

A STUDY OF ONE SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL'S TRANSFORMATION TO  
SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

A Doctoral Thesis Presented to the  
Faculty of the College of Education  
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education  
in Professional Leadership

by

Linda Farrell Mack

May, 2011

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Dorothy Harrison Farrell, who inspired my passion for life-long learning. To my husband, Thomas Mack, who supported me unconditionally every step of the way. To my daughters, JamiLyn, Kristina, and Patricia who are brilliant and beautiful. My hope is that they are inspired to follow their own passions, no matter where they may lead them. And, to my grandson, Landon, who never seems to tire of hearing the same books read over and over.

I love you, I adore you, I worship you.

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Lastly, I want to thank three more of my editors. My oldest daughter JamiLyn Mack, herself professionally published at twenty-five years old, helped me to navigate sometimes incomprehensible APA format. And my youngest, Patricia Mack, along with Becky Yerkes, whose final pagination made it all complete – thank you for dropping everything and coming to my aid.

All, regardless of race or class or economic status,  
are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools  
for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost.  
This promise means that all children  
by virtue of their own efforts,  
competently guided,  
can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed  
to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives,  
thereby serving not only their own interests  
but also the progress of society itself.

*-A Nation At Risk, 1983*

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### **ABSTRACT**

It was once thought that large high schools could offer a range of benefits including student body diversity, more choices for elective courses, greater opportunities for gifted students, and increased competition in the sports arena. Over the last several decades, however, large high schools have been blamed for a host of problems that have kept students, parents, educators, researchers, and policymakers concerned not only for the plight of the public school system in particular, but for the very fabric of American society. This study contributes to the current body of knowledge regarding establishment of more personalized and caring learning environments by examining archived data from one suburban high school over the course of implementation of the small learning communities model. Commonly accepted indicators of successful schools such as student attendance, dropout, discipline, and academic achievement were analyzed to determine if there had been any significant differences in these areas. In addition, the data from this targeted high school were compared to the data from two high schools within the same district that have similar demographics, but were not involved in this reform effort. As a further component to this exploration, parents, students, and teachers were surveyed to determine their beliefs regarding the effectiveness of the model. Results indicate that students at the target school demonstrated improvement on all indicators except attendance, although students at the control schools demonstrated similar gains. Survey results indicated that parents, students, and teachers believe that

there had been benefits to the transformation to small learning communities, however, results of this study indicated that this could not be a sole contributing factor impacting student performance at this time.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Purpose of the Study.....	8
Research Questions.....	10
Definition of Terms.....	11
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	13
Elements of Successful Schools.....	13
Personalizing the School Environment.....	18
Effectiveness of Small Learning Communities.....	24
III. METHODOLOGY.....	29
District Background and Setting.....	29
Participants.....	31
Procedures and Data Analysis.....	31
Instrumentation.....	32
Analysis.....	36
Limitations.....	36
IV. RESULTS.....	37
Attendance Rates Data.....	37
Dropout Rates Data.....	38
Discipline Data.....	39
Student Achievement Data.....	41

Survey Data.....	45
V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.....	52
Discussion.....	52
Implications for Future Practice.....	54
Implications for Future Research.....	56
VI. REFERENCES.....	57
VII. APPENDIX A SURVEY RESULTS.....	64

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1 2009-2010 Demographics for District, Target School, and Control Schools.....	31
2 Number of Inappropriate Student to Student Interactions at Each School.....	40
3 Number of Inappropriate Student Behaviors Toward Adults at Each School.....	40

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1 District Demographics for Target School 10-Year Comparison.....	30
2 Comparison of Attendance Rate Among Schools.....	38
3 Comparison of Dropout Rate Among Schools.....	38
4 Number of Discipline Incidents for Each School from 2007-08 to 2009-10...	39
5 Percent of Students Meeting TAKS Minimum Passing Standards for All Tests for Target School.....	41
6 Comparison of Percent of Students Meeting TAKS Passing Standards.....	42
7 Percent of Students Meeting TAKS Passing Standards for Sub-populations at Target School.....	43
8 Percent of Students Meeting TAKS Passing Standards for Sub-populations at Control School A.....	44
9 Percent of Students Meeting TAKS Passing Standards for Sub-populations at Control School B.....	44
10 Percent of Respondents Indicating Small Learning Communities Model is of Benefit.....	46
11 Percent of Respondents Indicating Faculty Care About Students.....	47
12 Percent of Respondents Indicating Faculty Respect Students.....	48

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Through the late 1950s and into the 90s after the uproar that arose in the wake of Sputnik and the knee-jerk reaction to reports of American students lagging behind their international counterparts on tests of math and science, there was a trend in public education toward building larger and larger high schools (Cleary & English, 2005). At the time many argued that large schools could offer a range of benefits including greater diversity as more schools desegregated, greater choices for students to take elective courses in areas of interest, greater opportunities for gifted students, and greater competition in the sports arena. Since then student enrollment in public schools has increased 400% while the actual number of public schools has fallen nearly 70% (Werblow & Duesbury, 2009). This translates to larger student bodies with half of all high schools having enrollments in excess of 1,500 and many urban schools such as Los Angeles and Miami having populations of 5,000 or more (Sammons, 2008). With such large numbers many contend that today's American high-schoolers can drift unknown, unmotivated, and unsuccessful through their secondary years leaving them ill-prepared for life after graduation, if they graduate at all.

In a 2002 release by Public Agenda, a nonprofit organization which surveyed 920 teachers nationwide, 51% of respondents from large high schools, defined as 1,000 or more students, were more likely to report that students fall through the cracks as opposed to only 39% of their counterparts at smaller schools. Only half of the teachers from larger schools indicated that struggling learners were identified and provided assistance, whereas 70% of teachers from smaller schools reported this. In addition, only 13% of larger-school teachers compared to 82% of those from smaller schools indicated that

most students would be known by name to the administrators and staff. Overcrowding of their schools (77%), their classrooms (65%), and their hallways (55%) were regarded as significant contributing problems for the lack of student success at larger schools.

### Statement of the Problem

Doubts about the ability of large high schools to provide all American secondary school children a quality education moved some researchers to start looking more closely at whether size really matters. Larger enrollments have historically been associated with low attendance rates, staggering dropout rates, increased school violence and discipline concerns, and a widening gap in student achievement that disproportionately affects minority groups. These are significant problems that for the last half century have kept students, parents, educators, researchers, and policymakers concerned not only for the plight of the public school system in particular, but for the very fabric of American society and way of life in general. Times have changed. Students have changed. And, unless schools and educators change as well, the future of America will continue to remain at risk.

### *Attendance Rates*

Longstaffe, (2009) an educator at Garey High School in California, noted the increasing state-wide trend of districts failing to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) federal accountability standard due to the poor attendance rates of its students. In researching a possible solution for the problem she first attempted to answer the question of whether, accountability aside, poor attendance had any impact on student achievement. Her findings indicated that these variables were indeed moderately negatively correlated. For the sample of 193 10<sup>th</sup> graders studied, those with better attendance rates had better

Grade Point Averages. In a study involving Ohio schools Roby (2003) reported that student attendance accounted for 60% and 29% of the variance held in common with student achievement at the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades respectively. He indicated a strong positive relationship existed between campus attendance averages and proficiency on the state assessments. In a similar study of the Pittsburg public schools Parke (2006) found that non-attendance, regardless of ethnicity, had a significant impact on both math and reading achievement for 11<sup>th</sup> grade students.

Cotton (1996), consolidating much of the research on school size, reported on the consistency regarding the information collected on the affective and social effects of smaller schools. With regard to the research on student feelings and attitudes she determined that personal and academic self-concepts are more positive for students enrolled in small schools. As Rutter (1988) has expressed “students who feel a sense of social bonding to school or teachers are less likely to reject school and more likely to conform to certain otherwise unappealing rules and procedures associated with schooling” (p. 229). It should be safe to assume that among these rules and procedures one could place attendance policies. It is this bonding to others at the school that may be responsible for increasing students’ willingness to attend classes, an extremely important consideration for later academic success. According to Branham (2004) low attendance rates cause children to fall behind in their studies and children who are frequently absent have a harder time catching up with their peers. This results in failing grades and retention, noted as specific risk factors for dropping out (Jerald, 2006; Balfanz and Legters 2006).

### *Dropout Rates*

Werblow and Duesbury (2009) found a significant relationship between the dropout rate and large school size indicating that large schools contributed to about 12% of dropout. Branham (2004) argued that those students who drop out of school not only have more trouble finding good and meaningful employment, they have more difficulty in retaining learned skills than those children who do stay in school. In 1987 Pittman and Haughwout “formulated the generalization that the dropout rate of a high school increases by about 1% for every 400 students added to its enrollment” (as cited in Gregory, 2000, p. 6). Just 8 years later, Sammons (2008) reported what she called the frightening statistic that, “as a nation, we now graduate only 50% of African Americans, 51% of American Indians, and 53% of Latino and Hispanic students” compared to 75% and 77% of White and Asian students respectively (p. 5). According to Swanson (2010) in *Diploma Counts 2010*, which highlights information from the class of 2007, it is estimated that 1.3 million students will fail to earn diplomas across the United States. Specifically in Texas 751 students each day will disappear from school rolls, leaving it rated as the second highest in the country for non-graduates.

It is said that the true rates of high school graduation at the state and national levels are often masked due to the markedly different methods of defining the concept and manipulating the data (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007). While it remains the subject of hot debate, though, no one can argue against the fact that any level of dropping out bodes badly, not only for students’ life choices, but for society as well. As Branham stated, “dropping out of school has wide-ranging negative effects on society, including a loss of national income, a loss of government tax revenues, an increased demand for government

service, more crime, less political participation, reduced intergenerational mobility, and poorer health” (cited from Rumberger, 1987). The Alliance for Excellent Education Fact Sheet estimated the staggering societal costs of dropping out of high school:

- a high school dropout earns over a quarter million dollars less than a graduate over the course of his or her lifetime;
- dropouts from the class of 2006 had cost the nation \$17 billion in health care expenditures;
- dropouts from the class of 2010 will cost the nation more than \$3½ million in lost wages;
- if minority student dropout rates were raised to the level of white students by 2020, the increase in their personal income would add more than \$3 billion to the American economy;
- increasing the high school graduation rate and college attendance of male students by just 5% would save \$8 billion each year in crime-related costs.

Related to this last point, Lochner and Moretti (2005) reported that 100,000 fewer crimes would take place nationally if there was just a one percent increase in graduation rates.

The implied social savings in law-enforcement costs from murder alone would be over \$1 billion. Based on their data the authors suggested that “while increasing police forces is a cost effective policy proposal for reducing crime, increasing high school graduation rates offers far greater benefits when both crime reductions and productivity increases are considered” (p. 26).

### *Discipline*

Marzano's (2003) meta-analysis of thirty-five years of research indicates that a safe and orderly environment is one of five school-level factors that impact student achievement. While this factor has been known by other names, such as school climate or learning environment, and has been somewhat hyped in the media and politicized by many, there is evidence that it remains a significant issue in school effectiveness. Marzano cited Grogger's (1997) findings that after controlling for "background characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, students in schools with high levels of violence had lower math scores by 0.20 of a standard deviation and were 5.7 percentage points less likely to graduate" (p. 54). Researchers surmised that students getting lost in large schools were becoming alienated from the culture and thus resorting to increased levels of misbehavior at school. In a WestEd policy brief (2001) it was indicated that "truancy, classroom disorder, vandalism, aggressive behavior, theft, substance abuse, and gang participation all decrease" when school size is also decreased. Noguera (2006) argued that smaller schools appear to offer greater safety to students due to better student-teacher relationships. In his review of a study of 150 Boston sophomores through a project called Pathways to Student Success, he determined that 94% of students from small schools reported that they felt safe compared to only 46% of students at larger schools. When asked the question, "If I feel threatened by someone at school, there is an adult I can turn to for support," 92% of small-school students answered in the affirmative, while only 38% of the students in larger schools did.

