The work of converting comprehensive high schools is in a relatively early stage. Whether conversions will be more than occasionally successful remains unclear, let alone whether it will become a “movement” that substantially changes the nature of high schools in this country. These are but three schools from among upwards of one thousand schools nationally engaged in, or at least investigating, the potential benefits of conversion. Even at this stage, however, we begin to see some early pointers from these schools that may benefit others who are at an earlier phase of the process.

**Strong, engaged, and positive principal leadership makes a difference.** Each site has benefited from strong leadership. The leadership styles vary among the three principals, in some ways quite dramatically. Yet each principal has worked carefully to improve staff sophistication about small schools through site visits, workshops, reading, and research review. Each principal has also maintained a strong vision for success. While each school still has some resisters and some uncertain staff, the prevailing ethos in the three schools is “we can take this on and succeed.” Finally, each principal’s personal integrity is unquestioned; each is viewed by the school’s staff as undertaking the conversion process for the right reasons.

These principals have been engaged fully in the process from the beginning. They decided early on that the work was important – for some, a moral imperative – and that they had no real choice but to proceed, given their growing understanding of their own school’s shortcomings. They have been thoughtful and inclusive, and they have been respectful of both the fears and legitimate concerns of their staff as they move forward. They have also been successful at transmitting their belief that the task could be done, and done well, by their staff. They have built the self-esteem of their staff through a mix of professional development, inclusion in the design process, shared decision-making, and moral argument.

In some other schools we work with, principals have chosen, for various reasons, to remain disengaged from this process. A few have viewed this effort as primarily a teacher-led initiative. Others are tired, or overburdened with the daily demands of running a comprehensive high school. Some have personal reservations about the wisdom of dismantling their comprehensive high school – an environment they have been a part of for most or all their careers. Still others lack the organizational or leadership skills to take on this task.
Looking at data on student achievement helps to make the case for change and builds staff commitment to serving all students. In each of these more-or-less average schools, it has been difficult to acknowledge the unforgiving nature of the data regarding student achievement. Across the three schools, data analysis revealed discouraging information. The particular pieces of data vary, but the message does not: six out of ten 9th graders graduate in four years. Many who do graduate have few marketable skills, or any sense of what to do after high school. Many who go on to higher education must take remedial courses. Current students and recent graduates alike report a lack of challenge or engagement in their high school courses. Forty percent or more of 9th graders fail one or more courses. The first-year GPA of college-going students declines more than that of most other high school graduates who go to college from other Washington high schools.

In spite of general community satisfaction and particular pride in some aspects of the school — the music program in one school, the arts program in another, the jazz band in the third, the occasional student accepted into an Ivy League school — the data makes clear, many, many students do not make it to graduation who should, and many who do have not been well-served academically.

Data such as this does not change the thinking of all teachers. Some believe high schools ought to continue the sorting process that has been part of its role from the beginning. Others do not believe that all students can achieve at high levels. Some blame students and their families for the data, or the state or the district for inadequate funding or poor leadership, or both. Still others believe this reform effort, too, shall pass.

In each of these schools, however, a majority of staff members have come to accept that their charge is to serve all students well, not just some of them. By this standard, analysis of their own student data leads to only one conclusion: school as usual has become unacceptable.

*Inclusion and transparency are key contributors to staff ownership.* An approach to the conversion work that operates on the basis of no secrets and no surprises, and which welcomes everyone into the process appears to build forward momentum. Each proposal was written by relatively few people and, in one instance, the grant was awarded to the district, not the school.

Each of these principals worked quickly to involve others and to
provide multiple avenues for that involvement. They were also strategic and persistent about engaging hesitant but key staff members. Such broad inclusion took many forms: positions on leadership groups, data analysis, examining research on high school reform generally and small schools in particular, visiting established small schools and reporting back to the staff, participation in professional development activities, and regular opportunities to talk with colleagues.

- Each school created an inclusive process for staff involvement. While they varied, each process engaged teachers and other building staff early and substantially in the study and planning so that work could move forward. Two of the plans also provided sufficient checkpoints early on so parents and students were aware of changes being contemplated and had intermittent opportunities to comment. At the third school, students and parents have been involved in a more continuous manner from relatively early in the process. Each school took from six to eighteen months to move from discussions that focused primarily on “why change” to “how to change.” In that time, most staff concerns were addressed (or at the least, acknowledged), and a process that led to broad consensus was developed and formed the basis for ongoing work.

