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Connecting to Kids With Small Learning Environments

Nettie Legters, Ph.D. • February 2009

Topic: Dropout Prevention
Practice: Learning Environment

Highlights

- Personalizing the learning environment has become a main strategy used to transform large secondary schools into smaller, engaging learning environments that help students advance towards graduation.
- Strategies that aid in personalizing a learning environment include: establishing small learning communities and interdisciplinary teams, flexible scheduling, and extracurricular activities.
- Programs that aim to provide a smooth transition from middle school to high school can be effective for students.
- Undergoing an inclusive and transparent planning process is a key to creating a successful learning environment.

About the Interviewee

Nettie Legters is a Research Scientist at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools. She co-directs the Center's Talent Development High Schools program and Everyone Graduates Center and is a nationally recognized expert on high school reform and dropout prevention.

Legters' current research focuses on micro-process interventions that provide students in high-poverty settings with the support, skills, incentives, and perspectives they need to successfully negotiate the transition into high school. She also is leading a project to identify indicators of high-fidelity implementation across a broad range of high school reform strategies. She serves on the advisory board for the randomized field evaluation of North Carolina's Learn and Earn early college high schools initiative, and is a senior advisor to ongoing projects at the National High School Center. She has a Ph.D. in Sociology from Johns Hopkins University.

Full Transcript

I'm Nettie Legters. I'm a Research Scientist with the Johns Hopkins University Center For Social Organization of Schools. I am also a Co-Director of the Center's Everyone Graduates Initiative and its Talent Development High Schools Program.

We have over a million young people who are dropping out of school every year and even more who are graduating from high school woefully unprepared for success in college and post-secondary training or in career and civic life. Personalizing the learning environment has become one of the main strategies that folks are adopting to transform large, bureaucratically-organized, anonymous, impersonal secondary schools into more personalized learning environments that engage students, meet their needs, and help them achieve and advance to graduation.

There're many ways to personalize the learning environment, and schools have been experimenting with all of these to good result. There's small learning communities, there's advisories, there's interdisciplinary teams, there's flexible scheduling, extracurricular activities. Schools are even reaching down into their feeder schools to get data on the students, so they can actually get to know them before they get to the school doors, setting up a Summer Bridge Program so that there is a community building and an academic skills building opportunity even before students get to school. So, there are lots of different ways that, you know, specific concrete strategies that schools are using to personalize learning environment.

One of the most prominent approaches to personalizing learning environment has been to kind of take large schools and break them down into smaller units. So, this occurs through the creation of new small schools or, in many cases, the creation of small learning communities. So some examples of small learning communities include ninth grade academies. There's a large push out there to really support kids who are undergoing a transition either into sixth grade or into ninth grade, and so ninth grade academies are a good example of a small learning community in a high school, and career academies—and career academies are small-learning communities that have a career focus.

The other approach that schools have taken to create even smaller instructional units are interdisciplinary teams, so breaking a small learning community down into interdisciplinary teams. An interdisciplinary team

typically consists of a math, an English, a science, and a social studies teacher. Those teachers have what's called a common-planning time every single day, preferably, and they share all the same students. The teams are really the front line when it comes to troubleshooting around what we call the ABC's of dropout prevention, and that's attendance, behavior, and course performance. And so, the teams are equipped with data and with their immediate experience of every student, and so when they meet, they can look back and see over the last, you know, week or two, who hasn't been coming to school, who has been enacting out, who has been falling behind in their homework, and really get on that before the problem gets so serious that the kid has fallen off track.

We've found that schools are much more likely to be successful in this conversion process if they undergo a very inclusive and transparent planning process so that all the adults are involved in looking at the data, understanding why they are doing this in the first place, really and seeing how many students are dropping out and how many students aren't succeeding, and then participating in all the steps of developing what kinds of small-learning communities they are going to have, what are the themes going to be. We've found that small learning communities that are really designed around student interest and faculty strengths and the availability of supporting partners, external partners, those small learning communities are really going to be strong.