

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

EVALUATING THE CIVIC EFFECTS OF CLUSTERING AND SCHOOL-WIDE GOVERNANCE

In September 2003, Hudson High School in Hudson, MA, launched two new civic development efforts— clustering and school-wide governance—and moved into a new building designed to facilitate them. This new educational strategy provided an opportunity to study the influence of school-wide democratic deliberation on students' civic knowledge and participation.

The interim findings suggest that the programs are associated with improvements in the political knowledge, community service, and school-wide civic engagement of twelfth graders.

CIRCLE Working Paper #58 contains preliminary findings of an evaluation of this unusual approach to civic education. The interim findings suggest that the programs are associated with improvements in the political knowledge, community service, and school-wide civic engagement of twelfth graders. The paper is entitled "Evaluation of a Comprehensive High School Civic Engagement Intervention in Hudson, Massachusetts" and was written by Hugh McIntosh, Sheldon H. Berman, and James Youniss.

CLUSTERING STUDENTS TO ENCOURAGE DELIBERATION

Hudson High School's civic reform effort centered around two changes: changes to the school structure and changes to the school governance. Structural changes included organizing the school into small clusters of 100 to 150 students that met for one hour each week to discuss governance and other school-related issues, performed community service, and pursued other cluster-related activities. The new school building was designed so that clusters of students could deliberate about school issues in public space—reflecting the idea that democratic deliberations need public spaces where citizens can exchange ideas. Clusters also form the basic unit of Hudson High's school-wide governance model, which the authors note, "attempted to draw the entire student body into the governance process, not just the most engaged students." According to Dr. Berman, "The belief underpinning school-wide governance is that students will become more civic-minded and engaged if they experience democratic deliberation as part of their school experience."

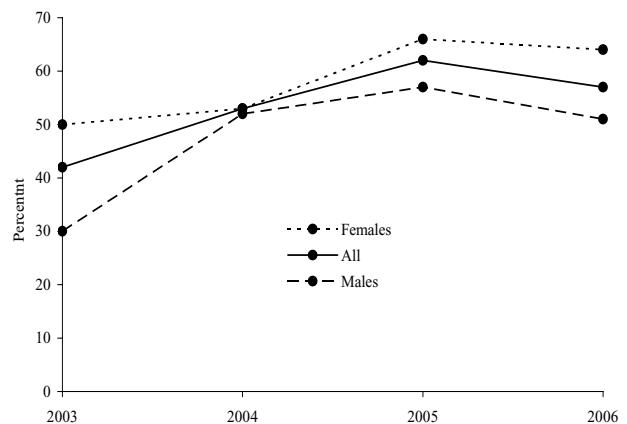
STUDENTS LIKE DELIBERATING IN SMALL GROUPS

The evaluation of Hudson High School's reform efforts used both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The first analysis relied on qualitative data and assessed the implementation of the cluster/governance programs. The findings are drawn largely from five focus group interviews with a quarter of the 2006 12th grade class—the first class at Hudson High School to go through all three years of the intervention.

According to the report, one student noted, "I didn't feel comfortable around 150 kids expressing their opinion. ... So usually when we have to talk about governance or anything like that, we meet in a small group. That way they can express their opinions OK."

Among other things, the focus groups revealed that students found it easier to discuss school governance issues in interest groups than in cluster-wide meetings (which involved often 100 or more students). According to the report, one student noted, "I didn't feel comfortable around 150 kids expressing their opinion. ... So usually when we have to talk about governance or anything like that, we meet in a small group. That way they can express their opinions OK."


Figure 1: Community Service Among Twelfth Graders.



INTERIM FINDINGS SHOW IMPROVEMENT IN STUDENT POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND LEVELS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE

The second analysis evaluated the impact of the school reform efforts on the civic development of the students and used questionnaire data collected from the 2003 to 2006 senior classes. The interim findings suggest that while the cluster/governance programs are still in the process of being fully implemented, the initial programs are associated with improvements in the political knowledge, community service, and school-wide civic engagement of 12th graders. Another important finding is that many civic engagement indicators rose for all groups of students, not just the most engaged students. According to Dr. McIntosh, "Two measures that showed some of the largest differences over the four years of the study—political knowledge and community service—also showed increases across different categories of students."

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While the evaluation is still ongoing, initial results certainly suggest some positive civic effects. According to the authors, "These [initial] results seem to warrant optimism that this effort might develop further to include a broader segment of the students and become a tradition that gives this high school and its students an inspiring introduction to participatory democracy and fosters a collective civic identity." Complete findings are contained in CIRCLE Working Paper #58 which can be downloaded from <http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=227>. 

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