

# THE SMALLER LEARNING COMMUNITIES CONNECTOR

An issue focused on  
Instruction and Building  
Teacher Capacity!

## DID YOU KNOW?:

There are 40 years of existing research and literature on smaller learning communities which indicates that students who participate in SLCs have higher attendance and graduation rates, fewer drop-outs, equal or better levels of academic achievement (standardized test scores, course failure rates, grade-point averages), higher levels of extra-curricular participation and parent involvement, and fewer incidences of discipline and violence.

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## SLC Schools Strive to Become High-Performing Schools

by Darlene J. Bruton, SLC Project Director

High-performing schools are dynamic places with high expectations for all students. The belief in these schools is that all students can learn and it is the responsibility of every adult to ensure that all students have every opportunity to succeed. The goal in high-performing schools is simple—*"learning for all—whatever it takes."*

Becoming a high-performing school is not easy. It takes years of sustained commitment and there is no silver bullet—no single thing a school can do to ensure high student performance.

Researchers have found that these schools have nine common characteristics.

1. A clear and shared focus
2. High standards and expectations for all students
3. Effective school leadership
4. High levels of collaboration and communication
5. Curriculum, instruction, and assessments aligned with state standards
6. Frequent monitoring of learning and teaching
7. Focused professional development

8. A supportive learning environment
9. High levels of family and community involvement

These nine characteristics are integral to school improvement and the implementation of smaller learning communities. They should be embedded in all stages of the planning and implementation processes.

Source: *Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools*, January 2003

## Collaborative Lesson Planning with a Focus on

### STUDENTS

 by Dave Eagle, HSC Coordinating Supervisor

Again this year the six America's Choice teachers from the Smaller Learning Communities high schools (Crossland, Duval, Forestville, Oxon Hill, Potomac and Suitland) will participate in the powerful professional experience of a Lesson Study in their *Pathways to College Prep Math* course. Lesson study is a professional development practice imported to the United States from Japan where teachers collaborate to develop a lesson plan, teach and observe the lesson to collect data on student learning, and use their observations of students to refine their lesson.

A key aspect of the success of lesson study is that it focuses on what teachers want students to learn rather than on what teachers plan to teach. Through this experience teachers learn to hone their observational skills, to focus on student work

and outcomes and to use the classroom experience as a total formative assessment of what is being effective and what needs to be adjusted in their lesson. In addition, it reinforces for teachers the value of working with peers in close, collaborative groups.

**A Lesson Study Process:** The Pathways teachers have been trained in the following protocol for doing a Lesson Study:

- **Form a lesson study team:** The teachers will work with a team of four teachers.
- **Focus the lesson study:** As a team they select an Algebra topic in their *Pathways* curriculum that they felt was a challenge to their students in preparing for the HSA.
- **Collaboratively plan the study lesson:** The teachers have been trained to use the backwards-

design process that starts with what do you want students to know and then they decide how will they will know if the students get it. After these are decided *then* the lesson is planned for deciding what they will do to get them there. The lesson "belongs" to the entire planning team not just the teacher presenting the lesson.

- **Prepare for the observation of students during the lesson:** As a team, the teachers determine the focus of what learning should be observed and what evidence might look like in the classroom during the lesson.

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## Spotlight on Duval High School: Scheduling for a Change

by Jessica Gitlis, SLC Program Manager



*DuVal High School*

*“The basis of success for SLCs and career academies is to what level common teachers are sharing common sets of students, otherwise defined as “purity.” This is what provides student support, safety nets, personalization, integrated teaching, rigor; and many other benefits of academic and CTE team teaching.”*

—Mikie Neubig, Capture Education Consulting Services, December 2009

At the heart of SLC secondary school reform is, “the belief system that ALL students can learn and ALL teachers should be expected to teach high-level curriculum” (Neubig, 2009). When this belief drives how our schools are organized, the master schedule becomes a framework that maximizes the time students spend in meaningful classes and teachers spend working collaboratively to meet the needs of their shared students. On the other hand, poor scheduling denies teachers the opportunity to ‘share common students and meet regularly regarding their needs’ (Neubig, CECS). It can also interfere with the opportunities students will have to improve their core content knowledge and minimize the amount of time students can spend in elective courses that build on their interests and post-secondary school goals.

