SEEING
IS BELIEVING
How Identity Contributes to the Success of Small Learning Communities
DESIGNING SCHOOLS THAT WORK FOR ALL STUDENTS
Being in an SLC is really like being in a family.

LAUSD SLC High School Student

03 Seeing Is Believing
07 Shifting to Small
10 Students Get Small
12 Building Blocks of SLC Identity
14 Identity Design Elements
16 Identity Builds Community
20 Getting There
23 A New Story Unfolds

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Architects of Achievement focuses on building bridges between educational design and architecture. Bringing knowledge of brain research, effective teaching methods, and sound educational facilities design, we partner with school districts, foundations, government agencies, charter organizations, and architectural firms to think creatively about design solutions that support higher achievement for all.
“It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.”

Henry David Thoreau

For decades, high school buildings have stood as symbols in neighborhoods across the Los Angeles Unified School District. To some they represent success: a winning football team, a debate team’s victory trophies, a drama program’s renowned performances. Others see symbols of failure: low graduation rates, unsafe environments, and unrealized dreams. But change is in the air.

Our high schools deserve a closer look.
“A symbol is an important thing. That is why we chose an Aztec eagle. It gives pride. When people see it they know it means dignity.”

Cesar Chavez
Across the District, school leaders and educators are working together to create environments where all students are known, challenged, nurtured, held accountable, and ultimately guided to success. Small Learning Communities (SLCs) of 350 to 500 students are emerging to take the place of large comprehensive high schools. Stand-alone small schools are being established. New high schools are being built with SLCs at the core of their design. And existing high schools with thousands of students are being converted into complexes with discrete SLCs—each with a distinct educational focus. The fundamental shift from large to small holds great promise for improved student achievement. Community partners are stepping up to support the work, many of them becoming involved in their local high schools for the first time.

To support this transformation, SLCs are being physically located in contiguous zones—shared, familiar environments sized to fit a community’s students, teachers, and staff. Satellite administrative offices within each zone bring support to its students. This represents a major shift in our schools’ learning environments and is contributing to the success of the SLC movement in LAUSD.

An important opportunity remains: for each SLC to communicate its distinct focus to students, staff, parents, and the community.

SHIFTING TO SMALL
Strong SLC identities (or “brands”) can provide a compelling rallying point on school campuses to make the change apparent—to those in the school and in the surrounding community.

Clear brand identity will communicate the location and focus of individual SLCs situated on a larger campus. Implemented in a coherent manner across campus, branding provokes curiosity, invites conversation, and builds a coalition of advocates who are committed to each SLC’s ambitious promise: improved outcomes for students.

The most significant benefit of SLC branding will be to our most important constituents: the students themselves. SLCs can help build community and continuity in our students’ lives. Each SLC’s brand identity will provide a visual reminder of our commitment to their success.

For students, seeing is believing.

COMMUNICATING CHANGE

To ignite buy-in for the small schools movement, people need to see the change and experience the transformation first hand.

FINDING INSPIRATION

An SLC’s visual identity should reflect what makes it unique and distinctive and must resonate with students, staff, parents, and the community at large.

Visual identity can vividly express a Small Learning Community’s academic focus and its unique culture. Logos, shapes, colors, and fonts combine to make a visual symbol of the SLC identity.

The final test should be whether the idea that drives the design is relevant, lasting, and inspirational to those who belong to the SLC. A key consideration should be the students.

What attributes do they believe make their SLC unique?

In some cases, an architectural or symbolic element can become the inspiration for the main shape of SLC logos, which are then expressed individually with each SLC identity, through distinctive variations.

In developing distinct logos for each SLC, school leaders may worry that campus-wide pride will be lost. Through the use of unifying shapes, complementary graphic styles, coordinated color palettes, and common fonts, SLC identities can simultaneously distinguish themselves from others on campus and work together as a system to complement a school’s heritage.

EXPRESSING CAMPUS UNITY

A coordinated system of SLC identities can express the unity of the campus and connect SLCs to their shared campus heritage.
Students are bombarded by high-impact communications each day. As ready participants in popular culture, they know and appreciate good design and use it as a filter when they make choices about the products they buy and experiences they engage in.

With iconic brand identity placed on banners, signage, apparel, and stationery, the prominent display of SLC identities can speak volumes about the transformation within a school’s walls. Such communicative power demands thoughtful, professional design and execution.

Professional design compels not only students, but parents, teachers, and others in the community. People in this broad audience routinely judge an organization by the quality of its visual presentation and the clarity of its essential message. Effective and consistent brand identity application can signal that SLCs are relevant, vital, academically-focused environments worthy of student and parent engagement.

