of Education. Critics of Houston's methodology, which included students who expressed the intention of earning a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) in calculations of graduates, estimate that the actual dropout rate during Paige's tenure was 30% or higher (Haney, 2000).

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, whose billion dollar secondary school reform initiatives have made increased graduation rates a central goal, estimates that the national average is between 68% and 71%. These estimates, cited in the introduction to a 2006 report entitled *The Silent Epidemic*, are largely based on the work of Manhattan

Institute analysts Jay Greene and Marcus Winters (Bridgeland & Burke Morison, 2006; Greene & Winters, 2005). Claiming that data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) of the US Census, which are used to calculate graduation rates by the National Center for Educational Statistics of the US Department of Education (USDOE), are inaccurate for the purposes of estimating graduation rates, these researchers instead look to state enrollment records collected in the USDOE's Core of Common Data (CCD). They dispute the USDOE's estimate of an 85% national graduation rate for adults 25 or older, and conclude that graduation rates for African American and Hispanic students are as low as 56% and 52% respectively (Greene & Winters, 2005). These conclusions were supported by another analysis of the same data conducted by Education Week's Research Center which calculated the nationwide graduation rate at 69.6%, and mirrored the racial subgroup analyses of Greene and Winters (Education Week, 2006).

While the analyses of the Manhattan Institute and the Research Center have been accepted by the most influential education foundation in the country, their validity have been challenged by others who argue that the extent of the crisis is exaggerated. Lawrence Mishel, of the Economic Policy Institute, argues that these studies fail to account for the numbers of repeaters who are included in the CCD 9th grade cohort (Mishel & Roy, 2006; Mishel, 2006). Mishel challenges the argument that CPS data is unreliable and uses these data to conclude that the national graduation rates have climbed steadily from 77% and 89% for blacks and whites respectively in 1979, to 88% and 95% for these groups in 2002. The analysis of national graduation rates that Mishel presents suggest both overall progress and a progressive narrowing of the achievement gap between Black and White students.

While there is some debate as to whether national high school graduation rates reflect a crisis, it is difficult to avoid negative conclusions in large urban school districts like New York City (NYC), where graduation rates have for decades been far below the national average. While both New York State (NYS) and NYC estimates suggest that large numbers of students are not succeeding, the data they provide are inconsistent. The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) publishes annual reports analyzing the performance of cohorts of students four years after their entry into high school. According to the NYCDOE report on the class scheduled to graduate in 2006, 59.7% of high school students graduated on time (NYCDOE, 2007). The New York State Education Department (NYSED) estimated the four-year graduation rate of this same cohort to be 52.4%¹. The discrepancy can at least partially be explained by the city's practice of counting students who graduated after retaking Regents exams in the summer or attending summer remedial classes. In addition, the NYCDOE includes in its calculation of graduates students who earn a GED. While the city's methodology provides a more optimistic picture, clear racial disparities are present with 76.9% of White students, 50.8% of Hispanic, and 54.6% of African American students graduating in four years (NYCDOE, 2007). Data also suggest that a significant number of students are spending more than four years to earn a diploma. Thus, in the three years following their scheduled graduation, an additional 16.3% of the Class of 2003 earned either a GED or a high school diploma (NYCDOE, 2007).

Given the social stigma and potential economic consequences of not possessing society's entry level credential, reformers have since the 1960s placed enormous

¹ State four-year graduation rate calculated from data from NYC's thirty-two school districts reported in table titled "2002 Total Cohort Graduation (4-yr outcomes)" in the New York State Report Card Database.

emphasis on increasing high school graduation rates (Dorn, 1993). Successful completion of diploma requirements, however, does not necessarily indicate mastery of a given skill set or body of knowledge as a recent report by the testing organization ACT dramatically highlights (ACT, 2007). Any meaningful assessment of the current state of public high schools in NYC must ask what it means to have earned a diploma.

One indicator of the value of a high school diploma as an indicator of mastery of skills and content is student performance on Regents Examinations, the exit exams which have been NYS's central instrument for maintaining standards in secondary schools for over a hundred years (Folts, 1996). The exams cover an encyclopedic amount of content, but are graded according to a scale which allows for high percentages of incorrect responses. For example, a student who earned a raw score of 25 out of a possible 84 points on the August 2006 Mathematics A exam would have passed with a scaled score of 55 under regulations in place at the time. The scale used to grade the English Language Arts (ELA) Regents, an exam that assesses a range of reading and writing skills as well as general concepts of literary analysis, is less forgiving. In order to earn a score of 55, students must earn more than 50% of the possible points. The reliability of scores on this exam is questionable, however, given that exams are graded at the school level where administrators sometimes pressure teachers to "scrub" exams – the widespread practice of rereading essays to "find" additional points needed to push students over the minimum threshold. Students do need to possess some mastery of English reading and writing skills in order to pass the exam. The brief and formulaic nature of the writing tasks, however, share little in common with typical writing assignments in college classes, and students can be coached to write responses which

address the categories on the scoring rubric without meeting most high school teachers' standards for effective expository writing.

The scale for scoring the Mathematics A Regents exam demonstrates that students who pass with a score below 65 cannot be considered to have mastered any significant portion of the curriculum. Students receiving scores between 55 and 64 on the ELA could reasonably be assumed to have basic literacy skills, but given the nature of the grading rubric, the nature of the writing tasks, and the lack of reliability of school level grading, are not necessarily prepared for the majority of writing and reading tasks they will encounter in college. In order to determine the numbers of NYC graduates who pass the Mathematics A and ELA Regents exams with minimum scores, it is necessary to examine the types of diplomas granted to a given class. Prior to 2005, students were required to score at least 65 on eight exams to earn a Regents diploma. Only 18% of the students scheduled to graduate in 2004 met this standard. For Black and Hispanic students the numbers were even more abysmal with only one in ten students graduating on time having earned this more prestigious credential (Gootman, 2005). In many cases, lower performing students never made it to the advanced mathematics, science, and foreign language classes that would prepare them to take the additional exams.

In 2005, when NYS graduation requirements changed to grant Regents diplomas to students passing just five exams with a minimum score of 65, the percentage of graduates receiving a Regents diploma jumped significantly. Of the students who graduated on time in 2005, 60.7% graduated with some type of Regents diploma. Whether this number represented an upward trend, however, was obscured by the change in graduation requirements. In fact, the new endorsement introduced that year, the

Advanced Regents Diploma, requires students to meet the testing requirements of the pre-2005 Regents Diploma. The percentage of students from the class of 2005 who graduated on time with an Advanced Regents Diploma was 24.8%, a decline from the 33.2% of students who graduated with Regents Diplomas the previous year. In addition, while the overall number of students graduating with Regents Diplomas was relatively high, disparate racial outcomes remained. While 75.6% of White students who graduated did so with either a Regents or Advanced Regents Diploma, only 48.6% of Black students and 51.1% of Hispanic students did the same (NYCDOE, 2006).

More recent data on four-year graduation rates show modest increases in academic performance for students scheduled to graduate in 2006 (NYCDOE, 2007)². For this cohort, 63% of graduates earned some form of Regents Diploma; a 2.3 point gain over the previous year. The 3.9 point increase in the percentage of African American graduates earning Regents Diplomas was greater than that of any other group. Hispanic students showed more modest gains with a 1.7 point increase in the percentage of graduates earning Regents Diplomas. While these gains are promising, a 30% difference remains between the percentage of Asian graduates earning Regents Diplomas and the rates of their African American and Hispanic peers. In addition, when the scores are further analyzed, they reveal that significant numbers of students are just barely passing the Mathematics A and ELA Regents exams. Of the 73,448 high school students from this cohort who took the ELA Regents exam, 16,570 had still not received the minimum score of 55 by their senior year. In addition, 18.7% of those who passed did so with scores below 65. Only 21.4% of the students in this cohort earned scores of 85 or above.

² Analysis based on data from NYC's thirty-two school districts reported in table titled "Regents Results 2005-2006" in the New York State Report Card Database.

Student performance on the Mathematics A was similar. Out of 86,884 students who had taken this exam after four years of high school, 14,155 had not yet passed. Almost one-fourth of those who did pass earned scores of less than 65 and less than one-fifth of the passing scores on the Mathematics A Regents for this cohort were 85 or above. Because some students who did not yet pass the Mathematics A and ELA Regents were still in school, it is possible that some stayed for additional semesters and eventually were successful. Since these are the students who were having the most difficulties, however, it is likely that a disproportionate number of them earned scores in the lower range. These data clearly demonstrate that among NYC's graduates, there are thousands of students who have not developed sufficient reading, writing, and computational skills to make a successful transition into higher education or many careers.

If data on Regents scores in mathematics and ELA raise questions about the mastery of basic skills by large numbers of NYC high school students, the adequacy of graduates' preparation is further thrown into question by the graduation rates at the City University of New York (CUNY), where 66.3% of incoming freshmen are graduates of the NYC Public Schools. By the end of their fourth year, 37% of the 2001 freshmen class in CUNY's Baccalaureate programs had left the CUNY system with no degree. The outcomes for students enrolled in Associates degree programs were even more discouraging with 61% of fall 2001 freshmen having left the system without a degree after four years. Data from the 1995 cohort show that after ten years, only 46.3% of Baccalaureate students and 31.4% of Associate Degree students who began their higher education at CUNY had earned degrees. The most recent data suggests that these numbers have improved by about 10 percentage points at the Baccalaureate level, but

have remained flat at community colleges where, since the 1998 decision to eliminate remedial classes at CUNY's senior colleges, there has been an increasing concentration of the lowest performing graduates of the NYC Public Schools (Summerfield et al., 2006).

There are potential explanations for the low level of college completion in CUNY schools that are not directly connected to levels of high school preparation. Fifty-four percent of CUNY students live in households where the combined income is less than \$35,000 (Summerfield et al., 2006). According to a study conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center, the greater responsibility that Latino students have in financially supporting their families plays a significant role in low college completion rates (Fry, 2002). Economic pressures on working class CUNY students are exacerbated in NYC by the exponential increase in housing costs over the past decade. Financial obligations mean that large numbers of CUNY students are enrolled part time; a factor which is negatively correlated to graduation rates (Summerfield et al., 2006).

Economic pressures undoubtedly point to part of the explanation for CUNY's low completion rates, but the sizeable number of students in remedial classes suggests that another part of the explanation lies in the lack of foundational skills which students possess upon entering college. The issue of remediation at CUNY was at the center of a heated debate in the late 1990s when a task force convened by Mayor Giuliani criticized university policy. The authors of the 1999 report titled *CUNY: An Institution Adrift* pointed out that 87% of the students entering junior colleges and 72% of students entering senior colleges in 1997 were required to take remedial classes after having failed at least one placement exam. Of this cohort, 55% failed more than one placement test

suggesting that large numbers of students had yet to master high school level mathematics, reading and writing skills (Schmidt & et. al., 1999). More recent research has demonstrated a correlation between those students who fail the mathematics placement test and failure to complete a degree. While no clear correlation was demonstrated between retention and student performance on the ELA placement test, English language learners have particular difficulties meeting minimum proficiency requirements in reading and writing including successful completion of freshman composition. Because these students do not receive credit for completing remedial classes, the inability to test out of them or move quickly through them creates additional financial hardships for struggling students (Summerfield et al., 2006).

Further evidence of where NYC college students are struggling is provided by analyses of course passing rates. At community colleges enrolling large numbers of ESL students, the rates of failure in remedial reading and writing classes exceed those of science and math courses. Across CUNY, 34.7% of the high enrollment, high failure classes were in mathematics including algebra, pre-calculus, and quantitative analysis. In addition, courses requiring mastery of mathematics skills such as accounting and economics were among those with the lowest passing rates (Summerfield et al., 2006). Once again the absence of basic mathematical and literacy skills appear to create insurmountable obstacles for large numbers of students.

Data for students entering CUNY through the SEEK and College Discovery programs provide evidence, particularly at the Associates level, that more robust support for low income students can improve these outcomes. Students are accepted into these programs based on financial need and lack of academic preparation as demonstrated

through lower high school grade point averages. These students are enrolled in intense skills development classes in the summer preceding their entry into credit bearing classes and are provided with a range of counseling and tutoring services atypical of a large public university system. While these students do better than their peers at two year schools, and only slightly worse than their peers at four year colleges, 56% of Associates students and 42% of Baccalaureate students who entered CUNY through these programs as freshmen in 2001 had left the system with no degree after four years. This suggests an inability of some students to get over the hurdle of under preparation even with substantial support (Summerfield et al., 2006).

Since over half of NYC's public high school graduates who attend college do so in the CUNY system, these data provide an important indicator of how graduates fair beyond high school. CUNY retention data strongly suggests that possession of a high school diploma from the NYC Public Schools is no guarantee that a student has the minimal skills necessary to complete college level work. When combined with PSAT, NAEP, and Regents passing data, it is clear that high schools have not been successful in providing significant numbers of graduates with basic mastery in foundational academic skills. The modification of standards has not guaranteed that all students graduate with sufficient levels of competency. The fact that students are spending additional years in high school to receive a diploma suggests that students are failing large numbers of classes along the way. In fact, data demonstrates that dropping out is often preceded by a period of being overage and under credited (Schemo, 2006). The presence of students in classes who are not performing at minimal levels academically, and the difficulties and costs of programming large numbers of students who continually fail classes, negatively

impact the education of even the more successful students. And while some students do graduate by spending additional years, the fact remains that seven years after entering high school, 19,215 students of the class of 2003 had left school without a high school diploma and had not yet earned a GED (NYCDOE, 2007).

Summary of Research

These data from secondary and post-secondary education in NYC demonstrate that despite the achievement gains of recent years, a tremendous gap continues to exist between the standards to which society holds public education and the outcomes in NYC. This research was designed to document and understand the efforts of a group of committed educators who are attempting to change these troubling patterns. The site is a massive comprehensive high school now two years into an ambitious reform initiative. The centerpiece of the reform was the creation of nine semi-autonomous institutes, or Small Learning Communities (SLCs), which exist under the umbrella of a central administration. Already many structures which had existed untouched since the schools' opening over three decades ago have been remade. Among those most deeply committed to this change, there is a sense of optimism and the satisfaction of some significant early accomplishments. But there is also a palpable sense that the work is just beginning. This research seeks in the broadest sense to describe what has changed at Valley High School and analyze why. In addition, it is an early attempt to understand how these changes have impacted the lives of students. The hope is that this research will make an important contribution to the existing literature on secondary school reform and be of immediate practical use to the approximately twelve large high schools in NYC engaging in similar

types of reforms. In addition, because parts of it will be shared with participants both during and at the end of the research process, it is likely that this research will directly support the efforts of Valley staff members as they reflect on what has been accomplished and strategize about how to move their work forward.

To accomplish the above goals, this researcher collected and analyzed data generated during the planning phases of this project (2005-2006) and during the first and second years of implementation (2006-2008). The quantitative data analyzed included Regents passing rates, demographic data, 8th grade test scores of incoming students, class lists and course offerings, course passing rates, credit accumulation patterns, the results of diagnostic tests, and attendance data. In addition, the researcher analyzed a variety of qualitative data generated by the reform process including organizational charts, minutes of meetings, memos, and other school correspondence. After conducting an initial analysis of pre-existing data, the researcher collected qualitative data through observations of a wide range of school settings, and through interviews conducted with key stakeholders. These interview data provided the researcher with the capacity to understand how faculty members understood and evaluated the ongoing reform process. Once collected, these data were organized by themes related to a set of three research questions and analyzed in order to identify patterns. Finally, the researcher analyzed these primary data against both the backdrop of the current policy context in the NYC Public Schools and the history of secondary school reform in the United States.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Explanations for School Failure

Social Class and the Limitations of Schooling

For decades universal high school graduation has been an official expectation of students in the United States, yet as data show NYC continues to fall far short of this goal. Among the country's largest urban areas, NYC is neither the lowest nor the highest performing district, and as in other cities, the gap between the performance of different groups of students is substantial (Greene, 2002). While achievement data from schools across the nation show that disparities in academic performance correlate with social class and race, the relative contributions of different factors to these disparate outcomes is disputed. Research into the factors which affect student performance has substantially influenced educational policy at all levels, and has regularly been at the center of national debates since the 1960s with the publication of the seminal report, Equality of Educational Opportunity (EEO) (Coleman, 1966). In response to a mandate of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the USDOE commissioned Johns Hopkins sociologist James Coleman to conduct a survey and report on the "lack of availability of equal educational opportunity for individuals by reasons of race, color, religion, or national origin in public educational institutions (Moynihan & Mosteller, 1972)." While many earlier studies examined only school resources, Coleman and his team examined learning, as measured by standardized assessments, and analyzed the relationship between resources and educational outcomes. Coleman expected to find not only a difference between resources

in the schools Black and White children attended but also a strong relationship between these disparities and student achievement (Grant, 1973; Moynihan et al., 1972).

When Coleman released his findings, it was interpreted by many as a refutation of the logic underlying the compensatory educational programs which characterized the expanded federal intervention into education under the Johnson Administration. Coleman did find substantial differences between the resources afforded schools in different regions of the country, and given the concentration of African Americans in the South, these regional differences had a disparate racial impact. Nevertheless, the differences between schools within any given region were far smaller than predicted. Even more counterintuitive was the finding that differences between schools seemed to account for only a small fraction of the achievement gap between Black and White students. When social characteristics of both students and teachers were controlled, differences in per pupil expenditures, curricula, numbers of books in the library, and other facilities seemed to have no demonstrable effect on student achievement (Moynihan et al., 1972).

While the verbal ability of teachers was positively related to achievement for Black students, the impact was modest. What did appear to have a greater influence on test scores than the school factors measured was the class composition of the student body. The percentage of minority students in a school correlated negatively with test performance, but Coleman suggested that this was because race and class were themselves correlated. Race, according to the analysis, did not independently influence test scores in a significant way (Coleman et al., 1966; Coleman, 1972; Gamoran & Long, 2006; Grant, 1973; Moynihan et al., 1972). In short, the social class into which a student

was born and that of his or her classmates was argued to have far more influence on test scores than the curriculum, resources, and teachers in a school.

Given its unprecedented scope and government sponsorship, the Coleman report has received more attention than any subsequent educational study. Not surprisingly a number of challenges have been made to its validity. Authors have suggested that the high number of non-responses likely produced a sampling bias, that the regression analysis employed likely underestimated the effects of school factors, that the measures of school resources were too crude, and that the differences in the distribution of resources within districts and schools were ignored (Moynihan et al., 1972). According to one critique, this probability led to an underestimation of the per pupil expenditure in more privileged schools within a district and an overestimation of the amount of funding flowing to those attending a large district's more marginalized schools (Bowles & Levin, 1968). In addition, within schools, the least qualified teachers are often assigned to teach the lowest performing students and different curricular tracks in high schools afford substantially different educational experiences (Oakes, 2005). A student in a vocational program might never have been taught the content tested by the study's instrument. Finally, as Coleman himself pointed out, the crude measures employed (i.e. numbers of books, money spent on windows, etc.) failed to account for the diseconomies of concentrated poverty which often shorten the lifespan of these resources (Moynihan et al., 1972). For poor students to have equal access to resources in both quantity and quality, a greater absolute investment would be necessary.

The extent to which these methodological limitations invalidate EEO's central findings is contested. Some of Coleman's contemporaries argued that the conclusions

were premature. More recently, economist Richard Rothstein has interpreted four decades of research as confirming Coleman's central conclusion that the majority of variation in student performance is attributable to student characteristics (Rothstein, 2004). Up until 1994, the most cited meta-analysis of research on the effects of different factors on academic achievement was Eric Hanushek's examination of 187 regression analyses which concluded, echoing the findings of Coleman, "that there is no strong or systematic relationship between school expenditures and student performance (Hanushek, 1989, 47)." An analysis of much of the same data by Greenwald, Hedges and Laine, however, concluded that factors such as per pupil expenditure, smaller schools, and smaller classes are positively related to increased student performance (Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996). In a recent review of research into the questions raised by Coleman, sociologists Gamoran and Long (2006) cite widespread support for the conclusion that school resources impact academic achievement in at least some situations. They argue, however, that the presence of additional resources is not in itself sufficient, and that it is the way these resources are used that best predicts success.

It is clear that EEO, regardless of its methodological limitations, redefined the notion of "educational opportunity." Merely guaranteeing that every school had the same types of resources was not enough if these continued to yield outcomes that mirrored society's class and racial inequalities. In addition, the often unexamined belief that schooling was the process through which social inequality could be overcome was thrown into question. In its place emerged a still unresolved debate over what could reasonably be expected of schools.

Four decades after the publishing of EEO, the central dilemma which Coleman and his colleagues sought to explain remains. Despite some significant improvements, the gap between the academic performance of Black and Latino and White students remains as a constant reminder that the outcomes of public education are not equal. If the majority of the variation in achievement is attributable to factors over which schools have no control, as Coleman and his colleagues seemed to many to have suggested, then no amount of additional funding or school reform is likely to produce equality of outcomes. Harvard sociologist Christopher Jencks drew the logical conclusion of this argument in the 1970s when he interpreted Coleman's data as showing that schools could not address educational inequality if it remained in the socio-economic status and educational levels of parents (Coleman, Pettigrew, Sewell, & Pullum, 1973; Gamoran & Long, 2006). For opponents of Lyndon Johnson's increased investment of federal dollars into education, the Coleman report confirmed the view that more resources would make little difference. Indeed, Nixon would eventually use the report's findings to justify funding cuts in a wide array of educational programs (Spring, 1976).

In recent years, arguments that schools are powerless to challenge racial and class inequalities in academic achievement have fallen out of favor across the political spectrum and in academia. In the view of many who work in schools, however, the influence of outside factors continues to provide the primary explanation for failure as witnessed by perhaps the most popular strategy for improving schools – attracting “better” students. Therefore, understanding the relationship between a variety of factors on student achievement becomes critical not only as a means of assessing the potential

effectiveness of different school reforms, but also because the beliefs which educators have both shape and limit responses to educational failure.

“Culture of Poverty” and the Search for Deficits

The Coleman report was released at a time when debates over the widespread educational failure in urban public schools led many researchers to investigate the mechanisms by which schools and families influenced these outcomes. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who at the time was a sociologist at Harvard, saw in the Coleman Report a confirmation of his views on the achievement gap between Black and White students (Gamoran & Long, 2006; Moynihan et al., 1972). Analyzing the experiences of NYC’s different ethnic communities, Moynihan and co-author Nathan Glazer had argued in 1963 that discrimination and inadequate resources only provided part of the explanation for the academic failures of Black students. Seeking to explain the apparent disconnect between the high value placed on education by many in the Black community and the poor performance of Black students, they pointed to the legacy of slavery, and in particular to its impact on the family. According to their argument, the preponderance of female-headed households and children born out of wedlock within the African American community made it far more difficult for students to succeed. This was particularly the case for black boys growing up without male role models. Why else, according to these authors, would the same insensitive institutions which had provided sufficient education for earlier generations of immigrant students from Russia and Italy, prove so unfit for the task of educating African Americans (Glazer & Moynihan, 1964).

The belief that the home environment for students from marginalized communities was failing to provide the experiences necessary to healthy development

guided not only the ambitious federal education policies of the Johnson presidency, but also a wealth of empirical studies during the 1960s (Deutsch, 1964; Hess & Shipman, 1965; Hess, Shipman, & Jackson, 1965; Olim, Hess, & Shipman, 1967). While Moynihan and Glazer argued for the primacy of ethnicity, others looked at the impact of social class. Many researchers in the United States were influenced by the work of linguist Basil Bernstein (1964) who conducted research in England on the relationship between speech and social class. Bernstein theorized that the way humans generate speech is governed by social relationships at the level of both vocabulary and structure. He theorized that verbal language was governed by “principals of choice,” or coding systems, which were either restricted or elaborated in nature (Bernstein, 1964). Restricted codes are highly predictable patterns of speech that assume a range of common understandings between the speaker and listener. When a local cultural identity is shared, there is less need for explicit, elaborate, and precise articulation of meaning. The unique intentions of the speakers are not communicated primarily through the speech itself, which is often cliché, but through non-linguistic channels such as gestures and tone. The content of such speech tends to be “concrete, narrative and descriptive, rather than analytical or abstract,” and when more abstract content is addressed, speakers tend to stop short of fully developing explanations. This speech, according to Bernstein, becomes accessible to all members of the society through socialization (Bernstein, 1962a; Bernstein, 1962b; Bernstein, 1964).

Unlike restricted codes, elaborated codes are not equally available to all social classes. Bernstein theorized that codes governing more explicit, deliberate, and unpredictable uses of language were largely inaccessible to working class children and that this had important implications for their ability to succeed in school. While restricted

codes assumed commonalities between speakers and thus left much of the intended meaning of verbal communication implicit, elaborated codes focused on personal difference. The onus in this type of speech is on the speaker to communicate meaning explicitly through verbal elaboration. Because the speaker employing an elaborated code is selecting from a wide range of syntactic and lexical possibilities, he or she tends to engage in process of reflection and self-monitoring that is in sharp contrast to the relative ease with which highly predictable patterns of restricted speech can be produced.

Deliberately selecting from a wide range of linguistic possibilities in order to communicate abstract ideas in precise ways is a prerequisite for engaging in the highly verbal tasks typical of formal schooling. For working class children, however, “speech is epitomized by a low level and limited syntactic organization and there is little motivation or orientation towards increasing vocabulary.” The sole linguistic code which they possess only serves to communicate and receive “concrete, global, descriptive, narrative statements involving a relatively low level of conceptualization (Bernstein, 1964, 66).” For working class children, then, the conditions of socialization inhibit the development of linguistic abilities necessary to school success (Bernstein, 1962a; Bernstein, 1962b; Bernstein, 1964).

In the United States, a number of researchers took Bernstein’s linguistic analyses as a starting point, arguing that lower class students begin school less prepared than their more privileged counterparts due to experiences which “deprive” them culturally (Deutsch, 1964; Hess & Shipman, 1965; Hess et al., 1965; Olim et al., 1967).” Of particular interest was the system of control that parents employ in the household. While middle class and upper class families appeal to the relationships between individuals,

asking children to consider the consequences of a variety of behavioral options (e.g., what would your father say?), working class and poor parents tend to appeal to formal roles (e.g., do as I say, I'm your mother). Parents did not differ in the affective support they provided their children, but rather in the verbal and cognitive environments they created through their approach to child rearing. Empirical studies of Black mothers from a variety of class backgrounds were interpreted as providing proof that higher class parents employed an elaborated linguistic code which due to its orientation towards individuals and consequences was more conducive to problem solving and reflection. This, in turn, led to students who were "assertive" and "initiatory" in their approach to learning when compared to their lower class peers who tended to be "passive" and "compliant (Hess & Shipman, 1965)." While working class and poor children tended to be impulsive and act hastily when cognitively challenged, children of more privileged families were more likely to reflect and to compare alternatives before responding. Schools did not address this initial lack of cognitive competence of poorer children, and feelings of inadequacy accumulated over time progressively alienating poor students from formal education. The proposed prescription to the problem thus defined was vigorous early intervention designed to work directly with poor students as well with mothers to foster children's capacity to use language in ways that more closely paralleled the syntactic patterns of middle and upper class speakers (Deutsch, 1964; Olim et al., 1967)."

Home Literacy Practices

In studying the relationship between home life and academic achievement many authors have reframed the discussion in an attempt to focus on differences and power

relationships rather than deficiencies, a shift intended to correct the patronizing and ethnocentric implications implicit in the notion of a “culture of poverty (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).” For these authors, this is more than a question of semantics. Seeing the children of a given community as deficient in some way, particularly when those children belong to groups which have been marginalized and the targets of widespread prejudice, slides too easily into unfounded assumptions about what else is “wrong” with a child (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). The student who struggles to read or who has yet to master standard forms of English, is too easily assumed to be incapable of engaging in complex thought. The curricular implication is often an overemphasis on the teaching of basic skills and the disparaging of children’s intellectual capacity (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Furthermore, while research has pointed to patterns that are more common among certain groups, there are also high levels of variation within any social group. Research can provide educators with a framework for understanding the range of children’s experiences, but is insufficient as a predictor of the particular challenges any given child will face in school. Finally, emphasizing the deficiencies of children from a given community makes it difficult for educators to recognize, value, and build on the unique strengths that one finds in every community (Brice Heath, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Valenzuela, 1999).

While the “cultural deficit” framework has largely been abandoned, in response to critiques, researchers have continued to focus attention on the development of verbal abilities to explain disparate achievement between different groups of students. Many investigations into the role a child’s home environment plays in literacy development have focused on the concept of “emergent literacy,” or the skills, dispositions and

understandings that precede learning to read and write. It has been widely demonstrated that home environments provide varied levels of support to the development of the literacy skills valued in a schools (Boyer, 1991; Rothstein, 2004; Storch & Whitehurst, 2001). The comparative ethnographic research of Shirley Brice Heath (1982) on literacy practices among different communities helps shed light on how well the language, verbal interactions, and learning climates in different homes prepare students for the experience of school. Among the “literacy events” examined by Heath were bedtime stories, which provided a forum for White middle class parents to model the “initiation – reply – evaluation sequences” pervasive in formal educational settings. While early shared reading in these families involved a steady stream of questions and responses, by the time the child was three these parents tended to encourage patience for extended periods of time during reading by forcing children to listen, formulate questions, and hold these until the appropriate time to ask them. Children learned not only to extract specific information from text, but also ways to communicate what they learned.

In Roadville, the pseudonym Heath gave to the White working class community she studied, children were also read to regularly by adults and asked to recall specific information from texts. In contrast to the White middle class community, however, little attempt was made to apply or connect the decontextualized knowledge of books to the real world. Similarly, in addressing real world situations, adults did not refer back to things they had read. Children were not often asked, for example, to compare the qualities of the dog in a picture book to the one that lived in their house. In addition, parents in Roadville did not provide the type of continuous verbal commentary for children highlighting the discrete parts of tasks in which they were engaged, comparing

them to similar tasks, and providing “reason-explanations” for why each individual action was necessary.

In Trackton, the working class Black community Heath studied, there was a scarcity of reading materials for children. Bedtime storytelling was not a regular practice, and when preschool age children were asked questions, parents seldom required that children provide specific information in response. Children were asked to compare things broadly, without attention to the specific details that made the things being compared either similar or different. According to Heath:

Because adults do not select out, name, and describe features of the environment for the young, children must perceive situations, determine how units of the situations are related to each other, recognize these relations in other situations, and reason through what it will take to show the correlation of one situation with another. The children can answer questions such as “What’s that like?” (“It’s like Doug’s car”), but they can rarely name the specific feature or features that make two items or events alike (Brice Heath, 1982, 117).

For Heath, shared reading is essential, but its value is partly determined by the patterns of interaction between parents during the activity. Furthermore, in the more privileged community she studied, patterns of conversation supported the development of skills by asking students to apply book knowledge to the real world and real world knowledge to reading. Parents narrated activities in ways that mimicked the analytical processes students are asked to employ in school settings. Finally, a learning climate that encouraged reading was fostered by the seamless integration of literary activities into many aspects of family life.