In order to align these educational priorities with the creation of our master schedule, teachers, counselors, and

administrators at DuVal worked together to revise course requests, prepare students and teachers for the registration season, and establish a timeline for meeting our scheduling goals for the next school year. Like all schools in Prince George’s County, DuVal had an extremely difficult summer and start of the 2009-10 school year due to a combination of scheduling software and course registration problems. Assuming accountability for our responsibilities with those problems, we acknowledge that there are many efforts that can be made to minimize the affect computer problems have over the success of our scheduling process. Key to creating a schedule driven by our educational priorities is to assure the quality of the course request data we collect and enter into the software. If the data is good, the impact computer problems will have on the master schedule is limited.

DuVal’s timeline included three months for review and revision of course requests, time for a ‘Career

Academy Registration Fair’ and a day for all students and teachers to discuss the course options and make recommendations for their students.

Registration started on February 2 and is already showing signs of improvement due to our updated and reinvigorated registration process. Even in the face of endless snow days, our timeline will help us stay on track and the outcome of another less than perfect registration season will ultimately meet the needs of all of our students. For a copy of DuVal’s scheduling timeline, email [jessica.gitlis@pgcps.org](mailto:jessica.gitlis@pgcps.org).

Examples of DuVal’s course request forms are available at: <http://sites.google.com/a/pgcps.org/duval-high-school---course-request-forms/>

Source: Mike Neubig, Capture Educational Services — <http://www.capture-education.com/>

## Framing Instruction at Crossland

by Marris Seymore, SLC Program Manager, Crossland High School

“The capstone of any school improvement effort is the quality of teaching, which represents the single most important aspect of any school’s program for ensuring student success” (Danielson, 2002). As a result, Crossland has engaged its staff in a year-long professional development series that focuses on the four domains from Charlotte Danielson’s *Framework for Teaching* (FFT). During this series, all instructional staff, whether academics, technical, or other, are engaged in learning activities that support effective teaching best practices as well as address the aims of the Smaller Learning Communities

(SLC) grant that include rigor, relevance, relationships, and capacity building. Teachers have responded that the professional development plan is “refreshing and affirms what they practice.”

In an effort to align professional development with how administrators and instructional coordinators support teachers, the series is broken down monthly by FFT components called Instructional Focuses. Follow ups are conducted using the Instructional Focuses to ensure that all instructional stakeholders are on the same accord. Administrators have responded that “this plan makes

LearningWalks simpler.” Teacher Coordinators and Department Chairs have added that the professional development design helps them “focus their support to teachers.”

Like most plans, Crossland’s professional development plan is constantly being revised to meet the instructional needs of teachers.

Charlotte Danielson is an educational consultant specializing in teacher quality and evaluation, curriculum planning, performance assessment, and professional development. <http://www.danielsongroup.org/index.htm>

# Collaborative Lesson Planning with a Focus on STUDENTS (continued)

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- **Teach and observe the lesson:** One teacher teaches the lesson and the observing teachers gather data based upon the behaviors of students and the work students generate during the lesson.
- **Debrief the lesson:** The teachers meet and discuss the lesson as a group. The focus of the debriefing is on the STUDENTS! This lesson “belongs” to the planning team. The teacher who taught the lesson speaks first—commenting on

his or her reactions to how the students performed during this lesson. What worked? What did not work? What could be changed? Then, in a round-robin fashion, the planning group members comment—What worked?

- **Reflect and plan the next steps:** After the debriefing, the teachers make suggestions for adjustments based on the students’ work. Then they decide if they want to have another teacher re-teach the same lesson with the adjustments and see if the changes impacted the student learning.

The SLC goals of providing effective math

intervention, developing academic rigor, and building teacher capacity are definitely being addressed in this intense and exciting professional development activity. The teachers involved in the Lesson Study are Tosin Alao from Crossland, Jennifer Lynch from Duval, Judith Sajulan from Forestville, Keith Marshall from Oxon Hill, Ramon Magnos from Potomac and Bernarda Torbeso from Suitland.

## Potomac’s Positive P’s: Parents + Positivity = Power

by Toni Dixon McFarland, SLC Program Manager, Potomac High School

A school is mainly judged by its reputation. At Potomac High School, our Jumpstart to Graduation staff wanted to set a tone of high expectations for student achievement and strong parent involvement. We shared with our first-time freshmen parents our high expectations for their children’s academic achievements and emphasized the critical role they play in their children’s success.