### *Student Achievement*

Noguera (2009) pointed out that the No Child Left Behind Act enacted under the Bush administration has drawn great public attention to the significant gap between student achievement among minority groups. He argued that the disparities in student success rates as measured by tests of achievement correspond to the racial, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds of children attending American schools. This is not a new occurrence. Lately, however, there has been a far greater outcry against these inequities, calling for major changes in policy that hold educators more accountable for all students' learning.

Garth-McCullough (2007) applied Hirschman's theories of institutional decline to the public school system which has failed to close this gap in achievement. Citing this theorist she explained, "Given that educational progress can operate as a stabilizing mechanism for most disenfranchised individuals, deterioration in performance in an urban school system that serves mostly disenfranchised people does in fact create permanent pockets of inefficiency and neglect." (p. 255).

Since James Bryant Conant's support in 1959 of large schools, contending that they may offer instructional programs of higher quality at a lower cost, the demographics of the typical classroom have changed. No longer are schools made up of predominantly middle-class white students. Instead, their enrollment populations are quite diverse. Irmsher (1997) cited Howley (1994) who noted that "residential patterns have changed, overburdening large inner-city schools with impoverished students and all the dysfunction they bring." She argued that students are more successful when they are part of smaller, more intimate learning communities that contain adults (Irmsher, 1997).

Crosnoe, Kirkpatrick-Johnson, and Elder (2004) reported that the academic difficulties of minority groups such as African American and Hispanic students are well documented and may be related to their greater feelings of being more disconnected from school, other students, and school staff. Findings from their study did indicate that these feelings of disconnect are significantly related to school size.

### Purpose of the Study

In 1972 when the second high school for this small, but growing district opened its doors, the surrounding area was moving from an agricultural and farming community to a suburban one. Previously the site of a dairy farm, the building is nestled within an incorporated village named after the cattle that once grazed the land it sits on. In the nearly four decades since its inception, the school has seen tremendous growth in enrollment and diversity that has been indicative of many high schools around the state and country. While continuing to emphasize high academic expectations and student success, this growth has not come without a price. But in this school district problems breed solutions; and as the building itself started extensive renovations in the fall of 2008, the administrators and staff thought it the perfect opportunity to make some much needed program changes as well. They turned to the small schools research that has become popular since the early 1990s and the goal of personalizing their large school environment.

Overall, the positive effects of educational reform that include breaking larger, more comprehensive high schools into smaller learning environments are well-researched. Size does indeed appear to be a significant factor in increasing attendance and graduation rates, decreasing violence and discipline problems, and closing the

achievement gap among students. And while it alone is not a panacea for all the perceived ills of public schooling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it does allow for more personal connections between students and teachers, which the WestEd Policy Brief (2001) reported as a key finding in the literature. It has generally been found that students feel a greater sense of engagement and belonging when others in the school community know them well, and this leads to better outcomes. In other words, relationships matter; and personalizing the depersonalized, large organization called the American high school can have sustained impact on students as well as society as a whole.

A proliferation of research related to the small schools movement has been published, most of which extol the virtues of transforming large impersonal schools into smaller, more caring communities that can offer the encouragement needed to propel students toward excellence. This study seeks to contribute to that body of knowledge by analyzing one school's efforts to move to the small learning communities model. Examining archived school data such as attendance rates, dropout rates, discipline incident reports, and academic achievement as distinguished by the results of TAKS testing one can determine whether or not this staff has been able to increase the success rates of its students. In addition, use of parent, student, and teacher surveys will help to determine if these groups believe that there have been beneficial changes in the school environment and climate toward more personalization and whether this has contributed to any changes with student success.

Beginning with the 2008-09 academic year this high school divided its student body of roughly 3,000 into four learning communities called houses, now located in distinct sections of the school building. Each house is represented by two assistant

principals, two counselors, and a body of core content teachers that will be responsible for the same students their entire secondary careers. There are fewer than 800 students per house who were randomly and heterogeneously assigned. Now in its third year of reorganization this study seeks to determine if the move to the small learning communities model has had a significant effect on attendance and graduation rates, discipline, and/or achievement.

#### Research Questions

1. Do students in small learning communities have higher attendance rates than students enrolled in traditional comprehensive high schools?
2. Do students in small learning communities have lower dropout rates than students enrolled in traditional comprehensive high schools?
3. Do students in small learning communities have fewer discipline problems than students enrolled in traditional comprehensive high schools?
4. Do students in small learning communities exhibit higher achievement levels than students enrolled in traditional comprehensive high schools?
5. Do subpopulations of students in small learning communities exhibit less difference in achievement than students enrolled in traditional comprehensive high schools?
6. What are the beliefs of teachers, students, and parents as to the benefits of the move to small learning communities and the areas of improvement needed?

## Definitions of Terms

### *Small Learning Community*

A small learning community is a type of school structural arrangement that divides large school bodies into smaller, more autonomous groups. There are many types of small learning communities, which are synonymously called schools-within-a-school. One of these is the house system which acts like a cohort and arranges students together with a group of teachers and staff that will stay together through their high school years. A house shares the school's curriculum and instructional values, but may operate under some of its own policies.

### *Attendance Rates*

This is the average percentage of students attending school each day. It is calculated by taking the total number of students in attendance and dividing it by the total number of students enrolled in school each day.

### *Dropout Rates*

Dropouts are defined as individuals ages 16 to 24 who are not enrolled in and have not completed high school. The dropout rate is the percentage of students who fail to obtain a high school diploma. These are students who disappear from a school's enrollment and do not enter another educational institution.

### *Discipline Incident Referrals*

This indicates instances in which a student is referred to the administrative office for infractions of classroom policy or the school's code of conduct which may result in various consequences including those that remove the student from instruction such as in-

school and out-of-school suspension. The Student Code of Conduct is the district's specific response to requirements of Chapter 37 of the Texas Education Code.

*TAKS Testing*

The Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) is a set of state-wide standardized tests that measure students' minimum levels of achievement in the areas of reading, writing, math, social studies, and science as required by the objectives of the Texas education standards.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study focuses on the relative merits of small learning communities within large high schools. The literature review that follows demonstrates that schools can make a difference and that relationships and size matter when trying to impact student performance. It is organized into the following sections: elements of successful schools; efforts to personalize the school environment; and the effectiveness of small learning communities.

### *Elements of Successful Schools*

For decades American educators, researchers, and policymakers have lamented the plight of children passing through the myriad of public school districts across the country. Many fear that students are not being adequately prepared for the world in which they will live once they leave the confines of high school and make the foray into higher education or the world of work. Children, they deem, are being left behind as will America itself in the global economy and world political arenas if something is not done to stem the spiraling decline of our nation's educational system. While some consider this doomsday rhetoric to be a little over-dramatic, others can't stress enough the urgency of the crisis facing our public schools. In response, studies that strive to pinpoint the characteristics of successful, effective, or high-performing schools abound. Gone are the days of what has become known as the 'Coleman Report' (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfield, & York, 1966) which contended that "schools bring little to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context" (p. 325). Instead, a significant body of research indicates that schools do matter

and that they do make a difference in the eventual outcomes of their charges, no matter the conditions they come from (Reynolds and Creemers, 1990).

Ronald Edmonds (1979), in examining the interaction between student performance and family characteristics, was one of the first to respond to the pessimistic view of the Coleman report with the declaration, “We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us; We already know more than we need to do that” (p. 15). He studied the characteristics of effective as well as ineffective schools to find both the correlational and causal factors that define them in terms of performance as measured in gains on standardized achievement tests in reading and math (Edmonds, 1980). What developed from this research was the five-factor effective schools model: strong instructional leadership of the building principal; an instructional emphasis understood by all; a school climate that is clean, safe, orderly, and serious; high teacher expectations regarding the children they teach; and the systematic use of standardized achievement tests for measuring student progress. What has developed from this early work is what is now known as the Correlates of Effective Schools:

- Clear school mission
- High expectations for success
- Instructional leadership
- Frequent monitoring of student progress
- Opportunity to learn and student time on task
- Safe and orderly environment
- Home-school relations

Furthering this research Lezotte (1991) identified a second generation of the correlates which broaden the scope and strategies available to effective school staff and can move schools closer to the “Learning for All” mission. He noted, however, that the first generation correlates must be present before the second generation can be implemented successfully.

Purkey and Smith (1982), also in reaction to the Coleman report, found that it is the school’s culture that is the determinant factor in bringing about positive effects on student outcomes. While these authors identified their own variables which contribute to the development of a culture that supports academic achievement, most are reminiscent of Edmonds’ correlates. These 13 key variables are: school-site management that allows for greater autonomy; strong leadership; staff stability; curriculum articulation and organization; staff development; parental involvement and support; school-wide recognition of academic success; maximized learning time; district support; collaborative planning and collegial relationships; sense of community; clear goals and high expectations; and order and discipline.

Cotton (1995) offered a research synthesis of effective schooling practices that included over 1,000 studies. She argued that at the classroom level “through careful preplanning, effective classroom management and instruction, positive teacher-student interactions, attention to equity issues, and regular assessment, teachers and students can achieve success” (p. 9). She determined that the overall qualities of the school can provide either negative or positive effects on learning. The key positive factors at the school level were identified as “efficient planning and clear goals; validated organization and management practices; strong leadership and continuous improvement; positive staff

and student interactions; a commitment to educational equity; regular assessment; support programs; and positive relationships with parents and community members” (p. 19). At the district level she reports that “leadership and training in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, together with positive district-school interactions, create a climate conducive to successful teaching and learning” (p. 34).

Visher, Emanuel, and Teitelbaum (1999) presented a report of the research on key high school reform strategies which hold promise in producing significant gains in student performance outcomes such as attendance and graduation rates, grades, and attainment of skills. While 10 strategies were reviewed overall, findings suggested the following to have the empirical research base to support the potential for developing successful schools:

1. Establishment of high levels of expectation for all students.
2. Creation of small learning environments which are more likely to sustain those conditions that enable the improvement of student outcomes.
3. Organization of students into defined cohorts that have a strong career focus and carefully planned sequence of course subjects which provide individualized attention to students.
4. Planning of continuous, ongoing staff development based on teachers’ actual needs in the classroom.
5. Strengthening of the career and college counseling that students receive.
6. Allowance of flexible scheduling approaches.
7. Use of good, comprehensive assessment to determine what students are learning.

8. Development of strong school partnerships with community stakeholders and parents.

While a substantial portion of the school effectiveness research in the 80s and 90s focused on classroom- and school-level factors which improve student achievement, Cawelti and Protheroe (2001) focused their study on those critical elements necessary for school districts to ensure that most of their schools successfully served all of their student populations, including those that were typically low-achieving. Among the six districts studied, three of which were located in Texas, and one each in West Virginia, Idaho, and California, they found common features that contributed to turning them into high-performing learning communities. Strategies for success in these districts included assessment data that is analyzed for both teacher and student performance; a “no excuses” policy regarding failure; a “do whatever it takes” mentality; an extensive, targeted, and effective staff development program; and clear standards with subject matter that is aligned with standardized tests.

