

Improving Student Learning & the School-Within-a-School Model

Why was the school-within-a-school model put in place almost 20 years ago?

The goal was to alleviate concerns of some parents and community members who worried that adding 9th grade to the high school made the high school too big and impersonal.

What was the intended effect of the school-within-a-school model?

The main goal was to provide students the wide range of curricular and co-curricular opportunities a larger high school offers with the feel of a smaller school.

What parts of the school-within-a-school model work well?

The connections unit office staff - including the unit principal, unit guidance counselors, and the unit secretary - make with our students is key to providing students a smaller school experience. They know who to go to when they need help or assistance.

What parts of the school-within-a-school model are not working as effectively as hoped?

Up until a few years ago, freshmen had limited room on their schedule for electives and no opportunities to take advanced or college-level coursework.

This meant they took most, if not all, of their core classes in their assigned unit, and so, especially for our freshmen, the school-within-a-school model was effective.

In the last 20 years, our Advanced Placement, dual credit, and Career and Technical course opportunities have dramatically increased for all students, including freshmen. Additionally, Kentucky's requirement that our district offer high school math and English courses to our middle school students created a situation where many 9th grade students are taking 10th grade courses. These shifts, which provide our students excellent educational opportunities, had the unintended consequence of making it nearly impossible to keep students in their units for the majority of their classes.

And so today, a student taking core classes exclusively in his/her unit is an exception rather than the rule.

What stays the same?

We still have a school-within-a-school model, organized into 3 main units. Students will continue to be assigned a unit at the beginning of their 9th grade year and stay in that unit all 4 years of high school. Current students will remain in the units they were assigned their freshman year. This allows students to continue reaping the benefits the unit system offers them.

What will be different?

Units will be organized by departments. This means the red unit will primarily be staffed by Social Studies teachers, the green unit will primarily be staffed by English & Science teachers, and the Blue unit will primarily be staffed with Math teachers.

Elective teachers will also be grouped across the units together with their department members.

What changes for our students?

Students may get a new PLT (homeroom) teacher next year. This is because many teachers will relocate to work in the same area of the building as the other members of their department.

How does this change improve student learning?

Improved and effective collaboration is key to improving student learning. Teachers in effective schools work closely together in developing and selecting instructional materials, assessments, and learning strategies. Highly collaborative practices in schools are associated with unusually strong student outcomes. Improving learning for all our students means we have to improve our professional collaborations. We can do this most effectively when the people who need to do the work together are located together in one part of the building.

Additionally, our hallways are spaces for informal learning and interactions. Students will benefit from having immediate access to multiple teachers who have expertise in different topics in the same course. It will also be easier for students to locate teachers. They will know their English teacher is in the Green 200 hallway, for example, because that's where ALL English teachers will be located.