The notion that children more frequently exposed to reading at home will be more likely to do well in school is widely shared. The argument that parents’ ways of speaking has a similar impact, as suggested by the cultural deprivation theorists of the 1960s, has

proven more difficult to accept not in the least because of the implications that families are in some way deficient. Victoria Purcell-Gates (2001) has attempted to clarify the issue by reformulating the notion of emergent literacy as development of the “conceptual and procedural knowledge of written language (8).” While differences exist between different types of spoken language, all forms of spoken language were theorized to be different than written language in ways that derive from the different purpose which each serves. Written language, by design, is intended to communicate with someone who is not present when the language is produced. The deliberative context in which it is produced allows for a more varied selection of words as well as syntactic constructs. Written language, therefore, tends to use a wider range of vocabulary, more unusual words, and more embedded sentence structures. Furthermore, written language is by its nature decontextualized and therefore requires the inclusion of explicit references that can be omitted in the shared space of conversation where gestures, intonation, and context support the communication of meaning. While this echoes the distinctions between Bernstein’s restricted and elaborated codes, Purcell-Gates points to empirical evidence suggesting that written language is syntactically and lexically distinct from even highly formal oral language in academic settings.

In order to assess whether groups of kindergarteners had already learned the distinct register of written language, Purcell-Gates asked them to “pretend-read” a story from a book. The resulting data from this and a series of other similar studies show that students from lower class backgrounds had far less familiarity with those elements of written language upon entry to kindergarten. While these findings confirm widely held beliefs about the influence of home environment on reading readiness, the fact that these

same students had mastered these skills after two years of schooling suggests that being read to and learning to read itself fostered this development. When combined with the finding that these students had begun as second graders to integrate more elements of decontextualized language into verbal activities as well, this suggests that exposure to written language is itself an important source of students' mastery of decontextualized language. The implication is that schools can effectively help working class children overcome the additional obstacles they face through consistent and structured exposure to written language.

Unequal Treatment by Schools

The most consistent critique of "cultural deficit" explanations for the achievement gap was that it located the problem in groups of students or their families, thus shifting attention from the disparate treatment schools meted out to children of marginalized communities. In Kenneth Clark's (1965) seminal analysis of America's ghettos, he challenged the theory, advanced by Moynihan and Glazer, that the "pathologies" of ghetto life and the Black family explain the continued cycles of poverty which trap ghetto residents. Acknowledging that poor black students do enter with particular needs, Clark cited a Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited report's conclusion that "what has not been demonstrated... is that these differences constitute a permanent barrier to learning (139)." For Clark and others, an explanation for the persistent academic failure of inner city youth of color could be found in the low expectations held by teachers.

The most well known attempt to establish whether teacher expectations had such an effect was a study conducted by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968). An experiment was designed in an elementary school in order to discover whether Robert Merton's concept

of self-fulfilling prophecy could explain the academic success of different students. Students were given an IQ test, but teachers were not given the results. Instead researchers reported to teachers that the test was an indicator of potential for intellectual growth, and randomly labeled 20% of the students as having a high probability of “blooming.” In order to measure whether this “special” group would experience an “expectancy” advantage, the researchers re-administered the same IQ test at regular intervals. The gains in scores of the children labeled bloomers indeed exceeded those of their peers suggesting that teachers’ expectations could have a powerful influence on student achievement.

Rosenthal and Jacobson’s study sparked enormous interest among researchers and a flurry of similar studies designed to test for what became known as “Pygmalion effects” after the title of their book. In a recent review of these studies, Ferguson (as cited in Phillips & Jencks, 1998) concluded that teacher expectations probably do play a role in maintaining the achievement gap between Black and White students. Studies suggest that the corrosive impact of low expectations is greater on Black students, female students, and low income students than others, and that the impact seems to be greater in ELA than in mathematics (Phillips & Jencks, 1998). In addition, Steele (as cited in Phillips & Jencks, 1998) has pointed to the impact of “stereotype threats” on Black and female students in standardized testing situations. In a series of experiments, Steele demonstrated that African American students performed more poorly on tests that were introduced as measures of intellectual ability. Steele hypothesized that students experience a “disruptive anxiety” when placed in a situation which potentially confirms a negative stereotype about an ethnic, racial, or gender group to which one belongs.

If teachers' expectations negatively impact the academic achievement of poor students and students of color in some situations, one can conclude that in either subtle or overt ways, these children are being treated differently. A great deal of educational research provides evidence that such differential treatment does in fact exist. This is seen when school faculty interpret the minor behavioral infractions of Black students as harbingers of serious future transgressions and respond in more punitive ways than they would to similar behavior on the part of White students (Ferguson, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; The Advancement Project & The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2000). It is also present in the disproportionate assignment of poor students and students of color to the lower tracks within integrated school settings and to special education (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Oakes, 2005). Finally, it is apparent in the disparity of resources afforded schools serving the poor, in the quality and preparation of teachers working in these schools, and in the rapid re-segregation of urban school districts such as NYC (Kozol, 1991; Kozol, 2005). Together these inequities work directly to create obstacles and indirectly to convey expectations about the value society places on the education of students of color and the poor. While questions remain about how significant a role such discriminatory or disparate treatment plays in fostering the unequal outcomes of schooling, at minimum they pose a significant obstacle to changing those patterns (Phillips & Jencks, 1998).

Cultural Mismatch

Given the diversity of the United States, it is not surprising that researchers have sought answers for the persistent achievement gap between different groups of students in the cultural differences between students' homes and the schools they attend. While the

population of non-White students in America's public schools almost constitutes a numeric majority, the majority of teachers continue to be White (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Authors have suggested that cultural differences between students and teachers lead to a myriad of difficulties in communication (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Valenzuela, 1999). Furthermore, teachers have a difficult time constructing curriculum that is relevant to the experiences of students and in affirming the value of the cultures students bring to the classroom (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994). There is evidence that this creates a situation in which some students feel they must choose between academic success and being faithful to their culture (Valenzuela, 1999). Finally, a number of authors have pointed to failures of teacher certification programs to inadequately prepare teachers for the complex cultural endeavor of teaching "other people's children (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002)." While the teaching and administrative workforce in NYC has undergone a significant demographic shift over the last four decades, the diversity of the city schools means that more often than not teachers continue to work with students whose experiences are not their own.

In addition to affecting the relationship between teachers and students, research suggests that cultural differences can shape the nature of parents' participation in the education of their children. While researchers have consistently found that most parents have high aspirations for their children, anthropologist John Ogbu has argued that members of historically oppressed communities communicate ambivalent messages about the benefits of academic success as a result of past experiences of discrimination in the labor market (Ogbu, 2003). In addition, there is some evidence that the lack of success of

disproportionate numbers of students from certain communities causes parents who begin with high aspirations to adjust these aspirations downward over time (Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001). Lareau analyzes disparate patterns of parent involvement arguing the relations between home and school in working class communities are characterized by “separation” rather than the “interconnectedness” which typifies the relations of more privileged communities with schools. Consequently, the participation of working class parents is sporadic and defers to teachers’ judgments in regards to classroom instruction, while upper middle class parents feel authorized to play a more active supervisory role. This situation is exacerbated when parents do not speak English and schools fail to make available translation services or hire sufficient numbers of bilingual staff. Overall, Lareau suggests that working class parents have fewer resources at their disposal to help their children achieve academically. The implications of this on the achievement gap between different students is potentially significant as parental involvement, particularly for low achieving students, is argued to have a substantial effect on student success (Lareau, 2000).

The widely shared belief that cultural disconnects between homes and schools are at least partly to blame for gaps in achievement has had significant implications for educational practice as many educators have advocated for curriculum and pedagogical approaches that are more culturally responsive. It is in this context that some educators concluded that the explicit teaching of standard forms of English was an unjustified cultural imposition of White middle class values. In an attempt to remedy the wrongs of previous generations of well meaning but ultimately patronizing educators and researchers, groups of White teachers, loosely united under a progressive banner, adopted

an increasingly passive role in relation to the verbal and written expression of their students of color. In this shift, they sought theoretical justification in the child-centered pedagogy of earlier generations of educational theorists from John Dewey to G. Stanley Hall. But as Lisa Delpit has powerfully argued, withholding instruction in the linguistic codes which mark power and status in a society does a profound disservice to those least likely to encounter them in their home environment. As was previously discussed, scores of studies have demonstrated that home language use and home literacy practices do have an impact on the competency with which students approach the variety of activities valued by schools. Delpit has argued that educators and parents can scaffold the acquisition of linguistic competencies which schools and society value in a manner sensitive to the enormous variation among children and respectful of the communities to which they belong (Delpit, 1995). The clear implication is that the efforts of schools to build on rather than ignore or devalue the cultures of their students, must be balanced with a clear recognition of the premium society places on different forms of discourse and types of knowledge and skills.

Limitations of the Emerging New Consensus

Four decades ago, when the New York City school system was virtually paralyzed by struggles between Black and Puerto Rican activists and the United Federation of Teachers for control over the public schools, Kenneth Clark (1965) argued that “a child whose parents have no books can learn to read in school as quickly as a child whose home is well equipped (126).” Discussing the success of one reading program, Clark suggested that “the only thing that was done was that they were being taught to read by individuals who believed that they could learn to read and who related to them

with warmth and acceptance (140).” Believing that poor black students cannot learn, Clark argued, teachers and administrators act as if the primary role of the school was a “custodial” one rather than an educational one. While the extent to which teacher expectations impact achievement seems to vary, high expectations are likely to be an important piece of any concerted effort to increase the academic performance of those students who have historically been unsuccessful. It is equally clear, however, that the idea that high expectations are alone sufficient is at best naïve. Such arguments, which are implicit in the work of Kenneth Clark and in many of the writings of yesterday’s community control activists, have today been adopted, albeit in a modified form, by forces on the other side of the political spectrum. The rhetoric of George W. Bush about the “soft bigotry of low expectations,” and the implicit logic of the No Child Left Behind Act, suggest that the only thing holding back poor students and students of color is the unwillingness of teachers to educate them and hold them accountable. Threats of punitive sanctions and the introduction of increased competition between schools are seen as sufficient to stimulate efforts capable of ensuring universal success by 2012.

In rejecting the theorists of cultural deprivation, with their inability to comprehend unequal social relationships and their unfair characterizations of Black families as uniquely deficient, authors, politicians, and policy makers too often fail to appreciate the implications of living life at the bottom of an increasingly stratified society. A pervasive assumption is that the teacher who is sufficiently sensitive to culture and committed to equity can overcome any obstacle. As Richard Rothstein points out, however, where one sits in the class hierarchy determines, at least in part, the obstacles one is likely to experience. These obstacles extend far beyond those generated by home

literacy practices and patterns of discourse. The school experience of poor students is more likely to be interrupted by frequent moves, court appearances, asthma attacks, and visits to the emergency room due to untreated health conditions. Poor students are more likely to have untreated vision problems that interfere with reading and writing, untreated cavities which cause problems of concentration, and ear infections which lead to hearing problems. Black students are more likely to watch more than six hours a day of television than their White peers, and fetal alcohol syndrome is ten times more frequent among poor Blacks than among middle class Whites (Rothstein, 2004). To imagine that these factors play no role in school achievement is to ignore the obvious, but to suggest that they create insurmountable barriers to the success of students from low-income communities is equally unsubstantiated as will be demonstrated below.

Student Resistance

Up until this point, a number of possible explanations for the unequal outcomes of schooling have been explored. Some of these focus on obstacles which originate outside of schools, while others emphasize the responsibility of schools themselves, suggesting that they either do not meet the needs of particular groups of students, or that they actively create barriers to high achievement. Students have largely remained the passive recipients of cultural, societal, and institutional processes in the picture painted thus far. A number of researchers suggest, however, that such an understanding is limited and that there is explanatory value in exploring the ways students exercise agency in educational settings. Students make decisions on how they respond to school, and these decisions are based at least in part on perceptions of the costs of participation, the chances for success, and the potential rewards for completion. Schools, particularly at the secondary level,

make an offer to students – do well and you’ll be successful as an adult. Everywhere in high schools one finds the promise of gainful employment and financial success dangled as a carrot and the specter of underemployment or unemployment wielded as a stick. But schools, according to some authors, suffer from a crisis of legitimacy in the eyes of many students from groups which have historically been excluded from equal participation in America’s prosperity. For these authors, the explanation to the lackluster performance of many students from such communities lays in part in their reticence to buy into the promise made by schools.

In the early 1970’s sociologist Paul Willis (1981) conducted an ethnographic study of a group of unruly teenagers in an industrial British town to chart the cultural contours of their seemingly inevitable journeys into working class jobs. These “lads” seemed, to Willis, to approach school with an “aimless air of insubordination ready with spurious justification and impossible to nail down (12).” Their resistance to the school was expressed in their clothing, vulgar language, drinking, and drug use. In the face of the school’s attempts to maintain control, these students waged impressive guerilla battles for control of their movement and largely preserved the ability to decide which classes they would attend. The school, according to Willis, was a site of conflict that asked students to conform to the expectations of an alien social class in return for the promise of social mobility. Students perceived the cards as stacked against them, however, sensing that their own cultural resources would make it difficult for them to compete in such an environment. Furthermore, students felt it unlikely that the secondary school credential to which they were asked to aspire would hold the promised exchange value in the labor market. Given their perception of dismal odds, and the fact that adopting

aspirations towards white collar employment was perceived as a repudiation of their own concept of masculinity, with its glorification of manual labor and immediately practical knowledge, the lads choose to immerse themselves in a peer culture whose values were incompatible with those of the school. Through their own actions of resistance, students ensured the smooth functioning of a class system sorting workers into those places where the economy generated employment.

Willis suggests that the “lads” perceived somewhat accurately the contradictions between the official narrative of schooling and the limited opportunity structure of a pyramid shaped capitalist economy. Jay MacLeod (1995) comes to a similar conclusion in an ethnographic study of a group of boys living through the turbulent 1980s in a Northeastern American city. Unlike Willis, who focused his attention primarily on students who openly rejected the official values of school, MacLeod compares the experiences of two groups who chose seemingly alternate paths. While both peer groups studied lived in the same public housing project, the “Hallway Hangers” and the “Brothers” adopted radically different stances toward school. The almost all White Hallway Hangers were rebellious like Willis’ lads and occupied their time getting high, cutting, fighting, and challenging their teachers, while the almost exclusively African American Brothers believed that school would lead to success in adulthood and generally did their best despite modest academic achievement. Like Willis, MacLeod suggests that the Hallway Hangers were responding to the perceived lack of future employment opportunities by leveling their future aspirations – a process which MacLeod points out was abetted by their school’s tracking system which isolated both groups in a program emphasizing character development and self-discipline over academic rigor.

While Willis' narrative leaves off at the tail end of the "lads" secondary school experience, MacLeod revisits the lives of his participants eight years later giving us the opportunity to see how the optimism of the Brothers fared into adulthood. While they managed to avoid the prison sentences and bouts with drug addiction of their rebellious peers, the promise of gainful employment proved elusive as most found themselves poorly paid in unstable jobs. Their experiences suggest that the critique of the Hallway Hangers contained some truth about the opportunities afforded society's poor youth. This critique is confirmed by the research of William Julius Wilson (1996), which points to the increasing concentration of poverty in certain neighborhoods and the accompanying scarcity in models of adult success for youth. Drier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom (2001) have documented the spatial mismatch that exists between employment opportunities and poor residential neighborhoods, while Sassen (1991) and others have described the increasing stratification of the labor market in "global cities" like NYC with the accompanying lack of meaningful employment opportunities for the majority of residents (Castells & Mollenkopf, 1991). Finally, the analysis of Gordon Lafer (2002) supports Willis' assertion that elevating the credentials of the workforce will not in itself transform the class structure of society. The experience of the last forty years underscores this in that the gap between the highest and lowest earners has increased exponentially and the real wages of the American working class have remained stagnant even as increasing percentages of workers earn high school and college diplomas (Pollin, 2003).

If one accepts that for some students, the promise of equal opportunity is contradicted by economic reality, then one must ask what effect the continual repetition of this message has on the relationship between schools and students. A number of

authors suggest that schools both silence student critique and demand false consensus around an understanding of society that fundamentally contradicts students' experiences. According to Michelle Fine, it is in many cases those students who most clearly perceive this contradiction who have the most difficulty complying with school demands (Fine, 1991). Through the systematic silencing of students and their parents, and through institutional cultures that tolerate high levels of failure as unfortunate but inevitable, schools generate the academic failure for which individual students are blamed. In this way schools are positioned in opposition to many of the students and families that they ostensibly serve, rather than alongside them in support of their aspirations.

Among the most troubling features of many inner city schools is the violence that is, along with the draconian institutional response it sometimes evokes, so disruptive to the educational process. Theorists of student resistance such as Fine, Willis, and Giroux have been criticized as downplaying the seriousness of violence committed by adolescents (Devine, 1996). Regardless of whether one interprets such violence as another manifestation of resistance, its chilling frequency necessitates a closer examination.

In attempting to explain pervasive violence among urban youth, sociologist Elijah Anderson (1999) suggests that an alternate set of values, a "code of the street," successfully competes with those of the school to the detriment of inner city youth. This "code" is "a set of prescriptions and proscriptions, or informal rules of behavior organized around a desperate search for respect that governs public social relations, especially violence, among so many residents [of the inner city] (9)." Anderson's ethnographic descriptions of inner city social life highlight the centrality of physical

proWess, particularly for boys, in the development of identity. The psychological consequences of being seen as “soft,” (i.e. backing down from a physical challenge) are too much to bear and adults and other adolescents regularly reinforce the belief that the only appropriate responses to disrespect are physical. The school becomes a central “staging area” in which students engage in elaborate “campaigns for respect.” Even students who are not oriented towards a “street” identity adopt attitudes and actions that conform to the code for their own protection, thus subjecting themselves to negative sanctions by school authorities unable to recognize this as a survival strategy. For Black students, conforming to the social expectations of school and achieving is sometimes seen as acting White, behavior likely to engender social sanction by one’s peers.

The notion that the racial achievement gap can be in part explained by a desire of Black students to avoid accusations of acting White is most often associated with the work of anthropologist John Ogbu (Ogbu, 1982; Ogbu, 1987; Ogbu, 1990; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Ogbu, 2003). Ogbu’s comparative ethnographic research explores the cultural responses of different ethnic and national groups to schooling and seeks to understand these in relation to their historical experiences. For the purposes of his analysis, Ogbu describes the characteristics that distinguish “involuntary” minority groups from “voluntary” ones. While some groups have chosen to immigrate to other countries in hopes of more opportunity, others have been forcibly brought to distant shores or had their lands integrated into a foreign country through war or other traumatic events. In the United States, African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and some Mexican Americans entered the United States against their will. According to Ogbu, it is in the differences between their experiences and those of other minorities, that one will find at

least part of the explanation for why various groups fare so differently, despite facing many of the same challenges. Whereas immigrants tend to see barriers such as discrimination and unequal distribution of educational resources as temporary ones capable of being overcome by individual effort, those who came to America against their will tend to perceive these barriers as precluding individual advancement without collective struggle. For involuntary minorities, a great emphasis is placed on maintaining the cultural markers that distinguish group members from the dominant society, and as a result there is a reticence to engage in the behaviors that are rewarded in schools.

Ogbu argues that there is substantial discrimination and inequity in school practices and society, but suggests as does Willis, that the cultural responses to these circumstances take on a certain life of their own generating outcomes not always predetermined by the social structure. A case in point is the perception among African Americans that the exchange value of an educational credential is severely diminished by workplace discrimination. Ogbu suggests that while discrimination continues to exist, the opportunities available to a college educated Black man or woman are greatly expanded today as a result of the Civil Rights Movement. Nevertheless, deep skepticism that investments in education will pay the promised dividends continues, according to Ogbu, to prevent many African American students from fully investing in their schoolwork. While the distrust of dominant society is historically warranted, it informs behavior that is, as with the behavior of Willis' lads, ultimately reinforcing of the current class hierarchy. It is not that immigrant students do not perceive the discrimination or the obstacles to their advancement, but that they view schools through the pragmatic lens of what it can offer them. And while immigrant students might, like MacLeod's Brothers,

have in some cases overly optimistic notions of the opportunity that exists, they on the whole outperform their “involuntary minority” peers even in cases where they face significantly larger language and cultural disconnects, conditions of poverty, and share the same skin color.

Declining Standards

Of all the potential explanations for school failure proposed by researchers, the notion that there has been a progressive compromising of standards is one that has captivated policy makers in recent years. Beginning in the early twentieth century, a steady stream of voices began to suggest that ineffective pedagogy employed in schools was responsible for poor student performance. It was in response to such critiques that the progressive movement in education was born and a wide range of reforms were advocated (Cremin, 1961; Kliebard, 2004). While the extent to which these reforms impacted classroom practice is questionable, as will be discussed below, in the last three decades critics have coalesced around a new explanation for school failure which holds progressive education as responsible for school failure (Ravitch, 2000). The thrust of these critiques were captured in the 1984 report, *A Nation At Risk*, which painted a dismal picture of a failing school system and held that loosened standards and a move away from an academic focus were among the main culprits. High schools, according to one author, had become “shopping malls” in which the degree of participation in an intellectually engaging program was a matter not-unlike consumer choice in the marketplace (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). Some of these critics pointed to the lack of accountability in public education and advocated for the creation of higher standards, a focus on instruction in basic skills, and more proscriptive definitions of core curricula. The

widespread acceptance of this explanation for failure in recent years can be seen in the initial bipartisan support for the No Child Left Behind Act with its strong emphasis on explicit and uniform standards and mandated high stakes assessments.

Schools as Institutions of Social Reproduction

As the preceding pages demonstrate, the tendency of politicians, educators, and the general public to attribute academic failure to one or two factors simplifies a complex picture from which it is difficult to derive simple causal relationships. While this review has pointed to both the limitations and explanatory power of many of these analyses, the primary intention has not been to establish the validity of any one of these perspectives. Instead the purpose is to use this literature as a framework for better understanding those conceptual frameworks that shape the thinking of those engaged in reform at the school level. As with any restructuring effort, the reform project which was documented in this research is motivated by a desire to address a gap between certain stated institutional goals and the actual performance of students. The way in which those crafting and implementing these reforms understand the problems and their causes informed both their focus and choices. In analyzing the actions of various constituencies, this researcher has attempted to make explicit the understandings that motivated and guided faculty members and to analyze them in light of existing research. Before moving on, however, an assumption woven throughout much of the literature on school failure must be highlighted. Most approaches to understanding various achievement gaps rest on implicit beliefs that schools are designed to ensure equality of outcomes. Since the 1960s, however, a number of authors have challenged this commonsense belief about schooling, suggesting that schools have never been organized to produce equality and instead are

integral to the reproduction of society's existing class structure and power relations (Anyon, 1980; Anyon, 1981; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Through a variety of mechanisms including vocational tracking and distinct approaches to teaching the students of different class origins, theorists have argued that schools effectively reproduce the class system while representing the transfer of class privilege as the legitimate rewarding of hard work and merit. The notion that high school should involve a common set of educational experiences and outcomes is in fact a relatively recent one as a survey of the history of secondary education will demonstrate. In fact, the historical evolution of schooling in the United States suggests that the unequal outcomes of schools, rather than unintended consequences, are entirely consistent with at least some of the purposes around which public schools were first organized.

Origins of the Public High School in the United States

Publicly funded and administered high schools in the United States have roots in the Common Schools Movement which first emerged in Massachusetts. The first public high school in the United States was Boston English, opened in 1821 (Labaree, 1988). Boston took the lead in promoting this new institution by passing a law in 1827 which required all towns beyond a certain size to establish one (Katz & Thernstrom, 1971; Labaree, 1988). Nevertheless, before the 1840's state sponsored secondary education was rare and was viewed negatively by many as a tax subsidy for the wealthy. For its advocates, the high school was seen as a natural extension of the public school system providing the missing link between grammar schools and universities. Because of the widespread skepticism, however, many early high schools courted students by offering

practical courses and contrasting themselves to the Latin seminaries whose curriculum was portrayed as subordinate to university admission requirements.

In NYC, the public school system did not emerge from a collection of common schools, but rather from charity schools that were organized with the goal of educating the children of the poor. Wealthy patrons of the Free School Society (later the Public School Society) saw charity schools as a way to fulfill their paternalistic impulses to help the poor and to supplant poor parents in the socialization of their offspring – a job for which these parents were seen as ill-fitted. The Free School Society was founded in 1805, and was successful in lobbying for public monies which allowed it to open its first school in 1806 (Ravitch, 1974).

Seminaries were the first secondary schools created in NYC, and these were followed by the emergence of academies in response to consumer demand. Academies blossomed as New York developed into a business center and new types of skills were needed for employment in expanding industries. By 1817, forty academies existed in New York. While supported by private tuition, some of these academies did receive public support to train teachers and by the mid-1830s, to the chagrin of public school advocates, the state legislature mandated that one existed in every senatorial district with a teacher-training program (Reese, 1995).

The first institution to be called a high school in NYC was the New York Monitorial High School opened in 1821. Founder John Griscom had traveled to Scotland and had been greatly impressed with Edinburgh High School which used the monitorial system of Joseph Lancaster; a highly structured instructional approach involving the use of student monitors to allow for high student-to-teacher ratios. The monitorial system had

been widely employed in grammar schools, but had yet to be applied in the United States at the secondary level. For Griscom, this represented an economic alternative to the far more costly model employed at schools like Boston Latin.

Despite the association of the monitorial system with schools for the poor, and the significant opposition to the use of the system at the secondary level by educators, the New York Monitorial High School managed to attract a wealthy clientele. After six years, however, the school was forced to close down due to financial difficulties highlighting potential limitations of a tuition-funded institution. At the same time, a series of conflicts emerged between universities and states as the states attempted to exert more control over these previously religious institutions. In a controversy over control of Dartmouth College, the Supreme Court ruled that the charitable nature of a private institution did not make it any less subject to the protection afforded other private institutions from government interference. Faced with the choice between attempting to exert control and extend further financial support to existing academies, and erecting new publicly funded and managed institutions, New York opted largely for the later option. Thus was born the Free Academy, an all-boys high school that would later become the City College of New York.

As previously mentioned, acceptance of the public high school was not forthcoming from all sectors of society. The working class and poor could not afford the luxury of keeping their children out of work through adolescence and were generally skeptical of the utility of secondary education. Hostility was so great that Horace Mann, for a period of time, urged supports to avoid using the name “high school” for its elitist implications (Reese, 1995). High school advocates were from the beginning put on the

defensive and forced to focus on the practical nature of the high school curriculum and the meritocratic nature of its design. Thus, when Townsend Harris proposed the NYC's Free Academy in the late 1840s, he vigorously denied that it would be an elite institution for college bound students. Nevertheless, the student body reflected the wealthier native-born Christian members of New York society (Reese, 1995).

Throughout most of the 19th Century, only 1% of the male students attending lower schools entered high school. While secondary education experienced a massive expansion during the first two decades of the 20th century as states raised the mandatory attendance age, estimates suggest that only one quarter to one half of high school aged children were attending school by the 1920s (Counts, 1921; Counts, 1922; Lee & Ready, 2006). In addition, there is evidence that the occupation of one's parent was highly determinant of both who was admitted and who graduated. The sons and daughters of business owners were most likely to earn diplomas, whereas the sons and daughters of laborers had the worst chances (Counts, 1921; Counts, 1922). The fact that so few students entered and graduate high school, however, does not necessarily mean that those few who did make it were the offspring of the wealthiest and most powerful families. In fact, evidence suggests that it was the middle classes that provided the most support for public high schools as they sought to supplant the diverse set of academies. For a middle class squeezed between the explosion of wage labor at the bottom of the class structure and the increasingly competitive business environment of an expanding capitalist economy, the high school credential came to be seen as a means of securing a comfortable future for one's children (Labaree, 1988). For middle class parents, the opportunity to receive this credential at the public expense and without having to send

their children away for years was welcomed (Katz & Thernstrom, 1971). It was this middle class support that allowed the number of students attending public secondary schools to surpass those attending the private academies by the 1880s (Tyack, 1974). Private academies were incorporated into the public system or driven out of business (Reese, 1995). By the turn of the century, public high schools had become the central institutions of secondary education and were poised for a massive expansion.

Emergence of the High School Curriculum

The Committee of Ten

Not surprisingly as high schools developed new structures and continued to expand, the curriculum underwent a number of transformations. The manner in which the high school curriculum was modified in response to competing pressures was to expand and to differentiate. Early high schools emerged in a wide range of contexts and served two distinctive groups of students: those who were college bound and those for whom high school would be their final formal education (Angus & Mirel, 1999). Consequently, the curriculum in the 1890s resembled, according to historian David K. Cohen, “a species of academic jungle creeper, spreading thickly and quickly in many directions at once (cited in Tyack & Cuban, 1995, 50).” It was with the goal of increasing the coherence and standardization of the high school curriculum that a group composed largely of college professors and presidents met under the leadership of Harvard president Charles Eliot. This Committee of Ten, as they came to be known, presented the first major report on the American High School to the National Education Association in 1893. Concerned about the preparation of high school students for college, the committee attempted to

devise a system by which all students would receive a rigorous academic program with some limited choices between the classical and modern subjects. The report dealt with three major areas: differentiation, the election of studies, and the principle of equivalence (Angus & Mirel, 1999).

The dilemmas around differentiation flowed most directly from the fact that high schools from the beginning served students with different goals. The question was if subjects should be taught differently depending on whether a student intended to pursue post-secondary studies. The committee decided that there should be no such distinction in pedagogy and curriculum. On the other hand, the committee did allow for some choice and flexibility through an elective system in which schools devised varied courses of study. The committee encouraged high schools to stick close to its recommendations in designing these courses so as to maintain their intellectual integrity. Furthermore, it was recommended that student choice be limited and closely guided by faculty (Angus & Mirel, 1999). This arrangement would address one of the major concerns of the committee: the preparation of students for college. By following these recommendations, high schools would guarantee a minimum standard of preparation and colleges and universities should in theory accept any high school's curriculum as sufficient for meeting admissions requirements. Angus and Mirel (1999) argue that this attempt to identify a core curriculum and put the brakes on the increasing differentiation of the high school curriculum was the first "back to basics movement led by professional educators (10)."

While the report of the Committee of Ten legitimized the placement of so called modern subjects in the high school curriculum, to the chagrin of the advocates of a purely

classical education, it failed to recognize a place for vocational subjects that had gained much popularity in preceding decades. One underlying belief was that subjects such as English literature and mathematics, if taught in a rigorous manner, provided as fertile ground for developing intellectual capacity of students as the study of Latin or Greek (Krug, 1969). In this sense the report attempted to broaden the definition of a college preparatory curriculum, while limiting the role of high schools in purely vocational training. The attempt to define a common core of intellectually rigorous curriculum was for Eliot a fundamentally democratic concern. Eliot argued that a highly differentiated program that organized students into tracks based on their likely post secondary destinations would be unjust. Critics, however, would quickly challenge many of the premises of the report arguing that it was in further differentiation of the curriculum that the high school would cease to be an instrument of the colleges and college bound minority.

