"Flying the Plane While We Build It": A Case Study of an Early College High School

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In a global society, the traditional American high school is seen as a fragmented, alienating system stalled by an adherence to an outmoded transmission-oriented model of teaching and learning. Thus far, educational reform efforts have fallen short of meeting the challenges of an increasingly diverse, technological, and economically-entwined world through innovative development of more thinking-oriented, student-focused learning communities (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Over the past two decades, the perceived failed promise of the comprehensive high school to effectively educate America's youth has generated a national interest in high school reform (Goodlad, 1984; Kuo, 2010; Oakes, 1985; Smeardon & Borman, 2009; Wasley, Fine, Gladden, Holland, King, Mosak, & Powell, 2000). One such area of reform is a movement to restructure high schools as small learning communities centered around unique curriculum and state-of-the-art teaching (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001). Financial support from organizations like the Annenberg Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation, and, most notably, the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI) launched by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, have helped push the small school model from margin to center, and with it, a host of empirical studies to examine the impact on student academic achievement.

Empirical studies examining small learning communities are important in developing a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the early college high school model and in developing policy for improvement and sustainability. Also important to our understanding of the ECHSI is qualitative research focusing on one or several small learning communities. Qualitative studies can deepen the breadth of the quantitative record as they illuminate the lived experiences, perspectives, and practices of the students and teachers who make up these learning communities. Qualitative approaches provide insight into the daily challenges and successes as they are experienced and understood in the small school context.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to offer on-the-ground insight into student and teacher relationships and challenges at one early college high school. We use Noddings' ethics of care as a conceptual framework to explore factors that support and constrain student and teacher development and success within one such small learning community. We conclude with several key issues and implications worthy of further consideration and investigative research of early college high schools.

The Value of Small Learning Communities

In a basic sense, small learning communities are rooted in ethics of care, particularly in terms of a focus on close, reciprocal relationships between students and teachers and the

personalization of the school environment. Noddings' (1995a) ethics of care contends that the primary educational aim should be to encourage "the growth of competent, caring, loving, and lovable people" (p. 24), not in the superficial sense of caring as "a warm and fuzzy feeling that makes people kind and lovable" (1995b, p. 676), but as a morally, ethically, and intellectually defensible act.

The argument for small, personalized learning communities as environments that also promote equitable gains in academic achievement is reflected in the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Carnegie Foundation's work, which focuses on more personalized teaching and learning (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004; Sizer 1992), the Annenberg Foundation's emphasis on reducing students' alienation in schools (Chicago Annenberg Challenge, 1994), and the Child Development Project's focus on restructuring schools to promote caring communities (Developmental Studies Center, 1998). According to a growing body of research, small learning communities promote more equitable access to academically challenging courses (Berstein, Millsap, Schimmenti, & Page, 2010; Bryk, Lee and Holland, 1993; French, Atkinson, & Rugen, 2007; Gregory & Smith, 1987; Meier, 1995; Werblow & Duesbery, 2009) and more equitable gains in achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Lee & Smith, 1995; Lee, Smith, Perry & Smylie, 1999). Research also shows that small learning communities provide favorable working environments with greater opportunities for teacher collaboration and innovation and lower student dropout rates (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Wichterle, 2002; George & Aronson, 2003; Pittman & Haoughwout, 1987; Steinberg, Johnson, & Pennington, 2006). Perhaps one of the best known small learning community models is the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI) whichinspired the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to commit significant resources[1] and innovative research efforts to investigate structures and strategies that increase student achievement and teacher quality (Stanford Research Institute International & American Institutes of Research, 2002).

The ECHSI is particularly interested in serving student populations traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary institutions—i.e., racial and ethnic minority students, low-income students, first-generation college students and English language learners—by offering rigorous curriculum and opportunities to earn college credit as part of their high school education. The ECHSI is built upon a framework of rigor, relevance, and relationships: the 3Rs (see Table 1). This framework is characterized by personalization, respect and responsibility, high expectations, performance-based decision-making, use of technology, common focus, and time to collaborate (American Institutes of Research & Stanford Research Institute International, 2003). It represents a foundational set of values for all early college communities. Taken together, these attributes are assumed to make early college high schools (ECHS) "inviting places where students and adults know each other well and pursue a common mission based on high academic achievement for all students and where professional community is collaborative and student focused" (American Institutes of Research & Stanford Research Institute International, 2005, p. 14). Several studies have demonstrated that small, more intimate schools founded on a close, supportive, and respectful school environment are a strong precursor to student success and strong professional communities (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Coalition of Essentials Schools, 2000; Lee et al., 1999; Sebring & Bryk, 2000). According to Shear, Means, House, Georges, Joshi, Smerdon & Shkolnik (2008), these attributes make early colleges "places that combine rigor in the academic program of every student (not just those in an honors or gifted track) with relevance to their interests and potential career choices, supported by positive relationships that can inspire students both academically and personally" (p. 1).

