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Research Proposal:

Educational Effectiveness of Learning Communities at the Secondary Level

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**Introduction**

This research proposal focuses on the topic of learning communities, specifically at the secondary educational level. A learning community is defined as a group of people who share common values and beliefs, and are actively engaged in learning together from each other. Community psychologists such as McMillan and Cavis (1986) state that there are four key factors that defined a sense of community: “(1) membership, (2) influence, (3) fulfillment of individuals needs and (4) shared events and emotional connections”. Such communities, like our current GIE cohort, have become the staple interdisciplinary approach to higher education. However, this template for educational success has not found its way into many secondary level educational programs (i.e. high schools). The purpose of this proposal is to identify the research questions that best address the topic: “Educational Effectiveness of Learning Communities at the Secondary Level”.

**Statement of the Problem**

As an educator the subject of learning communities has interested me since my undergraduate work at West Chester University, where I was first put into a “learning community” cohort. West Chester separates their educational majors into communities, based on subject area. When I entered the secondary education program I joined a cohort of other prospective English teachers and finished the last two years of classes with these individuals. The experience was both refreshing and effective, as I encountered newfound academic success at the undergraduate level.

Currently I am an English teacher at Wissahickon High School in Pennsylvania. Last year I taught at the middle school where we had learning communities. Each grade level (roughly 400 students) was separated into three learning communities. Six teachers (two English, one Social studies, one Math, one Science, and one Special education) taught the same 130 students for the entire year. There were numerous benefits with the learning communities: student engagement, a sense of fulfillment, loyalty to the group, shared emotional connections, and academic achievement. Now, at the high school, we don't have learning communities. I'm not sure if it would be possible to have learning communities at the high school level without heterogeneously segregating the students. However, the same benefits I saw with learning communities at the middle school are needed at the high school level.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study will focus on qualitative data taken from students, educators, and administrators. The study will begin with a quantitative method in which theories or concepts are tested and followed by a qualitative method involving detailed exploration with a few cases or individuals. I will be using four methods for data collection: 1) Open-ended interview and questions, 2) Field observation and document data, 3) Statistical and text analysis, 4) Performance observation and census data. Interviews and surveys will serve as a measure of understanding how learning communities affect each facet of schooling. Test scores, graduation rates, college rates, and overall academic performance will be measured in a quantitative analysis of a variety of different schools. While statistics are available for those

schools not using learning communities, this study will aim to take new segregated data from schools using learning communities, and those using a traditional schooling setup. The hypothesis tested is: Learning communities will create a sense of “community and camaraderie” at the secondary level and will consequently raise test scores and graduation rates. This hypothesis will be measured using both the qualitative and quantitative data collected.

### **Research Questions**

The term "educational effectiveness" has long been debated between educators, administrators, politicians, parents, etc. What is educational effectiveness, and does a more "communal" way of learning create educational growth, and success?

Obviously there isn't one system that works, or everyone would be using it.

Although research has been done on learning communities, the main question posed is: why hasn't this learning system caught on at the secondary education level, especially with the focus on high-stakes testing? This question forms the basis of the research, and the following questions focus specifically on how effective learning communities can be at the secondary level: What are the benefits of learning communities in a formal educational setting? Are learning communities effective at the secondary level? What is considered a high level of academic achievement at the secondary level? If they are not effective, can they be tweaked/changed/molded to be effective at the secondary level? These questions will be addressed in a comparative study of the current literature on learning communities and educational effectiveness.

**Significance of the Study**

This proposal outlines an inclusive study on the educational effectiveness of learning communities. As the world of primary and secondary education is faced with growing amounts of scrutiny, using resources as effective as possible is a complex and paramount task. The advent of high-stakes testing, NCLB, and international comparisons has led educators, administrators, and politicians to focus on improving academic performance across all levels. If learning communities are proven to have a direct influence on students' achievement the results could produce a wave of educational change. However, most likely this study would be most beneficial to researchers and practitioners by calling for further research. In order for the field of secondary education to swing over towards "learning communities" more research needs to be done, especially qualitative studies on schools implementing smaller learning communities. This study could spark the discussion, and provide a basis for education change.

**Limitations**

The study is a bit broad in its reach, and although covering a breadth of research questions is valuable, and it may lack the depth needed for an adequate analysis. Another limitation of this study is the need for more data. The overall lack of data regarding learning communities is the reason a study like this is needed, however, it also puts the researcher in a paradox. Moreover, this proposal calls for new qualitative data to be taken which will take a lot of time to properly collect. These

time constraints will also affect the immediacy of the study, and how relevant the findings will be to the current educational situation.