Marzano (2003) reviewed 35 years of research in order to provide a comprehensive framework for what schools can do to be “highly effective in enhancing student achievement” (p. 11). He identified 11 factors at the School (1-5), Teacher (6-8), and Student Levels (9-11) that can have significant impact on academic achievement as measured by high percentages of students passing state tests:

1. Guaranteed and viable curriculum
2. Challenging goals and effective feedback
3. Parent and community involvement
4. Safe and orderly environment

5. Collegiality and professionalism
6. Instructional strategies
7. Classroom management
8. Classroom curriculum design
9. Home atmosphere
10. Learned intelligence and background knowledge
11. Motivation

Cooper, Ponder, Merritt, and Matthews (2005) studied North Carolina districts and identified five patterns of success for 11 high schools that had high performance on state assessments. These were relationships and connections; safety nets and family feeling; data-directed dialogue and collaborative instruction; departments as drivers; and collaborative leadership.

If there is one thing that all of this research has demonstrated to those who wish to raise the academic success of students across America it is that committed and informed leadership and staff, high expectations, rigorous curriculum, and strong parent and community involvement are integral components for creating effective, successful, high-performing schools.

#### *Personalizing the School Environment*

While academic performance is considered an important measure of a school's success, however, it can be argued that it is not the only one. Jones (2004) stated:

The caring aspect of school is essential to high-quality education.

Parents expect that their children will be safe in schools and that adults in schools will tend to their affective as well as cognitive needs. In addition,

we know that learning depends on a caring school climate that nurtures positive relationships (p. 585).

Westerberg (2007) argued, “The high school experience should be about more than simply arriving at an academic-achievement destination. Instead, the journey through high school itself ought to be enjoyable, rewarding, and fulfilling for students” (p. 54).

Crosnoe, Kirkpatrick-Johnson, and Elder (2004) proposed that the ideal school is one that would maximize the academic as well as social development of its charges, thereby increasing the connectedness that they feel with the organization. Cleary and English (2005) have shown that compared to peers in large schools minority students in small schools are more likely to feel connected to their teachers. This connectedness can then have more far-reaching effects.

During adolescence, the school functions as the primary formal organization for students roughly between the ages of 14 and 19. This time between childhood and the advent of adulthood is one which focuses on interpersonal relationships. Students at this age need to feel that teachers are involved with them and care about them. There needs to be a sense of belonging. Shiller (2008) postulated that caring is a central feature within a set of practices that can build connectedness and thus improve student outcomes. She argued that schools must move from aesthetic care, which emphasizes adherence to policies, grades, and academic achievement, to authentic care, which emphasizes relationship building between teacher and student. In this type of environment teachers not only care about their students’ academic achievements, but also care strongly about who their students are. Authentic care moves toward personalizing the school environment, a central goal of educational reform efforts related to the small schools

movement. When schools are large, they tend to be more formal in structure and more bureaucratic in nature, resulting in less personalized human relations (Crosnoe, Kirkpatrick-Johnson, & Elder, 2004).

Personalizing learning refers to the structures, policies, and practices that promote relationships based on mutual respect, trust, collaboration, and support (Breunlin, Mann, Kelly, Cimmarusti, Dunne, Lieber, 2005). Research indicates that for adolescent learners, personalizing the learning environment contributes to greater motivation, increased attachment to learning, and improved achievement, especially for those students who are less successful or feel more alienated (Adelman and Taylor, 2001 cited in Breunlin et al, 2005).

Westerberg (2007) cites *Breaking Ranks II* (2004), a report which confirmed the importance of the strong relationships that contribute to the personalization of learning. A major contributor to *Breaking Ranks II*, DiMartino (2006, as cited in Westerberg, 2007) identified ten “basic tenets” of personalized learning, three of which cut to the core of relationship-building:

- teachers get to know each student’s strengths, weaknesses, and interests;
- personalized learning begins with individual interests so each student becomes engaged in learning;
- adults in the school model and benefit from stronger professional and student relationships (p. 55).

Recommendations from the publication suggest “breaking large high schools down into smaller, more personalized units” (p. 56).

Much of the current research on personalizing the school environment centers on the concept of school climate and culture, and yet while there doesn't seem to be a universally accepted definition of it there is a theme which runs through all of this research; relationships matter. Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral (2009) suggested that "school climate is based on patterns of people's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures" (p. 182). The authors reported that most researchers "agree that there are four major areas that shape school climate: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the external environment" (p. 182). For the domain of relationships, the authors indicated the element of connectedness, describing this as students being engaged in learning and feeling connected to one or more adults in the school. According to Tschannen-Moran, Parish, and DiPaula (2006) a major metaphor for school climate depicted in research literature is organizational health. One need only to see the title of their work, *School Climate: The Interplay Between Interpersonal Relationships and Student Achievement*, to understand their stance that a healthy organization is one with positive student, teacher, and administrator interactions. MacNeil, Prater, and Busch (2008), also using organizational health as a measure of a school's culture and climate, stated that "school principals seeking to improve student performance should focus on the school's culture by getting the relationships right between themselves, their teachers, students and parents" (p. 6). Stover (2005) remarked on the work of Perkins, author of research funded by the Council of Urban Boards of Education and the National School Boards Association to further this point. Using a survey of 33,000 students from urban populations Perkins had concluded that one measure of a school's success is whether

students believe adults in the school care about them. Quoting Haynes, Emmons, and Ben-Avie (1997) Roach and Kratochwill (2004) defined school climate as the “quality and consistency of interpersonal interactions within the school community that influences children’s cognitive, social, and psychological development” (p. 12). Angelis (2004) cited a study by Langer (2000, 2001, 2002) reporting that effective schools fostered a school climate that engendered, among other dimensions, “a caring attitude that extends to colleagues and students” that manifests itself in “being attuned to the needs of individual students” (p. 52 and 55). Hernandez and Seem (2004) reported that in numerous studies of school climate, Gottfredson and Sherman (1989) concluded that “schools in which students do not believe they belong and feel uncared for by school personnel experience higher levels of disorder” (p. 256). Soukamneuth (2004) studied six public high schools in California to determine how school leaders “create the contexts for positive intergroup relations and a caring and safe school environment” (p. 14). While not specifically using the term school climate, one can easily draw the conclusion that it actually is the ‘context’ that the author referred to. Among the more successful strategies was creating “personalized spaces” or a school-within-a-school structure that supported student interaction, as well as creating “respectful two-way relationships” between adults and students in the school setting.

As Breulin *et al.* (2005) have found, however, the task of personalizing large, comprehensive high schools, “which seem to function more like small cities than small learning communities,” is not an easy one. Through their four-year efforts with the Lyons Township High School, they conceded that changing school climate is a slow process, but not an impossible one, and certain factors were significant detriments. One

of these is important to note. The faculty was, as with many high schools, more content- and subject-centered than student-centered, so creating a more personalized environment was going to take some work. But, forging ahead, with the support and assistance of a steering committee that enlisted administrators, teachers, students, parents, community members, and consultants they targeted six areas in which personalization could be improved. Three of these were teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, and faculty-administration relationships. A personalization survey, adapted from a school climate survey developed by NAASP, was administered on three occasions, the first serving as a baseline, to about 300 students and 70-90 teachers. Interventions for developing teacher-student relationships included professional development that focused on personalization and conflict management in the classroom, as well as a three-day Partners in Learning Institute which focused on four aspects of promoting healthy development and school success for students. Interventions for developing student-student relationships included a student leadership training program which taught students to help other students by intervening where they can in one-on-one situations; a peer-mediation program; and a program designed to enhance respect in the school. Interventions for developing faculty-administration relationships included initiatives to improve the organizational climate of the school. After four years of interventions, the results were statistically significant for the four scales being measured: personalization of the learning environment; teacher-student relationships; student-student relationships; and whole school climate. However, this was only significant for students, and overall, roughly only 50% of them agreed that personalization was present. Unfortunately, teacher data showed no significant results, however teachers on the whole

perceive more personalization than students. Despite the small positive growth, the authors reported that five of the six interventions remain in place and teachers continue to work toward personalizing their classrooms as well as the whole school environment.

### *The Effectiveness of Small Learning Communities*

Over the past twenty years many organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have invested billions of dollars in restructuring large schools into smaller learning communities similar to Soukamneuth's (2004) reference to "personalized spaces." What has been learned over this course of time is that small, in and of itself, will not automatically produce better student outcomes. As many researchers have argued, it is not a silver bullet or a magic pill that can transform public education overnight (Raywid 1996; Fine and Summerville, 1998; Gladden, 1998; Visher, Teitelbaum, Emanuel, 1999; Cotton, 2001). Instead, it is merely the setting event that then establishes the climate in which other important educational practices can exist.

Cotton (2001) reported on the conditions that must be present in order for small learning communities to be effective. She argued that these communities must be granted the autonomy they need to carve separate and distinctive identities apart from the larger school. In addition they must be heterogeneous organizations that teachers and students choose on their own. Among other key implementation factors, she listed professional development and collaboration, academic teaming, integrated curriculum, and use of multiple forms of assessment as necessary if the benefits of "small" are to be realized in such a way that other best practices such as differentiated instruction can be carried on as needed. Only when the small learning communities model is implemented well will student performance outcomes then be affected to a significant degree.

In 2009 the Hanover Research Council summarized much available research on the effectiveness of small learning communities restructuring efforts on student outcomes. While the results of individual studies varied and researchers cautioned readers about drawing causal conclusion, the overall results indicated many important outcomes such as higher attendance and graduation rates; more safety, order, and discipline; and higher academic achievement including the reduction of the gap between the performance of poor, minority students and their higher socio-economic majority peers. Two studies in particular were each an evaluation of *Project Achieve*, a program that divided 32 low-performing New York City schools into houses. Results were very positive across the schools after a year of implementation, but staggering for one high school in the Bronx after 10 years.

Connell, Legters, Klem, and West (2006) reported that “effective high schools combine rigorous academic preparation for all students with personalized, engaging, flexible, and responsive learning environments” (p. 1). Translated into the small learning community approach, these learning environments need to be well-implemented especially when used as a large school conversion tactic. Examining the data from two successful projects, *First Things First* and *Talent Development High Schools*, the authors argued that a structured and systematic planning process, which may have a timeline of up to 18 months, must be in place. In addition, both models have identified 250-350 students as an ideal number for each community suggesting that this number is small enough to be personal, yet adequate enough for staffing at least two teachers to each academic subject. Moreover, the authors contended, scheduling can make or break the entire process.

Felner, Seitsinger, Brand, Burns, and Bolton (2007) found that the creation of small learning communities within larger schools, such as with the *HiPlaces* project, is essential if educators wish to truly engage students and enhance their learning and development. However, five dimensions of implementation must be considered if efforts will prove to be successful. Among these there are structural and organizational elements such as enrollments, class size, and student-teacher ratios which need to be considered. The critical levels of student-to-teacher ratios, for instance, is reported to be 24 or 25 to 1, with 80 to 120 students per interdisciplinary team and 60-80% of a student's school day being spent with that team. In addition, climate is seen to be another important aspect for effective functioning. Felner, *et al.* (2007) reported that students who have teachers who feel empowered believe them to be more supportive and available to them, thus strengthening the student-teacher relationships across the school environment.