Because ECHSs are organized around themes of caring that promote trust, support, sharing, cooperation, and growth, the focus of this paper is on relationships. Relationships in the

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1 As of 2006, the Gates Foundation had invested over 110 million dollars in the Early College Initiative.

Table 1: Key Characteristics of the ECHSI 3R Framework

Rigor	Relevance	Relationships
• Challenging instruction, rigorous coursework, and high expectations for all students	• Variety of learning opportunities, such as community service learning, in-depth projects, personalized learning opportunities	• Strong, supportive teacher-student and peer relationships
• Early, focused academic intervention for low-performing students	• Opportunities to take college courses and participate in college services and activities	• Professional and resources/services-based relationships between ECHS and college/ university partner
	• Meaningful opportunities for linking curriculum to personal experiences and future work world	• Professional learning communities among administrators and teachers and across subject areas

context of this study speak primarily to the close and supportive bonds between and among teachers and students but may also be extended to include the relationships between the early college high school (ECHS) and its school district as well as the community college or four-year university with which it partners. As the demand for greater standardization and testing continues, it is especially important to consider how caring "as a continuous search for competence" (Noddings, 1995a, p. 24) might counterbalance the emphasis on measurable student and teacher performance.

Hudson Early College High School (HECHS): A Case Study
In an effort to better understand student and teacher perspectives of how an ethics of care supports and constrains teaching and learning in an early college high school, we piloted a small case study at Hudson Early College High School[2] (HECHS) located in Southeastern North Carolina. Established in 2007, HECHS partners with a four-year state university and is housed on the perimeter of the university's main campus. This pilot is part of a longitudinal-empirical study examining student performance and student, teacher, and staff experiences at HECHS. Because of the preliminary nature of this study and the small sample size, our intent is not to make definitive, generalizable statements regarding early college high schools. Rather, we offer a snapshot of how an ethic of care, particularly within the ECHSI 3Rs frame-work, is perceived and enacted by HECHS students and teachers.

Description of HECHS
HECHS offers a rigorous roster of honors classes (see Table 2). The school does not provide opportunities for extracurricular activities, but students are required to engage in extensive service learning projects of their choosing until graduation.

As is typical of many high schools in the U.S., the racial demographics of faculty and staff at HECHS are not reflective of the student body. At the time of this study, the school principal, all 11 teachers, and one of the two career counseling staff were European American. The school had one African American career counselor. HECHS also has a university liaison that serves as

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2 Hudson Early College High School is a pseudonym.

Table 2: Hudson Early College High School Demographics and Courses

Student Demographics	Staff Demographics	Course Offerings
Total # of Students: 198	Principal (European American)	• English I, II, III and IV, Latin I & II
136 European American	11 Teachers (European American)	• Biology, Chemistry I & II, Earth and Environmental Studies
62 (includes African American, Latino, Asian, Bi- and Multiracial)	2 Career Counselors (1 European American, 1 African American)	• World History, Civics, U.S. History, African American Studies
% Free/Reduced lunch: 33%		• Algebra I & II, Geometry, Trigonometry, Pre-Calculus & Calculus

an interpreter of university policy and processes; as a bridge between HECHS and university faculty who teach HECHS dual enrollment students; and as an advocate for HECHS efforts at the university level. HECHS enjoys a mutually beneficial partnership with its university partner and the university's school of education. HECHS students begin their dual enrollment in university classes in their junior year. Students typically take 12–15 credit hours and attend class with regularly enrolled college students. Each cohort enrolled in university courses is assigned a HECHS faculty member who maintains regular contact with students through regular meetings to monitor and support their progress and provide assistance in such areas as studying, time management, organization, and navigating the new college environment.