## **Literature Review**

The resources reviewed are relevant studies done on the topic of “Learning Communities” in Secondary Education. Learning communities began to gain popularity at U.S. colleges and universities during the late 1980s and continued to spread throughout the 1990s. The Washington Center's National Learning Commons Directory has over 250 learning community initiatives in colleges and universities throughout the nation. As higher education gained momentum through the advent of learning communities, secondary education was slow to take notice. Today, the debate surrounding learning communities at the secondary education level, is pending on whether or not the same “communal” type of learning that is so effective at the university level, can translate to academic success at their level. The review is organized into four categories: School Reform through Learning Communities, Case Studies of U.S. Learning Communities, International Learning Communities, and SLC (Smaller Learning Community) Programs.

### **School Reform through Learning Communities**

In his 2004 article, “Wall to Wall: Implementing Small Learning Communities in Five Boston High Schools”, Allen writes: “A growing number of school districts around the country are using small school development as a central strategy for

improving high schools and overhauling the way the district itself does business. Driven by an increasing sense of urgency and frustration with reforms that fail to fundamentally change the quality of instruction or the nature of student-teacher relationships, they are transforming large, under-performing high schools into "education complexes" made up of multiple autonomous small schools under one roof" (p. 1). This accurately depicts the reason behind the implementation of learning communities in school districts across the United States. A small schools strategy provides educational leaders with an opportunity to fundamentally rethink such key areas as administrative structures, staff roles, student/teacher relationships, course sequences, subject matter, the use of time, community partnerships, and parent engagement (Allen, 2004). High-stakes testing and No Child Left Behind have instituted the "age of accountability" for U.S. school districts. Comparisons are made between neighboring districts, county schools, state-by-state, and internationally. Frankly, comparative education has made administrators rethink how their school's function and perform, and knowing the comparisons are going to be there at the end of the year has created a sense of urgency among most districts to achieve. Allen goes on to say that, "Communities undertaking a small schools strategy are developing answers to two basic issues: (1) how quickly to proceed; and (2) what process to undertake in developing and managing small schools (2004, p. 2). This report, similar to other literature, examines an assortment of strategies being undertaken by districts to plan and launch multiple small schools within the walls of large high schools. Allen's report specifically explores implementation issues that arise concerning school-level autonomies, governance,

and leadership of high school reform at the district level, and it delves into the challenges for "central office" leaders of managing a system of learning options that offers a broader range of choices for students and parents (2004).

Felner takes a slightly different approach in his 2007 article, "Creating Small Learning Communities: Lessons from the Project on High-Performing Learning Communities about What Works in Creating Productive, Developmentally Enhancing, Learning Contexts". Felner believes personalizing the school environment is a central goal of efforts to transform America's schools (2007). The greater part of the article analyzes three decades of work by the Project on High Performance Learning Communities. The findings demonstrate the potential impact and importance of the creation of "small learning environments" on student motivation, adjustment, and welfare (Felner, 2007). Conversely, DuFour (2007) writes on the impact of learning communities on educators. His article, "Professional Learning Communities: A Bandwagon, an Idea Worth Considering, or Our Best Hope for High Levels of Learning?" depicts the relationship: "The professional learning community concept does not offer a short cut to school improvement. It presents neither a program nor a recipe. It does provide a powerful, proven conceptual framework for transforming schools at all levels, but alas, even the grandest design eventually degenerates into hard work" (p. 2). Felner hits on this subject as well, voicing how the creation of small learning communities leads teachers to feel more effective, experience the climate of the school more positively, and raise their expectations of students. Felner's article "found clear gains in a range of factors relating to student motivation, achievement, and adjustment" (p. 219). Both of the



authors give a clearer picture of the benefits of learning communities in secondary education. However, the shift to learning communities does not automatically produce academic results. DuFour writes, “A school staff must focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively on matters related to learning, and hold itself accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement” (2007, p. 2). This focus on “learning” rather than “teaching” needs to be a school-wide initiative, because the success of school reform through learning communities depends on it. Dufour ends his article with this thought: A school does not become a learning community by enrolling in a program, renaming existing practices, taking the learning community pledge, or learning the secret learning community handshake; a school becomes a professional learning community only when the educators within it align their practices with learning community concepts (2007).

