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SMALL SCHOOL INITIATIVES SURVEY

Contact Nancy Baenen (919) 850-1840

Author: Amy Overbay

ABSTRACT

During 2002-03, surveys of Wake County Public Schools (WCPSS) middle school principals and high school assistant principals for instruction (APIs) indicated that all middle and high schools implemented at least one strategy for creating smaller learning communities using the schools-within-schools mode. Nearly all middle schools implemented two or more strategies within existing school structures. High school responses were more varied in terms of strategies used and the extensiveness of use compared to middle schools. APIs' responses also indicated that WCPSS high schools use a broad range of support services to personalize the school environment for students, though some strategies were not directly related to the creation of smaller learning communities, and others targeted specific groups of students and not the entire student body.

BACKGROUND

Research indicates smaller learning environments can improve student engagement in school, with some studies suggesting learning benefits as well. However, smaller schools tend to be less cost-effective than larger schools. School systems across the country are examining the advantages of creating smaller learning communities within existing school facilities (Cotton, 1996; Overbay, 2003; Raywid, 1996). In their study of 31 middle schools that implemented smaller learning communities by subdividing students and teachers into teams, Felner and Jackson (1997) found that middle schools that made the most comprehensive restructuring efforts were more successful in raising student achievement and reducing behavioral problems. Although outcome data at the high school level are less widely available, U.S. high schools are also turning to these restructuring strategies to create more personalized climates and improve student performance (George & McEwin, 1999).

SURVEY RESPONSES

In March 2003, WCPSS middle school principals and high school assistant principals for instruction were surveyed to determine how their schools were working to create smaller learning communities and personalized learning environments for their students. For each group, the response rate was 100%; surveys were returned by 26 middle schools and 17 high schools. The following discussion outlines respondents' answers for each of the three items on the survey. Attachments 1-4 include copies of the survey instruments and tables listing the strategies and approaches identified by each school for each item.

Item One: "What are you currently doing to create smaller learning communities for your students?"

The first item on the survey was intended to solicit information about schools' use of strategies that were most closely associated with the schools-within-schools model. This item offered respondents multiple options representing common strategies for creating smaller school environments, as well as the opportunity to describe alternative means used to create smaller learning communities in their schools (see Attachment 1). The practice of dividing grades into "houses" or "teams" of students is based on the theory that subdividing grades into smaller units promotes greater solidarity and intimacy. Similarly, geographically isolating grades within the school facility can represent a way to help students bond with their classmates and teachers, and experience a feeling of "togetherness." Team teaching was also listed as a response option, because it can help students and staff build stronger relationships, and can help schools develop an integrated curriculum. On the high school API survey, respondents were also offered "Creating mini-academies" as an option, because some high schools use this approach as an alternative to subdividing entire grades.

Responses: Middle School Principals

Each middle school reported using at least one of the strategies listed on the survey as a technique for creating smaller learning communities, and 24 schools reported using at least two of these strategies. Two approaches, isolating grades and team teaching, were used by 25 of 26 schools.

All but one middle school reported geographically isolating grades within the school facility. Few schools gave details on how this was accomplished, but the available responses suggest that middle schools use this strategy in different ways. For example, Martin Middle reported separating grades during core instruction and lunch, while Daniels Middle reported that their 6th grade is housed in a separate building. Principals at different schools identified the physical structure of the school building as a key issue in facilitating this practice; the principal at Moore Square Middle observed that the design of the school building lent itself to this practice. However, some schools that did not have a "pod" design reported that this strategy was more difficult to implement.

Another strategy that nearly all middle school principals utilized to promote smaller learning communities involved teaming teachers. The types of teaming that schools offered appeared to vary. Some schools reported using four or five-teacher teams, while others, such as Ligon GT Magnet Middle, indicated that they used some two or three teacher teams. Of the schools that used team teaching, six also offered these teachers a common planning period and/or additional preparation opportunities. Four principals also noted that their schools relied on rotating teachers, especially resource personnel, to reduce class sizes and give additional help to low-achieving students.

