

Summary of Research on Successful High Schools

This research represents a broad look at the literature on high schools. Critically, what does matter about these research findings is that they show that these features matter for ALL kids but have particularly powerful effects for our most vulnerable kids.

10 Features of Good Small Schools: Redesigning High Schools, What Matters and What Works

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Full Study located here:

https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/10-features-good-small-schools-redesigning-high-schools-what-matters-and-what-works_0.pdf

Introduction:

“We dare many of our children to learn in schools that were designed at the turn of the last century explicitly on the factory model - schools in which we put children on a conveyor belt and move them from one overloaded teachers to the next, from 45 minute class period to 45 minute class period, to be stamped with separate disconnected lessons six or seven or eight times a day.”

The introduction to this article points out that institutional structures often present barriers to learning and success. The authors point to the idea that a broad body of research suggests that smaller schools are better. Yet, they caution that “small is not enough.” This article points out 10 features of successful high schools.

Feature 1: Personalization

The goal of personalization is to create schools that support the development of “meaningful, sustained relationships among teachers and students.” These successful small schools also typically have smaller classes so that teachers see fewer students each day. Schools create smaller class sizes by thinking about staffing in creative ways.

For greater personalization, these small high schools also reorganize the structure of the school day by having teachers teach fewer students for longer blocks of time. In these schools, students generally take fewer courses at one time.

Successful high schools also find ways for teachers to collaborate closely in curriculum and student support.

Feature 2: Continuous Relationships

Successful high schools structure ways for teacher/student relationships to develop over time through “looping.” “Looping” means that teachers teach the same students for multiple years. In this way both teachers and students develop stronger and more lasting bonds.

These schools also use “advisories” as a way for students to receive ongoing academic counseling and supports. Advisories are usually 10-15 students with a faculty advisor (teacher, staff, counselor, admin) and meet regularly each week. In many schools students stay with the same advisor for multiple years. Advisors also can communicate regularly with parents and family members and serve as advocates for their students advisees.

Feature 3: High Standards and Performance Based Assessments

Successful high schools articulate clear and rigorous goals. They have common expectations of high standards for all students. These schools work continuously to create and communicate standards that teachers, students and families understand.

In these schools, there is a focus on student work. Teachers and students continually discuss, review and analyze student work.

Successful high schools also employ “performance based assessments.” Generally, performance based assessments include:

- portfolios of student work that demonstrate in-depth study through research papers, scientific experiments et.
- rubrics that illustrate the set of standards against which student work will be measured
- oral presentations and exhibitions by students to a committee of parents, teachers, students etc.
- opportunities for students to revise their work and improve in order to demonstrate that their learning meets the standard.

Feature 4: Authentic Curriculum

Teachers in successful schools use engaging curriculum and challenge students to understand concepts deeply. Authentic curriculum focuses on deep understandings, integrating evidence, weighing different ideas and developing analytical skills.

Authentic curriculum is intellectually challenging work. Usually this work includes large integrated projects. Additionally, curriculum is linked to students’ lives and interests. The idea of Authentic curriculum is “less is more” - it forgoes the idea of superficially covering large quantities of information. Instead, authentic curriculum focuses on personalized instruction, partnerships with community organizations and ways for students to better understand the world that they live in.

Authentic curriculum includes internships and community service projects. It also prepares students for higher education through connections to colleges and universities.

Feature 5: Adaptive Pedagogy

Adaptive pedagogy focuses on instruction that is based on understanding the different ways that people learn. This type of instruction uses many different instructional strategies including group work, inquiry, discussions, projects, independent work, internet research, construction of models, use of technology, arts integration etc.

In successful high schools, academic skills are explicitly taught to all students. Teachers work to make sure that all students can access and understand the work. These schools also have a culture of “revision and redemption” - students can always redo their work to ultimately show that they understand the material. Students also receive extra supports when they need it.

Feature 6: Multicultural and Anti-racist Teaching

This feature focuses on high expectations for ALL students. Multi-cultural / Anti-racist teaching acknowledges how discrimination and racism affects the outcomes for marginalized student groups in schools. In order to combat this discrimination and racism, multi-cultural and anti-racist teaching using “culturally responsive pedagogy.” Culturally responsive pedagogy means that teachers form and maintain connections with their students, they celebrate their students as individuals and members of specific cultures. These teachers regularly incorporate instructional materials that represent a variety of viewpoints.

In order to do this work, teachers and schools have a good knowledge of their community. They have an active approach to teaching. In these schools there is no tracking and students and teachers are involved in democratic decision making.

Feature 7: Knowledgeable and Skilled Teachers

Successful high schools have highly qualified teachers who know how to make content accessible, they understand the needs of diverse learners and they know how to support the learning process. These teachers have good knowledge of their content and also effective instructional strategies to meet the needs of all students.

Feature 8: Collaborative Planning and Professional Development

Effective teachers have time to collaborate and plan together. They work together to carefully craft lessons.

Feature 9: Family and Community Connections

Successful high schools create strong family and school partnerships. These schools treat families as experts on their own child’s needs. In these schools parents and teachers look at student work together. Parents are invited to contribute to the classroom. Families cultures and languages are valued and respected in meaningful ways.

These high schools find ways to have time for parents and teachers and students to meet regularly to talk. There are opportunities for parents to work in “co-constructing” the schools. Additionally, these schools support family learning opportunities and activities.

Feature 10: Democratic Decision Making

In these schools there are shared norms and values that have been developed by the whole community. Teachers play an important role in school governance. There is also meaningful involvement of students, parents and families in governance and decision making at the school.

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