During Jumpstart, we met with every parent of a Watch List student. Watch List data consists of attendance and academic information on all



incoming freshmen and is a critical source of information that helps us address specific students needs. Parents were able to collaborate with our JSTG Coordinator and Program Manager to discuss their child and plan interventions for the upcoming school year.

Other parent/student outreach efforts that were a part of our student success include:

- Incoming Freshman Orientation
- Jumpstart to Graduation Open House
- Watch List Data Review with Students
- Watch List Data Review with Parents
- Follow-up Collaboration Meetings with Freshman Institute Teams
- Follow-up Collaboration Meetings with Freshman Institute Parents

It’s no secret that involved parents increase teen stability. Educators talk in

the abstract about communicating with parents, but the reality is, that **not** talking to parents about the important challenges and issues facing their children can place their child’s whole academic career at risk. The weeks prior to the start of school, especially when that student is transitioning from one school level to another, is the perfect time for parents to discuss not only the academic rigors of high school but the social aspects such as dating, establishing friendships, and developing communication skills for the workplace.

Parents are reminded that building a relationship with the school is the key to our students’ success.

For more information about Potomac High School’s Jumpstart to Graduation program and Freshman Institute, contact Vickie Arnold-Taylor: [vickie.arnold@pgcps.org](mailto:vickie.arnold@pgcps.org).

*“What we resolve to do in school only makes sense when considered in the broader concept of what the society intends to accomplish through its educational investment in the young.”*

—Jerome S. Bruner, The Culture of Education

## Teachers & Student Leaders Banning Together for Cadet Success

by Syeed Abdul-Rahim, Forestville Military Academy

“What am I willing to sacrifice for what I want my students to become?” Motivated by this quote and desire to see students achieve total academic success, the faculty and staff at Forestville Military Academy are placing our students’ academic needs as our first priority and making strides to better provide support and services to meet

the needs of our rising sophomores. Teachers are banning together to provide tutorial services to struggling students who could benefit from additional academic support.

Teaming up with the Student Government Association and the National Honor Society, the teachers of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade cadets have instituted after-

school tutoring on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. In addition, the teachers of High School Assessment classes will soon begin offering after-school tutoring in order to prepare cadets for the HSAs. This tutoring will be offered Monday through Thursday from 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.



# Spotlight on Suitland High School: Enter to Learn, Leave to Achieve

by Shana Beckwith, SLC Program Manager, Suitland High School

As the largest of the five Smaller Learning Community Schools, Suitland High School boasts a student population of over 2,500. Accordingly, there are multiple programs of study, academies, and institutes to address their unique needs and interests. Approximately 45% of Suitland students are enrolled in the Center for Visual and Performing Arts, International Baccalaureate, or the Technical Academy. The motto at Suitland, "Enter to Learn, Leave to Achieve", is built on the schools' mission to develop lifelong learners who are able to find success in either post-secondary education or employment.

In addition to internal programs, a major strength of Suitland High School is its numerous

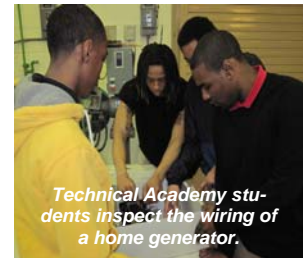
relationships with the surrounding Forestville and Suitland communities. Principal Mark Fossett has been instrumental in creating partnerships that impact student achievement, and provide access to resources and opportunities. This winter he was able to create a coveted partnership with the Hillside Work Scholarship Connection (HW-SC), a non-profit entity of Wegman's Food Markets. The Hillside program provides two full-time youth advocates at Suitland. As advocates, Nicol Turner and Kenneth Ferguson work with a caseload of students to provide one-on-one mentoring, teach life and social skills, and job-readiness training. Students that show a successful commitment to the program are eligible for

employment with local businesses, including Wegman's, which is scheduled to open in Prince George's County later this year.

Another such partnership is held between the Technical Academy's electrical training program and PEPCO Energy Services. Academy teacher Tyrone Tarlton has worked with representatives from PEPCO for the past three years, with the goal of building the type of knowledge and skills that future employers find valuable in new hires. Once a week PEPCO employees come to Mr. Tarlton's class to work on "real-life" scenarios and discuss the ins and outs of their careers as above- and below-ground Electrical Specialists. Students exit Mr. Tarlton's class with

employment connections, including opportunities available through PEPCO.