Eighteen principals reported that their schools divided grades into “houses” or “teams” of students. Again, few schools provided details on how teams functioned within their schools. However, East Cary Middle reported offering enrichment periods during which students “go back on team,” and other responses indicated that the team approach was used to encourage solidarity among students. The principal at Davis Drive Middle noted that students “exclusively identify with their teams.” As the principal at Durant Road Middle commented:

Because of our size and geographic area, we stress ‘team.’ They all have very recognizable identities, i.e., team name, t-shirt, assemblies, parent activities, website, team brochures, etc. This was perhaps the number 1 item that makes us a ‘school to watch.’

Block scheduling was identified by two schools, Martin Middle and Centennial Campus Middle, as a method used to create smaller learning communities. The rationale for this strategy is that the fewer transitions and teachers a student experiences on a daily basis, the more intimate the school climate. As the principal at Centennial Campus Middle observed, “Flexible block scheduling with each grade level functioning on a different daily schedule contributes to the ‘school within a school’ feeling.”

Responses: High School APIs

As was the case for middle schools, each high school reported using at least one of the methods commonly associated with smaller learning communities. At the same time, APIs’ responses to the first question indicated that high schools may be less consistent in their methods of creating smaller learning communities than middle schools, in that there was more variety in the approaches they identified, and several of these approaches were only used by one or two schools. Further, the degree to which these methods were employed also appeared to vary across schools.

Of the seventeen APIs surveyed, twelve indicated that their high schools teamed teachers. The degree of “teaming” used appeared wide-ranging. Some schools, like Longview, reported teaming instructors in core curricular areas, whereas other schools reported teaming electives instructors. Of the schools that used team teaching, four schools specifically referenced their use of PALS, a program that pairs mainstream classroom teachers with special education teachers, to decrease class sizes. Three schools that reported teaming teachers also reported using the Paideia approach, which provides inquiry learning experiences for students through formal instruction, coached projects, and seminars. Although they did not report using team-teaching,

one additional school reported the use of common planning time for groups of teachers, and another reported developing interdepartmental and interdisciplinary projects.

Ten schools reported the use of mini-academies. These mini-academies appeared to fulfill a variety of functions. In some cases, these academies focused on career-oriented instruction, as was the case with Sanderson High's "Academy of Finance" and Wakefield High's "TEAL Academy," which focused on technology education. However, in other cases, these academies targeted specific populations, such as ninth-graders or students at risk for school failure.

Six schools reported geographically isolating grades or groups of students or teachers within the school facility. Again, responses indicated that schools envisioned this strategy differently. In some schools, a special section of the school building was assigned to ninth graders. In others, specific departments were housed in separate wings or halls.

In contrast to middle schools, only two high schools reported dividing grades into "houses" or "teams" of students. One of these schools, Fuquay-Varina High, only used this strategy with a portion of its ninth graders. Additional implementation details were not available.

Item Two: "Are there other ways in which you are trying to create a smaller school atmosphere by personalizing the environment or engaging students more fully in school (e.g., via extracurricular support services)?"

The second item on the survey was open-ended, and asked respondents to reflect on other methods used to personalize the school atmosphere. Overall, responses to the second item were more disparate; no support services were identified by a majority of middle school principals or high school APIs.

Responses: Middle School Principals

Although their responses to the first item showed strong commonalities, principals' responses to Item Two were less consistent, which may suggest that middle schools are using a variety of supplementary approaches to create smaller learning communities.

Ten middle school principals identified their schools' mentoring, advising, or guidance programs as helpful in personalizing the school environment for students. The focus of these programs varied considerably across schools. In some cases, these programs targeted specific at-risk populations, and in other cases, these programs appeared to have a vocational focus (e.g., East Garner's IBM e-mentees program). Some programs were related to school-specific needs. For example, because Wakefield Middle had a high percentage of new students, it created a "Newcomers Group" led by counselors. Centennial Campus Middle indicated that its students met with advisors daily.