Among the critics of the Committee of Ten report was G. Stanley Hall, a psychologist at Columbia University. Hall argued that teaching all students in the same way was a mistake given the different needs, aspirations, and aptitudes of those attending high schools. For Hall, whose critiques sharpened after 1900, the central role of high schools was not to prepare students for college, but for life (Krug, 1969). Eliot had argued that choices to pursue a program more directly suited to college preparation should be postponed as long as possible lest education become preparation for a particular social destination. Krug points out that the “conservative” position, at that time, was that which argued for the broadest possible educational experience, while the “liberal” stance emphasized tracking based on likely post-secondary destinations. Despite

the committee's recommendations for a common program for intellectual development, the existing distinctions between college preparatory programs remained.

While the Committee of Ten had assessed the value of different subjects in their potential for university preparation and the developing of intellectual capacity, Hall and his followers believed that curriculum should start with the student. The Child Study Movement, for which Hall became the principal spokesman, argued that the needs and interests of each individual child must inform the design of educational experiences. This movement would in time have an influence in secondary education as questions were raised regarding the ability and aptitude of students to engage the existing curriculum (Krug, 1969). The writings associated with the child study movement and the child centered educational philosophy of Johann Friedrich Herbart had provided, according to Krug, the basis of what would become known as the "new education."

While the high school curriculum remained highly contested after the Committee of Ten released its report, some standardization did take place in response to the demands of post-secondary institutions. The most concrete manifestation of this was the emergence of a unit system which defined the amount of "seat time" required for a course. The Carnegie Foundation Board defined one unit of study as a course that was offered five times a week for a year. For courses that met less frequently, partial units would be granted (Krug, 1969). Whereas college acceptance previously relied on the ability to pass an entrance examination, the new requirements connected acceptance to a specified amount of time spent in different high school classes. It was through this process that 12th grade became the end point of secondary education, and colleges ceased to offer courses to students in that age group. Furthermore, the five subjects identified by

Eliot as the core of the high school program (English, mathematics, science, history and foreign languages), organized into classes of less than an hour, established the traditional high school program which remains until today (Hammack, 2004)

From 1890 to 1905, there was a massive expansion of high schools with 5050 new schools being created (Krug, 1969). Larger numbers of middle class and working class students were entering this institution for the first time and it was this context thatSizer argued the Committee of Ten had ignored (cited in Krug, 1969). It was the needs of this new group, among which was a “great army of incapables” that G. Stanley Hall argued the Child Study Movement addressed (Krug, 1969, 201). In a paper introduced to the 1906 Massachusetts Commission on Industrial and Technical Education, or Douglass Commission, Susan M. Kingsbury raised the specter of 25,000 school-aged dropouts who had in many cases never even completed grammar school. Kingsley and others placed the blame on the schools for failing to adequately differentiate the curriculum to meet the needs of these students. These children were held up by advocates of vocational education as a symbol of the failures of the existing system. President Theodore Roosevelt captured the mood in 1907 when he declared the US school system “gravely defective in so far as it puts a premium upon mere literacy training and tends therefore to train the boy away from the farm and the workshop (cited in Krug, 1969, 225).” Two years later, Leonard Ayers published his influential report, *Laggards in Our Schools*, which argued that the curriculum was ill suited to the majority of students and was in fact geared towards the unusually bright (Kliebard, 2004). In keeping with the popular shift in sentiment, Eliot reversed his earlier position arguing that guiding students into areas

where they could be most successful would increase overall happiness – a goal in keeping with democracy.

Industrial education emerged as a response to increased concern over the large numbers of students who dropped out before even reaching high school. By 1909, NYC added to the three already existing evening trade schools a daytime school for dropouts (Krug, 1969). In addition to the creation of special trade schools, existing schools added vocational courses to the existing offerings. Students were increasingly choosing classes on a case-by-case basis rather than following carefully designed courses of study as had been envisioned by the Committee of Ten. Differentiation based on likely destinations was pushed down into the seventh and eighth grades, although this was opposed by some educators including William H. Maxwell, superintendent of the NYC public schools (Krug, 1969).

In addition to generating an expansion of the high school curriculum, the industrial education movement created the new position of vocational guidance counselor. The proliferation of course options required that some adult guide students in making choices and constructing a coherent program of study. While vocational high schools were created in large cities, their popularity largely gave way to a vision of a “comprehensive” high school with many programs under one roof. The distinctions between practical and academic courses deepened, with the academic program being seen as inappropriate for many poorer or working class students and the cause of high dropout rates. Large institutions with highly diverse programs for different populations of students increasing became the norm in urban centers like NYC.

Progressive Education

The perceived inadequacy of high schools to meet the needs of the hundreds of thousands of new students who entered during the first decades of the 20th century placed added pressures on schools to adjust their curriculum. Increasingly, questions were raised regarding the programs of study recommended by the Committee of Ten. At the same time, new developments in the field of psychology led to increasing confidence in the ability to measure the aptitude of children (Ravitch, 2000). New psychometric tests were seen as ideally suited tools for reorganizing schools. Opponents of differentiated programs argued that it would be impossible to adequately assess the appropriateness of a given program for a child, and in the absence of scientific criteria for making such decisions, existing social differences and biases would lead schools to reinforce existing class distinctions. Proponents of the new tests argued that they could be used to provide a scientific basis for such decisions, and therefore ensure that the existence of a meritocracy, an “aristocracy” of ability. According to the arguments that had been gaining ground since the early 1900s, the curriculum was a blunt instrument that only served a small portion of the student body. By creating highly differentiated tracks tied to destinations in a stratified labor market, and assigning students to these with the aid of scientifically objective psychometric tests, schools could become “socially efficient” institutions (Ravitch, 2000). The new machinery of mental measurement would ensure that innate ability rather than social class would be rewarded, thus allowing educators to maintain their faith in the fundamentally democratic character of public education (Tyack, 1974).

Gurus of the social efficiency movement Bobbit and Charters saw curriculum planning as logically beginning with an analysis of the activities students were expected to perform in adulthood. From this analysis, educational objectives could then be extrapolated (Ravitch, 2000). General survey classes replaced course sequences in subject areas such as history (Powell et al., 1985). In the first decades of the 20th century, the percentage of high school curriculum that was academic declined from a majority to only a third, while general, commercial, and trade courses expanded exponentially. There was much evidence that instruction was ineffective, but improvement efforts involved modifying the courses to make them more practical and less rigorous rather than attempting to improve pedagogy (Cremin, 1961; Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969). This time period also witnessed the explosion of extracurricular activities. What had occurred in schools, according to Cohen (1985), was a watering down of the curriculum with the maintenance of the same dull pedagogy of recitation.

No document codified the expansion of the high school curriculum in the early 1900s more than the 1918 report of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*. This commission was made up of high school representatives, administrators, and education professors. Reflecting a new consensus that saw academic subject matter as secondary, the Cardinal Principles left unanswered questions concerning the content of the curriculum and instead identified a set of seven broad objectives: health, command of fundamental processes, worthy home-membership, vocation, citizenship, and the worthy use of leisure (Angus & Mirel, 1999). From early on, academies and high schools had promised a wide range of practical subjects to appeal to potential middle class clientele. The Committee of Ten had, under

Eliot's leadership, pushed to clearly define a core academic program that it believed to be the central goal of the school. Twenty years later, the Cardinal Principles repudiated much of this report, and indeed the first three decades of the 19th century saw a steady increase in the number of vocational courses being offered. Nevertheless, the vast majority of students remained in a largely academic program suggesting that the vocational programs designed to attract the children of the laboring classes were not as inviting as the traditional curriculum (Angus & Mirel, 1999).

The result of these curricular shifts were dramatic. As Mirel and Angus (1999) point out in their discussion of the Grand Rapids schools during the first three decades of the 20th century:

more students from diverse backgrounds were attending high school than ever before, but the educational experiences of these students were diverging along class and gender lines more clearly than ever before. This pattern is the essence of what reformers called democracy's high school, which equalized the opportunity to attend high school by providing curricular programs that were profoundly unequal in the adult roles for which students prepared (38).

As Labaree points out in his history of Philadelphia's Central High School, the institution had responded to demands for more inclusiveness by creating an increasingly complex stratified structure and by reproducing social divisions under one institutional roof (Labaree, 1988).

If the entry of large numbers of students into high schools during the first decades of the 20th century led to pressures towards curricular differentiation, the Great Depression would subject schools to a new set of pressures which would lead to the emergence of a more expansive view of the public school's role. Some have argued that the expansion of high school is largely explained by the need to keep youth out of the

workforce and off the streets (Nasaw, 1979). According to this argument, the custodial function schools played was equally important to its academic function. Whatever the reasons, the demographic shift placed a pressure on schools to respond to a wide range of needs beyond academics (Powell et al., 1985). Students from immigrant communities in urban centers lived in squalid conditions and often lacked basic necessities to maintain their health. The dire conditions were exacerbated as unemployment swelled during the 1930s and large numbers of youth were pushed out of the labor market and reluctantly into schools. Between 1930 and 1934, high school enrollment swelled by 30% (Angus & Mirel, 1999). Keeping students in school was seen as particularly important given increased concerns about delinquency, crime, and political radicalism among unemployed youth. While the “youth problem” was initially attacked by two New Deal agencies: the Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Youth Administration, by 1943 educators had successfully lobbied for public schools to be granted a monopoly in serving the needs of adolescents. Angus and Mirel (1999) argue that through this process, “the function of the high school changed dramatically, shifting from an institution that prepared young people academically and vocationally for the adult world to an institution whose primary purpose was to meet the immediate needs of youth while keeping young people separate from the adult world (69).” According to these authors, this represented a shift in the basic function of the high school from one of preparing adolescents for the job market to one of keeping them out of it. This new definition of the role of high schools would carry over into the “life adjustment” curricular movement which followed on the heels of the WWII and sought to increase enrollment after the wartime decline (Kliebard, 2004). From 1947 until 1953, the life adjustment movement led to a proliferation of

“relevant” courses. Because all courses would be practical, teachers’ knowledge of their subject areas was seen as less important than their knowledge of pedagogy and their willingness to facilitate a range of extracurricular activities.

The changes to curriculum and structures in the first half of the twentieth century were seen by some as motivated by efforts of corporate elites to control immigrants and other working class groups and others as a conspiracy by new educational elites (Nasaw, 1979; Ravitch, 2000; Spring, 2001). Still other authors describe a process whereby these changes were not simply imposed, but often emerged in response to the various demands of grassroots activism (Reese, 1986). Whatever interpretation of these changes, two things are clear. Firstly, the notion that different groups of students would receive entirely different educational programs, in many cases based on their probable destination in life, became acceptable to large numbers of educators. Simply put, until the 1980s there were few urban high schools organized to ensure that all students successfully met rigorous academic standards. Secondly, regardless of changes to formal curriculum, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that classroom teachers’ practice often remained untouched (Cuban, 1993; Goodlad, 1984; Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969). In studying the current reform efforts at Valley High School, it will be important to examine how the legacies of differentiated curricular structures impact the process and to what extent the reforms actually impact pedagogical practice in classrooms.

Revisiting the Comprehensive High School

For over forty years, the dominant secondary high school model in urban school districts was the comprehensive high school. The comprehensive high school model had

been popularized in the late fifties by former Harvard President James P. Conant in his influential book *The American High School Today*. In this best seller, Conant argued that no high school should “have a graduating class of fewer than one hundred students (Conant, 1959a)” Conant’s influence was enormous and helped accelerate the consolidation of smaller schools into increasingly large institutions. The extent of this movement is witnessed by the fact that “by 1996, nearly half of all American high school students attended a high school with an enrollment of more than 1500 students, and 70 percent attended a high school larger than 1000 students (Ravitch, 2000, 458).” The size of these institutions and the increasingly differentiated roles of staff members allowed for the proliferation of a highly diverse set of course offerings and curricular tracks (Angus & Mirel, 1999; Conant, 1959b; Hammack, 2004; Hampel, 2000; Wasley & Fine, 2000). When judged according to the current standard of universal graduation from a rigorous academic program, many large high schools in NYC have been ineffective. As more attention was shifted to the problem, it became clear that in some urban schools less than a third of the students who entered as 9th graders were surviving through graduation (Fine, 1991). In addition, rising levels of violence and disorder within schools in the 1980s led to the proliferation of an elaborate security apparatus with metal detectors, specialized suspension centers, and a massive security force (Devine, 1996). As various attempts to turn around failing high schools in the 1970s and 1980s failed to reverse these trends, increasing numbers of educators, researchers, and policy makers began to question whether the comprehensive high school model was viable, particularly in urban settings (Fine, 1994; Meier, 1995; Raywid, 1996; Sizer, 1992; Sizer, 1996; Wasley & Fine, 2000). The history of small school reform over the last two decades can best be

understood as an attempt to remedy, in part, the perceived disconnect between school structures and desired outcomes.

When the dismantling of NYC's lowest performing comprehensive high schools accelerated in the 1990s, there was already a rich history of precedents for small school creation within the district. As teachers, principals, and district administrators began planning a response to the dismal performance of large schools, many looked to Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) as a model (Allen, Almeida, Cushman, & DeSalvatore, 2000; Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Ort, 2002). This school was opened in 1985 by veteran reformer Debbie Meier. The school drew on the experiences of Meier and others who had pioneered a series of reforms in East Harlem's District 4. Since the founding of the original Central Park East elementary school in 1974, this district had become a center of innovation in the NYC school system. By 1976, a major restraint on refashioning the schools of this district was lifted when the zoning system whereby students were sent automatically to schools within their district was replaced by a system whereby students could choose from among different middle schools within the district. Within two decades, the 13 middle schools of this district were replaced by 29 alternative programs (Cookson & Shroff, 1997; Meier, 1995).

Meier's decision to open up CPESS came at the urging of Brown University professor Ted Sizer. As the former Dean of the Harvard School of Education, and author of the widely read 1984 critique of the American High School entitled *Horace's Compromise*, Sizer had significant authority. Published during a time when *A Nation At Risk* and other studies were being released that painted a dismal picture of the American educational system, *Horace's Compromise* proposed a series of reforms to change the

state of secondary schools. The book, itself a product of a five year research initiative called *A Study of High Schools*, painted a devastating picture of the typical comprehensive high school as ineffective and fragmented. Sizer proposed that teachers work in interdisciplinary teams to teach a college preparatory core curriculum. For schools to be effective, they had to be flexible and simple so that they could tailor learning to the needs of individual students (Sizer et al., 1992). To promote reform along these lines, Sizer created the Coalition of Essential Schools in 1984 which has grown from twelve member schools to over one thousand. Sizer encouraged Meier to create CPESS because he saw the original Central Park East schools as embodying the spirit of the reforms he was advocating. Meier, in turn, created a network of likeminded schools to create the Center for Collaborative Education, an organization linked to Sizer's Coalition for Essential Schools.

It was because of the perceived success of schools like CPESS, that a number of people began paying more attention to what was happening in small and innovative new schools. Among those who began to see in these schools a possible model for urban school reform was Joseph Fernandez, who began his tenure as schools' chancellor in 1989. NYC had begun experimenting with ideas for making the large and anonymous comprehensive high schools more human in 1987 with a house plan for ninth graders. This initiative, however, never really took root (Raywid, 1996). In 1992, Chancellor Fernandez went a step further and made a decision to lay the groundwork for the first large wave of new small high schools by enlisting a non-profit organization called the Fund for New York City Public Education in his efforts to create small schools. This organization, which subsequently changed its name to New Visions for Public Schools,

would open fifteen schools during this period. It was around this same time that Sizer was brought on as an early advisor to the national Annenberg project which would pump \$500 dollars into public school reform between the years of 1993 and 2000 (Domanico, 2000).

Between 1992 and 1995, the New York City Board of Education opened more than 50 new small high schools. The creation of small high schools abated in the late nineties, but resumed with even more vigor in 2002. During this second wave of restructuring, the geographical epicenter of reform shifted northward to the Bronx with the majority of new schools being created in this borough. In recent years, the initiative has once again picked up steam and currently over two hundred small high schools exist in NYC. In September 2008, the NYCDOE opened 52 new schools including 25 new high schools and in September 2009, 42 additional schools will be created.

The Ascendency of Small Learning Community Reform

The policy of small school creation that has been dominant in NYC over the past decade and a half has not been without its critics. The most frequently heard criticism in the last five years is that large high schools were largely abandoned by the NYCDOE and had become dumping grounds for the most difficult students. According to some, overcrowding in the large high schools was the result of small school creation (Bloomfield, 2005). In order to understand the current restructuring of Valley High School and the current appeal of small learning community reforms, it is necessary to look briefly at some of the tensions in the years preceding it.

In October of 2003, high schools with more than 1000 students were significantly overcrowded in all four boroughs where restructuring was taking place¹. On average these schools were operating at 120% of the capacity as defined by the NYCDOE. Forty-four of these 66 schools had more than 110% of the students they were projected to house. When compared to capacity utilization data from twelve schools that were being restructured during this time, there is clearly a disparity. These schools were using on average 92% of their space. While two-thirds of the non-restructured large schools were operating at 110% or more of their capacity, only one-fourth of the restructuring schools were this overburdened.

The reasons for using less space in a building that is being restructured are in many ways obvious. The typical pattern is that the phase out school stops accepting 9th graders and new small schools open in the campus with significantly smaller 9th grade classes. The complexity of phasing out and creating new schools makes it likely that there will be transitional years when certain spaces in buildings are not used as efficiently as they could be under normal circumstances. In order to assess the extent to which this disparity is a temporary phenomenon, it is instructive to look at the two original NYC campus schools – Julia Richmond and James Monroe. In the fall of 2003, these schools, which previous to their 1993 restructuring housed around 3000 students apiece, were operating at 67% and 90% of capacity respectively. On average, these two schools were 42% less crowded than schools not undergoing reforms. When the average utilization of twelve schools that have already been converted into campuses is calculated, the results

¹ *Note.* This analysis is based on data in the New York City School Construction Authority's (SCA) "Blue Book" on capacity utilization and high school enrollment projections. Some specialized schools were excluded from this analysis since stringent admissions procedures make it unlikely that they will become schools of last resort.

are similar. During this same period, these schools were operating at 79% capacity suggesting that the campus schools have either been receiving preferential treatment, or are designed in ways that necessitate reduced numbers of students.

Data from the years preceding the current wave of SLC reform projects show that overcrowding in high schools of more than 1500 students was steadily worsening. In October 2003, these schools were on average operating at 126% capacity with 39 of 52 surpassing 110%. Data from 2004 show that the average utilization rose to 129% with 41 schools surpassing 110%. These numbers seem to point to a policy that has made small school creation a priority over reducing overcrowding in existing large schools. The existence of these disparities does not, however, in themselves point to a causal relationship linking small schools to overcrowding. Nevertheless, it is instructive to note that if students had been distributed evenly between high schools of all sizes, the average school would be operating at 104% capacity. While there are reasons why some schools need more space than others and why students will never be equally distributed among all schools, these data suggest that the creation of campus arrangements in large high school buildings has exacerbated the problem of overcrowding. Finally, the fact that the disparities continue to exist even in those two campuses which were restructured over a decade ago suggest that this is not a temporary function of a transitional period.

A relative small number of new schools opening in 2009 will be high schools, and it is likely that the pace of high school creation will slow even more significantly in coming years. Many of the city's lowest performing high schools have already been reorganized and finding space for new schools is an incredibly difficult task. It is in this context that the focus of high school policy in NYC has begun to shift and new questions

are being asked about the future of the city's remaining large high schools – schools that continue to serve the majority of the city's teenagers. The NYCDOE and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have become increasingly serious about exploring other options for increasing academic performance while leaving large high schools intact. Valley High School is one of approximately a dozen large high schools in NYC which are currently engaged in one manifestation of these efforts: SLC reform. In this way, Valley is representative of a movement that has gained momentum in urban districts over the past five years.

Theories of Small Learning Community Reform

Small learning community reform is motivated and guided by research and experiences from years of high school reform and shares much in common with the movement to create small thematic high schools. A central goal of this research is to evaluate the explanatory power of core elements of the theories supporting these reforms in light of the particular experiences of a high school where faculty members have attempted to implement them. The following discussion is not meant to be an exhaustive summary, but rather an attempt to highlight those which have been most prominent in the thinking of the reformers themselves, including the author of this study in his work with the school. While framed in a slightly different manner in this presentation, all of these core elements can be found in the emerging “framework” documents produced by NYCDOE Office of Small Learning Communities and presented as the official “theory of change” guiding this work.

Core Belief 1: Distributing decision making responsibilities will lead to deeper consensus around vision and goals, increased faculty capacity to problem solve, deeper staff commitment to school improvement, and improved student outcomes.

Both small school creation and SLC restructuring projects in NYC involve an examination of the structures and practices of decision making in a number of key areas. Against a backdrop of principal “empowerment” at the district level, with significant amount of authority over budgetary and curricular decisions devolved to schools, plans for creating new small high schools and restructuring large ones echo popular school reform literature in calling for new ways of making decisions and expanded participation of all school constituencies in the process (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Fullan, 1999; McDonald, 2003; Meier, 1995; Schmoker, 2006). While this is in part a question of how tightly the principal holds the reigns of power and how closely he or she manages decisions of all types, attempts to reconfigure decision making are motivated by more than a call for increased democracy or the softening of authoritarian school leadership. Equally important as expanding the circle of those involved in the deliberations is the creation of mechanisms for collective approaches to problem solving. New attention to decision making is called for not only to improve the quality of the decisions themselves, but also to increase the depth and sustainability of their implementation and to build the capacity of faculty.

The arguments for why improved and more collective forms of decision-making can lead to more effective schools are numerous. The first of these is nicely captured in the concept of the “wisdom of crowds” developed in James Surowiecki’s (2004) book by the same title. In a sweeping and provocative examination of research on the behavior of human groups, Surowiecki argues the counterintuitive notion that groups of individuals

can solve complex problems whose solutions elude even experts. Through an eclectic mix of case studies, Surowiecki explores the prerequisites for a highly functioning group. The first of these is the requirement that there be “cognitive diversity,” that individuals within a group have different ways of understanding and approaching a given situation. A group of diverse individuals can generate a pool of many ideas from which the best can be selected. Ensuring that a group explores a wide range of options is both a function of who its members are, but also of the manner in which it is organized. In order to reap the benefits of a group’s diversity, Surowiecki argues that individuals must be sufficiently independent of each other at critical moments to develop their unique understanding of the problems and possible solutions. A group which is either too homogenous, or within which some individuals exert so much influence over other members that the generation of diverse ideas is short circuited, cannot capitalize on the enormous potential of collective problem solving. Individuals in such situations either follow the lead of the groups’ dominant members, or are too constrained by the dominant framework for understanding problems to develop original solutions.

Surowiecki’s exploration of collective decision-making has some immediate implications for schools. If groups have the ability to collectively problem solve more effectively than experts, at least some of the time, then it follows that even the most capable school leaders must find ways to tap this potential. This is particularly important for those challenges with which successive generations of schools have struggled such as the difficulties in successfully educating students with a range of dispositions and abilities. Heifetz and Linsky describe these historic challenges as “adaptive” to emphasize that addressing them adequately requires the learning of new skills, values,

attitudes, and behaviors (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). A savvy principal, or assistant principal, can figure out how to maximize the flexibility of budget by effectively mixing and matching funding sources to support existing programs. Deciding on which programs will be higher leverage investments of limited resources given a large and diverse group of students is far more complicated. In addition, there are some problems that reflect unresolved tensions woven into the fabric of schools. Cuban (2001) has termed these “dilemmas” to highlight that they can never fully be resolved, but must instead be managed over time. It is these adaptive problems and dilemmas for which no one has adequate answers that collective problem solving presents the greatest possibilities. For this potential to be realized, however, requires an abandonment of deeply held faith in the transformative power of heroic and charismatic leaders who hold all the answers. The principal is called on instead to become a “leader of learning” or a “leader of leaders” facilitating a process whereby the faculty can develop from the “people with the problem” into the “people with the solution (DuFour et al., 2005; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Senge, 2000).”

The cognitive diversity of staff in a large high school is a function both of the life experiences and professional preparation of its employees as well as the roles they play within the organization. The historic isolation of different individuals within large high schools means the understanding of problems can be radically different as one moves from one part to another in the organization (Lortie, 1977). For this reason, creating mechanisms for widespread discussions are thought to be particularly important during the early stages of SLC reform. As new structures are created, ensuring that those involved directly with students have the ability to influence decisions becomes critical.

An often-stated goal of SLC reform is to create institutions that are more flexible and responsive to individual student needs. The proximity of SLC leaders and teachers to a relatively small group of students, and the regular opportunities for both informal and formal conversations between members of these dedicated teams, means that much of the information needed to design responsive programs and instructional strategies resides within the SLC. For this reason, literature on SLC reform suggests that the devolution of decision-making authority to this subunit, and the development of collective problem solving practices and structures are essential features of successful reform (Cotton, 2001; Lee & Ready, 2006).

In addition to diversity and relative independence of individual members, the case studies examined by Surowiecki suggest that a high functioning group must have a mechanism for aggregating the ideas of its members. Without structures for communicating, collecting, and in some cases synthesizing information, the good ideas simply wither on the vine, trapped in dark corners of an organization with no ability to influence its trajectory. SLC reform projects attempt to address this challenge of communication through the creation of subgroups of teachers and support staff dedicated to working with a group of between 200 and 400 students (Cotton, 2001; Lee & Ready, 2006; Oxley, 2004). This arrangement, when coupled with a common planning period for all staff members, allows for information to be efficiently shared through face-to-face interactions between all adults working with a student. Curricular and instructional discussions can be both more inclusive of relevant staff and more informed by rich qualitative student level data than in a traditional departmental structure. Thus, through the broader distribution of decision making authority, the creation of norms for collective

work, and the establishment of dedicated faculty teams working with manageable groups of students, SLC reform attempts to lay the foundation for highly function teams in which there is diversity of opinion, the relative independence to explore a range of possible solutions to challenges, and a mechanism for quickly aggregating these as the basis for new practice and policy.

One of the strongest arguments for transforming decision-making can be found in the nature of teaching itself. At its core, effective teachers are not simply those who have strong knowledge of their academic content or a wide range of pedagogical techniques. These are important, but equally important is the ability to make decisions that take into account complex factors and to constantly fine tune these decisions in light of evidence of their effectiveness (Fullan, & Hargreaves, 1996). These decisions and the process by which they are arrived at are in many cases hidden from view and the fact that these decisions are made in isolation is one reason why transforming classroom practice is so difficult (Elmore, 2004; Lortie, 1977). Improving teaching requires building those dispositions and analytical skills that allow teachers to consistently make more effective instructional decisions. Collaborative work around lesson and curriculum planning is one place where these skills can be built and it is that work which Little suggests is the strongest form of collaboration (cited in Fullan et al., 1996). Systematic deliberation between colleagues can over time help teachers to clarify their conceptions and practice. It is also the mechanism by which the tacit knowledge of teachers can be made public so that expertise can be shared (Fullan, 1999).

The complexity of teaching highlights underscores something of which administrators and school reformers are constantly aware – that the power of positional

authority to guarantee effective classroom instruction is limited. School leaders are dependent on classroom teachers to implement their vision (Evans, 1996; Lortie, 1977). If the majority of reform initiatives over the past century have failed to significantly alter basic patterns within the classroom, the best efforts of school level supervisors are often equally stymied in their efforts to transform teaching. Even in cases when supervisors have substantial clarity around those practices they expect in the classroom, the complex challenges of effective teaching make it impossible to mandate. While building the capacity of teachers to make highly nuanced and informed choices around curriculum and lesson design is necessary, literature on school reform suggests that success also requires the development of deep commitments to shared visions and goals. Effective schools are not simply places which employ large percentages of talented teachers, but organizations which mobilize individuals around goals which have been internalized and linked to faculty members own values and beliefs (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 1999). This commitment can be built through opportunities to collaborate in meaningful ways. Through deliberations over critical decisions, important differences are surfaced and over time common language and values emerge and are reinforced (Cotton, 2001; Rosenholtz, 1991). A strong leader who consistently acts as the final arbiter of all disputes not only creates an unsustainable situation, but encourages individuals to keep disagreements and questions to themselves and form informal networks whose values run counter to the school's larger objectives (DuFour et al., 2005). Overtime the product is a balkanized staff working in ways that are not complementary or even contradictory. In such situations, the use of positional authority by supervisors is limited in the impact it can have on day-to-day instruction. Many SLC reformers argue that widespread commitment

to shared vision, combined with the professional transparency which accompanies common work, can provide a form of lateral accountability which complements the traditional supervisory structure (Fullan, 1999).

In examining high school reform theories and the vision they contain of transformed decision-making, two caveats are in order. The first of these is the perceived necessity of focusing collective work around what Elmore (2004) calls the “core” of teaching – how teachers understand knowledge and learning and the way in which these understandings translate into instruction and classroom activities. Unless grounded in problems of classroom practice, the benefits of collective decision-making are seen as unlikely to have any effect on either teachers’ sense of agency or on the educational outcomes. Absent an instructional focus, they risk becoming what Fullan (1996) calls “contrived collegiality,” a type of collaboration driven more by external mandate than by authentic necessity (Rosenholtz, 1991). In addition, it is important to highlight that there are some decisions which are best made collectively and some which are better decided by principals and assistant principals who have formal authority, specific legal obligations, more flexible work schedules, and are held accountable in different ways. Unstructured and poorly thought out attempts to shift decision making to broad groups of staff members can lead to demoralization and the perception that school leaders have abdicated their responsibilities. The decisions as to what will be decided collectively and what supervisors will decide must necessarily take into account the complex context of any given school. As Jonathan Saphier suggests (1989), both the process and responsible parties must be explicitly articulated so that the ensuing decisions carry sufficient legitimacy. Thus to have the intended impact, authors suggest that the shift to more

collective forms of decision making necessitates both a careful and structured approach as well as a grounding in issues of classroom pedagogy.

Core Belief 2: Dividing a large high school's students and faculty into semi-autonomous sub-units will support the development of more robust and healthy relationships between students and faculty, deeper investment by students in their work, and improved student outcomes.

The movement to create small high schools has for decades rested on the assumption that large comprehensive high schools with thousands of students create conditions of anonymity which undermine the best efforts of educators. It is out of concern for those students who consistently “fall through the cracks” that a wide range of school reformers have called for reinventing high school on a “human scale (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Fine, 1994; Meier, 1995; Sizer, 1996).” The creation of SLCs represents an attempt to create in large schools the conditions for the type of more personalized learning environment which has been associated with improved academic achievement in small schools (Anness, 2003; Ark, 2002; Cohen, 2006; Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Fine, 1994; Wasley, 2002).

Reducing the scale of institutions through the creation of semi-autonomous academies is theorized to improve student outcomes in a number of ways. The first of these involves changing the perception of students of their school and their relationship with it. One of the unintended byproducts of the proliferation of massive urban high schools is the feeling by students that they are neither known nor cared about in any systematic way (Fine, 1991; Sizer et al., 1992). The departmental structure of the institution structures highly fragmented interactions between students and adults. Even when students are able to develop a substantial relationship with an adult, the details of

this relationship often remain unknown to other adults in the building. While many adults might have substantial information about a student, none have anything approaching a complete picture – a fact which students themselves are aware of and manipulate to avoid being held accountable. SLC reform attempts to reverse this situation by grouping a manageable number of students together and dedicating a faculty team to working with them. The goal is for students to feel that a group of adults are collectively monitoring them and guiding their progress. This sense of increased attention is thought to be particularly important to the success of struggling students during the transition into high school as many struggling students in an urban district like NYC are never promoted to the 10th grade.