Students choose to identify with visual symbols of companies and causes: brands that engage their desire and curiosity. Their school environment should be a community they want to be a part of.
A Small Learning Community’s identity can vividly express and symbolize its academic focus and unique culture.

Schools may be tempted to use traditional athletic mascots as a starting point for SLC identity. Such mascots clearly have their place on high school campuses, helping to rally students and alumni around shared traditions. Yet these mascots do not communicate academic purpose or distinguish one SLC from another on a shared campus. SLC identities should strive to invite the celebration of academic effort and distinction—qualities that differ from the pride of athletic tradition.

Some of the most effective logos consist of simple forms that are meaningful but distinctive. When professionally designed, logos can indicate a commitment to learning and to permanence in ways that clip art images or copies of popular commercial logos cannot. Each part of the logo contributes to its clear communication. Parts that make up the whole logo include shape, typography, symbols and color.

SOUTH GATE HIGH SCHOOL
Four years ago, teachers at South Gate High School made the decision to transition into Small Learning Communities, which now include eight theme-based career academies. Identity development and usage have been integral to this process. They have begun to see early benefits and some students describe South Gate as a “college bound culture.” The school’s unified, professional SLC logos have reinforced this new focus and given visual expression to this new culture.
When combined, these elements comprise SLC identity, which can be displayed on signage and banners, added to letterhead and other communications, printed on apparel, and applied to architectural details within the SLC environment.

Shape
A shared geometric outline can provide a unifying container or frame for each SLC’s unique symbols. It can also provide a common placement for the name of the campus and the name of each SLC. When selecting a shape, consider both atypical and common shapes, the amount of information that needs to be organized within, and the desired impression when the logo is viewed from a distance.

Typography
Fonts have a unique power to convey personality and attitude. They can appear formal or informal, stylized or simple, modern or traditional. Sometimes the most appropriate font relates to the history or architectural style of the campus, such as traditional, Art Deco, or modern. Fonts should be selected for legibility, professional tone, visual relevance to each SLC’s theme, and coherence throughout the campus.

Symbols
Symbols or icons contained within the logo’s shape can be powerful indicators of the academic focus of the SLC. Icons can be literal interpretations of the school’s emphasis (a medical symbol for a medically-themed SLC for example) or they can be more metaphorical in character. A professionally rendered, refined icon can make all the difference in the credibility and lasting impression the logo makes on its audience.

Color
Colors have deep symbolic meaning. When SLCs adopt a set of colors that work well together, they contribute to campus unity. Complementary colors are particularly important when two or three SLCs on a year-round campus rotate in and out of the same contiguous space. Traditional school colors may be incorporated into SLC color palettes to forge a link to campus tradition but should not necessarily become the lead colors in the SLC palette. Once SLC colors are selected, their consistent application provides visual coherence and helps to enrich the identity of the campus and its component SLCs.

Logo
Logos are the cornerstone of SLC identity, so their visual strength, professional rendering, and clear legibility at different sizes are important. With consistent implementation, the logo can build visibility for each SLC and foster community with its neighbors.
The elegant display of SLC identity communicates a powerful idea: smaller, more personalized learning environments are taking the place of large, impersonal, comprehensive high schools. SLCs are being physically located in contiguous zones—shared, familiar environments sized to fit a community’s students, teachers, and administrative staff. The physical environment where students learn is the most powerful place for expression of the identity—and affords the best opportunity to signify change.

When logos, fonts, and colors are established, these elements become rich assets that can be applied in countless ways. Adopting an identity that has meaning and looks professional will build momentum for each SLC “brand.” Applying a set of identities consistently throughout campus will express unity and commitment.

Through the use of unifying shapes, complementary graphic styles, coordinated color palettes, and common fonts, SLC identities can simultaneously distinguish themselves from others on campus and work together as a system to honor a school’s heritage.

**Banners**

Banners are a vivid and cost-effective way to mark outdoor space. Hung together at a school’s entry or separately in SLC courtyards, banners provide all SLCs with a common, professional presence and promote campus harmony.

Compared to other kinds of signage, digitally printed banners are easy to remove and replace. This flexibility is particularly useful in LAUSD’s year-round schools or other settings where SLCs may relocate or share space. Banners usually require the installation of appropriate hardware—whether flagpoles in courtyards or brackets mounted to overhangs or multi-story buildings—to increase stability and decrease potential vandalism.

**Architectural applications**

SLC identity elements can be used to mark architectural space in many creative ways. SLC logos can be applied as decals or placards to the doors or windows of individual classrooms and offices. Large-scale logo murals can enhance stairwells or walls.

Color can simply and creatively extend identity. Painting architectural details (such as doors, door frames, lockers, columns, and poles) with SLC colors can be coordinated with a school’s modernization or painting programs. SLC colors can also be chosen for vinyl floor and paving tiles, carpeting, furniture, and the fabric of shade structures to further unify contiguous space.