Eight principals reported that clubs and opportunities for extracurricular activities at their schools helped create a smaller school atmosphere. Although some clubs appeared to be designed for specific groups (e.g., Beta Club), respondents identified a broad array of extracurricular

opportunities for the entire school population such as Step Teams, Science Olympiad, and Drama clubs.

Special programming or support services for specific subgroups were reported by six middle schools. West Cary and Leesville Road Middle offered special support services for at-risk students. Two schools, Centennial Campus Middle and Ligon GT Middle, reported that they featured some type of transition program targeting sixth graders. Extracurricular programs for specific groups (e.g., “Girl Power”) were reported by two schools.

Five principals reported that their schools offered tutoring programs. Three other schools indicated that they offered enrichment and remediation opportunities for specific subgroups either during the day or after school. For example, Carnegie Middle offers an “academic achievement block” for at-risk sixth graders.

Five principals indicated that students at their school engage in extracurricular “team” or departmental activities. As the principal at Zebulon Middle explained, “teams at each grade level develop activities and field trips designed to engage the students.” Principals suggested that these activities helped establish team identities and raise student interest.

Three schools indicated that they used “pull out” strategies to target the needs of specific groups of students. For example, Carnegie Middle features an academic achievement block for at-risk 6th graders, while students who need additional academic practice at Moore Square Middle participate in remediation or enrichment activities instead of physical education instruction.

Additional opportunities for parent, student, and teacher interaction were identified by two middle school principals as a strategy used to facilitate a smaller school climate. Daniels Middle hosts a “jamboree” for parents and students, and some teacher teams at Durant Middle implement “parent chats” once a month.

Sports or intramurals were reported by three schools, and homerooms were identified by one school as promoting a more personalized school atmosphere.

Responses: High School APIs

APIs’ responses to Item 2 overlapped with the information provided in an existing report on out-of-class support services in WCPSS high schools 2002-03 (Lewis, 2003), which offers more extensive and comprehensive descriptions of programming. As was the case with middle schools, APIs’ responses to the second item suggested that a variety of approaches are being used to personalize the school climate in WCPSS’ high schools, but that no single approach is used by a majority of schools. The following discussion focuses on responses that pertained specifically to methods used by more than one high school.

Six high school APIs indicated that mentoring/advising/guidance programs at their schools helped personalize the school environment. As with middle schools, the focus of these programs varied across schools. For example, grade level advisors at Cary High conduct specific activities or projects with their grade level; the guidance department at East Wake High coordinates small

groups dealing with specific topics; and Garner High offers Communities in Schools, a national program that encourages mentoring relationships between community members and students. The API at Southeast Raleigh High noted that at his school, “Students also have academic coaches. This relationship with a teacher for four years is much more personalized than a regular homeroom setting. This person serves as a student’s career counselor, advocate, and mentor.”

Six APIs also identified tutoring programs as a strategy used by their schools to engage students and make the school climate more intimate. In some cases, tutoring was offered for specific groups only (e.g., athletes). In other schools, the tutoring program focused on SAT preparation or competency skills. At Enloe, N.C. State tutors worked with students in small groups after school, while at Wakefield High, students who need extra help attended “Lunchtime Learning” tutorial sessions. An additional five schools reported the use of S.O.A.R, a grant-funded after-school learning program.

Three APIs reported that special support programs at their sites personalize the school climate for at-risk students. At Enloe High, the “Leaders Program” focuses on helping black males. Other schools were more generalized in their approaches. According to Broughton High’s API, their school “has developed a strong individualized student assistance program that at-risk students have taken ownership in. This has led to their taking a greater interest and responsibility for their own academic success.” East Wake High has initiated an “Operation Success” program for at-risk 9th graders; these students meet monthly with counselors and the East Wake Business Alliance “for support and a sense of belonging.”

Three APIs reported that clubs at their schools fostered a smaller school atmosphere, two reported that ESL programs help personalize the school setting, and two APIs indicated that night classes at their schools are creating a smaller school climate. Two high schools also offer special opportunities for parents, teachers, and students to interact (e.g., Holiday Dinners and barbeques).

Attachment 3 provides a chart listing all responses to item 2, including those which have been identified and described more extensively in another report on WCPSS out-of-class support services (Lewis, 2003).

