

Educational Leadership Magazine

Small Schools, Real Gains

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Research shows that small schools can help students achieve. To create more small schools, however, we must first overcome some significant barriers.

When my teachers asked me to go to a smaller school within my high school, I thought they were trying to ruin my social life. If I went to school for three years with the same kids, especially a bunch of puny boys all my own age, how was I ever going to get a date? But I agreed to do it because I liked the teachers. We had the same four teachers for our core subjects for three years, and we got to know the other kids in the class really well.

The teachers started telling me that I was a good writer. Then the kids did, too. And the teachers pushed me—hard—and eventually I started helping other kids. Before long I also began to believe I could be a good writer, and now I am going to the University of Arkansas on a journalism scholarship. So, Barbara Walters, look out!

—Elizabeth, recent high school graduate

Elizabeth's positive experience in a small high school in Arkansas is similar to the experiences of many other graduates of intentionally small high schools. Her school of 240 students was created by educators who wanted to get to know their students, challenge them, and make sure that no student fell through the cracks. For the past 15 years, educators have been creating small schools in New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and other urban areas. Together, parents, teachers, and principals have found these small schools better able to engage the intellectual and emotional lives of students and to improve students' academic performance. As the number of small schools has grown over the past decade, the body of research on these schools also has grown, in both breadth and depth—enough to make the case for small schools compelling, if not irrefutable.

For decades, similar data have been available but largely ignored by policymakers. During the past two years, however, shootings at large high schools have made people realize that the structures, daily routines, and impersonal relationships of large schools have created cultures where significant numbers of students are unengaged in the life of the school and alienated from adults and one another.

At the same time, the growing determination to ensure that all students succeed in school has led us to look more carefully at the achievement data of different student populations. After two decades of improvement, the achievement gap between the nation's poor students—often African American and Latino—and middle- and upper-class students—most often white—is widening once again (Fine, 1994).

The Research

In Chicago—with the encouragement of the Small Schools Workshop, Business People for the Public Interest, Lawyers for Quality Education, and the Chicago School District—small schools have been proliferating for the past eight years. Each of these approximately 150 small schools serves 200 to 400 students. Located in the poorest neighborhoods in the city, they take shape as schools within larger schools, as freestanding schools in their own buildings with their own principals, or as redesigned large schools with one principal but containing several smaller, independent schools, each with its own head teacher. These small schools were created to remove the sense of isolation that can seed violence and alienation and to reduce the gap between the performance of poorer—and, too often, minority—students and the more affluent students in the district.

Last year, a study (Wasley et al., 2000) found that students in 90 small Chicago high schools made significant improvements in school behavior and achievement. For example, compared with students in host schools, students in schools-within-schools attended up to five more days of school per semester,

Educational Leadership Magazine

dropped out at one-third to one-half the rate (in newer small schools, 4.8 percent compared to 12.9 percent); had up to 0.22 higher grade-point averages, and improved reading scores by the equivalent of almost half a year. In math, the scores held steady, but because more students remained in school and took the tests, we consider this result to be positive—though clearly not sufficient.

Students reported feeling safer and more connected with adults in these schools. Teachers reported a greater sense of efficacy, job satisfaction, and connection with parents, as well as more opportunities to collaborate with other teachers, build a coherent educational program, use a variety of instructional approaches, and engage students in peer critique and analysis. Parents and community members reported increased confidence in the schools.

Other studies of small schools report similar findings. In one study, for example, "disadvantaged students in small schools significantly outperformed those in large ones on standardized basic skills tests" (Raywid, 1997/1998, p. 34). Small schools were better able to close the achievement gap (Lee & Smith, 1994; Lee, Smith, & Croniger, 1995), especially between less and more affluent students (Howley & Bickel, 2000). Small schools were safer, reporting fewer fights and no incidents of serious violence (Franklin & Crone, 1992; National Center for Education Statistics, 1998; Zane, 1994). Students from small schools tended to complete more years of higher education, accumulate more credits (Fine, 1994; Oxley, 1995), and score slightly higher on standardized tests (Bryk & Driscoll, 1998; Fine, 1994; Lee & Smith, 1996; Sares, 1992). With such consistent findings, we need to look more closely at how small schools foster student achievement.

What Makes Small Schools Work?

Size alone, of course, does not make a school good, but it does appear to be an important factor in creating more effective schools. Small size—fewer than 400 students—makes possible certain structures and practices that are conducive to student learning.