In Quint’s 2008 article, “Relationships, Rigor and Readiness. Strategies for Improving High Schools”, he describes three reform measures that districts have adopted: (1) Personalization (supplying individualized attention and personalized options that respond to student needs and choices); (2) Academic rigor (delivering a demanding yet accessible curriculum that engenders critical-thinking skills as well as content knowledge); and (3) Postsecondary preparation (making possible a smooth transition from high school to the world of higher education and work) by providing students the guidance and understanding they need to be admitted to and succeed in college (2008, p. 4 ). Quint’s report covers the lessons learned from three different high school reform conferences held in the summer of 2007. The conferences, sponsored by MDRC, the Council of the Great City Schools, and the

National High School Alliance, “provided a forum for practitioners to share research and practice-based lessons about helping students transition successfully into high school, stay on track to graduation, and be prepared for moving into postsecondary education, training, or the workforce” (2008, p.1). The conferences agreed that challenges faced by high school districts are not likely to dissipate, and district leaders can’t wait for rigorous evidence to take action. Three broad areas in which practitioners have experienced promising results were identified: (1) Small learning communities (SLCs) as the foundation for instructional change; (2) Teacher quality; and (3) College preparation programs. Investigation into these areas could provide valuable information to education policymakers and administrators (Quint, 2008). It is interesting to point out the inclusion of “small learning communities” to this list. While teacher quality and college preparation programs have long since been discussed as cornerstones to educational performance, smaller learning communities is a new and growing measure of school reform.

In the same way DuFour calls for educators to focus on learning, Servage (2008) applies transformative learning theory to highlight how professional development improves student learning. In “Critical and Transformative Practices in Professional Learning Communities” she argues: “Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been held up as powerful structures for teachers’ continuing professional development” (2008, p. 63). School reform through learning communities needs both sets, one for the staff, and one for the students. As Dukes points out in his article, “Conceptualizing Special Education Services in Small Learning Communities”, the ills of urban schools are well documented: “The

challenges of recruiting and retaining quality teachers, student mobility, poor conditions of school facilities, and lack of parent involvement are only a few of the issues related to urban schools. Large comprehensive high schools are a staple of many urban school districts, and the reduction in size of schools, especially large comprehensive high schools is now the focus of many school reform efforts” (2007, p. 412). However, school reform is not limited to only “urban” districts, but instead has been sweeping over the country in most large districts, whether they are urban, suburban, or rural. Dukes’ article discusses what is lost in this discussion: the consideration of special education services and how special education services can be effectively integrated into any small learning community restructuring efforts (2007). Interestingly, most of the school reform efforts of the past two decades have been on inclusion of special needs children. There is still a lot to be uncovered in the discussion of learning communities for school reform, but Servage puts it best when she writes, “The goal of such conversations is not to “find answers” or apply solutions in a technical manner, but to find questions--the sort of questions that, over time, may nudge the professional learning community closer to its potential role as a sight of transformative learning for participants” (2008, p. 64).

### **Case Studies of U.S. Learning Communities**

The majority of literature on learning communities is theoretical in nature. There hasn’t been enough cases of learning communities for a proper quantitative study, but there is a number of case studies available on U.S. Learning Communities. For the sake of the proposal I focus on four specific case studies that apply directly

to the research questions. The first is the Ohio Community Collaboration for School Improvement model. Second is the report on Philadelphia's Children Achieving reform effort. Third is the "First Things First" reform effort in Kansas City. Fourth is SRI International and the Bill and Melinda Gates attempt at a quantitative report.

Anderson-Butcher's 2008 article, "Community Collaboration to Improve Schools: Introducing a New Model from Ohio", argues that conventional school improvement models traditionally involve "walled-in" approaches. These models focus primarily on academic learning strategies in response to standards-based accountabilities. Their study believes, "although positive outcomes have been documented, expanded school improvement models such as the Ohio Community Collaboration Model for School Improvement (OCCMSI) are needed. Expanded models like this one enable educators to gain some influence over students' out-of-school time and address nonacademic barriers to learning (2008, p.162). The OCCMSI model boosted performance by re-organizing schools into smaller learning communities, focusing on teacher collaboration and planning time, and teacher-student relations. This qualitative study depicts the differences between school reform efforts, specifically stepping beyond the "walled-in" approach, and realizing learning happens outside of school, as well as inside of school.