Item 3: What alternatives do you see as possibilities for creating smaller learning communities in your school?

The third item on the survey asked respondents to identify strategies their schools may use in the future to create smaller learning communities. Overall, this item elicited fewer responses than the other items; five schools did not offer any suggestions for creating smaller learning communities. Responses to this item suggested that different schools have different visions for reforming the school environment. (Attachment 4 lists all responses.)

Responses: Middle School Principals

When asked about strategies they envisioned as possibilities for creating smaller learning communities within their schools, middle school principals listed a variety of approaches. At the same time, this item generated fewer responses, compared to the other items on the survey. The fact that principals made fewer suggestions about ways to create smaller learning communities in the future may indicate that they saw their schools as already using the most important or effective approaches.

The most frequently identified suggestion involved changing the structure, function, or composition of teams; this issue was referenced by 11 principals. Seven principals indicated that student teams needed to be smaller. For example, the principal at West Millbrook observed that “the teams are really too large for the [middle school] model,” and the principal at East Garner Middle suggested that “were students to be assigned to 2-person teams, the teams would be smaller with approximately 55 students each.” Other principals indicated that changing the way teams operated in their schools would help create smaller learning environments. One principal suggested that a “stronger emphasis on teams” was important, and the principal at Fuquay-Varina Middle suggested that assigning a special education resource teacher on a by-team basis would facilitate a smaller learning community in his school. Two additional principals indicated that creating a common planning time for team teachers would improve the way teams functioned.

Six principals indicated that using block scheduling represented a possibility for creating smaller learning communities in their school. As the principal at East Cary noted, “A modified or block schedule would reduce the number of students that teachers see in a day creating stronger relationships and fewer transitions.”

Four principals suggested that adding staff would allow their schools to reduce student-staff ratios, and create a smaller learning environment. As the principal at Davis Drive remarked, “If I had more teaching positions I would lower class size and create new teams [and] thus smaller communities.”

Three principals indicated that creating or strengthening existing mentoring or advising programs would be useful. The principal at Moore Square Middle observed that “having more mentors/volunteers to help students during the day would help since...staff is limited.” Additionally, two principals reported that offering more opportunities for parents and staff to interact and communicate would create a stronger sense of community. One of these principals suggested that having an orientation day for rising 6th graders and their parents would be useful.

Two principals indicated that renovations to their existing facilities would help students and staff use the structure more effectively. As one principal noted, “we have a team presently that is not located together due to space and large student numbers.”

Responses: High School APIs

As was the case for middle school principals, the third item generated fewer responses from high school APIs. Furthermore, none of the suggestions for creating smaller learning communities was identified by more than three respondents.

However, several respondents indicated that they would like to implement some elements of the schools-within-schools model at their sites. Three APIs indicated that geographically isolating grades or groups within the school facility was a possibility for reform at their school. Two APIs indicated that they would like to create mini-academies. Teaming teachers was seen as a possibility at two schools, with one of these schools reporting that a common planning period for teachers as well as a Paideia approach was desirable. Additionally, one API reported that dividing students into teams or houses was an option at his school site.

Two APIs reported that improving mentoring or advising programs could help create a smaller school environment. The use of block scheduling was seen as another possibility for reform at two schools. The adoption of an International Baccalaureate Program (IB) model was suggested by two schools, with one additional school reporting that curriculum mapping across the school (one of the features of the IB model) would be beneficial. Two schools indicated that additional staff could help decrease class sizes, and promote a small school environment.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, WCPSS schools appear to be making some strides in creating smaller learning communities and finding ways to personalize the school environment for students. Responses to the survey indicated that schools have approached this issue in a variety of ways, but that each school has at least one strategy in place to accomplish this goal.

Middle schools appear to have invested in the schools-within-schools model more heavily than high schools. At least one element of this model was used at each middle school, and nearly all middle school principals reported that their schools were using at least two methods to break the student body into smaller units. At the same time, 15 high schools reported the use of at least one subdividing technique, and six indicated that they were interested in implementing additional strategies in the future.