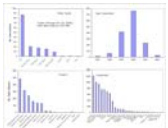
By actively seeking opportunities to expand partnerships and to utilize community resources, Suitland's administration and staff have ensured that its students have first-rate access to job readiness, employment opportunities, and the knowledge and skills to compete in the 21st century.



Technical Academy students inspect the wiring of a home generator.

## A Teacher Learns the Instructional Power of Data

by Simone Gibson, SLC Program Manager, Oxon Hill High School



Data is often one of those terms that many teachers come to resent as it seems to symbolize "more work that we just don't have time for", cited Mr. McManus Turner, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade Social Studies teacher, at the beginning of the 2010 school year. However, after leading his interdisciplinary collaborative team meetings, Mr. MacManus' perspective has shifted somewhat from the beginning of the school year. "If we don't

have data, we don't have a conversation. We can't speak just from our memories about our kids. We need more conclusive evidence to consider effective strategies for them." As such, Mr. McManus is one of several team leaders who promotes the importance of using data to structure conversations about students.

Data takes shape in a variety of forms. Items often introduced within team meetings include teacher referrals, written observations about students' progress, outcomes on assess-

ments and correspondence with parents.

"Data doesn't have to be some meaningless numbers. It can be really helpful and actually save time if you analyze it as a group and strategize about how to address the concerns." As we strive to embrace a data driven mentality at Oxon Hill High School, we take pride in the work of teachers like Mr. McManus who embrace forward thinking and data driven strategies to help our student improve their academic performance.

"You cannot reshape a high school without reshaping ninth grade at the most fundamental level."

—Billie Donegan, 2007

**"Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season. It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year. It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow."**

—W.E.B. DuBois



**"Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today."**  
—Malcolm X



**Ms. Maya Bond**  
DuVal High School

## Teacher Spotlight: Maya Bond

by Jessica Gitlis, SLC Program Manager, Duval High School

"A good teacher is like a candle - it consumes itself to light the way for others." While some may rebuff this perspective about teaching, Maya Bond is one of many educators at Duval who whole heartedly embraces this outlook and sacrifices endlessly to support and inspire her students' academic pursuits. Although a teacher who is trained in Science, teaching Biology and Integrated Science, Maya has also assumed the role of Freshman Institute Coordinator and the Student Government Association sponsor. As Freshman Institute Coordinator, she focuses additional attention on those 9<sup>th</sup> graders who attended the Jumpstart program during the

previous summer. She is well acquainted with the heralding statistics about freshmen failure rates and works ardently with freshmen to transform potentially negative student outcomes into success stories.

Maya emanates an incredible amount of energy and positivity with regards to her consistent and constant efforts with her students. Under her guidance, the SGA has become a powerful force within the school, uplifting school spirit and re-engaging in activities to strengthen the surrounding community. Most recently, Maya's students raised funds to assist with the recovery efforts in Haiti. Maya's dedication is further

evidenced in her decision to forfeit her planning in order to teach the Student Government Association class.

When reflecting on SLCs at DuVal, Maya commented, "I am looking forward to the possibilities that the Smaller Learning Communities initiative will bring to DuVal. SLCs will provide students with a sense of identity and belonging and teachers with the opportunity to build connections between classroom content and their students' future interests.

Maya is an incredible asset to Duval and we are proud to feature her as a teacher to be lauded and emulated.

*"How personal the secondary school environment is matters more than any other single factor in encouraging engagement and their willingness to work hard on academic goals. When teachers connect with and understand their students' families, cultures, and life outside school, students achieve at higher levels."*

—McLaughlin, Milbrey W. and Talbert, Joan E. *Contexts That Matter for Teaching and Learning*, 1993

## The Power of Relationships

By Darlene Bruton, Coordinating Supervisor, SLC

In the worlds of business and politics, we hear over and over again that "it's all about relationships." But that saying can also be applied to the field of education. The multitude and complexity of relationships—among students, teachers, administrators, parents—form impressions on our children that can last a lifetime. Research shows that a positive culture within a school can connect students to learning. Such things as a safe and respectful environment, supportive and personalized learning experiences, and personal relationships allow students to develop a connection with the school and attain educational success. Building relationships is a "win-win" situation for all. Think about the power of this:

- **What If...**All schools were personalized learning environments where caring adults knew the needs, interests, and aspirations of each student well?
- **What If...**All school staff had the opportunity to develop close connections and mentor-

ing relationships with a small group of students throughout their high school years?