Relationships between students and adults are strong and ongoing. These relationships develop most often through extensive advisory systems. Teachers serving as advisors stay in contact with parents, work with each advisee to develop a personalized learning plan, and serve as advocates for the students with other staff and community and social service organizations as necessary. Advisory groups—a teacher with a small group of 15 to 18 students—meet several times a week, if not daily, and focus on study skills, conflict management, team building, and goal setting. Advisors typically take responsibility for ensuring that their advisees are on the path to graduation and worthwhile postgraduation plans. Teachers who have been a part of an effective advisory system describe it as the single most important design element for making possible a high level of personalization. And because teachers work with students for several years, they acquire an authority that allows them to confront and challenge students about their performance in ways not typical in large high schools.

Relationships with parents are strong and ongoing. In most small schools, advisors and parents communicate regularly, not simply when a student experiences problems. Many small schools schedule individual advisor-student-parent meetings several times a year.

The school's organization is flat, with broadly distributed leadership. Small schools have a leaner administrative structure, without specialized academic departments. Principals or directors often teach part of the day, and teachers make administrative decisions about matters directly affecting students.

Most small schools do not attempt to be comprehensive. Small schools concentrate on a few goals and insist that all students meet them, finding ways to honor student choice through the development of projects or other learning activities within a course rather than through an extensive course catalog.

Professional development is ongoing, embedded, and site-specific. Most small schools design their own professional development activities, concentrating on how to work more effectively with their students.

Educational Leadership Magazine

Some school staffs derive useful data from districtwide or statewide testing, but more often, teachers look together at their students' ongoing work, using protocols developed over the past decade through the work of such organizations as the Prospect School, the Coalition of Essential Schools, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, and Project Zero.¹

For examples of how a school staff might begin to look at student work in their school, visit Looking at Student Work at www.lasw.org.

The school develops its own culture. The culture of small schools typically revolves around hard work, high aspirations, respect for others, and the expectation that all students will succeed. Advisory groups and all-school meetings often provide the forum for strengthening the school's clear expectations and high aspirations. Traditional extracurricular activities, such as proms and athletics, while present, are usually at the periphery of school life.

Smaller schools engage the community in educating young people. Many small schools require internships or applied learning opportunities for all of their students. Because of the more intimate size of many of these schools, business or nonprofit partners find it easier to place students and to get to know them. Small schools often engage community members in assessing portfolios or exhibitions, providing them with a look at student learning that goes far beyond reviewing standardized test scores. Community members are more likely to feel invested in, and familiar with, the kinds of contributions young people are able to make.

The Barriers

With such promising data on what makes small schools work, why do we continue to build large schools that fail a significant percentage of students?

Cultural expectations about high school are deeply embedded. What we imagine high schools to be constrains what we allow them to become. We hold a collective, nostalgic memory of high schools: proms, football games, exciting social lives, first romances, and first cars. No matter that such memories don't apply to most students. Most students neither participate in nor attend high school sporting events; indeed, the larger the school, the smaller the percentage of student participation in and attendance at these activities. For most students, the social context in large high schools is tough and unforgiving, with sharp distinctions made between the small group of social haves and the far larger masses of have-nots. And high school memories seldom include a significant academic component, let alone an intellectual one.

Schools and the communities they serve are also locked into the notion that a large selection of courses is the best way to meet student needs. In a consumer society, few people question this assumption. As a further complication, many high schools have some activity that everyone speaks of with great pride: the jazz band, the orchestra, or a sports team. These activities become sacred cows, untouchable in any effort at change, even though they serve a very small percentage of students and rarely have any connection to helping all students learn to use their minds well. Reform efforts are held hostage to false nostalgia and sacred cows. "We want schools that are better, but not different" is a common refrain that narrows the boundaries within which school reform may occur.

Schools attempting to become small do too little, too slowly. Making real change in the tightly woven structure of high schools is difficult. Many small pilot programs never get off the ground because other teachers demand to wait until the innovation can be studied further, administrators insist that the reforms not interfere with the larger school's operation, or the central office requires that small schools operate under the same constraints that larger schools do—even when those constraints are, in part, what the reform is trying to break. The result is frustration on the part of reformers and a disinclination among district leaders to try any additional reform efforts. In such circumstances, schools need a clean, bold break with practices that have served many students poorly—not a conditional and timid incrementalism.

So-called small schools are not small enough. Data and anecdotal evidence indicate that the size of an effective small school is closer to 200 than to 400 students, and certainly not 500 to 800 students, as is

Educational Leadership Magazine

often recommended. Schools of more than 400 students tend to work hard to remain comprehensive (Gregory, 2000), a quality that leads to and then depends on teacher specialization. Such specialization, however, along with the smorgasbord of course offerings that accompanies it, works against the high personalization and clear focus that drive successful small schools.