While they used fewer strategies related to the schools-within-schools model, high schools in WCPSS offer a variety of support services and strategies. In some cases, these services may be viewed as alternatives to schools-within-schools models, although some (such as guidance programs) were not directly related to the creation of smaller learning communities, and some created smaller learning environments only for specific segments of the student body. The fact that WCPSS high schools are considerably larger than the middle schools suggests that strategies used to subdivide the student body could have advantages at the high school level, though logistical concerns related to space and staffing may make these reforms more difficult to implement.

References

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Attachment 1

Smaller Learning Communities Questionnaire

Name of School _____

1. What are you currently doing to create smaller learning communities for your students?
Check all that apply.

_____ Dividing grades into “houses” of students.

_____ Geographically isolating grades within the school facility.

_____ Creating mini “academies” (e.g., career academies). (*High school version only.*)

_____ Teaming teachers. Please describe briefly:

_____ Other. Please describe:

2. Are there other ways in which you are trying to create a smaller school atmosphere by personalizing the environment or engaging students more fully in school (e.g., via extracurricular support services)?

3. What alternatives do you see as possibilities for creating smaller learning communities in your school?

Smaller Learning Communities Questionnaire

Name of School _____

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Check all that apply.

____ Dividing grades into “houses” of students.

____ Geographically isolating grades within the school facility.

____ Teaming teachers. Please describe briefly:

____ Other. Please describe:

2. Are there other ways in which you are trying to create a smaller school atmosphere by personalizing the environment or engaging students more fully in school (e.g., via extracurricular support services)?

3. What alternatives do you see as possibilities for creating smaller learning communities in your school?

Attachment 2

Item One: Middle School Principals' Responses

School	Houses/Teams of students	Isolating grades	Teaming teachers	Common planning period/ collaboration opportunities	Rotating teacher/smaller class size	Block Scheduling
Apex	1	1	1			
Carnage	1	1	1	1	1	
Carroll		1	1			
Centennial Campus	1	1	1	1		1
Daniels	1	1	1			
Davis Drive	1	1	1	1		
Dillard Drive		1				
Durant	1	1	1			
East Cary	1	1	1			
East Garner		1	1	1		
East Millbrook	1	1	1			
East Wake			1	1		
Fuquay-Varina	1	1	1			
Leesville Road	1	1	1			
Ligon GT Magnet	1	1	1			
Lufkin Road		1	1			
Martin	1	1	1			1
Moore Square	1	1	1			
Mt. Vernon		1	1			
North Garner	1	1	1		1	
Wakefield	1	1	1			
Wake Forest- Rolesville		1	1			
West Lake	1	1	1		1	
West Cary	1	1	1			
West Millbrook		1	1	1		
Zebulon	1	1	1		1	
Totals	18	25	25	6	4	2

Item One: High School APIs' Responses

	High School	Dividing grades into "houses" of students.	Geographically isolating grades within facility.	Creating mini "academies"	Teaming teachers.	Padela	Common planning time for teams/groups of teachers	Developing interdepartmental/interdisciplinary projects.	Pals	Small Learning Communities/IB Model	Curriculum mapping and interdisciplinary lessons
Apex			1					1			
Athens Drive			1	1						1	
Broughton		1					1			1	
Cary		1	1	1				1			
East Wake											
Enloe		1		1				1			
Fuquay-Varina	1	1	1	1	1			1	1		
Garner			1						1		
Green Hope			1	1	1						
Leesville Road				1							
Longview		1		1							
Middle Creek						1					
Millbrook				1					1		1
Sanderson			1	1	1						
Southeast Raleigh			1	1					1		
Wakefield			1	1							
Wake Forest-Rolesville	1	1	1	1							
Total	2	6	10	12	3	1	1	4	4		1

