The Case for Small High Schools

Large, comprehensive high schools shortchange too many students. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation believes that, with the right elements in place, small schools offer a promising alternative.

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Although elementary and middle schools have been the focus of numerous reform efforts, high schools have largely been ignored—and many of them are struggling to keep up. Even in the mid-1990s, when high schools began receiving better-prepared students, achievement remained flat (Campbell, Voelkl, & Donahue, 2000). One of the main problems is size: Many of today's high schools have enrollments of 2,000, 3,000, even 4,000 students.

Now educators, policymakers, and parents are joining the chorus of researchers who have long trumpeted the benefits of small schools. Studies show that small schools have higher attendance rates and lower dropout rates, their students have higher grade point averages, and students and teachers report greater satisfaction with the school experience.

That's why the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is supporting efforts to create smaller, more personalized learning environments. The Foundation has invested more than $250 million in grants nationwide for creating new small schools and transforming large high schools through the schools-within-a-school model.

Large Schools: Missing the Grade

Compared with schools a generation ago, most schools today serve students who are more diverse, come from more varied life circumstances, and are less motivated by traditional means. In addition, technology has created a new world of opportunities and challenges, and the economy is increasingly rewarding those with a college education. But our high schools continue to operate as they did decades ago, and as a result they display serious shortcomings.

For example, many seniors lack basic reading and mathematics skills. Nearly one in five cannot identify the main idea in what they have read, and nearly two in five haven't mastered the use and computation of fractions, percents, and averages (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001a). Dropout rates are another indicator. Each year, 1 in 20 high school students drops out (Kaufman, Kwon, Klein, & Chapman, 2000), and dropout rates exceed 50 percent in many urban and poor rural school districts. Even many students who finish high school are not prepared for college. Although nearly 80 percent of all high school graduates go on to college, more than half must take remedial courses once they get there (National Educational Longitudinal Study: 1988–1994; Adelman, 1999).
Students of color are especially hurt by the failures of the education system. Latino students are the most likely to drop out of school, with only two-thirds earning diplomas or GEDs. In reading and mathematics, many African American and Latino students graduate from high school with skills at the middle school level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001b). After two decades of progress, the achievement gap between white children and children of color and between low-income students and more affluent students widened or remained static during the 1990s (Campbell, Hombo, & Mazzeo, 2000). The much-discussed achievement gap is only part of the problem, however. The more daunting challenge is the wide gap between what all students should know and be able to do and the level at which most students are achieving.

Our schools are not failing—they are obsolete. They foster anonymity and stifle learning by systematically inhibiting those things that are most important: powerful sustained relationships; students' ability to address complex problems individually and as members of a team and to communicate in various ways; and the ability of teachers and administrators to take on increasing responsibility. The Challenge Designing systems of schools that work for all students is one of America's most important challenges, but the barriers to change—especially for secondary schools—are numerous and daunting. District policy, state law, and higher education all articulate their expectations in the form of credits, making it difficult for a high school to structure learning in segments other than blocks of 50 minutes each. Most high school teachers face 125 to 150 students every day and work in virtual isolation from other adults. Most school boards (and a few states) select textbooks, making it difficult for a group of teachers to develop an integrated, thematic curriculum. Principals seldom have staffing, budget, or curriculum autonomy. Archaic state and district funding models control the resources a school receives, inhibiting new ideas and methods. High school faculties are so large that conversation and democratic decision making are very difficult.

Among other things, we must rethink our preconceptions about the 50-minute, discipline-based blocks of learning. High school must be a place where young people can grapple with such complex issues as globalization, environmental degradation, and terrorism, as well as the implications of new technologies and advances in science. Students need extended periods of time to study multidisciplinary topics, opportunities to work in teams on complex projects, and the expectation that they will communicate a reasoned perspective in a variety of ways.

Small Schools: Making the Grade

Although too many high schools are not providing students with the education they deserve, a growing number of public, charter, and private schools are defying this trend—and they are all small. Buoyed by research and increased momentum around the issue of small schools, more school leaders are considering redesigning their existing facilities with size as the guiding force. And though size is only one component of what makes a good school, it is a necessary one and one with tremendous ripple effects.

Researchers vary in how they define small schools, but from what we've seen, high schools with no more than 100 students per grade level create the kind of rich learning environment that leads to success. Research points to significant differences between large and small schools in a number of areas.