In addition to communicating to students that a stable community of adults exists to support their development, SLC reform seeks to greatly increase the extent to which students feel invested in their schools. The mechanisms for accomplishing this usually begin with a self-selection process in which students choose membership in a given SLC because of their interest in its theme or the appeal of its reputation (Cotton, 2001; Lee & Ready, 2006). There is some evidence to suggest that this element of choice is connected to the success of career themed academies (Legters, 1999). In addition to the initial selection into SLCs, efforts to strengthen the identification with SLCs involve a range of SLC-wide activities or activities involving students in particular grades. Some of these are academic projects which involve interdisciplinary work or which involve explorations of topics related to the SLC theme. While these are not unlike the types of activities any school might do to build school spirit, it is the greatly reduced scale that allows these to happen more frequently and to include all students. The belief is that stronger student

identification with the SLC will translate into deeper commitment to school work and to improvements in attendance and academic performance (Allen, 2001; Legters, 1999).

Increased personalization is not simply a matter of changing the perceptions of students, but also one of radically altering the vantage point of adults. By providing the structures for teachers across disciplines and support staff to regularly communicate about a group of students with whom they work, it is expected that each adult will gain a more complete understanding of their students. A departmental structure works against a global view on the development of students undermining attempts to build a collective sense of responsibility which extends beyond narrowly defined professional roles. With interdisciplinary teams, on the other hand, patterns of success and failure across different subject areas and information about students' social development and home lives are revealed for staff to collectively confront. This can provide a foundation for developing classroom experiences more customized to the needs of students and for developing coordinated responses to challenges (Cotton, 2001; Legters, 1999; Oxley, 2004).

In discussing these attempts to transform the relationship between students and teacher in schools it is important to note that while these efforts have resulted in demonstrable changes in school climate, a causal relationship between personalization and improved academic outcomes is less clear (Lee & Ready, 2006; Legters, 1999). Like reducing the scale of the institution, increased personalization is better conceived of as a platform for other work rather than an end in itself (Oxley, 2004). The connection to academic rigor is summed up nicely by Sizer who suggests that these supports are a necessary complement to demands that students produce intellectual serious work (Sizer, 1996). High academic expectations absent this personalized support from adults risks

driving the most vulnerable out of school when they become discouraged. Without academic rigor, however, more personalized environments are unlikely to alter any of the current patterns of unequal outcomes in education.

Core Belief 3: By using a wide range of formative and summative assessments of student learning to inform instruction, professional development, and school wide initiatives, schools can substantially improve student achievement.

This last core belief is one that has become a mantra not only in the NYC schools engaged in SLC reform, but in the district as a whole. Popularized by authors like Richard Stiggins and John Popham, the notion that the better use of assessments holds the key to sustainable school improvement has led to NYCDOE to make substantial investments in formative assessment products from major publishing companies and to mandate their use in all schools for mathematics and English language arts (NYCDOE, 2006; Popham, 2003; Stiggins, 2005). Evidence from a wide range of research suggests that teachers who regularly use well-designed formative assessments to refine their instruction consistently have better results (Boston, 2002). Authors point out, however, the obstacles presented by deeply held beliefs about the purpose of school assessments (DuFour et al., 2005). Rooted in a notion of schooling as a sorting process whereby the more gifted and hardworking are sifted out from those destined for manual occupations, beliefs about the purposes of assessment emphasize their evaluative function (DuFour et al., 2005). In addition to increasing the capacity of teachers to design and more effectively interpret the results of assessments, reformers call for a significant shift in how teachers and administrators understand the uses of assessment data.

Closely connected to this emphasis on new and more sophisticated uses of assessment to guide decision making at the classroom, school, and district level is the

belief that the focus of professional conversations must be shifted from “teaching” to “learning.” For Richard DuFour, former principal and guru of “professional learning communities,” this marks a profound reorientation from an emphasis on teacher behaviors to evidence of student mastery (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). In this new paradigm, investigations begin not with an evaluation of how faithfully a teacher implements a particular model of what effective teaching is thought to be, but with a rigorous examination of evidence that students are mastering learning targets or objectives. Since the early 20th century, when the influence of scientific management theories encouraged school supervisors to analyze in minute detail the behaviors of effective teaching and to generate exhaustive checklists to monitor their implementation, a strong current in supervision has emphasized teacher behavior over results with students (Callahan, 1962). The “new paradigm” being advocated is quite simple, but often runs counter to existing practice but is also remarkably simple. At its core is the notion that good teaching is that which produces the most learning for a particular group of students.

Accompanying the call for increased use of formative assessments and to rooting decision-making in carefully parsed evidence of student learning, is a theory of change involving the strategic use of case studies. Starting in September of 2007, the NYCDOE mandated that each school create an “inquiry team” whose responsibilities would include identifying a group of academically struggling students, developing an intervention, monitoring the effects of this intervention through formative assessments, and dynamically modifying the interventions over time in light of evidence regarding its effectiveness. These faculty teams were designed not only to improve achievement for the targeted students, but also to generate responses to instructional challenges that could

inform school-wide improvement efforts. As Elmore points out in a description of a similar approach, the ultimate goal is to “teach people in the organization how to think and act around learning for continuous improvement (Elmore, 2004, 80).” The presumption, which is supported by literature on teacher research, is that a collective process of investigation which leads to evidence based theories about the obstacles to student success is a powerful starting point for school improvement efforts (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992). Once the obstacles are identified, a school community will recognize that some of the answers are already present in the building while others require external support. In both tapping internal and external resources, a school which can clearly articulate its needs is more likely to avoid the lack of coherence which has characterized many past reform initiatives (Fullan, 1999).

CHAPTER 3

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH

Research Context

Valley High School is located 45 minutes by train from midtown Manhattan in one of NYC's outer boroughs. Like many of the city's public high schools, the approximately 3200 who attend Valley High School are extremely diverse with roots in over 50 different countries. Approximately 28% of the student body is of Asian descent, coming primarily from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Guyana. Of the roughly 23% of the student body of Hispanic descent, the majority are Dominican although there are growing numbers of students from various Central American countries. About 48% of Valley students are Black, and of this group almost half are immigrants from Caribbean or African nations. The American born Black population is, like many of the students at Valley, primarily middle and working class. About 4% of the student body is White and as a result of the predominantly female Health Careers program, only 38% of the student body at Valley High School is male.

Since it opened in the early 1970s, Valley High School has seen its share of both good and bad times. When the current principal, Mr. Stevens, arrived in the mid-1990s the school was considered one of the most dangerous in the borough. This reputation led many more savvy parents to send their children elsewhere, and with the exception of the screened "Pre-Med" program, the academic performance of Valley's students was weak. Historical achievement data and conversations with senior staff members suggest that a shift began to take place within the first few years of Mr. Steven's tenure. The most

obvious manifestation of this change was a concerted effort, through the dean's office, to reestablish a safe and orderly environment. In addition, there was an increasing turnover of staff as large groups of senior teachers retired. The wave of retirements peaked in June of 2002 when thirty-five teachers left. This included every guidance counselor and grade advisor, both college counselors, the head dean, the coordinator of student affairs, and everyone on the executive board of the United Federation of Teachers local chapter. When Valley opened in September 2002, over 20% of the staff was newly hired. The teaching force was now significantly younger and more inexperienced than the staff Mr. Stevens had inherited when he took the job. Similar turnover of assistant principals meant that by the start of the current reform process in September 2006, every administrator at Valley had been hired by Mr. Stevens.

By the end of the 2005-2006 school year, Valley was outperforming the citywide four-year graduation rate by 14 percentage points. While there were sometimes fights both in and around the school, the hallways were largely quiet during classes and both teachers and students most often felt safe. Mr. Stevens was praised by the school's chancellor, the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (CSA), and a variety of school reform organizations for successfully turning around a failing school. In that same school year, Valley met NCLB Annual Yearly Progress targets for all subgroups. On Regents passing rates, graduation rates, credit accumulation, and virtually all other metrics of school performance, the trend at Valley was positive.

Given that small school and small learning community reforms in NYC have largely been prescriptions for the least successful schools, Valley's decision to embark on an ambitious restructuring agenda is somewhat of an anomaly. No one at the district's

central or regional offices was pressuring for structural changes. The decision to reorganize Valley as a collection of semi-autonomous institutes was made instead at the school level by a principal committed to turning a relatively successful school into an exceptional one.

To understand this decision it is necessary to go back to the 2004-2005 school year when Mr. Stevens and three teachers at Valley participated in a pilot program called School Reform through Leadership Development (SRLD)¹. This program involved a partnership between a major educational non-profit and a public university. As part of their work in SRLD, the Valley High School team was asked to study a struggling group of students. The group they chose to focus on was Hispanic students. This group was significant for two reasons. Firstly, among the Hispanic students at Valley were a significant number of native Spanish speakers. Spanish speakers were the only language group with sufficient numbers to necessitate a bilingual program. Secondly, these students were historically the lowest performing academically and in years past belonged to the two NCLB subgroups in which Valley had failed to meet Annual Yearly Progress targets.

The experience in the SRLD program contributed in two ways to the decision of Mr. Stevens' to create SLCs at Valley. Firstly, the deep study of unsuccessful students revealed that despite impressive gains over the years, there were still significant pockets of students who were failing. In looking at these patterns, it became clear that existing structures and practices often created obstacles rather than facilitating effective responses to academic failure. Among the systemic patterns identified through this work were

¹ pseudonym

multiple barriers to timely communication of student information between guidance counselors, administrators, and teachers.

Another aspect of the SRLD experience which helped shape the decision to restructure was the contact that Mr. Stevens had with the small school movement. In NYC, small school creation has been for some time the centerpiece of high school reform policy. Large high schools and small high schools exist to some extent in two separate worlds. In many cases it is only those large high schools which are forced into space sharing arrangements that have any meaningful contact with small high schools. The pilot group in the SRLD program consisted of both small and large schools, and included one school which had already begun creating SLCs. Through this experience, Mr. Stevens had the opportunity to engage in extensive conversations with leaders whose schools represented the full gamut of high school structures in NYC. In addition, he established a personal relationship with the non-profit organization that has helped create the majority of new small high schools in NYC.

After pursuing a number of possible funding sources to support an ambitious restructuring project, Valley finally secured with its partner non-profit organization a substantial grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The bulk of this grant money was earmarked to support leadership development by expanding the SRLD program to a wider group of teachers. A public announcement was made regarding the principal's intention to create SLCs, and applications to run these institutes were solicited. From an initial pool of over 50 applicants, and after an interview process, seventeen teachers were chosen to enter the SRLD program by the principal and the assistant principal of pupil personnel services. This cohort would simultaneously

complete the twenty-four credits of coursework required for NYC supervisory certification, and plan and implement a top-to-bottom restructuring of their school. The understanding was that in the fall of 2006 each individual in the program would lead, either by themselves or with a co-director, an SLC.

The SLC project at Valley was unique from the approaches of all of the other high schools in NYC currently engaged in this type of reform. In the first place, while schools which had begun creating SLCs in previous years had gradually phased them in starting only with the 9th grade, Valley created 9th through 12th grade institutes all at once. This decision was guided by a belief that the emotional and organization stress created by major structural changes would best be dealt with all at once rather than over a four-year period. The metaphor often used was that of removing a band-aid. Remove it quickly and it hurts but only for a few seconds. Peel it off slowly and the agony is slightly less intense, but prolonged. In addition, Mr. Stevens feared that phasing in a reform over a period of four years would lead to a concentration in the upper grades of those staff members most committed to the status quo.

The other decision which made the model at Valley unique was that existing administrators were not charged with managing the new institutes. Instead teacher “directors” were handed the responsibility for a wide range of administrative tasks previously performed by assistant principals. There were a few reasons for this arrangement which had been developed in conversations between Mr. Stevens and the collaborating educational non-profit. Firstly, there was a fear that if assistant principals both supervised an SLC and had the responsibility of supervising a subject area across the entire building, they would be stretched too thin. The alternative of having them

exclusively supervise the teachers in their own SLC was also seen as inadequate in that it undermined the potential benefits of having subject area specific supervisors. The model which emerged at Valley was one in which subject area assistant principals were freed up of administrative tasks such as creating teacher programs, so that they might focus their efforts exclusively on support and supervision of teachers in their subject area as well as curriculum development. Through these and other changes, Valley High School attempted to borrow some of the most effective structures and practices from small schools while strengthening those potentially effective structures which exist only in large schools.

In September 2006, Valley High School opened with nine SLCs. Of these, two are one-year transitional programs. The Future Academy, which began as a pilot SLC in the previous school year, is a ninth grade institute designed to bolster the skills of the 150 lowest performing students in the incoming class. The Newcomers Institute is a transitional institute open to newly arrived immigrants with both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Second Dialect (ESD) programs; the latter serving students from the Caribbean and African countries who speak non-standard dialects of English and who in many cases have underdeveloped literacy skills due to interrupted schooling. Of the seven four-year institutes, Theater, Pre-Med, Health Careers, and Pre-Teaching grew out of existing programs. In the past, students enrolled in these programs would take a sequence of specialty courses leading to an endorsement on their diploma and in some cases to vocational certifications. These programs were not self-contained, however, and when students took their traditional academic courses, they did so in mixed classes with teachers from across the building. In the new structure, these programs,

along with the newly created Humanities, Biz-Tek, and Public Service and Law institutes, were to the extent feasible given dedicated teachers and students. In addition, at least one guidance counselor was assigned to each SLC, and students of each institute have lunch and physical education together in order to free up two common periods a day for teachers. Whereas in the past, large numbers of students graduated Valley without having participated in any of the themed programs, now every student was enrolled in an institute. For the existing students in the school, this had been accomplished through a series of internal “high school fairs” and other recruiting activities, which took place during the 2005-2006 school year. At the end of that year, students ranked their top three choices, and a guidance counselor worked with the preference sheets to match students to SLCs while ensuring institutes had no less than 350 and no more than 450 students.

In order to accommodate the new structure, a massive reorganization of space was required. To the extent possible in a building operating over capacity, institutes were given sets of classrooms with contiguous space. While the guidance counselors initially maintained offices in the traditional guidance suite on the first floor, a shift was made after the spring semester. Guidance counselors moved to offices in proximity to the classes and directors of their SLC. What had been the guidance suite since the building opened now became “AP Lane” – a row of offices for assistant principals with a dedicated secretary and two conference rooms for conducting professional development activities. With this move of the guidance counselors and assistant principals, the last major structural shift was completed.

Research Questions

This research investigated Valley's ambitious reform project through both quantitative and qualitative methods. The data analyzed for this research were generated during the planning phases of this project (2005-2006) and during the first two years of implementation (2006-2008). The quantitative data analyzed included standardized exam scores, demographic indicators, class lists and course offerings, course passing rates, credit accumulation patterns, the results of diagnostic tests, and attendance rates. In addition, this research involved an analysis of a range of qualitative data generated by the reform process including organizational charts, meeting minutes, and memos. Finally, the researcher conducted observations of a wide range of school settings and interviewed key stakeholders. These data were analyzed to answer the following three research questions:

Research Question #1: How do stakeholders' explanations for school failure and theories of change influence their actions?

Teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators all have theories about why schools fail to meet certain stated goals. In addition, they have notions about the types of actions which are most likely to lead to improved outcomes. These explanations for failure and theories of change are mental models through which teachers understand their experiences and they can shape how staff responds to proposed change (Evans, 1996; Senge, 1999). Through data collected in interviews and through an analysis of observational data and artifacts, the researcher described the beliefs of faculty members and explored the relationship between these beliefs and their actions. Examining these "theories of change" is particularly important given that reforms historically focus on

what they intend to implement without developing a coherent theory of how such change will be accomplished (Elmore, 2004). Because the diffusion of new ideas or practices is a complex process that is by no means guaranteed by their inherent quality, it is important that theories guiding implementation are examined closely (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 1999; Gladwell, 2000; Rogers, 1983).

Research Question #2: How have structures, practices, or roles changed and how are these changes related to enhanced school climate and improved educational outcomes?

A comprehensive evaluation of the impact of this reform on educational outcomes at Valley High School is impossible at this point given that the new structures have only recently been put in place. Nevertheless, through an analysis of quantitative data on student achievement as well as qualitative data generated through interviews and observations it is possible to identify early indicators that changes to structures, practices, and roles are indeed having an impact on students or at least on elements of school climate which have been associated indirectly with improved educational outcomes (Cohen, 2006). In addition to identifying those areas where such conclusions are warranted, this research attempted to assess the likelihood that the identified changes will be sustained and deepened.

Research Question #3: How are existing theories of reform confirmed or challenged by the experiences of Valley High School?

The data collected for this research provide a unique opportunity to test the explanatory power of the theories of school change discussed above. A larger theoretical goal of this research is to reconstruct these theories in light of the particular experiences of this reform project (Burawoy, 1991).

Procedures

Surveys

Surveys conducted by the researcher as well as by the Center for the Research for the Context of Teaching (CRC) at Stanford University provide substantial amounts of data for this study. CRC surveys were administered at three intervals and provide both a baseline prior to the onset of restructuring as well as critical data on trends over a two-year period. The SLC survey provides a snapshot of faculty perceptions at a critical junction halfway through the first year of reform.

Interviews

A significant part of this case study involved interviews with teachers, administrators, and SLC directors. These interviews were conducted in June of 2008. The guiding questions for these semi-structured interviews were generated from an analysis of the documents and quantitative data collected from two years of school reform at Valley. Interview questions were directly related to research questions guiding this study. Participants were given the opportunity to review transcripts from interviews and informed of their right to ask that they not be used. Participants were also informed of their right to refuse to answer any questions. Each interview took approximately forty-five minutes with only the researcher and the interviewee present.

Observations

Observations were conducted over the course of two years of reform in staff meetings, SLC common time meetings, professional development workshops, SLC and

school wide extracurricular activities, hallways, SLC common areas, and classes. During observations, the Principal Investigator recorded low inference notes on a laptop computer.

Archival Analysis

The researcher collected and analyzed organizational charts, mission statements, memos, agendas and minutes from school meetings, public brochures and recruitment materials, and other documents related to the SLC reform process.

Quantitative Data

This researcher analyzed many types of quantitative data. The school agreed to provide data on course passing rates, student demographics, Regents Examination passing rates, attendance, NYS 8th grade test scores for incoming 9th graders, class size, course offerings, and room assignments. These data were available both in aggregate form, for the entire school, and in disaggregated form, by SLC.

Selection of Participants

Teachers and administrators were informed of this research in staff meetings. The researcher solicited volunteers who were interested in sharing their perspectives on the SLCs at Valley. Interested staff was instructed to inform the researcher of their desire to participate in the study. From this pool of volunteers, the researcher selected as diverse a group of stakeholders as possible. Volunteers who were selected to participate were given consent forms and informed verbally of their right not to participate. No staff member was permitted to participate in an interview until a consent form was signed and returned.

Analytic Plan

In keeping with the advice of Wilkinson, theorizing took place continuously over the course of this research and helped guided ongoing data collection (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995). The analysis of qualitative data from focus groups and interviews involved a number of steps. Using traditional content analysis, the researcher read over transcripts and identified recurrent ideas. Building from these patterns, the researcher identified themes related to research questions and attempted to develop larger theoretical concepts to describe what was taking place (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Once a theme was identified, the researcher returned to the data, identifying other examples that fit. The researcher closely analyzed each of these data sets in order to identify recurrent patterns as well as outliers in relation to each of the themes. Patterns were described in the narrative and exemplary quotations and examples of these patterns were included.

Through the use of multiple methods, and both quantitative and qualitative data, it was possible to triangulate data in the spirit of Lather's notions of catalytic validity (Lather, 1991). The intention was to create understandings of the reform process that allowed participants to act more strategically and be more effective in working toward the goals of the reform. To this end, the Principal Investigator engaged in continual dialogue with participants, and shared findings with key stakeholders throughout the process. For this reason, the final product represents a range of perspectives and understandings of this reform (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

CHAPTER 4

OVERVIEW OF NEW STRUCTURES AND KEY DECISIONS

The Impetus For Change

In March of 2006, Mr. Stevens asked a room full of Valley's High School's assistant principals how many wished he had never involved the school in a SLC reform initiative. Reading the silence in the room, he answered his own question by suggesting it was probably somewhere between 60% and 98%. The decision to restructure Valley had been made in the fall of 2005 and planning had begun in earnest at the beginning of the spring semester. The quiet skepticism of this meeting and many others during the 2005-2006 school year was by no means confined to the school's eleven assistant principals. The decision to begin an ambitious remaking of structures and practices at Valley was one made by the principal and initially understood by few. The fact that the majority of the school's staff did not share the perception that such radical structural changes were necessary would have a significant impact on the early stages of this reform effort. In the short-term, it meant that Mr. Stevens had to spend a great deal of time explaining his rationale. These explanations, along with some broader features of the current educational policy landscape, help illuminate the initial impetus for school reform at Valley.

The policy initiative in the NYC schools which seems to have had the greatest initial impact on SLC reform at Valley was the ongoing move to create small high schools. The initial SLC structures were designed against a backdrop of small school reform by a school leader acutely aware of the radical changes being wrought on many of

the city's comprehensive high schools. As previously mentioned, Mr. Stevens had, through his involvement with the SRLD pilot program, spent considerable amounts of time during the 2004-2005 school year with the principals of a few of the hundreds of new small high schools created over the past decade. Through this experience, he became impressed with the robust nature of the personal relationships which small school structures fostered between faculty and students and with this in mind he decided to reinvent Valley so that such relationships could become the norm rather than the exception. As he put it in a meeting with the school's most senior teachers held in late March to answer questions about the reforms:

In this time and age with so many fractured families, kids living away from both parents... they need an adult that appears to care about them. It's very different than 33 years ago when I was graduating from high school. By breaking us up into groups of 500 or less, it will afford them the ability to develop that connection.

Mr. Stevens would also suggest in this meeting, and a number of the school's most veteran teachers would nod in agreement, that many of the successes of the school's existing Pre-Med and Theater programs rested on the relationships built between adults and students in those programs. At Valley, thematic programs in Pre-Med, Theater, Pre-Teaching and Business and Technology had existed for some time, but these were limited to sequences of specialized classes and had neither dedicated faculty nor facilities. In addition, as the process of assigning students to the new SLCs began, it became evident that far larger numbers of students than previously imagined weren't connected to any of the existing programs and were instead assigned to the catch all "liberal arts" program. As Mr. Stevens stated in an early April cabinet meeting, "I would have guessed it was around 100 students who were not linked to an institute... in reality it was 850." As the

groundwork for the creation of nine semi-autonomous institutes was laid, it would become increasingly clear that despite an overall trend upward in student performance, significant numbers of students continued to lack any real connection to their school and were quietly failing in the shadows. During the semester of planning, Mr. Stevens would repeatedly address questions from skeptical staff members asking rhetorically, “So the question is if we have been so successful, why are we doing what we are doing? Firstly, while 62% of our students did graduate in 4 years, 38% didn’t.” Addressing the needs of the 38% of the students who were not meeting basic expectations was consistently articulated as one rationale for the reforms.

If improving student performance through increased personalization was one reason for creating SLCs, another was to foster greater collective responsibility for student achievement on the part of the faculty. According to this view, greater transparency would translate into improved student performance as staff members felt more urgency and became increasingly committed to the success of the institute in which they worked. Among other things, Mr. Stevens saw SLC structures as a way of “forcing interpersonal relationships between adults in this building.” In the past, like most high schools, Valley was organized in ways that were highly fragmented with individuals performing highly specialized roles in relative isolation. The most obvious manifestation of this fragmentation involved communication between different faculty members. When in an early professional development seminar, SLC directors were asked to map out communication of information between students and faculty, it quickly became evident that almost all information flow between guidance counselors and teachers was mediated by students. In addition, teachers saw students only as they performed in the subject area

they taught. As Mr. Stevens put it, “while Matt (chairman of the science department) had a great handle on how kids were performing in Pre-Med classes, he didn’t have a clue as to how they were performing in other classes.” In addition to preventing the development of coordinated responses to challenges, this fragmentation was understood by the principal as undermining the sense of collective purpose and sapping the willingness of the staff to address the organization’s thorniest and most endemic challenges. Failure was either buried in the averages or someone else’s problem.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of increased personalization and collaboration in high schools, small school reform in NYC weighed heavily for another reason on the consciences of principals like Mr. Stevens. The general perception among many large school administrators during Joel Klein’s tenure as chancellor was that they were forgotten stepchildren, perceived as dinosaurs by those in charge at the Department’s Tweed Courthouse headquarters. Mr. Stevens expressed this frustration in a meeting with a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation program officer who came to visit in March:

All you read from the Department of Education is about the new small schools. The only press about this project [the SLC restructuring] is negative and central [central office administrators] did nothing to correct it. They are not saying things about what we are doing. Will we be given the same nurturing and support that the small high schools have been given? If you look at the fact that there are sixty large high schools potentially looking at this model, then let’s look at what’s going on. Get it some attention. We know that there has been a huge impact on large schools by reform. Large schools have had to absorb kids that small schools haven’t wanted to take.¹

¹ The frustration with negative press coverage expressed referred to a New York Times article which mistakenly conflated Valley High School in with a number of other schools undergoing involuntary restructuring and labeled them all failing.

Mr. Steven's assessment of the situation was validated by the program officer, a particularly surprising admission given that before this project the Gates Foundation had supported small school creation almost exclusively as the solution to underperforming comprehensive high schools. As the official stated:

There is a bit of a vacuum around large high schools. I would agree with your assessment of the Chancellor and the Mayor's lack of talk about small learning communities and large schools. Seventy-eight percent of kids are going to be in a large school even when the small schools are at scale.

Thus, another possible motivation for SLC reform was the desire to capture some of the spotlight back from the new small schools in demonstrating that large high schools could achieve many of the same outcomes while preserving a single administration and overarching large school structure. As Mr. Stevens put to his veteran staff members, "I philosophically believe in large schools." For this principal, SLCs were a means to demonstrate that large schools could still be successful and innovative in an era in which they had fallen from grace. This dovetailed with a recognition both on the part of the Gates Foundation as well as from some within the NYCDOE that the policy of replacing large high schools with campuses of small high schools, which had strained already overcrowded facilities and come under fire for privileging schools serving a minority of the system's students, might not be the only option. As a result, the policy environment was increasingly open to SLC reform as an alternative approach². As Deputy Chancellor Andres Alonso said in a meeting with SLC principals in September of 2006, "The small school strategy is not sustainable system-wide. There simply isn't enough space."

² The growth in support can be seen in the increasing profile of the Office of Small Learning Communities within the NYCDOE as well as in the recent announcement of millions of dollars in new grants to schools involved in SLC reforms.

Another related motivation for SLC reforms was related to the way in which surrounding communities perceived Valley High School. Public perceptions of a school often lag significantly behind its actual environment or performance. This worked against Valley which was perceived in 2006 by many members of the community to be the violent and out of control building it had been eight years prior. The impact of public perception has grown as the NYCDOE has moved away from geographical zoning in high school admissions and created a system in which students vie for seats in schools that draw from across the city. The creation of semi-autonomous thematic institutes within the building was seen by Mr. Stevens as a way to compete with newly created small schools and to “change the perception of the school in the community.”

A final reason why Mr. Stevens decided to restructure the school has to do with his own professional trajectory. As a principal in his 10th year, Mr. Stevens was among the most senior in the city and having decided not to pursue a central office job, he reasserted his commitment to staying at Valley for another five to eight years. Already credited with turning Valley around from a failing school to one which was performing relatively well, Mr. Stevens was looking for both a professional challenge and the next logical step for the school. The move to restructure into SLCs was seen by him as a second stage of his own leadership journey to transform the school into a high performing institution.

Central Design Features

During the spring and summer of 2006, the major elements of the SLC structure were designed at Valley (see Appendixes D & E for an overview). While these would be modified over time, with one major exception, the structures elaborated during this planning period remain in place two years after the original reorganization. The following represents a description of these elements along with an analysis of why they emerged in the form they did.

Creating the Institutes

As previously mentioned, the restructuring at Valley led to the emergence of seven four-year SLCs and two transitional programs. These institutes came into existence in one of three ways. The first set of institutes emerged from existing programs in the building. This was the case for the Pre-Med, Theater, Health Careers, and to some extent Business and Technology (Biz-Tek). These programs previously existed as “educational options,” meaning students could apply directly to them from 8th grade. They did not have, however, dedicated faculty members except in the sequence of specialized electives and therefore the majority of a student’s school day was spent in undifferentiated classes with students from other programs.

The second group of institutes emerged, at the behest of the principal, in response to a perceived need of a given population of students. This group included the Future Academy, which predated the full restructuring by a year and served as a laboratory to test out some of the initial ideas about how SLCs could be implemented at Valley. Future Academy was loosely modeled on 9th grade academies being instituted in many high

schools across the country and was motivated by increased attention within the NYCDOE to the challenging transition from 8th to 9th grade. The Newcomers Institute, conceived of as an intensive program for recent immigrants to smooth their transition into an American high school, found precedents in the “international” schools that existed in every borough of NYC. As previously mentioned, a decision was made to include in Newcomers students who spoke, but who might have had interrupted formal schooling or weak literacy skills. Such students were seen as a particularly vulnerable population as they were not eligible to ESL services afforded non-English speaking immigrants. The final institute created by the directive of the principal was Public Service and Law. This SLC was designed to provide relevant experiences to a student population whose families often worked in the public sector and who might benefit from exposure to these careers.

The third group of SLCs emerged from proposals by teams of teacher leaders. After Mr. Stevens made the initial announcement that the school would be restructured into SLCs, two teams of teachers approached him with proposals for institutes. One of these, Global Action, would be aborted during the planning phase when the two directors abruptly resigned over their frustration with the way the restructuring was progressing. The other institute, Humanities, was created by a pair of English teachers and joined Pre-Med as the other academically selective (or “screened”) program in the building.

Emergence of New Leadership

One of the most immediate changes that happened as a result of the SLC reforms was the creation of a new layer of leadership in the building. As was mentioned previously, the decision not to place the existing assistant principals in charge and to instead entrust the day-to-day operations of each institute to teacher-leaders made this

reform project unique in NYC. Through a university partnership and the SRLD program, the seventeen SLC directors were enrolled in an accredited graduate program in school leadership and received substantial amounts of professional development.

From the beginning, questions emerged about the role of the SLC directors that ranged from attempts to define their specific responsibilities to broad interrogation of their legitimacy. Among assistant principals, there was significant unease for a number of reasons. Some assistant principals questioned whether this was the first move to eliminate their positions. With the emergence of small schools, the existence of subject specific supervisors occupying the role of department chairs was no longer a given. From early on in the process there were rumors that this might be the end of the assistant principal position. One department chair reported hearing from his colleagues at another school that by going along with this restructuring he was sealing his own fate, while another reported a teacher in her department saying to her in a meeting that soon “you won’t have a job because they are bringing people in.” The perceived threat to job security for assistant principals even provided impetus for the administrators union, the Council for Supervisors and Administrators, to express concerns over the new model directly to Mr. Stevens.

