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Small School Sustainability: A Study of Tensions and Solutions for Small School Teachers

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of
Education

by

Clare Levy Clarke

2012

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Small School Sustainability: A Study of Tensions and Solutions for Small School Teachers

by

Clare Levy Clarke

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Megan Loef Franke, Chair

This study explored the unique issues that small school teachers face as school leaders and as teachers. Teachers and principals from three small public high schools participated in interviews and focus groups in which they discussed frustrating tensions (i.e., long hours, equity amongst teacher inputs, teacher buy-in) teachers experienced in their small schools and, by extension, potentially damaging forces to small school sustainability.

I found that many teachers valued the opportunities to be teacher leaders, to collaborate, and to make meaningful changes in their schools, but they felt overwhelmed and frustrated by aspects of their school culture and structures which interfered with their capacities to do so. Some teachers felt isolated in their professional communities. Some felt overwhelmed by the demands put upon them. And some felt a lack of support from school leaders.

This study is relevant to teachers and leaders in small schools as well as leaders of the small school movement. It recommends that small school leaders establish a leadership model that fits the vision of their school and their community of teachers at the same time. Small school leaders also need to bring teachers to the table for vision-forming conversations, even if it means revisiting the same conversations and re-crafting the school vision year after year. Just as small school teachers should be integral participants in their school leadership practices and in the development of school vision, their voices should also be heard when it comes to designing teacher supports. To that end, small school leaders need to make practices meaningful and honest for teachers when designing support programs.

The dissertation of Clare Levy Clarke is approved.

Ronald G. Gallimore

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2012

DEDICATION PAGE

I dedicate this work to my daughter, Norah Frances Clarke. To you, my sweet baby girl, I dedicate my love of teaching and my passion for school reform. I wish for you a life in which learning excites you and inspires you to explore that special curiosity of yours.

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I want to thank my parents for being amazing sources of support and love. From giving me the incredible educational experience I have been so lucky to have to giving me the tools to discover a profession that truly feels like a calling. I could *never* have completed this endeavor without their support, faith, love—and childcare.

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that came with them—and took them on as his own. For him, for his belief in me, and for his perfection as a husband and father, my gratitude and my love are endless. Here’s to “Daddy Days!”

VITA

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CHAPTER 1: PROBLEM STATEMENT

I began my teaching career on East 15th Street. My Manhattan school was the 5th floor of the historic building which once housed Stuyvesant High School. Its facade recalled its former all-boys public school, but the world of the Institute for Collaborative Education (I.C.E.) was far from the traditional school that once occupied the building. Because the demands often went beyond those of a traditional public school, it was at I.C.E. that I truly became a teacher. There, I discovered that my role in shaping the school community was as critical to my students' successes as my role in the classroom. My life at I.C.E. was all-consuming: it was the world of a teacher in a small, start-up school.

I.C.E. was a small, progressive public school serving 450 students in grades 6-12 and was one of few schools in New York City exempt from taking the standardized Regents Exams. Classes of 15-20 students investigated diseases in science, put Lady Macbeth on trial in humanities, or defended their arguments for historical thesis projects. As a teacher, I saw student inquiry, discussion, and analysis at the heart of the classroom. I assessed students through final projects like monologues, memoirs, documentary projects, and portfolio exhibitions rather than “high stakes” tests. When the school day ended, students stayed—many because they had nowhere to go. Each night when I left, I.C.E. came with me. I called parents on my walk to the subway. I graded papers on the train. My cell phone rang with students' calls soon after I arrived home. Emails from colleagues circulated throughout the evening. Each morning, I phoned my “wake up call” students to get them going. Behind the scenes, I, along with twenty-four other teachers, helped move the school forward. I wrote curricula, discussed individual students' educational plans, held parent meetings, led professional development sessions, and collaborated with colleagues in planning classroom instruction as well as school operations.

I do not pretend that I.C.E. was perfect. While many students thrived in the classroom, others were lost. Special needs students were under-resourced. Our methods of teaching classrooms of diverse learners did not reach everyone. Because space was limited, we turned large storerooms into inadequate makeshift classrooms. We promoted under-performers out of fear of losing them to the streets. Unfinished after-school meetings led to before-school meetings. Often, lessons went unchanged because there was little time to reflect, collaborate, and improve. I.C.E. had a small cohort of strong, driven, impassioned teachers, but passion alone could not solve such problems.

Many teachers in small schools experience burnout as a result of the unique administrative and teaching responsibilities demanded of them. For some, burnout means low morale or exhaustion, for others, it means quitting. As reformers continue to push for small schools¹ as an answer to students at-risk of failing, we must consider the connection between teacher retention and school sustainability. Teacher retention is necessary for creating a stable professional community where teachers grow, develop, and establish their own best practices; thus, teacher retention is critical in establishing strong, stable schools (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Fullan, 1991).

¹ Varying definitions of what constitutes a small school exist even among reformers. Gladden (1998) notes two leading definitions of small school size. One definition suggests that a small school is one with a population of 500-900 students where students have access to the social benefits of a small-school environment, such as close teacher-student relationships, without having to suffer losses of resources on account of per-pupil spending (Lee and Smith, 1996; Monk, 1987; Haller, Monk, and Tien, 1992). Gladden presents an alternate definition of a small school that serves a diverse population of no more than 500 students and a cohesive faculty community that is led by a teacher-director; such a school also has a high level of autonomy from district mandates and has varying degrees of freedom in its structure, governance, and operations (Business and Professional People for the Public Interest, 1995; Cross City Campaign, 1995; Klonsky, 1995). While small public high schools find themselves along the spectrum of these two definitions, for the most part, this study will assume the latter definition when referring to small schools.

Causes of Teacher Burnout in Small Schools

Like me, many of my colleagues at I.C.E. were motivated by the work, but we were tired, overwhelmed, and burnt out. As a licensed secondary social studies teacher, I had completed required courses and certification tests, but I had no formal training on how to successfully tackle the teaching and administrative demands expected of teachers in new small schools. Collegiality and my own feelings of efficacy made for a strong professional community at I.C.E., but despite that, the work often seemed insurmountable.

While strong professional communities and strong teacher voices so often exist in small schools, teachers who are motivated by the work—and who are in fact drawn to the autonomy of small schools—are frequently overwhelmed by the administrative and teaching demands put upon them from day to day. Freudenberger (1974) coined the term burnout to refer to service professionals who are simply worn out by their work. Maslach and Jackson (1981) further defined burnout as having feelings of depression, low morale, and exhaustion. Teachers in small schools have noted their long hours—usually working well beyond the school day—and extra responsibilities including counseling students, fulfilling administrative duties, and meeting with students, parents, and colleagues in the evenings and on weekends. Such demands put upon teachers are especially hard-hitting in start-up schools (Anness, 1997; Klonsky, 2002).

Beyond the daily tasks required in small schools, one must recognize the fact that the small school movement is still young and in its pioneering phases. While it has stronger roots in cities such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, still, the oldest small public high schools of this modern movement are little more than two decades old.² Given this, many small schools' organizational and operational structures are in their fledgling years. While some

² The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) opened eleven small schools in 1984. While some small public schools existed before then, I am using this as a marker for the start of the modern small school movement.

teachers are often the ones shaping rules and policies in their schools, they are also the ones working under—and enforcing—policies that have yet to solidify their roots. Researchers (Dworkin, 2001) point out that teacher burnout can result when a school seems to have no rules or when the rules are perceived as being dysfunctional.

While many teachers choose small schools with an understanding of their demanding expectations, they actually have little preparation with which to meet these demands. Because many teachers in small schools were trained in more traditional schools with top-down management, few have experience in shared decision-making in the workplace; they often lack skills in collaborative group problem solving and decision making (Holland, 2002). As Linda Darling Hammond (1996) notes, teacher training today does not generally provide instruction on the skills needed for democratic schooling. Similarly, current school reform, centering on high-stakes standardized tests, further detracts from supporting teachers with the skills they need to teach in democratic schools where inquiry-based instruction is the focus (Dworkin, Saha, & Hill, 2003).

As mentioned previously, many teachers choose small schools with an idea of what will be required of them. They believe in the vision of small school reform, and they choose to be part of the work. While they may have an understanding of what is expected, they do not necessarily have the training or the supports necessary to effectively meet those expectations. As a result, teachers in small schools often experience burnout. As stated earlier, burnout can mean exhaustion, low morale, and, even, depression. Although burnout does not *necessarily* lead to quitting (A. Gary Dworkin, 2001), turnover can result.

Research Questions

Research shows that many teachers in new small schools experience burnout as a result of the unique administrative and teaching responsibilities demanded of them. In this qualitative study, my research project addressed following research questions:

1. From the perspective of teacher leaders and administrators, to what extent do teachers feel prepared for and/or supported in the administrative and teaching demands of the small schools in which they work?
2. In what ways do teachers feel prepared for and/or supported in for the administrative and teaching demands of the small schools in which they work?
3. From the perspective of teachers, how do the cultural norms, institutional structures, and mission of their small schools place demands and/or indirect pressure on them to go above and beyond what is required?

Small School Reform

In recent years, the small school movement has been gaining momentum in the eyes of reformers who see a connection between school size and low academic achievement. According to the Department of Education, 30% of all public schools in the U.S. enrolled between 750-1500 students in the 1999-2000 academic year. In that same year, 14% of all public schools enrolled over 1500 students. In larger districts, some schools enrolled between 2000-5000 students (Education, 2001). Some believe large school size can contribute to problems, such as school violence, poor attendance, and low academic achievement, particularly affecting low-income, minority youth (Fine, 1994; Lee & Smith, 1997; P. A. Wasley, et al., 2000). Many of these youth are placed in classes with inexperienced teachers and low-level curricula (Oakes, 1987; P. Wasley, 2002). Such problems have been connected to students dropping out of high school (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986; Rumberger, 1987; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Greene, 2002, Russell W. Rumberger, 2004).

The small public high school has become an increasingly popular alternative to the failing large comprehensive public high school. While it is not necessarily small size that is the key to successful school reform, the environments that small schools offer often lead to school improvement (Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006). Research shows that small schools are safer than larger public schools and have fewer incidents of violence (Franklin & Crone, 1992; Zane, 1994; National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). Raywid (1997/1998) reveals that “at risk” youth attending small schools are more likely to outperform their peers attending comprehensive large schools. Students in small schools tend to have higher grades, gain more course credits, and have higher standardized test scores than their peers in large schools; similarly, students in small schools are more likely to make advancements in grade levels and attainment of higher education (Fine, 1994; Oxley, 1995; Bryk & Driscoll, 1998; Lee & Smith, 1996; Sares, 1992). In her review of small schools and their impacts on schooling, Cotton (1996) connected improved student attitude, behaviors, and achievement to small schools. Cotton also highlighted the presence of strong professional communities in many small schools. Characteristic of such communities were improved teacher efficacy, positive teacher attitudes, and strong interpersonal relationships among teachers, students, and administrators.

Teachers’ Experiences in Small Schools

The Challenge of Sustaining Teachers through Professional Community and Shared Decision-Making

No matter which definition small school reformers ascribe, they generally believe that strong interpersonal relationships are the cornerstone of a school. The strength of interpersonal relationships when combined with feelings of teacher efficacy and satisfaction are indicators of *professional community*. The strength of a school is often dependent upon the strength of its

professional community. Bryk & Driscoll (1988) discuss the necessity of having a common vision among adults (and students) in order to engender shared commitment and intrinsic motivation throughout the school. They contrast their concept of a “communal” school with the traditional school where teachers have a weakened sense of efficacy and demonstrate less commitment to the school (Grant, 1988). Alternatively, Bryk suggests that motivation and shared commitment amongst teachers in small schools inherently give strength to the overall professional community.

This picture of professional community is evident in small schools where “democratic” schooling is practiced. Small schools often practice democratic schooling, a philosophy adopted from John Dewey. Dewey’s vision of the ideal democratic school meant teachers, students, and administrators sharing in the teaching and learning processes as well as in the school governance and decision-making processes. Democratic schools hinge on teachers’ abilities to guide student-centered instruction and to participate in the communal school through shared vision, purpose, and meaning (Soltis, 1994).

Research has provided evidence of democratic practices in small schools through teachers’ collective support of the schools’ mission, vision, and goals. These have included a commitment to reform, to small school size, to shared responsibility for student interests, to collective accountability, to collaborative work, and to enhancing the school’s mission through instructional practice. In such small schools, faculty often share administrative and teaching responsibilities (Holland, 2002; Johnson & Landman, 2000; AIR/SRI, 2003). Teachers who are empowered by the work are more likely to be active change agents (Feimen-Nemser and Floden, 1986); thus, teachers in small schools who participate in shared leadership and experience autonomy in curricular decisions are more likely to be empowered by their work than their

counterparts in large, urban schools (Woods & Weasmer, 2002). Research shows a positive connection between teacher investment in their schools and their inclusion in the decision-making process of school development (Sizer, 1984; Marks & Louis, 1997; White, 1992; Chapman, 1988, 1990). Studies show that teacher satisfaction and professional climate increase in small schools as evidenced by observations of high teacher morale, positive feelings toward work, close relationships with students, supportive collegial environments, and a presence of collaboration among students, teachers, and administrators (Oxley, 1995; Fine, 1994; Zane, 1994; Larson, 1991; Bryk and Driscoll, 1988; Gottfredson, 1985). Researchers find that teachers in small public high schools perceive they have a stronger professional community than teachers in larger high schools (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Even though some teachers in small schools experience characteristics of burnout, they also report that they are more motivated and rejuvenated by their work and by their professional communities than they had been in previous jobs (AIR/SRI, 2003). Teachers in many small schools generally believe they have a voice in making schoolwide decisions and are often essential in doing just that.

While some research clearly shows the presence of positive professional communities in small schools, some studies show that the opposite is true, particularly when teacher satisfaction is low (Bryk and Driscoll, 1988; Oxley, 1990; Lee, Dedrick, and Smith, 1991; Rutter, 1986). More specifically, small school teachers often feel overwhelmed by the multiple responsibilities, including administrative and counseling duties, they have to take on in addition to their classroom teaching. Feelings of helplessness are common. Such negative feelings are particularly evident among teachers who do not necessarily choose to be part of their small schools or who do not “buy in” to the mission, vision, and goals (Business and Professional People for the Public Interest, 1995; Fine, 1994; AIR/SRI, 2003).

While research has not shown a connection between the professional climate and improved teaching and administrative practices (Lee and Smith, 1994; Lee, Smith, and Croninger, 1995), Newmann and Wehlage (1995) highlight the connection between a strong professional community and student achievement.³ They find that within strong professional communities, collaboration, professional accountability, and shared goals among teachers create supporting and demanding environments for students. Such environments ultimately lead to improved student achievement. Given this, Holland (2002) recognizes the importance of understanding the factors that support and sustain educators in schools today.

Demanding Work: Balancing Long Hours with Teaching and Administrative Responsibilities

As mentioned above, positive feelings toward one's professional community do not overshadow the feelings of burnout when teachers in small schools work long hours and tackle multiple responsibilities beyond their classroom duties (i.e., administrative duties, student counseling, after-hours meetings). Research (Johnson & Landman, 2000; AIR/SRI, 2003) shows that teachers in new small start-up schools feel particularly overwhelmed by the demands of keeping new schools functioning. Beyond their classroom teaching, their roles and responsibilities include school governance and decision-making, curriculum design, student advising, extracurricular coaching, and administrative decision making such as budgeting and building management. Teachers report that their work—teaching and nonteaching—is overwhelming and their time is limited. Principals often depend on teachers to take on administrative tasks in addition to their teacher roles. These teachers, many of whom have never been administrators, feel the pressure of making decisions about recruitment, operations,

³ In her synthesis of small school literature, Cotton (1996) claims that little attention has been given to this connection between the professional climate and student achievement. The reader should note that research does not conclusively connect small schools with academic achievement (Foley and McConaughy, 1982).

structure, and instruction, often without having strong guidance on how to make such decisions. (The responsibilities are particularly challenging for the large numbers of inexperienced teachers.) (Johnson & Landman, 2000).

Such responsibilities are uniquely taxing on teachers in conversion schools and schools-within-schools where teachers have responsibilities in both the small school as well as in the larger school complex. In these situations, teachers are often stretched thin and find it difficult to balance their duties (Holland, 2002; AIR/SRI, 2003).

While many claim to be motivated by their small school work, they also spoke of being overly-stressed and tired. In several schools, the long hours, the multiple responsibilities, the feeling of helplessness, and the demanding expectations lead committed teachers to leave their schools, largely because they feel burnt out (Johnson & Landman, 2000; Holland, 2002; AIR/SRI, 2003). On the other hand, some teachers, who were initially attracted to small school work precisely because of the emphasis on shared decision-making, find that their schools practice more traditional top-down management. As a result, these teachers find themselves frustrated and dissatisfied because they are being left out of decision-making processes. Alternatively, teachers whose schools are converted from large schools into small schools (i.e., small learning communities, schools-within-schools, etc.) without their support often have little “buy in” for the small school model (Johnson & Landman, 2000; (Marshak, 2010) or the demanding work that comes with it.

Lack of Effective Preparation for Teachers in Small Schools

A lack of preparation for small school teaching coupled with a lack of ongoing institutional support can increase the likelihood of teacher burnout. Teachers in small schools

often lack training in shared decision-making and group problem-solving skills, skills that are critical in democratically-run small schools. Teachers who come from traditional “top-down management” schools do not receive training in these democratic practices (Holland, 2002). Researchers find that start-up small schools which intend to capitalize on their collaborative cultures and provide mentoring and training through professional development, often have little time for either (AIR/SRI, 2003).

As mentioned previously, many teachers who join small schools are enthusiastic about reform efforts. Many of these teachers are inexperienced and are often among the most challenged, particularly when it comes to classroom management issues. Designing and administering curricula in small schools presents its own set of challenges to teachers—both veteran and inexperienced—who lack training in student-centered instruction. Teachers, particularly those in new start-up small schools, often feel they are ineffective in providing student-centered instruction (AIR/SRI, 2003).

Given that small school reform demands a new set of skills for small school teachers, advocates of small schools are calling for professional development that caters specifically to their teachers. Michael Klonsky, a leader in the small school movement, notes the need for systemic and ongoing professional developments in small schools that address the particular needs of small school teachers (Klonsky, 2002). For example, teachers who become principals or “project directors” in small schools need support (Cushman, 1999) in how to lead a school—not just their classroom—effectively. In their study comparing Chicago’s new small schools to larger comprehensive high schools, Wasley et al. (2000) find that teachers in small schools are more likely to engage in professional developments that specifically address their work in small schools rather than district-mandated professional development activities. Wasley and Lear

(2001) build on an earlier finding when they look at high-performing small learning communities; they find that professional development activities are ongoing and institutionally rooted in the communities themselves.

In their evaluation of Gates-funded small schools, researchers (AIR/SRI, 2003) find that grantee organizations often offer support to small school teams but the support does not necessarily meet the immediate needs of the school. For example, grantee organizations often focus on supporting schools' long-term planning needs rather than providing guidance for the day-to-day demands.⁴ Researchers also find that support from grantee organizations is overall inconsistent. In some cases, grantee organizations provide little support—long-term or short-term—to the small schools they help fund.

Intent of the Study

In this study, I examined the extent to which teacher burnout in new small public high schools was attributable to the following: lack of preparation and institutional support (e.g., professional development) teachers received specific to teaching in small schools; cultural norms of small schools that put pressure on teachers; demands teachers in small schools put upon themselves.

There is limited research about burnout-inducing tensions for small school teachers, particularly tensions that are connected to the culture and structure of small school communities. There are also few, if any, studies on small schools that use such tensions as a basis for offering recommendations that potentially support small school sustainability.

My intent is to help ensure the sustainability of small public high schools in Riverside by

⁴ This finding is specific to organizations receiving funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for the purpose of supporting and mentoring small start-up and conversion schools.

helping them better prepare and support teachers for the type of work that is expected of them. I looked at the systemic efforts small schools and their supporting organizations used to prepare their teachers to meet the more non-traditional demands of small schools. To do this, I conducted a qualitative study to understand administrators and teachers' perceptions about teacher training, professional development opportunities, and professional communities in Riverside City's small public high schools.

Product

My goal was to develop a set of guidelines for small school leaders as to the kind of supports that need to be provided in order to prepare teachers for the demands common to new small schools.

Conclusion

In *Horace's Hope*, Ted Sizer, founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools, writes the following:

What we have found...is that change in schools, ultimately raising their standards, is exceedingly difficult, and the incentives to undertake such change in most communities are very weak. The work is hard and teachers sometimes burn out. But we have also found much that is encouraging. Essential schools that have more or less "broken through" with their plans appear to help young people attain notably higher academic levels than were previously forecast for them, as conventionally measured. In such schools, attendance of both students and teachers rises, disciplinary problems decrease, more students graduate, college matriculation increases, and those who enter college make it through. Finally, we sense higher morale among teachers and students (Sizer, 1996).

As Sizer, a lifelong educator and a leader of the small school movement, notes, the work of school reform is hard. In the midst of the work, teachers can feel hopelessness and burnout. But, at the same time, Sizer saw the student gains that can come out of small school work. As a teacher in the Coalition's small schools, I have seen many student gains, but I have also seen the costs that teacher burnout has had on potential small school successes. While the small school movement is continuing to move forward, its progress is hindered by teacher dissatisfaction,

exhaustion, and, in some cases, turnover. With this study, I hope to help support the sustainability of small schools by energizing its teachers for the work that lay ahead of them. The work will likely continue to be challenging and, at times, overwhelming, but with the right systemic supports small school teachers can effectively carry out the work.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last three decades, educational reformers have been looking toward the modern small school movement more and more to solve such problems as school violence, rising dropout rates, and low academic achievement. Small schools have been shown to increase rates of student engagement, a factor researchers link to the above problems (Franklin & Crone, 1992; Sares, 1992; Zane, 1994; Fine, 1994; Oxley, 1995; Lee & Smith, 1996; Bryk & Driscoll, 1998; National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). Small schools offer learning communities that focus on close student-teacher relationships and inquiry-based learning where teachers have autonomy in their instruction. Small schools often offer unique professional communities that enable teachers to have a say in school governance; collaborate in curricula design; and participate in shared decision-making.

While small schools provide many motivating factors for teachers, they also foster an environment where teachers find their responsibilities to be overwhelming. So often, teachers are expected to take on administrative and teaching duties—in fact, that expectation is frequently an attraction for teachers to join small schools—without the necessary supports, training, or experience to complete the work. For some, despite the long hours and demanding responsibilities, this work is part of what builds strong professional communities so common in small schools. However, even the most motivated teachers have expressed feelings of being overwhelmed, helpless, or burnt out from the work. While teacher turnover in small schools does not always result from such experiences, the sustainability of small schools is called into question when teachers are expressing such feelings.

The theoretical framework underlying this problem is the learning theory of legitimate peripheral participation. According to this theory, learning occurs through social participation in

communities of practice. Legitimate peripheral participation involves newcomers becoming part of a community of practice through active participation in an effort to find identity and to ultimately shape the community. Just as access to a community of practice is a vehicle for learning through legitimate peripheral participation, denial of access can impede learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In the small school world, small schools themselves embody communities of practice, where teachers are the newcomers searching for identity.

In this chapter, I further apply the learning theory of legitimate peripheral participation to teachers making connections to their own learning processes and their unique evolving identities as *small school teachers*. In this application, I recognize aspects of legitimate peripheral participation that coincide with the experience of small school teachers as well as those that contradict the theory's assumptions. I then present studies that discuss the challenges of sustaining teachers through professional community and shared decision-making in small schools. Next, I discuss the specific demands of small school work that initially motivate teachers but, ultimately, cause teachers to express characteristics of burnout. I conclude this chapter with a discussion on the lack of effective preparation and support for teachers in small schools.

Theory of Legitimate Peripheral Participation

The theory of legitimate peripheral participation, put forth by Lave and Wenger (1991), analyzes the ways in which people learn in the social world. Legitimate peripheral participation refers to a learning process that takes place in a community and involves active participation of *newcomers* as they become a part of that community. According to Lave and Wenger, learning is driven by one's development of identity—both as an individual as well as part of a group—in a

community.⁵ The authors refer to the world in which individuals interact and participate in activities as a *community of practice*. While communities of practice exist everywhere—in a home, a school, a place of work—it is the ultimate *membership* to such communities that shape identity (Wenger, 1998).

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), learning through legitimate peripheral participation leads to the development of one's identity by becoming connected to a specific community of practice. As a result of the impact membership can have on a community, legitimate peripheral participation also leads to the reproduction as well as the transformation of the communities of practice.

In order to achieve genuine legitimate peripheral participation, Lave and Wenger put forth several components of the learning experience. First, they believe that learning occurs in a social world and is, in fact, an integral part of social participation, or a community of practice. Second, legitimate peripheral participation involves newcomers actively becoming a part of a community of practice where they are wholly invested and serve as full participants, rather than mere observers. With that, learning depends on interaction between *newcomers* and *old-timers*. In the U.S., this interaction often looks like an apprenticeship as seen in medical or legal training. In his examination of apprenticeships, Becker (1972) puts much of the onus of the learning experience on the learner himself; he that apprentices must guide their own learning by choosing teachers and setting goals for themselves. Third, legitimate peripheral participation involves intentional learning, learning in which the newcomer is fully involved and intent on making meaning. Ultimately, learning occurs within the developmental cycles of a community itself and,

⁵ The authors theorize that legitimate peripheral participation is part of *situated learning*, learning experiences that act as bridges between cognitive and social practices. Situated learning is not an isolated learning experience, rather it is a repeated part of social practice.

thus, through legitimate peripheral participation, continuously shapes the community and the knowledge within it (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

While Lave and Wenger (1991) place much of the responsibility for learning on the newcomer, they also recognize that without access to participation, the newcomer is not given genuine learning opportunities and, thus, cannot become a full member of a community. Access can be withheld through political and social structures. In fact, access is often denied to new participants by those who hold positions of power. Even further, access to *understanding* can be denied. (Lave and Wenger refer to tools, or artifacts, of practice as *technology of practice*. Technology of practice can be a general understanding of the workings of a community.) Becker (1972) recognizes that apprenticeships can fail when access to full participation is withheld. Without access, apprentices are denied the opportunities to learn what is necessary to master a trade.

In Lave and Wenger's theory of legitimate peripheral participation, learning hinges on the community of practice; for teachers in small schools, the community of colleagues, students, administrators, and parents make up the community of practice, or the professional community. As mentioned previously, the professional community in small schools often dictates the degree to which teachers feel satisfied and effective in their jobs. In this professional community, newcomers can be new or veteran teachers who were trained in large, traditional schools. In either case, newcomers depend on guidance for learning the unique democratic practices of small schools; unfortunately, such guidance is not always provided to the fullest extent. Much of the sustainability of small schools depends on teacher satisfaction, thus, legitimate peripheral participation of teachers is essential in small schools. In other words, teachers' development of identity—as teachers, as colleagues and collaborators, as leaders, as reformers—and their feeling

of membership to communities of practice are integral to the sustainability of small schools themselves. According to Lave and Wenger's theory, a teacher's learning through full participation in a community must be guided—by old-timers—but it must also be intent on making meaning. A teacher without proper guidance from others or without his own commitment to participate fully may fail to find identity as a small school teacher. Further, a teacher may lack the membership necessary to contribute to his community of practice. Just as learning and, by extension, knowledge will shape how a teacher participates, so will a lack of knowledge. Ultimately, a teacher's connection to a community of practice, or small school, through his own identity and knowledge will shape the formation of that small school.