Christman's 2001 report details what happened in Philadelphia's middle schools during the Children Achieving reform effort, a comprehensive, one-size-fits-all reform project. His article, "Powerful Ideas, Modest Gains: Five Years of Systemic Reform in Philadelphia Middle Schools", is based on research of the program over a 5-year period, and explains why reforms fell short of their intended outcomes. The

critical levers for change were content standards, the accountability system, and decentralization (Christman, 2001). Of all the case studies on learning communities, Christman's is the one to detail why a massive school reform effort – built around the idea of smaller learning communities – failed miserably. Although the article puts most of the blame on the reform leaders, and not the learning community model, it does highlight some key areas for improvement and illuminate the need for further study. Christman writes: "Smaller learning communities were intended to be an important site for instructional decision making so that education could be customized for students. They were also intended to foster closer collegial relationships among teachers. The research shows that they were unable to capitalize on the potential of smaller learning communities to be the catalysts they were intended to be" (2001, p. 46). The reform leaders did not "custom tailor" the learning communities for the specific task, and their efforts fell short. Another lesson from the study is that its not enough to specify the ends in a school reform effort. "The initial lack of guidance in Philadelphia about curriculum and pedagogy resulted in the widespread use of test preparation materials that were not integrated with the standards or the envisioned classroom curricula" (Christman, 2001, p. 59). However, over time the lessons learned from the Philadelphia reform effort will likely be the most beneficial to the field of education

Conversely, "First Things First" reform in Kansas City resulted in major improvements in academic achievement. First Things First (FTF) is a major comprehensive school reform that includes three central components: small learning communities of up to 350 students and their key teachers who remain

together for several years; a family advocate system, in which each student is paired with a staff member who meets regularly with the student, monitors his or her progress, and works with the student's parents to promote success; and instructional improvement efforts aimed at making lessons more engaging and rigorous, as well as better aligned with state and local standards (Quint, 2005). In Quint's 2005 article, "The Challenge of Scaling Up Educational Reform. Findings and Lessons from First Things First", he details the impacts of FTF by using a comparative interrupted time-series design:

In summary, the key findings are: (1) Middle and high school students in Kansas City, Kansas, registered large gains on a wide range of academic outcomes that were sustained over several years and were pervasive across the district's schools; similar gains were not present in the most comparable schools in the state. The improvements occurred over the course of eight years of substantial effort by the school district and IRRE to implement FTF as the district's central educational reform. (2) It is not yet clear whether the expansion sites, which had operated FTF for two or three years at the time of the research follow-up, will replicate the impressive findings for Kansas City (2005, p. iii).

The authors of this study tell two stories — one of success and the other of the challenges of replicating success. First, this study corroborates earlier research showing that high school and middle school academic outcomes improved

substantially in Kansas City, Kansas, the first site where First Things First was implemented. This success came after years of focused support from school district leaders and intense technical assistance from the Institute for Research and Reform in Education, the developer of the reform initiative (2005, p. xiii). It seems the difference in the case of FTF and Philadelphia, is the reform's scope and sequence, as well as the constant readjustment to the needs of the district. Quint leaves us with this thought: "It seems likely that if SLCs have a role in enhancing student achievement, it is because they serve as a setting in which discussions about individual students are interwoven with discussions of pedagogy and curriculum" (2005, p. 140). Again this author keys on the significance of learning communities at two levels, professional and student.

The SRI International's report, "High Time for High School Reform: Early Findings from the Evaluation of the National School District and Network Grants Program", attempts to do a quantitative study on school reform efforts in the United States. "The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded a 5-year program supporting the start-up of new small high schools of no more than 400 students and the conversion of larger high schools into smaller, more personalized schools or learning communities" (2003, p. 2). This report analyzes the first year and compares schools just starting the reform effort with those already in operation. Data was gathered via interviews; observations; and surveys of 12 grantee organizations, 5 model small schools, 8 start-up small schools, and 8 converting schools, and findings indicated that teacher-student relationships in small schools were more supportive than in larger schools (SRI, 2003). However, the authors point out that, "many start-

up schools were still struggling with implementing innovative instructional practices by the end of the first year, but most exhibited teacher professional community and distributed leadership” (2003, p. 3). Moreover, many issues of human and material capital in start-up schools were still unresolved. While the report only focuses on the first year, issues have already come up, and again the spotlight is on the reform leaders to adjust accordingly

### **International Learning Communities**

Literature on International Learning Communities is relegated to the United Kingdom and Canada. While these two areas are a key international comparison for U.S. schools, the literature fails to provide a breadth of studies on other non-Western nations. This “lack of research” raises questions on the effectiveness of learning communities on an international level, and whether or not the United States has begun to adopt this type of school reform only because the current model of schooling is not performing on a global scale.