Data Collection
A descriptive single case study (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003) examining factors that facilitate and constrain teaching and learning was appropriate for in-depth examination of complex phenomena and contexts (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Merriam, 1998). Data in the form of individual and focus group interviews for teachers and students were collected over a three-month period, April - June 2009. Rapport with teachers, staff, and some students was already established through previous research collaborations, making it easier to communicate with the HECHS community. Prior to beginning interviews, the research team met with the school's principal and university liaison to identify key areas of inquiry important to the school community and to share research ideas for understanding student and teacher development at HECHS. The team also met with the entire teaching and counseling staff during a regular staff meeting to share ideas, address questions and concerns, and invite participation in the research.

A total of five teachers representing each subject area (except for math) participated in individual interviews. Teacher and staff interviews ranged from 1-hour to 2-hours. A total of 16 HECHS students participated in this pilot: 6 African American and 10 European American students. Twelve students were interviewed in three separate focus groups each comprised of 4 students. The four remaining students—3 African American and 1 European American—opted to only participate in individual interviews. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Data were analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software tool.

Data Analysis
Analytic procedures included analysis of student and teacher interviews and student focus group transcripts. We then constructed categories (Merriam, 1998) using a care perspective and the ECHSI 3Rs framework, with a specific focus on relationships. An iterative coding process allowed us to create matrix displays (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton 2002) from

which we compared the coded data for patterns and analyzed themes using the four components of the care perspective: (1) modeling – caring by example; (2) practice – opportunities for practicing care and reflecting on that practice; (3) dialogue – a method by which attempts to care are discussed and evaluated as a community, and (4) confirmation – affirming and encouraging the best in others (Noddings, 1988).

Findings
Two main themes emerged from the data: 1) Caring Relationships and 2) Teacher Constraints. Each of these two themes contained several specific codes. Once themes and their related codes were member-checked, we shared our findings with key informants in the school and factored their insights into the final analysis (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Caring Relationships
The theme, *caring relationships* includes two types of relationships: (1) those based on trust, competence and growth are embodied in the affiliative and intellectual relationships between teachers and student and peer relationships and (2) relationships based on continuity and support, such as those between HECHS and its university partner. Study findings suggest that the theme of caring relationships can also be extended to include the relationship between the early college high school (ECHS) and the districts in which they reside, although these relationships are more aligned with teacher challenges and constraints. Key relationships in this theme are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Caring Relationships
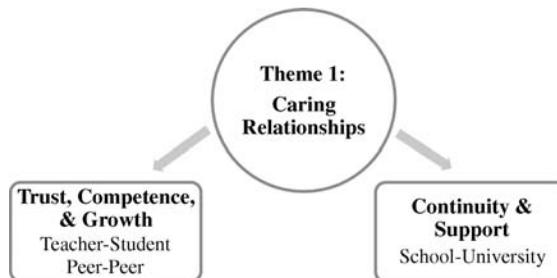
Trust, Competence, and Growth: Teacher – Student Relationships
Teacher-student relationships at HECHS are characterized by personal, social, and academic relationships between students and their teachers. Educators work to foster relationships and environments where students know they are cared for and about and where students can learn to care (Noddings, 2002). Respondents described relationships between and among teachers and students in the school as "close," "friendly," and "like family." Student participants described relationships as consisting of "mutual respect," "responsibility," "common focus," and "high expectations." One 10th grade student described the teachers:

> Teachers here really care. They are comfortable with us since they have been with us for two years. Unlike in regular H.S. where you really don't get to know all your teachers, here teachers know us by name, they know our personalities and we know theirs. We know what to expect from them. They are really loving. (Student focus group interview, May 25, 2009)

Students indicated that teachers require them to actively participate in class thereby ensuring that even shy students are noticed, connected, and cared for. Because HECHS students and teachers stay together for two years, affiliative needs are met, allowing teachers to relax the need for control and to incorporate relevant learning opportunities based on their knowledge of students. These affiliative relationships also provide students with a sense of safety,

belonging, and willingness to take risks in their learning (Rabin, 2008). A student in a focus group described one of the teachers:

> Take Mr. N., for instance. He is really interesting because he is like the solid rock in all of the confusion because when weird things happen, he is really calm and collected when no one is, and he will say this one thing that will lighten the moment. Like in calculus, which was very challenging to many students, he was very encouraging. He connects with us really well. (Student interview, May 26, 2009)

Other students echoed the same message that teachers at HECHS "are not just interested in you the student but they are interested in you as a person." Teachers valued students by showing interest in them, listening to them, communicating high expectations of them and engaging in personalized and caring conversations such as "What is bothering you," "How is your day going?" "Has your mama recovered?" In demonstrating an ethic of caring for students as complex, moral beings, HECHS teachers in this study illuminate the important link between caring and high expectations. Noddings (1995a, 1995b) views this link between feeling and thinking as opportunities for teachers to demonstrate caring through curriculum choices and instructional strategies that contribute to the intellectual and personal growth of the student. Caring relationships and caring curriculum are seen as an important element in fostering students' academic and intellectual growth.