While the theory of legitimate peripheral participation supports the idea of small schools as communities of practice and small school teachers as members, there are possible challenges to its implementation amongst small school teachers. First, the dependence on old-timers for guidance is risky in the small school world, particularly since many small school teachers are either new to small schools or new to teaching altogether. Given the fact that small schools are still largely new to the educational scene, there is an inherent obstacle to the dependence on old-timers for guidance. Second, as Lave and Wenger warn, lack of access can be a roadblock to legitimate peripheral participation. In small schools, a lack of access can derail teachers' efforts to participate on many fronts. For example, small school teachers who lack access to shared decision-making power may experience frustration and, thus, burnout. Similarly, small school teachers who are denied access to understanding, or technology of practice, may find equal frustration; such understanding may include tools for teaching in student-centered classrooms, for working in collaborative environments with democratic governance, or for meeting administrative demands without formal training. Third, according to Lave and Wenger, the

newcomer has few responsibilities other than to gain an understanding of the community's practice.

A newcomer's tasks are short and simple, the costs of errors are small, the apprentice has little responsibility for the activity as a whole. A newcomer's tasks tend to be positioned at the ends of branches of work processes, rather than in the middle of linked work segments....An apprentice's contributions to the ongoing activity gain value in practice—a value which increases as the apprentice becomes more adept (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 111).

While this distribution of responsibility may be true in certain communities of practice, it is rarely the case in small schools where every teacher is expected to uphold the responsibilities of a full participant, no matter his level of experience. According to this view and the demands put upon small school teachers, small schools do not necessarily enable newcomers to be true apprentices.

The Challenge of Sustaining Teachers through Professional Community and Shared Decision-Making

Professional Communities in Small Schools

The quality of a school's professional community depends on professional climate and teacher satisfaction. *Professional climate* is a measurement of interpersonal relationships among students, teachers, and administrators at a school. This often measures the degree of collaboration among adults as well as the strength of adult-student relationships. It also measures the degree to which faculty believe in a school's mission. *Teacher satisfaction* measures the degree of efficacy teachers feel in their schools (Gladden, 1998).

In addition, working in small schools leads to increases in teacher satisfaction and professional climate as indicated by high teacher morale, positive feelings toward work, close relationships with students, supportive collegial environments, and a presence of collaboration among students, teachers, and administrators (Oxley, 1995; Fine, 1994; Zane, 1994; Larson,

1991; Bryk and Driscoll, 1988; Gottfredson, 1985). Newmann and Wehlage (1995) also find that teachers in small public high schools feel more positively toward their professional communities in small schools than they did in their previous large high school work environments.

While small schools may foster strong professional communities, the demands put upon teachers in small schools can also negatively impact professional communities. So often, small schools' work is overwhelming for teachers, particularly those expected to balance multiple teaching and administrative responsibilities. Feelings of helplessness, low teacher satisfaction, and lack of "buy in" often result from this work. (Rutter, 1986; Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Oxley, 1990; Lee, Dedrick, & Smith, 1991; Fine, 1994; Business and Professional People for the Public Interest, 1995).

In their study of communal school organizations,⁶ Bryk and Driscoll (1988) recognized that while staff morale and feelings of teacher efficacy increased in small schools—when compared with large schools—their conclusions were not always clear-cut. For example, in some large schools teachers had stronger feelings of individualism simply because they had more choice in teaching and extra-curricular responsibilities (Powell et al., 1985). Additionally, teachers in larger schools may have had more resources allocated to them because of the relationship of income to the number of students served by the school. The authors also found that staff morale was higher in small schools; however, along with this, staff morale was higher in schools that were more selective as well as ones that had more parental cooperation (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988). While some small schools are more selective and have more parental

⁶ The organization, structure, and governance of a communally-organized school centers around a school's *common purpose*. Bryk & Driscoll (1988) outline the communally-organized school as an organization in which adults and students share values that promote a community of cooperation, motivation, and common purpose. Building a sense of community through strong relationships is essential to the workings of a communal school. To do this, these schools foster strong interpersonal relationships between teachers and students as well as a sense of shared responsibilities and decision-making power among faculty.

cooperation than others, such factors are not necessarily inherent in small schools. With that, Bryk and Driscoll (1988) recognize that further examination of external factors, such as government involvement and policies for firing teachers, is needed in order to understand how communal organizations impact the school community. The authors also recognize the absence of the role of school leaders in their study. Given that the principal can largely shape the development of a communal organization, the authors realize their shortcoming in omitting school leadership as a contributing factor for teacher attitudes.⁷

In her study of small Chicago public high schools, Holland (2002) found evidence of strong professional communities in small schools. Her study examined practices small schools (i.e. freestanding small schools, schools-within-schools, multischools)⁸ use to improve teaching and learning. Her study looked primarily at schools serving low-income, minority youth. Holland noted that in the 25 small schools she studied, faculty and staff largely shared a commitment to reform, a commitment to small school size, and a commitment to support their schools' mission through practice. Further, she found that teachers had a shared interest in the welfare of their students, as seen through advisory programs, regular meetings to discuss about students, daily classroom practices, and school policies. Teachers in small schools embraced collaboration—around instructional practices, lesson plans, and student issues—with one another. Teachers in Holland's sample of small schools felt a general accountability to one another, to their students,

⁷ While all of the 457 schools sampled in Bryk and Driscoll's study were not small schools, the authors recognize that small school settings offered the best environment for achieving the goals of a communal organization. Bryk (1994) and Lee and Smith (1995) indicate that the personal environment of small communal schools increases student engagement and decreases dropout rates.

⁸ For the purposes of Holland's study, a *freestanding small school* can either be a small school with its own space, budget and principal; or it can be a small school that is part of a multiplex in which several schools share a building as well as a principal, but it acts independently of the other schools in the complex. A *school-within-school* is a small school within a larger school of which it does not act independently; further, a school-within-school is subject to leadership or budgetary decisions made for the entire building. A *multischool* is a building comprised of several small schools; unlike freestanding small schools within a multiplex, a multischool's small schools do not act independently of one another.

and to the development of their school community. In addition to evidence of strong professional communities in small schools, Holland further found a connection between strong professional communities and improved student attendance as well as lower dropout rates.

While Holland's findings clearly demonstrate the existence of strong professional communities in small schools, she also recognized the components of small school life that are cause for concern when it comes to the strength of professional community. For example, Holland found that teachers' responsibilities included classroom as well as administrative duties and that teachers' hours extended long past the school day. In some cases, teachers were even pulled away from their own classrooms to meet other responsibilities during the school day, thus, leaving students without their teachers, or calling upon other teachers to cover for colleagues. Holland recognized that such conditions could be attributed to increased teacher turnover.

She also pointed out that in some schools, teachers had difficulty with collective decision-making because they feared offending colleagues; in small schools, where teachers work closely with one another, this fear can lead to unintended policy approvals (Holland, 2002). I address these specific findings in greater detail later in this chapter, but it is important to note here the strain such conditions may have on teachers and the negative impact they may have on the strength of the professional community—and, by extension, on the viability of the small school community. In many small schools, the strength of professional community is measured by the presence of democratic practices such as shared decision-making. I will address the influence shared decision-making practices, or lack thereof, have had in building professional communities in various small schools.

Shared Decision-Making in Site-Based Managed Schools

Shared decision-making has become a common thread within many small school professional communities today. While this move toward collective decision-making on the part of faculty is relatively unique to the modern small school movement, its roots grew out of reform nearly three decades ago. Following the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and the waves of reform that followed, Dworkin (2001) examines the effects that new education reform efforts have had on teachers. He specifically looks for teacher burnout patterns resulting from each of the following reform waves⁹: centralization in the late 1980s (Wave I); decentralization in the early 1990s (Wave II); and high-stakes testing in the late 1990s (Wave III). For the purposes of this argument, I will focus on Wave II reform efforts. The rise of small public high schools today can most directly be connected with reformers' efforts to decentralize education in Wave II and localize authority at the school site. Along with a rise in site-based management came more of an emphasis on school-based autonomy and, by extension, a new dependence on teacher responsibility and accountability. Dworkin finds that teachers in Wave II exhibited *more* burnout than those teaching before the publication of *A Nation at Risk*; however, Wave II teachers exhibited *less* burnout than Wave I teachers who experienced closer scrutiny from the government, businesses, and the public.

Nevertheless, Dworkin found that site-based management as a result of reforms during Wave II have the potential to lead to job stress for teachers who find themselves held to higher standards of accountability. For them, shared decision-making means teachers share responsibility with district administrators and, thus, share the blame if their schools fail. For

⁹ According to Dworkin (2001), Wave I reform efforts began in 1984 and were intended to build uniformity through standardization in classrooms across the U.S. Wave II reform efforts occurred in the late 1980s and were focused on site-based management and on building teacher—as well as principal—accountability. Wave III reform efforts occurred in the mid-late 1990s and were focused largely on implementing state-mandated standardized achievement tests and other measures of accountability.

teachers working in the previous era of centralization, school failure could mean that teachers were following orders from higher-level administrators in the district. Similarly, for teachers involved in shared decision-making, burnout also results in cases where invested teachers find themselves in power struggles when administrators or other stakeholders, such as parents, vie for control of the school community.

Shared Decision-Making in Democratic Schools

As mentioned previously, many small schools incorporate practices of shared decision-making and other democratic schooling methods into their missions. Recognizing the lack of research that had been done on studying the effects that democratic schools have on teacher performance, Dworkin et al. (2003) studied the effects that democratic school policies have on teachers, particularly on teacher burnout. Their study characterized democratic schools as having non-authoritarian leadership, open communication and information sharing, and shared decision-making structures (Tse, 2000). Dworkin et al. (2003) looked at teachers in a high-poverty Texas metropolitan district where pressure to perform on Texas' high-stakes tests is pervasive and where teacher attrition ranges from 10-15%; much of this is due to teacher retirement and turnover. In their findings, Dworkin et al. discuss the importance of principal leadership in democratic schools. They found that the presence of a non-authoritarian principal who shared decision-making power had the strongest effect on preventing teacher burnout in democratic schools. This finding builds upon previous findings that suggest school climate and teacher morale are largely influenced by the principal (Dworkin 1987; Dworkin, Haney and Telschow 1990; Dworkin and Townsend 1994; Firestone and Rosenblum 1988; Kyriacou 1980; and Murphy and Paddock 1986).

Despite their findings, Dworkin et al. (2003) recognized that burnout factors may still exist in democratic schools despite non-authoritarian principal leadership. They consider that democratic schools may, in fact, increase the likelihood of teacher burnout for the following reasons. First, given the nature of student-teacher relationships in democratic schools, teachers may find it difficult to cope with what they see as undefined, or ambiguous, roles. Second, the student-centered model of instruction in democratic schools requires teachers to put in more effort than is required by fixed lesson plans. Third, the collaborative teaching and learning process practiced in democratic schools can challenge the teacher who is used to being the sole instructor rather than a partner; this idea builds on Seddon (1997) who found that such schools threaten to “de-skill” teachers. Lastly, finding the balance between curricular autonomy and “teaching to the tests” can be stressful for teachers in democratic schools and, thus, can lead to burnout (Dworkin et al., 2003). Such factors prevalent in democratic schools cannot be ignored. I will give more attention to these factors later in the chapter.

Shared Decision-Making in New Small Schools

Understandably, teachers’ responsibilities in new small schools are different from those in more-established small schools. In 2000, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation granted \$350 million to organizations nationwide committed to small school reform. This grant was directed toward establishing small high schools through one of two ways: either through *start-up* high schools or through the *conversion* of large schools into smaller learning communities or individual schools. Both types of schools receiving grant money focused on serving youth in low-income communities. In an effort to focus on the experiences of teachers (and students) in these particular small schools, the American Institutes for Research and SRI International (AIR/SRI, 2003) documented the experiences of educators in Gates-funded small schools after

the first year of the grant. (Most of the schools studied received support and resources through organizations receiving grant money from the Gates Foundation.)

Start-Up Schools. Despite the challenges they faced, evidence of shared leadership and collective responsibility was prominent in small start-up schools. In these professional communities, founding teachers felt a sense of collegiality and shared vision. Teachers, who formerly taught in larger, traditional schools, spoke more favorably of their professional communities in small schools. Nevertheless, while teachers felt collaboration existed in areas of instruction and governance, they were also frustrated by the amount of time that collective decision making took, particularly since there was a often shortage of common planning time. As a result, the pressing day-to-day needs took precedence over long-term planning decisions (AIR, SRI, 2003).

Conversion Schools. Unlike the experience of teachers in start-up small schools, researchers (AIR/SRI, 2003) found that teachers involved in conversion schools felt a lack of shared leadership; more specifically, they did not feel that they were full participants in matters of school governance. Survey data showed that most teachers did not participate in shared leadership. The majority of teachers reported that they had little or no control over the daily schedule, assessments, or school programs. Further, teachers reported that they had little or no control over professional development activities or student discipline policies. Overall, researchers (Shear, et al., 2008) found that conversion schools were more challenged than start-up schools when it came to building strong professional communities. In their 2008 report of the 5-year evaluation of Gates-funded schools, researchers found that building strong professional climates in conversion schools was initially deterred by a focus on structural changes and

equitable staffing reassignments; by extension, teachers struggled with embracing instructional change as well as with grasping a common vision for the learning community.

Demanding Work: Balancing Long Hours with Teaching and Administrative Responsibilities

A common thread within small public high schools is the degree to which teachers feel overburdened by the responsibilities they are expected to uphold. This thread has even exhibited itself in small schools where professional communities are strong and shared decision-making is frequent. In her study of small Chicago public high schools, Holland (2002) discovered that even though adults (i.e. faculty members, school leaders, community stakeholders) generally feel positively about their professional experience in their small schools, they also have concerns. Teachers are frustrated about working long hours and taking on multiple responsibilities (i.e., administrative duties, student counseling, after-hours meetings). They understand that such work is necessary in order to keep the school functioning; however, many fear that such a pace will lead them to burnout.

Putting extra demands on teachers risks negatively affecting students as well. For example, when teachers are called away from their classrooms to carry out administrative duties such as coordinating student internships or planning professional developments, the students miss out on instruction. Because small schools typically lack auxiliary faculty members to cover classes, teacher absence can have larger effects on small schools (Holland, 2002).

Holland (2002) also found that teacher “fragility” is a reality in small schools as evidenced by teacher turnover. In some cases, teachers leave to start their own schools or to join others schools; in other cases, teachers leave the profession completely. Teacher fragility also refers to teachers who have to uphold responsibilities in multiple schools at once; for example,

teachers who teach in schools-within-schools have responsibilities in both the small school as well as in the larger school complex. Teachers in new conversion schools¹⁰ frequently have similar experiences as they are expected to fulfill responsibilities in both the new conversion school as well as in the existing larger school (SRI/AIR, 2003). In these situations, teachers are often stretched thin and find it difficult to balance.

The Demands of De-Regulated Schools

The connection between teachers' working conditions and school success is pivotal for sustainable school reform. With the growing number of small schools throughout the nation, Johnson and Landman (2000) studied de-regulated schools (i.e. school-based management schools,¹¹ charter schools,¹² pilot schools,¹³) in Massachusetts for the purpose of examining their effects on teachers' working conditions. All three types of small schools observed in this study allow teachers and administrators a certain degree of autonomy. Because hiring is intentional and autonomous, teachers in charter and pilot schools generally share the values, mission, and goals of their small schools.

¹⁰ Conversion schools refer to small learning communities or individual schools that exist within—and were once part of—large high schools.

¹¹ Massachusetts site-based managed schools or school-based managed schools are seen by the researchers as *regulated* schools. They are given the power by the district and the teachers union to make decisions about their program, budget, and staffing. However, they must also adhere to rules and operating decisions made by the district. Throughout this paper, I will refer to site-based managed schools and school-based managed schools as SBMs.

¹² Massachusetts charter schools are seen by the researchers as *unregulated* schools. They are set up and funded by the state under charter laws. Such laws vary in terms of degree of accountability and autonomy under the state. While charter schools are held accountable for results in terms of student performance, they have few restrictions in terms of their operations. Most often, they maintain autonomy in hiring, budgetary allocation, and curricular decisions.

¹³ Massachusetts pilot schools are seen by the researchers as more *regulated* than charter schools but *less regulated* than SBMs. They are district-sponsored, but they are autonomous in their hiring and in most of their operations. They are largely exempt from following district and union rules. The researchers also referred to Boston's pilot schools as "in-district charter schools".

While Johnson and Landman’s study (2000) is limited in its small sample size¹⁴ and its single-state focus, the researchers are, nevertheless, able to recognize indicators of teacher burnout in the growing small school movement. For example, even though charter and pilot school teachers endorse their small schools and enjoy working with like-minded teachers who share their commitment, many feel the demands put upon them are overwhelming. In each of these schools, principals often depend on teachers to take on administrative tasks in addition to their teacher roles. Responsibilities include writing student narratives, writing individualized learning plans for each student, reaching out to parents, attending long faculty meetings, participating on decision-making committees, attending professional development activities in the evenings or on the weekends, meeting with collaborating teachers, writing new curricula, or attending school-site council meetings. The responsibilities are particularly challenging for the large numbers of inexperienced teachers. For teachers at charter and pilot schools, the expectations of the schools are that the workday lasts ““until the job is done.”” At one charter school, all teachers claimed that they regularly worked 9-10 hours per day, 6 days per week; teachers at SBM schools are restricted to working 6.5 hours per day, although many stay afterschool to complete their work and attend meetings. While many claim to be motivated by the work—both the classroom duties and the administrative jobs—they also speak of being overly-stressed and tired. Furthermore, there are few formal systems in place for teachers to lodge complaints; given the close working relationships in small schools and the strong commitment of individual staff members, teachers are hesitant to voice complaints—or call for help—when they are struggling. In several schools, the long hours, the multiple responsibilities, the feeling of helplessness, and the demanding expectations results in high teacher absenteeism

¹⁴ In total, this study looks at 6 small schools: 2 state-sponsored charter schools, 2 pilot schools, and 2 public school-based managed schools.

and, even more, leads committed teachers to leave their schools, largely because they feel burnt out.

As mentioned previously, research shows that teachers who feel included in the decision making process of their school will also feel more invested in their school as a whole. In many of the small schools studied, Johnson and Landman (2000) found that teachers ran much of the schools' operations; in fact, having the opportunity to take on leadership roles was an initial attraction for many of these teachers to join their small schools in the first place, particularly in the case of pilot and charter schools. In these schools, teachers participated in faculty-wide decision making processes and through smaller action teams. In some schools studied, however, top-down leadership left teachers largely out of the decision-making process, leaving them frustrated. While the researchers point out that teachers were motivated by their administrative duties, they also point out that small school teachers were often expected to make decisions about recruitment, operations, structure, and instruction, frequently without having strong guidance on how to make such decisions. I will discuss this lack of preparation for small school demands later in this chapter.

Demands of New Small Schools

While the schools in Johnson and Landman's study were publicly funded, some small public schools receive additional funds from outside partnering organizations. As mentioned previously, in 2000, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation granted \$350 million to organizations who partnered with small start-up and conversion schools nationwide. Given the nature of planning, the start-up schools studied were in the midst of their first year of operation at the time of this study; all but one of the conversion schools were still in their planning phases and had, thus, not officially converted into smaller learning communities. The researchers

examined teachers' experiences with administrative and teaching responsibilities in these early years.

Balancing administrative and teaching responsibilities in start-up schools. The study (AIR/SRI, 2003) revealed that founding teachers felt that the administrative challenges of starting a new small school were complex and often unguided. Many felt they had no idea of what hurdles lay ahead in the planning process. Staffs recognized that there were many critical structural and procedural decisions to be made after the first year of operation. They faced issues of recruitment as well as decisions about operations, structure, and instruction. These issues were particularly daunting at start-up schools where teachers, many of whom have never been high school administrators, were in places of leadership positions.

In general, teachers—new and veteran—in the study (AIR/SRI, 2003) were attracted by the autonomy of these schools; they embraced the opportunity to develop their own curricula. In this study, teachers spent their planning year designing curricula for the school year. However, teachers often had to revise and re-design the curricula they had planned after the start of the year when they realized their students did not have the skills necessary for student-centered learning. Because start-ups do not have existing student populations, the curricula and policies planned by the teachers/design teams over the summer do not necessarily fit the skills or needs of the students.

As in studies cited about teacher burnout in other small schools, researchers (AIR/SRI, 2003) found that teacher burnout at small start-ups was largely connected to the multiple responsibilities that the small teaching staffs assume. Beyond their classroom teaching, their roles and responsibilities included school governance and decision-making, curriculum design, student advising, extracurricular coaching, and administrative decision making such as budgeting

and building management. Teachers in this study reported that their work—teaching and nonteaching—was overwhelming and their time was limited.

Given the fact that the AIR/SRI study (2003) was conducted only after the first year of operation for its start-up schools, the study is limited in its scope. The authors recognized that some of the complaints from teachers may be a result of first-year pains. They noted that small school teachers who showed signs of burnout also claimed they felt more motivated and rejuvenated by their work and by their professional communities than they had been in previous jobs. Nevertheless, the authors also recognized the obstacles that burnout presents in establishing strong, sustainable staff models.

Balancing administrative and teaching responsibilities in conversion schools. As previously stated, at the time of the study (AIR/SRI, 2003) all but one of the conversion schools were still in planning phases and had, thus, not officially converted into smaller learning communities.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the unique responsibilities held by teachers working in the conversion process paralleled many other teachers working in small schools. Like teachers in start-up small schools, teachers involved in school conversion were expected to take on additional roles such as coaches, mentors, transition team members, and curriculum designers.

Teachers involved in planning conversion were also committed to working full-time in the larger existing school; in a sense, they worked in two schools. Teachers were expected to plan curricula as well as learn new forms of assessment and instruction while they continued to teach, plan, and meet the needs of students in the existing school. (The student populations of existing schools in the study consisted of up to 2000 students.) As a result of this commitment, teachers involved in conversion planning often lacked the time to attend professional

¹⁵ According to the study (AIR/SRI, 2003), conversion is often a two-year process. Much of the first year of conversion considered by school staff to be a “planning year.”

development opportunities provided by the grantee organization or other partners. Further, funding did not necessarily support teachers' dual commitment to two schools. The lack of funds limited teachers' abilities to collaborate during the work day. As a result, teachers experienced stress and slow progress (AIR/SRI, 2003).

As mentioned previously, the AIR/SRI study (2003) was conducted before all conversion schools had completed the conversion process. Five out of seven schools sampled were still in the pre-conversion planning phase. Given this, one must be cautious in generalizing the findings beyond the actual period in which large schools are undergoing conversion. Further, researchers (Shear, et al., 2008) recognize that the data collected reflect small schools in their early stages rather than organizations after years of maturation.

Lack of Effective Preparation and Support for Teachers in Small Schools

Lack of Skills for Small School Work

Teachers who seek small school work are clearly motivated by the opportunities for autonomy, leadership, and student-centered instruction that many small schools work to implement. However, despite these motivating factors, teachers often find themselves overly challenged by the work because they were not prepared with the skills necessary to fulfill small school responsibilities. In her study of small public high schools, Holland (2002) finds that teachers in small schools lack training in shared decision-making skills, skills that are critical in democratically-run small schools. In situations where teachers were trained in "top-down management" schools, teachers often lack skills in group problem solving and decision-making.

In their study of Gates-funded start-up schools, researchers (AIR/SRI, 2003) found that many teachers were inexperienced, having taught for less than three years. Many inexperienced

teachers joined the start-up teams because they were enthusiastic about small school reform efforts. Often, these teachers were among the most challenged when it came to classroom management issues. While researchers found that the start-up schools in their study intended to provide mentoring and support through professional development activities, there was often little time to follow through with these intentions.

Despite the lack of experience or training for small school work, teachers in Gates-funded start-up schools were motivated by the autonomy to design their own curricula. However, in the first year of operation, founding teachers felt that with their limited time and multiple non-instructional responsibilities, curriculum planning was a burden. Curriculum design was especially demanding for inexperienced teachers, who were expected to decide what content and skills were essential. In general, most teachers in the first year at new start-up small schools lacked knowledge of how to effectively provide student-centered instruction. While researchers found evidence of close student-teacher relationships, only 38% of teachers—veteran as well as inexperienced—in start-up schools, said they received enough training to carry out student-driven project-based curricula.

Even with this data, researchers also found that teachers in start-up small schools felt more prepared than teachers in small conversion schools when it came to implementing certain instructional practices (i.e., utilizing technology, conducting performance-based assessments, applying new teaching methods). In the schools studied, researchers found that teachers in conversion schools averaged less than sixteen years of prior teaching experience while teachers in start-up schools averaged less than eight years of experience. They concluded that veteran teachers, such as those in conversion schools, were less apt to abide by reforms and change their teaching practice (AIR/SRI, 2003).

Lack of Teacher Buy-In

While many small schools, particularly start-ups, have the opportunity to hire teachers who are specifically drawn to the mission and goals of those schools, others do not have the same control over their hiring decisions. This is especially true in small conversion schools or schools that are subject to strict regulations by the district. Without control of hiring decisions, a small school may employ teachers who do not necessarily ascribe to that school's vision, instructional practices, or collaborative work. As a result, small schools often struggle with a lack of "buy-in" amongst all of its teachers.

Johnson and Landman (2000) note this lack of "buy in" amongst teachers at SBM small schools. Given that some SBMs are converted from large schools, teachers are often transferred from the large schools as it undergoes conversion. As a result, SBM small schools can be stuck with tenured teachers who do not buy-in to the mission, do not share the values of the small schools, and resist change. As a result, SBM schools continue to grow with a faculty that lacks shared purpose, consensus, commitment to the program, and investment in the school community beyond the required workday. This is a stark contrast to charter and pilot schools which hire teachers who believe in their mission and who buy-in to their model.

Gates-funded conversion schools are similar to SBMs when it comes to teacher buy-in. Researchers (SRI/AIR, 2003) find that teachers are often not involved in making the decision for school conversion, rather the decision is made in a more "top-down" fashion by the district or other officials. Further, as in SBMs, teachers are not necessarily hand-picked to teach in conversion schools. As a result, support for conversion, or school change, on the part of the faculty can be weak, and feelings of disenfranchisement amongst teachers can be pervasive.

Researchers (SRI/AIR, 2003) found that teachers in small conversion schools lacked faith in reform. Many had seen district-mandated reform efforts fail in years past and feared that the conversion process would ultimately have a negative impact their teaching. (Some teachers feared that compromises they would have to make, such as sharing a classroom, were cause for concern.) Despite this, some teachers did support the change from large to small schools. Researchers found that some supported the inquiry-based, in-depth instruction that small conversion schools promoted.