- **What If...**Every student in every school felt that a teacher, administrator, or support staff member really cared about him or her?
- **What If...**All parents felt confident that there was at least one person at their child's school who knew their child well and could personally share what the child was doing at school?
- **What If...**All students had educational, career and personal goals toward which they were working and could see their courses as useful in reaching these goals?
- **What If...**Teachers and students developed mutual trust and maintained open lines of communication nurtured through a long-term commitment focused on the educational success of all students? If achieved, these "what ifs" could make school a more rewarding place for all!

One of the goals of the SLC grant is to build relationships. The five SLC schools are committed to creating personalized learning environments where every student is known well, respected, and appreciated in order to foster a commitment to learning and increase the academic achievement of all students. One way that these large high schools are achieving a small school "feel" is by personalizing the high school setting to develop meaningful, sustained relationships among teachers and students. Each high school implemented a number of strategies and structures as follows: summer bridge program to transition incoming freshmen from middle school to high school, advisories, freshman and sophomore institutes, tiered interventions with targeted supports, looping of guidance counselors, and, in school year 2010-11 the implementation of theme-based career academies.

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## SLC Schools — “Preparing students for their future, not our past!”

What the research says:

- “A rigorous high school curriculum is the greatest predictor of college completion, regardless of socio-economic status or race.” (College Board, 2006)
- “The biggest risk factor for failing ninth grade is the number of absences during the first 30 days of high school, and failing ninth grade is one of the most important predictors of dropping out.” (Neild & Balfanz, 2006)
- “If you want to know what and whom a school *really* values, examine its master schedule. Staffing and scheduling decisions are clear evidence of where priorities—and status—lie.” Billie Donegan 2008

Special thanks to Dr. Simone Gibson and Ms. Shana Beckwith, SLC Program Managers at Oxon Hill and Suitland, respectively, for their assistance in editing and organizing this SLC newsletter focused on Instruction.



# Teacher Spotlight: Commander Robert Clements

by Shana Beckwith, SLC Program Manager, Suitland High School

This fall Commander Robert Clements joined the Suitland High School staff as the Department Chairperson and Senior Naval Instructor for Naval Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (NJROTC). Commander Clements's enthusiasm for Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) is evident in the amount of time he has invested in the upcoming collaboration between NJROTC and the SLC initiative which will ultimately produce Suitland's new Academy of Military Science. In 2009, the NJROTC program attracted nearly 100 freshmen or first year NJROTC students. Commander Clements is optimistic that this partnership will result in an increased enrollment of approximately 200 students in the 2010-11 school year and 250 students in 2011-12.

The partnership between SLC and NJROTC will also lead to numerous academic opportunities, namely dual and cross enrollment options to enhance career marketability, and access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses for students focused on college admission. Commander Clements notes that, “In the past it was thought that students who enrolled in AP courses, Technical Academy, or the Business Management Academy would not have

available credit time in their schedule to allow participation in NJROTC. However, through creative scheduling which is encouraged by the SLC initiative, there are a number of pathways available that have optimal post-secondary value to students. This combination of academics and NJROTC leadership will prepare our students for competitive admissions and scholarship processes such as the Naval Academy.” Commander



Clements believes that all students; regardless of whether they are interested in a military career, pursuing college, or entering the workforce immediately upon graduation, benefit from increased exposure to standardized testing. Looking toward the future, he anticipates that the Academy of Military Science will be pursuing funding to acquire computer assets, Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) study guide resources, and ASVAB CDs to be used

to support the improvement of test scores on the ASVAB test. “This will enable students to properly prepare through the use of the ASVAB CD tool and the study guide book, while additionally being tracked and monitored by the Naval Science instructors”. Commander Clements sees the ultimate goal as being able to prepare students for exceptional performance in all high-stakes testing environments, including the HSAs, SAT, as well as the ASVAB.

The mission of NJROTC has always been to instill in students the value of citizenship, service to the United States, personal responsibility, and a sense of accomplishment. With 22 years of service in the Navy, Commander Clements is confident that “this viable and uplifting mission,” will now receive the additional support and guidance that comes with the SLC initiative, and more students will be able to feel this “sense of accomplishment” upon graduating from the Academy of Military Science.

For more information about NJROTC, please contact Commander R. Clements: [robert.clements@pgcps.org](mailto:robert.clements@pgcps.org) or a Suitland High School Guidance Counselor.