Teacher participants also referenced strong relationships with students. Jillian (a pseudonym), a veteran English teacher and one of the founding teachers at HECHS explained the benefits of getting to know her students:

> You get to know them very well. You get to understand their personality, what drives them, what makes them tick…I think that with understanding different individuals like that, you know what you can expect out of them, you know when they are slacking, and you know when there's truly issues going on. I think it is very beneficial in that you are not guessing what is going on in their life. And with the ones who have a really hard time staying focused, you can direct them on a constant basis. (Teacher Interview, April 7, 2009)

Another teacher found that the ability to remain with her students through two years was important to building strong, caring relationships.

> I looped with them, so I get to have them again this year. I will continue to keep in touch with them through their years at the University. So I get to see the whole product, which is awesome. You don't get to see that a lot in a regular, traditional high school. So in that respect, it's wonderful. You get to know your kids, see their personalities, their ups, and their downs. (Teacher interview, April 7, 2009)

Academic and personal relationships between teachers and students occurred beyond the confines of a classroom through the use of social networking sites such as Facebook. Teachers used these sites to check in with students, offer support, and clarify class readings and assignments. Students used the social networking tools to work on group projects, complete homework, and share information about their service learning experiences in their communities. Relationships were highly personalized and contributed to a culture of academic and social engagement and achievement. It was not uncommon for teachers and students to attend movies or other social and cultural events together; teachers and counselors valued their roles as confidante and mentor to many of their students both inside and outside of school.

Trust, Competence, and Growth: Peer-Peer Relationships
Study findings show that HECHS nurtures and models a culture that encourages strong and positive peer relationships among students, which promotes socially appropriate behavior and fosters academic engagement and general learning experiences. Students shared that their relationships were characterized by high expectations of each other, working together

to complete class projects, and encouraging each other to attend school regularly and develop academic resiliency in the face of challenges. The four key components of a care perspective—modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation were evident in student responses and a school structure that included looping and student cohorts. The looping academic structure at HECHS contributed to students' perception of themselves as a family, as revealed by one HECHS sophomore: "Here, we are like family. It is a small school. Everybody knows everybody. It's kind of like, there's always someone to turn to for homework or even personal issues." Peer support in academics was also captured by other students:

> With the variety of my friends, if I wasn't doing well in a subject, at least one of them would tell me and I would casually go to them and ask for help to explain certain concepts and that is how I would cash on my friendship. The help is reciprocal. I help them too in what I am good at. (Student focus group interview, June 3, 2009)

In terms of holding each other to high expectations, one student stated,

> My friends here are my lifeline. They don't keep quiet when I score less than an A grade. They will talk about it until you get it. We hold each other so highly that sometimes teachers say that we over think. Our eyes are set for college and the time to start is here. (Student interview, June 4, 2009)

Peer relationships, in this context, promote a safe learning environment, positive academic and social support, and a sense of belonging where students support and push each other towards high academic achievement. Students have opportunities to practice and reflect on their attempts to care, as seen in the high expectations and support mentioned in student peer comments. The notion of reciprocity is important, for as students are cared for by their teachers, they reciprocate in their efforts toward competence and in their support of peers. Goldstein argues that teaching and learning that occurs in relationship with valued others serves as a point of connection between feeling and intellect, and moves the "conception of care as a moral stance that leads to ethical action" (as cited in Rabin, 2008, p. 3).

Continuity and Support: School-University Relationships
Findings also suggested that the relationship between HECHS and its university partner shared important HECHS fundamental principles of both care and the 3Rs. For instance, participant teachers expressed a commitment to see all HECHS students do well in the university. When we inquired about this commitment, one teacher said:

> I will really feel guilty if my students flunk in Dr. D's class. I respect a number of professors here at the university and for my students to excel in university courses, I will feel really good. If they fail, it is like I will be guilty of something I am partly responsible for. (Teacher interview, May 23, 2009)