Teacher Preparation Programs and Professional Development

Lack of Teacher Education in Democratic Practices. The momentum behind reform for small schools parallels the move for more democratic practices in schools as well. However, the typical modern public high school today is reminiscent of the factory system, after which it was originally modeled, where there is little evidence of democracy. There, minority students are predominantly relegated to the lowest performance tracks where instruction lacks the quality that higher tracked students may receive (Oakes, 1985, 1990). In general, minority students are more likely to attend schools in high-poverty areas with fewer resources and with less adequate learning environments (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Rather than providing an equitable, student-centered education for all, the modern school relies on impersonal instruction where teachers may see 150 students per day. There, students move from classroom to classroom and from grade to grade, often without having any personal connections with adults in the building. Just as students lack the experience of democratic schooling, so do teachers in their own practices. Teachers in the modern school often work in isolation without collaboration or the opportunity to share knowledge (Darling-Hammond, 1996). For teachers who spend their careers in the modern school, they rarely, if ever, learn how to implement such democratic

practices as shared decision-making, collaboration with colleagues and students, and inquiry-based instruction.

Today, education reformers recognize the need for a change in teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 1996) in order to sustain alternatives to the typical modern school; a lack of teacher preparation for teaching in progressive schools is no new phenomenon. In tracing the history of alternatives to the “factory school,” Darling-Hammond (1996) looks at the 1930s and 1960s as moments where progressive school reform took off. In both periods of reform, progressive reformers worked to move schools toward more democratic communities where critical thinking, collaboration, performance-based assessments, and community were all central to the curricula. Researchers found that where reforms were successfully implemented, students in these new progressive schools had more academic success and were more socially responsible than their peers in traditional schools. However, while the successes were largely consistent in both periods of reform, most teachers in the 1960s schools who were expected to implement these reforms lacked the skills to do so (Smith & Tyler, 1942; Chamberlin & Chamberlin, 1942; Dunkin & Biddle, 1974; Glass et al., 1977; Horwitz, 1979; Peterson, 1979). As a result, despite the student benefits shown, progressive education did not stick. After these initial periods of reform, little investment was made in teacher education that was specific to these democratic practices. Further, little investment was made in policy directives that would support progressive education. In fact, for much of the 20th century, education policy was more geared toward taking control of the curricula away from teachers—and students (Darling-Hammond, 1996). Despite the challenges progressive education reform has faced, research continues to show its benefits, particularly through the successes of modern small schools. Small schools, where collaborative teaching and learning, heterogeneous classes, and strong student-teacher relationships are

emphasized, are credited with high graduation rates (Braddock & McPartland, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Fine, 1994; Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993; Wehlage et al., 1990).

In order to continue this progress, Darling-Hammond (1996) recognizes the urgent need to invest in teacher education. Already, teachers in reform schools are struggling to apply democratic practices in their classrooms because they do not understand how to do so. More specifically, teachers are struggling to develop classroom practices that are student-centered while also creating curricula that is appropriately challenging for all students. Teachers in progressive schools have the dual challenges of knowing their subject matter and their students well. Without proper teacher education in democratic practices, progressive education reform will likely have the fate of previous reform periods.

Conventional teacher education programs are not intended “to promote complex learning by teachers” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). In fact, the common belief among many teacher educators and education researchers has been that teachers simply need to follow prescriptive texts and set curriculum in order to disseminate information to students (Darling-Hammond, 1996). Despite this belief, teachers often come into the field of teaching with their own preconceived ideas of how teaching should be practiced; these are usually formed from experiences or images of their own school days as students (Lortie, 1975). Letting go of these ideas can be challenging for any teacher, particularly for those who teach in small schools with practices very different from those where they learned. Given this, teacher education is critical in developing teacher behavior and understanding of classroom practices.

The conventional teacher education program does not currently focus on preparing pre-service teachers with the skills needed for implementing democratic practices found in small schools. Most pre-service teachers receive training through a 4-year undergraduate program,

where professional training is combined with other undergraduate academic courses, or through a 5th year program that focuses only on professional training. This model receives criticism for its overall lack of coherence. Classes end up being disconnected from one another without a guiding framework, and such programs fail to establish specific goals for teaching and learning. Overall, they lack a development of teacher knowledge (Goodlad, 1994; Howey & Zimpher, 1989; Tom, 1997).

While there are criticisms of coursework in teacher education programs, the student teaching component is seen to be the most valuable part of training by pre-service teachers. Nevertheless, conventional student teaching does not consistently promote the reform practices teachers see in small schools. Further, often mentor teachers, who see many reform methods as unfeasible, choose to shield student teachers from such practices that are promoted by reform-minded education professors. Given that most student teachers in conventional preservice programs train in traditional schools, they rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to see reforms in action. For example, regular teacher collaboration and experimentation with curriculum design are not realities in most traditional schools; thus, student teachers do not get a strong sense of these practices in their training. One must recognize that reform-minded teacher education programs, which focus on democratic practices such as student-centered instruction and community building, do exist but they are out-numbered by the more conventional preservice programs (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Teacher Preparation for Small School Practices. Preparation for small school work, specifically work that focuses on training teachers in democratic practices, is lacking amongst teacher training programs. The New Teachers Collaborative (NTC), a teacher licensing program

in Devens, MA is one of the few that focuses on preparing teachers for such work.¹⁶ NTC began in 2002 and resides at the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School. It was begun by Ted and Nancy Sizer as well as other leaders in the small school movement in order to train teachers in how to teach the philosophical principles central to the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES).¹⁷ Each year, NTC prepares a small cohort of teachers,¹⁸ known as “collaborating teachers,” to teach in small CES-minded schools with the intent of giving adults the opportunity to learn to teach by actually teaching. The program initially began through a partnership with the Harvard Graduate School of Education; it currently has program approval from the MA Department of Education as an independent teacher preparation program with no university affiliation (Ringwall & Rogers, 2008).

Collaborating teachers participate in a one-year apprenticeship at a NTC-partner school where they take on their own classroom under the supervision of a mentor or share one with a collaborating mentor teacher. In order to ensure teachers receive training in small school practices, each partner site must have the mentoring capacity to take on a collaborating teacher. According to Clare Fox Ringwall, the director of the New Teachers Collaborative, each partner school is CES-minded and includes collaborating teachers as full faculty members from the start of their apprenticeship. Each of the partner schools emphasizes strong student-teacher relationships through an advisory program. Additionally, each partner school takes a democratic approach to decision-making, giving collaborating teachers a voice in the community. Faculty members collaborate with one another in planning, reflecting upon, and questioning their

¹⁶ According to Ringwall (Interview with Clare Fox Ringwall, March 19, 2010), NTC is one of only two programs that specifically prepares teachers for work in small CES-minded schools. Eagle Rock School, a year-round, residential school, in Estes Park, CO offers a year-long Teaching Fellowship Program that grants a teaching certificate to its participants. Eagle Rock is also a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools.

¹⁷ As mentioned in Ch. 1, the CES began in 1984 under the leadership of Ted Sizer. With its opening of 11 small schools, the modern small school movement began.

¹⁸ This year, there are seven adults in the cohort.

curricula. "...[NTC teachers have] a commitment to the school that extends beyond their specific classroom and discipline...[They] are not guests and are members of the school. Their perspectives and insights are genuinely welcomed by the team." After the one-year apprenticeship is complete, collaborating teachers gain a teaching license in MA. (Ringwall & Rogers, 2008)

While NTC resembles other teacher preparation programs in its cohort-style seminars, its mentorship component, its focus on history and philosophy of education as well as adolescent development, it stands out in its focus on small school democratic practices. As one partnering administrator noted:

This is the best way to find and develop new teachers that fit our model and our mission. This is bigger than the schools in NTC as well; this is a model that I feel should be replicated across the country. Education schools should really stand up and take notice of this excellent program and look to mold their programs into something similar—this is what we really need in our schools. In short, I believe that this is the way we'll be training teachers in the future (Ringwall & Rogers, 2008).

Lack of Teacher Support for New Teachers and Relevant Professional Development in Schools. Teacher training does not stop at the completion of a preservice program. Even after teachers have completed their preservice coursework and student teaching, their education continues well into their teaching career. For many teachers, the first few years of teaching can be the most formative in shaping their professional identity. Those first years can dictate whether or not one remains in teaching, and they can also shape what kind of teacher one will be decades down the road (Bush, 1983). Despite their preservice training, many new teachers¹⁹ find that they are expected to demonstrate skills that they do not have in their first years of teaching; this is especially true for teachers who complete a conventional preservice program but pursue small school work. Beginning teachers—in new small schools as well as in traditional large schools, are expected to have the same responsibilities as their veteran colleagues who have more years of

¹⁹ For the purposes of this chapter, I will refer to “new teachers” as those in their 1st-3rd years of teaching.

experience. At the same time they are learning new skills and new students, they are working to master new curricula, teach and respond to students' needs, learn the goals and outcomes for their students' grade level, coordinate with district and state expectations, how to use the resources available to them, and how to engage with parents; all the while, they are expected to be *effective* teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

As beginning teachers work to develop their teaching behaviors and learn how to teach and respond to student needs, they often find mentor teachers. While some teachers are fortunate to be "adopted" by mentor teachers in their schools, many states and urban districts have formal mentoring programs for new teachers (Fideler & Haselkorn, 1999). However, even though many new teachers have mentors to support them, mentorship does not always meet their specific needs. For example, often mentors reinforce traditional practices rather than encourage new practices (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1993) that are more student-centered. Often, mentors offer support through materials or advice rather than focus on working to develop new teachers' skills in teaching and learning. Further, mentor programs are usually only provided for teachers in their first year of teaching (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Despite criticisms, there are strong mentors and strong mentoring programs that work to develop new teachers' behaviors and skills as well as that promote collaboration, inquiry, and reflection (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). For example, the Santa Cruz New Teacher Project (SCNTP) offers a two-year program to support teachers in their first and second years. The program provides full-time mentors, or advisors, who hold two-hour visits with their mentees at their schools on a weekly basis. Advisors coach, model lessons, observe, and co-teach with their mentees. They cover topics such as literacy, language development, standards, and teaching diverse populations. By creating short- and long-term goals for mentees, advisors also work with

new teachers to develop their teaching behavior (Moir & Dalton, 1996; Moir, Gless, and Barron, 1999).

Researchers, policy makers, and other stakeholders have called for the improvement of support programs for new teachers (Griffin, 1986; Brooks, 1987; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996; Standards of Quality and Effectiveness for California's Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment Program, 1997; Fidler & Haselkorn, 1999; Odell & Huling, 2000) so that they are as effective as SCNTP in developing new teacher growth. Most emphasize the need for a multi-year approach focused on new teacher development and support where beginning teachers are held to high standards of teaching and learning and are supported by mentors as well as by school-university partnerships (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Howey and Zimpher (1999) also suggest that by changing the structure of schools could improve the new teacher development; for example, they suggest that new teachers be given a lighter teaching load or even share a classroom so that they can have time in the school day to meet with mentors. Feiman-Nemser (2001) calls for stronger university-school partnerships that extend from the preservice phase into the early years of teaching in order to build better coordination of teacher development from one stage to the next.

Like conventional teacher education programs, conventional professional development opportunities are not intended "to promote complex learning by teachers" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Typical professional development opportunities are usually infrequent and disconnected from teachers' actual classroom needs (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). Klonksy (2002) refers to these as "one-shot workshops." Professional development usually occurs as part of a district-mandated staff development or as part of a graduate degree program; however, there are problems with both. First, with district-mandated staff development, teachers are often intended

to *receive* disseminated knowledge which they are then expected to *apply* to their work. There is little, if any, follow-up, and the disconnect between a teacher's actual work and the information disseminated often means that there will be little change in a teacher's practice. There is a similar disconnect between professional development offered at the university level and teacher practice. While the information presented may be inspiring to teachers, there is often little opportunity for classroom implementation. Even more, much of these professional development opportunities are geared toward more traditional aspects of teaching and learning and do not inform new, less conventional teaching practices (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). As teachers move toward alternative schools, such as small schools, and more democratic practices, these conventional professional development opportunities are less meaningful.

Despite this reality, even more progressive attempts toward professional development do not necessarily meet the needs of the school. This is particularly true in the Gates-funded small start-up and conversion schools where grantee organizations pledged to offer professional development. In the case of start-up schools, grantee organizations offered supports through conferences and workshops, leadership coaching and strategic support, operational supports, and instructional tools. They spent time working with principals and design teams on crafting school visions and working through governance structures. Many provided models of instructional tools from which teachers could adapt and classroom coaching. However, small school staffs felt that grantee organizations spent too much time on "big picture" planning and too little on the day-to-day details of the work. As a result, staff reported that they spent much of their first year "struggling to fight fires" (AIR/SRI, 2003, p. III-26). Staff complained that had to focus on dealing with the day-to-day operational needs and were too busy to take part in the leadership coaching opportunities offered by the grantee organizations. Small school teachers also reported

that grantee organizations failed to provide specific instructional materials and often felt that they were on their own when it came to learning how to implement the pedagogical philosophies in classrooms with low-achieving students and designing individual learning plans. Further, not all start-up schools had close relationships with their sponsoring grantee organizations; some grantee organizations came on board well after the school design team had begun its work; in other cases, the grantee organizations actually contributed little to no funding for the start-up school and, thus, played virtually no role in the start-up process. Additionally, some small start-up schools were partnered with more-established model small schools from which to learn and seek guidance.

Support and professional development from grantee organizations for Gates-funded conversion schools was also disappointing from the perspective of conversion school leaders. Principals felt that while the grantee organizations had offered some support in helping them gain more autonomy and in accessing community leaders and resources, the grantees had played a very small role in their overall conversion process. Four of the seven principals interviewed said they did not have close relationships with their grantee organizations (AIR/SRI, 2003).

Researchers recognize that new approaches to professional development are essential in any move to reform schools and teaching (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hawley and Valli, 1999; Little, 1993; McDiarmid, 1994). In their study comparing Chicago's new small schools to larger comprehensive high schools, Wasley et al. (2000) found that teachers were more likely to participate in professional development opportunities that were specifically geared toward their work in small schools than in district-mandated professional development. According to their later research of high-performing small learning communities, professional development should be ongoing and integrated into the learning community itself (Wasley &

Lear, 2001). In fact, there is a consensus among researchers (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hawley and Valli, 1999; Little, 1993; McDiarmid, 1994) that professional development should be ongoing and fundamentally connected and relevant to the work of teachers, addressing teachers' specific needs and concerns (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Researchers have also identified common characteristics that are key to professional education and developing one's identity as an educator. For example, conversation with other practitioners is critical to developing one's teaching identity. Such conversation includes examining documents and evidence, searching for alternative practices and interpretations, and asking difficult and uncomfortable questions (Ball and Cohen, 1999; Stein, Silver, and Smith, 1994). Similarly, collaboration is another essential component of professional education that builds toward developing practice and identity. Researchers emphasize the value of collaboration in examining documents and evidence; rather than relying on stories or unsubstantiated reports, which is often done in conventional professional developments, teachers can join in analyzing evidence and discuss alternate interpretations (Ball and Cohen, 1999; Lampert and Ball, 1998). Collaborating on curriculum design allows for further growth and development as teachers examine their goals and justify their instructional practices. Lord (1994) emphasizes the importance of "critical collegueship," a relationship in which teachers are collaboratively committed to inquiry, discussion, and debate as they push one another to improve (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). As previously mentioned, collaboration and conversation are built into the modern small school philosophy, but because of the demands of small schools, appropriate professional development is sometimes difficult to achieve.

Summary

The state of current teacher education programs and professional support for teachers bears a significant weight on the sustainability of small schools. The unique expectations and culture of small school work requires skills in democratic practices when it comes to both administrative needs and classroom instruction. Without proper training and on-going support, small school teachers risk losing the motivation with which they began. With a loss in teacher motivation, the small school movement risks losing its own momentum.

Over the last two decades small schools have offered alternatives to the traditional high school experience. As mentioned previously, small schools have led to increased student engagement and have shown high graduation rates. Similarly, small schools have the foundations for strong professional communities where democratic practices offer teachers autonomy, leadership, and identity. While these foundations are present in the philosophies of the modern small school movement, the reality for teachers in many small schools is one of exhaustion and lack of preparation. For many, there is currently a disconnect between teachers' skills and the expectations of small school work. This disconnect resides in the misalignment of teacher preparation—through preservice programs, professional development opportunities, or experience teaching in traditional high schools—and the realities of small school work.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

My intent in this study was to uncover how small school leaders and teachers sustain the vision and initiative so unique to the small school movement and its individual schools. By focusing on new small public high schools in Riverside, this research specifically looked at how school culture and teacher support contributed to the sustainability of the larger small school movement.

This qualitative study sought to understand teachers' feelings, perceptions, and beliefs about their past teacher training, current professional support, and their professional community at their small school site. Additionally, this study sought to understand school leaders' feelings, perceptions, and beliefs about their ability to support teachers and sustain the vision of their individual small school. My research questions sought to determine the extent to which teachers in small schools felt prepared for and supported in being successful in small school work.

Research Questions

The following questions guide the research design of this study.

1. From the perspective of teacher leaders and administrators, to what extent do teachers feel prepared for and/or supported in for the administrative and teaching demands of the small schools in which they work?
2. In what ways do teachers feel prepared for and/or supported in for the administrative and teaching demands of the small schools in which they work?
3. From the perspective of teachers, how do the cultural norms, institutional structures, and mission of their small schools place demands and/or indirect pressure on them to go above and beyond what is required?

The first and second research questions address the experiences of many teachers in small schools as they take on administrative and teaching responsibilities of their schools. The third

research question is directed at determining what drives small school teachers to push themselves.

To investigate the research questions, I conducted a qualitative study of three small public high schools. I used focus groups with teachers, interviews with principals and teacher leaders, and observations of teacher meetings.

Site Participants

The sites selected for this study met the following criteria:

- Each school site served no more than 500 students.²⁰
- Each school site implemented practices characteristic of the modern small school movement. Such practices included the following: shared decision-making, teacher leadership, student-centered instruction.

Because my client, the Riverside City Small Schools Center (RCSSC),²¹ works to support new small schools in Riverside City, the school sites for my research were within Riverside City School District. My collaboration with RCSSC gave me access to teachers and administrators at three small public high schools in Local District #2²² all of which had at least two graduating classes by the spring of 2010. Each of these schools had no more than 500 students, fitting the criteria of small school size laid out in Chapter 1. One of these schools was an independent small

²⁰ As mentioned in Ch. 1, this study defines small schools as those with no more than 500 students.

²¹ The Riverside City Small Schools Center is a non-profit community partner that works to support innovative teaching and student-centered learning in small school reform in Riverside's small public schools. As a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, it follows CES principles. With its emphasis on promoting equity and social justice in education, the RCSSC focuses on Riverside's lowest-performing schools that predominantly serve Latino and African American youth. The RCSSC has been integral in establishing Riverside pilot schools and mentoring small learning communities on democratic practices.

²² Local District #2 serves 103 schools with over 87,000 students. Since 2003 Local District 2 has been a leader in the small school movement. Working with community partners such as RCSSC, Local District 2 has supported the development of small autonomous schools.

public high school; two were pilot schools. They were each housed within a larger school complex. As affiliates with the RCSSC, each of these schools claimed to have elements of democratic practices as well as practices in common with the Coalition of Essential Schools. Student populations within each of these schools were predominantly Latino and African American. I contact principals at small public high schools in Local District #4 in late July 2010 to explain the study and to invite their participation.

The following descriptions provide an overview of each school site:

School Site #1: Shady Grove School

A spacious green quad amidst school buildings, a full-scale track and field, a two-story library, wide hallways, spacious classrooms with tall windows letting the sunlight stream in—these images were not necessarily expected when one pictured a “small” urban school. Situated in the downtown section of a large urban school district, Shady Grove School as one of four schools within a larger school complex. While it shared many of its facilities with other schools in the complex, Shady Grove operated largely autonomously. In its 3rd year as a pilot school, Shady Grove School had 23 teachers on its faculty,²³ 1 counselor, 1 administrator and 457 students in 9th-12th grades.^{24,25} Ninety-two percent of students were Latino with African American, Filipino, Asian and American Indian students making up small percentages of the rest.

²³ The number of teachers employed at each school site throughout this chapter are based on information provided by their respective school principals.

²⁴ According to the school principal, class sizes are currently between 28-30 students; the district average is 40 students. The school principal said the goal is to decrease the student body population to 400 students.

²⁵ Student population statistics throughout this chapter are based on the 2010-11 district school report cards.

School Site #2: Sweetbriar School

Similar to Shady Grove, Sweetbriar School is also situated in the downtown section of a large urban school district on a multi-school complex with a spacious green quad, access to a large track and field, and a multi-level library. Sharing space with four other schools, the school's office and classrooms occupy the second floor of this facility. Opening in 2006 with funds from an outside organization, Sweetbriar operates as an independent public school having been granted unique status by the district.²⁶ It has 349 students in 9th-12th grades, 18 full-time faculty members,²⁷ 1 counselor, and 1 administrator. Ninety-two percent of students are Latino, with Filipino, Asian, African American, American Indian, and White students making up small percentages of the rest.

School Site #3: Hein Park High School

Hein Park High School resides in the center section of a large urban school district and is part of a multi-school complex. Like Shady Grove, Hein Park High School is a pilot school and, as such, operates largely autonomously. It shares its facilities with several other small schools—all of which are pilot schools as well—on K-12 campus. In its 3rd year as a pilot school, Hein Park is in its first year at a new campus. With their own two-story building, wide hallways, and spacious classrooms, students and teachers at Hein Park High School have little interaction with members of other school communities on its campus. Hein Park has 22 teachers on its faculty, 1 counselor, 1 coordinator, 1 principal and 426 students in 9th-12th grades.²⁸ Eighty-six percent of

²⁶ Only three other schools in the district operate with this same status Sweetbriar has. Despite this, Sweetbriar does hope to pursue pilot school status in the future.

²⁷ In addition, there are approximately 7 student teachers each semester collaborating with Sweetbriar's full-time teaching faculty.

²⁸ Currently, class sizes are between 28-30 students; the district average is 40 students. According to the school principal, the goal is to decrease the student body population to 400 students.

students are Latino with Asian, Filipino, African American and White students making up small percentages of the rest.

Population Participants

Participants included 9th-12th grade teachers and school principals at each school site. Teachers varied in their levels of teaching experience as well as in the roles and responsibilities they held at their schools. Participation in this study was voluntary.

I presented the purpose of my study to teachers during school leadership team and faculty meetings and answered any questions that arose. The intent of these presentations was to build trust as well as garner participation from teachers. I invited all high school teachers at each school site to participate, understanding that the rate of volunteerism may be low. I did not ask teachers to show interest or commitment during faculty meetings in order to preserve confidentiality. I followed up with teachers through email, asking for confirmation from those who would like to participate in focus groups. To avoid the perception of coercion, administrators did not participate in the sample selection. However, it was helpful, if not essential, to have principals actively supporting the research. While interviewee selection was based on volunteerism, direct teacher recruitment was necessary through email as well.

Prior to meeting with faculty, I met with the principal of each site to explain the study and to invite their participation. During meetings with principals, I presented the purpose of my research, the role school personnel would potentially have, and the anticipated benefits the research would have to the broader small school movement. If the principal approved of the study, I requested to speak with faculty during fall faculty meetings. Each administrator agreed to participate as interviewees during these initial meetings as well. I also planned to identify teacher leaders in the school through the principal's counsel.

Data Collection & Analysis

This qualitative study involved time spent getting to know the school and listening to the teachers and administrators in three small schools as they were asked about their day-to-day work. Teachers participated in interviews and focus groups; I interviewed administrators and teacher leaders. I collected data through interviews, focus groups, and observations.

- **Interviews:** I conducted one-on-one interviews with 1 administrator and up to 2 teacher leaders from each of the three school sites. Interviews lasted no more than one hour and took place at the interviewee's school site. However, in some cases interviewees were interested in follow-up interviews which took place over the phone after the initial interview. Questions explored the perceptions administrators/teacher leaders have of teachers' experiences in small schools. My goal for these interviews was to learn the extent to which administrators/teacher leaders believed their teachers were prepared and supported for the demands of their small schools.
- **Focus Groups:** I conducted one teacher focus group at each school site; each group consisted of 4-7 teachers. This sample size was sufficient in providing a range of perspectives while also proving to be manageable for the researcher. Creswell (2009) suggests using open-ended questions in focus groups with 6-8 participants as a means of drawing out the beliefs and opinions of interviewees. Because collaboration is a focal point of small schools, responses during focus groups informed research on small school culture. I also recognized that certain teachers may feel more comfortable sharing their views with some colleagues more than others. Given that, I offered to have follow-up interviews with focus group participants. I also offered to have one-on-one interviews with teachers who did not feel comfortable

joining a focus group. Focus groups lasted no more than one hour. Questions explored the opinions teachers had about their professional responsibilities, their school culture, and their professional community. My goal for these focus groups was to learn the extent to which teachers believed they had been prepared and supported for the demands of their small schools. Focus groups informed recommendations on how teachers could be better supported through teacher preparation, professional development, and changes in school culture.

- Observations: I observed teacher meetings at each site; such meetings included professional development meetings, all-school faculty meetings, Instructional Leadership Team meetings, department meetings, advisory team meetings, and grade level meetings. My goal was to better understand what it felt like to be a teacher at each small school site. Observations informed a better understanding of the cultural and professional norms characteristic of each school site. Observations allowed for additional interpretations to be made that may not have been realized through interviews alone (Maxwell, 2005).
- Data Collection at Each School Site:
 - Shady Grove School: I spoke with 9 teachers, including 2 who are considered teacher leaders. I also spoke with the principal. I conducted one focus group and two teacher interviews. I also observed a faculty meeting—considered part of the school’s professional development--and an Instructional Leadership Team meeting.
 - Sweetbriar High School: I spoke with 6 teachers—most of whom are or have been considered teacher leaders at one time. I also spoke with the principal. I conducted one focus group and two teacher interviews. I also observed a content-area meeting during part of the school’s professional development time and an Instructional Leadership Team meeting.

- Hein Park High School: I spoke with 6 teachers, including 2 who are considered teacher leaders. I also spoke with the principal. I conducted one focus group and three teacher interviews. I also observed a faculty meeting—considered part of the school’s professional development—and a grade-level team meeting.

I began collecting data in late February of 2011 during the 2nd semester of the school year; by that point in time, teachers were settled into their routines and knowledgeable of their teaching and administrative responsibilities. I conducted teacher focus groups, interviews with administrators and teacher leaders, and observations through mid-May of 2011. I scheduled focus groups and interviews around dates that worked best for participants.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded with a digital recording device. After transcribing interviews and focus groups, I removed all school, teacher, and administrator names from the transcriptions. I provided participants with transcripts and requested their feedback to ensure accuracy. I then organized transcribed data into to the following themes:

- School Culture
- Teacher Buy-In
- Long Hours
- Classroom and Non-Classroom Responsibilities
- Teacher Support

In order to avoid bias in my interpretations, I triangulated interviewee responses (Maxwell, 2005) from all participating school sites to deepen my own understanding of small school experiences and to better understand what was being done in these schools to avoid teacher burnout.

