

Sunday Oct 14 San Mateo Daily News



---

BY Konstandinos Goumenidis / Daily News

---

Neal Donohoe, left, a teacher at Hillsdale High School, reviews the math section of the SAT test with Kyle Lau, 17, on Friday in San Mateo. The school received a \$1.1 million federal grant for its innovative Smaller Learning Communities program.

---

## Smaller program has huge impact

Grant is lifeline for Hillsdale's learning communities

**By Will Oremus / Daily News Staff Writer**

In the four years since it launched the innovative Smaller Learning Communities program, San Mateo's Hillsdale High School has gone from underachiever to the honor roll.

Test scores have shot up, students from disadvantaged backgrounds have made strides and the once-troubled school is being considered for national recognition as a model success story.

All that from a program that has never been fully implemented, due to the San

Mateo Union High School District's well-documented financial problems. It is only in place full-scale for grades 9 and 10, and it doesn't apply at all to grade 12.

A five-year, \$1.1 million federal grant announced this week could change that.

"Our hope is this grant allows us the time and resources to expand the program all the way through 12th grade," Principal Jeff Gilbert said.

If that happens, it will be a step forward for the Smaller Learning Communities, or SLCs, at a time when the program is facing pressure to take a step back.

The concept, developed with guidance from Stanford University's School Redesign Network, is simple.

Take a relatively large and impersonal campus -- albeit the smallest in the district at about 1,200 students -- and divide it into three mini-schools, called "Houses." Each house has its own set of teachers, who work together to advise and guide the students even as they move up through the grades.

Besides creating more of a connection between teachers and individual students, Gilbert said the SLCs encourage teachers to work together on an integrated curriculum.

"The model of education for high schools is about 80 years old now, and it's really not the right model for our global economy. You sit in rows, you do what the teacher tells you to do, then you get up and march off to another class that's disconnected from the one before it."

At Hillsdale, said Gilbert, "We give students centralized projects to work on -- tasks that are carried across an advisory, English, history class." That helps mold students who cannot only regurgitate information but "can think, can apply knowledge to new situations, can collaborate and can defend their work."

If it all sounds a bit abstract, co-principal Cheryl Lawton offers numbers to support the program.

Since 2004, the school's API scores have gone from 688 to 774, the fastest growth among the district's six schools. Scores of students considered "socioeconomically disadvantaged" have risen from an embarrassing 443 to a more respectable 642, above the district average.

It's not just the less-well-off students who have benefited, Gilbert said. Last year, the first in which the graduating class had gone through the SLC program, Hillsdale's seniors received the most scholarships of any year on record. Three went on to Stanford, and two went to Yale.

All that good news hasn't made the program immune to the district's money troubles, however. The fact that Hillsdale requires more resources per student than other schools has provoked occasional calls for cuts there.

"Does the program work? Yes. Is it financially feasible? Not at the present time," said Kevin Nelson, a teacher at Burlingame High School.

To Nelson, it's an issue of equity. He points to estimates that the district shells out an extra \$500,000 per year for extra staffing at Hillsdale. "The one problem with the SLCs is that they cannot be replicated at other school sites without considerable financial impact."

Replicating the program could in fact be a long-term goal, said district Trustee Linda Lees Dwyer. But she agrees it's not something the district can afford anytime soon, strapped as it is with hundreds of millions in debt from construction projects.

Still, the district left the SLCs mostly intact while making millions of dollars in emergency cuts last year.

"It was considered, but if you cut back into that program, you start jeopardizing the quality of the program and diluting its power to help students," said Liz McManus, the district's business chief.

The program isn't out of the woods yet financially.

The new \$1.1 million grant will be used mainly for planning and training related to the expansion of the SLCs into the upper grades, Gilbert said. That means the funds for extra staffing may have to come from somewhere else.

McManus said the district will do what it can in the way of support. "It is incumbent on us to make sure this is a sustainable program over time. It will probably take us a few years of cuts or reallocations to get where we need to be on that."

She added, "Transforming a school from being mediocre to being a national leader in this program -- I don't know what the price is on that."

E-mail Will Oremus at [woremus@dailynewsgroup.com](mailto:woremus@dailynewsgroup.com).

## **SIZE MATTERS**

Since the first year of Hillsdale High School's Smaller Learning Communities program, its API test scores have zoomed upward, putting it on par with the district average. A snapshot of the trend:

### **All students:**

2004 2007

Hillsdale 688 774

District Avg. 737 774

### **Socioeconomically disadvantaged students:**

Hillsdale 443 642

District Avg. 532 618

### **Hispanic students:**

Hillsdale 543 651

District Avg. 590 643

Source: Hillsdale High School co-principal Cheryl Lawton