The existential concerns on the part of the department chairs during the first stages of reform at Valley manifested themselves in part through endless wrangling over role definitions of the new directors. Agenda after agenda during the spring 2006 semester listed roles and responsibilities as a topic for discussion and while lists were generated, they failed to ease those concerned. Some assistant principals reported concerns over the professionalism and perceived lack of maturity of the relatively young

group of directors, particularly as it related to issues of confidentiality and other teachers. This was accentuated by a sense that their promotion to leadership positions had been premature. As one assistant principal expressed it, “I am a firm believer that you should come through the ranks. They just don’t have the experience.” In addition, the question of who was supervised by whom was raised enough times for Mr. Stevens to acknowledge in a full staff meeting that there was only one “rating officer” for every adult in the building. Sometimes preservation of hierarchy was explicitly advocated as when one assistant principal argued in a meeting that “they [SLC directors] have to know who the boss is.” During one attempt to create a written description of roles and responsibilities, a department chair insisted that the document include a statement that “the SLC directors will be supervised in their content areas by subject APs [Assistant Principals] when they are teaching.” In point of fact, it was decided early on that this would be the case, and that in their role as directors of SLCs would be supervised by the assistant principal of pupil and personnel services. Nevertheless, the lack of certainty over the new position would again force an assistant principal to state in late March that, “Supervision is problematic... they [SLC directors] believe they are supervising teachers in each institute.” He went on to clarify to the administrative team that teachers should neither be doing formal observations and rating, nor taking disciplinary actions against other teachers. In all of this, the technical challenges of defining roles and responsibilities were far overshadowed by the sense of uncertainty that the organization’s mid-level administrators felt with the creation of a new layer of leadership.

Another place where the question of authority surfaced was around hiring. In meetings, assistant principals almost universally expressed the belief that directors should

have some input in the hiring process for vacancies in their SLCs. In a meeting with assistant principals in late March, Mr. Stevens would push for the hiring process to take into consideration the ability of a new hire not only to teach well, but also to be a good match for the SLC team. This was not controversial, but the notion that directors would have veto power over hiring decisions was strongly opposed by assistant principals. In the words of one department chair, “I don’t have a problem with them providing input, but I do have an issue with Mary Williams [a project director] having veto power when the ultimate responsibility for instruction rests with me.” The discussion over hiring seemingly became an opportunity for assistant principals to express frustration with what they perceived to be a larger issue – that their authority and power was undercut while they continued to be held almost exclusively responsible for student performance on Regents Examinations and for passing rates in courses.

While there was a great deal of anguish among the assistant principals, and while tensions would remain through most of the first year of the reform project, the response to the SLC project was by no means universally negative. In early discussions, department chairs expressed excitement at the prospect of being relieved of some of their administrative tasks. As one assistant principal put it in mid-March,

I’m looking forward to my day being different. Right now I spend time doing things like ordering supplies for the department. My day is consumed by the riso [risograph machine], radiators leaking. All these little things that none of us would put down on the job description but they consume our day.

This sentiment was echoed by another assistant principal who added, “I do miss being in that type of role [as a coach] in the classroom. I wonder whether we will have more opportunities to get in the classroom.” Thus the skepticism with which the assistant

principals greeted this project was at least in part tempered with a hope that they might find a place within it to flourish as leaders of teachers and experts in a subject area.

The concerns during the planning phase of this process were by no means limited to assistant principals. SLC directors were under an intense amount of pressure that came not simply from the workload of teaching a full program, participating in graduate school seminars, and planning a wall-to-wall restructuring of a comprehensive high school, but also from the scrutiny of being the representatives of an ill understood new agenda. In meetings, the new directors often voiced a concern that they would not be taken seriously by their older and more experienced colleagues. They wondered how they would deal with a resistant and uncooperative colleague if they had no formal supervisory power. By the time the school reopened in the fall of 2006, five of the original directors were no longer in their positions and the questions about their legitimacy were as much alive in the rumors which continued to spread through the building as in the self-doubt expressed by the directors themselves.

Distribution of Students

Decisions around how students would be allocated to SLCs were complicated and recognized by all parties as having significant implications for the character of the SLCs and the success of the project as a whole. There were two sets of issues. The first involved the assignment of Valley's existing students to SLCs and the second involved the admissions and transfer policies. Complicating the matter was the existence of myriad legal and regulatory constraints that govern the education of populations such as students with disabilities and English language learners (ELLs).

From the beginning, there was an emphasis on ensuring that ELLs and special education students were granted equitable access to SLCs. Language to this effect was in the original SLC grant application and was also a concern of many of the faculty member leading the reforms. The problem was that that it would be nearly impossible to offer both Special Education and ESL services to students in each of nine institutes without a significant increase in the number of staff members teaching these subjects. In addition, the school had a bilingual Spanish program which it would be inconceivable to offer in a given institute if only a few of the students enrolled in the program. Thus the desire to maintain equitable access by ELLs and students receiving special education services came into conflict early on with another major goal of the restructuring – to ensure that students and teachers spent as much of the day as possible in their SLC.

A plan which attempted to balance between these competing goals emerged in February 2006. Under this plan, which remains in place until today with some minor changes, no institute would serve both ELLs and special education students. Three four-year SLCs would house special education students and three would serve ELLs. One of the three institutes which housed ELLs would also be home to the bilingual Spanish program which meant that if this group wanted to continue to remain in bilingual program, they would have to forego the option of choosing their SLC.

The initial distribution of the existing student body into the newly formed institutes was carried out through an application process not unlike the NYCDOE's current approach to high school admissions. Throughout the spring of 2006, each team of directors embarked on a recruitment campaign that included admissions fairs, informational displays, and hundreds of recruitment posters plastering the walls of the

school. Students were asked to rank three institutes in order of preference and parents or guardians were required to sign off on the selection. A newly hired guidance counselor was then given the task of matching preferences to available seats in programs. The challenges in this recruitment process were numerous. Firstly, the actual process of managing it was technically challenging and the guidance counselor assigned to it was often overwhelmed. This led to a perception among some of the directors that some of the placement decisions were arbitrary. In addition, the typical tensions that exist between high schools in the city emerged between SLCs with different directors claiming at times that “undesirable” students were being “dumped” in their institute. Finally, the initial popularity of programs varied greatly with one having over 1000 applicants while another had just over 100. A decision was made by the principal to maintain the size of each four-year SLC to between 350 and 450 students. This meant that students would be assigned to second and third choices to ensure that the overall numbers were balanced.

With all the challenges, the initial recruitment process generated an enormous amount of excitement about the new institutes. They provided a forum for the new directors to pitch their programs, and the application response rate from parents and guardians was unusually high given previous patterns of family involvement at Valley. Unlike many NYC high schools that have phased in SLC reforms year-by-year over a four-year period, the change at Valley was dramatic. By the end of the spring 2006 semester, both students and faculty members alike were talking about the different institutes and speculating about what the following year would be like in the “new” Valley.

The admissions criteria for each institute differed slightly and not surprisingly was a major topic of conversation in planning meetings. The two transitional programs took students who were believed to have the particular academic and social needs which they were created to address. For Newcomers, this was defined as any student who scored below a certain level on the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test and had been in the country for less than three years, and for Future Academy it meant the 125 incoming 9th graders who had scored the lowest on the NYS 8th grade assessments in mathematics and ELA. Unlike the other SLCs, students did not apply to Newcomers or Future Academy, but rather were selected based on meeting certain criteria from the overall pool of students entering the building at the beginning of the year. After a period of one year in Future Academy, and one to two years in Newcomers, these students would be given the opportunity to apply to a four-year SLC.

Public Service and Law, Biz-Tek, and Health Careers were all designated by the NYCDOE Office of Student Enrollment, Planning, and Operations (OSEPO) as “educational option” programs. Hundreds of schools and programs across NYC use this method of admissions. From a pool of applicants, the directors rank students with the provision that on their 8th grade state assessments at least 16% are above grade level, 64% are at grade level, and 16% are below grade level. 50% of the incoming students for an Educational Option program are selected in this manner and the other 50% are randomly selected, also from the pool of applicants, by a random process. The Theater Institute, in contrast accepts students by audition. In practice, the relatively small number of students applying to this program meant that this program was not academically selective, but other city schools for which students must audition are in fact highly

selective and this SLC potentially could be if the number of applicants increased in the future.

The last two programs, Pre-Med and Humanities, are academically screened. The Pre-Med program predated the SLC restructuring and for years had been attracting relatively high performing students from across the borough. As part of the SLC restructuring, Mr. Stevens lobbied for and received approval from OSEPO to create a second screened program. Students were expected to have a middle school grade point average of 80 or above to qualify for the program. The rationale for creating a second screened program was articulated by Mr. Stevens on numerous occasions. Firstly, there was a feeling that high performing students found themselves in the Pre-Med program without having any interest in the sciences. A strong liberal arts program with an aggressive orientation towards preparation for college was conceived of as an alternative for students fitting this profile. In addition, screened programs were seen by Mr. Stevens as a mechanism for attracting students to the building who would otherwise chose from a wide range of academically rigorous high school programs in neighboring communities. During the planning phase, other directors often raised questions about the legitimacy of creating another academically screened program. Concerns included the fear that it would cause other programs, or the students in them, to be seen as less able or worthy. In addition, other directors felt the initial assignment of students would lead to a siphoning off of the most successful students from the existing programs. To this concern, Mr. Stevens once again asserted that long term it would mean a more academically diverse student body in the building and was necessary to prevent hemorrhaging of higher performing students to neighboring schools. In practice, there were not enough students

in the building (outside of the Pre-Med program) during the initial assignment of students to provide Humanities with 400 students who met the SLC's admissions criteria so the student profile was not terribly different in standardized test scores or academic performance.

By the second year of this restructuring project, Mr. Stevens was able to ensure that students could apply directly to any one of the four-year SLCs, which were listed in the city's public high school directory. On the other hand, Valley continued to be considered a zoned high school meaning any student who lived within the schools catchment area had a right to attend. Thus, when the majority of the approximately 800 9th graders who enter the school each year arrive they have already been accepted into one of the SLCs. There are, however, approximately 100 zoned students who arrive each year because they were not accepted into one of the schools they chose. This is one significant exception to an admissions system that otherwise treats each of the newly created SLCs as separate schools, and assigning these "zoned" students to SLCs must happen after they arrive in September.

Scheduling, Shared Facilities, and Geography

Programmers are the unsung heroes of large school operations. Many a noble and ambitious educational vision has disappeared into the black hole of interwoven constraints which union contracts, state regulations, city policy, and the limitations of personnel and physical space generate. Entirely reorganizing a building of 3200 students and 200 adults is an incomprehensibly complex task not unlike manipulating a tremendous rubix cube where any one decision generates a cascade of unanticipated effects. The attempts to create teacher and student programs for the Fall 2006 semester

was, from the vantage point of the SLC directors, almost universally seen as the most frustrating and challenging part of the entire planning process.

In February 2006, discussions began about priorities for programming. An early assessment of the facilities revealed that it was feasible to have all students from a given SLC eat lunch and have physical education at the same time. This would create two common periods a day when teachers from an SLC were not in the classroom (teachers of physical education were not assigned to SLCs). Another priority was for students to take as many classes within their SLC as possible (the only exception to this being Advanced Placement classes which were offered building wide). Mr. Stevens consistently pushed for this “purity” of class assignments fearing that a series of compromises in the program office in response to new challenges would quickly lead to student programs that looked similar to what they would have had in previous years.

To the extent possible, the goal was to give each SLCs contiguous space in a given part of the building. Doorframes in the area designated for a given SLC were painted with colors selected by the directors to demarcate space. Because the building was operating at 120% capacity, however, it was impossible for the classrooms in a given SLC to be left unused when students were at lunch. The resulting room assignments did give SLCs general areas where the majority of their classes were held, but there was no firm separation and considerable overlap continues to occur even two years after the initial redesign.

One of the benefits in programming a large comprehensive high school is that the sheer numbers of teachers and rooms allow for enormous flexibility. This is particularly helpful when a school has large numbers of students who have to repeat failed classes or

have a desire to accelerate their progression through a sequence of courses. One of the first things the SLC directors learned on May 25th, when together with the assistant principals they spent 10 uninterrupted hours in the school's library, was that by programming students only for classes in a given SLC much of that flexibility is sacrificed. The constraints were exacerbated by the fixed physical education and lunch period, which in some cases made it almost impossible for teachers to be assigned classes without violating the contractual provision prohibiting the teaching of more than 3 classes in a row without a break. The frustration among these new school leaders, who on top of the new challenges which the restructuring created were programming for the first time, reached a fever pitch with one director resigning at the end of the day. While the resignation was rescinded a few days later after some encouragement by Mr. Stevens and others, the sour memories of that day lingered and it was some time before the participants gained enough distance to be able to joke about it.

When the smoke cleared the teacher and student programs that emerged looked similar to those which would have emerged in any other year with a few exceptions. Firstly, students were largely programmed into classes offered within their SLC. An analysis revealed that purity levels (defined as the percentage of classes students were assigned to within their own SLC) ranged from 69% to 84% in the four year SLCs and were nearly 100% in Newcomers and Future Academy. Disaggregating these data by grade, purity levels averaged 89% for 9th grades, 80% for 10th graders, 71% for 11th graders, and 71% for 12th graders. Mid-year program changes during the 2006-2007 school year led to increased purity and in each subsequent year, the programming has

been streamlined to ensure that students spend even greater percentages of their day taking classes within their SLCs.³

From the vantage point of the classroom teacher, the general trend was towards decreased specialization. If there were only a handful of social studies teachers in a given institute, it became difficult for any one to teach only one course (e.g., US History). In some cases this meant increased numbers of faculty members teaching classes for which they lacked expertise, and in some cases, such as science, where NYS certifications are course specific, more teachers were teaching out of license. When assistant principals raised the issue, Mr. Stevens responded that teachers would have to be more flexible in the new arrangement. In addition to the question of teacher expertise, equalizing the sizes of classes would also prove to be a challenge. When frustration mounted in the first weeks of September over inequities in class sizes between institutes, Mr. Stevens made clear that they would not be equalized at the expense of purity.

Even given these tensions, the re-programming of the school for SLCs was widely perceived by staff members as having gone remarkably smoothly and no major programming catastrophes marked the opening of school in September 2006. While individual directors had raised in numerous planning meetings the possibility of experimenting with some non-traditional form of programming (e.g., double period classes, rotating schedules, etc.), nobody felt comfortable enough navigating the technical and emotional challenges it would take to implement such a change with so much already in flux. What exploratory proposals existed for more ambitious changes to programming

³ Purity rates calculated using data from the High School Scheduling and Transcript system (HSST) which NYC Public Schools use to create teacher and student class schedules.

structures were dropped before being seriously elaborated and by year two had not yet captured the attention of anyone again.

Distribution of Teachers

The process for assigning teachers to SLCs looked in many ways similar to that of assigning students. There was an attempt to balance between SLC directors' preferences and teacher preferences. In April 2006, every teacher in the school was given a preference sheet which asked them to list three SLCs in order of desirability. Directors then received the preference sheets and attempted to honor as many teachers' preferences as possible while asserting their own preferences. In situations where a teacher wanted to work in an SLC and the director wanted the teacher, the match was made easily. For the remaining situations in which there were no matches, attempts were made to honor the preferences of as many teachers and directors as possible. The process was not entirely systematic, but neither was there deep frustration or a sense that it had been inequitable. The United Federation of Teachers local chapter chair was consulted by Mr. Stevens throughout the process and raised no major objections.

There was one indicator that suggested that the process for assigning teachers was largely successful in honoring both the preferences of teachers and the needs of SLCs. Halfway through the first year of implementation, Mr. Stevens and the chapter chair of the teachers union announced that all teachers would be "frozen in place," or assigned to their current SLC until they applied to another and were accepted. The process was modeled after the Open Market Transfer System that governs transfers of teachers within the NYCDOE. If a teacher left an SLC, the director would "declare a vacancy." Teachers from other SLCs in the building would have the chance to apply for this vacancy and if

accepted by the director, would be permitted to transfer. What was significant and speaks to fairly high levels of teacher satisfaction was that there were only a handful of teachers in each of the first two years who applied to transfer. Both Mr. Stevens and the SLC directors were quite anxious when preference sheets were handed out in the spring of 2007, but in the end very few teachers conveyed an intention to move on. The high levels of stability among the teaching staff in each of the SLCs would in turn provide a solid foundation for the emergence of effective and collaborative working relationships and distinct cultures in each of the nine institutes.

Curriculum

When the SLC restructuring began at Valley High School, curriculum varied highly across different departments, grade levels, and classrooms. In some subject areas, textbooks or pacing charts from textbook publishers formed the heart of the curriculum whereas in other subject areas the situation was significantly less structured. There was no centralized mechanism for collecting teacher generated curricular units. Attempts had been made at various junctures in the past to create interdisciplinary units. The creation of a set of lengthy ELA units designed to parallel topics in the Global History curriculum stand out as one example. The implementation of these, however, varied widely and was rarely systematic. Sharing between teachers happened largely through informal channels with teachers of a given subject area congregating around particular areas of the building during preparatory periods. While both assistant principals and SLC directors suggested at various points that things could be done to improve curriculum, major changes to the curriculum of the school was not identified by any group of stakeholders as a central goal of the reforms. Individuals would sometimes express the desire for more conceptual or

thematic approaches to teaching their subject matter, but there was no consistent push. In fact, when the Tom Vander Ark, then Director of Educational Initiatives for the Gates Foundation, visited the school in May of 2006 and asked what would change with curriculum, Mr. Stevens responded that the core curriculum was established by NYS and would remain similar. He and other directors did suggest that there would be some modification to include greater integration of each institute's theme into core academic classes.

If the push to customize academic courses to connect to each SLC's theme was one place that curriculum was expected to change, the other was in the development of SLC specific elective courses. In pursuing this goal, each SLC faced distinct challenges. SLCs which had grown out of existing programs inherited extensive elective sequences. Health Careers had the most extensive programs with Practical Nursing, Emergency Management Technician, and Dental Assistant programs organized around hands on experiences, employable skills, and in some cases industry recognized certifications. For the directors of SLCs such as Health Careers, the challenge was not to create programs wholesale, but rather to examine pre-existing programs for their relevance and their appropriateness for the student population. Over time, these directors have made modifications to these programs, adding new courses and exploring the possibility of new tracks.

In the case of new programs such as Public Service and Law and Humanities, the challenge was a different one. The elective courses which would define the academic program of students in these SLCs as unique had to be created from scratch and the creation of these new electives were overseen by the directors. In fact, thematic electives

were the only place where the new directors had systematic and significant input into curriculum. Both the assistant principals as well as Mr. Stevens were reluctant to allow directors to make any significant changes to curriculum in those academic classes which culminated in Regents exams. An example of this appeared early on when one institute proposed offering US History in the 9th grade rather than in the 11th grade. Anecdotal evidence from schools which had tried making a similar change led the assistant principal to conclude that this would have a negative impact on Regents passing rates. Once again there was a perception that when push came to shove it was the department chair who would ultimately be held responsible. This was one of a number situations in which assistant principals expressed concern that inexperienced teachers would make attempts to reformulate curriculum leaving out significant amounts of content and compromising preparation for the Regents Examinations. Ultimately Mr. Stevens would clarify that in regards to curriculum, oversight, and ultimate decision-making authority was the responsibility of the department chairs. As he stated in a meeting to this group in late March of 2006, “the only people that are supervising the writing of curriculum are in this room. They might outsource it, but the actual validating of it is in this room.” And in this validation, he reminded them on numerous occasions to be careful what they accepted.

A few things were revealed through the way curriculum was treated in the early stages of the SLC restructuring. Firstly, while there was an impetus to create new thematic elective courses and to make relatively minor modifications to existing courses so as to tailor them to the theme of individual institutes, there was no conscious attempt to rework curriculum in this reform effort. In fact, when asked what changes needed to take place with the existing curriculum, both assistant principals and SLC directors made

suggestions, but the underlying sentiment was that curriculum was satisfactory as presently organized. In addition, there was an underlying fear expressed on at least some occasions that going “beyond the Regents” could negatively affect both passing rates in courses as well as passing rates on the exam. Given this, it is not surprising that curriculum in core classes continues to look similar today as it did when this process began.

A second thing revealed through discussions over curriculum became clear when there were tensions between assistant principals and SLC directors. In asserting the assistant principal’s role in overseeing and ultimately approving all curriculum, Mr. Stevens often articulated a set of deeply held beliefs around the role of subject area specialists which would remain constant over the course of this reform. Mr. Stevens believed that one of the strengths of the model which Valley developed was that it freed up department chairs of many of their clerical and administrative duties so that they might focus on the critical job of supervising curriculum and instruction and coaching teachers. To this end, he added “Academic Learning Specialists” to their official title during early phases of the reform. As he expressed it in a meeting with this group,

One of the reasons why your position is so valuable and unique is that you are an expert in your field. One of the things we saw in Future Academy was that one supervisor doesn’t have the content knowledge in all the subjects. None of the project [SLC] directors have that across different subject areas. They’ve got to see the need for the AP [assistant principal] supervision to support instruction. They don’t have the experience so that are really going to be relying on your support.

Mr. Stevens believed that having subject specific supervisors was critical to a school’s success and that the absence of such supervisors in many small schools, where one or two supervisors fulfill a wide range of diverse roles, was a major weakness. When halfway through the 2006-2007 school year, assistant principals were moved from

disparate parts of the building to a central location on the first floor, Mr. Stevens saw an opportunity to strengthen leadership through increased opportunities for communication and collaboration among administrators.

Professional Development and “Common Time”

As mentioned above, the scheduling of all students from a given SLC for a common physical education and lunch period afforded all of the teachers in each SLC with a common lunch time and a common professional period. Two to three times per week during their professional period, teachers were expected to attend a “common time” meeting in their SLC. During the remaining days, teachers attended to other professional duties or tutored students in their subject areas. The initial model called for assistant principals to both “push-in” to common time to run professional development sessions on areas around which they had particular expertise, and to “pull out” teachers to work with them more intensely on subject specific topics.

During the lead up to the opening of school in September 2006 and during the first few months of school, meeting minutes reveal directors struggling to figure out how best to use common time. Topics ranged from formal discussions of individual students (referred to as “kid talk”) and discussions of classroom management to the sharing of instructional strategies for supporting literacy development and the establishment of goals for the new SLCs. The previous structure had left little time for meaningful departmental meetings so meeting this frequently was an extremely different experience for most teachers.

While the reaction of teachers to the new directors was by no means overly hostile, these teacher-leaders struggled in the first months to maintain the attention and

ultimately win the investment of their colleagues. There were many examples of meetings degenerating into complaining sessions and the new directors in some cases struggled to find the balance between acknowledging frustrations and steering discussions in a productive direction. Over the course of the first semester what hostility did exist would largely dissipate, but a larger question continued to surface: what was the role of assistant principals in common time?

Assistant principals, SLC directors and Mr. Stevens would all express enormous frustration over the ill-defined role of department chairs in relation to common time during the first month of the new structure. From the vantage point of the directors, assistant principals would offer help but often in passive ways and leave the responsibility on the director to define what meaningful involvement would look like. As one director put it, “Many of them [assistant principals] are coming to us to ask how they can help. If we don’t have an answer, they just go away. Another director added, “instead of waiting for us to come up with things, it would be good for them to take the initiative.” For many assistant principals, on the other hand, the message seemed to be that they were either reluctantly invited or not invited at all. By the second week of school, Mr. Stevens began encouraging directors in meetings to avail themselves of the support of the assistant principals, but it would take some time before the mistrust and frustration generated over this issue would dissipate and working relationships could emerge.

Beyond the major questions surrounding the role of assistant principals in common time, another consistent pattern was the tendency of these meetings to gravitate towards non-instructional issues. Underlying this was an ambiguity in the position of the

directors. If they were not formally supervising teachers, than what right did they have to discuss instruction. This was exacerbated by the presence of teachers from a variety of disciplines and the resistance of teachers to having discussions across content areas. Nevertheless, SLC directors did manage to work through these first difficult months, and were even able to facilitate some discussions around instructional issues that were perceived by their colleagues as meaningful. By no means was professional development perfect, but the general sense was that it was moving in the right direction. As one teacher put it,

I feel like these meetings are real. They are the first real meetings I am sitting in here at [Valley]. Before it always seemed as if someone was coming with an agenda from somewhere else that they had to get through. I tuned out.

The Context of Decision-Making

One of the questions which was consistently raised by staff members during the early stages of the planning process was whether there was someplace else where this type of reform had “worked.” In fact, like many of the school reform projects in NYC, the structures described above were worked out largely in isolation with a few staff members having at best vague notions of how things were done in other places. There were few high schools in NYC which were engaged in SLC restructuring at the time when this process began at Valley and many of those which were beginning the process at around the same time were phasing SLCs in slowly and thus were at least a year or two away from the upheavals which Valley confronted in September 2006. As a result of this, the structures described above emerged largely through trial and error even if against a hazy backdrop of reforms taking place elsewhere.

CHAPTER 5

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Despite the improvements in academic performance at Valley High School in the years preceding the decision to restructure, as Mr. Steven's would consistently point out, large numbers of students continued to be unsuccessful. Thus the members of Valley's faculty, like their counterparts at many schools across the country, were consistently forced to confront the gap between the exhortations to leave no child behind and the daily reality of persistent student failure. One of the direct consequences of the planning process for creating SLCs was that structures, practices, and ultimately patterns of student achievement were examined closely. Never before, at least in the memory of the building's most senior faculty, had so many eyes been focused on so many different indicators of the institution's performance and the patterns that were revealed brought to the surface, in sometimes dramatic ways, those shortcomings that are too easily buried in a large institution. In coming to terms with these clear indications that a gap existed between the organization's stated goals and actual performance, teachers, SLC directors, assistant principals, and the principal all offered explanations. These theories, which emerged in the myriad formal and informal conversations to which this researcher was privy, help explain both the actions of individual stakeholders and the trajectory of the reforms at Valley.

External Sources of School Failure

In interviews conducted in spring 2008, teachers, assistant principals, and SLC directors had pointed to a broad range of explanations for why some students were successful at Valley while others continued to struggle. Among other things, they identified a number of characteristics of the students themselves, which either predated their arrival at Valley or were the products of influences outside of the control of the school. These explanations, which trace student failure to preexisting qualities, were not dissimilar from those expressed in meetings and conversations of all types and warrant further exploration.

On the first day this researcher entered Valley High School, a veteran teacher nearing retirement casually offered his thoughts on the coming changes. While expressing no hostility towards the concept of SLCs, he made clear his belief that nothing significant would change unless there was a significant shift in the “quality” of the students coming into the school. He used the metaphor of building a car. If the parts were inferior, the car was going to be as well. When asked to what the car parts in the analogy referred, he clarified that they were the students. For him it was unrealistic to imagine that the results would ever be good if the inputs were “1s” and “2s” (students designated by their scores on 8th grade assessments as performing below grade level). This teacher framed, albeit in a particularly disturbing way, one of the most pressing questions that faculty members were confronted with as the SLC reforms began. For one to become invested in building new structures and implementing new strategies, one would have to believe that schools could in fact alter patterns of failure or success established before students arrived in high school. The debate over whether or not this was possible was

never on official agendas, but always simmered just below the surface and in part explains the differing levels of commitment among faculty members to building a new order. Faculty members identified a number of different qualities of their students which they believed, in some cases, posed insurmountable obstacles to fundamental changes.

Motivation and Parental Involvement

One area which faculty members looked to in order to explain disparate levels of achievement was motivation. Teachers and counselors consistently expressed frustration over students' perceived lack of motivation or investment in schoolwork. As one teacher theorized, "I find that a lot of kids don't make long term goals... immediate gratification... jewelry and sneakers. It must be a self esteem issue."

For many, these beliefs about school were rooted in cultural values of families. Families of Hispanic and African American origin were identified by faculty members, most often of Hispanic and Afro-Caribbean descent, as placing less value on education than families from other ethnic backgrounds. If such views were shared by teachers of other ethnic backgrounds, they were less willing to share them publicly.

Discussions of student performance were often seen through ethnic prisms, as was the case when teachers in a common time meeting identified a perceived disparity between the attendance rates of Hispanic and Haitian students. In addition, the level of direct family support was at least in part explained by cultural differences. For some, this was understood as a conflict between home cultures and a school culture. As a senior teacher explained:

I would not count, from my experiences, on ESL students getting support at home. The kid has two experiences a day. One is the culture at home and one is

the school. I had a culture like that. Creole culture at home and British at school. These kids are distracted.

While many discussions suggested that teachers saw students' level of motivation as rooted in immutable cultural beliefs of families, another consistent current in conversation suggested that motivation could change, but only with increased parental engagement. As one teacher bluntly suggested, "Without parent involvement, nothing is going to change." The fact that SLC directors and guidance counselors increased attempts to reach out to parents from the beginning of the reforms suggested that there was a belief, at least among some staff and school leaders, that the level of parental involvement could change in response to actions taken by the school. These efforts to reach out to families were more coordinated than they had been in the past given the more robust communication between guidance counselors and the teaching staff. The assumption, which guided the efforts of the SLC directors at the time, was that more frequent contact would generate increased parental involvement and have a positive impact on student motivation.

Efforts to increase the levels of parental engagement began with a more aggressive implementation of existing strategies, but led to some new strategies when these failed to yield expected outcomes. At the end of the second year of reform, still unsatisfied with the level of parental engagement, Mr. Stevens made a decision to radically alter the way in which parent teacher conferences were conducted. Rather than invite parents to speak with each of their children's subject area teachers, a decision was made, with the support of the teachers' union chapter leader, to have every teacher take responsibility for a group of approximately 18 students. As part of this new plan, teachers would use common time meetings to collect information about how these students were

performing in their academic classes, and set up individualized meetings to discuss this information with families. This represented a major departure and an acknowledgment on the part of the school that parent teacher conferences, one of the central mechanisms for involving parents in the educational process, had been organized a such a way that rendered them largely meaningless. Parents would wait in long lines to hear a few minutes of general information about their child and often left with no understanding of next steps to be taken. The poor attendance at these conferences, which was previously understood by faculty members and administrators as another indicator of parental apathy, was reframed as the product of a failed school structure. While there were undoubtedly faculty members who continued to believe that student motivation was inevitably sapped by the cultural values of families, the trial and error approach to increasing parent involvement led the principal and others to believe that the school itself played a significant role in maintaining past patterns.