Role Management

I presented myself at each site as both a teacher in a small school and as a researcher. I focused on my role as a small school teacher in order to build trust and comfort from participants. I was not in a supervisory role with any of my perspective participants, and I made this clear from the beginning of my study and data collection. I intended for my experiences as a small school teacher in two high schools to help participants see that I shared their experiences. I also intended for my commitment to my own teaching to help participants understand that I was committed to strengthening the sustainability of small schools and that their participation would help me further the work they were trying to do.

While I was forthcoming about my experiences as a small school teacher, I did not disclose my current school of employment to participating teachers unless directly asked. My primary reason for this was to avoid any judgment (positive or negative), preconceived notions, or labels that participants might project onto me if they were familiar with my school. Such perceptions risked damaging the credibility of my interviews and observations. While I wanted participating teachers to find comfort and solidarity in knowing I was a small school teacher like them, I also worked to define myself as an impartial researcher in their eyes without ties to a particular school setting. I also recognized that if participants asked me directly about my current place of employment, I would disclose the name of my school; however, I did not initially volunteer this information. For the purposes of access, I disclosed my place of employment to the site principals in my initial contact with them.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

As a veteran small school teacher, I was cognizant of separating my own personal bias from my work as a researcher. Having been a relatively young, inexperienced teacher when I began teaching in a small public urban high school, I recognized that many teachers may have had the same experience of exhaustion and lack of support that I felt at times. However, in order to protect my research, I worked to keep my own beliefs and assumptions from interfering with my study. Similarly, I was open to—and welcoming of—the potential reality that all teachers in small schools did not necessarily share my experiences in their work. This was especially important during interviews as I was careful not to *lead* participants as I questioned them. I worked to protect against the reactivity of my participants during focus groups and interviews. While I understood that it was impossible to completely eliminate my influence as the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), I maintained an awareness of my presence and the effect it may have had on participant responses. “[T]rying to ‘minimize’ your effect is not a meaningful goal for qualitative research....[W]hat is important is to understand *how* you are influencing what the informant says, and how this affects the validity of the inferences you can draw from the interview.” (Maxwell, 2005)

I did my best to build trusting relationships with participants. Recognizing my role as a part-time researcher, this presented an obvious challenge. However, given that I did not intend to begin my data collection until the 2nd semester, I aimed to make myself present at school sites during the 1st semester. This included appropriately observing leadership team and faculty meetings and doing my best to gain an understanding of school culture at each site. I encouraged teachers to be forthcoming and honest about the pressures and challenges they faced in order to best support other small school teachers.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This study examined the professional culture and institutional structures of small public schools as defined by the teacher's condition. More specifically, this study looked at how dimensions of professional community and school expectations shaped the teacher's condition.

In this study, I asked the following research questions:

1. From the perspective of teacher leaders and administrators, to what extent do teachers feel prepared for and/or supported in the administrative and teaching demands of the small schools in which they work?
2. In what ways do teachers feel prepared for and/or supported in the administrative and teaching demands of the small school in which they work?
3. From the perspective of teachers, how do the cultural norms, institutional structures, and mission of their small schools place demands and/or indirect pressure on them to go above and beyond what is required?

To answer these questions, I identified existing tensions within the cultural and institutional structures of three small public high schools and asked teachers and principals about their perceptions of these tensions, particularly about their influence on teacher supports. I present the study's findings in five sections. The first 3 sections focus on the findings within each school site. Within each school I examine the tensions related to the following themes: school leadership, school culture, teacher buy-in, long hours, teacher responsibilities, and supports for teachers. Even though discussions around these tensions varied at each school, I looked at some categories more closely. Within the theme of "school culture," I looked at school policies and the collaborative professional environment. Within the themes of "responsibilities and long hours," I looked at the expectations of teachers and the issue of equity around the time teachers commit. Within the theme of "supports for teachers," I looked at supports for teaching skills unique to these small schools and supports for teachers new to their school. I present findings based on the extent to which these tensions were apparent at each school site. The fourth

section is an analysis of teacher-suggested recommendations from the three school sites. The final section includes a summary of findings.

Case Study 1: Shady Grove School²⁹

Shady Grove’s professional community rested upon practices of teacher leadership and collaboration. Teachers valued having a voice in school-wide decisions and felt empowered to make change. As one teacher said, “[I]n a small school, there’s no *they* and *them*. So when issues come up, it’s *you*.” Routinely, those “issues” meant working on non-classroom tasks long after the school day’s end. While the tasks of running a small school could seem endless, Shady Grove teachers reported that they both appreciated the challenge and, to an extent, felt obligated; “I feel that for the school to be successful I need to be part of decision-making.” Teachers’ successes as leaders and change makers were largely dependent on the school’s strong collaborative culture, a culture that shone as teachers reflected positively about the support they felt in being part of a team. School leaders made teacher support a priority through mentorship, observations, professional development, and new teacher trainings.

Despite efforts made to support teachers and build a unified team capable of running a small school, Shady Grove teachers encountered challenges to their work. The following findings address the tensions that arose.

School Leadership

The capacity of teachers to lead was limited by teachers’ feelings of being overwhelmed with responsibilities as well as by their perceptions of mistrust from

²⁹ This chapter is based on data collected during the 2010-2011 school year.

colleagues when it came to exercising roles of authority. While many teachers at Shady Grove took on leadership responsibilities informally, the school had two official Lead Teachers who served as teachers, mentors, teacher evaluators, and pseudo-administrators. The Lead Teachers had been involved in school leadership since the beginning of the school and had, thus, built their roles and responsibilities into the school's institutional structure. "They were a key part of writing the proposal for the school...They're required to be on the Governing Board, they're required to be on the Leadership Council, they're required to be involved in leadership-type decisions." As a result of their tenure as Lead Teachers stepping down and allowing new teachers to replace them became challenging. According to one Lead Teacher, "[P]artly because we hired a lot of younger teachers and then with all the budget crisis...where we keep having turnover in staff, it's hard to have somebody new to this school take on some of those responsibilities. They need to be here a little bit."

This risk of burnout had even begun to threaten what the Lead Teachers felt they could accomplish. One Lead Teacher described her experience over the past few years as being overwhelming and, by extension, limiting.

[The other Lead Teacher and I]...helped to develop [the school]...[We] just signed up for another three years, and after that I think I'll be done with the Lead Teacher role...because I'm constantly feeling as if...[I am] trying to juggle slime or something...[T]hings end up staying together but you keep having to like, it keeps trying to run through your fingers. You keep trying to keep it together.

The frustration of "keeping it together" was exhausting to the point that this teacher had decided to retire from the Lead Teacher position.

Some teacher leaders felt that certain members of Shady Grove's faculty did not appreciate their colleagues acting as pseudo-administrators. This sentiment weighed on one Lead Teacher; "I've always seen myself as a support person but then in reality what happens is that the people that you're observing, not all of them see it that way." "So it at times is a lonely

job...because you, at times you feel like an administrator, but you're really not." One teacher leader who had been at Shady Grove since its early days lamented over what she saw as a lack of trust toward one Lead Teacher, particularly in reference to newer school structures such as teacher evaluations;

I always viewed [the Lead Teacher] as supportive to the tenth degree and she has always viewed herself in that way too. So when it comes back now...that people don't look at her that way...it's been really painful for her. And it's been painful for me to see....[I]t feels like it's coming out of a place of mistrust....

The perception of a lack of trust did not only concern Lead Teachers, rather, other teachers with leadership responsibilities felt similar sentiments of mistrust. For example, some members of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT)³⁰ felt these sentiments projected from other teachers. One teacher member of the ILT discussed her feeling that teachers newer to the school distrusted the school's teacher leadership—which was consequentially comprised of many founding teachers.

[I]n those first years...We all felt like we were part of this project...But what I feel is happening now is that a lot of the teachers...who are new to this school don't have that [feeling]...[T]here is...this real disconnect in terms of the perception that some of our newer teachers have about the way the power structure is organized and how it really functions. And so like there is this division of "us versus them" kind of building.

This division between newer teachers and Shady Grove veterans limited the capacity of teachers to comfortably lead and offer support to others.

[L]ast year when it was the whole new group of teachers new to our school...I sort of found myself in the position of having to say, "Look this is the way we do things because we have to do things this way, and if we don't we're all gonna be suffering." But it's an awkward position because the teachers who have been around a little longer in a certain sense, we could be sort of supervisory. But on the other hand, we aren't necessarily. We don't have that clout. So it's kind of a weird balance because I'm not any administration.

This perception of mistrust had become part of Shady Grove's culture to the point that those who were in positions to offer leadership, support, and guidance were reluctant to do so.

³⁰ While Shady Grove's ILT meetings were open to all faculty members, the team was officially comprised of the principal, the school counselor, the 2 Lead Teachers and 2 other teachers.

School Culture

School Policies

Teachers were frustrated by either inconsistent, unimplemented or ineffective day-to-day structures/policies, particularly discipline policies, at their school, but they were committed to—and empowered by—the work necessary for improving school structures and policies, even if it meant taking on more work themselves. The Shady Grove community reported that they routinely struggled with setting effective policies and structures for students. Discipline served as one example of these struggles. Teachers stated that part of their frustration was the result of being in a small community with a small faculty to enforce such consequences. “And the reality is in our school we don’t have anyone who can be there consistently to deal with the consequences.” While teachers were the default enforcers of discipline, the supports for them in this area often ran short. One teacher recalled early detention policies that failed because teachers did not feel supported.

In the initial years we had detention....But then it just didn’t work, and then the next thing [we tried was,] “Okay, well the students who have detention...they’re going to stay in their 6th period class.” So I felt like we, the teachers, were being punished....[S]o we told [the Lead Teacher], “This is not working out. I don’t want to do this anymore.”...I think the lack of consistency in doing something and giving it a try for long term has been an issue...

As a result, teachers felt stifled when it came to consistently following through with consequences for students. The principal acknowledged the teachers’ frustrations; “[I]t’s frustrating at some point because when you look at it as a teacher, and you’ve got an individual [policy] concern, if it’s not being addressed immediately because we don’t have that policy in place...it’s a little bit frustrating.”

Despite teachers’ frustrations, they were committed to doing what it took to change school structures and policies for the better. Teachers at Shady Grove knew that in order for

structures to be effectively set into motion, they were the ones that had to agree upon a design and then carry them through.

[W]e can't just take a discipline model from a large comprehensive high school and just stick it onto a small school because there isn't...that "they" that are gonna do the discipline once the kids leave our room....[W]e have had to kind of invent [our discipline policy] as we've gone along....We're trying something new now where every morning there's a couple teachers who meet to go over the cases of the students who were sent to the office the day before....

But according to one teacher, this could only work if teachers adopted the mentality that success meant taking on more work. "Moving on that process and developing—that means putting on more hats, it means working extra hours, it means increasing knowledge in other areas."

But as teachers took on more work, they did so with the idea that they were the change makers that were shaping the success of their school community. This did not mean that their work came without struggle, rather, it meant that they could see the struggle and work through it together. As one teacher leader said, "[W]e have the ability to be more flexible. For example, if a group of teachers are saying, 'Hey you used this,' or a group of students are saying, 'Hey we need to work on this,' we can do that....[We have] the ability to really listen to students and staff and families and adjust because of our size." The principal echoed this sentiment, reflecting on the fact that—for better or for worse—Shady Grove teachers had genuine ownership of the policies they put forth.

One of the beauties of being in a small school...is that you can try things, and you know right away if it's going to work or not. And if it doesn't, we fix it....An example would be student discipline. There was a lot of confusion in terms of what is our discipline policy....We struggle, we struggle, we struggle, and we come up with ideas, and we try and add to it, constantly trying to work and tweak things so it makes sense.

There seemed to be an understanding amongst the faculty that despite the extra work that came with working through school policy issues, many valued the autonomy that came with such challenges.

Collaborative Professional Environment

While there was a collaborative spirit amongst the faculty, neither school structure nor teacher culture promoted curricular collaboration for most teachers. Teachers at Shady Grove were often teaching in isolation. Because the school had such a small faculty, teachers rarely taught the same subjects. In fact, one teacher was the only one in his subject area; “It’s been my first high school I’ve ever taught at. I am my department so I have no one really checking my content, so it’s more me staying on myself with that,” Similarly, another teacher said she planned alone because no one else in her content area taught at the same grade level.

The school’s daily schedule did allow for some teachers who taught the same grade to have common conference periods during the week; however, common conference periods did not mean that teachers prioritized cross-curricular collaboration over their other responsibilities.

We’ll talk at lunch sometimes just about where things are going, but, we don’t have time to co-plan...We do have a common conference period, and then we’ll have to make the time to do that, but, we have four conference periods a week...And a lot times I have stuff going on during that time, or I have to get stuff done, or I’m planning for 4th period that time....So, that’s where it gets frustrating because we don’t have the time.

It seemed that teachers had to take the initiative themselves if they wanted to collaborate on curricula. One teacher who supported the idea of co-planning pointed this out when she said, “[I]t’s kind of voluntary right? If you want to do it, you...kind of have to convince everyone else to do it...”

Given the lack of common planning time, collaboration amongst teachers often took place during faculty lunchtime. However, lunchtime collaboration was less about planning curricula together and more about discussing student or school issues with one another. As the principal noted, “[Teachers] will have lunch here every day...So during their lunch period, [discussion] might be light, but most of the time they’re [like], ‘Hey, you know, I need to talk about this,’ or ‘Does anybody have any suggestions on that?’ So they’re talking shop.”

Buy-In

In a vision-driven school where teachers depended on one another to follow through on common core practices and policies of the school, many teachers were frustrated by colleagues who did not share the school vision. Teachers felt that universal buy-in to common core practices was critical to the school’s success. As one teacher said, “[I]t takes a different kind of teacher, and you have to buy into it, to wearing the different hats. And if you don’t, then it’s never going to work....” While buying into common practices at any school—large or small—is crucial, some teachers felt that it was even more dire in their small school. “[I]n this school—if teachers don’t buy-in, the entire school feels it. Whereas at a larger school, if there’s one teacher who is not buying in, it may not affect the school as much as it would a smaller school.” The school’s Elect-to-Work Agreement (EWA),³¹ a document of expectations for Shady Grove teachers, laid out these practices expected of teachers.

Understanding some of the core practices of the school did not always come easily. This was especially true for some teachers in regards to the advisory program. As one teacher leader recalled, “[F]or me, it took a couple of years for it to really sink in why we had to do what we were doing [in advisory], all of us in the same way—so that it would be successful. Because once the teachers start going their own separate way...then that starts to cause problems across the board....” One teacher leader felt that having teacher support around the advisory program went hand in hand with the sustainability of the school vision. “[W]e have a specific curriculum

³¹ As a pilot school, each year Shady Grove teachers receive an Elect-to-Work Agreement (EWA), a contract documenting what is expected of Shady Grove teachers. These teacher-drafted expectations lay out classroom and non-classroom responsibilities as well as the school vision; before the EWA is issued each year, the faculty agrees upon the content which outlines what they, as teachers, agree they are going to do as members of the school community. If teachers are not performing in a way that is aligned with the school vision, they risk having their EWA withheld by the principal.

for advisory, and we're always concerned to make sure people are comfortable teaching that curriculum and are on board to teach it so that some of the school norms can be established and move forward."

Even though building a shared vision was a priority at Shady Grove, many teachers felt that there were still a number of colleagues who lacked buy-in and did not uphold the expectations set forth by the school vision. One teacher felt this lack of buy-in to the advisory program, particularly within her team of advisory teachers.

The group [of advisory teachers] is...kind of dysfunctional because there are a couple of people who don't really get with the [advisory] program...and there are people who do, and the kids are all over the place....[I]t hasn't been an easy time of forming consensus and co-planning with that group. I've struggled....[W]e all end up kind of doing our own thing.

Other teachers felt the lack of buy-in through the high rate of teacher absences. In a meeting of the Instructional Leadership Team, members discussed the troubling trend of teacher absence, noting that many teachers were missing work for reasons other than illness. The principal noted that teacher absence had recently been averaging two per day and that she was troubled; "I have two issues with it. One is that they are not here teaching our kids; we have subs teaching our kids. My second issue is that I trust teachers when they call in sick, and I am supposed to sign off on them. It's a trust issue." Teachers on the ILT were also frustrated by their colleagues' absences. They claimed that in addition to sacrificing their classroom responsibilities, absent teachers were failing their colleagues. One ILT member pointed out that students of one particular absent teacher had been watching movies in class for four days in a row. In response, another teacher said, "And I'm supposed to plan a unit with her. I'm way up here, and she is way behind."³²

³² Evidence from Instructional Leadership Team meeting observation, 3/29/11.

This lack of a universally-shared vision put a strain on veteran teachers. One teacher voiced her aggravation over having to work with dysfunctional teams. “[T]here are people in every group that I’m in who aren’t doing what they’re supposed to be doing, but by what authority do I have to get them on track? So that can be sort of frustrating for people who are...more goal-oriented...” Similarly, such aggravation also stemmed from the need to actually build the very buy-in at issue. This could be especially frustrating for veteran teachers in an environment where new faculty members, who didn’t know or understand the Shady Grove “way,” regularly came into the community.

[W]e’ve just been decimated in the sense several times by big turnovers....[I]t can be exhausting to kind of have to revisit things sometimes, and it’s frustrating because sometimes you end up having to go back to the buy-in thing....[B]ut if one teacher is not doing what everyone else needs them to be doing, it throws the whole system off. But if they don’t know how to do that, then ... We have to train people....And so I think that’s been something kind of exhausting....That for me is burn-out producing....And it affects you much more in a small school, I’m convinced.

Turnover from year-to-year at Shady Grove created a cycle of discord followed by continued efforts to train and build buy-in amongst new teachers. Some teachers have felt burnt out by this cycle.

Responsibilities & Long Hours

Many teachers here took on extra responsibilities because they felt an obligation to help the school succeed. However, more and more, the extra responsibilities—and the extra hours needed to complete them—were overwhelming those teachers. Because there was no clear schoolwide expectation of committing long hours, the lack of equity in terms of the hours some teachers committed risked creating a divide in the community.

Expectation of Extra Time

There was no clear expectation that teachers work beyond the required school hours; teachers were only required to stay afterschool one day per week for office hours, and they

claimed they didn't feel pressure from colleagues or from administration to put in more time.

(Some teachers chose to tutor afterschool and receive compensation.)

We're not being told that we have to stay... We have office hours and I do that, and I'm usually after school for a while. I don't do the tutoring, but I don't get paid and the people who are doing the tutoring are getting paid. They made the decision...It's not like they [administration] say to come in at 7pm and leave at 5pm. It doesn't exist here.

One teacher praised the administration, in fact, for supporting her by helping her draw boundaries between her personal and professional time.

[H]aving two small children, I was very upfront in my interview saying, "I'm not the teacher I was when I was twenty or thirty-something because I can't put in those hours anymore," [and] that was okay...and I also remember [the principal] saying, "Take your lunch."...And [the principal] saying, "Leave campus by 4pm. You might wanna stay here till 7pm....You need to have a life."

This professional courtesy was similarly extended to faculty members across the board. One teacher, who was completing graduate work, noted that teachers were given the flexibility to determine how much "extra" each put into their work.

[T]here's really a self-scaling perspective...I think I inherently put in a lot of outside of classroom time grading papers, making lesson plans, that sort of thing...I'm doing my credentials classes and masters right now, and I haven't felt bad that I'm not staying for tutoring, for example. But I think that for some of that kind of work, that we're compensating teachers for that extra [time].

Despite the flexibility Shady Grove teachers were awarded from their principal, many still chose to put in several hours beyond what was required. This personal drive was a common teacher characteristic when it came to individual classroom responsibilities. Teachers were also driven by a certain sense of personal obligation to the community. For some teachers, this personal obligation was a commitment to the success of the students. "But sometimes we stay not necessarily because of the pay but because students need our help like on Mondays or Wednesdays. I don't have to stay but if the students need me, I'm there and not because you're getting paid for it." For others, it was a personal obligation to the success of the school itself. "I don't feel that we're being obligated to wear all these hats and stay after school, but I do feel obligated to do so because I want the school to be successful, because I want the staff to be able

to teach to the students in a way that the students will then be successful. So, yeah, the obligation...comes from me.”

While teachers agreed that they were not being told by administration to stay afterschool, some felt that there was nevertheless a *de facto* expectation that they stay because students needed them. “[S]ometimes I feel that, ‘Okay, it’s sort of like expected that you stay,’ but I still feel guilty [for] not staying that late....[T]hose are the terms you buy into—‘Okay, I believe that I want to help the students do better, so that’s why we stay.’ But I have tremendous guilt if I leave.”

Equity of Time and Responsibilities

Teachers’ committing extra hours was evidence more of an individual expectation than a schoolwide expectation. Without a clear expectation of how much time teachers were supposed to put in, a growing tension around accountability risked creating a sense of resentment in the community. One teacher revealed this when giving the example of teacher participation at monthly Parent Night Events. “Initially we’re all expected to arrive and to participate—and it’s an opportunity to meet the parents—but not everybody stays, and it creates a problem with, ‘Well, so-and-so stayed,’ and ‘How long are we required to stay?’ and ‘What if we don’t stay? What are the repercussions?’”

Lack of equity was also a central point in the discussion around the EWA. In a document that was designed to be mutual contract amongst teachers, school leaders were troubled with how to appropriately protect some teachers from doing disproportionately more work than their colleagues. As one ILT member said, “How can we ensure that we are doing this equally? There are some teachers who are good teachers but they don’t do their fair share [outside of the classroom]....”

However, while a divide inched its way into the Shady Grove faculty, several were working to keep that divide away and build a sense of understanding. They recognized that a cohesive professional community—and the hours it took to maintain one—was critical to the success of this small school. One teacher spoke to this when addressing his colleagues during a focus group,

[W]e all know there's work to be done, and we could all be here till 8pm. Running a small school is an infinite amount of work. It's never going to be done, and I know we all know that. And there are people that definitely put in more hours than others, no question. So, the trick is how to make it still...feel okay for those people who maybe don't put in all those hours or put them in some other time where you can't see it necessarily....

The issue of equity and maintaining a strong professional community went hand-in-hand with school success for some Shady Grove teachers.

Support

Teaching Unique Skills for Small School Work

Teachers often found themselves unprepared when performing certain non-traditional school responsibilities and wished they had the skills and supports necessary for their work. The system of support as it was collided with some aspects of the current school culture and structures. Teachers were anxious over their lack of preparation for doing all aspects of their work. For example, one teacher expressed her stress and frustration over her lack of skills in certain advisor responsibilities.

I feel like something that I feel very ignorant about [is] that I'm expected to do with my students is [the] college application process—financial aid applications.... CAHSEE Prep, SAT Prep...I have no training in any of that. And I wasn't particularly good at taking those tests...I really don't have knowledge on how to do that...I think that's something that we're expected to do. But we really haven't done enough to help create institutional knowledge and skills that would help us.

While there was a frustration around a lack of skill in non-classroom responsibilities, there was also a frustration around a lack of skill in classroom responsibilities. At Shady Grove, teachers were expected to develop and implement student-centered curricula where projects were the

main assessment tool. However, teachers trained in traditional programs often struggled with integrating project-based assessments with their curricula. One teacher reflected this very struggle. “I would like my classes in some ways to become a little more project-based....But I don’t know how to do that very successfully....So, I would like training in how to develop...these authentic assessments.” Teachers struggled with performing the tasks expected of them when they lacked the knowledge and skills of how to do them.

As a result of teachers not knowing *how to* do certain aspects of their job, Shady Grove teachers often learned “as they went.” In one focus group, teachers discussed their reality—that while they didn’t always know how to do all aspects of their job, they nevertheless had to learn it one way or another. “You kind of figure it out. Because it’s a small school you might be able to figure it out a little bit more easily because you only have 20 people to deal with versus 200.” From working with students to working with adults, collaboration was essential to the Shady Grove community and so were mastering skills in collaboration. Sometimes teachers had to learn how to actually *work with* those in their community. “[U]ntil the time I had this job, I didn’t really ever have to work with a group of people for years on end on different things....And so I’ve had to learn a lot about how do you try to be more diplomatic, and that is something that I’ve had to learn in this job.”

Part of learning skills in collaboration was learning how to lead one’s peers. In a community where teachers often led their peers, being a teacher leader required its own set of skills. At Shady Grove, amidst responsibilities such as mentoring, scheduling, and school budget planning, the Lead Teacher’s responsibilities included developing and implementing professional development for all faculty members. One Lead Teacher discussed the challenges of this on-the-job learning.

I was not trained to [be a Lead Teacher]...I've learned a whole lot. I had no idea what I was doing....[W]e can kind of work our way into the job. Like the first year PD, after doing that the first year I was like, "I can't do it like that again. That was bad." So we had to do some things differently, and so we made some significant changes, and we continue to do that. But I think...for me, learning how to do PD has been like something major.

While learning on-the-job had value, learning how to be a teacher leader *while* actually leading carried unique challenges.

School leaders recognized that teachers had a lot of unique on-the-job learning. As a result, setting up formal supports for teachers through mentorship, observations, and professional development was a priority. The school's two Lead Teachers acted as "official" mentors to struggling teachers. In addition, other veteran teachers (who were not Lead Teachers) often jumped in as unofficial mentors where needed.

However, the system of support as it was collided with some aspects of the current school culture and structures. First, the effectiveness of mentorship was hampered by a lack of time. One teacher who had become an unofficial mentor to two of her colleagues lamented the lack of time she had to support them. In one case, she blamed scheduling. "[W]e have the same planning period, [so] I can't go into [that teacher's] class and help her out."

Secondly, mentorship was held back by the need to protect the egalitarian atmosphere of the teacher community. In a school where teachers took on many non-traditional roles—including leadership—an egalitarian community amongst teachers was paramount. Thus, when it came to mentoring, the relationships were often very fragile between struggling teachers and mentoring teachers. For example, teachers who took on unofficial mentoring roles sometimes found themselves in uncomfortable spots. One unofficial mentor said that she often referred struggling teachers to a Lead Teacher instead of offering support herself.

Part of the reason I think I go to [the Lead Teachers when I hear a teacher is struggling] is because I don't have the extra period to go and help [that teacher] and part of it too is that all the teachers are sort of equal...I don't always feel like I wanna go and say, "Look, I've been hearing this, this, this," because I don't feel comfortable doing that.

While teachers may have deferred to a Lead Teacher as a means of protecting teacher equality, Lead Teachers themselves did not necessarily feel the lines were clearly drawn when it came to mentoring. As one Lead Teacher said,

[W]e only have one administrator...I'm not technically an administrator. How do I observe? And, then, if I'm observing, what's my role in that? Am I an evaluative observer, or am I a support observer?...I've always seen myself as a support person but then, in reality, what happens is that the people that you're observing, not all of them see it that way.

The discomfort teachers felt in acting as mentors called into question the capacity of Shady Grove's support system.

Weekly professional development time was another teacher support built into Shady Grove's structure. While PD meetings were teacher-designed and teacher-led, some teachers felt that PD time was not always efficiently used and was not appropriately addressing every teachers' day-to-day or professional needs. While some teachers felt their greatest need was time to plan their own curricula, others wanted to commit their professional development to looking ahead as a school community. There was a constant tension between these two needs when it came to planning and using PD time efficiently for all faculty members. As one Lead Teacher, who planned PD time, discussed,

[S]itting down and writing your lesson plans is what some teachers think of as, "I get my planning time." Whereas we're trying to facilitate conversations to help enrich or connect between different courses and things like that. I think one of the things that the fatigue of a small school brings up is, "[W]e just want to sit down and do our planning."