The small schools strategy has traditionally been held as the hope for improved outcomes for poor students and minorities. It has been postulated that it would create more personalized environments in which relationships could develop between teachers and students; relationships that could foster the growth of adolescents toward productive ends. However as Shiller (2008) reported, without essential elements in place the move to small learning communities is not always successful. As preliminary results indicate for *The New Century Schools Initiative* based in New York City, these relationships don't just magically happen because students are grouped in these small communities. In order to be effective, teachers need initial training and continued support in relationship-building strategies and the facilitation of conversations with students and parents. Without this key ingredient student outcomes among the three city high schools studied

varied considerably. Cotton (2001) would appear to agree. She has argued that new small learning community schools must build in the structures for teachers to know students well. As cited by Aness and Ort (1999), Cotton reported that schools which seek to affect student outcomes must have strategies that “enable teachers to know students well, to closely monitor their progress, and to provide academic and social supports and interventions necessary for success” (p. 29).

*Quality Counts*, which tracks key education information and grades the states on their policy efforts, examines more than 100 indicators in the areas of standards and accountability, efforts to improve teacher quality, school climate, and resource equity and educational spending. According to the 2006 report Texas does not fare as well on many measures including that of school climate, which includes data on student engagement, parent involvement, and school size. Compared to the nation as a whole, fewer students in Texas attend smaller schools, which research shows is a significant factor in successful school outcomes for youth.

To date, there is ample evidence to support the argument for the creation of small learning communities that provide environments in which students are encouraged by adults who know them well and where isolationism and alienation are thwarted. But, as Cotton (2001) has argued,

Since not all small school restructuring outcomes are equal, care must be taken to insure that these resources and efforts will be truly productive. The last thing small school proponents want to see is a future in which school downsizing ends up on the dead fad pile, with students reaping few benefits from it, funding

agencies declaring it a bust, and school personnel across the country remarking wistfully, “Oh, we tried small schools, but they didn’t work.” (p.3).

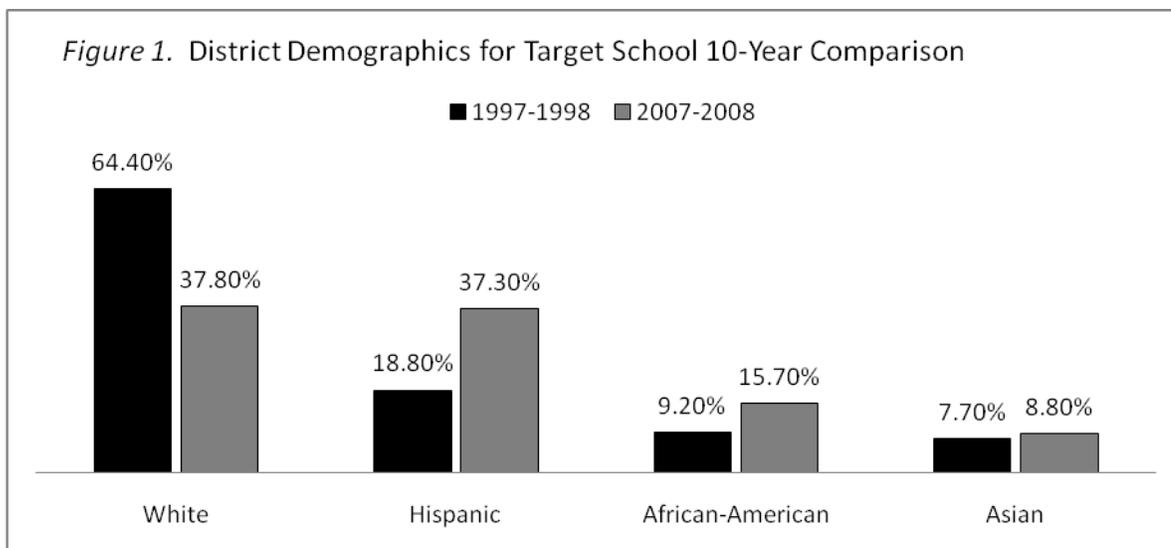
In those communities that are well-implemented student outcomes are high. There are better attendance rates, lower dropout rates, fewer discipline incidents, and greater academic achievement of all students.

## **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this quantitative research is to contribute to the current body of knowledge regarding reform efforts that transform large schools into smaller, more caring learning communities. Chapter III describes the district background and setting, the participants, the instruments, the procedures, data analysis, and limitations of the study.

### *District Background and Setting*

The school district under study for this research is the third largest in Texas. It comprises 186 square miles of land that has seen tremendous residential and commercial development since the 1980s, transforming it into one of the area's largest metropolitan communities. At the start of the 1997-98 school year there was a reported enrollment of less than 60,000 students; 64.4% White, 18.8% Hispanic, 9.2% African American, and 7.7% Asian. Ten years later enrollment has grown to nearly 97,000 bringing with it greater student body diversity resulting in a drop in the percentage of White students (to 37.8%) with increases in the percentages of Hispanic and African American students to 37.3% and 15.7% respectively (see figure 1). Projections indicate that enrollments will continue to expand and diversity will continue to bring increased economic challenges, since students come to this district from all socioeconomic groups.



Diversity notwithstanding, the district continues to set high goals for its students and staff. These include a priority for attendance and completion, excellence in core academic areas, and the call to reduce the achievement gap between at-risk and non-at-risk students. In addition, the 2010-11 goals include that of developing “for all students, staff and facilities strategies to maintain the safe and disciplined environment conducive to student learning and employee effectiveness.”

The target high school has not escaped the challenges facing its district, nor those endemic to public education across the nation. While embracing the district’s vision of an exemplary educational community dedicated to the highest standards, doubts about the ability to offer each of their students in this ever-growing population a quality education began to emerge among faculty. During the 2008-09 school year as the building was architecturally being renovated they decided to transform their large student body into smaller learning communities called houses. This has been a pilot program for the district and it is currently in its third year of operation.

## Participants

The target school for this study is one of ten high schools in the district. According to the 2009-10 Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) report compiled by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), it has a current student population of 3,189 students, an enrollment just under half that of the entire district when it opened as its second high school almost three decades ago. The two high schools that data will be compared to opened in 1984 (Control A) and 1992 (control B) and have current enrollments of 3,396 and 2,921 respectively. Demographic information among the three schools is similar, especially the percentage of economically disadvantaged students (see table 1).

*Table 1.* 2009-2010 Demographics for District, Target School, and Control Schools

<b>2009-10 Demographics</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Target HS</b>	<b>Control A</b>	<b>Control B</b>
African American	16.0%	13.4%	16.8%	19.0%
Hispanic	39.0%	40.4%	34.3%	37.3%
White	36.0%	34.1%	40.5%	31.6%
Native American	00.2%	00.2%	00.4%	00.2%
Asian	09.0%	11.8%	08.0%	11.9%
Econ Disadvantaged	42.0%	35.5%	34.8%	35.5%

## *Procedure and Data Analysis*

In this study, the researcher examined some commonly accepted indicators of successful schools for one suburban high school that has moved to the small learning communities model. It identified whether there had been any changes in these data indicators, such as attendance rate, dropout rate, and academic achievement among student groups from the 2007-08 school year, the year prior to implementation of the model, through the 2009-10 school year, the most recent year for published data of this type. Archival data published in AEIS reports from TEA, which pulls together wide-

ranging and extensive data on each school and district in Texas, was used for this purpose. In addition, this information was compared to other schools within the same district that have similar demographics to the school under study, but operate under the traditional model of the comprehensive American high school.

Besides these performance indicators this study also examined discipline data obtained from all three schools comparing the number of behavior infractions occurring at the campuses overall, as well as those occurring between students and those occurring by students toward adults.

In addition, parents, students, and staff from the target school were surveyed to determine their beliefs regarding the effectiveness of the small learning communities model. Roughly 100 participants from each of these groups responded.

### *Instrumentation*

#### *Attendance Rates Data*

Attendance rates for the target high school under study were taken from the 2007-08, 2008-09, and 2009-10 published AEIS reports compiled by TEA. The attendance rates which are published in this yearly report are based on student attendance for the entire academic year. It is calculated by dividing the total number of days students were in membership in a given school year into the total number of days students were present for the same year. This data were additionally compared to the two control high schools included in this study.

#### *Annual Dropout Rates Data*

The annual dropout rates for the 2007-08, 2008-09, and 2009-10 school years for all three high schools were also compared. This AEIS indicator reports the number of

dropouts in grades 9 through 12. It is calculated by dividing the number of 9<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade students who were in attendance at any time during one school year into the number of dropouts for those grades during the same school year. The AEIS glossary indicates that the effects of mobility for a school's dropout rate are neutralized by including in the denominator every student ever reported in attendance at the campus, regardless of their length of stay (AEIS, 2010).

### *Discipline Data*

Data regarding the numbers and types of discipline incidents resulting in consequences that do not remove students from instruction, such as warnings, contracts, and detentions, and those that do, such as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and alternative education placements were obtained from the district. This report covered information from all three schools under study over the course of the 2007-08 to the 2009-10 school years.

According to information presented on the school district's website, violations to the student code of conduct, which is derived from Chapter 37 of the Texas Education Code, can be sorted into five levels. Level I violations include infractions that are generally violations of classroom, school bus, or campus rules which impede orderly procedures or interrupt the orderly operation of the classroom. These can include such behaviors as tardiness to class; possessing and/or using nuisance items; refusing to follow classroom rules; and running and/or making excessive noise in the halls, building, and/or classroom.

Level II violations include those infractions that are more serious in nature and/or any repeated violations or chronic instances of misbehavior included in Level I offenses.

Examples of Level II violations include cheating and/or copying (plagiarizing) the work of others from any source; skipping and truancy; exhibiting any unacceptable physical contact which could result in injury; unwanted touching of others; verbally or physically taunting other students; violating the dress code; and any other acts which interfere with the orderly educational process.

Level III violations include those infractions in which the effect or potential effect of the misconduct is disruptive and more serious in nature than Level I or II. A violation of this magnitude may result in a student being suspended and/or placed in a disciplinary alternative educational program. Level III violations include such behaviors as any repeated violations cited in the previous levels or chronic or repeated instances of misbehavior, acts of disobedience or disorderly behavior which are detrimental to the school, harmful to health and safety, or inhibit the rights of others such as: harassment; online harassment, bullying, cyber bullying; or creating or possessing a hit list. Examples of Level III violations include assault; fighting; disrespect of authority; failure to comply with assigned disciplinary consequences; misuse of district technology; vandalism; misuse of over-the-counter medication; and possession of a device, object, or substance that could cause harm to property or persons.

Level IV and V violations are subject to mandatory removal and expulsions. Level IV infractions result in placement at alternative education programs. These infractions include terroristic threats, and reporting false alarms. Level V violations form the basis for expulsion and removal to the Juvenile Justice Alternative Educational Program. These infractions include serious misbehavior and/or illegal acts that threaten

to impair the educational efficiency of the school and/or seriously disrupt the educational process.

#### *TAKS Data*

The performance data reports are designed to provide information about student achievement across different demographic groups based on the yearly results of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), which is the statewide assessment program for Texas. The TAKS assesses students at the high school level in grade 9 for math and reading achievement, and in grades 10 and 11 for math, English/language arts, science, and social studies. Data for Met Standard for all tests for all students and for sub-groups were examined for the 2007-08, 2008-09, and 2009-10 school years to determine any changes during these years. This data were additionally compared to the control schools as well.