This statement represents teacher participants' support for student learning. They held all students to the highest expectations, cultivated caring relationships with them and their families and made learning interesting and challenging. This is helpful for motivating students to "stay on task and keep [their] eyes on the ball," as they transition from the high school to the university environment. Resources at the school such as study halls, after-hours teacher tutoring programs, graduation coaches, accountability partners, and mentors link to university resources that include the library, computer labs, and academic support services such as the writing and math centers, and social and cultural events held on the university campus. These resources accessed within the framework of the school-university relationships provide an important structure of support for HECHS students and teachers and are essential to the continuity of the school itself, as noted by one HECHS teacher:

> Anything that we are lacking because we are not in a traditionally large high school, we have been able to compensate – even more than compensate – make it better than it would

be by the availability of different things here at the university. So that partnership is a big facet…it [the university] has been throughout our whole existence, a really important link. (Teacher interview, June 7, 2009)

Although not examined in this study, the close and supportive relationship HECHS faculty and students enjoy with members of the university school of education may also be considered a valuable and valued part of the school-university relationship. In addition to teaching some of HECHS' dual enrollment students, university education faculty regularly volunteer as reviewers for HECHS student capstone projects and attend school activities. Several faculty members, including the authors of this paper, enjoy personal and professional relationships with some faculty and students. Combined, these features create high expectations and support a college-bound culture for historically underrepresented students, as well as providing access and exposure to engage in important social, cultural, and community opportunities and issues. A tangential feature of the school-university relationship is the exchange of information between HECHS administration and faculty and university partners. The university liaison's role in this process is crucial in translating university policy and expectations and articulating the interests and needs of HECHS. This reciprocal exchange provides opportunities for sharing and conducting research to support and inform HECHS and ECHSI efforts.

Teacher Challenges
The challenges faced by early college high school teachers mirror those faced by their colleagues in traditional schools; both teach classrooms of diverse learners with varying levels of academic preparation; both experience the constant pressure of high stakes testing; and both must navigate a shifting and frequently inflexible educational bureaucracy. Given the highly personalized nature of the early college and the expected high level of independent innovation and motivation of its teachers, these challenges may be magnified for teachers in an early college. The three areas characterizing the theme of teacher challenges illustrated in Figure 2 provide insight into HECHS teachers' perspectives of the challenges and unique opportunities offered by their position as key stakeholders and committed actors in student and school success.

Figure 2: Teacher Challenges
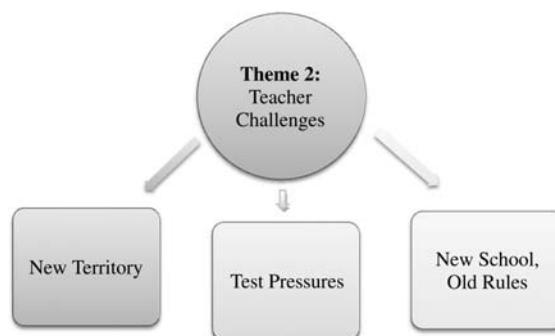
New Territory: Flying the plane while we build it
At the time of this study, HECHS was beginning its third year as an early college and its second year housed in its own physical plant located on the perimeter of its university partner's campus. During its founding year, however, HECHS was temporarily housed in a restructured wing of a local elementary school and was struggling to build its staff and recruit students. Several other early colleges had already been established in North Carolina the year before HECHS was launched, and although these schools provided a model for the newly

formed HECHS staff, "the framework did not really prepare us for how everything was going to work with the University here, because every school is different" (Teacher interview, May 23, 2009). During this transition period, HECHS staff embarked on a crash course in learning and meeting ECHSI expectations. At the same time, they also had to attend to understanding district and university rules and expectations. As one HECHS teacher stated,

> We had to assimilate and make all these work together, because some of them have different agendas and we had to make sure the big picture was on the same page… that was a year of struggles trying to get all these plans for the future. (Teacher interview, May 27, 2009)

Teachers were fully involved in the implementation process of "this new baby," and in the words of the principal and echoed by several teachers, "We are flying this plane while we build it." As an HECHS veteran teacher stated, "our focus is to make sure that our kids have done well here and in college." At odds with teachers' "can do" energy, findings denote that tensions existed in the collaboration between new and veteran teachers.

A teacher who was relatively new to the school described what she considered tracking of students: "during senior project, they put a lot of lower achieving kids in one class and asked a new teacher to take over." Another new teacher shared her frustrations finding any meaningful collaboration with veteran teachers: "there are good teachers here, but they are not really willing to share their experience or things they have with other teachers." This was supported by a veteran teacher who also is a proponent of movement toward greater teacher collaboration.