The balance between giving teachers time to do their work and giving them the opportunity to develop new skills was difficult one to find, particularly when there was a need for both.

While there had been an effort to merge the two—curricular planning with the school's long-term needs—some teachers were still dissatisfied. Teachers partly blamed PD's inefficiency on the lack of grade level chairs and frequent teacher turnover. Some teachers believed that the absence of a grade level chair—or other team chairs—meant that their team meetings lacked

direction and often failed to be productive. When recalling one meeting in which grade level teams were given certain tasks for Shady Grove's WASC application, one teacher said,

There is no one grade level [team leader]. We kind of do it just as a group which is problematic sometimes. Sometimes I have definitely felt that it would be better if you had [a point person]...because I think a lot of things just kind of get left. There is not a lot of follow-through because we haven't developed kind of a structure.

Even in this researcher's observations of an advisory team meeting, the absence of a team leader was apparent. There was no clear beginning to the meeting and no point person to call items to an agenda. Two teachers seemed to take the lead in terms of bringing up tasks that each team was asked to complete by faculty PD leaders. Advisory planning business and student issues were loosely brought up without clear objectives. Side conversations frequently evolved amongst members of the group, and the meeting ended without clear resolutions.

In addition to the lack of team leaders, teacher turnover was also to blame for teacher frustration regarding an inefficient use of PD time. As mentioned previously (in the Findings section on "Buy In"), much time was spent introducing teachers new to the school to certain aspects of Shady Grove's mission and vision. While this was necessary to build teacher buy-in, veteran teachers were frustrated when their own professional development needs were repeatedly overlooked.

I think it [is] a problem...in our professional development when we have to spend a lot of time going over stuff that we've already gone over. I feel like...sometimes we're spinning our wheels because we have to keep incorporating new people...[I]t is frustrating to have to constantly re-teach...as opposed to being able to go to the next level. So, in that respect it's kind of exhausting for the teachers that have been around.

Even the Lead Teacher in charge of planning PD blamed teacher turnover for holding back the school's overall curricular development.

We [as a faculty] have...elected to create curriculum maps...[with our PD time]. So we spend a lot of time of PD working on those....And especially with the turnover...you end up with a whole new person in the spot, and you're handing them someone else's map and saying, "Let's try to make sense of those together"...I feel like...if we hadn't had so much turnover, we would've been able to move ahead more quickly.

For some, the frustration around PD was rooted in routinely changing faculty members, a circumstance over which the school had limited control but nonetheless had become part of the school's culture.

Supporting Teachers New to the School

The challenge of teaching the unique culture and experience of the school to new teachers remained a struggle for school leaders. In a vision-driven school like Shady Grove with its unique systems and small environment, being a teacher new to the community could be quite a challenge. The principal recognized that new teachers had the challenge of learning both the school strategies but also the school's culture.

In order to be an effective teacher, these teachers need proper support, and I don't care if they've been in the system for 10, 15, 20 years, you still have to learn the culture of this school. So if we're bringing in experienced teachers, they have a handle on their management or their vision, but there is still time that it takes them to learn our [instructional] strategies....And so the stress of being a first year teacher in [here] is tough.

The school principal pointed out that the professional community of a small school could often be more transparent than that of a large school, and could, thus, leave teachers more vulnerable.

[H]ere there's no place to hide. So, you've got that pressure of knowing that you're gonna be on all the time. You are going to actively participate in professional development. People are going to know where you are. People are going to recognize your strengths, but also you're going to expose yourself to some of your challenges. And that's intimidating.

Similarly, the closeness of the school community also meant that teachers had the extra challenge—and expectation—of forming relationships with students.

We're small, and our kids all know the teachers, and they've built a relationship with the teachers. So when one teacher leaves, there's a lot of the emotions attached to that teacher.... And now you bring somebody in to replace them...all of a sudden, "Who's this outsider coming into my school?" from the students perspective.

The closeness of the small school community, which may have been exactly what attracted many teachers to the school in the first place, was also a factor for consideration in providing more targeted support.

Summary of Findings at Shady Grove

Teachers at Shady Grove felt motivated to take on “extra” and to put in long hours because they felt a strong sense of obligation to school success. This obligation was personal and not required by a schoolwide expectation. Along with this, however, was a growing sense of inequity amongst the faculty. Some were perceived as not doing their fair share. Division threatened the professional community, and a culture of mistrust developed, particularly toward teacher leaders. These feelings of mistrust weighed on teacher leaders who struggled with how to be leaders and offer support to colleagues. Many recognized that teachers, particularly new teachers, needed support around understanding the school’s vision. However, while there was a collaborative spirit at Shady Grove, efforts made to support struggling teachers and provide professional development were inhibited by school culture and structures.

Case Study 2: Sweetbriar School

Similar to Shady Grove, Sweetbriar School is also located in the downtown area and is one of four schools in a multi-school complex. School leadership was a combination of principal leadership and teacher voice. The principal believed in distributive leadership, seeing himself as a support for teachers to explore their leadership potential. Teachers were central players in making schoolwide decisions and enacting policies. Despite the lack of schoolwide policies, teachers often took the initiative to problem solve as the need arose. Some thought of this as a testament to the strength of the “proactive” and “intelligent staff.” For some, Sweetbriar empowered teachers to create school policies; “That’s the great stuff about working in a small school and having the liberty to do that.” Collaboration was woven throughout school structures—both in and out of the classroom, and efforts to support teachers were integral.

Teachers new to Sweetbriar—whose model focused on student-centered, project-based learning and advisory practices—often had a steep learning curve. To provide support, new hires were sent to a summer orientation to learn Sweetbriar’s core teaching practices.

While the culture at Sweetbriar was one of teacher leadership and collaboration, teachers nevertheless felt school structures at times fell short in supporting them. The following findings address these tensions.

School Leadership

Some felt the combination of teacher and principal leadership was ineffective and inefficient in decision-making. Several saw the principal as too distributive, wanting him to be a stronger leader and decision maker, and wanting teacher leadership roles to be more clearly defined. The principal saw his role as that of a support for teachers to explore their leadership potential. “I’m trying to do that distributed servant leader model...[W]e have a strong staff who’s very committed...[I]f I’m now the support system, allowing them to take off, then it really moves them along in a very powerful way.” Despite this, there was a demand from teachers for a strong leadership figure *to work with* them in leading the school—and in some cases, to be the final decision maker—rather than *to only support* teachers in leading the school.

As one founding teacher leader said,

I know at our school we have fought really hard to preserve our empowerment as teachers and to have a say in everything, and that’s really good. But then we also fault [the principal] sometimes, because it’s like, “We still need leadership.” At some point someone has to just be like, “Okay, discussion over, this is the decision.”...I’m so tired of [distributive leadership].

While distributive leadership was a valued practice at Sweetbriar, some teachers were worn out by this type of leadership. Teachers wanted a leader to make decisions when they felt they couldn’t. Teachers wanted a system on which they could rely and in which they could trust.

Many teachers felt that in order to cultivate their own leadership potential, they needed to have solid leadership to guide them. One teacher leader expressed concerns around the lack of leadership structure,

A lot of issues come up [in grade level meetings] like just concerns that the teachers have or things that they feel they need support on, but it's not clear like "So what do we do with all those concerns? Are we supposed to tell them to [the principal]? Who's supposed to tell them to [the principal]? When? [The principal is] not necessarily asking for them. If we do just kind of mention to [the principal], what's the follow-up process?"

Without a clearly defined leadership structure, teachers' concerns or issues often went unheard.

Some Sweetbriar teachers felt that there was little leadership in creating a unified vision. One teacher felt that while individual teachers at Sweetbriar were strong, the future of the school was shaky because there was no one successfully uniting the teachers. "In a school you've got a group of people who have a shared profession, but other common characteristics cannot be assumed...[W]ithout a leader to shape the mission of that group of people and to support the jelling of that group, you have no chance."

Teacher leadership was a central part of Sweetbriar's theoretical distributive leadership model; however, some teachers had doubts about the way the model had been put into practice. For example, Sweetbriar's Lead Teacher was uncertain about how her role was defined;

I don't know what it means [to be the Lead Teacher]. I've tried to suggest that we have some kind of [document] that explains the position. "What am I responsible for? What is the staff supposed to see in me? What is the point of having a Lead Teacher?" But a lot of people aren't comfortable [with that].

For this Lead Teacher, the cultural groundwork had not been laid for her to lead. Instead she felt pushback from her colleagues when she tried to be the leader she thought was expected.

[M]y interpretation of what Lead Teacher was at the beginning has really changed...[When I started]...I felt I was responsible at least for making agendas for the [faculty] meetings and starting the meetings and like taking minutes...and like trying to elicit participation from all the teachers...And I also thought [it] was like part of my job to get some of those policies in place, to address the teachers' concerns....I really don't know what the Lead Teacher position is at this point...I've been...told not to make agendas for the meetings.

She felt that teachers were uncomfortable with a colleague acting as a pseudo-administrator. As a result, over time, she lost the motivation to be a school leader.

[W]hen you take the lead it's not necessarily thanked....I felt more people were like, "Why is she doing this? Who gave her the power to do that? Why is she then suggesting this policy? Or making this agenda? Or trying to get things organized?" It is just so disempowering that they might as well not have the position.

Similarly, members of the Leadership Team did not feel they had the structural or cultural groundwork to effectively lead. The Leadership Team was seen as a place where ideas were discussed and debated, but decisions were not necessarily made. This was evident in one Leadership Team meeting during which future schedule options were discussed; the meeting began without a clearly, stated objective and ended mid-discussion with no decision on the schedule being made.³³ Sweetbriar's Leadership Team was not a selective group. As one member put it, "It's just whoever shows up to the meeting. Whoever wants to put in that extra time that they're not getting paid for on a Tuesday and just wants to hang out and like sit there, listen, talk, it doesn't matter." While the meetings were open, they were not necessarily well-attended. Some even saw Leadership Team meetings as a source of frustration rather than an opportunity for them to shape the school's future. "[T]here's even become a point where no one even wants to come to the Leadership meetings anymore....[I]t's almost like some people *have* to go because there wouldn't even be a Leadership meeting."

For many teachers, this frustration stemmed from a lack of direction. They generally did not see the Leadership Team as having a clear objective—or even a clear purpose—uniting them in their work.

I don't think it's ever really gotten settled what [the Leadership meeting] is for. People want really different things....Some people really want Leadership meetings to be like a discussion space....like a critical friends group. And then other people want [them]...to be like a place where accountability is held, where [the principal] is sort of getting reports from his staff....Now Leadership Team is just kind of like whatever the most pressing issue is, I guess.

³³ Evidence from Leadership Team meeting observation, 4/12/11.

One former teacher leader interviewed spoke about her first year at Sweetbriar during which she eagerly joined the Leadership Team—or attended the meetings—because she wanted to involve herself as much as she could in shaping the school. Unfortunately, she found the meetings so frustrating. “I wanted to make myself valuable to the school, so I stayed at these meetings, and I noticed it was lot of chasing tails and arguing. I got really frustrated with that. “ As a result, she dropped off the Leadership Team. Without a clearly defined system for teacher leadership, teachers were reluctant to take on leadership roles, and, thus, the teacher leadership component of the school model remained blurred.

School Culture

School Policies

Many teachers felt frustrated by the lack of set policies and, in turn, blamed their colleagues or school governance structures for inconsistent follow-through on policy implementation. Sweetbriar School operated on a system of “case-by-case” policies and procedures rather than universal school-wide policies. Certain school policies were often loosely defined (if at all) or went unimplemented to the extent that many teachers and students ignored them. For many teachers, this “case-by-case” policy structure was frustrating because there were no schoolwide protocols to follow. For example, in the absence of a policy on personal electronic devices, teachers differed on how they handled student possession of devices such as cell phones.

[Y]ou’ll find teachers who will take away iPods and phones if they see them out and being used, and, at the same time...you have teachers who will...encourage that behavior, and some who are dealing with it on a case-by-case basis—academic use, non-academic use. And others who just don’t wanna deal with it...[I]n a small school, that’s a problem.”

While some teachers adapted by either creating their own protocols or problem solving as the need arose, teachers still worried about the impact inconsistent policies had on the school

overall; "...if there's no policy I'll just make one in my classroom and that's that. But, it's more school-wide that I feel like unhappy with..." According to some teachers, the failure of school governance structures to provide clear protocols for teachers resulted in both inconsistencies for students but also in tensions amongst teacher colleagues.

[The lack of agreed-upon policies] just creates tension. [T]here's a lot of teachers who don't know what they're supposed to be doing, so they try one approach, and, then the next day they try another approach, and then it's inconsistent. And the kids start seeing that different kids are being treated differently....There is no set consequence....

There seemed to be a divide within the school in terms of how schoolwide policies were decided. In a small school like Sweetbriar where distributed leadership was emphasized, many believed that policies should be agreed upon by teachers before being officially put into place. On the other hand, others felt that without clear orders from school leadership, there was no mandate for schoolwide policy implementation. Additionally, some teachers were perceived as being against universal schoolwide policies in general; these teachers drew anger from colleagues who felt their philosophy weakened the school community. "[T]hey're against the idea of having a policy because they feel like it goes against personalization, and they feel like it's very traditional, and to them any consequence is punitive....So any policy that has been agreed upon has always been undermined by a few teachers who just...aren't going to do it." One teacher highlighted her frustrations with this three-sided debate.

[We create policies as issues arise]. We call it... "Building the plane as you're flying it." We have this big school mentality when we are a small school....We need to get rid of that and... not rely on bureaucracy....Nobody tells you what to do or what the protocol is because there is none. Then we encounter these problems, and we end up suffering along the way, and still nothing has been solved, and nobody has stepped up to solve the problem.

Those who wanted clear policies for the school felt directionless in their absence.

In addition to inconsistencies in policies like student discipline, several voiced concern about the school's advisory program, a program which relied on schoolwide implementation of certain policies. Advisors expected colleagues to uphold core protocols central to the school's

advisory program, however, some felt there were inconsistencies in the implementation of advisory policies. “[Y]ou don’t know what that means when you send the kids to their advisory teacher. You don’t know what’s going to happen.... I still think there should be some agreements on like common practices that the advisors will do.” One teacher discussed the discrepancies in how different teachers handled advisory and discipline policies.

[O]ur policy right now is that discipline goes through the advisory teacher....It is hard because it’s like trusting someone else to do things, and then some people don’t believe in calling home whatsoever or having parent conferences....So then it’s hard because then if I want to take it back into my own playing field [in my classroom], I feel like unempowered to do that....[I]t wouldn’t be appropriate at this point because it’s not what we’ve agreed to as a school.

Failing to follow-through on agreed-upon policies such as advisory policies had become a trend that threatened teacher unity as well as the strength of the school program itself.

In a school like Shady Grove where teachers’ classroom practices obviously varied, many struggled within a professional community where policy implementation was individualized as well.

Collaborative Professional Environment

While collaboration was built into the structure of the school, a lack of skills in distributive leadership and in collaboration made successful collaboration challenging. For the most part, team teaching and common planning periods for collaborating teacher teams were institutionalized at Sweetbriar. Most classrooms had team teachers³⁴ and most grade-level teams had common conference periods. Despite this structure, however, collaboration itself was not embraced by all teachers. While there were overarching challenges to collaboration—like the time it demanded or a preference to work independently—the predominant challenges to successful collaboration at Sweetbriar were largely linked to a lack of skill. As one teacher put it, “I don’t think [collaboration] works very well [here], and I think it goes to the types of skills—

³⁴ At Shady Grove, some teachers team teach with colleagues, and others team teach with student teachers.

distributed leadership is nice idea on paper—the skills involved in producing that buy-in and teaching teachers to work together, that’s a real challenge.” Another teacher elaborated on this, claiming that it was difficult to collaborate in the context of distributed leadership when many teachers still operated in a “big school” mentality. “In a small school...we’re creating a team that’s supposed to be looking at our common goals...but if we have teachers that are only going to follow something if someone on high tells [them] because of that context shift—from a large school to a small school—then it’s difficult to make that progress.” Without skills in how to participate within the distributive leadership model, several failed to embrace their role as participants in the small school context.

Similarly, many teachers failed to embrace their role as participants in a collaborative environment because they did not possess the necessary skills. This was apparent for some who struggled with team teaching in the classroom because they felt some of the basic skills in collaboration were missing in their partnerships. As one teacher, who was working with a student teacher, discussed,

This is my first year co-teaching with a student teacher...so there’s less of that [equal peer collaboration]. There could be complications about content or even behavioral management...[Collaboration] is still really hard...like how to...observe and give feedback and work together, and finding the time to common plan...[T]he lack of skills makes the collaboration hard.

For some teachers who lacked skills in collaborative teaching, team teaching referred more to the actual number of teachers in the classroom rather than a genuine collaboration in teaching. One teacher pointed this out;

[W]hen you have nice big classrooms like this, it’s easy to schedule in two teachers; [but] having them actually successfully communicate with one another, have shared expectations and be able to give constructive feedback, that’s a whole other challenge. And I’m not sure we’ve succeeded yet in doing that at our school. It’s more likely the teams will break up, that partners will split the classes, that we’ll simply change the schedule next year so those folks...don’t have to be paired up.

It seemed that efforts to improve collaboration were more about shifting teachers around than focusing on team-teaching skills. One teacher, who was turned off of team teaching, blamed the school for failing to effectively teach skills in collaboration.

I had team teachers in the past, and, honestly, I'm happier not having one...I would want to have my projects organized and...have it be like the best project ever, and that requires a lot of time...[I]f someone's going to team teach it with you...and if they don't want to put in the time, then they're not going to be equal members of the team...I don't think the school has done anything to really address that....

For this teacher the inability to effectively collaborate with a team teacher was a failure of the school leadership.

Struggles with collaboration went beyond just team teaching in the classroom and extended into grade-level and department teams. Sweetbriar's structural design intended for teachers who taught the same subject or the same grade level would ideally work together in teams. However, some teachers felt their teams lacked the team building skills to be effective in their work.

[W]e haven't even talked about how we create a team...What is our goal? What is our function? What is our purpose? And so, we just sit in those teams...We haven't gone through the steps of: How do we create that team? How do we hold each other accountable? How do we have honest discussions about our successes and our failures? Team building is really important for the small school. It's an important skill.

Team building was also threatened by colleagues calling one another's commitment to the school into question. Teachers felt pressure from other colleagues in terms of how much "extra" to contribute beyond their classroom duties. Some felt pressure to contribute more, some felt pressure to contribute less. One teacher felt that some teachers "bully" others into committing more time at school.

[T]here are like one or two people who I personally feel are bullies at this school...I don't mind staying the long hours, but I think there are people at this school who try to use that as a weeding factor, saying that "You don't belong here, you aren't willing to commit your life."...I care about the kids, absolutely, but I'm not going to kill my marriage over it.

On the other hand, one teacher leader felt pressure by colleagues to commit less time to her work as a teacher leader. "[I]n the small school environment...it creates a lot of tension when you're

doing a lot more than other teachers....Your staff doesn't necessary see it as an entirely good thing. So, I felt like I was getting criticized a lot [for going above and beyond]." For that teacher leader, committing less time was about avoiding tensions with colleagues; "[A]s time goes by, you try to fit in. You try to conform to the environment that you're in....[M]y first few years here I did everything I could think of, and as time has gone on, it's like I feel like I've become more of an average staff member." For that teacher, collaboration had become largely about avoiding conflict with colleagues rather than about building skills in distributive leadership and collaboration.

Buy-In

In a vision-driven school where teachers depended on one another to follow through on common core practices and policies of the school, many teachers were frustrated by colleagues who did not share the school vision and felt that the school lacked discussions around vision and values. For them, the disconnect between faculty teachers and an understanding of school vision had led to a disconcerting absence of buy-in. As one teacher said, "[I]n a small school...there has to be increased participation....[W]e have 18 teachers...and each of those teachers contributes to the culture. If you're in a school with 200 plus teachers, your lack of buy-in or your complete buy-in may not even matter. Here it does." Despite that, some teachers felt that that critical buy-in had been diluted within the faculty to the point that the school lacked a unified vision. In one focus group, teachers expressed this,

P3: We've lost the connection between the rules and the values. It's supposed to be a value-driven environment, and now we couldn't get 12 of us together to agree on what the values are.

P4: And so the discussion becomes "Why aren't we all following the same policy?" instead of "What is the value we're trying to transmit?" So it's not a discussion about culture, it becomes "Why isn't everyone doing what we agreed to?" And so that becomes difficult, because how do you have that conversation?

Some felt that vision- and value-forming conversations had been replaced by discussions of rules and policies. Their concern was that without a clear understanding of school vision schoolwide, core practices and policies were empty.

Some teachers felt their practices were far-removed from those of their colleagues, largely because honest, meaningful conversations about vision and values weren't happening. As one teacher said, "Eighteen teachers never talking to each other. Different instructional practices going on two doors apart from each other in a school that's supposed to have a unified strategy. Some of them [collaborating teachers] aren't talking to each other." One founding teacher lamented over the fact that without critical on-going, vision-forming conversations, he felt directionless.

[The school has been] held back in just honest conversation... I feel like a chicken with my head cut-off sometimes, not knowing what direction we're going. And so, we haven't had any meaningful staff meetings where we're talking about "What is the vision for our next 3, 4, or 5 years? What does success look like at our school?..." And so, when you don't have a clear direction, it's easy to not worry about what's going on at the school.

Teachers reported a breakdown in communication around school vision beginning with the hiring process. Teachers new to the school often did not know the expectations of the school before being hired. One teacher leader claimed that candidates were only given part of the picture when learning about the school's expectations. "It's hard to...buy in because there hasn't been a clear expectation [laid out]....When you come we say, 'This school is going to require more time commitment,' but ... we don't define it." This was a particular problem for teachers hired at the "last minute" late in the summer.³⁵ In the hastiness of hiring, these new teachers were often not informed of practices core to Sweetbriar's program. One teacher leader brought up the

³⁵ Because of budget cuts to Sweetbriar's school district, teacher lay offs (or "pink slips") are common. As a result, new teachers are often hired late in the spring or summer and are chosen from a list of displaced teachers. Autonomous schools like Sweetbriar are limited in their choices of teacher hires.

problem that especially in these circumstances new teachers often didn't know the school's expectations and thus could not actually "buy in or not."

Now when our hiring process works the way it's supposed to work, then people are well-informed....But, that hiring process hasn't always happened....So there are a few people here this year who...had no business being here. I wouldn't say they didn't buy-in, because they didn't even know what they were buying in to or not. Some of them didn't know that we were a project-based school, that we're non-traditional, that we're going to do team teaching, that we go out of our way to not fail kids.

While this teacher was frustrated with the lack of buy-in amongst new teachers, she blamed the school's hiring system—not the new teachers—for a breakdown in communication. Without passing along the school vision to new members of the professional community, school leaders risked losing understanding of school vision and, by extension, buy-in.

Responsibilities & Long Hours

While there was no clear schoolwide expectation of committing long hours, there was nevertheless a cultural expectation at the school that teachers take on a range of tasks and put in time beyond the school day to collaborate and design curricula. The time demanded of teachers weighed heavily on them and, consequentially, raised the issue of equity. It was expected that teachers take on non-classroom administrative tasks, collaborate, and design their own curricula. However, the time that teachers were expected to spend to complete these responsibilities was not clear or explicit. Nevertheless, such a commitment of putting in hours long past the school day was commonplace for most teachers at Sweetbriar.

Cultural Expectations of Non-Classroom Administrative Tasks

Whether teachers felt persuaded to take on more responsibilities—"[O]ftentimes someone says, 'I want you to take this position. Come on.... Do it.' And most of the time you're not gonna say no."—or whether teachers felt an inner compulsion or commitment—"I do it on my own,. [I choose to put in long hours at my school.]"—a culture of doing "extra" evolved. As

a result, there was a cultural expectation that teachers put in more time and take on extra responsibilities ensued as well. “I think the expectation is there but...we’re under union contracts...” implying that the hours they spent working could not be officially mandated.

For the system to function teachers took on responsibilities that were more traditionally handled by administrators in larger, traditional public schools. For most teachers, while taking on these non-classroom tasks was part of working at a small school, it was nevertheless taxing on them. One teacher voiced his frustration of not really feeling he was completing any of his responsibilities.

[Y]ou’re not just a teacher, you’re not just an advisor...you also have to take on leadership roles. Someone has to be testing coordinator; someone has to be this coordinator, that coordinator. Sometimes, that second job can just take on as many hours as your teaching duties. You can find yourself working 16 hours a day...and not even getting the work done.

Being stretched across a range of tasks was part of being a teacher at Sweetbriar. The cultural expectation that teachers have multiple responsibilities outside of the classroom risked leaving teachers without a sense of accomplishment.

Time for Collaboration

As mentioned earlier, collaboration was built into the structure of Sweetbriar, and, as such, collaborative practices were expected of teachers. Whether it was working with other teachers or with the principal, collaboration was a very time-consuming process. While team-teaching pairs and grade level teams shared common planning periods—which many felt rarely provided enough time—teachers still had to find time beyond the school day to work together. As one teacher stressed the extra hours collaborative teaching required, she reflected on the irony that team teaching was viewed as a support for teachers since it required so much time.

I guess there are built-in supports in the sense that most teachers are teamed with someone, [but] how do you work with your team teacher if you don’t [get] any extra time? Between team teachers, they have to figure it out. Are they going to meet after school to plan stuff, or are they going to meet on the weekends?

Teachers also had to meet outside of the school day to collaborate on their administrative responsibilities. As one member of the Leadership Team explained, “We don’t have enough time in the school day for grade level teams or teaching partners to accomplish their planning and discussion...So if they’re gonna do [the Leadership Team], they have to do it on a Saturday or after school.”

While the principal worried about teacher burnout and tried to support teachers through structural supports, team members still had to find time outside of the school day to collaborate. The principal tried to support his teachers through efforts such as team teaching structures, common planning periods and meeting time built into their professional development time each week. “We try to create a system where we can put that [team teacher planning] time into the master schedule but they get fifty minutes, four days a week for their conference period. And Tuesdays, we try to make that very protected time with PD.” Despite the principal’s efforts to support teachers—team teaching in and of itself being a support—some teachers felt these common planning periods weren’t enough.

Curricular Responsibilities

While designing curricula is a task common at most schools—large and small—circumstances of Sweetbriar dictated unique situations that made curricula design particularly time-consuming for teachers. At Sweetbriar many teachers jumped around from year to year, teaching different grades and building new curricula as well as teaching with multiple teaching partners. In fact, many teachers felt that they spent so much time building new curricula each year that they didn’t have time to take on non-classroom tasks like the ones discussed in the previous section. As one teacher stated, “I don’t actually spend a lot of time on extracurricular activities, supporting various different functions. But I find that curriculum development and

working with my team teacher are more than enough to feel like the hours are endless.”

Similarly, one teacher felt that curricula planning took so much time that he didn’t even have time to commit to attending faculty meetings;

The nature of curriculum development weighed on teachers—new and experienced—largely because of Sweetbriar’s student-centered, project-based, interdisciplinary approach.