Small schools act like large schools. A small school that attempts to remain comprehensive most often ends up looking like a small big school, maintaining many of the design features and cultural components that most small schools seek to undo. Schools of 400 students with a dean who handles discipline, an advisory that meets for only 10 minutes a day, a block schedule that features teacher-talk 80 percent of the time, a conventional organization of faculty into departments, a system that classifies students by age or grade level, and a substantial course catalog that requires teacher specialization—are unlikely to be successful. Shrinking a large, comprehensive high school is not the goal. Indeed, comprehensive is as great a barrier to significant improvement in student accomplishment as large.

Decision makers focus only on short-term goals. School boards or state legislators often insist that the reform efforts provide data about improvement quickly—data that the larger school is rarely requested or able to provide. The demand for instant evidence of success often leads to compromises that seem necessary for survival but decrease the possibility for long-term success. Schools eliminate or reduce the advisory system and teachers abandon project-based teaching to ensure time to prepare for high-stakes tests. Some small schools succumb to demands to conform to the district's curriculum or grading system. In the end, the school that remains bears little resemblance to the school that its founders or staff had imagined.

Many mandates and practices favor larger schools and centralized operations. "Bigger is better" has been the mind-set for almost five decades, and most district and state laws, regulations, policies, and procedures reflect this attitude. State funding formulas often explicitly favor large high schools for school construction funding. Section 206 of Washington State's School Facilities Manual, for instance, declares that the state board of education

shall match the total approved costs of the project at 75 percent if two or more districts reorganize into a single district and the construction of new school facilities results in the elimination of . . . a high school with a full-time equivalent enrollment in grades 9–12 of fewer than 400 students" (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1999, p.7).

Leaders try to make reforms educator-proof. The years following the launching of Sputnik in 1957 saw the first significant engagement of the federal government in K–12 education. A major thrust in that push for school reform was an attempt to teacher-proof the curriculum so that almost anyone could teach it. Many leaders considered teacher capacity and judgment as obstacles to reform. Today's policy environment is similar.

Carefully developed standards can serve small schools well, but many districts and an increasing number of states are creating lock-step curriculums and adopting textbooks for all schools, thereby denying the particularity of school populations and cultures and removing room for teacher judgment in small schools. A profound irony pervades our business leaders' nationwide call for increased accountability because state legislators and school leaders are now adopting the same management-by-objectives approach that brought many of the nation's largest corporations to the brink of extinction during the past 25 years. Such a rigid approach to reform has made almost impossible the entrepreneurial, quick-response, high-flexibility, customer-driven, shared- leadership environment now so highly admired in the business world.

Educators lack images of small schools. Because many teachers and principals attended large schools and have worked in them for years, they perceive the critique of large schools to be personal and respond defensively. "The kids have changed. Parents don't share in the responsibility for getting kids to work hard. Kids, raised on TV, expect to be entertained and don't want to work hard," they say. Certainly, the context in which we are educating students has changed, but we need to provide educators and communities with alternative images of school organization and design—and changed teacher practice—so that they can move beyond defensiveness to creative solutions.

Educational Leadership Magazine

Growing Support and Momentum

These barriers are real and serious. To deny that they exist is to invite disaster. Support for small schools, however, has been growing. In fiscal year 2000, the U.S. federal government awarded \$42 million in grants to districts and schools to create smaller learning communities in high schools with more than 1,000 students; the U.S. Congress then included almost three times as much, \$120 million, in the budget for fiscal year 2001. The secondary school portion of a recent pledge of \$350 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation will help create small high schools serving no more than 600 students, with 400 students the preferred limit. The Joyce Foundation and Pew Charitable Trusts have supported small school development in Chicago, Philadelphia, and other cities.

The cost savings to our society will be enormous. A well-known analysis of New York City schools demonstrates that costs for small schools are somewhat less than large ones when calculated on a per graduate basis (Steifel, Iatarola, Fruchter, & Berne, 1998). And cost savings over the long run will be substantial, especially considering the costs of school dropouts, who are disproportionately represented in our prison population, and of workers with only a high school education, who are often consigned to a life of poverty as our economy becomes increasingly knowledge-based.

Small schools can help all students reach their highest potential. As Arthur Powell points out in *Lessons from Privilege* (1996), successful independent schools have always combined small class size with smaller school size, recognizing the strong need that adolescents have for contact and guidance from adults. The small schools movement may be the first indication that we are willing to provide opportunities that have been reserved, thus far, for the wealthy.

With money made available through grants, gifts, and new construction funds, we can give educators the support they need to be bold and to create the kinds of learning environments and physical spaces that students need to work more closely with caring adults who challenge them to succeed. All students deserve schools where they can be free from worry about personal safety and where they can be confident that their teachers and administrators know them well and can guide their development of skills and knowledge. Small schools can deliver real gains.

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Educational Leadership Magazine

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