> I think there's a faction of prima donnas that are very afraid to share, but I see that's breaking down a little bit. I see the English teacher coming down and talking to me and me going down to the other English teachers and trying to establish a little camaraderie and mutual respect, so that's what I'm trying to do…we are working for the betterment of our kids. (Teacher interview, April 7, 2009)

Several of the founding teachers interviewed shared that their practice was enhanced through collaborations across subject area but emphasized that these collaborative activities were neither widespread nor a formalized part of the teaching environment. Despite a stated commitment to the reforming promise of relationships within a small learning community, the growing pains of HECHS may well be attributed to a traditional school administrative and policy structure that failed to support teachers' efforts to build relationships of care and trust (Noddings, 1995b). Establishing opportunities for teachers to develop caring relationships is critical to student engagement. Research by Newmann et al. (2001) demonstrates that as teachers collaborate, they build instructional coherence, an important foundation for supporting student achievement. It is possible that tensions between teachers have the potential to constrain meaningful collaborations and compromise gains made on student engagement and achievement. Relationships forged in the midst of resource constraints and a collective learning curve helped HECHS teachers navigate the difficult terrain of new territory. Teachers expressed genuine care about their new venture and were supported through the collaborative role of guidance/career counselors in linking real-world learning and service opportunities to academic content.

Test Pressure
Another key point of tension expressed by teacher participants was the focus on testing and test preparation. Teachers overall felt undue pressure to keep test scores up, and newer teachers especially tended to focus on test scores and test preparation. In contrast, veteran teachers felt that if good teaching were happening, test scores would bear this out. The teachers interviewed in this study continually expressed their commitment to student learning, but their comments here reveal a more complex view of achievement and learning than those prescribed by state-mandated tests. One veteran teacher expressed

her frustration with what she felt was an overemphasis on testing imposed from the district and state level:

> Test scores, test scores, test scores! To be honest with you, that's all schools look at. And that's all well and good, but you are not looking at your students and what they are learning and if they are being globally competitive, what have you done? —Oh, I got great test scores. That to me has been the biggest problem with the early colleges, is that, you have this wonderful opportunity, but it's under constraints, and nobody's willing to look beyond that! (Teacher interview, May 27, 2009)

Since the ECHSI operates within the context of the local county school policies and curriculum mandates, teachers felt bound to bureaucratic constraints that inhibited not only what they taught, but also how they taught. For instance, one teacher shared his disappointment that teacher quality is too heavily measured by "how well students perform in EOCs (i.e., state-mandated end-of-course tests) instead of how well students perform at the university." Another teacher expressed discontent with federal mandates on curricular issues like sex education, stating that, "we are told to preach about [sexual] abstinence, well, in a perfect world, yeah, but these kids are coming into a college campus and they need to know more about safe sex beyond abstinence."

Teacher interviews underscore how bureaucratic controls from the central office can create conditions where teachers depart from what they might otherwise do and behave in ways that contradict or fail to take advantage of their professional expertise and judgments in the care and education of their students. Teachers' desire to explore diverse pathways to engage students in rigorous and innovative learning experiences despite the conventional bureaucratic constraints to their practice is evident. As one veteran teacher stated, "we need some room to use new tools to educate these diamonds in the rough."

New Schools, Old Rules
The tension between the more fluid and lean structure of an early college and the traditional knowledge and structure of the school district is characteristic of the evolving relationship between HECHS—and perhaps other ECHSI's—and the school district. Teachers at HECHS chafe under a bureaucratic structure that often views early college high schools through a traditional high school lens and set of accountability standards. This frequently results in confusion and frustration of faculty and staff as the schools attempt, in one teacher's description, "to serve too many gods…" The teacher goes on to say,

> …Our expectations are from New Schools Project—that seems to be our first set of rules. Then we have our second set of rules that come in through the county, and then we have the third set of rules that come in through the University. (Teacher Interview, April 7, 2009)

This frustration and lack of understanding at the district and state levels about an early college high school model is also evident in the following comment by a founding teacher:

> Part of the problems that I see with the early college is that we are held under the same constraints as county high schools and I don't think you can have a [traditional] high school and an early college; it has to be one or the other. So, if you are going to make it an early college, think outside the box and walk outside the box. You don't have to be constrained with those end-of-course tests; they are meant for a traditional high school…Rote memorization is not 21st century [teaching]. I think if you want your kids to be competitive in the world out there, then you need to get out of that whole EOC kind of thing and move on. (Teacher Interview, April 7, 2009)

Teacher quality and innovation, and ethics of care, are constrained by traditional constructs of high schools. Despite the perceived lack of support and knowledge at important decision-making

levels about how early colleges work, HECHS teacher comments remained largely positive. The early college's commitment to relationships, rigor, and relevance afforded them exciting opportunities to take risks in curriculum content, in planning and delivery, and in connecting with students through engaged teaching grounded in an ethic of caring and innovative practice. As one teacher declared, "We are risk-takers."