Inadequate Academic Preparation

In addition to family cultural values and levels of parental involvement, faculty members at Valley saw student motivation as being related to previously acquired academic skills. It was not uncommon to hear teachers express frustration at the number of students who arrived at high school without the requisite skills to engage the curriculum. The perceived lack of preparation in earlier grades and the resulting struggles which students had reading, writing, and performing basic numerical operations were seen by many teachers as a central cause of poor academic performance. According to this view, students lacking these skills were often reticent to admit it, and would either act out or sit quietly turning in little work. For one teacher, who was particularly

concerned with the performance of special education students integrated into general education classes, the issue of shame played a role in maintaining this cycle. Because students were embarrassed of what they did not know, those most in need of support would sometimes sit quietly, afraid to ask questions, and ultimately fall further and further behind. According to this view, student motivation was not a fixed quality so much as something that varied in relation to ongoing experiences in the classroom. In the face of unrealistic expectations, students would become demoralized and it was this demoralization that manifested as a lack of motivation.

Data from standardized tests and other assessments seem to support some of the conclusions that teachers' expressed in meeting after meeting about students' foundational skills. In the years proceeding the restructuring at Valley, the percentages of incoming freshmen that performed below grade level on New York State's 8th grade assessments consistently hovered around 80% for English language arts and 73% for mathematics. An assessment administered to 470 9th graders to screen for delays in decoding and encoding skills suggested that at least 100 had significant issues that would greatly impede their ability to succeed in their classes. The fact that a gap between what students came knowing and what they would need to know to be successful was rarely questioned. The responses of different individuals to this challenge, on the other hand, were varied and connected in part to how mutable teachers believed these skills were.

Like many high schools, Valley has historically offered both honors and non-honors classes and differentiated tracks were maintained within each SLC during the restructuring. In discussions surrounding the programming of students for classes, it was not uncommon to hear complaints that some students were not "honors" material and

should be programmed into non-honors classes. Such distinctions were challenged at times, but were often accepted as legitimate distinctions for making judgments about which classes should be made available to different students. The intention in raising this is not to enter into the ongoing debate about the advantages or disadvantages of academic tracking, but rather to highlight that at least for some faculty, the die had been irrevocably cast before a student arrived in high school. Whether the superior abilities of some students were imagined to be the product of fortuitous genetic inheritance, different life experiences, or inconsistent academic preparation, there was in the minds of some little that a high school could do to make a student “bright.” From such a vantage point attempting to bring the school’s lowest performers up to grade level would be a wasted effort and if anything was to be done it should be guided by a set of differentiated and significantly lowered expectations. The disparity between the academic skills of incoming students and the Regents exam driven high school curriculum was perceived by these teachers as too great to bridge. This interpretation was challenged by others, however, who argued that classrooms organized differently could allow many low performing students to meet the expectations to which other students were held.

Attendance

If teachers expressed frustration in relation to student motivation, they expressed even greater consternation at what was perceived to be sporadic attendance. Over the course of this research, the average daily attendance rate at Valley hovered around 85%. While consistent with many similar schools in the city, this meant that on an average day 480 students were absent and the resulting disruption to the educational process was widely felt. In a forum with the school’s most senior teacher, which Mr. Stevens

convened to address concerns about the restructuring, attendance was among the issues most consistently raised. One teacher wanted to know what could be done with students who come to high school with attendance issues, while another responded that he had “spoken to parents and guidance counselors,” and that “something has to be done with these kids.”

Unlike the issue of weak academic skills, patterns of poor attendance were seen to emerge at least in some cases during the high school years. A ninth grade math teacher described a pattern in which students come into the school and attend consistently, but begin to cut as they establish relationships with other students and succumb to negative peer pressure. Because mathematics is cumulative, he argued, they would inevitably fall behind. The further they fell behind in the course, the more demoralized they would become until they ultimately gave up.

Regardless of where faculty members identified its origin, conversations about student attendance and tardiness were often colored by a sense of futility – a feeling that no matter what the school did, the results would be the same. This sentiment was captured by a teacher in one common time meeting who told his colleagues, “I’ve been in this school for eight years and seen four different schedules and kids always come late.”

In another meeting with Mr. Stevens, a teacher speculated:

Maybe this is beyond the school. Maybe we have to hold the parents accountable as some communities have. Maybe this is something you [Mr. Stevens] have to address with [Chancellor] Klein.

Improving attendance, like inconsistent parent involvement, was seen by some teachers as both out of the control of the school and a precondition for making substantial changes in student achievement. Believing that meaningful change was possible required

either that faculty see opportunities for improving attendance, or that they refine their understanding of the relationship between attendance and student achievement and identify actions over which the school has control which might influence both. The school's leadership would attempt to take the former path from early on and dedicated substantial time and resources to improving attendance. Some SLC directors emphasized the need for a "new" school culture that unlike the "old" culture would not accept tardiness and inconsistent attendance, while others asserted the need to establish consequences and to consistently enforce them. In general, there was a feeling among the SLC directors and assistant principals that meaningful work had to happen each day in morning classes and that it had to begin as soon as the bell rang if students were to feel a sufficient sense of urgency. One SLC director suggested that games and activities be available during breakfast in the cafeteria. Other directors criticized this, however, as placing the onus on the adults rather than shifting responsibility back to students for attending school regularly and punctually.

In the end, each SLC experimented with a range of initiatives around attendance, but unlike parent outreach where a fundamental rethinking of assumptions took place, those interventions differed only in frequency and intensity from actions that were taking place previous to the reforms. The general sentiment was captured by a teacher's suggestion that "they [students with inconsistent attendance] need someone who is constantly on their case... constantly calling their parents." Interventions included more letters home, automatic phone calls, and outreach to parents from guidance counselors. The most substantial change was the principal's decision, in response to calls from SLC

directors for more support, to assign school aides to make phone calls to the families of absent students every morning.

Behavior

Another issue, which was seen as impeding academic progress, was disruptive behavior in the classroom. The impact of disruptive behavior was not limited, according to SLC directors and teachers, to the students who were engaging in it. During the first year of implementation, the directors of one SLC in particular expressed the feeling that special education students were so disruptive in the general education classroom that they often prevented teachers from moving through a lesson. An assistant principal made a similar observation while discussing the relatively low percentages of students receiving passing grades in some classes. As he explained, “I visited one class. The students were really difficult. They were in the face of the teacher cursing at him over grades.”

One of the most significant achievements of Mr. Stevens early years at Valley had been, according to a wide range of observers both inside and outside the school, to transform a dangerous and out of control school into one which was remarkably orderly and safe for its size. That is not to say, however, that all behavioral issues reported by faculty were imagined. During the first year of the reform, an SLC director was physically assaulted by a student while attempting to call security to remove the student from the classroom. The student had just been released from jail, and while this was by no means typical of the 3200 students in the building, it did speak to the presence of at least some students with severe behavioral issues. Even a small number of students with issues this serious could, from the vantage point of another SLC director, eat up an inordinate amount of one’s time. This director shared the example of a student who didn’t

want to leave school because she was afraid that gang members would kill her. The student was living in foster care and feared that if her foster parents received another phone call, she would be moved to yet another home.

The responses to disruptive behavior under the new SLC structure reflected a gradual shift away from punitive and reactive responses towards preventive actions and interventions designed to teach students to respond in productive ways to conflict. Early in the planning process, there was considerable debate as to whether the “dean’s office” would remain a centralized operation. Many SLC directors felt that student infractions were dealt with in overly punitive ways that interfered with the educational process. The clearest example was suspensions which disproportionately impacted the most struggling students and created a cycle in which they missed class, fell further behind, and with even less invested tended to act out even more. When confronted with the task of developing an alternate system to ensure safety and security in a school the size of Valley, however, the directors almost unanimously decided that it was beyond their capacity. Mr. Stevens, for his part, was clearly opposed to dismantling something that was working relatively well until a strong alternative could be developed. He did, however, believe that the new SLC structure could greatly reduce the need to rely on the centralized security apparatus. To Mr. Stevens, disruptive behavior was more often than not triggered by academic or instructional issues and thus could best be dealt with teachers, guidance counselors, and SLC directors who saw students not primarily through the lens of their misbehavior, but as multifaceted individuals whose actions varied wildly depending on context. For him, a dean should be relied on only as a last resort. He argued:

If a dean is already involved in a situation, there has been a misstep. When I was a teacher, I never ever sent a kid to the dean’s office in my whole career. No kid

was going to think I had to relegate my power to someone else. The community should never give away their power.

In keeping with this view, SLC directors and guidance counselors were identified, in the new structure, as the first place behavioral issues should be brought unless they were extremely serious. For many SLCs, common time was used on a regular basis to “case conference” students who exhibited disruptive behavior and to develop action plans to attempt to change the patterns. Because these conversations included all of the academic teachers working with the student, the student’s counselor, and the directors of the SLC, the information shared was more complete and the responses to the disruptive behavior were in theory more informed. Mr. Stevens would on many occasions suggest that over time such an approach would reduce the need for deans and that the financial savings could be used to sustain the directors reduced teaching loads once the initial grant money had been spent. Others argued, however, that SLC directors still lacked sufficient time in their schedule to address these issues and in some cases lacked the expertise as well.

Internal Sources of School Failure

One of the new practices that was implemented as part of the redesign of Valley was a rotating cycle of “walkthroughs” during which department chairs who supervised content areas visited classes and then met with teachers from the SLC and the SLC directors to discuss what they observed. The protocol for these went through many iterations over the years, but the records of these discussions indicate that assistant principals believed patterns of instructional practices which were ill-suited to the needs or learning styles of students were in part to blame for poor academic performance. The list

of mismatched practices which emerged from these discussions was comprehensive and ranged from “low level questioning” and poorly designed tasks to the lack of clear behavioral and academic expectations. What is less important perhaps than the specific practices which were observed and critiqued, is the question as to why these persisted despite their perceived ineffectiveness. Meetings with assistant principals, SLC directors and Mr. Stevens all yield some clues to the thinking of the school’s leadership on this matter.

Inadequate Preparation of Teachers

One of the most common explanations expressed at Valley for why teachers persisted in practices which evidence suggested were ineffective was that this was the path of least resistance. As Mr. Stevens put it after one walkthrough, “I think that teachers teach the way they feel comfortable.” For many this meant either the way they learn or the way they were themselves taught as students. Another explanation often raised was that teachers don’t know how to teach differently. As Mr. Stevens would often say, “for many teachers re-teaching a concept when a student has not learned it too often means teaching it either slower or louder.” The notion that teaching more effectively required skills that not all teachers possessed was widely accepted by individuals in leadership positions at Valley.

There is some evidence which suggests that many teachers agreed that they lacked the skills to deal with the students who furthest behind. When faced with students who were unable to engage the curriculum due to weak literacy or numeracy skills, teachers would sometimes pass the more compliant of these students along for fear of doing more damage. As one teacher put it,

We have tremendous issues with SIFE [students with interrupted formal education] students in ESL. I have a student who can't decipher vowels. He has been in the school system for three years and when I checked with the guidance counselors he is passing most of his classes.

This pattern was particularly prevalent among ESL students and in one SLC this was revealed in the large discrepancies between grades in English classes and scores on a diagnostic test suggesting that students were struggling to spell elementary words. While some teachers expressed a sense that teaching these skills was not their job, there were large numbers who were willing to learn new skills as witnessed by 18 who signed up for a seminar in reading for adolescents offered at the school through a local university. One of the big challenges to effectively increasing the capacity of staff members to teach skills was the lack of specificity in the conceptual framework many teachers employed for understanding the nature of the problem. In discussions of student performance it was common to hear that a student or a group of students "wrote poorly" did not "read well." It was far less common to hear a teacher describe a students' ability to accurately decode the medial or final syllables in multisyllabic words from a given academic discipline, or that a student could not apply their knowledge of word parts to predict the meaning of an unfamiliar term. The one notable exception was the discussion of reading comprehension skills among the teachers who had been trained in the America's Choice Ramp Up curriculum. Otherwise discussions of student skills remained general and both teachers and their supervisors seemed to struggle to identify exactly what it was that teachers needed to learn to better serve low functioning students.

Teacher Resistance

From the vantage point of SLC directors, teacher resistance to engage in meaningful professional conversations during common planning time and to become committed to truly trying new structures and practices was perceived as a major obstacle to changing instructional practice. Agendas from meetings dating back to the beginning of the planning process show that teacher resistance was discussed on a regular basis and that a significant amount of time was spent developing strategies to deal with it. In some cases, the anticipatory fears of SLC directors proved unfounded as they rarely faced outright hostility. There were some cases early on, however, where teachers sat in common time meetings reading the newspaper, or in which not one teacher in a room of fifteen would volunteer to take minutes. These cases, as with the one time a director was told that their agenda was “shit” along with everything they had done, were the exception and the more substantial challenge was a general passivity among many staff members. The directors of one SLC encountered this in attempting to institute a system of portfolio assessments. They feared what could be termed the “tried that already” syndrome in which teachers associated something new with something that had already been tried and ultimately unsuccessful. The landscape of Valley, like many schools, was littered with the remnants of unrealized or under realized past initiatives and unless new ones came with some compelling rationale, they risked evoking the general weariness with which teachers responded to anything perceived to be the new “flavor of the month.” In addition to a compelling rationale, moving SLC reform forward seemed to require that leaders engage faculty skepticism in a productive manner. As an assistant principal pointed out in discussing a previous instructional initiative:

Even if they can cite it in their sleep, if they don't buy into it, they won't do it. We need to know how much they have bought into it and if they haven't, what their objections are to it.

SLC directors sometimes struggled to address the skepticism of their colleagues as well as to provide a compelling rationale for what they were proposing as they took their first tentative steps as leaders. Over time this would become easier, but the challenge would still remain a central one.

Another explanation for teacher resistance was the particular manner in which some teachers understood the challenge of teaching students who lacked basic skills. Many teachers perceived an irresolvable conflict between the need to cover a wide range of content in order to prepare students for Regents Examinations and the need to re-teach foundational skills that students had not yet mastered. This tension often permeated supervisory conversations with teachers claiming that they were pressured to move at a pace that made it impossible for many students to keep up or for them to teach the skills students needed. There was at least evidence, however, that while teachers blamed their tendency to privilege “coverage” over “mastery” on supervisory pressure, teachers themselves often saw their primary role as being messengers of content. When one assistant principal explicitly instructed the teachers he supervised to make informed choices and jettison parts of the curriculum if necessary, many teachers resisted and responded that their job was to teach the curriculum. According to him, the most difficult thing to change at Valley was:

to get teachers to stop trying to cover material at the expense of the kids. We've done away with pacing calendars, and still up until last week they [teachers] were complaining that the results [Regents Examination scores] were what they were because they didn't get to the last chapter.

At least some teachers attempted to insulate themselves from any potential critique by focusing on “teaching the curriculum.” In this way, they believed they could claim to be doing their job regardless of whether any students in the class were learning.

A final manifestation of teacher resistance identified by assistant principals and SLC directors involved teachers setting as preconditions for their investment in reforms the resolution of certain issues. Both attendance and parental participation are examples of these that were already examined above. Class size was another one. The belief that smaller class sizes were necessary to improve academic performance was widely held among teachers at Valley. During the early months of the 2006-2007 school year, many common time meeting agendas were derailed as teachers repeatedly raised class size concerns. “I have huge classes and there are still students being transferred who aren’t even in our institute,” one teacher would exclaim while another would ask, “Wasn’t the whole purpose of SLCs to get smaller classes?” A quarter of the faculty responses to an open ended item on a January 2007 survey identified class size as something that needed to change. On this issue, a significant gap existed between the majority of the teaching staff, who saw reducing case load as one of the most meaningful steps that could be taken to improve academic outcomes, and the principal who argued that “the majority of teaching styles are not reflective of any level of differentiation and a reduced case load will accomplish little without changing the delivery of service.” Class size, parental participation, attendance, and a host of other frustrations with operational issues such as the timely distribution of books, supplies, and furniture were seen by some teachers as precluding any serious discussion about new initiatives or attention to instruction. Whatever the merits of each side’s argument, the fact remained that teacher resistance

coalesced around these demands making the job of the SLC leaders, assistant principals, and the principal more challenging.

Low Expectations

From the vantage point of Mr. Stevens, many of the assistant principals, and some of the SLC directors, diminished expectations of some faculty members were another factor responsible for the failure of certain students to succeed. Directors argued that students in some classes were not being challenged. This was highlighted by a trip that the entire group of assistant principals, SLC directors, and Mr. Stevens took to a local elementary school. In the discussion that followed visits to a range of classes, participants expressed shock at how similar in content, design, and even level of difficulty many of the tasks were to those assigned at Valley. In Mr. Steven's mind, this could be explained by the fact that setting expectations low was a means for ensuring success, while setting them high necessarily involved greater risk.

Observational data collected by assistant principals during supervisory walkthroughs supported their belief that courses lacked rigor and that this undercut students' abilities to achieve at high levels. This lack of rigor was often demonstrated in inappropriate "aims" – the stated objectives of lessons that supervisors expected teachers to write on the blackboard at the beginning of each lesson. It was also manifested in task after task that required students to copy text from one place to another without processing its meaning in any substantive way. Finally, the sense of low expectations was seen to be implicit in many conversations between faculty and students in which teachers and guidance counselors subtly suggested that minimum passing grades in courses and on Regents exams were the ultimate goal. For the assistant principals, SLC directors and Mr.

Stevens, all of these things contributed to an environment which generated little urgency for students to achieve at high levels.

Implications

The explanations by which different faculty members made sense of the patterns of student success or failure provides important clues as to why individuals acted in the way that they did. The belief that the deleterious influence of students' home lives and peer groups precluded any success academically unless they were first addressed led teachers to pay substantial attention social aspects of their students' development when attempting to discuss their needs. The experiences of one SLC, which attempted to engage teachers in a collective analysis of a student writing during common time, are instructive. The student had written a short essay in which he argued the only thing that mattered in life was women and money, and that the value of money lie primarily in its ability to attract women. The subsequent discussion was framed by a protocol asking teachers to describe what they noticed in the student's work and what they wondered. Given the provocatively crude arguments of the student, it was not surprising that teachers spent time speculating about why he was writing this. What was instructive was that the exclusive focus of the discussion became speculation about what the essay revealed about the peer group and home life of the author. The discussion failed to deal in any systematic way with the structure of the writing, the use of language, or the development of the actual argument. In short, a group of subject area teachers mined the student's work for evidence of his or her social and psychological state and spent a considerable amount of time attempting to refine each other's theories. The emphasis on

analyzing social aspects of students' development was not unique to this discussion and represented a consistent tendency across SLCs whenever teachers met to speak about students. While addressing social needs of students was clearly one goal, it had the tendency to eclipse all other goals in faculty discussions about individual students. As one assistant principal would put it in an interview:

The goal for this work is to individualize our services for our students... teachers end up knowing the students more personally and create an environment where students can succeed academically and socially. But my own observation for certain SLCs is they tend to focus more on the social than on the academic aspects. My own expectation is to see the school push more the academic programs than the social aspects; especially in the common time activities and conversations between teachers. They should focus more on instruction.

That this interview took place at the end of the second year of implementation suggests that, at least in some SLCs, the tendency of discussions of students' social needs to overshadow instructional issues in professional conversations was an ongoing one. This was despite the exhortations from every level of leadership to focus on instruction as primary.

In January of 2007, four months into the restructuring project a survey was administered to all faculty members at Valley. In this survey, only 46% of respondents agreed that the "reform process will lead to significant improvements in academic achievement." Forty-one percent of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, suggesting that many faculty members still had not been convinced either that the reforms being instituted were the right ones, or that improving academic achievement was within the power of the school. As discussed above, evidence suggests that there were significant numbers of teachers who believed nothing would improve until there was a shift in family values, or in the "type" of students recruited to the school. Others believed that the

school could impact levels of achievement, but that preconditions such as the reduction of class size would have to be met for this potential to be realized. Disentangling and testing the theories advanced to explain student failure was made more difficult by the general manner in which student characteristics and skills were discussed and the tendency for the impact of given factors to be magnified or minimized in accordance with the context of the conversation. While some acknowledged that students needed support which teachers were not sufficiently prepared to provide, the lack of specificity in describing student abilities made it difficult to identify exactly what training teachers most needed. Lack of clarity led not only to murky assessments of student needs, but also to an overreliance on expert outsiders to help “fix” problems.

The administration and the leadership at Valley, along with a substantial minority of the faculty, believed that significant improvement was possible through the types of reforms being enacted. There was general consensus among the assistant principals, SLC directors, and Mr. Stevens, that this would involve changing the way teachers worked with each other and changing, in some cases substantially, what they were doing in the classroom. While consensus existed among school leaders, however, the understanding that the goals of reform necessitated changes in classroom practice was not shared by large portions of the faculty. This would have significant implications for the outcomes of SLC reform as will be demonstrated below.

CHAPTER 6

IMPACT OF REFORM

Valley High School employs over two hundred men and women and is tasked with the academic, social and vocational preparation of over 3200 students. As baby boomers retire in large numbers, faculties across the city have become younger, a factor that would impact the professional climate absent any intentional changes to school structures or practices. In addition, the NYC public school system has, in recent years, undergone some of the most radical transformations of any district in the nation. This has included the introduction of mayoral control, the dramatic reduction in the power and resources granted to superintendents, the farming out of instructional support and oversight to non-NYCDOE entities such as New Visions for Public Schools and the City University of New York, the granting of greatly increased autonomy over budgetary and hiring decisions to principals, and an increased reliance on quantitative measures to compare and evaluate the performance of individual schools. To say that the policy environment has not stood still over the course of this research is an understatement. But while it is likely that the experience of working in many of the city's schools is different for teachers from what it was in 2006, it is possible to identify those changes which different members of the Valley faculty attribute to SLC reform. Establishing the impact of these reforms on academic performance is more challenging, but some trends are evident. When staff perceptions and quantitative data from a number of key indicators of academic performance are compared, it is possible to better understand the relationship between SLC reform and changes to school climate and academic outcomes at Valley.

Faculty Perceptions of School Climate

Three major data sources will be used to examine the impact of SLC reform on school climate. The first of these is a series of three faculty surveys developed and administered by Dr. Joan Talbert and her team at Stanford University's Center for Research into the Context of Teaching (CRC). These surveys served to collect information for an evaluation of the School Reform Through Leadership Development program, and were administered in May of 2006, 2007 and 2008. Because the first version of this survey was administered before any major restructuring had begun, and because the final administration took place at the end of the second year of the restructuring, the data generated are particularly useful in identifying those perceptions of faculty members which changed during the restructuring.

The CRC surveys consisted of 4 and 5 point Likert items, with the number of items ranging from 120 to 160. The majority of these items were previously field tested for validity as part of existing survey instruments including the Bay Area School Reform Collective Teacher Survey, the Minneapolis Public School District web-based Staff Survey, the Minneapolis Public School District Principal Survey, and the 1999-2000 national Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) Public School Teachers Survey. Forty-five of the items on these surveys appeared in identical form on all three administrations, and these serve as an important source of data for the analysis of the shifting perceptions of faculty members. The number of respondents to these surveys ranged from 120 to 166.

For the purposes of this analysis, the CRC team provided this researcher with a codebook that indicated the percentage of respondents who selected each possible response for every survey item. Due to CRC confidentiality agreements, this researcher

was neither able to obtain the actual number of responses to each possible choice nor to examine participant level data. The secondary analysis of the CRC survey data conducted for this research involved: 1) analyzing trends in the percentage of positive and negative responses for individual items across the three administrations, 2) ranking the items according to the change in the percentage of positive ratings from the first to the final administration, and 3) grouping similar items to create scales and then calculating the mean change of the items which constitute these scales from the first to the final administration. One limitation of this approach is the inability to analyze the correlation between the individual items grouped to create scales in order to evaluate internal consistency. In order to offset this limitation, data from the CRC surveys will be triangulated with data generated from another survey instrument and interviews with key stakeholders.

The second data source that will be used to investigate the impact of reforms on school climate is a survey developed by this researcher and administered to the Valley faculty in January 2007. This survey consisted of 33 four and five point Likert items and was completed by 109 respondents. Unlike the CRC survey, which was distributed to the principal, assistant principals, teachers, and guidance counselors, the SLC survey was distributed only to teachers and counselors. Data from this survey will be used to supplement data generated by the CRC survey. To this end, survey items have been matched to the scales created for CRC items based on common themes. One limitation of this survey is that it was administered only once and asks respondents to compare current conditions to previous conditions in retrospect.

The final source of data on faculty perceptions of changes to school climate is interviews conducted with eight faculty members including teachers, SLC directors, assistant principals, and the principal. Interviews were conducted by the principal investigator and lasted approximately forty-five minutes. Common questions were asked in each interview with follow-up questions added when deemed necessary (see Appendix A). Survey responses were organized into categories consistent with major research questions, patterns were identified, and quotations that were representative of the most common and relevant patterns were selected. The rich qualitative data from these interviews effectively complement data collected from surveys and provide mechanisms to triangulate these other data and support study findings on the impact of SLC reform on school climate.

Overall Working Conditions

Between 2006 and 2007, the percentage of respondents on CRC surveys who reported being “satisfied” working at Valley remained nearly constant (77.9% in 2006 and 79.4% in 2007). A closer examination of survey data, however, reveals substantial shifts in faculty perceptions. While none of the items that appeared on all three CRC surveys addressed faculty working conditions in general, six items that appeared on both the 2006 and 2007 surveys provide evidence of shifting perceptions towards the end of the first full year of reform (see Table 1). The largest gains were in the percentage of respondents who agreed that teachers played an active role in school wide decision-making, suggesting that SLC reform brought an increased sense of agency for faculty members.

Table 1

CRC Survey Results on School Climate

Positively Phrased Items	Percentage of respondents		
	agreeing with statement^a		Change
	2006	2007	2006 - 2007
Rules for student behavior are consistently enforced by teachers in this school, even for students who are not in their classes	43.9	63.2	19.3
In this school, staff members are recognized for a job well done	45.8	54.4	8.6
Teachers take an active role in school wide decision making	19.5	39.7	20.2
Necessary materials such as textbooks, supplies, and copy machines are available as needed by the staff	42.9	57.7	14.8
Unweighted mean	38.0	53.8	15.7
Negatively Phrased Items			
The level of student misbehavior in this school (such as noise, horseplay or fighting in the halls, cafeteria or student lounge) interferes with my teaching	46.9	35.9	-11
The amount of student tardiness and class cutting in this school interferes with my teaching	74.8	64.3	-10.5
Unweighted mean	60.9	50.1	-10.8

Note. Most of the items contained in this table did not appear on the 2008 administration of the CRC survey.

^aIncludes respondents who selected either "agree" or "strongly agree" on survey items.

In order to supplement the data on working conditions generated by the CRC surveys, five items were included on the SLC survey (see Table 2). While only about half of the respondents felt that support for classroom management problems had increased, responses to items addressing current working conditions were generally more positive.

Survey responses indicate that faculty members perceived opportunities to discuss issues and influence decisions in an organizational context that was both tolerant of opposing views and respectful of employees. The most dramatic indicator of faculty perceptions of working conditions on the SLC survey was that less than four percent of the respondents indicated overall dissatisfaction with the SLC in which they worked.

Table 2

SLC Survey Results on Working Conditions (January 2007)

Survey Item	Agree^a		Neither^b		Disagree^c	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
This year at [Valley] teachers are better supported when they have problems with classroom management	48	46.2	34	32.7	22	21.2
In my SLC (department) there is a culture in which teachers are treated with respect	78	72.2	20	18.5	10	9.3
In my SLC (department) there is a culture in which opposing points of view are respected	64	59.8	31	29.0	12	11.2
In my SLC (department) there are opportunities for shared decision making around important issues affecting the SLC	76	70.4	23	21.3	9	8.4
Overall, I am satisfied with the SLC to which I belong.	86	83.5	13	12.6	4	3.9

^aIncludes respondents who selected either "strongly agree" or "agree."

^bIncludes respondents who selected "neither agree nor disagree."

^cIncludes respondents who selected either "strongly disagree" or "disagree."

Survey data from the CRC surveys suggest that faculty perceptions of overall working conditions at Valley were improved during the first year of reform and the snapshot provided by the SLC survey mid-year provides additional evidence that these positive perceptions were widespread. Items which elicited responses about SLCs, rather than the school as whole, tended to generate even more positive responses suggesting that SLCs were associated with positive changes to the workplace. Qualitative data from observations support this conclusion and highlight the fact that teachers came quickly to

have both a sense of pride in their institutes and to see them as places where they could thrive professionally. As one SLC director argued at the end of the second year:

I think [Valley] has been very successful with giving teachers a place to grow and become leaders in the building and to feel a greater sense of responsibility for the building and student population as a whole and for being professional and I think that's a big success that doesn't exist in many schools.

Teaching Culture and Collaborative Work

Among the stated goals of the SLC restructuring at Valley was to transform the way in which teachers worked together and it was acknowledged by many that this would require a shift in the way teachers perceived themselves, their colleagues, and their work. During an overnight leadership retreat convened by the principal in February 2007, school leaders discussed in depth the enormous pressure that many were feeling. As one assistant principal explained, “we are not just transforming a school, but ourselves. Personally, I’m having a really hard time with this. I don’t know where I fit in.”

While the turmoil and tensions of the early days of the restructuring had subsided by the end of the first year, a central question for this research was whether relationships among staff members had actually changed. Seven of the items which appeared on all three CRC surveys provide an overview of the shifting perceptions among faculty members of the teaching culture at Valley (see Table 3). From spring 2006 to spring 2008, the percentage of teachers who agreed with positively phrased statements about the teaching culture increased on every survey item. Most dramatic among these data was a 27 point gain in the percentage of teachers who agreed they received meaningful feedback from their colleagues. Increases in other items suggest increasing levels of trust, wider agreement on what constitutes effective teaching, and a broader sense of collective

responsibility. While there were mostly modest increases in the percentage of teachers reporting willingness to ask for and provide collegial feedback, the explanation might lie in the fact that 2006 baseline on these items was among the highest.

Responses to the SLC survey are consistent with those on the CRC surveys in pointing to substantial and positive changes in the teaching culture at Valley (see Table 4). A large majority of respondents agreed that were collaborating more effectively than they had prior to the transformation. When asked about specific aspects of the teaching culture within their SLCs, large percentages of participants reported that teachers support each other's work and share responsibility for the success of the SLCs. One of the primary goals of the restructuring was to address the needs of students who had been unsuccessful under previous structures. Given this goal, the fact that two-thirds of participants felt that there was a coherent approach to addressing student failure suggests widespread satisfaction that structures and practices were appropriately designed.

Data from both the SLC and CRC surveys clearly indicate that faculty saw SLC reform as having transformed, in sometimes dramatic ways, the culture of teaching at Valley. Two years into the new structures, staff members felt more supported and open with their colleagues and believed they were working better together. In order to better understand these largely positive perceptions, it is instructive to look at a second set of survey items from the CRC surveys that address more specific aspects of faculty collaboration.

Table 3**CRC Survey Results on Teaching Culture**

Survey Item	Percentage of respondents agreeing with statement^a			Change
	2006	2007	2008	2006 - 2008
Teachers trust one another	44.1	64.3	67.5	23.4
Teachers share a vision of good teaching	56.7	78.1	79.2	22.5
Teachers feel responsible to help one another do their best	46.6	66	68.6	22
Teachers use time together to discuss teaching and learning	44.6	75.5	68.4	23.8
I receive meaningful feedback on my performance from colleagues	38	60.7	65	27
When addressing particular instructional challenges, I feel comfortable asking for advice or help from other teachers	77.5	80.9	83.9	6.4
I feel comfortable giving feedback to other teachers on ways they might improve their instruction	58.6	68.2	71.2	12.6
Unweighted mean	54.4	70.1	71.6	17.2

^aIncludes respondents who selected either "agree" or "strongly agree" on survey items.