According to information obtained in chapter 16 of the TAKS Technical Manual the reliability, or the consistency, of the TAKS is based on internal consistency measures such as the Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 and the stratified coefficient alpha. Most are reported to be in the high .80s to low .90s range.

#### *Survey Data*

Parents, students, and staff of the 2010-11 school year were invited to participate in an on-line survey to determine their beliefs regarding the personalization of the school environment and the small learning communities structure. The survey consisted of statements to which the participants rated whether they Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree. It also consisted of one open-ended question asking parents and students, "How can this high school improve?" and of staff,

“What benefits have you realized from the small learning communities/ house structure?”

The survey was administered through SurveyMonkey, which provides free, on-line questionnaires and surveys. Descriptive analysis was used to determine if more respondents tended to either agree or disagree with these statements. Overall themes to the open-ended responses were discussed in narrative form.

### *Analysis*

Descriptive statistics were used to compare all quantitative data collected for this study. Comparison of the target school to the two control schools were made through inspection of data obtained from AEIS reports for attendance and dropout rates, as well as the percentage of students meeting minimum standards on all portions of the TAKS for each of the years under study for all students as a group and for subpopulations based on ethnicity. Analysis of discipline data regarding the number and type of office referrals as well as their consequences were also used. Results of the survey instrument were reported using descriptive statistics as well; however, the responses to the open-ended question were described qualitatively.

### *Limitations*

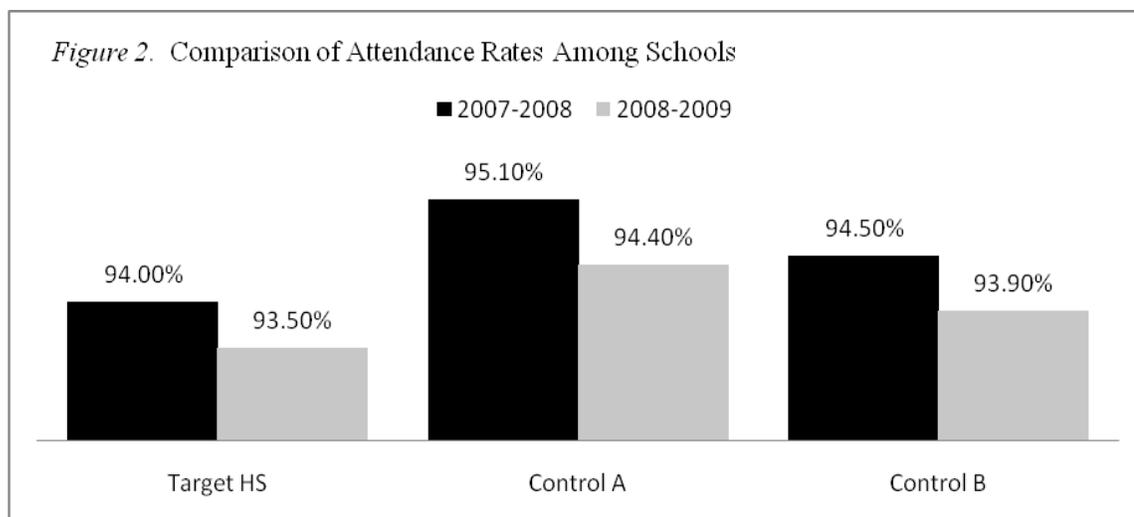
The reliability and validity of the survey utilized in this study could be considered questionable. Overall, surveys tend to be weak on validity since the feelings of most people are hard to grasp in terms such as agree/disagree. In addition, the fine delineations between strongly agree, somewhat agree, and agree may be difficult for most respondents to make. Although all participants were presented with the same stimulus, the wording, format, and content of the statements were not expertly reviewed.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine if the move to the small learning communities model by the target high school has impacted student performance as measured by attendance, dropout, discipline, and TAKS achievement results. This chapter presents the findings of this investigation using quantitative data for the 2007-08 school year, the year just prior to implementation of this model, through the 2009-10 school year, the most recent year for published information of this type and the second full year of implementation of this model at this school. Additionally reported are the results from a survey completed by parents, students, and teachers of the target school indicating their beliefs regarding the benefits of this model and whether the school environment is a caring one as well as what the school could do to improve.

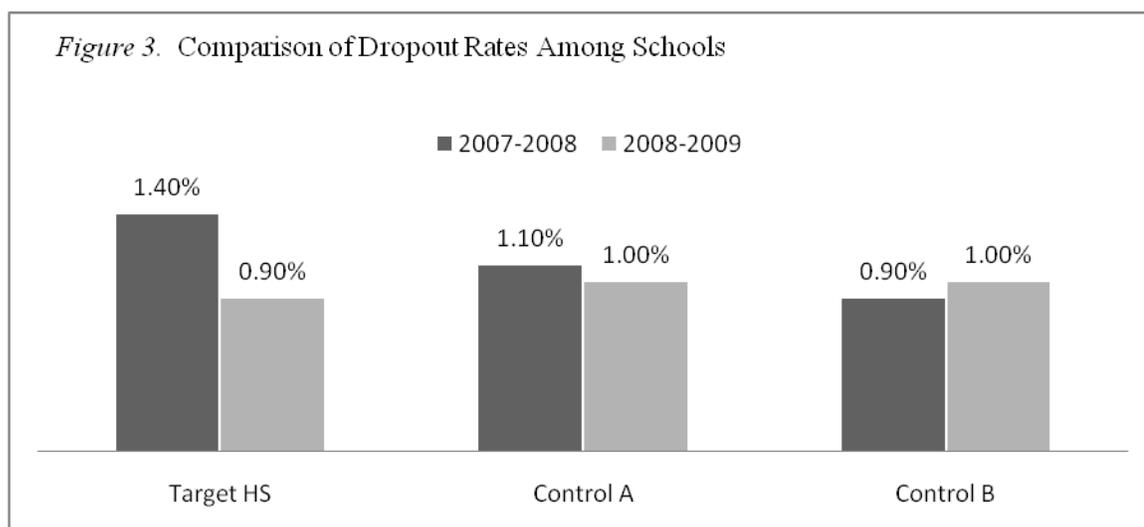
### *Attendance Rates Data*

The first question addressed by this study was whether or not students in small learning communities exhibit better attendance as compared to students enrolled in schools structured in more conventional standards. Results indicated that a slight decrease in attendance rates have occurred for the target school over the first year of implementation of the small learning communities models as well as for the control high schools under study. As shown by figure 2, Control High School A showed a greater decline than the target high school, demonstrating a .7 percentage point decrease as opposed to half a percentage point for the target school. This difference, however, did not appear to be significant for any of the schools.



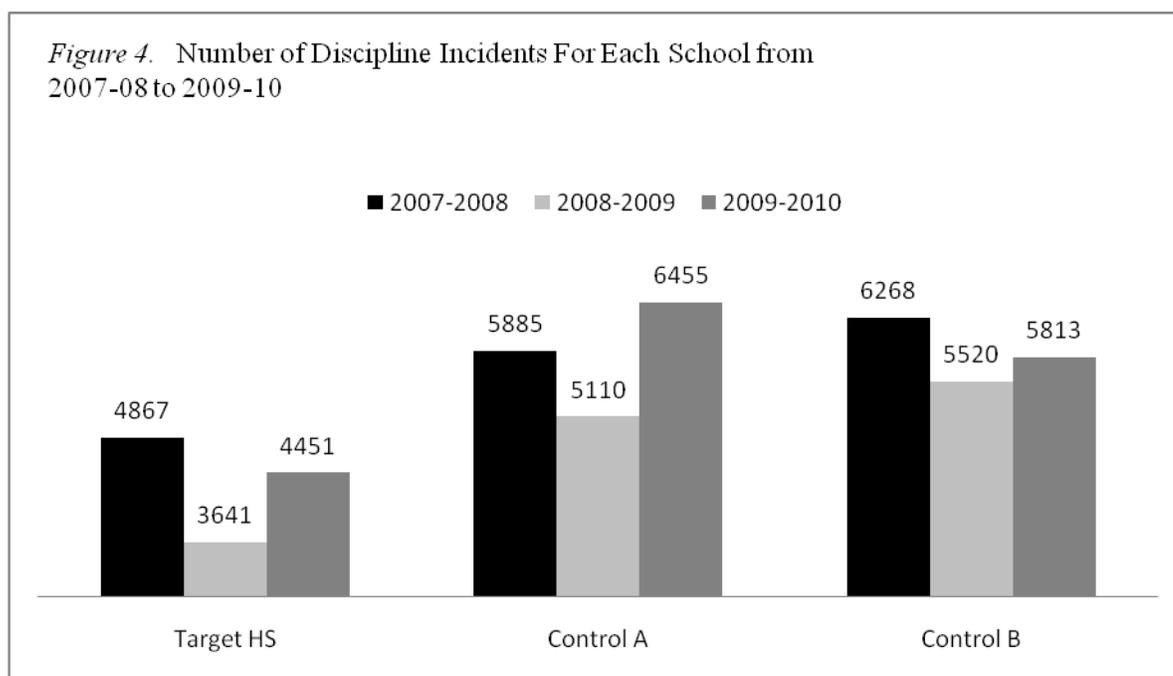
### *Dropout Rates Data*

The second question this study addressed was whether or not students in small learning communities experience lower dropout rates compared to students in schools which have not undergone restructuring to this model. As figure 3 demonstrates, students at the target school showed better performance in this area after implementation of the small learning communities model. Although dropout rates for students in Control School A also showed a decline, it was less than that at the target school. Rates for Control School B increased slightly.



### *Discipline Data*

To address the third question of this study, whether or not students in small learning communities maintained better discipline, the researcher examined the total number of office referrals that resulted in disciplinary consequences. As figure 4 shows, the trend for all three high schools exhibited a similar pattern, a drop for the first year of implementation with an increase after the second. Results indicated, however, that the overall number of discipline concerns in the 2009-2010 school year ended up at a lower number than the 2007-2008 starting point for the target high school and control school B.



An analysis of data was further undertaken to determine the types of discipline incidents which were occurring, specifically those that fall under the Level I, Level II, and Level III violations categories which typically include behaviors such as inappropriate interaction between students; inappropriate interaction of students toward adults; and breaking class, school, or bus rules. Results indicated that instances of

inappropriate student to student interactions occurring on the bus or on the campus decreased by 26% for the Target Campus between the beginning of the 2007-08 school year and the end of the 2009-10 school year. Decreases were found in both Control Schools as well, with a greater decrease in these behaviors occurring in Control School B (32%), but a much smaller one found in Control School A (7%). Table 2 displays the number of incidents of inappropriate student to student interactions reported for each school year with the percent of difference found between 2007-08 and 2009-10.