Overall, teachers and students reported that HECHS was a positive and caring community where students felt supported personally and academically. Teachers also reported feeling as though the school had the potential to create contexts marked by trust, collaboration, and shared leadership, but they felt constrained by bureaucratic and decision-making structures that are largely underprepared to support these new small school communities.

Discussion

The early college model exemplified by HECHS seemed to have a promising effect on the learning environment. The context of this study was characterized by deeper and more significant interactions between students and teachers as well as fruitful exchanges between HECHS and its university partner. Students seemed motivated to come to school regularly and talked of being academically engaged and on track to successfully graduate from high school and join college. It is worth noting, however, that as students transitioned from high school and started taking classes at the university, the environment and the challenges changed. For many students, the transition from HECHS to the university can be socially and academically challenging. The safe spaces and supportive structures that existed in high school were suddenly unavailable to the same degree to support and nurture students' academic and social skills, including time management and life skills. The personalized environment at the high school was diminished once students arrived at the university.

We suggest that school and university partners should, as early as the students start their 9th grade, establish a program and/or a network of adults—school, university, and community partners—who can work together with students to start an early student initiation to campus life. Such programs can build upon some of the characteristics students in this study identified as supporting their learning: student and teacher interactions based on trust, respect, and open communication, clear and shared expectations and a safe and welcoming learning environment. If the vision of early colleges is to blend high school and college in a rigorous yet supportive program for vulnerable students who might be at risk of dropping out of high school, then consistent support structures should be established to bridge the move from the school to the university – one that extends a caring perspective while students increase academic and social competence.

On the other hand, we argue that for an early college to differ from a traditional high school – in terms of teaching and learning opportunities – one facet requiring change is teachers' professional currency. This is likely to work if teachers are accorded a professional learning environment with greater thoughtfulness and creativity, rather than being constrained by a focus largely on compliance and predetermined procedures. The issue of conventional standards and procedures of compliance is an important consideration for early college high schools and the teachers it hopes to attract and retain. Although the academic success of all students is of key importance, "[a] model that depends on great teaching can't be replicated by schools that can't attract and develop great teachers" (Gates, 2008, n.p). Teachers working in early colleges do not undergo a different kind of teacher preparation; however, if provided with more autonomous opportunities for meaningful collaboration conducive to innovation and effective instruction, there is a greater chance for establishing strong and caring professional communities with the potential to spur meaningful curriculum and instruction that may improve student engagement and performance. Currently, HECHS teachers stated that they are bound and constrained by a central office that controls what they can or cannot do to prepare students to "graduate from high school, globally comp[ete] for work

and postsecondary education and [be] prepared for life in the 21st century" (North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards, n.p).

The success of high school reform initiatives such as early colleges depends in large part on innovation and "the creation of new opportunities for teacher and school learning, new modes of accountability, and new kinds of incentives for continual improvement and problem solving" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p.238). If "the twin pillars of high school reform are structural changes to improve personalization and instructional improvement," (MDRC, 2007, p. 203) it is imperative that supportive structures occurring at the district-level not compete or undermine instructional efforts and improvements (Newmann et al., 2001). Although personalized relationships between and among teachers and students is a valued and essential attribute in small learning communities, the primary focus of early colleges is to bolster student performance through rigorous, traditional course work. This focus is in contrast to the care perspective which views the narrowed focus on specific curriculum, standards, and outcomes as a distraction from the more critical themes of ethical and moral action. In short, an education in which care is the central mission of learning, teaching, and action (Noddings, 1984, 1995a, 1995b, 2002).

Implications for Further Study
This pilot study raises several salient questions that provide potential for further research. We underscore some of those questions and implications here.