Table 4**SLC Survey Results on Teacher Collaboration (January 2007)**

Survey Item	Strongly Agree^a		Neither^b		Disagree^c	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Teachers collaborate more effectively with their colleagues.	71	70.3	17	16.8	13	12.9
In my SLC there is a culture in which teachers support each others' work.	72	69.2	27	26.0	5	4.8
In my SLC (department) there is shared responsibility among staff for the success of the SLC.	77	72.0	24	22.4	6	5.6
In my SLC (department) there is a coherent approach to addressing student failure.	71	65.7	26	24.1	11	10.2

^aIncludes respondents who selected either "strongly agree" or "agree."

^bIncludes respondents who selected "neither agree nor disagree."

^cIncludes respondents who selected either "strongly disagree" or "disagree."

Five items that appeared on both the initial and final CRC surveys address specific aspects of faculty collaboration (see Table 5). From 2006 to 2008, there were substantial increases in the percentage of respondents agreeing with positively phrased statements. The most dramatic shift among the items constituting this scale was the 35.9 point increase in the percentage of respondents who agreed that they worked together to improve instruction including a substantial increase in the percentage of respondents who strongly agreed. This increase suggests that two years into the reform, an overwhelming majority of the faculty perceived themselves as being involved in meaningful and collaborative work around instructional issues. In contrast, the practice of collectively analyzing student work, that gained traction in the first year of restructuring, seems to have faded by the end of the second year.

Table 5**CRC Survey Results on Specific Areas of Teacher Collaboration**

Survey Item	Percentage of respondents agreeing with statement^a			Change
	2006	2007	2008	2006 - 2008
We use a variety of assessment strategies to measure student progress	60.3	76.0	74.8	14.5
We use assessment data to evaluate our curriculum and instructional practices	46.0	—	70.6	24.6
We discuss particular lessons that were not very successful	27.9	44.1	48.3	20.4
We work together to improve instruction	42.0	67.9	77.9	35.9
Unweighted mean	47.8	68.3	68.2	20.8

^aIncludes respondents who selected either "agree" or "strongly agree" on survey items.

Survey data on the collaborative work of faculty further support the conclusion that SLC restructuring brought with it positive changes in faculty perceptions of the teaching climate. These data clearly suggest that the frequency of many types of collaborative work increased and that this work was perceived to be meaningful by faculty. Survey data suggest that this shift was not a gradual one and that faculty perceptions changed substantially even after only one year. Furthermore, an analysis of all three CRC surveys suggests that in most areas the momentum was maintained through the end of the second year of implementation. These data are consistent with the qualitative data generated through observations and interviews with key stakeholders who often perceived the transformation as having had a positive impact. As one faculty member expressed it in June 2008:

I think conversations between professionals in the building have shifted away from traditionally what you would have heard in the teachers' lounge... these kids can't or don't. The conversations are more around what do we need to do for these students. I think an example of it is that people are willing to ground their conversations in what students are producing instead of generalities about students' abilities. They're looking at student work and asking what is missing? What do we need to provide individually or in groups? When we have those conversations, they've been good. Five years ago you would have been laughed out of the room if you pushed that.

Changes in Leadership

In creating SLCs, the formal leadership structures at Valley were modified in substantial ways. As discussed in Chapter four, the most dramatic of these was the creation of a new layer of leadership: the SLC directors. In addition, the job descriptions of assistant principals supervising academic subject areas were substantially modified as the departmental structure itself was partially dismantled. Added to this was the fact that all of the SLC directors formed a cohort in an intensive, credit bearing school leadership

and supervision graduate program, and the fact that the rhetoric around SLC reform was replete with calls for more distributed forms of leadership. It would seem logical given these factors that faculty perceptions of leadership in the school would have changed substantially from 2006 to 2008. Over twenty items that appeared on all three versions of the CRC survey provide a wealth of information for evaluating whether this was the case.

As previously mentioned, 45 items appeared on all three versions of the CRC survey. When responses were ranked by the change in the percentage of respondents agreeing with positive statements, seven out of the ten biggest increases were in categories addressing school leadership. The average percentage of positive responses on all of the leadership items increased 18.8% and positive responses decreased on only three of the 20 items (see Appendix B). While the overall positive trend is clear, what is less clear is whether the 2006 responses and the 2008 responses are talking about the same individuals. In 2006, before SLCs were created, respondents were asked to “consider leadership conditions within your primary school community.” In 2007 and 2008, respondents were asked to evaluate the “leadership in your school or SLC.” While the responses on the 2006 survey were based on perceptions of assistant principals, and to a lesser extent the principal, it likely the responses on the 2007 and 2008 surveys were largely based on perceptions of the newly created SLC directors. Patterns in responses support this interpretation.

The three items with the greatest increase in positive responses all speak to the ability of school leaders to accommodate diverse views and to be flexible with their own. One interpretation, which is supported by these data, is that the leadership style of the SLC directors was characterized by an inclusiveness and a humility that teachers

responded to positively and which stood out in contrast to the historic pattern of relationships between staff and assistant principals. Data from the SLC survey, which contained items that were specific to the two different layers of leadership, support this conclusion. Of five items that asked faculty to assess the leadership of the SLC directors, an average of 75.4% of the respondents agreed and only 2.6% of the responses disagreed with positively phrased items. Over 86% of those surveyed agreed that their SLC directors were supportive of their needs, and not a single respondent disagreed. This was in contrast to the responses on items that asked faculty about assistant principals. Only 26% of the faculty agreed that professional development, which assistant principals were leading, better addressed the needs of teachers and students than in previous years - roughly equal to the percentage of teachers who disagreed. A larger percentage felt that supervision was more supportive of effective teaching than it was prior to the restructuring, but even this paled in comparison to the positive evaluations of the SLC directors.

In these survey results, respondents seems to be expressing a general dissatisfaction with supervision as it was organized prior to the SLC reforms, and a feeling that in relation to assistant principals, little had changed by half way through the first year. In order to make better sense of these data, however, a number of contextual factors need to be taken into account. The first of these factors is the fact that the SLC directors did not formally supervise teachers and therefore were not given unpopular tasks such as reprimanding employees who violated school policies or failed to perform in a competent manner. In addition, SLC directors were still members of the teachers' union and still taught up to three classes making it much easier for teachers to identify

with them. Finally, the only survey items that asked respondents to directly assess assistant principals were administered in January 2007, a moment during which dissatisfaction among the assistant principals was extremely high and tensions between them and SLC directors at its apex. Qualitative data from subsequent periods suggest far greater levels of cooperation and raise the possibility that these data are skewed toward the negative. Thus, while the enormous gains on these items do reflect strong popular approval on the leadership style and actions of the new SLC directors, the positive ratings are likely inflated by the greater ease with which other teachers could identify with the SLC directors, the differences in their responsibilities, and the timing of the SLC survey. It is unlikely given the size of these gains, however, that these confounding factors account for the entire difference and as a result these data suggest that a major shift in faculty perceptions of school leadership did occur.

The three items in the leadership category on which there were declines in positive responses asked about the knowledge which leaders had about standards, curriculum, and pedagogy. These declines are consistent with qualitative data which suggested that despite their positive appraisal of the new SLCs and the SLC directors, teachers felt something had been lost with the partial dismantling of subject area departments. As one assistant principal reported:

I received feedback from teachers that the interactions they used to have within their content area have not been there. We consider ourselves experts in our content. The more you have conversations with experts, the more best practices are shared, but if you are dealing with people with different expertise and there is no common ground, you lose expertise.

This sentiment was echoed by another teacher who reflecting back on two years of reform:

I think what I miss is the fact that teachers used to talk about curriculum and lesson plans. We don't bounce information off of each other any more... subject teachers I mean."

Thus, while there was a strong overall sense that leadership at Valley had greatly improved, there was also a sense that the new structure offered decreased opportunities for both formal and informal subject specific conversations and that this was a loss.

Teacher Preparation

While all of the scales examined thus far showed significant increases in the percentage of respondents offering positive responses, the nine items that addressed teacher preparation remained almost flat (see Table 6). In analyzing these items, it is important to note that the baseline in 2006 was far higher than that of any other category. Before the SLC reforms began, teachers saw themselves as highly prepared on items ranging from their ability to manage classes and teach their content, to their competency in assessing students and effectively planning lessons. The largest gain in this category was in how prepared teachers felt in using a variety of instructional methods. This is in keeping with both a school and district wide emphasis on increasing the capacity of teachers to "differentiate" instruction that predates SLC reforms.

The two areas where positive responses declined most substantially were in teachers' perceptions of their own preparedness to teacher English language learners and special education students. Part of this might be a response to the increased challenges of large numbers of immigrant students and the increasing number of special education students being placed in general education. But while this might be the context, the responses to these items suggest that the professional development teachers participated in was not perceived to be sufficient to help them address the needs of these student

populations. Data from the internal SLC survey support this conclusion with 42% of the respondents reporting that the support they were being provided in relation to special needs students was ineffective or very ineffective. In addition, frustration was expressed with the broad moves to shift students from self-contained to integrated settings. As one teacher responded to an open ended survey item in January 2007:

ISS [instructional support services] inclusion should be done on a case-by-case basis. Everyone is not ready for the mainstream. Inclusion of students with behavioral disturbances is particularly detrimental to instruction. To ask teachers to address the needs of these students, with 34 or 33 other students, is unfair. These students should be in self-contained classes.

To what extent survey data indicate frustration with inadequacy of professional development in this area is unclear. As the above quote suggests, these data might also reflect frustration borne of deeply held beliefs that students were “misplaced” in general education settings under new special education policies.

Perceptions of Leadership Decisions

As opposed to many SLC projects across the district and nation, the different components of the reforms at Valley were implemented simultaneously rather than introduced gradually. As discussed in Chapter four, a wide range of decisions were made by the principal, SLC directors, and assistant principals during a semester long planning period. Data from the SLC survey provide a window into how effective faculty members perceived these decisions to be midway though the first year of implementation.

Table 6**CRC Survey Results on Teacher Preparation**

Survey Item	Percentage of respondents reporting feeling prepared			Change
	2006	2007	2008	2006 - 2008
Handle a range of classroom management or discipline situations	89.8	87.5	89.6	-0.2
Use a variety of instructional methods	83.8	88.8	94.8	11
Teach subject matter	97	92.5	99.1	2.1
Use computers in classroom instruction	55.8	64	64	8.2
Plan lessons effectively	94.1	92.8	97.4	3.3
Assess student learning	92.6	90.7	97.4	4.8
Select and adapt curriculum and instructional materials	86.8	89.3	91.1	4.3
Teach English language learners	61.2	54.1	57.2	-4
Teach special education students	53.7	44.9	49.6	-4.1
Unweighted Mean	79.4	78.3	82.2	2.8

^aIncludes respondents who selected either "well prepared" or "very well prepared" on survey items.

One of the biggest fears among school leaders at every level during the planning process was that the September 2006 opening would be chaotic. All evidence suggests this was not the case. When asked in an open ended survey item what surprised them about the transformation, nine faculty members spoke to the smoothness of the transition and not one response spoke to disorganization, although a few complained about lack of clarity and direction. As one faculty member from the Humanities institute explained,

I have been surprised at how smoothly the transition has gone and how quickly we've been able to build a real community. It gives me great hope for what we can achieve.

The responses to Likert items on this survey support the picture of the initial transition as remarkably smooth given the scope of the changes. Over two-thirds of respondents evaluated the handling of teacher programs, student programs, and room assignments as “effective” or “very effective,” despite the fact that these were areas in which some of the most dramatic structural changes were made. This was particularly significant given that Mr. Steven’s had been regularly questioned by many faculty members during the planning year for his decision to transform these same structures all at once rather than as part of a gradual “phase in” process.

Equity

While faculty members overall assessment of major administrative decisions was overwhelmingly positive, one area in which questions were raised was equity. Over 46% responded on the SLC survey that they felt school leaders had been ineffective in “maintaining equity between SLCs.” One area in which this was reflected was the mixed evaluations by respondents of the distribution of resources. This dissatisfaction with the distribution of resources was further reflected in 11 responses to an open-ended survey item that spoke of the need for more resources, including technology, and in some cases directly questioned the fairness in how existing resources were distributed. On items asking for an overall assessment of leadership decisions, the percentage who responded “very ineffective” was also particularly high on the perceptions of support given to teachers working with students with special needs as discussed above. While chapter four outlined the design of each institute along with the different selection criteria and their rationale, unpacking exactly what was behind the concern over equity necessitates a

closer analysis of achievement and demographic data of the student populations in each of the SLCs.

It is clear that the population served by each of the new institutes created at Valley was unique and these particular demographic characteristics created both opportunities and challenges for each team of teachers. The design outlined in chapter four called for the creation of two academically screened institutes (Humanities and Pre-Med), two transitional institutes (Future Academy and Newcomers), and for the remaining five institutes to serve one of two populations with unique needs (students with disabilities and English language learners). A review of the demographic data from the second year of implementation suggests that the distribution of students closely followed this initial design.

Approximately nine percent of the students at Valley High School have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) which entitle them to specialized academic services. The services range from the special education teacher support services (SETSS), commonly known as “resource room,” to students who received more extensive support either in a general education setting with the support of second teacher, known as collaborative team teaching (CTT), or in a self-contained (SC) setting. During the years when these data were collected there was a fair amount of fluidity between the SC and CTT settings as increasing numbers of students were moving into general education settings. For the purposes of this analysis, SC and CTT students will be grouped together. In fact, as special education services have been reconfigured at Valley, these groups are increasingly interchangeable.

Four small learning communities served the overwhelming majority of special education students at Valley after the restructuring (see Table 7). The first of these, Future Academy, because its mission was to serve the lowest performing incoming 9th graders, became a natural destination for students with IEPs. While the overall percentage of special education students in Future Academy was among the highest, the majority of these students were entitled to the less restrictive “resource room” services. This was in contrast to the Theater and Health Careers institutes where far larger percentages of the sizable special education population were served in CTT or SC settings. The remaining institutes did have students with IEPs, but the numbers were far less than the previously mentioned SLCs and the overwhelming majority of special education students in these institutes only received resource room support. The two academically screened programs, Humanities and Pre-Med had negligible numbers of students with IEPs and the few they had all received resource room as their primary support.

The population at Valley was highly diverse with students from over 50 national groups represented. Approximately 12% of the student body is entitled to English as a second language services and a far larger group of students speak a language other than English at home but have already tested out of ESL services. Three institutes serve almost every ESL student at the school (see Table 7). Newcomers, as was mentioned above, was designed as a transitional institute for students who had recently immigrated to the United States. About a third of the students in Newcomers were entitled to ESL services, while the remaining two-thirds were immigrants who had either become somewhat proficient in English as a second language or who spoke an English dialect but had weak literacy skills due to interrupted or inadequate education in their native

countries. Biz-Tek has the largest percentage of ESL students of all the SLCs, and while the Public Service and Law institute had a smaller ESL population, the institute housed the only bilingual program in the school which was one of its defining characteristics.

Table 7

Distribution of Special Education and ESL Students

Institute	All special ed. ^a		SETSS ^b		ESL ^c	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
BizTek	25	4.8	19	3.6	190	37.7
Future Academy	12	13.2	10	11	0	0
Health Careers	57	11.2	15	2.9	6	1.2
Humanities	12	3.3	12	3.3	1	0
Newcomers	0	0.0	0	0.0	22	40
Pre-Med	4	0.8	3	0.6	10	2.1
Pre-Teaching	31	8.0	3	0.8	4	1
Public Service & Law	22	4.7	20	4.2	121	26.9
Theater	73	16.5	35	7.9	12	2.8

Note. Data collected on October 6, 2007. The total student population in each SLC against which the percentages in this table were calculated varies and is different for the "all special ed." and "SETSS" columns than from the "ESL" column. Unresolved questions about the home room codes assigned to special education students are the reason for these disparities.

^aIncludes all students receiving self-contained, collaborative team teaching, or special education teacher support services (SETSS).

^bIncludes only students receiving SETSS.

^cIncludes students receiving English as a second language (ESL) services.

Simply comparing the percentages of English language learners in each institute masks some significant differences in the populations each of these three institutes served. A look at distribution of students by ethnicity helps to clarify this (See Table 8). Public Service and Law has the highest percentage of Hispanic students in the school while the percentage of Hispanic students in Newcomers was negligible. Just over half of the students in Newcomers identified as Asian/Pacific Islander and these included large numbers of Bengali, Pakistani, and Guyanese students of Asian descent. Students in

Newcomers who identified as black were primarily those who recently immigrated from the Caribbean and Africa.

In addition to Newcomers, Biz-Tek and Pre-Med also had high percentages of Asian students. In contrast, the student populations of both Future Academy and Health Careers were over two-thirds Black. The unique nature of the academic programs, admissions policies, themes, and support services available in each SLC meant that the ethnic make up of each institute was quite different even as they all remained extremely diverse. Most dramatic among the demographic distinctions between institutes was the approximately 40% gap between those institutes with the highest percentage of Black, Hispanic, and Asian students and those with the least.

Table 8
Ethnic and Racial Composition of Small Learning Communities

Institute	American Indian ^a		Asian ^b		Hispanic		Black		White		None reported		Totals
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
BizTek	3	0.6	193	38.3	100	19.8	185	36.7	20	4	3	0.6	504
Future Academy	1	1.1	12	13.6	9	10.2	64	72.7	2	2.3	0	0	88
Health Careers	3	0.6	84	16.5	69	13.6	346	68.1	6	1.2	0	0	508
Humanities	1	0.3	102	29.1	83	23.7	153	43.7	10	2.9	1	0.3	350
Newcomers	1	1.8	28	50.9	3	5.5	22	40	1	1.8	0	0	55
Pre-Med	2	0.4	246	51.9	63	13.3	150	31.6	12	2.5	1	0.2	474
Pre-Teaching	1	0.3	91	22.9	99	24.9	200	50.4	6	1.5	0	0	397
Public Service & Law	2	0.4	70	15.6	199	44.2	169	37.6	8	1.8	2	0.4	450
Theater	3	0.7	51	11.9	100	23.4	265	62.1	8	1.9	0	0	427
Whole school	17	0.5	877	27.0	725	22.3	1554	47.8	73	2.2	7	0.2	3253

Note. Data collected on October 6, 2007.

^aIncludes students who identify as American Indian or Alaskan Native.

^bIncludes students who identify as Asian or Pacific Islander.

One final area necessary to examine in order to assess equity between institutes is in the academic skills of incoming students as reflected on NYS 8th grade assessments. Given the existence of two academically screened programs, it is not surprising that the gap in 8th grade scores between institutes was in some cases dramatic. At one end of the spectrum was Biz-Tek where in 2007 only 6% of the 10th, 11th, and 12th had scored on or above grade level on the 8th grade ELA assessment. In contrast, 42% of the same cohort

of students in Pre-Med had scored at or above grade level on the same assessment. In the following year, however, the percentage for Biz-Tek increased to 20% which was still relatively low but closer to Theater (26%) and Public Service (27%) for that year¹. In general, the trend from 2006-2007 to 2007-2008 was upward for all institutes and this paralleled a general upward trend in 8th grade test scores around the city. Pre-Med continued to have the highest percentages of students entering on or above grade level, but Humanities and Health Careers were not far behind. In Humanities, 9% of students scored above grade level on the ELA exam which paralleled the 10% of Pre-Med students who did the same on the 8th grade mathematics exam and was in keeping with the program's design to provide a home for high achievers whose strengths were not in mathematics or science. The scores in mathematics as a general rule were higher, but the relative number of students on grade level in different institutes paralleled fairly closely the gaps between institutes that existed in ELA scores.

These data suggest a possible explanation for the concern faculty members expressed over equity. Two institutes, Humanities and Pre-Med, by design served negligible numbers of English language learners and special education students. The percentage of teachers in these two institutes who felt administrators had been “ineffective” in ensuring equity between institutes, however, was only slightly below the average percentage for the entire school. In addition, faculty members assigned to the institute which served the highest number of special education students, Health Careers, expressed the greatest satisfaction with the manner in which equity was managed by

¹ The 2006-2007 data for Biz-Tek was most likely skewed by the high number of students who had recently immigrated and had never taken NYS assessments in 8th grade. The shift upward in the percentage of students scoring on or above grade level is likely due to fewer students entering without 8th grade scores rather than an indication of a substantial shift in the academic skills of the incoming population.

administrators. There was little apparent relationship between the presence of either special populations, or the academic preparation of incoming students, and the stated beliefs of faculty members regarding the equity of the process. What is also clear is that while the racially distinct characteristics of the institutes were by no means neutral, neither were there deep expressions of concern over tendencies towards racial segregation. The diversity of the communities served by Valley ensured that even the most competitive institute, Pre-Med, was approximately 45% Black and Hispanic.

Outcomes for Students

Qualitative Indicators

While the CRC survey did not ask teachers to directly evaluate the impact the SLC reforms were having on the types of experiences of students at Valley, the internal SLC survey administered halfway through the 2006-2007 did and as mentioned above, under half of the respondents agreed that the reform process would cause significant gains in academic achievement. Data from interviews conducted with key stakeholders at the end of the second year of restructuring shed further light on faculty perceptions of the impact of SLC reform on students.

Faculty members indicated in their responses to both the CRC and the SLC surveys that they believed SLC reform had brought significant improvements in the level of communication and collaboration between faculty members. Participants' responses in interviews reinforced this conclusion that a broad range of information about students was being shared more effectively and this created an overall impression that students were more fully "known" by faculty members. Key stakeholders reported that the

relationships between students and adults had been strengthened by SLC reform. As one Spanish teacher explained when asked what had been most successful about the changes:

I believe that the most successful thing is [that] the relationship between teachers and students is stronger. The students confide more in the teachers because they get to be with them for four years. The rapport is stronger. You develop a bond.

In addition to a general feeling that students experienced a greater sense of being known and of belonging, faculty members expressed the belief that SLC reform had increased the emphasis on academic achievement and the scrutiny of the performance of struggling populations. As one assistant principal expressed it,

teachers' expectations have changed because they are being held more accountable and we have been using data differently than we did before. I've been an AP [assistant principal] for 6 years. I always knew the percentage of Regents in June, but before I never knew what teachers were doing individually besides what I saw here and there in observations. You couldn't have a conversation with teachers about specific students and the progress they are making and the students who might need AIS [academic intervention services] to identify these students very early.

Whether the early identification of students' needs and increased scrutiny on performance was translating into improved outcomes and increased learning or simply a pressure to pass students along by inflating grades is an important question. On this subject, the responses of key stakeholders continued to be ambivalent. As one teacher put it:

I still feel that there are a bunch of kids who we haven't serviced... really low functioning students. A lot of our students are not prepared for high school work so we need to aggressively pursue a reading and writing program. Maybe high school needs to be five or six years for these students. They won't succeed if we just pass them along. They need to be prepared for the Regents exams and entrance exams for college.

The stubborn question that continued to return was whether instruction had changed. In chapter five, it was demonstrated that both administrators and some SLC

directors perceived a mismatch between teacher skills, instructional practices, and the needs of students. In addition, the discourse of reform within the NYCDOE and beyond continually emphasized that changing instruction was the only legitimate purpose of reform and road to increased academic outcomes. At the conclusion of this research, there was a general sense that positive and often dramatic changes to the school's structures and climate had occurred, but that classroom instruction had remained far more constant. As Mr. Stevens explained,

I would say the initial important goal was to personalize the school... making connections between students and adults. The work that still needs to be done is the personalization of instruction and that has not taken place to the same extent.

The question as to whether the slower progress in transforming classroom practice inhibited the progress of students can be answered in part by looking a wide range of quantitative achievement data.

NYCDOE Accountability Indicators

SLC reform at Valley High School coincided with the introduction of a radically new system of accountability in the entire NYC school district. The centerpiece of this new accountability system was an annual report card that assigned a letter grade to every school in the city. School progress reports assess schools on both progress as well as performance and attempts to balance between comparing schools to similar schools and to the city system as a whole. The first report cards were issued in the fall of 2007 and were based on data from the 2006-2007 school year. Given that this was the first full year of reforms, it was extremely demoralizing to the faculty when the school received a "C" and placed in the 21st percentile of schools citywide. The following year, the faculty was relieved when the school received a "B" and in comparing key metrics from these two

school years, it is possible to identify some patterns and trends, which along with the data reported above, provide evidence of the impact SLC reform had on student achievement.

Data from Valley's progress reports will be analyzed in a number of ways (see Table 9). Firstly, the change in key metrics from year one to year two will be calculated. Simply looking at the change in metrics, however, provides an incomplete picture in that some metrics such as attendance have consistently improved citywide. Thus, the shifts in performance on key metrics must also be assessed in relation to the performance of other schools. Measuring relative performance by assessing which percentile Valley falls into on each metric is problematic as the widespread initiative to create new schools leads to substantial shifts in the overall number of schools. What is generally a better measure of the relative performance of Valley in relation to other schools is the rank from the highest school in each category.

In order to compare schools to similar schools, the NYCDOE assigns a peer index to every school. The central components of this peer index are the scores on the NYS 8th grade ELA and mathematics assessments. The theory behind using these scores as the primary indicator of equivalency is that they are argued to be highly predictive of high school performance. In fact, the NYCDOE Office of Accountability has argued that other factors such as race and family income are far less predictive by the time a student arrives at high school. For the 2007-2008 school year, two additional factors were included in peer index. These two factors were percentage of special education students and the percentage of students who enter high school two or more years overage. In 2006-2007, Valley was assigned a peer index of 2.62, a rank of 158 out of approximately 327 high

schools citywide. Because only 8th grade assessment scores were used to calculate this index, this is simply the average of all of the scores of Valley's student body on 8th grade ELA and mathematics assessments. A score of 3.0 would mean the average student had earned the minimum score to be considered on grade level in both ELA and mathematics. Valley's score of 2.62 indicates that the average student entered below grade level in both subjects, but not far below.

For the 2007-2008 school year, the peer index for Valley dropped to 2.42 with the addition of calculations for the percentage of overage and special education students. Because of the change in how peer indexes were calculated, the peer indexes of the overwhelming majority of schools citywide also declined. The relative position of Valley, however, increased as it moved from the 158 to 140 in the citywide rankings. This suggested that the percentage of special education and significantly overage students at Valley was slightly less than a large number of other city schools and also meant that the peer group to which Valley was being compared when the school moved up a grade was a more competitive one. Another change in how the final grade was calculated also meant that peer group comparison had a larger overall impact. Whereas on the first report cards, peer group comparison accounted for 67% of the overall score with the remaining points coming from a citywide comparison, the relative weight of the peer comparison was increased to 75% on the second round of report cards.

Table 9

Comparison of Performance on NYCDOE Progress Report Metrics (2006 - 2008)

	Performance		Citywide rank ^a		Citywide percentile		Change 2006 - 2008	
	2006-7	2007-8	2006-7	2007-8	2006-7	2007-8	Rank	Percentile
Overall progress report score	40	52.7	190	181	19.5	36.5	9	17
Peer index	2.62	2.42	158	140	51.7	62.2	18	10.5
Progress Report Categories^b								
Environment	0.31	0.638	268	86	18	76.8	182	58.8
Performance	0.461	0.377	165	245	49.5	33.8	-80	-15.7
Progress	0.336	0.479	272	187	16.8	49.5	85	32.7
Individual Metrics								
Attendance	84%	84%	196	220	40.1	40.5	-24	0.4
4 yr. graduation rate	62%	60%	142	200	39.8	32.9	-58	-6.9
4 yr. weighted graduation rate ^c	95%	101%	149	212	36.8	28.9	-63	-7.9
6 yr. graduation	73%	68%	120	126	29.4	40.3	-6	10.9
6 yr. weighted graduation rate	112%	113%	102	120	40	43.1	-18	3.1
10+ credits in 1st yr. ^d	60%	76%	196	161	40.1	56.5	35	16.4
10+ credits in 2nd yr.	61%	70%	168	158	46.2	53.9	10	7.7
10+ credits in 3rd yr.	63%	68%	132	163	53.4	49.9	-31	-3.5
Avg. Regents completion ^e	0.219	0.279	209	196	28.4	39.9	13	11.5

^aRank calculated by comparing performance of Valley to all other schools which have comparable data. Because of there are significant numbers of new schools which have not fully phased the total number of schools to which Valley is being compared change both between different indicators (i.e. there are fewer schools with six year graduation rates than there are with students in their third year of high school) and school years.

^bPerformance in these categories represents a score which is calculated by aggregating differentially weighted individual metrics. Some of these individual metrics are included in this chart and others are not.

^cWeighted graduation rates can exceed 100% because different types of diplomas are awarded additional points.

^dThe three credit accumulation metrics are calculated by measuring the percentage of students who earn ten or more credits the first time they are in the 9th, 10th and 11th grades.

^eAverage Regents completion rate is calculated by dividing the number of Regents exams which students pass for the first time by the total number which the student body was required to pass upon entry into high school. The performance of 9th graders is not included in this metric until the end of their second year of high school.

Two areas where performance at Valley remained almost constant, and even declined relative to the city were in graduation rates and attendance. Over the ten years that Mr. Stevens was principal of Valley, the graduation rate had increased at a relatively steady pace. While there was a slight decline in the four-year and six-year graduation rates from the first to the second year of reform, this decline is likely too small to be significant. When combined with the fact that Valley did drop significantly in citywide ranking for four-year graduation rates, it is clear that SLC restructuring had no immediately positive impact on either four or six-year graduation rates.

As previously mentioned, attendance was a constant source of frustration for faculty members at Valley. The attendance rates at Valley have fluctuated by less than 2% in the last seven years and hover around 85%. The average daily attendance rate stayed almost constant between the first and second year of SLC reform. Because attendance in all schools increased slightly during the same period, however, Valley dropped from 196 to 220 in the citywide ranking. Again, it is clear from the data with regards to attendance, SLC reform at Valley had no initial positive impact. Even when disaggregating the data by grade level, those students who had entered the school after the restructuring did not show increases in attendance over their peers from previous years.

The NYCDOE progress reports organize measures of achievement into three differentially weighted categories. The first of the categories is environment which contributes 15% to a school's overall score. Five percent of the environment score is the average daily attendance for the year, which as discussed above showed a slight decline relative to the city, and the remaining 10% is calculated from surveys which ask students, teachers, and parents to evaluate schools in a wide range of areas. In the school environment category, Valley gained 58.7 points jumping from 268 to 86 in citywide rankings. This remarkable increase was the result of significantly more positive responses on the "learning environment surveys." While the design of the survey itself might be methodologically sound, there are factors that raise questions about the validity of using data generated by these surveys for research purposes. These surveys directly contribute to a school's grade which in turn has wide-ranging implications for student recruitment, the school's ability to advocate for its needs in the larger system, the survival of the

school's leadership, and ultimately the continued existence of the school. As a result, there is a great deal of incentive for teachers to think through not only how they perceive their school, but also the political implications of their responses. It is logical to think that such sensitivity would be heightened in a school that received an adverse grade in the previous year.