While teachers may have supported the school’s curricular mission and vision, many nevertheless struggled with it. One teacher discussed feeling overwhelmed; “[I]t’s so much more difficult than anything I’ve done before....[T]he amount of time planning is just—I do the best that I can, is all I have to say. I’m sure I could spend 24 hours if I wanted to get the job done just right, but that’s not realistic.” This teacher compared her curriculum development at Sweetbriar with her work in a traditional school;

[As] a teacher in a traditional school after your 3rd year you feel comfortable. You have your curriculum down, then you might feel...more creative and secure. And you don’t have to panic about it the night before...I think that’s why so many teachers leave [here]. It’s because you never get comfortable....[I]t’s part of the culture....[I]t’s part of what’s to be expected at a small, project-based learning environment, that that’s the type of work you need to do for the kids.

For this teacher, the expectation of curricula development at Sweetbriar was exhausting and burnout-inducing.

Teachers often put in long hours designing curricula that they only used *one time* or collaborating with a colleague *for only one year*. This year-to-year practice weighed on teachers, particularly when they felt they had little time (if any) to improve upon their work. While teacher turnover is hard on any school community, it could be particularly draining on a school like Sweetbriar. In a school where teachers depended on having the same teaching partner from year-to-year, teacher turnover could supplant the hard work and effort that teachers put into curricula design from one year to the next. One teacher reflected on the time demanded by this cycle of constant curricula design;

[C]urriculum is always in development. It [has] this kind of experimental quality...you're looking at it again and revising. And then you change your teaching partners or classes based on turnover and so on. So it just seems curriculum development and the time meeting on a Saturday with your team teacher or after school with your team teacher, just a lot of time.

While teachers recognized invaluable aspects of student-centered, project-based learning, the year-to-year practice of curricula design that had developed at Sweetbriar weighed on teachers. One teacher spoke of feeling of inadequate and exhausted.

I don't feel good at anything...I feel like I haven't mastered anything...I do feel like I'm not a good teacher...I want to prove to myself that I can get better at something, and I don't feel like that's possible...[E]verything I'm doing...is the first time, and the first time at everything sucks...I don't feel like I'm doing a great job, but I know I'm working my butt off....

The nature of teachers' curricular responsibilities, particularly given Sweetbriar's culture of teacher mobility, risked infusing this sense of demoralization in its professional community.

Equity of Time and Responsibilities

The issue of equity arose in a few conversations with teachers around the number of hours certain teachers put in and the number of tasks some took on. Because the expectation of extra time and responsibilities was cultural rather than institutionally-mandated, some noticed a discrepancy in how much time certain teachers devoted. For example, one teacher noted that those members of the Leadership Team who voluntarily met on the weekends put in more time than those teachers who didn't take on administrative tasks. This sentiment was also relayed during one focus group conversation.

P4: It's not a general expectation of the staff that they have to work long hours. I think what we need to be more clear about is sharing more of the responsibilities as a school but that hasn't been clearly discussed. And so the long hours tend to occupy...[the hours of a] small majority. The multiple hats, that doesn't even go into the idea of designing curriculum, implementing curriculum, collaboration with a team teacher....

P2: ...[O]n occasion you hear a particular teacher or 2 or 3 of them, they have six hats on. They do a whole bunch of stuff, and they are just messed up by the end of the year.

The general sentiment at Sweetbriar was that while most of the 18 teachers put in extra time, there were some who went above and beyond. The question at-hand was how to share the burden more equitably.

Support

Teaching Unique Skills for Small School Work

While teachers valued professional development meetings as time to get work done and discuss student issues, professional development time was not always efficiently used and did not appropriately address teachers' day-to-day needs or professional growth.

Professional development at Sweetbriar referred to weekly meetings which rotated from department meetings to grade level meetings to collaborating teacher team meetings.³⁶ It was time set aside to work together in teams—absent of “official” team facilitators—on issues deemed to be priorities by team members. “It’s basically planning time or time to have parent conferences or discuss students...[Each team] will like make a list of priorities, what they need to talk about...And we critique each other’s projects...we’ll brainstorm ideas to help make the projects better.”

Even though teachers appreciated time to plan lessons and discuss students, they nevertheless felt professional development meetings fell short. Some teachers felt that the very structure of professional development was inefficient in addressing teachers’ needs simply because follow-up was so spread out; “So with the three-week rotation...then if there is a week of vacation, let’s say, it could be a month [before a team meets again].” Teachers complained that the lack of a team facilitator added to the inefficiency of PD time.

[T]hirty minutes might just go by of us just sitting there, and no one taking the lead because no one is in charge. There is no facilitator. And [the principal] kind of mentions that he wants minutes, but ... no one has been taking minutes in ours because they’re not collected, and they’re not followed up on. And who’s supposed to be taking them? No one’s volunteering....

³⁶ Prior to this current configuration, professional development meetings followed the model of week-to-week workshops based on the needs teachers voiced the previous week. School leaders and faculty members felt that model was unsustainable given the quick turnaround from week-to-week and given the feeling that in-house teacher leaders weren’t having their own professional needs met. Teachers also felt that such workshops were often inefficient because they did not result in solutions for their pressing issues at-hand.

In one observation of an English and History Department meeting, the lack of an official team facilitator was glaring. For example, five minutes passed from the “official” beginning of the meeting until one teacher took the lead and attempted to get business started. One by one, other teachers chimed in with what they *thought* the objective of the meeting was, but there was no clear direction in reaching their goal. Soon after business got underway, it seemed that several teachers got side-tracked with talking about student issues, thus, taking the department meeting off-course. It seemed that throughout the meeting the group lacked clear direction and focus, wasting time on the task at-hand.

Despite the fact that some believed the model worked well in addressing certain priorities, teachers felt that the weekly professional development meeting was not a space for helping teachers in their professional growth. As one teacher put it, “I’m not sure it’s helping me become a better teacher, but it’s giving me time to plan at least with my team teacher. Some teachers felt their in-house capacity to be “all things” was limited. One teacher suggested bringing in outside experts on project-based learning to support teachers;

There are many challenging elements in project-based learning, and I think...many teachers feel that some of the things they’re doing...are really ineffective in the classroom....But we don’t have the expertise in-house to move beyond our current practice....I think we could use more professional development on our core teaching methods.

,Teachers perceived the in-house professional development meetings were not enough to support them, given the lack of focus on pedagogical needs as well as their inefficient structure.

Supporting Teachers New to the School

School leaders relied on ongoing teacher collaboration as a built-in support for new teachers. However, the system as it was collided with aspects of current school structures, leaving teachers new to Sweetbriar struggling to learn the teaching model of the school.

Supports for teachers new to Sweetbriar centered upon regular collaboration with teachers who

were veterans at the school. Teachers found team-teaching partnerships to be especially helpful in teaching them what they needed to know to survive in their first year at Sweetbriar. As one teacher put it, “I really feel like mimicking and going through the motions with my team teacher is what set my foundation, that and the [summer] conference.” In addition to forming collaborative partnerships, informal supports were also provided through the larger team model (i.e. grade-level teams, department teams) as a means of integrating teachers new to the school. As one teacher leader explained, “[Grade-level teams meet] once a week. So, if the teacher is part of one of those teams, they’ll go to that. So they’ll be hearing like what our school is about, and people offer support and help them on whatever they need help on.”

While the school attempted to help new teachers through ongoing collaborative supports, the supports were not always as consistent or as meaningful as needed. In some cases, the support system did not reach all new teachers, leaving some without the guidance of Sweetbriar veterans. For example, some teachers were left without collaborating partners. One teacher compared her first year of having a strong veteran teaching partner with that of three other new teachers hired along with her who were left to teach alone; those teachers left after their first year. “I was hired in June...so I had the good benefit of the summer institute and working with my team teacher for an entire month before summer even started...And these new teachers, they didn’t get any of that. They just started the first day, walked alone into a room.”

Even in a school where collaboration was commonplace, many veteran teachers were too busy to offer support to new teachers. As one teacher put it, without the support of strong mentors, those new teachers struggled, particularly with learning teaching practices expected at Sweetbriar like project-based learning;

[T]here is a huge lack of teacher support for new teachers who are coming in from traditional schools—because that’s generally where they have to come from—into this new model, and there’s no support

because every other teacher is so busy with their [project-based learning units] that there's no time to support the new teacher.

Ironically, new teachers who struggled with learning Sweetbriar's core practices, such as project-based learning, often went without mentorship because many veteran teachers themselves were overwhelmed with the same core practices.

Even when new teachers did receive some guidance from colleagues, they were still often left to figure things out on their own. One teacher recalled her struggles with learning aspects of the advisory program like the weekly check-in.

I could probably represent most new teachers...You could say, "[Y]ou're supposed to do check-ins every Monday," but I didn't know what a check-in was...[People said,] "Oh, your students will tell you," "Oh, we just talk about what happened on the weekend." Now...I've been able to...find out what a check-in is and make my own personal observations and develop my own philosophy on the check-ins...[T]here wasn't someone specifically saying, "This is how you do a check-in. This is why you do a check-in."...[T]hat's just one example.

Teachers continued to struggle with buying into the school's mission and vision, largely because they didn't know how to participate in the practices expected of them. One veteran teacher noted that he saw teachers struggle frequently because they didn't understand project-based learning. "An issue that we've had over the first 5 years is that we would bring in new teachers who were not used to project-based learning; it does not work out for them. It might be 1 teacher out of 5, [or] 1 teacher out of 10, that can kind of buy into it and get used to it..."

Teachers recognized that support for new teachers continued to be a weakness for the school as a whole, but they felt stuck in how to handle it. Meaningful support would require time and resources that some felt they couldn't appropriately offer. As one teacher discussed,

[For]...two consecutive years we identified transitioning and supporting our new teachers as a critical task...and we've failed to do it. We just don't seem to have the time or the will...[I]t's very consuming to take a teacher and give them a new way of teaching...and if you don't have the time to work through that, they're gonna do what they know how to do.

Without the proper support for new teachers, many felt that new teachers would continue to struggle with the teaching practices at Sweetbriar and instead revert to the traditional practices

they knew. One teacher discussed this tension as it related to Sweetbriar's place in the larger district context, "[Finding time to support new teachers is] even harder in the context of budget cutbacks which is driving most of our turnover. So we're getting teachers who already think they know how to teach, but not the way we do." The lack of support for new teachers compounded by teacher turnover set into play a cycle which some feared would damage school culture.

Summary of Findings at Sweetbriar School

While distributive leadership and collaboration were part of Sweetbriar's vision, school practices were not successful in integrating these into the structure and overall culture there. The principal believed his role was there to support teachers to reach their leadership potential, but, at times, teachers were frustrated by the absence of what they saw as a strong leader and decision maker. They especially felt this absence around their struggles with implementing school policies, policies which many felt were absent themselves. Teachers were expected to collaborate with one another—and even to find support through collaboration—but school structures and a lack of skill often interfered with successful collaborative practices. Efforts to collaborate often added to the extra hours teachers already spent on their classroom and non-classroom responsibilities. Teachers found their professional development time more useful for getting work done than for their professional growth. Teachers, especially new teachers, struggled to understand and implement certain practices core to Sweetbriar's vision. While some were frustrated by teachers who seemed not to buy in to the vision, others were frustrated because teachers weren't necessarily given the tools *needed* for this buy-in.

Case Study 3: Hein Park High School

Collaboration is a core value at Hein Park where teachers and the school principal work together in most every aspect of the school's leadership. The principal believes in distributive leadership and wants to bring it into practice at her school by encouraging teacher leadership. Hein Park is a school that expects that teachers take on non-classroom responsibilities, and its teachers value those challenges as part of small school work. As one teacher noted, "If you work in a small school, it's a given that you have less administration, that teachers have to pick up that responsibility, and that's why you chose to work here." The principal recognizes that Hein Park teachers work long hours and tries to support them in both their leadership endeavors as well as in their classroom instruction. In addition to offering one-on-one support for struggling teachers, the principal works closely with teacher leaders who design professional development.

Despite the distributive leadership ideals and the methods of support built into school structures, tensions were evident in Hein Park's professional culture. The following findings address those tensions.

School Leadership

There was a theoretical expectation of distributive leadership at Hein Park, but because of ambiguous leadership roles and a lack of general knowledge in the model, teachers had challenges with the distributive leadership model. While some held positions of "leadership" such as the Testing Coordinator or the Instructional Leadership Team Coordinator, teachers generally saw leadership roles as somewhat ambiguous and took on responsibilities as needed, and in some cases by default. One teacher leader spoke about the practice of teacher leadership at Hein Park, emphasizing the focus on the egalitarian nature of their community;

[T]here are no set “teacher leaders” per say. That label isn’t really used, so people kind of step up where they want...[T]here’s usually one key person per grade level...[who takes the lead in grade level meetings]...[W]e wanted to stay away from [leadership titles] because we didn’t really want to create those different strata amongst the faculty.

While the teacher above noted that someone usually took the lead in grade level meetings, another teacher brought up that her grade level meetings usually went without a point person.

In cases where there was a designated leader, or “point person,” there were still challenges of ambiguity when it came to that person’s role and responsibilities. It seemed that some teachers did not know *how to lead* their colleagues, and others did not know *how to follow*. As one teacher noted, “[O]n Instructional Leadership Team, there is a point person, but it’s kind of weird, the dynamics...people still kinda look to the principal for leadership even though there is a point person.” This practice was evident during one professional development meeting in which a teacher leader—who served on the school’s accreditation committee—briefed her colleagues on the accreditation process. During the briefing, the principal regularly interrupted to raise questions or make clarifying points. During the meeting, the distinction was unclear.³⁷

Ambiguity also surrounded certain teacher-run committees in which there were no designated point people, “[T]here are just people that take on that position,” as one teacher put it. This was partly a result of protecting teacher equality, as mentioned above, but there was also a noteworthy lack of accountability when it came to teacher-led committee work. This was brought up in a focus group conversation.

P4: We were supposed to have a Discipline and Incentives Committee. [This committee is not happening.]...

P1: The Discipline Committee is a ghost committee. _____ is supposed to call me whenever we have the Discipline [meeting], and he’s never called me. It’s not happening.

P4: [N]o one knows what happened to that committee.

In some situations ambiguity around teachers’ leadership roles ultimately translated into inaction. Often this meant that one or two teachers took on the burden of work that was supposed to be

³⁷ Evidence from Professional Development meeting observation, 4/5/11.

done collaboratively. As one teacher leader said, “[T]hat was another of my jobs that first year, I was on the Advisory Committee—me and one other person really, because the other people who were supposed to do it never did it.” The principal, too, expressed frustration over her feeling that she ended up taking on extra work she believed should be shared by her teachers. The principal pointed out in an interview, “[I]t should be the ILT that plans [and runs PD] and executes it. But for a long time it’s been often me...I type up the agenda for it, and sometimes I chair it, which I don’t want to do.” Both teachers and principal shared frustrations over having to do work that was designed to be collaborative.

In addition to the ambiguity of teacher leadership roles was a general lack of distributive leadership knowledge and skills amongst Hein Park’s teachers and the principal. In some cases, teachers wanted to lead, but they didn’t necessarily know how to do so within the distributive leadership model. As the principal reflected,

We had a faculty meeting last week where one of the teachers who’s on our Instructional Leadership Team said, “I come to this school because I want to be a school leader. I have ideas for improving this school...[A]t the same time I shy away from that responsibility not only because it takes time but also because then I’m accountable and also because sometimes I don’t always know what to do.”

Some teachers, particularly those trained in traditional public schools were unfamiliar with pilot school structures, structures that often relied on an understanding of distributive leadership. In fact, the principal admitted sharing teachers’ unfamiliarity with certain pilot school structures.

The teachers on the Instructional Leadership Team and the principal, myself, didn’t know how to actually have an ILT because we never saw one function. So we’re just now starting to sort of figure it out. [Figuring out] goal setting for the year, trying to shape the PD, trying to have a teacher be in charge of the committee....

Without knowledge of how to lead or what to direction to go, both teachers and the school principal struggled to effectively fill the leadership needs of the school.

Like the teachers, the principal lacked a thorough understanding of how to lead in a way that was consistent with the distributive leadership model. She admitted that she struggled with

knowing when to step back and let teachers lead. “[S]ome of [the teachers] might say they think that I don’t know what I’m doing. And there’s elements of that...obviously, there’s learning on the job...I don’t know that fine line between leading [teachers] and them leading.” In one teacher-run PD meeting, the principal routinely took over facilitation from other teachers. At times, she apologized, seeming to recognize that she was acting more as a facilitator than a collaborative participant, and attempted to step back.³⁸ The principal also expressed that she felt teachers relied on her too much to lead; “[W]e have some subcommittees that just haven’t met very well. If I [as the principal] don’t convene the Hiring and Evaluation Team, then we don’t meet, and it’s like ‘Why? I’m just one of three members on it.’”.....

As a result of the principal’s struggle with balancing her own leadership, school structures somewhat restrained distributive leadership practices at Hein Park. Teachers felt there was no room for them to lead. As one teacher leader put it, “[Because the principal is at school for so many hours] it kind of lends itself to micromanaging and trying to be involved in everything...She doesn’t delegate enough. I know that [people want her to delegate].” Teachers felt that because the principal did not truly practice distributive leadership, they were not given the opportunity to be accountable for their own leadership responsibilities.

School Culture

School Policies

In their school where policies were either loosely defined or went unimplemented, teachers were frustrated by the inconsistent actions of their colleagues and principal. As a result, many teachers felt directionless, frustrated, disengaged, and worn out. While in its 3rd year as a pilot school, Hein Park still struggled to have clearly-defined and consistently-

³⁸ Evidence from Professional Development meeting observation, 4/5/11.

implemented school policies, particularly those that revolved around student discipline. Teachers felt that this was one of the most troubling issues plaguing the sustainability of the school. As one teacher leader voiced in frustration, “Our handbook and our student policy book are still not complete....[O]ur policies are not necessarily there, and they’re not set in stone, and we don’t always enforce them very well. And, I think that’s one of our biggest issues across the board.” Even those policies that were agreed-upon by teachers often went unimplemented in the day-to-day. One teacher leader spoke about this in reference to the student hat and teacher monitoring policies.

[K]ids are still wearing hats in the hallways, and we had this whole PD conversation about hats. Teachers are still not out in the hallways when kids are coming into class. Again, another conversation. We keep having these conversations and claiming to follow [certain policies], and not everyone does it. And there’s no action in terms of trying to remedy this.

The frustration around the lack of policy implementation was compounded by the feeling that no efforts being made to change fix the problem.

Teachers who were enforcing certain agreed-upon policies felt as though they were being pitted against their colleagues who didn’t. One teacher spoke about the stress she felt when upholding certain policies; “It’s a big pressure. I’m like the monster because the kids tell me, ‘You’re the only one. I can wear my hat in so-and-so’s class.’ Or [when I] make them sign [out] even to go to the bathroom....And they say, ‘Well, you’re the only one....’” This feeling that teachers were competing with colleagues in a sense risked weakening the professional community.

Teachers’ lack of accountability when it came to upholding policies was only made more difficult by what teachers perceived as a lack of principal leadership. Teachers who attempted to follow agreed-upon policies felt exhausted and unsupported when administration failed to hold up its end of policy implementation. In the end, teachers often just gave up.

I sort of lost faith though...I remember we had the whole “No cell phones” [policy]. You would tag it, put it in a Ziploc, turn it in to administration, sign all this paperwork, and I did it. And then the student...went to complain to administration...And the administrator, right in front of me, gave the cell phone [back to the student]...that to me just was a slap in the face, and I was like, “You know what, I can’t deal with this...I’ll just deal with it internally...”

The feeling that teachers did not have the support of the principal made schoolwide implementation of certain policies even more out of reach.

Teachers’ sense of defeat around certain policies contributed to on-going student discipline issues. Some teachers recognized that this lack of follow-through had affected the overall student culture of their small school. One teacher leader reflected,

[S]ome of the stuff we started to see...[students] coming to school intoxicated, tagging, vandalism in the bathroom, [offenses] that are pretty big for a small school. [I]n a community like this I would expect kind of a higher standard of behavior, but it doesn’t exist, only because we’re not consistent in our consequences, mostly because you’re looking at individual teachers to implement it...[W]e don’t all do it in the same way.

In a small school like Hein Park, where teacher practices obviously vary, depending on teachers to consistently implement school policies was challenging.

Inconsistent policy implementation was not always a black-and-white issue. It was not necessarily a case of finger-pointing or blame. While some teachers felt unsupported by the administration or by their colleagues when there was no follow-through, others saw the problem more as an issue of resource shortages and structural shortcomings. In one focus group conversation, teachers discussed the lack of administrative support as a structural issue.

P1: We’re supposed to check [students for their IDs] on the very first class...But this Wednesday, I sent 5 kids that did not have their IDs...to the office. And what happened in the office? They all came back and said, “They’re too busy to deal with it.”

P3: Yeah, they’re too busy.

P1: ...[T]hey go to administration and every single time without fail administration says, “We’re too busy now.” They have to come back after school, and do they come back after school? No.

P4: And that’s been one of our biggest issues...because no one is there to be able to handle some of the issues that happen. Then things just get thrown out. Like the ID thing, no one follows the ID thing.

Nevertheless, teachers still felt the same sense of defeat. One teacher spoke about the inability to enforce “mandatory tutoring” for students in academic jeopardy; “Does it work? No. The number of D’s and fails is appalling. Absolutely appalling...But we don’t have the resources to enforce

it...And the kids know that, they see through it. So there's really nothing [we can do]." While the lack of support for consistent implementation of policies was personally and professionally frustrating for teachers, several recognized the larger negative impact the practice had on student and school success. Without changes in school structure and professional culture, these negative patterns risked continuing.

Collaborative Professional Environment

While collaboration was built into the philosophy of the school, a lack of time and a lack of skill in collaborative practices made successful collaboration challenging. In general, teachers struggled with finding time to collaborate. While efforts to incorporate team meeting time into the school day were appreciated, some teachers felt there still wasn't enough time to collaborate. Logistical obstacles often got in the way, and teachers were pulled in multiple directions by different commitments, often abandoning their teams.

We've got Thursday and Friday morning which is...45 minutes [each] that we actually get [for grade-level or content team meetings]. But sometimes it just isn't enough time because you get pulled into other things...[L]ike I'm on the Governing Board, so then I have to cancel the 12th grade meeting because I have to meet with parents...Or, I have to meet with the principal for whatever reason....

Some teachers were frustrated that teams were not given PD time to work together; "[T]here just isn't enough time to be able to handle all of the meetings without having any time allocated during professional development time."

In addition to the logistical obstacles, teams struggled with collaboration largely because teachers didn't know how to effectively communicate with one another. The principal felt that this lack of skill negatively affected teams dynamics.

In the grade-level teams there's been collaboration issues around talking with each other—How do you disagree politely? How do you have an opinion and not just keep it to yourself? We have several members who almost never open their mouths in any faculty meeting for fear of, they don't like conflict, they don't like tension.

Without skills in collaboration, teams did not necessarily function as *teams*; some members dominated meetings while others sat silently. In some cases, these struggles in collaboration had structural affects on teams at Hein Park. One teacher spoke about the fact that teachers have actually switched grade-levels as a result; “[Teachers are moved to another grade level] to balance out the grade-level teams, because some people don’t work so well [together].”

Even the logistical methods in which to communicate had become an obstacle for some in their collaboration. For example, collaborating through email was a challenge for some teachers who struggled with technology; “[T]here is not a culture of electronic resources. I’d say a quarter of the faculty is just not computer-friendly which is not okay if that’s how we decide to communicate.” Without agreed-upon methods of communication, effective collaboration was a struggle.

Buy-In

In a vision-driven school where teachers depended on one another to follow through on common core practices and policies of the school, many teachers were frustrated by colleagues who did not share the school vision. In a small school like Hein Park, shared vision, values, and expectations were crucial. Like other pilot schools, Hein Park High School teachers showed they supported the school vision and agreed to its expectations by signing an Elect-to-Work Agreement (EWA); however, teacher practices showed that even though teachers signed the EWA, they did not all buy in to the school in the same way. In some cases, it seemed that teachers did not necessarily understand what they were signing onto. One teacher leader expressed her frustration with teachers who signed the EWA without understanding expectations like teaching interdisciplinary units.

In our EWA it says that you're supposed to have...1 or 2 interdisciplinary units...and that we use...[specific curricular models]...So in my mind if you sign that document, and you don't know what those things are, you're a...moron for signing it and not saying, "Excuse me, I don't know what those things are, and I need training to be able to fulfill this."

Some teachers believed there was little room in a small school for teachers who did not support the mission and vision or did not seem to pull their weight. As one founding teacher put it, "I don't really want to fire [anybody]...but it's so clear sometimes when somebody doesn't fit with the mission and vision. And that's the whole idea that we fought for [becoming a pilot school]...because we had people who were unsupportive of our vision [before we became a pilot school]."

Part of the lack of buy-in was attributed to hiring teachers who did not thoroughly understand the expectations of the school. Teachers new to the school often did not know or did not necessarily understand the expectations of the school before being hired. One teacher leader reflected on her own ignorance upon joining Hein Park; "When this [job] came out, this was my dream job—pilot school autonomy....So, I went for it...I was very naïve....It's so wonderful in so many ways, but there are certain things about it that I wasn't really anticipating and that have been kind of hard." While veteran Hein Park teachers were frustrated by those new to the school who didn't buy in, these same teachers recognized that they had a responsibility to educate new teachers about the mission and vision as well as about the expectations of being a teacher at Hein Park. "[W]e have, I think, a very clear mission and vision, but if you don't make [teachers] know it, then you're not going to be successful at that." Buying in to the school vision was a shared process; veterans had to effectively communicate that vision with new teachers before those new to the school could genuinely understand and participate.

Some believed that Hein Park's current hiring circumstances made building buy-in uniquely challenging. Like other pilot schools in the district, Hein Park's otherwise autonomous

hiring practices had been constrained by “last-minute” hiring of previously displaced teachers in the school district. As a result, many felt that some newer—formerly displaced—teachers did not clearly understand the school’s expectations. As the principal explained, “I think a lot of them—not having small school experience and also seriously looking for a job—are willing to say that they’re willing to do a lot of things. And then they get here and all of a sudden, it’s a big surprise that there’s all these demands on them.” Hein Park teachers who saw themselves as “buying in” felt the weight of the current situation. As one teacher leader lamented, “[A] number of our ‘weak links’ came off of a displaced list. So even if we had a really solid hiring committee in place—and we do—it was done over the summer, so there’s no time you can observe a lesson. So some of this is circumstantial.” While some felt responsible to build an understanding for the school’s vision, teachers also felt disempowered by the current situation.

Responsibilities & Long Hours

Many teachers here took on extra responsibilities because they felt an obligation to help the school succeed. However, more and more, the extra responsibilities—and the extra hours needed to complete them—were overwhelming those teachers. Because there was no schoolwide expectation of committing long hours, the lack of equity in terms of the hours some teachers committed risked creating a divide in the community.