Diversifying the Teaching Staff
The ECHSI largely targets those students who have been historically underrepresented in rigorous college-preparatory programs and those who are most underserved in traditional high schools. Typically, these populations refer to students from historically underrepresented racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. During focus and individual interviews, several underrepresented students expressed the need to hire more teachers of color at the school. For instance, several of the African American males argued that some teachers, as much as they held them to high expectations, did not make learning interesting or relate it to their background. One African American student described one of the teachers:

> She is great as a person. But she does not listen to us sometimes. I don't understand what she says sometimes and it is not that I am dumb; I think she does not understand who we are and our way. (Student focus group interview, May 29, 2009)

African American students further stated that they liked teachers who allowed them "not just sit there and listen, you are involved in the discovery or learning process. They [teachers] make class funny and I think you learn more and better when you are having fun," said one student in the focus group. Another student, an African American girl in the same focus group interview session, thought that, "sometimes the brothers [African American males] play a lot when the teacher is lecturing. Some teachers, especially white female teachers have to choose their words to tell them to keep quiet. A black teacher will just land the plane." These conversations reveal what we characterize as cultural differences in terms of learning and communication styles between the teacher and their African American students. It presents a challenging balance for the teacher to know when to push the students, back off, hold them accountable or let them take responsibility of their own academic success or failure.

Although extant literature on comprehensive school reform is replete with data on the success of small learning communities in providing important educational opportunities for culturally and ethnically diverse students, Jordan and Cooper (2000) assert that the issue of "race and culture within the context of comprehensive reform has been largely ignored" (p. 8). We contend that future study could investigate ways early colleges might increase the recruitment of quality teachers of color to work with this population. Teachers who are representative of the student body may also set an example of how education can and does lead to

success. We further contend that the learning needs of this population can be met by exploring and building relationships that are anchored in culturally responsive teachers and pedagogies (Ladson-Billing, 1995). Engaging in culturally responsive relationships requires that teachers "understand the views and learning preferences students bring to school, including, for example, how students communicate in their communities and whether some students feel more comfortable with communal or individualistic approaches" (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2007, p. 335). The need for culturally responsive pedagogy is an important and effective teaching tool for any learning environment and may be particularly important for a small school premised on relationships and relevance to students' lives.

But What Happens When They Fail?
Another critical area for further study concerns rigor and success in the early college high school. Student participants in this study indicated that the rigor of work at an early college high school—that is, the high level of critical thinking and the sheer volume of individual and group project work—can be overwhelming. Students questioned the assumption held by many that all students who join an early college high school will succeed academically. There was genuine trepidation expressed by students that although some students might be successful at HECHS, many may still fail to meet university academic requirements. Given that the ECHS model does not offer electives, it is important to consider the question of what structure(s) might be added to the model to support students who, even with significant support and mentoring, may not meet either high school graduation or university academic requirements.

Professional Learning Communities: Promoting and Supporting Teacher Development and Innovation
The call for 21st century teachers who can teach diverse learners, maintain high expectations for all students, and deliver a challenging, rigorous, and relevant curriculum is greater than ever. The ECHS provides the right conditions in which to develop a professional learning community for teachers and staff. Such a community could provide professional development in creating structures and processes for teacher and staff to discuss issues of mutual concern, work on collaborative solutions, share information on student progress, exchange and build innovative teaching protocols, and develop collective ways to develop students' social and academic resilience and link student learning to real-world experiences. Professional learning communities within early colleges also offer a compelling model for teacher training in which new and veteran teachers have opportunities to establish meaningful relationships with each other and their students while receiving encouragement to take risks in growing their teaching practice and leadership.

Questions for further exploration include, what kind of professional development is most beneficial for teachers in early colleges? What supportive structures can state and district levels working with early college high schools create to effectively attend to the unique needs of teachers and students in early colleges and foster teacher collaboration and innovative practices? How can pre-service teacher programs utilize early college environments as fertile training grounds for new teachers? Since the small, learner-centered structure of early colleges emphasizes the key components of care (i.e., modeling, practice, dialogue, and confirmation), both students and teachers would benefit from cross-discipline sharing and planning in which teacher and student work models collaborative engagement and learning.

The challenges and growing pains of the ECHSI are a natural part of the continuing effort to reform the nation's high schools. As we have learned from this pilot, HECHS students and teachers overall affirm the important role of early college high schools in the provision of viable alternatives to the traditional high school model. This positive assessment of the Early College High School Initiative is echoed in the literature and continues to grow as states work to raise graduation and student achievement rates for all students. There is much to learn as we continue to seek innovative reform models that defy a one-size-fits-all methodology.
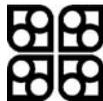
Hudson Early College High School provides just one glimpse into the challenges and promise of the early college model. May there be many more.

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