O’Brien’s 2006 article, “Learning Networks for Schools: Keeping up with the Times or a Leap into the Unknown?” seeks to explore the “fit” of “the network” as an organizational form being implemented in schools in England. The article “considers current trends within education policy, pedagogy and educational technology in the context of these new service delivery models and relates these to the current interest in learning networks” (2006, p. 398). Similarly, Sammons’ 2007 article, “Participation in Network Learning Community Programmes and Standards of Pupil Achievement: Does It Make a Difference?” analyses national assessment and



examination data sets in England to test the claim that networked learning activity contributes to raising standards of attainment. The two authors focus is on the England funded National College for School Leadership push for “Network Learning Communities” (NLC). O’Brien states, “Although, on the face of things, the position of the “school network” as a structural model seems logical, there are significant tensions which suggest that the implementation and development of meaningful and high quality networks is far more challenging than the government may appreciate” (2006, p. 399). Sammons concurs when he writes, “In particular, the hypothesized link between the development of professional learning through network activity and enhanced learning outcomes leading to improvements in the measured attainments of students is lacking” (2007, p. 214). The authors seem to conclude that there is very little empirical evidence to substantiate some of the assertions made concerning the benefits of networking in terms of enhanced student learning. Their efforts combat the National College for School Leadership’s stance on NLCs, and suggest the claim has only weak empirical support and that any links are likely to be indirect and to operate in combination with other features and policies intended to promote improvement (2007, p. 233).

Correspondingly, just as the United States and United Kingdom, professional learning communities have become a focus of educational reform in New Brunswick (Williams, 2008). William’s article, “Professional Learning Communities: Developing a School-Level Readiness Instrument” argues “the implementation and sustainability of this reform is dependent on shifting many of the organizational and operational characteristics of the traditional bureaucratic model into those that

support a learning community approach in schools” (2008, p. 1). Again, the focus is on the fact that learning communities is not a “one size fits all” type of model that we have seen in past educational reform. Williams’ study examines the process for developing a school-based instrument that identifies systemic barriers that may prevent schools from becoming professional learning communities. The instrument examines culture, leadership, teaching and professional growth & development factors in an attempt to determine the readiness of a school to become a PLC (Williams, 2008). New Brunswick seems to be a catalyst in understanding how a “school-based instrument” would be particularly useful when it come to evaluating a reform that has so many variables intrinsically linked to success.

### **SLC (Smaller Learning Community) Programs**

The creation of learning communities, to bolster school reform, lead a number of reformers down different paths. The most popular and successful model is First Things First, developed by James P. Connell, a former tenured professor of psychology at the University of Rochester in New York. First Things First is followed by a litany of other smaller learning community programs, including Big Picture.

Hendrie’s 2005 article, “First Things First Shows Promising Results”, describes the basics: The model has three pillars for the high school level: (1) small, themed learning communities that each keep a group of students together throughout grades 9-12; (2) a “family advocate” system that pairs teachers with 15 to 17 students over four years; and (3) a heavy emphasis on instructional improvement (Hendrie, 2005). FTF was initially met with resistance in the Kansas

City, school district. However, the model was eventually implemented, and all five of the district's high schools were restructured into small learning communities. The model has such backers as Tom Vander Ark, executive director of education for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He has remarked, "First Things First appears to be the best model for improving existing high schools. In this urban district, where nearly four of every five students are non-white, and three out of four qualify for federally subsidized school meals, attendance is up, the graduation rate has increased, and reading scores have improved" (Hendrie, 2005, p. 3).

A slightly modified version of First Things First was implemented in five high schools in Boston, Massachusetts. The schools worked to benchmark curriculum to high standards, ensure effective instructional practice, implement multiple and ongoing assessments, create small learning communities, reduce student-teacher ratios, create respectful learning environments, and build partnerships with families, communities, businesses, and higher education (Allen, 2001). Although these districts had a "successful history of career pathways and academies", the restructured schools have improved performance across the board. One of the areas this district was struggling in, like many urban districts, was with low-income families. Allen writes: "Fueling interest in this strategy was a growing body of interest that smaller school size has positive effects on student engagement and achievement, especially students from low-income families (2001, p. 1). Smaller learning communities ability to reach all students is what made it so effective in the Boston area.