Expectations of Non-Classroom Administrative Tasks

In a small school like Hein Park, most teachers expected to have non-classroom tasks that in a traditional school would be done by an administrative team; “It’s a small school and someone needs to do it. We have one person that’s administration. At a large school, someone else takes care of those small details for you.” While some of the non-classroom work was

burdensome, teachers nevertheless felt committed to it. One founding teacher reflected on the obligation—and the burden—she felt spearheading the advisory program; “I was in charge of making these lessons [for advisory]. I never had it ready until the very last-minute, and people were always complaining....[I]t was this horrible burden...and it was on me because...I had advocated for advisory [at our school]. So I felt like I HAD to see it work.” In some cases, the very pressure teachers put upon themselves in taking on these non-classroom tasks was overwhelming.

In their efforts to see Hein Park succeed, some teachers saw their role as unofficial “mentors” to their struggling colleagues. They recognized that the transition from teaching in a traditional school to teaching at Hein Park could be quite drastic. For some Hein Park teachers, this meant mentoring colleagues, for others, this meant writing lesson plans for other teachers. In some cases, Hein Park teachers were even mentors to others who actually had more teaching experience. But since that experience was not in a small school like Hein Park, they often struggled with adapting. One teacher leader spoke about the efforts she took to support one struggling teacher with two decades of experience;

[E]ven though she [had] 20 years of experience [she was] completely overwhelmed...She [came] from the “big” school...[and was] freaked out; it was a year of trying to help her. So here I [was] in my... 4th year teaching, and I wrote lessons, I wrote unit plans for her. I spent so much time creating [material] for her to use in her class.

Mentoring colleagues—in the name of school success—sometimes meant going “above and beyond” to support them. While teachers voluntarily took on the extra responsibility of supporting colleagues, it nevertheless presented its own set of hardships. One teacher spoke about her role as a mentor, “I’ve seen...teachers...coming from comprehensive high schools who are really struggling with pedagogy, strategy, planning....I’ve been trying to help one person...but it’s really time-consuming....[I]t is hard if you’re floating your own classes to really

try and help a colleague do that.” One teacher leader spoke about one year in which she volunteered to give up her classroom to a new teacher who had been assigned to travel to multiple classrooms throughout the day. “I volunteered to take on all her different classrooms and then even the classrooms of a couple other people. So I ended up traveling five periods a day. So every time I had a class, I had to go somewhere else with all my crap...” Teachers who took it upon themselves to support struggling colleagues often found themselves stretched thin.

While many teachers took on non-classroom responsibilities because they knew that was part of working at Hein Park, sometimes those responsibilities became a burden that kept them from their classroom duties. As one teacher noted, “[I]t’s just too many commitments that sometimes gets in the way of your curriculum, and you get sucked into something else all of a sudden...” Some teachers recognized the affects that their non-classroom commitments had on their teaching and worked to create more of a balance. One teacher leader spoke about how she cut back on some of her non-classroom responsibilities after feeling overwhelmed her first year; “I wasn’t that great of a teacher...[b]ecause of all these commitments that I was obsessively trying to meet....So last year I came back, and I was like ‘I’m not going to be on the ILT.’ ...And I was a much better teacher and I made better choices that were more protective of me....” On the other hand, other teachers had a more difficult time setting boundaries and finding that balance. “You’re here until 7pm everyday, and you go home, and you still have to type up something, and you still have to plan something for the following day. And it’s just too many commitments. That sometimes gets in the way of your curriculum.” For some, there was no line between non-classroom and classroom responsibilities, it was all part of teaching at Hein Park.

Curricular Responsibilities

Despite the number of non-classroom commitments teachers had, curricula design in and of itself was a challenge at Hein Park. Teachers often had to create new curricula from scratch, a task that came with its own set of pressures. This was partly a result of the school's lack of documentation. Teachers new to the school found it frustrating that there was little to no documentation of past curricula. As one new teacher said, "[V]ery little has been documented...[O]ne thing I'm surprised by...is that very little is written down. So there's no curriculum from the past....So we're having to kinda recreate the wheel at least in terms of...getting it down on paper....So that's really time-consuming right now." While some teachers valued the challenge of creating new curricula, there was also the feeling, especially amongst new teachers, of being overwhelmed; "I love creating curriculum but I don't love creating a whole year's worth of curriculum when you're under the gun plus advisory." While teachers expected to create new curricula, the extent to which it was necessary at Hein Park was overwhelming for some in addition to their other responsibilities.

Teachers' having to create new curricula was also a consequence of teacher shifts and mobility within the school. In some cases, teachers jumped around from year to year, teaching different grades and building new curricula. Teacher turnover affected teaching teams. Teachers often put in long hours designing curricula that they only used one time. In one focus group, teachers discussed the pressures of creating curricula amidst teacher shifts;

P2: One [issue]...was that people keep getting switched to new grade levels. So then they were just adjusting to teaching 10th grade, and they got switched to another grade level....

P4: Or [teachers are moved to another grade level because of] teacher turnover.

P2: [O]r like some teachers are on pregnancy leave....So some people are switched around. So, it's like recreating every year....[I]t's hard to take someone else's curriculum and make it yours too. So people don't seem to want to re-use things from previous years.

Teacher mobility was also an obstacle to establishing a strong scope and sequence for the school's curricula. Without established curricula, the school lacked clearly established benchmarks from one grade to the next. Teachers felt the burden of not having benchmarks and goals that were aligned throughout the school. One teacher felt teachers struggled to design new curricula, largely because they had no benchmarks or goals to guide them; "If we had curriculum that was aligned vertically and there was transparency, and everyone was aware of what was being taught...I feel like [creating curricula] wouldn't be as big of an issue." It was clear that the absence of well-documented, aligned curricula weighed on teachers.

Time Commitment

While teachers *voluntarily* committed extra hours—at home or at school—the time commitment often felt like a burden. "[I]t's in my nature to [spend long hours working]....The long hours is not new to me, but...it still does weigh on you....[I work] 7 days a week, morning and afternoon tutoring. The only time I don't tutor, I'm in a meeting. I planned until 10pm last night, writing curriculum." The time and the extra responsibilities—such as leadership or committee work—often felt like too much. As one teacher reflected, "it just seems very overwhelming... all the extra hours you have to spend after school being part of ILT, or the Governing Board, and some teachers are on more than one."

Even though some teachers voluntarily put in long hours, some nevertheless felt pressured to take on extra responsibilities and, by extension, the time needed for these. Some felt that there was a unique pressure from colleagues to take on more just by the very nature of being a pilot school teacher; "[A] lot of teachers have been vocal about the long hours and that extra expectation of '...[A]s a pilot school [teacher], you're expected to do a little bit more.' [W]e're

always hearing that...” Some teachers also felt a very specific pressure coming from their principal. One teacher relayed the pressure she felt from the principal,

The principal will ask me, “Can you do this now,” or...“Can you come to this meeting,” when I was never intending to be part of that group at all. And, then, now I’m going to ILT meetings, and I never wanted to go to ILT meetings, but now...I’m getting pulled in that direction...[Y]ou get pulled into so many different directions here that your life becomes work, and that’s problematic.

For some, their responsibilities to Hein Park had developed to the extent that they felt little separation—if any—between their jobs at Hein Park and their personal lives.

Equity of Time and Responsibilities

While some teachers put in extra hours beyond what was expected of all teachers, there was not a schoolwide cultural expectation of doing so. It seemed that certain teachers took on more responsibilities than others, or stayed for more hours at school than others. One teacher spoke about this pattern; “I wouldn’t say that it’s [a cultural expectation to stay after school], I think for a group of people it is, and you can tell who stays...I don’t think that it’s across-the-board, a cultural expectation of the school...” One teacher felt that because doing “extra” was not necessarily a part of the professional schoolwide culture, some teachers did not realize they weren’t doing their part; “[T]hose people who are leaving at 3:30, 4:00...I don’t know if they really realize that they’re not pulling their weight because it’s not an expectation.”

Whether or not some realized they were not pulling their weight, teachers’ perceptions that some colleagues did not work as many hours or take on as many responsibilities outside the classroom bred frustration, resentment, and low morale. One teacher in her first year at Hein Park spoke about her disappointment with the professional culture. “[When I came to this school] I was expecting kind of like camaraderie and a team ethic that would just keep morale up and keep things going, and, unfortunately, it isn’t that way...[T]here is a lack of equity, and I think that’s been a great source of tension, if not burnout.”

Feelings of inequity were common amongst teachers who believed some colleagues only did the bare minimum. One teacher relayed professional climate, “[T]he people who check [students for their IDs] are the people who do everything. And the people not checking are the ones who most staff would agree are not picking up the pace.” Another teacher spoke about the effect on students, “[T]here’s been this underlying tension that people are not pulling their weight, especially in terms of curriculum and instruction because students are beginning to talk and express frustration.” The lack of equity pushed teachers to question their own motivations for putting in so much time and effort. “It does feel a bit inequitable when you’re pulling so much weight, and then you feel like, ‘What is everyone else doing?...Why am I carrying so many things?’ ...[T]here is a bit of a lack of transparency with what teachers actually do here.” This feeling of a lack of transparency had instilled itself in the professional community to the point that teachers questioned their colleagues’ commitment as well as their own. Hein Park’s professional culture was threatened by teachers’ perceptions that they were not in the work together.

Support

Teaching Unique Skills for Small School Work

While teachers valued their in-house teacher-led professional development as practical and relevant, they still had concerns about getting their larger individual professional needs met. By and large, teachers wanted supports coming from within and were pleased that weekly professional development meetings were planned by Hein Park’s ILT members. As one ILT member said, “[Teachers] lead [PD and] design it. [One teacher] is doing a writing PD, she’s leading the whole PD. And we opted to do that just because we felt like we

wanted it to come from within.” Teachers who led professional workshops—like the writing workshop mentioned—received compensation for providing such supports. In fact, this idea of compensating teachers for bringing their own expertise to their colleagues had generated support amongst teachers at Hein Park. As one teacher leader said, “[W]e need more internal [professional development]. Let’s pay each other and deliver it to each other.”

Not only were teachers pleased to be utilizing in-house expertise to support one another, but teachers also felt that such supports were relevant and practical to the school’s needs. In praising recent changes to Hein Park’s professional development, one teacher spoke about the writing workshop mentioned above as being useful for teachers’ curricular needs;

[Professional development] has become more relevant to what we are doing in the classroom. This year we’re doing a lot of in-house professional development where we have one of our teachers actually going over writing across the curriculum. And I think that’s been the most useful professional development that we’ve had.

Another teacher recognized that though professional development may not necessarily have helped her in the classroom from the day-to-day, it nevertheless often addressed a relevant school issue. “[Is PD]...always like practical for our daily instruction? No, I don’t think so. But it’s almost....directly related to a need at this school....It might not be the lesson you’re teaching tomorrow, it might be like we have to do the self-study for WASC, but that’s big.”

Even though many teachers were positive about the teacher-led professional development, they still felt unprepared for many of the day-to-day non-classroom demands of their school. While their training as teachers did not prepare them with the necessary skills for their pseudo-administrator roles, their work required them to step up to the challenges nonetheless. One group of teachers discussed the fact that this was just the reality of being in their small school;

P2: Teacher training programs don't prepare you. They just train you to be a teacher, classroom management, they don't tell you about the others. Like how to do testing, which I had to do last year...I don't know how to do testing.

P4: You suddenly get handed things.... My first year [the principal was] like "Hey, can you do [accreditation] with someone else?" OK. What am I supposed to do?...[Y]ou just have to roll with the punches.

While teachers recognized that they "just have to roll with the punches," there was also a need for support around certain responsibilities that were not typical duties of a classroom teacher.

One such responsibility was handling discipline without administrative support. In a school like Hein Park where there was no dean in charge of discipline, teachers needed support around student discipline problems. Many Hein Park teachers felt they were alone in dealing with student discipline issues. As one teacher said, "There's nobody to handle discipline....[T]here's been little accountability for the kids." Even though the distributive leadership model relied on all members of the community to participate, some teachers—who were already stretched thin—felt they couldn't implement discipline policies on their own; as one teacher leader said, "[I]t's, unfortunately, not always realistic to expect teachers to handle some of it. "The lack of accountability for students and the isolation teachers felt threatened Hein Park's long-term sustainability.

In addition to the isolation teachers felt in the day-to-day over discipline issues, many teachers also had concerns about their curriculum and instruction needs. As mentioned earlier, there was a lack of curricular alignment at Hein Park. This gap in curricular connections created a certain day-to-day isolation for teachers who weren't aware of the benchmarks and goals they needed to be reaching with their students. Teachers also voiced a need for support in daily instruction, particularly with instructional strategies for reaching struggling students. As one teacher said,

I think our PDs need to...get down to the nitty gritty of just daily instruction. And that could come through with...student engagement strategies. Like, "Here are some effective [Specially Designed Academic

Instruction In English] SDAIE strategies,” SDAIE is just good teaching.... But if people don’t know it, they don’t know it.

The principal also recognized that teachers needed support around instruction, particularly in working with EL students and students with special needs; “[H]elping our teachers to scaffold for all the SpEd and the EL and the struggling learners is a really big instructional challenge....[Help for teachers] should be coming in the form of PD that’s very relevant to that, and it hasn’t been that yet.”

Teachers also stressed the need for support with advisory. Some teachers felt they didn’t know *how* to be advisors, while others struggled with the actual advisory program as it was.

P1: It’s very difficult with advisory. It was really a mess last year, and this year I have to follow someone else’s plan, it’s difficult....

P4: Advisory definitely needs specific training that we haven’t prioritized....

P1: I think we need that [advisory training]. It’s not working.... I have these lessons plans, and they’re given the day before sometimes and to prepare for it [is difficult]....

The principal recognized the need for more training in advisory but struggled with pushback from teachers. As she said, “We don’t have folks who have been trained to do advisory, and so our faculty wanted to toss it out because they felt it unsuccessful....” Without appropriate training in advisory, teachers continued to feel unprepared as advisors; as a result of their discomfort and lack of skill with the program, some wanted to abandon it completely.

While teachers admitted that their current in-house professional development structure only went so far, there was a general skepticism and unwillingness from teachers around external supports. One teacher explained her perception that these negative feelings had been somewhat inherited; “[PDs from the outside are] hated, they’re loathed....because they’re from outside....I think that happened a lot in the past without any buy-in....So then people are very resentful of anybody coming in from outside...There is a strong voice coming from a number of faculty that have been here.” Even though teachers recognized that all of their concerns were not being

addressed by current in-house supports, it seemed that their reliance on support from one another—and, for some, a firm disdain for outside support—risked holding them back from getting the support they needed.

Supporting Teachers New to the School

There was an expectation that teachers adopt the teaching model and practices of the school. However, new teachers were not receiving the training and support necessary to do this effectively. All teachers at Hein Park were expected to design and implement interdisciplinary units in their curricula, a practice specific to the school’s teaching model, but many new teachers lacked the training in how to design such curricula. Teachers, who discussed this problem in a focus group, recognized that this lack of training set teachers up for failure;

P4: We are expecting our teachers to have these interdisciplinary units...but the training isn’t there for new teachers that are coming on this faculty. And we’ve had such a huge turnover....And with that turnover, we’re not training people to really be able to handle that, and we’re expecting this from them.....

P1: The [school’s teaching model] is really tough....

P1: It is difficult....you really need the training.

As a result, teachers often struggled when they came to Hein Park. One teacher leader, who acted as a mentor to struggling teachers, spoke about this; “I’ve heard of a handful of other teachers who are really struggling with just the instruction and coherent lesson plans and all of that.”

The more new teachers struggled, the more it affected the rest of the Hein Park learning community. In a school where teacher accountability was already a contentious issue, new teachers who weren’t doing what was expected of them in terms of instruction only compounded the tensions amongst colleagues. One teacher leader spoke about the support she saw as necessary but also about the onus on new teachers to do their part;

[Support] is gonna have to be intense if they’re gonna make the progress that’s needed. Or maybe they need to go to a different school. I don’t know. But, basically hard-line, either they need to go, or they need to step up. But then the problem...is that we really don’t have the resources in place to help them step up.

While they were expected to be full participants in the Hein Park community, they were not given the supports to do so. Without those supports—and without an adjustment in expectation—teachers new to the school continued to flounder.

Summary of Findings at Hein Park High School

At Hein Park, teachers struggled to build a collaborative culture. Despite the school's intention for distributive leadership, teachers struggled to find their places as leaders. This was partly due to a lack of experience and skill in distributed leadership—or in leading a pilot school—but it was also due to a lack of skill in collaboration itself. Teachers struggled with communication on many fronts—from not knowing how to navigate team conflict and compromise to not having agreed-upon times or methods for communication. The most significant impediment to building a collaborative culture seemed to be a lack of trust in the community. There was a strong feeling of a lack of equity when it came to teacher inputs; this perception amongst teachers threatened the strength of the professional community. Teachers relied on one another's in-house expertise which proved to be supportive in many respects, however, this expertise did not always reach every teachers' professional needs.

Teacher-Suggested Recommendations

Through the course of interviews, focus groups and observations at the three participating small schools, teachers and school leaders voiced their own recommendations for some of the areas they saw as sources of tensions. In most cases, these recommendations are specific to the school structures and culture of those interviewed. However, while they may be site-specific, they may also prove to be relevant to other small schools sharing similar issues.

School Leadership

As discussed above, teacher leaders were often overwhelmed by their responsibilities, particularly because in some cases they seemed to be the only ones in their schools with the specific knowledge and skills needed to tackle certain responsibilities. As a result, a recurring trend developed which inevitably concentrated a disproportionate amount of work in the hands of only a few teachers. To break this cycle, one lead teacher stressed the importance of providing colleagues with the skills and knowledge to be school leaders. As she said, “[O]ne of my goals [as Lead Teacher]...is...for there to be four or five people that could [have the necessary knowledge]...and run for the position [of Lead Teacher].” While this suggestion may have been specific to training future Lead Teachers, it was also relevant to training teacher leaders to take on non-classroom responsibilities that demanded institutional knowledge and leadership skills.

School Culture

School Policies

Teachers at every school site were concerned about the effects their student discipline policies—or lack of—were having on school culture. Several teachers at one school felt that the solution was to have more out-of-classroom support—such as a point-person or dean—around student discipline issues. One teacher’s suggestion of getting funds to pay for more out-of-classroom support also pointed toward ways of restructuring the school’s resources. As this teacher said,

[M]aybe we can create more with what we have. Maybe if we allocate our resources...if we collapse a class and release somebody just for one hour a day to write us a grant to get us money to pay somebody part-time. I don’t know. That’s kind of what I’ve been thinking lately because we just don’t have the out-of-classroom support, and everybody who’s out of [the] classroom is doing everything they can, and they’re totally overloaded too.

While out-of-classroom support seemed to be a popular solution, another suggestion was to form a teacher-run discipline committee to spend time looking into discipline policy issues. One teacher at another school also suggested building parent and student committees with clear objectives.

In talking with teachers and school leaders, it seemed that some felt they could benefit from a dialogue with other schools—large and small—around issues that dealt with school policies like student discipline. As one teacher said,

[T]here are tens of thousands of other schools. Really we have to reinvent a discipline policy? Really we can't find another one that works?...We know that other people are doing this, so there are other models out there. And it's hard sometimes because...in a reform model school you want to have a model that is your own and that makes sense and that fits with your culture and your vision and all that. But at the same time, sometimes it feels like we're spending so much effort on something that somebody else must've figured it out already.

While discipline was the issue at-hand, teachers and school leaders recognized there may be a larger value in discussing policy decisions with other schools.

Collaborative Professional Environment

Teacher leaders and principals recognized that effective collaboration at their schools was challenged by limited common meeting and planning time. Each school built at least some time into the school day for teams (i.e., grade level, department) or teaching partners to meet, but teachers at every school felt the need for more. Some called for more grade-level time to discuss student issues. Others called for more common planning periods for teaching partners. One principal voiced her efforts at trying to think creatively about ways to structure the schedule so that teachers could have several days throughout the year set aside to meet with colleagues when students were not on campus.

Efficiency was another problem teachers felt got in the way of effective collaboration at their schools. Teachers at several schools felt that even when team meetings did happen, they

were often inefficient because they lacked a point-person to keep the team on track. Teachers suggested having a point-person in charge of teams, especially grade-level and department teams, to keep the team business in order and on track.

Responsibilities & Long Hours

Equity and accountability in terms of time teachers committed to their school were issues for teachers at all participating sites. One teacher suggested two ways to approach a solution. First would be to clarify the school's expectations of teachers; second would be to build a system of internal accountability. If there were going to be a cultural expectation that teachers commit a certain amount of time and energy, then that expectation needed to be explicit rather than assumed. Teachers would need to know the expectations of the school *and* of their colleagues. While the first suggestion could be documented in a school's EWA, the second suggestion was less tangible. In this, the teacher felt that schools must build their own culture of internal accountability where teachers supported one another and participated for the sake of community. This teacher suggested formal methods, such as critical friends groups, as well as professional behaviors to bring about internal accountability.

I think it's a matter of really working together and sharing struggle and witnessing, "Oh my God, this person is here until 7pm every night. That's not cool, and I'm clocking out at 4pm. Maybe we can share this." I'm betting on the good nature and the good intention of everybody. I'm hoping that if people are more aware of what everybody is doing that certain people would step up...If we have the critical friends group that that would kind of help spread the wealth or the burden....

By putting the measures in place to build a structure and culture of internal accountability, teachers could contribute to alleviating these tensions around equity.

Support

Teaching Unique Skills for Small School Work

As discussed earlier, the responsibilities of designing and implementing curricula were particularly challenging for teachers who had to build new curricula—often year after year—that was project-based and student-centered, particularly when teachers lacked training in how to do so; these challenges were also compounded by these teachers’ non-classroom duties. Teachers at all participating small schools suggested specific supports around these classroom responsibilities.

Teachers spoke about needing support in instruction. More specifically, they spoke about needing training in two curricular areas: engaging students with special needs and designing project-based instruction. While the needs were different at respective small schools, teachers recognized that their instructional needs had to be addressed by someone with expertise, whether they were in-house or outside experts. One Hein Park teacher thought that professional development should be largely delivered by the school’s own teachers; “Why aren’t [school leaders] paying [this teacher] to teach us about this? He’s a freaking genius....Let’s pay each other and deliver it to each other.” While several schools emphasized using their in-house experts for their own internal support, one Shady Grove teacher emphasized the value in bringing in experts from the outside; “I think we need outside eyes. I think in a small community like this we tend to get insulated and teachers don’t have a clue as to what’s happening elsewhere. Or we don’t have insight into some of our dysfunctions.” A teacher from Sweetbriar echoed this by saying, “We don’t have the expertise in-house to move beyond our current practice.”

In addition to needing specific instructional training, teachers also voiced their need for more time to design curricula with their partners. One school leader hoped to allot more professional development time for this. One teacher suggested that her school provide a stipend for teacher teams to meet and develop their curricula in the summer.

The connection between professional development and teachers' day-to-day needs was also an issue discussed during interviews. As mentioned earlier, many teachers felt that their professional needs were not necessarily addressed by their school's professional development. To make the connection more apparent, one school incorporated specific skills discussed during professional development time into the school's teacher observation rubrics. While the rubrics clarified expected classroom skills, this same principal felt that the goals of weekly professional development needed to be more meaningful—and less disconnected—for teachers. As she said, "I think what we're not doing well enough yet is there hasn't been a sort of clarity of goals in the PD. So it feels to people sometimes like we started this, but now we're doing this, and now we're doing this, as opposed to 'the three most important things are [this, this, and this].'" For this principal, consistency and follow-through were critical to delivering effective support through professional development time.

Supporting Teachers New to School

As discussed earlier in the chapter, teachers new to small schools experienced a unique fragility by having to learn small school ways very quickly and, in some cases, on their own. While some schools paired new teachers with experienced small school teachers, this type of mentorship did not happen in every case. One teacher, who saw new teachers struggle without mentorship, strongly believed that all teachers new to a small school should have a mentor.

I really think just having a human being take you through the day and show you, "This is protocol. This is what's expected. This is the timeline—this is short-term planning, this is long-term planning, and this is the

final goal....This is how it works,” instead of figuring it out the day of. And then to be judged on top of that, it’s just demoralizing.

While a mentor’s support could be invaluable to teachers new to small schools, new teachers still had the challenge of adjusting to the small school culture. One principal recognized this need to institutionalize a culture of support for new teachers;

[H]ere there’s no place to hide. So, you’ve got that pressure of knowing that you’re gonna be on all the time. You are going to actively participate in professional development. People are going to know where you are. People are going to recognize your strengths, but also you’re going to expose yourself to some of your challenges. And that’s intimidating. And then we’re saying, “Now, you gotta do things [our] way....[Y]ou’re gonna have to revamp your style to create and to fit into ours, which is hard.... I’ve gotta figure out a way to support all of our brand new teachers...and provid[e] them with the guidance that they need to adjust to teaching at this school cuz it’s a very unique place to be at.

While less concrete than a mentorship program, this suggestion required active and ongoing understanding from all members of a school community.

Summary of Findings

This study of teacher supports in small public high schools substantiated the assumption that teachers in small public high schools feel overwhelmed with accomplishing all of the day-to-day tasks required for supporting student learning while maintaining their schools. Teachers in vision-driven, small, public schools face a unique set of challenges in both classroom and non-classroom responsibilities. They find that school-based structures often fall short of addressing their needs and concerns.

As expected, school leadership at each small school was a combination of principal leadership and teacher voice. However, teachers in leadership positions at all three sites experienced some kind of tension that restricted their leadership capacities to some degree. Tensions included being overwhelmed by responsibilities and, at the same time, feeling a sense of resentment from colleagues. In some cases, teachers struggled with ambiguously defined leadership roles and a general lack of knowledge in distributive leadership skills. No

participating school seemed to internalize a leadership model that was embraced by all members of the community.

Teachers also expressed feeling tensions around the issue of policy implementation in their schools. No participating school seemed to have universal schoolwide policies that were consistently implemented. Rather, each school seemed to operate on somewhat of a case-by-case policy structure. In many situations, teachers felt that agreed-upon policies often went unimplemented by their colleagues. This lack of “set” policy was particularly frustrating for teachers around the issue of student discipline. Teachers often felt isolated and unsupported and turned to blaming colleagues or the principal for what they saw as a negative aftermath in their school culture. On the other hand, in some cases, teachers felt empowered to be change agents and take on the work necessary to shape school policies themselves.

Teachers also expressed frustrations around collaboration at their schools. Collaboration was an overarching component of all three schools, yet teachers at each site seemed to struggle with making it work. Collaboration took time, conducive structures, and skill. While a collaborative spirit was present at all school sites, each experienced a unique challenge with institutionalizing—and operationalizing—it as part of the school’s structure and culture.

For each of these schools, collaboration was, in theory, part of buying in to the school vision. Teachers depended on one another to uphold common core practices and policies, yet, at each site, teachers felt there was a lack of universal buy-in for the school’s vision. While some blamed colleagues for their *failure* to “step up,” many felt this issue could be attributed to teachers’ lack of understanding of what the school vision actually was. Some blamed the district’s budget cuts and teacher displacement for the lack of buy-in, and others blamed their

school's hiring practices. At all sites, teachers were frustrated by colleagues whom they did not see as equal participants in their school.