*Table 2. Number of Inappropriate Student to Student Interactions at Each School*

	2007-08 School Year	2008-09 School Year	2009-10 School Year	% of difference
Target School	405	297	298	-26%
Control School A	506	425	473	-7%
Control School B	331	214	225	-32%

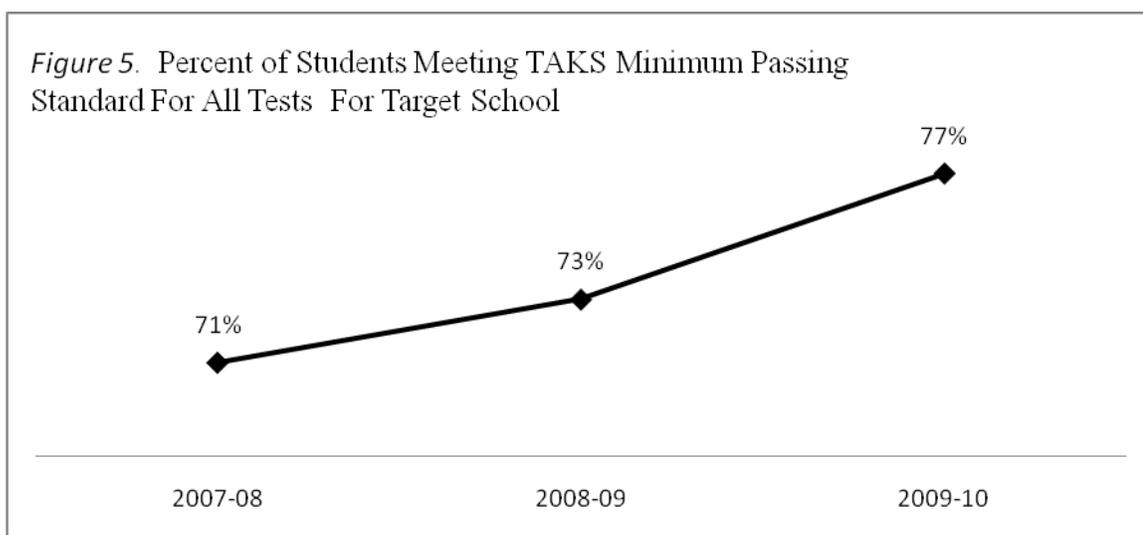
Incidents of inappropriate behavior by students toward adults on the bus or campus were found to have increased by just 8% from the 2007-08 school year to 2009-10 at the Target School, but by 32% at Control School A. Control School B demonstrated a decrease of 7% in these same behaviors (see table 3).

*Table 3. Number of Inappropriate Student Behaviors Toward Adults at Each School*

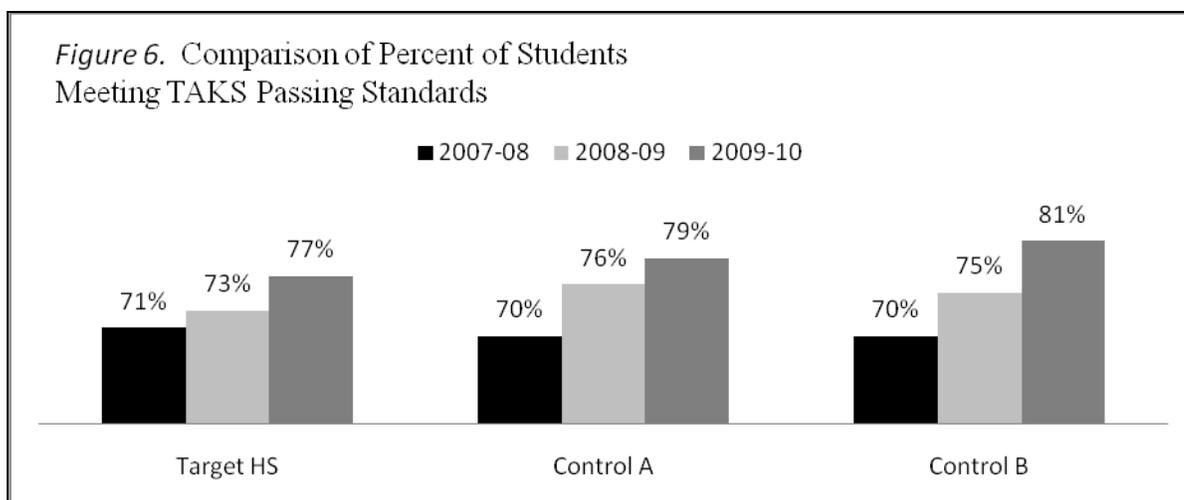
	2007-08 School Year	2008-09 School Year	2009-10 School Year	% of difference
Target School	641	562	696	+8%
Control School A	559	703	818	+32%
Control School B	1076	1117	1001	-7%

### *Student Achievement Data*

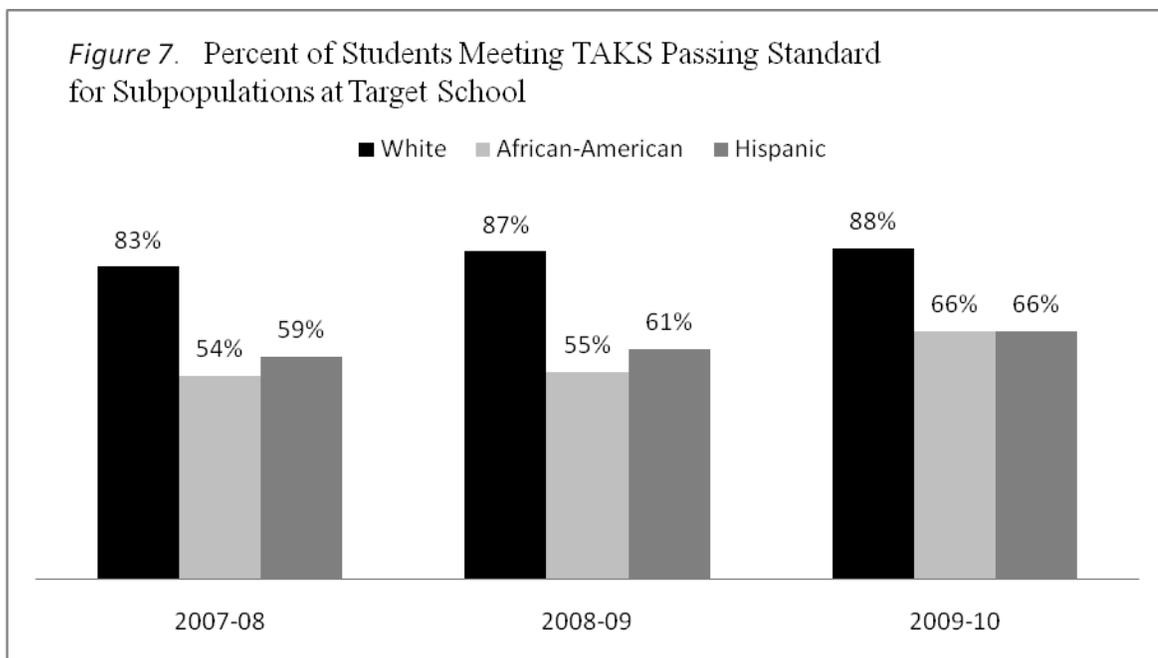
The fourth question this study addressed was whether or not students in small learning communities score better on measures of student achievement overall as well as whether there is less of a difference in scores between students in specific ethnic sub-populations. As figure 5 depicts for the high school under study, there has been an overall slight increase in the percent of students meeting minimum standards on TAKS for all tests given in the year prior to implementation of small learning communities and the two subsequent years, from 71% to 77%.



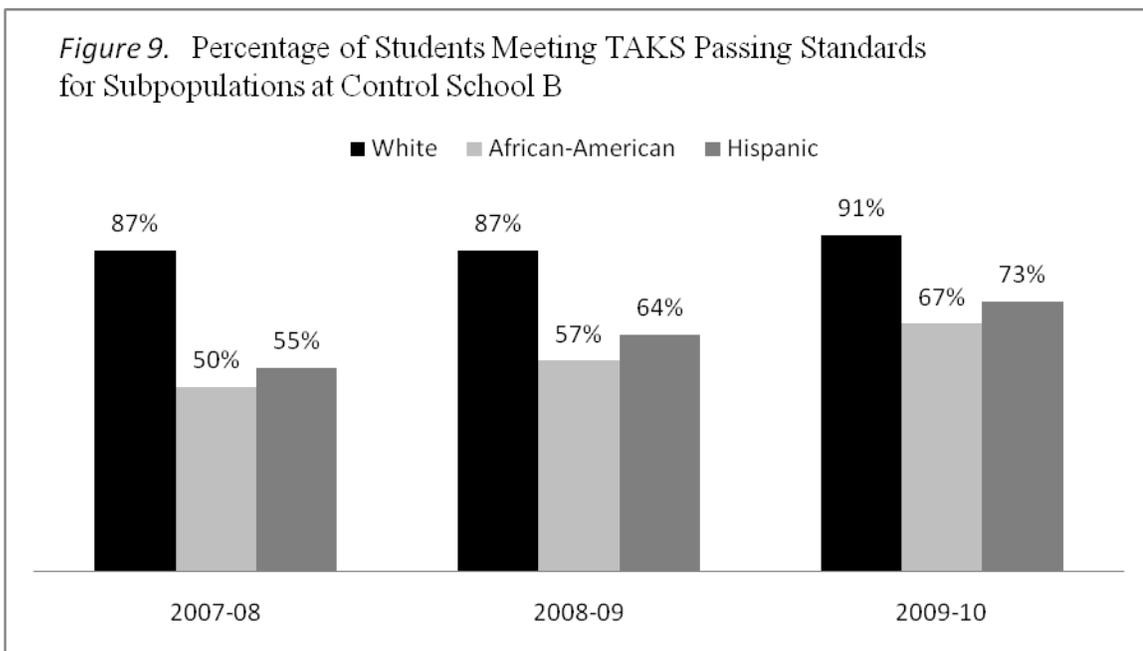
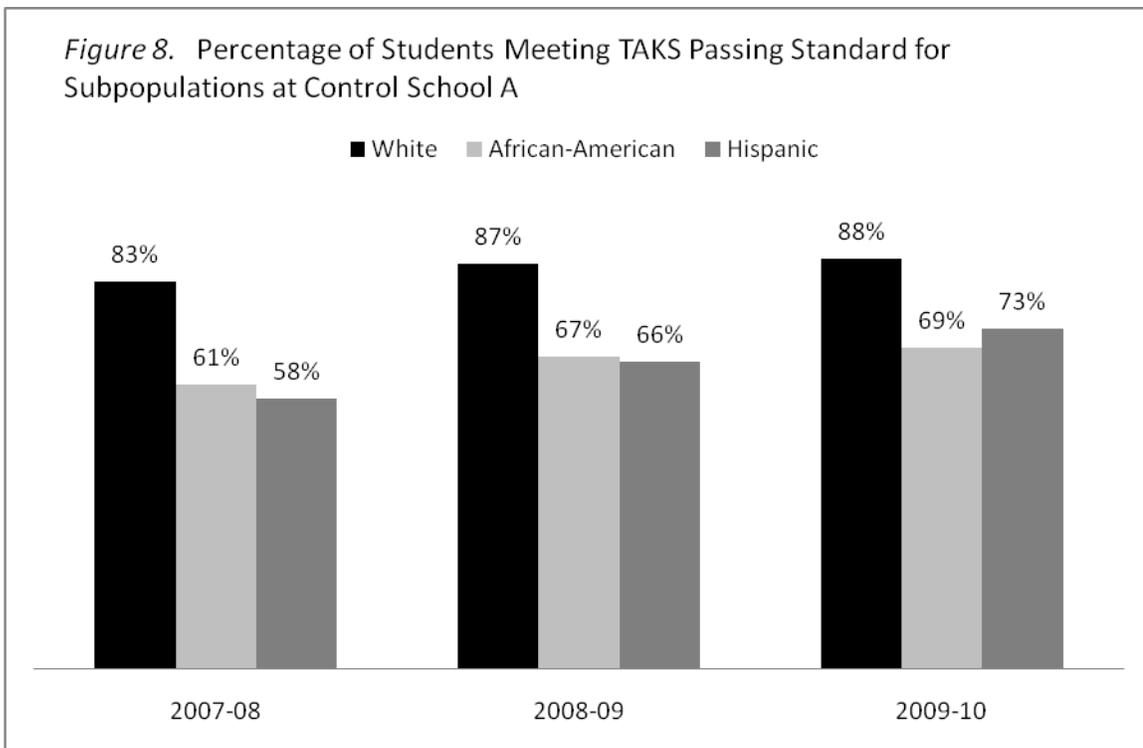
As depicted in Figure 6, however, this trend was seen in the control schools' data as well, with a greater overall increase in scores demonstrated by both of them as compared to the target school. Control School B had the best overall increases in achievement.