**Branded communications**

Looking beyond buildings and physical space, SLCs can prominently display their identities on SLC communications and apparel. These can include letterhead, visual symbols let students know that their learning and achievement matter.
business cards, brochures, posters, t-shirts, and other printed materials. Many SLCs commission websites, presentation templates, and other electronic assets, all of which can be designed with SLC logos, colors, and fonts as integral components.

Directional kiosks
Directional signage can simplify wayfinding, and reinforce the reconfiguration of a traditional campus into small schools. Kiosks can be strategically placed at points of entry and along major circulation routes to help students, teachers, staff, and parents find their way around campus. Signage can strengthen campus unity and pride by displaying fonts, coordinated color palettes, and graphic styles of individual SLC identities.

Architectural signage
A statement of permanence, architectural signs create a formal entry point to an SLC environment. Signs can be freestanding or mounted to exterior walls. To communicate equity among SLCs, schools can adopt an integrated signage program that gives equal weight and prominence to each SLC sign. In all forms, new architectural signage should blend with existing campus architecture.

Display of student work
SLC branding efforts ultimately should stand for an SLC’s learning goals. When effective, they draw people in and invite them to participate in the academic environment. Such identity is buoyed by the purposeful display of student work, evidence that learning is the core focus.

The ongoing and professional display of student work in key locations throughout an SLC helps to generate excitement about, interest in, and understanding of the teaching and learning that is going on within it. Showcasing student work celebrates accomplishment and continually raises the bar for good work.

Many campuses have existing display cases, which can be distributed among SLCs and utilized for the display of academic work and visual art. Other display options include inexpensive picture frames, shallow picture rails, and fiberboard panels—all of which encourage frequent updating. Any display mechanism can employ the identity elements of its SLC to physically and graphically connect student work to that SLC.
A systematic approach for creating SLC identity

The process of creating SLC identities will be unique for each school in LAUSD but should involve a systematic approach to attain thoughtful, professional end results.

The SLC initiative approved by the LAUSD Board of Education releases bond monies for specific campus improvements to create smaller learning environments in existing comprehensive high schools. These improvements include design and application of SLC identity elements.

All SLC campuses should embark upon a branding process aimed at fostering a unified, professional, and academic tone across a campus.

**Step 1**

**Logo and identity development**

As part of a school’s SLC development phase, a graphic designer could work with SLC teams to develop logos reflecting their educational vision. Teams may include administrators, teachers, students, and others. In cases where SLCs have already created logos, the designer can work with teams to refine existing designs and maximize their visual impact. In addition to helping design individual SLC logos, the designer helps ensure that all logos work together in a unified way. As an integral participant, the principal will ultimately approve the completed identity system, which is one component of the school’s SLC implementation plan.

**Step 2**

**Application design**

Once SLC identities are designed and approved by the principal, SLC teams can plan immediately to create t-shirts, paper communications, websites, and other applications.

For facilities applications on existing campuses, a design architect can specify school-approved identity applications, such as the design of banners and kiosks, as well as their placement and installation on the campus.

**Step 3**

**Installation**

Banners, signage, and other facilities elements should be installed according to established guidelines.
Small Learning Communities hold tremendous promise for LAUSD students. At its core, the SLC movement is about achievement—achievement that research argues can be improved when students are known, supported, and challenged to succeed. Often, school buildings tell a different story—a story of overworked personnel, underfunded initiatives, and a neglectful bureaucracy.

A coordinated and professional identity development program, as part of a school’s overall transformation into small learning communities, can powerfully rewrite the script. As students are surrounded by graphic representations of our deepest intellectual hopes for them, new stories will emerge: stories of faith, commitment, and ultimately, accomplishment. SLC identity helps signify the change in these schools. Seeing is believing!

In classrooms across Los Angeles, SLC teachers tirelessly remind students of their core focus: “Achievement matters, and your achievement matters to me.”

“A NEW STORY UNFOLDS”

“Students transition from class to class with ease. As they walk down the hall, they are greeted by teachers who know their names and reassured by the identity of their academy. They know that they belong here.”

Eli Azrouel
Lead Teacher, Architecture Academy SLC
South Gate High School
Being in an SLC is really like being in a family."

LAUSD SLC High School Student

The Architects of Achievement focuses on building bridges between educational design and architecture. Bringing knowledge of brain research, effective teaching methods, and sound educational facilities design, we partner with school districts, foundations, government agencies, charter organizations, and architectural firms to think creatively about design solutions that support higher achievement for all.
SEEING IS BELIEVING

How Identity Contributes to the Success of Small Learning Communities