In addition to smaller learning community reform efforts, conferences have been popping up in recent years devoted specifically to this issue. Buechler's article, "Enhancing Equity and Accountability through Smaller Learning Communities in High Schools" reports on the sixth national conference of Northwest Regional Educational. The conference theme became high school reform, focusing on the role of smaller learning communities (SLCs) in enhancing equity and accountability in high schools. The Houston Independent School District hosted the conference to serve as a case study on high school reform. This proceedings summarizes six major sessions: overview of high school reform in Houston; open discussion on Houston's efforts; panel discussion of evidence from research and practice on achieving equity in high schools through SLCs; structured interview about strategies to engage parents and communities in high school reform; presentation on federal and state expectations for school accountability; and panel discussion on the meaning and consequences of the accountability movement (Buechler, 2002). In the article Kemple "identified the following characteristics of the strongest learning communities: well defined boundaries, opportunities for teachers to collaborate, support for academic advising, and a heterogeneous student population (Buechler, 2002, p. 16). This conference is just another example of the growing popularity and interest in smaller learning community programs.

As reported earlier, the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation funded a five year program supporting smaller learning communities in 21 schools. Coming out of this program were five key findings from the first year: (1) Student-teacher relationships in the small schools were deeper and more supportive, both

academically and personally, than is typical in larger, comprehensive schools; (2) Many of the small schools were still struggling with putting consistent, innovative instructional practices in place as their first year drew to a close; (3) Most start-up schools showed strong evidence of teacher professional community, and distributed leadership; (4) Starting a new small school is an enormously complex, time consuming endeavor; (5) Many issues of human and material capital in schools are still unresolved (SRI, 2003, p. 8-9).

While the term "Professional Learning Community" emerged among researchers as early as the 1960s (when they offered the concept as an alternative to the isolation in which most teachers worked), over the years, more and more schools have adopted PLCs, and the concept has gained wider acceptance in education circles. A broad range of stakeholders, from state education departments to teachers' unions, sing the idea's praises (Honawar, 2008). Following a close correlation to the development of smaller learning communities are professional learning communities. Klein's 2008 article, "Learning, Unlearning, and Relearning: Lessons from One School's Approach to Creating and Sustaining Learning Communities" describes The Big Picture's [BP] philosophy around teaching and learning, particularly as it relates to professional development. The Big Picture explores the role of professional communities of practice in the process of learning, unlearning, and relearning; and discusses the implications of data for others engaged in school reform, teacher professional development, and building communities of practice (Klein, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

The literature is broad and the majority of it is generalized. However, there are key findings, as well as questions pointing to further research. The literature does show that the idea of learning communities is not going away anytime soon, and as the interest grows, so does the amount of districts cultivating these learning communities within their walls. Ultimately, districts will have to address the question of whether the district is the best system to oversee this sector, especially given the long history of community-based organization involvement and the growing prevalence of charter management organizations with contracts to operate multiple schools (Allen, 2004, p. 19). Eventually, the success of this stage of high school reform will depend on the development of new strategies for launching and managing a system of high-quality learning options that offer a broader range of choices for students and parents (2004).

## **Research Methodology**

I chose to use an advocacy/participatory knowledge claim and mixed methods design while conducting the research for this study. Researchers of the advocacy/participatory claim have a politically biased agenda, and the research of learning communities educational effectiveness will contain an action agenda for reform. This agenda will focus specifically on the empowerment of the students, educators, and communities involved, and the findings will have the possibility to change the lives of the participants. Using a mixed methods design - instead of the narrative design most often used with an advocacy/participatory claim - will open the study to both a qualitative and a quantitative research approach. The study will

be conducted using sequential procedures in which the researcher seeks to elaborate on or expand the findings of one method with another method (Creswell 2008). The study will begin with a quantitative method in which theories or concepts are tested and followed by a qualitative method involving detailed exploration with a few cases or individuals. I will be using four methods for data collection: 1) Open-ended interview and questions, 2) Field observation and document data, 3) Statistical and text analysis, 4) Performance observation and census data. The first two methods are qualitative by nature, while the last two methods are of the quantitative approach. The rationale for this methodology is it collects both quantitative and qualitative data, it develops a rationale for mixing, and it employs the practices of both qualitative and quantitative research (Creswell 2008). Thus, the evaluation of learning communities will be backed by both individual responses and national statistics, giving the political reality a host of resources to draw from when pushing the reform agenda.

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