Cotton (1996) found no study that showed superior achievement in large schools compared with small schools. In other words, small schools have achievement that is at least equal to if not greater than achievement in large schools. One of the most powerful findings on small schools relates to their impact on low-income students. A study of schools in four states found that students in less-affluent areas achieve at higher levels when they attend small schools,
and in lower-income communities the benefit of smaller schools is even greater. Phrased differently,

The well-documented correlation between poverty and low achievement is much stronger—as much as 10 times stronger—in the larger schools than in smaller ones in all four states. (Howley & Bickel, 2000)

The Met High School in Providence, Rhode Island, serves a diverse population of 200 students, more than half of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. In its first graduating class, every Met student was accepted to college. The school also boasts a dropout rate one-third lower than other Providence high schools. Studies of small schools in Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia have also found higher GPAs and lower dropout rates (Wasley et al., 2000; Raywid, 1996). Students in these schools are more motivated, feel more connected to their school, and are thus more likely to remain.

Small schools have fewer incidents of violence and report fewer discipline problems than large schools (Wasley et al., 2000). Small schools also tend to have less-invasive security measures, shunning such methods as drug sweeps and metal detectors. The Julia Richman Education Complex in midtown Manhattan once housed a large, failing urban high school. After closing and redesigning itself in the early 1990s, the facility is now home to a consortium of small schools, each with no more than 300 students. Metal detectors have been replaced with teachers who know every student's name, and incidents of violence have plummeted.

As far back as 1964, researchers reported that students in small schools were more likely to be involved in extracurricular activities and to hold important positions in school groups (Cotton, 1996). In fact, "the greater and more varied participation in extracurricular activities by students in small schools is the single best-supported finding in the school size research" (Cotton, 1996). For some small schools, such as Chicago's Best Practices High School, having after-school activities is less important than involving students during the regular school day. As the founders of the school write,

Between 8:30 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., we're going to do our damnedest to know you, to care for you, to challenge you—and not to waste your time. At our school, involvement is not an after-school activity. (Daniels, Bizar, & Zemelman, 2001, p. 37)

Research shows that small schools don't necessarily cost more to operate than large schools. And with the savings in remediation (as a result of having fewer failing students), many consider small schools to be more cost-effective than their larger counterparts (Gregory, 1992).

Small schools encourage collegial professional relationships and the kind of ongoing learning that is vital, given the challenges that teachers face today. In The Power of Their Ideas, Meier (1995) notes that "schools must be so small that governance does not become the topic of discussion but issues of education do" (p. 108).

The Need for Strong Leaders

Although the research on school size is compelling, size alone does not make a good school. Good small schools share a common set of characteristics, including strong leadership.

Leaders of small schools maintain a clear vision, facilitating the design of a curriculum that is aligned with this vision, as well as appropriate organization and use of technology and facilities. They are instructional leaders and teacher coaches, providing job-related learning experiences and time for teachers to work together. They are marketing executives, communicating the

school's vision and the benefits of attending the school. They are collaborators, developing learning partnerships with businesses, community groups, and institutions of higher education. They are competent administrators, distributing leadership and management tasks across the staff. At the district level, school board members and superintendents play an important role in ensuring that small schools have the autonomy and flexibility to succeed.

**The Importance of Autonomy**

Autonomy is important in a number of areas, including curriculum, budget, and staffing. Good small schools are created around a vision for teaching and learning, a few important goals, and a coherent design that reflects both. Small schools need curriculum autonomy to develop integrated learning experiences that support their focus.

Small schools operate successfully around the country with the same per-pupil funding as large schools. Like charter schools, however, they need lump-sum funding to allow for flexibility and creativity. District funding formulas, staffing models, and programmatic funding frequently are barriers to developing a personalized education program for all children.

Small schools need the opportunity to hire staff members who understand the mission of the school and have complementary skills. Central-office placement and seniority schemes inhibit the ability of small schools to retain their focus.

In addition to providing autonomy for schools, districts need to develop a clearly articulated system of accountability for students, staff members, and schools. Performance contracts may be needed to help delineate goals, parameters, funding, and steps of intervention for underperformance. Oakland Unified School District recently adopted a New Small Autonomous Schools policy that clearly articulates these issues.

**Moving Toward Success**

The research is clear: Today's large high schools are not working for most students, and smaller schools are reaching those who have floundered in big schools. Fundamental to the success of small schools are the relationships they foster. Students succeed in school when they connect with an adult or a subject. Small schools create spaces where young people have the opportunity to be known, to ask and to answer life's most important questions.

The Julia Richman Education Complex in Manhattan and the Met High School in Providence are among the best examples of what is possible if we reconsider the organization and architecture of our secondary schools. If we replace anonymity with community, sorting with support, and bureaucracy with autonomy, we can create systems of schools that truly help all students achieve.

**References**


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