Another factor, particular to Valley, which might have had an impact on the survey results was the fact that the 2006-2007 version was administered in the midst of an enormous transition during which there was heightened tension between different members of the school community and a great deal of uncertainty. The second survey, in contrast, was administered at a time when all new structures were in place and much of the uncertainty associated with the reforms had dissipated.

Even given the factors which might have resulted in an increase in percentage of positive ratings on the learning environment surveys, the size of the increase and the fact that significant increases occurred among not only teachers, but also among students and parents, suggested that that all members of the school community perceived the school as having changed in significant and positive ways from the spring of 2007 to the spring of 2008. Seen in the context of the CRC and SLC survey data discussed above, this supports the finding that the changes which SLC reform brought to Valley were perceived as positive.

While Valley increased its overall school environment score dramatically, it saw a decline in the second category, performance, which measured graduation rates and diploma types. On the third category, progress, there were substantial increases. The progress combined a number of metrics on Regents exam completion and credit

accumulation. In this category, Valley went from the 272 to 187 citywide. Particularly significant were the increases in the number of first time 9th and 10th graders earning ten or more credits during the year. In addition, slight increases were seen in a metric called “average Regents completion rate” which measures the progress of students in meeting NYS exit exam requirements. Finally, the measures of performance on individual Regents exam showed improvement in every subject area with the exception of science which remained stagnant. Together, these measures demonstrated that more students at Valley were passing required exit examinations and accumulating sufficient course credits for on time graduation.

Overall, Valley jumped from the a rank of 190 citywide to 181, but this modest increase masks the fact that significant increases in school environment and student progress – the categories containing those metrics which would logically change first in response to school reform. Attendance is the notable exception here. Given the positive shift in Regents passing and credit accumulation it is likely that other metrics which remained stagnant such as the graduation rates will improve in future years. While this research lacks a firm baseline of data collected prior to the restructuring, the qualitative and quantitative data discussed above points to a school which is moving in a positive direction as a result of the SLC reforms.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Context and Goals of Reform

Before summarizing the major findings of this study, it is useful to revisit those goals school leaders at Valley intended to achieve through SLC reform as well as the historical and current policy contexts. The first intended effect of the restructuring project at Valley was to transform a school that was only slightly beating the average for city schools on most metrics into one that was high performing. These reforms began at the tail end of almost two decades of intense high school reform; reforms which had led to the restructuring of well over half of the comprehensive high schools in the city.

For Valley's seasoned principal, these reforms were both an attempt to borrow successful structures from newly created small high schools as well as a move designed to recapture for large comprehensive high schools the spotlight which had shifted away in the preceding decades. The most significant success of small schools that SLC reform attempted to replicate was the increased level of personalization of the educational experience for students. School leaders' perceptions of the changes that needed to take place were consistent with the most widely read small school reformers, although school leaders at Valley arrived at their conclusions more through their own observations of the limitations of certain large school structures and through direct collaboration with small schools than through direct exposure to the literature on small schools. Under the broad label "personalization," a number of things were included. For Valley's leaders, this meant creating a sense of belonging and attachment to the school, something that was

lacking according to critics of large high schools who posited it as an important ingredient to improving outcomes. School leaders at Valley shared with school reformers the belief that improving the quality of relationships between students and faculty members could provide a platform for improved academic achievement.

In addition to personalization, Valley's leadership perceived structures in small school structures as allowing for more effective collaboration among faculty members. Studies of schools have long pointed to the isolation of teachers within their classrooms and the lack of transparency in instructional practice as being a barrier to professional development (Lortie, 1977). Literature points to the potential for increased collaboration, when coupled with the distribution of decision-making authority, to generate greater staff investment, strong collective norms, higher professional standards, and increased capacity to problem solve (Sizer, 1992; Meier, 1995). Evidence from observations and interviews with key stakeholders suggest that both the principal and SLC directors agreed.

As discussed previously, high schools in the United States from their inception intentionally structured differentiated educational experiences for diverse groups of students. In some cases, this led to a distinction between those students who intended to pursue post-secondary studies and those who did not, and in all cases, until mid-century it was accompanied by an assumption that the majority of students would leave before earning a degree. Underlying the existence of a differentiated program was the tension between the practical and theoretical which manifested itself in major struggles over curriculum. While the position labeled "progressive" early in the century was that which pushed for programs explicitly differentiated based on one's future destination in the

workplace, such vocational tracking lost favor in the 1980's as many policy makers converged around a set of critiques which argued that progressivism had sacrificed rigor on the alter of relevance.

An enduring feature of the 1980s critiques of public schools is the expectation that every student will complete a college preparatory program. In the 1980s and 1990s, political support and funding for vocational programs dwindled and the high school programs in which students were enrolled became increasingly uniform. One aspect of the trajectory of small school and SLC reform in NYC represents a countertrend marking a modest step towards a return to vocational education and the privileging of relevance. Like every new school approved in recent years by NYCDOE, each SLC at Valley had a theme and in the case of six of the institutes, these themes had explicit vocational connections. Underlying this was a belief, supported by literature on SLC reform, that choice in itself could provide additional motivation (Legters, 1999). In addition, there was a belief that revived a current in education dating back to the inception of high schools: that the connections between schools, the workplace, and society should be explicit.

What was different about reforms at Valley is that they took place in a system that continued to be organized around an expectation that all students are bound for post-secondary academic programs. Thus, the core curriculum between institutes did not differ greatly. New York State defines the number of necessary credits needed in all academic areas for graduation and explicitly defines which courses are mandatory within most disciplines. Five exit exams are the primary mechanism for ensuring that the curriculum is taught, and while there were substantial opportunities to customize these mandatory

courses to explore the vocational or academic themes of a SLC, this was not a priority at Valley. This was not unexpected given that the NYCDOE accountability system in place during the time of this research exclusively credited academic progress and provided no recognition for successful vocational preparation¹. As a result of this, teachers and students in those programs that established vocational programs leading to industry recognized certifications, such as Health Careers, continued to identify most strongly with the themes of their SLCs. In all institutes, the themes resided primarily in elective courses, and core classes between institutes remained similar. Thus, while there was an impulse towards a more explicitly vocational educational program, the constraints of NYS graduation requirements, the fact that other elements of the reform took priority, and the values inherent in both the NYCDOE and the federal accountability systems meant this impulse had little initial impact.

The final element of context that makes this project a particularly instructive one is that it represents a new wave of high school reform in NYC and the dovetailing of two key trends. As previously mentioned, at the time when Valley began restructuring, small school reform had reached in the eyes of many some natural limitations. The policy of reformulating large failing comprehensive schools into campuses of small schools had placed enormous logistical and facilities strains on the system, and those schools which had been failing most dramatically had in most cases already been shuttered. Despite this, the majority of high school students in the city continued to attend large high schools and while some of these schools were among the highest performing in the city, there were a

¹This has changed for the current school year with schools being granted additional credit for students who earn career and technical education endorsed diplomas. At the current time, this only impacts students in the Biz-Tek and Health Careers program.

substantial number which still performed below public expectations. In addition, this restructuring project represented the early stages of a shift among the leaders of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation away from the long held operating assumption that creating small schools was the only viable way to address large school failure. Given that this is the first of a new wave, it is important to assess what the experiences of Valley suggest about the viability of the SLC strategy for increasing educational outcomes at the city's largest remaining high schools.

Findings

Research Question #1: How do stakeholders' explanations for school failure and theories of change influence their actions?

This research examined a broad cross section of literature explaining the differential outcomes of public education as well as theories about how positive change could occur. These theories ranged from those that located the source of failure in the qualities and characteristics of students and their families to those that identified school structures and practices as the primary culprits. Data collected for this research suggest that theories of school faculty parallel many of the lines of inquiry which researchers have pursued over the years and that these working theories oscillate between the two poles of student/parental and school responsibility. Neither in formal theory nor in the working theories of this research's participants are these two sources mutually exclusive. One question of this research was whether reformers' working theories would impact their actions and ultimately the trajectory of reforms. This proved to be the case in relation to personalization and pedagogical practice.

While one of the stated intentions of SLC reforms at Valley was to significantly decentralize decision making and authority, the initial decisions were made by Mr. Stevens and the initial implementation largely followed a top-down model. As a result of this, during the initial stages it was unclear to most faculty members why such dramatic changes were necessary. While the fact that the administration did not generate any widespread consensus in favor of reform did seem to lead to some resistance during the first year of implementation, this had largely dissipated by the second year. By that time, data analyzed in this research suggest that the majority of the staff reported being positively disposed towards the changes that had occurred. This shift from early suspicions to broad levels of acceptance seems to have been mediated by the SLC directors who were the primary agents of change in the early period of the reforms.

As increasing numbers of staff members became open to restructuring, the element of the reform agenda around which the deepest consensus emerged was the need to increase personalization. Observational and interview data show that faculty members regularly expressed concern over fragmented and tenuous nature of students' relationships with their school and studies. Motivation and values were intertwined in the eyes of these faculty members, and without teaching new values, students were seen as being doomed to failure. In addition, they believed that many students lacked the parental support that would ensure their success and saw it as necessary that the school replace this absent support. Deep consensus existed between administration and faculty around the need to increase the robustness of personal relationships between faculty and students. Not surprisingly, it is in this key area of agreement that significant changes were reported.

Another possible explanation for the consistently reported gains in quality of personal relationships between students and faculty is the fact that this was far less threatening to teachers. Interview and observational data indicate that a tendency existed for instructional discussions to shift into conversations about motivation, values, psychology, and family life. For some of the stakeholders interviewed, this was because these were easier topics to speak about than instructional practice which had historically remained a private affair. Added to the challenge of discussing pedagogical issues was the fact that the facilitators of the conversations were most often teachers themselves who by the norms of the existing teaching culture were dissuaded from raising questions regarding their colleagues' competency – questions which in the eyes of some teachers lurked beneath any conversation about pedagogy. And finally, the fact that the new structures meant the overwhelming majority of meetings were interdisciplinary in composition further encouraged the tendency to avoid instructional issues in professional conversations.

Widespread consensus regarding the need for increasing the personalized nature of the educational experiences for students contrasts to the disparate views which faculty members held on instructional issues. Final interviews with key stakeholders and survey data indicate a substantial gap between the perception of the teaching staff, on the one hand, and the administration and SLC directors, on the other hand, about the extent to which teachers either needed to develop new skills or modify their instructional practice. Teachers indicated on surveys that they were extremely confident in their own teaching abilities. SLC directors, on the other hand, were consistently forthcoming about both their own challenges in the classroom as well as their frustrations with the quality of

instruction they sometimes observed within their colleague's classrooms. Assistant principals and the principal were the most consistently critical of instruction and in contrast to the assertion by teachers that teaching was appropriate and teachers were sufficiently prepared, administrators saw inadequate instruction as a primary cause for student failure. In addition, they felt that teachers either lacked the skills to teach in more effective ways or were resistant to trying new things.

The lack of consensus around the need for significant transformations of instructional practice in part explains the skepticism that faculty members expressed regarding the possibility of anything changing in this domain. SLC directors and administrators, on the other hand, expressed consistent frustration in final interviews that instructional practice had remained so static. There is a great deal of literature on school reform that suggests that core instructional practices are the most challenging to change, and this research in part supports this view (Cuban, 1993; Elmore, 2004; Hoetker and Ahlbrand, 1969). Teachers often argued that increased academic performance required improved attendance and increased levels of parent involvement, and they often derailed discussions of instructional practice by bemoaning the failure of these areas to improve. School leaders, on the other hand, were not particularly effective in challenging these belief systems and often resorted to repeating two mantras from the current policy environment: "all students can learn" and "instruction needs to change." By the end of this research, evidence suggested that academic performance could improve even absent an increase in daily attendance rates. In addition, the staff began to identify school structures and practices that contributed to abysmal levels of parental participation. While this is significant in suggesting opportunities to move beyond the current impasse, the

first two years demonstrated the enormous difficulties associated with facilitating sustained investigations into teaching practice – related at least in part to a strong emphasis many teachers placed on social factors as primary and to widely held beliefs that pedagogical practice had a minimal impact on current levels of student achievement.

Research Question #2: How have structures, practices, or roles changed and how are these changes related to enhanced school climate and improved educational outcomes?

As should be clear from the preceding descriptions of the reform project at Valley, a great deal of change took place in a relatively short time period. Faculty, students, and parents all experienced these changes in ways that suggested something was substantially different than it had been in the past. Survey and interview data point to widespread perceptions that school climate had improved over the course of these reforms and that faculty perceived these changes as related to improved academic outcomes.

At the beginning of the restructuring, many SLC leaders and administrators wondered to what extent faculty members and students would shift their primary identification from the school to their SLC. Informal reports from other schools engaged in SLC reform suggested that many students could not identify which SLC they belonged to even after a few years of reform. This proved not to be the case at Valley where from the initial student recruitment through the end of this research, enormous amounts of energy and excitement were associated with building the SLCs. Students spent the majority of their days with peers from their SLC and often participated in extracurricular activities and elective classes related to the SLC themes. Teachers quickly began to collaborate and socialize with their colleagues in their SLC rather than with those in their

subject area department. The relative stability in the student and teacher populations in each SLC supported the development of a sense of community and SLC communities seemed to provide a foundation for a collective sense of purpose and responsibility.

A number of the changes involved increased opportunities for faculty members to engage in a wide range of professional activities. The most dramatic example of this is the creation of teacher leaders which will be explored further below. Other opportunities existed for teachers not directly involved with leading the reforms. These included opportunities to facilitate common time professional development activities, to develop SLC structures and policies, to plan and implement initiatives, and to develop new curricula. While not all members of the faculty took advantage of these expanded opportunities, for those who did it was often the first time they engaged in substantive professional activities outside of their classrooms. Evidence from this research suggests that these increased opportunities led to a greater sense of satisfaction on the part of many staff members.

One final change that was seen as directly connected to improved academic outcomes was in communication. At the start of the reforms, the lack of communication between staff members was widely perceived to be an obstacle to improvement. No structured opportunities existed for teachers to communicate with other faculty members outside of their academic department. Guidance counselors existed in almost complete isolation meeting with other counselors, their supervisor, and students, but almost never with teachers. Opportunities for subject area teachers to learn about the performance of their students in other classes or to learn through their colleagues about the lives of their students beyond the classroom were non-existent. The reorganization into SLCs created

through scheduling a time when guidance counselors and teachers who worked with the same students could share information. While they didn't always agree on how this time could best be used, both teachers and guidance counselors agreed that this increased communication was a positive change which allowed them to make more informed decisions about how to address the needs of their students and best support the work of their colleagues.

Whether the dramatic improvement in communication between faculty members, or any of the other changes to structures, practices, or roles were in themselves responsible for the improved academic outcomes which accompanied SLC reform are unclear and establishing a causal relationship is beyond the scope of this research. What is clear, however, is that these changes were perceived by the leaders and participants in the reform as overwhelmingly positive. Furthermore, these changes provided what both faculty members and school reform literature perceived to be as important components of a foundation for sustained school improvement.

Research Question #3: How are existing theories of reform confirmed or challenged by the experiences of Valley High School?

Leadership at Valley underwent a number of major transformations as part of the SLC reforms that were the subject of this study. The most dramatic of these changes was the creation of teacher leaders, or SLC directors. While data show that these new leaders were initially greeted skeptically by both assistant principals and teachers, observational, survey, and interview data all suggest that initial questions of their legitimacy faded in a relatively short period of time. This suggests that creating teacher leaders with significant decision-making authority was feasible even in an institution which at the onset of the

reforms was organized in highly structured and hierarchical ways. In fact, all indicators analyzed in this study suggest that these new teacher leaders came to be highly respected by the teachers in their institutes and were the primary agents responsible for convincing members of the faculty to become invested in the new structures and practices.

A key component of the development of these new leaders was their enrollment in a school leadership degree program that used Valley as the case study for investigations of critical issues in school leadership. Through this work, the new teacher leaders gained access to a wide range of information on the operations of the school, the constraints under which administrators operated, and the challenges of management. In addition, both their training as well as their position as leaders without supervisory authority encouraged an approach to leadership that emphasized building consensus, encouraging initiative among teachers, creating opportunities for meaningful discussion and the collective generation of novel solutions to problems. For these reasons, SLC directors were successful in facilitating discussions among teachers on a broad range of challenges facing the school; discussions that were far more sustained and informed than anything that preceded them in recent years. Out of these discussions emerged not only decisions that were implemented, but also deep levels of investment by teachers in building successful institutes.

What is also clear from the data analyzed in this study is that sharing information more broadly and creating opportunities for shared decision making will not in itself lead to the clarification of organizational goals. Thus, where consensus existed, as was the case with the need for personalization, action could take place. Where there were deep differences in how stakeholders understood problems, as with pedagogical practice, a

stalemate emerged. Broadening the circle of decision makers generated deeper commitment to already agreed upon priorities, but did not naturally create consensus around issues where faculty member held highly disparate views. This suggests that those leading reforms and facilitating the conversations needed to be able to challenge deeply held beliefs both about the causes of student failure and the actions capable of transforming historic patterns of disparate achievement. Evidence from this study suggests that neither SLC directors, nor administrators were able to successfully do this with any broad section of the staff.

The need to address deeply held beliefs was recognized by school leaders and attempts were made even if they often fell short. As part of their graduate coursework, each team of directors engaged in case studies of struggling groups of students as part of an action research project. The working model was that such a case study could illuminate the needs of a group of students and inform a set of instructional responses. The impact of these instructional interventions could then be evaluated through the performance of students on ongoing assessments and the data generated by classroom observations. In theory, this cycle of inquiry would over time generate evidence of the impact of different instructional strategies and challenge the deeply held beliefs of the educators involved. In practice, however, a number of things prevented this from having the intended effect. In the first place, getting teachers to change an element of practice on a consistent basis presupposes in most cases that they are already somewhat in agreement that the change in their actions will have the desired effect. In practice, teaching largely continued to be a private act at Valley and this likely meant that once the door closed, teachers continued to engage in those practices which they believed would yield the best

results. In the absence of consistent implementation of new practice, it was hard to assess the impact of any instructional initiative. Even if changes to teaching practice had been more evenly instituted, having teacher researchers determine causal relationships between instructional practices and student outcomes confronts the same challenges with which professionally trained researchers struggle including difficulties in controlling for confounding variables. The expectation that teachers will analyze the performance of students over time and develop working hypotheses about what instructional practices are effective is not unrealistic and in keeping with the practice of expert teachers everywhere. What is a far greater leap of faith, however, is to expect that they will be able to describe these relationships between teaching and learning in such a compelling manner that skeptical staff members abandon their deeply held explanations for why students fail. For this to happen would require school leaders to develop more sophisticated abilities to analyze data and to develop narratives regarding these data which are capable of challenging the validity of beliefs in which faculty members are deeply invested.

Once again, the example of student attendance provides a modest example of what this process might look like. Teachers consistently argued that poor attendance was to blame for much of the failure in their classes and that attendance was immune to any efforts of the school to change it. A running battle between administration and teachers over attendance was fought over the inclusion of long-term absences (LTAs) on reports of passing rates in courses. Teachers felt it unfair to hold them responsible for the performance of students who didn't regularly attend classes and the principal felt it was important that these students be included as the school was responsible for them. SLC directors were caught in the middle and teachers' expressions of frustration over the issue

often derailed common time discussions. In discussing the issue in a meeting, the directors made a decision to present these data in a new format. In the scholarship reports generated each semester, all students who received failing grades were lumped together. School policy, however, required that grades for students who were LTAs be recorded as a 45, instead of a 55 which was the default failing grade. This allowed data for students who failed because of excessive absences to be disaggregated from those of students who failed for poor performance. Once these calculations were made, it quickly became clear that significant numbers of students were failing despite attending classes. Armed with these data, SLC directors returned to the common time discussions with a proposal to temporarily table conversations about LTAs and to focus on the performance of students who regularly attended class. The simple reorganization of these data allowed them to tell a different story - a story about students who regularly attend school, but still fail their classes. This created, at least in the short term, space for the conversation to move forward and coupled with the fact that academic performance did improve over two years while attendance remained constant, the beginning contours of a counter narrative was evident. While this example was a small success, neither administrators nor SLC directors were capable of engaging in similar reframing with the majority of instructional issues around which disagreements remained.

Despite its limited effect on instructional practice, data collected at Valley consistently point to enormous potential of SLC reform to improve school climate and provide a foundation for improving academic performance. Survey data indicate that teachers were increasingly satisfied with working conditions, felt there had been an

increase in the quantity and quality of their collaboration, and saw school leadership as increasingly effective.

Trends in achievement data suggest that the transformation of Valley had a positive impact on student achievement. This was particularly the case with those metrics which are mostly likely to experience short term gain such as credit accumulation and Regents passing rates. The one exception here was attendance. While long term metrics such as the four and six-year graduation rates showed no improvement, the improvements in Regents passing rates and credit accumulation suggest that they will if trends remain similar in coming years.

Evidence from Valley suggests then that creating semi-autonomous themed institutes is a potentially viable strategy for the city's remaining large high schools, particularly the middle performing schools which the NYCDOE's Office of Small Learning Communities has identified as potential candidates for this initiative. The creation of campuses of small high schools has shown enormous promise in NYC but has its limitations in the logistics of shared space arrangements, diseconomies of scale, and limitations of educational offerings. These limitations necessitate further investigations of attempts to reorganize comprehensive high schools without abandoning them completely. This study represents a small contribution to this conversation and suggests, in contrast to the trends of the past two decades in high school reform, that there might be a future for the urban comprehensive high school after all.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Frame for Participants

For my doctoral research I am studying SLC reform at Valley HS. In order to get a more complete understand of the perspectives of people who work at Valley, I would like to ask you some questions. The interview should last approximately a half hour and in some cases I will ask follow up questions. Your answers will remain confidential and while direct quotations may be used, they will not be included if there is a way of identifying the speaker.

Interview Questions

- Why are some students are successful at Valley and others unsuccessful?
- What are the most important goals of the SLC work at Valley?
- What are the biggest challenges Valley faces?
- What would it take to further improve the academic performance of students at Valley?
- What has changed at Valley since the SLC work began?
- What has been most successful about the changes at Valley?
- What has been the least successful about the changes at Valley?
- How has your job changed since the SLC work began?
- What has been most difficult part of the SLC work at Valley?
- What did not work well under the old structure at Valley?
- What were or are the most difficult things to change at Valley?
- What will Valley look like in another two years?

APPENDIX B

LEADERSHIP ITEMS FROM CRC SURVEY

CRC Survey Results on School or SLC Leadership

Survey Item^a	Percentage of participants responding always or often			Change
	2006	2007	2008	2006 - 2008
Are willing to admit and learn from mistakes	34.5	67.7	76.5	42
Actively seek and make use of diverse and controversial views	25.8	62.5	61.8	36
Negotiate successfully between opposing points of view	35.4	59.6	71.2	35.8
Use objective evidence to identify, frame and solve problems	48.4	68.2	79.8	31.4
Help others to solve their problems themselves	46.9	69.5	78.2	31.3
Work effectively with individual teachers to improve practice	40.3	58.6	69.2	28.9
Use data to evaluate the effectiveness of decisions	51.3	68.4	78.1	26.8
Use data to identify patterns to inform decision making	57.8	71.2	81.5	23.7
Demonstrate the capacity to delegate and trust others with real leadership tasks	54.4	66.7	76.4	22
Differentiate professional learning opportunities based upon identified patterns in faculty proficiencies and needs	50	59.3	70.8	20.8
Create structures for dealing with recurring problems	58.3	69.8	79	20.7
Demonstrate high expectations for all students	69.5	87.1	89.1	19.6
Cultivate a shared vision and common purpose among the staff	64.6	75.1	83.3	18.7
Actively pursue their own learning	68.4	73.1	81.5	13.1
Take responsibility for others' learning	54.5	57	66.6	12.1
Manage time, people, money, and space so as to maximize their impact on student achievement	64.6	65.2	71.5	6.9
Communicate clear expectations that everyone is responsible for the learning of their colleagues	67.5	66.9	73.1	5.6
Demonstrate deep knowledge of a range of teaching methods and lesson designs	75.3	63.3	74.6	-0.7
Demonstrate knowledge of curriculum scope and sequence for all subject areas under their supervision	76.5	60.8	70	-6.5
Demonstrate a working knowledge of performance standards and the means by which students will be assessed against them	81.5	71.7	69.8	-11.7
Unweighted mean	56.3	66.8	75.0	18.8

^aAll items in this section of the survey began with "School/SLC leaders..."

APPENDIX C

SLC SURVEY

SLC Survey - Valley HS, January 2007

This survey is anonymous. Do not write your name anywhere on this sheet.

Indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements by comparing your experiences at Valley this year to your experiences in previous years (Please skip this section if this is your first year working at Valley).

This year at Valley ...

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Students receive more personal attention from adults					
2. Students develop more substantial relationships with staff					
3. The quality of teaching has improved					
4. Struggling students receive more effective support					
5. Teachers collaborate more effectively with their colleagues					
6. Information about students is shared more effectively among staff					
7. Information about students is used more effectively to inform teaching					
8. Teachers are better supported when they have problems with classroom management					
9. Guidance counselors and teachers work more effectively to support students					
10. Supervision is more supportive of effective teaching					
11. "Pull-out" professional development with APs better addresses student and teacher needs					

Indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

In my SLC there is/are (respond for your department if you are not in an SLC)...

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
12. A coherent approach to addressing student failure					
13. A culture in which teachers are treated with respect					
14. A culture in which teachers support each others' work					
15. A culture in which opposing points of view are respected					
16. Shared responsibility among staff for the success of the SLC					
17. Opportunities for shared decision making around important issues affecting the SLC					

Indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements regarding common time (CT) in your SLC (Please skip this section if you do not participate in CT).

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
18. CT professional development activities effectively address student and teacher needs					
19. Teachers and guidance counselors make decisions with SLC directors about the use of CT					
20. Teachers and guidance counselors regularly plan and implement CT activities					

Indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements (Please skip this section if you are not in an SLC).

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<i>My SLC director(s)...</i>					
21. Is(are) supportive of my needs as a teacher					
22. Communicate(s) a clear vision for our SLC					
23. Encourage(s) others to take on leadership roles					
24. Effectively confront(s) unproductive behaviors among staff					
25. Effectively facilitate(s) conversations on difficult issues					

Indicate how effective school leaders have been in the following area:

	Very ineffective	Somewhat ineffective	Somewhat effective	Very effective
26. Teacher programs				
27. Student programs				
28. Room assignments				
29. Resource allocation				
30. Maintaining equity between SLCs				
31. Supporting teachers working with students with special needs				

Indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
32. Overall, I am satisfied with the SLC to which I belong					
33. This reform process will lead to significant improvements in academic achievement at Valley					

APPENDIX D

ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

AP ORGANIZATION

- Budget
- Staff attendance
- Transportation – Transportation Office
- Principal's Liaison to Custodian
- Building repairs and maintenance-Keys
- Supplies-Stockperson
- Elevators-Elevator Operators
- Furniture/Equipment
- Switchboard-Telephone System
- Payroll-General and Per Session
- Grounds-Outdoor Campus
- Publications-Mailboxes-Announcements
- Weekly and Monthly Calendars
- Lavatories/Water Fountains/Plumbing
- CASS-Staff/Student ID Cards
- Cafeteria
- Principal's Liaison to Dietician
- Special Events Liaison
- Supervise School Aides/Paras-Administration
- Testing Coordinator

AP PUPIL PERSONNEL SERVICES

- Admissions/Discharges
- Programming-Programming Office
- Student Records
- Guidance Services-Counselors/Advs. Soc. Wrkr.
- College Advise-ment-College Office
- School to Work
- Child Abuse Liaison
- Aides/Paras assigned to Guidance
- Supervise hearings
- Student Attendance
- Attendance Office Staff
- Supervise Parent Liaison
- Testing-Scheduling of Students
- Supervision of all SLC Directors/Co-Directors

AP SECURITY AND STUDENT LIFE

- Security Issues
- Suspense Hearings
- School Safety Agents
- Incident Reports
- School Safety Plan
- Discipline Code

- Liaison with Police
- Sexual Misconduct Liaison
- COSA/Student Life
- Supervise Aides/Paras assigned to Security
- Supervise Deans/SSAs
- Supervise Trips/After School Activities
- Supervise Yearbook

AP SUPERVISION RESPONSIBILITIES

- Management of Student Scholarship
- Curriculum Alignment
- Regents Scheduling/Grading
- Academic Intervention Service
- Program Department
- Displays (Halls and Classrooms)
- Substitute Lesson Plans
- Substitute Training
- Textbook/ ordering/ distribution/collection
- Advanced Placement Exams

AP ENGLISH

- Literacy Coach
- Supervise all English Staff/Library/Newspaper
- Principal's Liaison for College Now

AP SOCIAL STUDIES

- Supervise all SS Staff
- Smith Barney Quality of Life Liaison

AP MATHEMATICS

- Supervise all Math Staff
- Math Coach
- Principal's Liaison for St. John's High School Extension

AP SCIENCE

- Supervise all Science Staff
- Supervise all Health Career Staff

AP HEALTH & P.E. TECHNOLOGY AND ATHLETIC DIR.

- Supervise all Health & PE and Technology staff
- HIV/AIDS Condom Distr. Supervisor
- Principal's Liaison-Clinic/LYFE Center
- Building Technology Infrastructure
- CISCO Liaison

AP ISS/ART/MUSIC

- Supervise all ISS/Art and Music Staff
- LRE and Barrier Free Issues/504 Coordinator
- State Monitoring Issues related to ISS
- Project ARTS

AP LOTE (FOR. LANG.)

- Supervise all Bilingual Programs/LOTE and ESL Staff
- Maintain compliance issues regarding ESL

AP PRE-MED/BUSINESS

- Supervise all aspects of Pre-Med Program
- Intel Liaison
- Research Liaison
- Coordinate Data Analysis
- Supervise Business Teacher
- Right To Know Liaison
- Virtual Enterprise Liaison
- VATEA Liaison

SLC DIRECTORS/CO-DIRECTORS/AP PRE-MED

- Operation of Small Learning Community (SLC)
- Collaborative Design of Professional Development for SLC
- Develop partnerships
- Develop Infrastructure Team
- Monitor Student Progress
- Plan/Develop SLC Identity
- Supplies
- Provide Academic Intervention Services to SLC
- Develop policies to further SLC goals
- Develop intermediate plan for curriculum within SLC

COLLEGE/BUSINESS**PARTNERSHIPS****DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR**

- Work with all SLCs and College Office to develop external resources and enhance College Office Services

Note: This list of organizational responsibilities was distributed to school leaders at Valley in February 2007. While the majority of these responsibilities remained consistent through the end of this research, one exception is the AP Pre-Med/Business who by the 2007-2008 school year had become an AP for data and was replaced by teacher leaders in the Pre-Med institute.

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