Teachers also felt overwhelmed by the time they spent working—either at school or at home—beyond the school day. While teachers felt that their time commitment was largely a personal choice, many also found it difficult to meet their school's expectations without investing more and more time. With the issue of equity as a significant source of tension, the difference in the number of hours teachers spent on work risked creating a divide in each school's professional community.

Teachers' feelings about the long hours spent on work went hand-in-hand with their small school responsibilities. At all three small school sites, teachers wore multiple hats including being an advisor, a collaborating and/or mentoring teacher, and a pseudo-administrator. While teachers seemed to value the challenges of small school work, they also felt overwhelmed by the time—and skill level—needed. In fact, many felt a direct conflict in terms of time between their non-classroom and classroom responsibilities.

While time commitment was one challenging factor when it came to tackling small school responsibilities, many also felt unprepared in terms of skill—and support—to effectively perform their small school responsibilities. Teachers were expected to design project-based curricula or to collaborate with colleagues, but they didn't always feel they knew how. While support mechanisms—such as mentoring, classroom observations, professional development—existed at each school site, they were not necessarily effective in meeting all teachers' professional needs.

School leaders were particularly aware of the challenges for teachers new to the schools, but they struggled with providing effective supports. They recognized the importance of helping

new teachers understand the unique culture of their schools as well as their progressive teaching models, but how to do that consistently, thoroughly, and with the resources at-hand remained a challenge.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Like traditional public school teachers, small school teachers face possible struggles in committing long hours, in working with colleagues, and in finding the support they need. But many small school teachers have the added burden of being “all things” at all times. In other words, in small public schools—many of which are new—teachers are leading professional development, designing and implementing school policies, reaching out to parents, coordinating teacher hiring, managing classroom supply orders, coordinating student testing, counseling students, and teaching academic courses. Teachers at small schools carry these responsibilities in the name of school vision. They feel the pressure of being experts in their practice—almost from the very start—in order to make their school vision a reality for all stakeholders who are counting on them. In this current state of education reform where small public high schools are increasingly becoming alternatives to the large, comprehensive high school, teachers are the ones working to ensure that students have a complete educational experience. So often this means that in addition to being classroom teachers, small school teachers have to be school leaders and managers, support personnel, and the keepers of the school vision.

This study explores the unique issues that small school teachers face as school leaders and as teachers. After talking with teachers and school leaders at three different small public high schools, I found that there were certain over-arching issues that present challenges for each of these small schools. In this chapter, I will present each of these over-arching issues and discuss how they present themselves as frustrating tensions for teachers and, by extension, a potentially damaging force to small school sustainability. Based on what I have learned in this study I will offer ways of thinking about these issues and the structural and substantive approaches that could support small schools in tackling these issues over time. In recognizing that no two small school

communities are the same, this chapter attempts to introduce some big ideas that small school teachers and leaders could find useful for designing their own communities of practice.

Leadership

Teachers in small schools are often attracted to these schools for the very reason that they have the opportunity to be leaders and change makers in these learning communities. They are motivated by taking their practice beyond the classroom as a means of furthering student success. However, while teachers so often embrace the challenges of leadership, they are also often overwhelmed—and, consequentially burnt out—by these same challenges.

Distributive leadership is often the theoretical model to which small school principals ascribe as a way of embracing their teachers' leadership capacities; in practice, such schools may refer to their leadership style as shared decision-making (Dworkin et al., 2003), shared leadership, or collective responsibility (AIR/SRI, 2003). In this model, a principal relies on teachers to take on leadership tasks that move the school forward. However, in reality, this model can lead to several wrong turns if those involved aren't given the proper supports or skills to lead. School leaders often do what it takes to keep a school afloat from day to day rather than simultaneously focusing on what steps need to be taken to move the school ahead. Teachers' needs risk getting lost in this day-to-day survival mode. (I will discuss this later in the chapter.) In many instances, teachers do not necessarily have the skills to be leaders in ways that move a school forward. In these cases where leadership is about the day-to-day school needs, teachers' leadership development is taken for granted. Thus, teachers are put into positions of leadership without necessarily having the skills to be successful. Distributive leadership models which foster opportunities for teachers to be leaders would criticize such practices as overlooking

critical support mechanisms. In small schools today, where teacher leadership is so critical, teachers often lack the skills in *how to lead* their colleagues and in *how to be led* by their colleagues. Without a strong leadership model, small schools risk limiting the leadership potential of their teachers and, thus, threaten their overall will to lead.

To counter this struggle around leadership in small schools, small school leaders need to establish a leadership model that fits the vision of their school and their community of teachers at the same time. Establishing a leadership model means that school leaders will both bring teachers into the discussion of what leadership will look like and provide teachers the training they need to know *how to lead* and *how to be led*.

In order to do this, school leaders should explore the leadership practice that best suits their school community, including the members of their community and their structural resources. In their exploration of a theoretical framework for leadership practice, Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond (2004) discuss leadership through a “distributed perspective” with the purpose of giving school leaders a framework to which they can apply their own leadership efforts. Their perspective discusses the interdependency of leaders, followers, and the situation of the leadership task. The authors refer to this interdependency as a *reciprocal interdependency*. In other words, leader and follower enable one another’s actions. In order to effectively lead, a leader must consider a followers’ skills, knowledge, and perspectives; similarly, as a follower acts, he must consider his leader’s resources (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). The authors’ distributed perspective is very similar to that of Lave and Wenger’s “community of practice” (1991) in that it is a social practice where members find meaning through their work together.

Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond also discuss the situational aspect of leadership practice. They point out that situational context not only influences leadership practice, but it also *defines* it. To them, situational context might refer to the actual structural facets of a school but may also refer to the sociocultural contexts—including racial or political—that shape the day-to-day practice of the school as well as the general school environment (Spillane, et al., 2004).

In small schools, where distributive leadership is common, reciprocal interdependency of school leaders and teachers is so often constant. This interdependency connects leadership practice to larger systems-thinking. Understanding the resources and the workings of a community—both within and outside the school—and how they inter-play is essential for effective leadership practice. In schools that do claim to practice distributive leadership, it is also essential that school leaders reflect on their own understanding of the model itself. While the intent of my study was not to examine principals' implementation of distributive leadership, it seemed that several had some misunderstandings of how to put it into practice. In small schools, leadership activities are shared by most members of the community—either as leaders or as followers. In order to maximize leadership opportunities in ways that promote school sustainability, it is essential to not only understand the complexities of leader-follower interdependencies and the situational contexts at play, but it is also crucial to know *how* to make meaning of them.

Communities of Practice

Small schools are their own communities of practice in which a teacher's identity as a full member of the community is essential for sustaining the very strength of the community. In

Chapter 2, I likened the learning that occurs in small schools to the theory of legitimate peripheral participation as put forth by Lave and Wenger (1991). Their idea is that through legitimate peripheral participation, newcomers actively participate in a community of practice and make meaning of their participation, ultimately building an identity around their membership to that community. Ideally, that same process happens in small schools where teachers find their identities—as teachers, as teacher leaders, as change-makers—through their participation on their schools. This happens through collaboration, through vision sharing (or buy-in), and through undergoing difficult work together as a team.

However, so often the reality of the work in small schools ends up weakening the very sense of community that is supposed to strengthen them. While collaboration is theoretically supposed to be at the core of small school work, it often gets undermined when teachers don't have the norms and structures that enable full participation. In some cases, teachers don't necessarily know how to establish their own norms that provide safe opportunities for collaboration. In other cases, teachers aren't given appropriate structures, such as enough time to collaborate effectively.

The issue around equity as it relates to the hours teachers feel they contribute creates similar tensions in small schools. In small schools where teachers spend several hours after the school day working with students or colleagues, working on lesson plans, or working on school leadership matters, resentment around teacher equity often occurs. A teacher might question a colleague's commitment to the community or might feel a sense of personal self-sacrifice and, thus, alienate other colleagues who don't appear to be contributing as much. In communities of practice, full participants, who rely on their shared goals and even shared identities, build

communities of trust. In a small school where some teachers feel like they are in it alone or doubt members of the community, the vision of the school risks being compromised.

Issues around buy-in and school vision can be particularly divisive in small schools that are known for being vision-driven. The point of contention comes when some members of the community fail to have necessary vision-forming conversations with all participants. In small schools, it means that some teachers don't enforce a "no hat" policy on their students because they weren't part of a conversation that decided it. It means that some teachers don't count students as tardy because they don't see administrative follow-through on discipline issues. It means that some teachers don't come to meetings on time because they don't feel their participation is valued. When teachers have different understandings of one small school's vision, opposing "clubs" of teachers can form, and teachers can end up alienating one another. As a result of all of these tensions, membership to the community—along with meaning making and identity formation—is threatened.

In small vision-driven schools, all teachers need to be part of the vision-forming conversations, even if it means revisiting the same conversations and re-crafting the school vision year after year. School leaders—in many cases, founding teachers—have the responsibility to include teachers new to the school in vision-forming conversations. These conversations must happen regularly and as often as necessary in order to ensure that all teachers have an opportunity to understand both the vision and the common core practices of their small school community. This is critical for productive participation by all members of the small school community, as it is the only way that they can have the opportunity to move from peripheral participants to full participants and *genuine* members of their community of practice. Without access to participation, the newcomer—in this case, a teacher new to the school—is not

given genuine learning opportunities and, thus, cannot become a full member of a community (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Not only is this solution necessary for the strength of the community's membership and, by extension, teacher satisfaction, but it is also necessary for the strength of the school vision. In addition to promoting full participation amongst all teachers, there is inherent value in regularly re-visiting, and re-shaping, one's school vision as the needs of teachers, students, and community change.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), active participation by all members is crucial for that community of practice's reproduction as well as its transformation. Thus, the long-term sustainability of small schools is dependent upon the full participation of all teachers through their own independent connections to their school's shared practice.

Supports for Teachers

As mentioned previously, small school leaders often focus on the day-to-day needs of the school in order to keep things afloat. This is partly the nature of many of the small schools, being relatively new and needing to "catch up," in a sense, with the more long-standing public schools in terms of what they can offer students. Small schools often want to be more to students and families than they can be; however, one could see them as limited by their small faculty, by their small number of administrators, or by the number of courses and extra-curriculars they can offer. These small schools do their best to push past these limitations by offering a unique, closely-knit democratic environment for teachers, students, and community members.

Despite small school efforts to offer an alternative educational experience, the focus on the day-to-day needs of the school often overshadows the day-to-day and long-term professional

needs of teachers. Teachers new to small schools often struggle with classroom practices such as student-centered instruction and project-based learning. Similarly, these teachers also struggle with their non-classroom responsibilities such as being advisors or designing professional development workshops. While teachers may be excited about these new ways of teaching or these new responsibilities, they do not necessarily have the skills to perform them successfully. Often they are left to learn on-the-job without being given effective supports. While on-the-job learning can be very valuable, it can also be overwhelming for already-overwhelmed teachers.

In designing support programs, small school leaders need to make practices meaningful and honest for teachers. Gallimore et al. (2009) advocate meaningful supports for teachers through school-based inquiry programs, programs they believe can improve teacher education. By using a framework of recursive collaborative inquiry, teacher teams—with external supports—design and implement their own professional growth plans.³⁹ The authors hypothesize that with teacher teams—of members who share students or subject areas—professional growth plans can be focused around shared problems and moved forward with intention (Gallimore et al., 2009). This process allows teachers to be the driving force behind their own professional growth and make connections to their own outcomes. It is important to note that for the teacher inquiry framework to be successful, it is necessary to have the support of a distributed leadership system. School leaders must buy into the process—which may include setting aside some day-to-day needs—as well as push teacher teams to work toward their goals. In some small schools, adopting this inquiry framework may require a cultural shift in systems and structures as they have been known (Gallimore et al., 2009), but such a shift may be necessary for the school’s sustainability.

³⁹ While the authors focus mostly on improving teaching and learning, I believe this teacher inquiry framework is applicable to supporting small school teachers with skill building and professional supports.

In thinking about ways to support their teachers, small school leaders need to look at teachers' day-to-day and long-term professional needs and avoid making assumptions about where they stand. Whether these support efforts be through using the inquiry framework or through efforts many small school leaders attempt to provide—offering on-site mentoring, offering professional development workshops, honoring scheduling needs, providing extra collaboration time, sending teachers to conferences—these supports need to address individual teachers' needs.

School leaders themselves need to be honest in that they don't have it all figured out. In other words, as small schools tread into new territory and build from the ground up, they can't tackle all aspects of their program at once. It takes time. Small school leaders need to make sure their teachers know where their schools stand and where they aim to be in the future. With that in mind, they may be better able to listen to their teachers' needs and support them in meaningful ways.

APPENDIX A: TEACHER FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

FOCUS GROUP AGENDA

1. Group Discussion over “Dilemma”
2. Provide Overview of Tensions for Group
3. Ask Interview Questions Relevant for Group

Dilemma

Read aloud to group: *As a 9th grade teacher, you attend a meeting with 9th and 10th grade teachers on Thursdays afterschool from 3:15-4pm. (The school day ends at 3pm.) During these meetings, you discuss matters dealing with student academic performance, students’ personal lives, teachers’ individual curricula, and decisions and debates about school activities. These meetings often last until 4:30pm. (Some of your colleagues typically leave at 4pm even though the majority of the teachers remain.)*

On this day, the discussion gets beyond generalities for a change. An idea comes up that you think might really lead to something. You think, “for once maybe this could get us actually doing something rather than just complaining and then doing nothing. It’s an idea that, if we worked on it as a group, it might really help my students who are struggling right now.”

At 4:20pm during this Thursday’s meeting, one of your colleagues, the teacher leading the meeting, suggests ending the meeting and continuing tomorrow morning at 7:30am. (You are not required to be at school until 8am.) Three of your colleagues had already left at 4pm as they usually do each Thursday; nine of you remained.

The teacher leader says “I think if we meet in the morning, we could come up with something practical to try out in our classrooms.” She asks for a vote

When this proposal is made, you consider your week. It is Thursday afternoon, and you are tired. You have been at school since 7am because you had to meet with a parent. You have stayed afterschool until at least 5pm every day this week, working with students. (But that is typical for you.)

Before voting, these questions run swiftly through your mind:

Do I have time and energy for another early morning?

Will this morning meeting become a routine and another time commitment?

Will it really help students? Will it help the school work better?

Will other teachers really follow-through, or will some flake out for good or bad reasons?

Will the administration support this? Can they realistically do it with the limited resources we have?

How do you vote?

Teacher Focus Group Questions

1. **LONG HOURS:** (*So, I realize long hours are an issue in the dilemma. To what extent are long hours an issue for you?*) Teachers in small schools often report that the long hours their work demands—both in and out of school—are the most difficult expectations of small schools. They claim that the hours needed to plan curricula, communicate with students and parents, collaborate with colleagues, and lead school activities are often overwhelming. Can you talk about your experience with this issue? Do you find that you are overwhelmed by the hours needed to complete your work here?
 - a. **Probing:** Have you found that there is a cultural expectation at this school to put in long hours?
 - b. **Probing:** How do each of you determine the hours you spend at school? Or the hours you spend at home working?
 - c. **Probing:** If you work beyond the required school day, why do you choose to do so?
2. **CURRICULA:** Often one of the challenges in small schools is balancing the use of existing curricula with the development of new curricula. Can you talk about how/if this is a challenge here (for you), AND how does your school work on this balance?
 - a. **Probing:** Where are the places you see that you could use help in this process? Are there resources that could help you?
3. **SPECIAL EDUCATION:** Meeting the needs of special needs students in a small school often means doing so without a full slate of special ed teachers or resources. How do **you and/or your school** deal with the tension or balance the demands?
 - a. **Probing:** Where are the places you see that you could use help in meeting the needs of these students? Are there resources that could help you?
4. **COLLABORATION:** Collaboration is a practice much-valued within small schools. Whether it's teacher-teacher collaboration or teacher-administrator collaboration, it is also a very time-consuming process. How does collaboration work here? AND, what could be done to make it work better?
 - a. **Probing:** Do you feel like collaboration works here, or do you feel like it would be best if you just worked on your own?
 - b. **Probing:** Do you feel like there is true collaboration amongst teachers and between teachers and administrators? (Explain)
5. **TYPES OF SKILLS:** Many small school teachers come from a more traditional background—whether it be a more traditional teacher education program or from years of experience in a more traditional school. Given this, do you feel that you could have benefitted from training in certain skills (i.e., in student-centered instruction, in collaboration, in student advising, in parent communication, in completing administrative tasks, in activities of a start-up school, in democratic practices, etc.) that are expected/required in small schools? (Explain.)
 - a. **Probing:** What types of skills do you feel would make you more successful as a teacher here?

6. **GOVERNANCE & SCHOOL POLICIES:** Often small schools are start-up schools in which teachers and administrators find themselves building school policies (such as tardy or conduct policies) as they go. Given this, do you find that this “build-as-you-go” practice is evident at your school? If so, how does it affect you as a teacher?
 - a. **Probing:** How does it affect the overall school environment/culture?
 - b. **Probing:** Are you spending time on issues/policies that you feel should have been decided already?
 - c. **Probing:** What kinds of policies do you wish had been set from the beginning? What kind of policies do you feel could fit into the “build-as-you-go” category?
7. **LACK OF INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE:** Because of the nature of small schools, much of the strength and stability of the school depends on a small group of motivated teachers. Also because of the nature of small schools, teachers feel the weight of the school on their shoulders and often leave, taking their institutional knowledge with them. Have you seen this? If so, what is it like to teach in a place where there is little (or no) long-standing knowledge?
 - a. **Probing:** Is there a lot of re-inventing the wheel in the classroom?
 - b. **Probing:** How is this being addressed at your school? How should it be addressed?
8. **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:** Teachers in small schools often struggle w/connecting to the professional development opportunities offered to them. Often, the PDs offered/mandated may be valuable but are irrelevant to the day-to-day needs of small school work. What has been your experience w/ professional development here?
 - a. **Probing:** Where are the places in which PDs could be more helpful to your work?
9. **EXPECTATIONS vs. PERFORMANCE:** Small schools are known to draw teachers who find the democratic practices (such as shared leadership and student-centered instruction) of these schools to be particularly motivating and attractive. However, literature shows that many of the factors that attract teachers to small schools also overwhelm them in reality. Do you find that the expectations you have for yourself as a teacher here match up with your performance? (Do you expect more than you are actually able to give?)
 - a. **Probing:** If there is a discrepancy between expectation and performance, how do you think the school could help better balance the two?
10. **TEACHER BUY-IN:** Most schools in the modern small school movement are built upon a more progressive, student-centered, democratic ideology, an ideology which can be found schoolwide—from classroom curricula to school governance policies. However, teachers at these schools do not always ascribe to this ideology. Have you found teacher “buy-in” to be an issue at your school? If so, how has it manifested itself?
 - a. **Probing:** How do you feel the school could address issues of teacher “buy-in?”
11. **Closing Open-Ended:** As a teacher, how do you feel you are doing? (5-10 min)
 - a. **Probing:** How supported? How confident? How skilled? (if necessary)

APPENDIX B: TEACHER LEADER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. **LONG HOURS:** Teachers in small schools often report that the long hours their work demands—both in and out of school—is the most difficult expectation of small schools. They claim that the hours needed to plan curricula, communicate with students and parents, collaborate with colleagues, and lead school activities are often overwhelming. As a teacher leader, can you talk about your experience with this issue? Do you find that teachers are overwhelmed by the hours needed to complete their work here?
 - a. **Probing:** Have you found that there is a cultural expectation at this school for teachers to put in long hours?
 - b. **Probing:** How do teachers determine the hours they spend at school? Or the hours they spend at home working?
 - c. **Probing:** If teachers work beyond the required school day, why do they choose to do so?
2. **CURRICULA:** Often one of the challenges in small schools is balancing the use of existing curricula with the development of curricula. Can you talk about how/if this is a challenge here (for teachers), AND how do you, as a teacher leader, work on this balance?
 - a. **Probing:** Where are the places you see that you could use help in this process? Are there resources that could help you or your teachers?
3. **SPECIAL EDUCATION:** Meeting the needs of special needs students in a small school often means doing so without a full slate of special ed teachers or resources. How does your school deal with the tension or balance the demands?
 - a. **Probing:** Where are the places you see that teachers could use help in meeting the needs of these students? Are there resources that could help you?
4. **COLLABORATION:** Collaboration is a practice much-valued within small schools. Whether it's teacher-teacher collaboration or teacher-administrator collaboration, it is also a very time-consuming process. How does collaboration work here? AND, what could be done to make it work better?
 - a. **Probing:** Do you feel like collaboration works here? (Explain)
 - b. **Probing:** Do you feel like there is true collaboration amongst teachers and between teachers and administrators? (Explain)
5. **TYPES OF SKILLS:** Many small school teachers come from a more traditional background—whether it be a more traditional teacher education program or from years of experience in a more traditional school. Given this, do you feel that teachers here could have benefitted from training in certain skills (i.e., in student-centered instruction, in collaboration, in student advising, in parent communication, in completing administrative tasks, in activities of a start-up school, in democratic practices, etc.) that are expected/required in small schools? (Explain.)
 - a. **Probing:** What types of skills do you feel would make your teachers more successful?

6. **GOVERNANCE & SCHOOL POLICIES:** Often small schools are start-up schools in which teachers and administrators find themselves building school policies (such as tardy or conduct policies) as they go. Given this, do you find that this “build-as-you-go” practice is evident at your school? If so, how does it affect teachers here?
 - a. **Probing:** How does it affect the overall school environment/culture?
 - b. **Probing:** Are teachers spending time on issues/policies that should have been decided already?
 - c. **Probing:** What kinds of policies do you wish had been set from the beginning? What kind of policies do you feel could fit into the “build-as-you-go” category?

7. **LACK OF INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE:** Because of the nature of small schools, much of the strength and stability of the school depends on a small group of motivated teachers. Also because of the nature of small schools, teachers feel the weight of the school on their shoulders and often leave, taking their institutional knowledge with them. Have you seen this? If so, what is it like to be a leader in a place where there is little long-standing knowledge?
 - a. **Probing:** Is there a lot of re-inventing the wheel? If so, where?
 - b. **Probing:** How is this being addressed at your school? How should it be addressed?

8. **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:** Teachers in small schools often struggle w/connecting to the professional development opportunities offered to them. Often, the PDs offered/mandated may be valuable but are irrelevant to the day-to-day needs of small school work. As a school leader, what do you feel teachers’ experiences have been w/ professional development here?
 - a. **Probing:** Where are the places in which PDs could be more helpful to their work?

9. **EXPECTATIONS vs. PERFORMANCE:** Small schools are known to draw teachers who find the democratic practices (such as shared leadership and student-centered instruction) of these schools to be particularly motivating and attractive. However, literature shows that many of the factors that attract teachers to small schools also overwhelm them in reality. Do you find that the expectations for teachers here match up with their performance? (Are teachers able to give what is expected of them?)
 - a. **Probing:** If there is a discrepancy between expectation and performance, how do you think the school could help better balance the two?

10. **TEACHER BUY-IN:** Most schools in the modern small school movement are built upon a more progressive, student-centered, democratic ideology, an ideology which can be found schoolwide—from classroom curricula to school governance policies. However, teachers at these schools do not always ascribe to this ideology. Have you found teacher “buy-in” to be an issue at your school? If so, how has it manifested itself?
 - a. **Probing:** How do you feel the school could address issues of teacher “buy-in”?

11. **Closing Open-Ended:** As a teacher leader, how do you feel you are doing here? Do you feel supported/prepared? Confident? Skilled?

APPENDIX C: PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. **LONG HOURS:** Teachers in small schools often report that the long hours their work demands—both in and out of school—is the most difficult expectation of small schools. They claim that the hours needed to plan curricula, communicate with students and parents, collaborate with colleagues, and lead school activities are often overwhelming. As an administrator, can you talk about your experience with this issue?
 - a. **Probing:** How would you characterize the cultural expectation at this school for teachers' hours?
 - b. **Probing:** Where do you see the most significant struggle for teachers around time?
 - c. **Probing:** Have you found ways as an administrator to support teachers around their struggles with time?

2. **CURRICULA:** Often one of the challenges in small schools is balancing the use of existing curricula with the development of curricula. Can you talk about how/if this is a challenge here (for your teachers), AND how do you, as an administrator, work on this balance?
 - a. **Probing:** Where are the places you see that you could use help in this process? Are there resources that could help you or your teachers?

3. **SPECIAL EDUCATION:** Meeting the needs of special needs students in a small school often means doing so without a full slate of special ed teachers or resources. How do **you and/or your school** deal with the tension or balance the demands?
 - a. **Probing:** Where are the places you see that your teachers could use help in meeting the needs of these students? Are there resources that could help you?

4. **COLLABORATION:** Collaboration is a practice much-valued within many small schools. How does collaboration work here?
 - a. **Probing:** Are there tensions around collaboration that you have noticed or worked on?
 - b. **Probing:** Are there resources that would help you support collaboration?
 - c. **Probing:** Have you found a way to collaborate?

5. **TYPES OF SKILLS:** Many small school teachers come from a more traditional background—whether it be a more traditional teacher education program or from years of experience in a more traditional school. Given this, do you feel that this is an issue at your school? In what ways?
 - a. **Probing:** Are there places where you would like to provide particular learning opportunities for your teachers? (i.e., in student-centered instruction, in collaboration, in student advising, in parent communication, in completing administrative tasks, in activities of a start-up school, in democratic practices, etc.) practices that are expected/required in small schools? (Explain.)

6. **GOVERNANCE & SCHOOL POLICIES:** Often small schools are start-up schools in which teachers and administrators find themselves building school policies (such as tardy or conduct policies) as they go. Do you find that there is sometimes a “build-as-you-go” practice at your school?

- a. **Probing:** How does it affect the overall school environment/culture?
 - b. **Probing:** How do you think it affects your teachers?
 - c. **Probing:** Are your teachers spending time on issues/policies that should have been decided already?
 - d. **Probing:** What kinds of policies do you wish had been set from the beginning? What kind of policies do you feel could fit into the “build-as-you-go” category?
7. **TEACHER BUY-IN:** Most schools in the modern small school movement are built upon a more progressive, student-centered, democratic ideology, an ideology which can be found schoolwide—from classroom curricula to school governance policies. However, teachers at these schools do not always ascribe to this ideology. Have you found teacher “buy-in” to be an issue at your school? If so, how has it manifested itself?
 - a. **Probing:** How do you feel you could address issues of teacher “buy-in?”
8. **LACK OF INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE:** Because of the nature of small schools, much of the strength and stability of the school depends on a small group of motivated teachers. Also because of the nature of small schools, teachers feel the weight of the school on their shoulders and often leave, taking their institutional knowledge with them. Have you seen this? If so, what is it like to be an administrator in a place where there is little (or no) long-standing knowledge amongst teachers?
 - a. **Probing:** Is there a lot of re-inventing the wheel? If so, where?
 - b. **Probing:** How are you addressing this at your school?
9. **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:** Teachers in small schools often struggle w/connecting to the professional development opportunities offered to them. Often, the PDs offered/mandated may be valuable but are irrelevant to the day-to-day needs of small school work. As an administrator, what do you feel your teachers’ experiences have been w/ professional development here?
 - a. **Probing:** Where are the places in which PDs could be more helpful to their work?

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