One issue for all American public schools in the past couple of decades has been that of closing the achievement gap between White students and other ethnic groups such as African-American and Hispanic students. This is the subject that question five of this study addressed. As figure 7 depicts, scores for all students at the target school have shown increases. Of particular note is the lessening of the gap between majority and minority populations after the second year of the small learning communities model implementation.



However, this was noted in both control high schools as well, with better results demonstrated by the control schools as shown in figures 8 and 9.



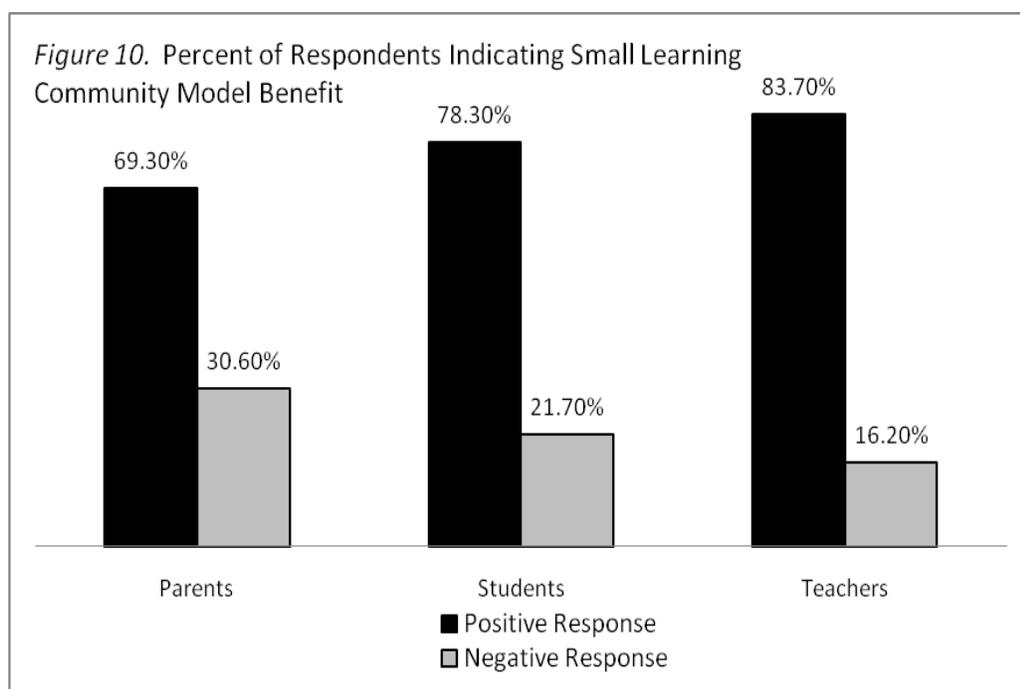
### *Survey Data*

Parents, students, and teachers were invited to participate in a short questionnaire through the electronic polling service, SurveyMonkey, in order to gauge their beliefs regarding the efficacy of moving to the small learning communities model. In total 115 parents responded to the survey with no more than four parents choosing to skip any one of the seven closed-ended questions. There were 121 student respondents with most of the seven questions being answered by all. Staff responses numbered 111, and again most questions were answered. Survey results can be found in Appendix A.

#### *Benefit to Students*

Results indicate that most respondents agree in some form that this move presented benefits to students, as figure 10 shows. In response to the statement, “The small learning community (house) structure at this school benefited my son/daughter” 36.9%, 20.7%, and 11.7% of parents answered Somewhat Agree, Agree, and Strongly Agree respectively, putting positive responses at nearly 70%. Less than one-third of respondents answered negatively with 18.0% and 12.6% responding Disagree and Strongly Disagree respectively. To the statement, “The change to small learning communities/houses at this school has benefited me” over 80% of students agreed, indicating percentages of 55.0, 20.0, and 3.3 for Somewhat Agree, Agree, and Strongly Agree respectively. Fifteen percent of students indicated Disagree to this statement and 6.7% indicated Strongly Disagree. In response to the statement, “The collegial relationships I have formed with other house teachers have benefited me and my students” nearly 85% of staff indicated agreement with 32.4%, 34.2%, and 17.1%

responding Somewhat Agree, Agree, and Strongly agree. Staff indicated a 13.5% response of Disagree while 2.7% indicated Strongly Disagree to this statement.

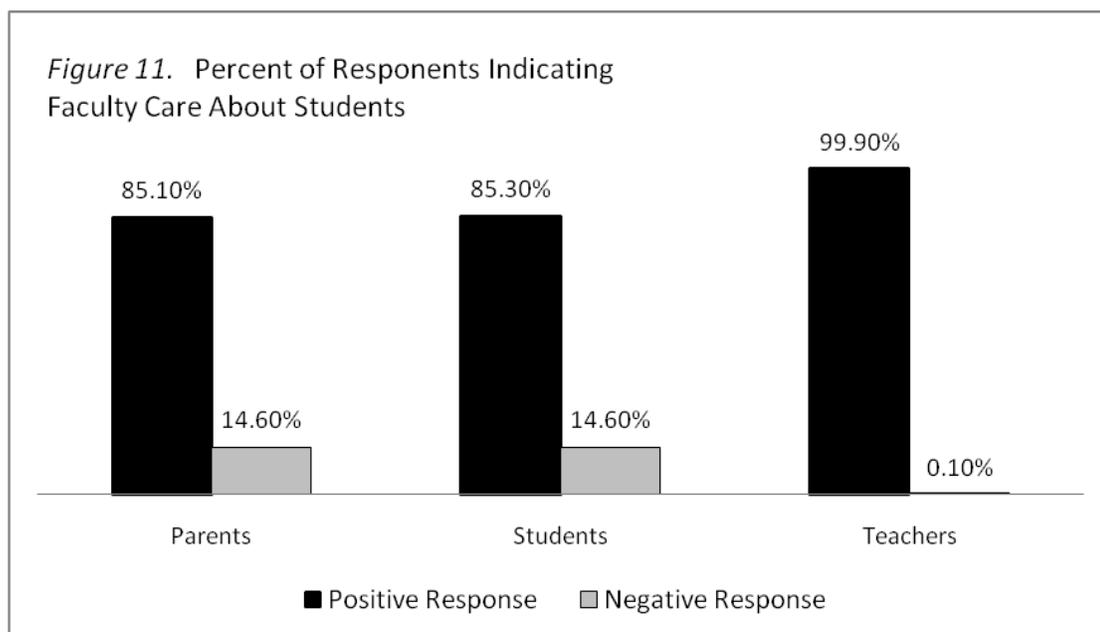


### *Faculty Care About Students*

To determine whether survey respondents believe that the faculty care about their students, parents and students were asked to respond to the following statements:

Teachers at this school care about my son/daughter/me; Counselors at this school care about my son/daughter/me; and Administrators at this school care about my son/daughter/me. For the purposes of this study the responses to these three statements were averaged in order to determine an overall percent for each category of response. For example 15% of parents indicated that they strongly agree that teachers care about their child, 20.4% strongly agree that counselors care, and 13.3% strongly agree that administrators care. These responses indicate that an average of 16.2% of parents strongly agree that the overall faculty care about their students. When added to the averages for the Agree and Somewhat Agree responses, more than 3/4ths of parents

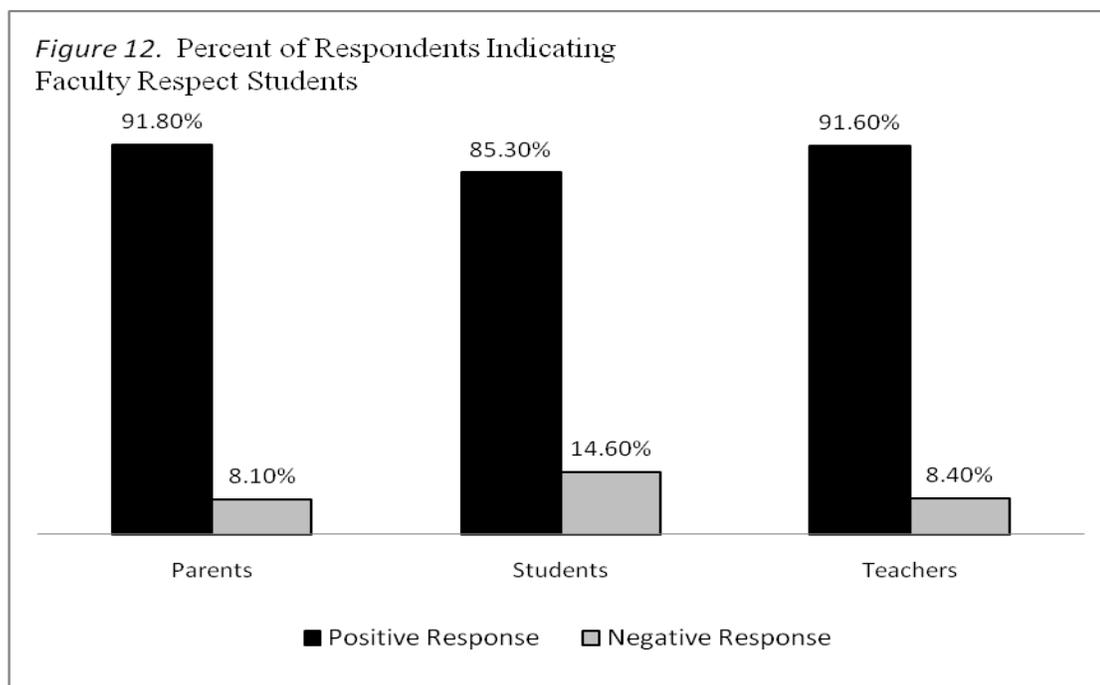
answered in the positive. This was very consistent with student responses of which the following averages were recorded: 36.1% Somewhat Agree; 37.4% Agree; and 11.8 Strongly Agree. On average 9.9% and 4.7% of students disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. Nearly 100% of the faculty reported that they care about students, with 9.9% indicating Somewhat Agree, 44.1% indicating Agree, and 45.9% indicating Strongly Agree. See figure 11 below.



### *Faculty Respect Students*

As figure 12 demonstrates, in response to the statement, “The faculty at this school respect students” 36.0% of parents indicated Somewhat Agree, 43.2% indicated Agree, and 12.6% indicated Strongly Agree. Less than 10% of parents responded to this item in the negative. Again showing consistency with parents, students also believe that the faculty respect them. With 40.3% indicating Somewhat Agree, 47.1% Agree, and 4.2% Strongly Agree while 4.2% indicated both Disagree and Strongly Disagree. Over 90% of teachers agree with this statement in some form with more than half of them

indicating Agree. Teachers responded with Somewhat Agree and Strongly Agree at 16.4% and 32.7% respectively.



