

Study: *Career Choices* Curriculum Positively Impacts High School Transition to Small Learning Communities

In a recent Master's Thesis study by Georgette Phillips, small learning community coordinator at Silverado High School in Victorville, California, the *Career Choices* curriculum proved to be a critical component in implementing total culture change in a large comprehensive high school.

The study, covering the 2004-05 school year to the 2007-08 school year, **showed dramatic increases in student GPA, student retention, and a corresponding decrease in student suspension and dropouts.** According to the report:

The study included a random sampling of 10th and 11th grade students who have been in small learning communities [utilizing the *Career Choices* curriculum] for at least three years at Silverado High School in the Victor Valley Union High School District. (Phillips, p. 28)

Phillips goes on to note the academic improvement in the sample group:

...students increased their Grade Point Average (GPA) by 69%... Further study by freshman Principal Nelda Colvin and the researcher revealed that **100% of the sample group passed the CAHSEE (California High School Exit Exam).** (Phillips, p. 49)

The small learning communities (SLCs) at Silverado include an academic program whereby:

Ninth grade students at Silverado High School take Freshman Seminar using the *Career Choices* curriculum and explore careers that interest them. The curriculum encourages students to visualize how they want their life to be like in ten years- what kind of home they want to live in, what vehicle they want to drive, what clothes to wear, their family size, vacations, toys, etc. They develop a budget (math) on what it will cost to live that lifestyle and look at which careers could support that lifestyle. They then research what education, skills, and qualifications are required for that type of job. They develop their personalized 10-year plan on a web-based program, My10yearPlan.com. This plan is revisited twice a year throughout high school English and Social Studies courses. (Phillips, p. 26)

Also noted in the study is the importance of using a program like *Career Choices*, which meets The George Washington University's *Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes*, designed by Dr. Rebecca Dedmond. Phillips notes:

Dedmond agrees that personalized learning will help every student identify strengths and qualities and discover the types of careers that may be enjoyed. Dedmond developed the widely adopted *Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes* with the 10-year plan [a cornerstone of the *Career Choices* curriculum by Academic Innovations]. (Phillips, p. 18)

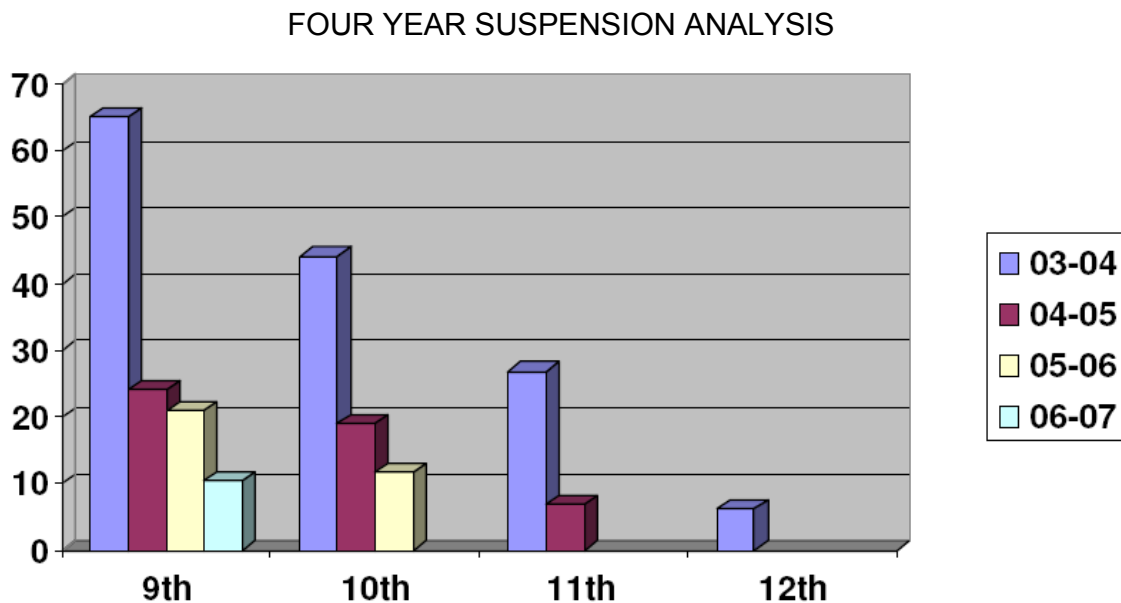
Phillips goes on to say how educators employing a program like *Career Choices* based on Dedmond's *Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes*, fosters achievement in learners because:

Students should be encouraged to pursue personal goals and passions by following a career development pathway program and complete a personal learning plan by identifying interests, strengths, and needs. **This personalized curriculum, along with strong relationships with caring adults, provides the momentum for high student achievement.** (Phillips, p.25)

In addition to the impact on student achievement, the study also points to philosophical changes in teacher opinion regarding SLCs. Notably, in the 2005 survey, approximately 30% of teacher respondents believed SLCs were a valuable program about which they would like more information (Phillips, p. 41). However, in the 2007 survey, the number of teacher respondents who felt that SLCs were valuable had risen to almost 93% (Phillips, p. 42).

The numbers are similar for teacher respondents who felt that SLCs employing *Career Choices* were helping to reduce discipline problems. In the 2005 survey, once again, approximately 30% of them agreed that the new program was helping reduce discipline problems (Phillips, p. 44). By 2007, the percentage of teacher respondents who agreed that SLCs were helping to reduce discipline problems had skyrocketed to almost 77% (Phillips, p. 45).

The impacts were similarly impressive on suspension rates at Silverado High School as demonstrated in the graph below (Phillips, P. 47):



In her summary Phillips notes, “High dropout rates, poor attendance, and low test scores prompted Silverado High School to begin the work of implementing wall-to-wall small learning communities.” (Phillips, p. 55) Today, she’s confidently able to state:

SLC student GPAs have significantly increased along with successful CAHSEE test results. Students and teachers not involved with SLCs are requesting enrollment. The optimistic results have encouraged the coordinator and Silverado administrators to continue, in full force, the implementation of wall-to-wall small learning communities at Silverado High School. (Phillips, p. 53)