Attachment 3

Item Two: Middle School Principals' Responses

School	Extracurricular programs for specific subgroups	Special support services for specific subgroups	6th grade transition program	Tutoring	Mentoring/Advising program	Extracurricular team or departmental activities	Intramurals program/sports for individual students	Extra opportunities for parents/teachers/students to interact	Pull-out enrichment/students to groups	Homerooms	
Apex Middle							1				
Carnage	1			1					1		
Carroll							1				
Centennial Campus			1	1		1					
Daniels								1	1		
Davis Drive				1		1	1				
Dillard Drive							1				
Durant								1			
East Cary					1						
East Garner				1	1		1				
East Millbrook				1							
East Wake											
Fuquay-Varina					1						
Leesville Road		1		1		1	1				
Ligon GT Magnet			1		1		1			1	
Lufkin Road											
Martin											
Moore Square	1								1		
Mt. Vernon											
North Garner				1							
Wakefield					1						
Wake Forest-Rolesville				1	1						
West Cary		1		1	1						
West Lake					1						
West Millbrook						1	1				
Zebulon						1					
Totals	2	2	2	5	10	5	3	8	2	3	1

Item Two: High School APIs' Responses

School	Extracurricular programs for specific subgroups	Special support services for specific subgroups	6th grade transition program	Tutoring	Mentoring/Advising program	Extracurricular team or departmental activities	Intramurals program/sports for individual students	Clubs/Extracurricular activities for individual students	Extra opportunities for parents/teachers to interact	Pull-Out enrichment/students to groups	Homerooms
Apex Middle							1				
Carnage	1			1						1	
Carroll							1				
Centennial Campus			1	1		1					
Daniels								1	1		
Davis Drive				1		1	1				
Dillard Drive							1				
Durant								1			
East Cary						1					
East Garner				1	1			1			
East Millbrook				1							
East Wake											
Fuquay-Varina						1					
Leesville Road		1		1		1	1	1			
Ligon GT Magnet			1		1			1			1
Lufkin Road											
Martin											
Moore Square	1									1	
Mt. Vernon											
North Garner				1							
Wakefield					1						
Wake Forest-Rolesville				1	1						
West Cary		1		1	1						
West Lake					1						
West Millbrook						1		1			
Zebulon						1					
Totals	2	2	2	5	10	5	3	8	2	3	1

Attachment 4

Item Three: Middle School Principals' Survey

School	Separate teams/houses of students/teachers	Better communication with parents	Smaller teams of students	Changing team structure/activities	Common/extended opportunities	Adult professional planning communities	Mentoring/Advising program	Block scheduling/instruction changes	Adding staff	Clubs/extracurricular activities renovation	Extra space/facilities	Intramurals program	
Apex			1		1								
Carnage													
Carroll	1												
Centennial Campus							1						
Daniels		1											
Davis Drive		1						1					
Dillard Drive													
Durant	1												
East Cary								1					
East Garner		1											
East Millbrook			1										
East Wake													
Fuquay-Varina			1										
Leesville Road									1				
Ligon GT Magnet								1					
Lufkin Road					1	1						1	
Martin	1												
Moore Square						1							
North Garner								1	1		1		
Mt. Vernon							1						
Wake-field		1						1					
Wake Forest-Rolesville								1					
West Cary			1					1	1				
West Lake			1	1									
West Millbrook		1									1		
Zebulon		1							1				
Totals	1	2	7	4	2	1	3	1	6	4	1	2	1

Item Three: High School APIs' Responses

School	Geographically isolating grades or groups	Dividing grades into "houses" or teams	Creating grades into "houses" or teams	Teaming mini academies	Common teachers	Padeia	Mentoring or advising period	Block scheduling	Assigning high risk students to special schedule	IB magnet program	Curriculum mapping-whole school	Integrated curriculum	Additional staffing	Instructional modifications	Extend school day
Apex	1		1												
Athens Drive							1								
Broughton									1						
Cary															
East Wake		1													
Enloe								1							
Fuquay-Varina	1														
Garner									1						
Green Hope											1	1	1		
Leesville Road	1		1	1	1	1									
Longview										1					
Middle Creek	1														
Millbrook						1									
Sanderson		1													
Southeast Raleigh											1				
Wakefield															
Wake Forest-Rolesville							1								
Total	3	1	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	