### *What Can The School Do To Improve?*

#### *Parent Beliefs.*

In addition to the seven Likert-type questions on the survey there was an eighth question involving open-ended responses. Of the 115 parents responding to this campus questionnaire 74 answered this question indicating what the school could do to improve.

As previously stated, on the parent survey about 30% disagreed in some way with the statement indicating that the small learning community (house) structure benefited their child. An examination of the written responses to how the school could improve lends some rationale for this disagreement. One parent reported that his/her son did not have any friends in his house, and the structure “just seems to be an easy way to divide the students for better access.” When another parent questioned staff about why his/her children were in separate houses, the reported response was, “It really doesn’t matter.” A

second parent also questioned why siblings were not in the same house and reported that the move to small learning communities was a “pointless exercise.” This parent, as well as one other, indicated that there is “no small learning group feel to the classes” and that perhaps the faculty could do more to build “camaraderie” among the students within each house. A few parents indicated no benefit to their children due to being in the Horizon’s program, or K-level or AP classes. These parents reported, as one stated, “More work is being done to help students that are having problems.” Another parent reported that her daughter says, “Don’t let the middle students get lost among the smartest and the rudest.” One parent reported that “students with good grades and good behavior are short-changed” in this system.

Although most parents had agreed that teachers, counselors, and administrators care about and respect students there were a number of responses to this question which seemed to indicate that other faculty members, such as the clerical staff, might need to be more sensitive to student needs. One parent stated that the school could, “encourage all personnel who work in the various front student- interface offices to show all students the respect they would like to be shown at all times.” Another parent reported embarrassment “by the way the clerical staff at two of the houses spoke to parents and students.” Other words used to describe clerical staff by three parents were, “horrible,” “ugly,” and “rude.”

#### *Student Beliefs.*

Of the 121 students responding to the campus questionnaire 91 chose to make a written response to the open-ended question regarding what the school could do to improve. A number of themes regarding student concerns were noted, two of which had

to do with having an advisory period and late buses. An examination of these responses revealed that students do care about their school work and getting additional help in completing or understanding assignments. One student reported, "Have one more class for advisory to have time to finish work or go to a class to do an assignment," Another reported that students need to be "able to stay after school to study." While another reported that during this after school time teachers "can better explain their lessons." Two additional students indicated that they "needed more days to stay after school to get caught up with their work" and for "lots of practice."

A third theme which emerged among student responses had to do with overcrowding of classes and hallways with eight responses referring to this concern. "Have less students so it's not crowded," "Get more stairways," "Control [hallway] traffic," and "Make some of the classes a little bit smaller," are some examples of statements from students.

One additional theme which emerged among student concerns related to better food in the cafeteria. There were seven statements made by students regarding this issue. *Staff Beliefs.*

Of the 111 staff members who responded to the survey 70 answered the open-ended question, "What benefits have you realized from the small learning communities/house structure at this school?" An analysis of these responses indicated two major themes. The first was that teachers do believe they have formed stronger relationships with colleagues and have a greater sense of belonging. But while many of them reported benefits to knowing and working with other core teachers within the house, a few indicated that this came at a price. One teacher indicated that he/she "hated being

so far away from the team” while another indicated that “there isn’t any synergy between members of the same team” and still another reported that the house system does not allow him/her to “spend as much time as in the past with the subject team.” A response by one staff member indicated that he/she “needs more time to work closely with colleagues who are teaching the same thing.” Additionally, overall, it appears that teachers of elective courses feel left out of the house system.

A second theme which seems to have emerged from these faculty responses concerns relationships with students. A few of these responses include, “Got to know our houses’ students better,” “Improved relationships with past students,” “Teachers are improving their one on one relationships with students,” “Better one to one communication with students,” “See former students more frequently and can follow up on their progress,” and “Teachers can’t help but get to know their students.”

## CHAPTER V: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study addressed the relative merits of transforming a large high school into smaller, more personalized learning environments. Commonly accepted elements of school success were examined to determine any changes in student performance data from the 2007-08 school year, the year prior to implementation of the small learning communities model, through the 2009-10 school year, the second full year of this pilot program for one of 10 high schools in a large suburban school district. In addition to determining any significant effects within this school over time, the data were compared to two control high schools within the same district that are organized under more traditional models. Parents, students, and teachers were surveyed to determine if the restructuring of the target high school to small learning communities was beneficial to students and whether or not they believe that faculty at this school care about their charges. The following is a discussion of the results of this study, implications for future practice, and recommendations for future research.

### *Discussion*

The most powerful piece of information that has come from the present study is that an overwhelming majority of parents, students, and teachers believe that the faculty at this high school care about and respect their students. This is the first step toward personalizing the learning environment which much of the literature indicates is an important strategy for stemming the tide of alienation and insignificance that so many students in large high schools appear to experience. If adolescents feel connected to their schools, perhaps through their relationships with teachers or staff at those schools, they are more likely to attend more, graduate in higher numbers, have fewer discipline

problems, and achieve at higher rates (Klem & Connell, 2007; Walsey & Lear 2001). Mendler (2001) quoting a philosophical axiom stated, “Students will only care what we think when they think that we care” (p.6). Protheroe (2010) contented, “Simply knowing a respected adult cares about his or her interests and concerns may provide... students with the emotional support needed to focus on learning” (p. 7). It is clear from survey data that the target high school has been able to establish the climate necessary for further work on personalizing the learning environment.

This further work, however, may need to focus on creating stronger identities and providing greater autonomy for each of the houses. While each of the four houses maintains, to a certain degree, physical separateness from the others, this is only one of five factors of self-determination which Cotton (2001) contends is necessary for successful and effective small learning communities. Other key factors in this area include autonomy, distinctiveness, self-selection, and flexible scheduling. Of particular note here is the distinctiveness factor. As the results of the survey indicated, some parents believe that more should be done to build camaraderie among the students within each house. The houses do not seem to possess any strong attributes that set one apart from another. If they did, it might create stronger alliances for teachers and students within them. Teachers seem to continue to feel anxiety over being separated from departmental teams instead of embracing the inter-collegial aspects of teaming with other curricular disciplines. In addition, students do not appear to have a strong enough concept of why their house is special and why they belong there.

Although results of this study show some slight, but promising, gains in most of the areas of student performance examined, similar results were found at each of the

control schools. It does not appear likely, therefore, that the move to the small learning communities model in and of itself was a determinant factor for this success. This is consistent with findings in the current literature base that indicate that “small” is not a panacea for improved student outcomes (Raywid 1996; Fine and Summerville, 1998; Gladden, 1998; Visher, Teitelbaum, Emanuel, 1999; Cotton, 2001), but instead the organizational structure that allows for the successful implementation of other promising practices that are more easily brought to bear in smaller learning environments. While recognizing that academic achievement is not the only indicator of a school’s success, the reality is that it is the reason parents send their children to school. In a small, caring culture there is evidence to support that students will rise to the academic challenges before them. Cotton (2001) has argued that student achievement is the ultimate accountability indicator, but agreed that it takes time to reach its highest levels, especially in small learning communities in schools only in their second full year of implementation as at this school. But, in this high school teachers and administrators have a strong foothold on the path that will take them and their students there.

#### *Implications for Future Practice*

Results of this study indicate that the target school has accomplished its goal of creating smaller, more caring learning environments. The faculty has been able to establish those interdisciplinary teams that Oxley (2007) has determined are core to one of the essential domains for successful small learning communities practice. Teachers have been able to carve out time to trouble-shoot the progress of the students they share within the house. Many struggling students are discussed and plans to address interventions are made. This practice should continue at this school and faculty should

continue to implement those relationship-building strategies that come with knowing their students well and caring about their successes and failures.

Continued work at this school needs to be done, however. Cotton (2001) stressed the need for professional development and collaboration as a key factor in successful implementation of small learning communities. It is important for teachers who want to continue to design instruction that is challenging and meaningful for their students. Oxley (2007) addressed this in two of five domains that she considered necessary for successful small learning communities implementation. Not only has she argued for the creation of interdisciplinary teams that can address program coherence, but she has found that the faculty's inquiry into the effectiveness of their practices is essential. As an additional supporting structure for transformation, therefore, the school will in the coming school year move to a modified schedule that will result in a two-hour block of collaborative learning for teachers each week. Some might call this a move to Professional Learning Communities, since, as Dufour (2004) defines them, teams of teachers will come together to focus on "learning rather than teaching, work[ing] collaboratively on matters related to learning, and hold[ing][themselves] accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement" (p.6). In the next school year these teachers will delve deeper into the data that will tell them where instruction needs to go; learn, from each other, what that instruction might need to look like; and reflect, with each other, how that instruction changed student performance. The foundation of teacher leadership is in place, and now the schedule will provide the 'wiggle room' needed for collaboration (Protheroe, 2010).

Other faculties of large high schools who are beginning to doubt their abilities to provide all of their students a quality education should take note. Even though there have been only slight gains in student performance, the move to small learning communities at this school has provided the essential structure that will now allow educational best practices that are not as conducive in large, more conventionally organized high schools. Research over the last 40 years has supported the small learning communities model as an effective strategy for increasing student outcomes when they are well implemented. But, it also suggests that it takes time to change the climate of a school from one of teaching to one of learning. The faculty at this school needs to stay the course.

#### *Implications for Future Research*

It must be recognized that this attempt at restructuring the traditional model of school organization is still in the very early stages at this particular high school. Continued research is needed to determine the full benefits of small learning communities implementation for them over time. Implementation does not guarantee better attendance rates, lower dropout rates, fewer discipline problems, or greater student scores on tests. It does, however, establish the right conditions for enhanced student performance. The survey completed in this study should serve as a baseline for determining the continuing beliefs of parents, students, and staff as to the personalization of the school's learning environment and the appropriate conditions needed for continued success. Examination of attendance rates, dropout rates, discipline, and student achievement should remain the focus of study for the next several years as the faculty continues to define their roles as members of individual houses, as members of professional learning communities, and as members of interdisciplinary curriculum building teams.

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APPENDIX A  
SURVEY QUESTIONS

*Parent Survey:*

1. I understand the purpose/goals of the small learning communities/house structure.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

2. The move to the small learning communities/house structure at this school has benefited my son/daughter.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

3. I like my son/daughter being assigned to a house.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

4. Teachers at this school care about my son/daughter.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

5. Counselors at this school care about my son/daughter.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

6. Administrators at this school care about my son/daughter.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

7. The faculty at this school respect students.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

8. What can this school do to improve?

*Student Survey:*

1. The change to small learning communities/house structure has benefited me.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

2. My teachers care about me.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

3. My counselor cares about me.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

4. My principal cares about me.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

5. I like being assigned to a house.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

6. The faculty at this school care about students.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

7. My teachers know my academic interests and goals.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

8. What can this school do to improve?

*Teacher Survey:*

1. I understand the mission, vision, and goals of small learning communities.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

2. I enjoy being assigned to a house.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

3. The collegial relationships I have formed in the house have benefited me and my students.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

4. The faculty at this school care about students.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

5. The faculty at this school respect students.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

6. The faculty at this school appreciates student differences.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

7. The faculty at this school knows students' academic interests and goals.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

8. What benefits have you realized from the move to the small learning communities structure?