- Each school developed a transparent decision-making process. These schools are notable among the conversion schools the Small Schools Project works with for the high degree of trust around decision-making in the school. Again, the processes themselves are different, but in each instance, they are known, understood, and accepted as reasonable by that particular staff. Acceptance of the process is due in no small part to the respect each staff holds for its principal.

- Each site has shared design authority among all staff members. In each building, staff members have been involved in designing their small schools. In one, where small schools will be differentiated from the beginning, the process has been lengthy, detailed, and characterized by high collaboration. When structural implementation begins in September 2003, it will take place over two years. At the other two sites, small schools, by design, have opened looking alike – “getting small” was the critical issue in these schools. The design process in both schools now moves in tandem with implementation, and will spread over four years, with differentiation occurring more gradually.
Not all staff members have chosen to be deeply involved in constructing the small school designs, but authority has been shared, and widely exercised by staff in all three schools.

A new, public commitment to equity sustains groups and individuals at difficult moments. A significant part of the “right reasons” for undertaking the conversion process in each school has been the recognition that their current comprehensive high school has served many students poorly and left many others unchallenged. At each site, that recognition has been painful, challenging both longstanding practice and personal philosophies.

The proof of this commitment to equity, of course, will not be known for some years. This commitment, which may contain a whiff of political correctness, stands in sharp contrast to often low expectations that many Washington teachers have for students (Fouts et al., 2003). Nonetheless, when key design questions have arisen, when staff assignments were determined, and when student placements were decided, the question of what decision would best promote equity has been the determining factor thus far.

Balancing teaching and learning issues with design and structure issues is critical. In most conversion schools, design and structure issues have seemed at times to be all-consuming. In some instances, it has led to frustration and confusion; in others, to ill-conceived solutions that are unsupportable or unimaginative, or both. (The observation, attributed to both Winston Churchill and Buckminster Fuller, that “first we shape our buildings, and then our buildings shape us” seems particularly appropriate to school conversions.)

Each of the three sites has tried to remain focused on increasing student accomplishment, even as they struggled with issues of design and structure. Two of these schools have taken explicit steps to place instructional issues at the forefront. One did so by “elevating” a curricular design process to the level of a design principle. The other, using the same approach to curriculum design, has used a high number of its weekly late start days to focus on instruction, and by insisting that the ongoing design and implementation process take account of current data on student achievement. The third school moved quickly to partial implementation to promote circumstances where the early implementers could begin to see the potential of high personalization and work to take advantage of that design element.
WHAT WE'RE LEARNING

After watching schools struggle with priorities for most of a year, we were convinced schools had made a serious tactical error by focusing so strongly on design and structure – as had we at the Small Schools Project, in initially supporting the schools in that focus. From the vantage point of another year, our sense is that what the schools (and we) had believed to be a strategic choice between focusing on teaching/learning on the one hand and design/structure on the other is in fact a dilemma. That is, the problem is not resolvable in favor of one or the other. Schools, like these three, that have worked to balance the focus have made the most steady, if uneven, progress precisely because they have recognized the two areas are deeply interdependent. Design is critical to school change precisely because it has a profound impact on the possibilities for teaching and learning it supports or confounds. At the same time, a change in design without a change in curriculum and pedagogical approach is unlikely to have the desired effect.

The following three case studies reflect works in progress. Though we have identified similarities between and among their approaches, each school has forged a path suited to its unique school context. The three schools exist – they are not composites of several schools. While their work to date has been thoughtful and their progress impressive, they are only in the early stages of what will be a five-year process simply to put their structural changes in place. We have therefore provided pseudonyms for the schools and individuals who work in them in the hope that they may continue their work without undue attention or distraction. Minor details have been changed for the same reason.

The chart on the following page illustrates the broad path these three schools are on in their work. More detailed charts are included in each case study and at the conclusion of this report.
The three schools described in these snapshots, and many others with whom we work, have made significant progress moving toward conversions, even though it has taken longer than most of them had imagined. While unanticipated problems, by definition, cannot be foreseen, a handful of critical issues are clearly in play at this point that threaten the ultimate success of conversion efforts.

Schools are embedded in districts, and districts will need to change in significant ways to support small schools. Two of these three schools are individual grantees, and are “outliers” in their district. The third school, a district grantee, is the only school in its district to undertake substantial change halfway through the district’s grant period. These and other districts in Washington are faced with difficult budget cuts, the looming implementation of high stakes tests, the onset of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, and a range of other projects and change efforts, many of them inconsistent with the move to small, focused high schools. In only one of the dozen districts where the Small Schools Project works with high schools is it clear that the conversion effort is the district’s educational priority.

Policies, procedures, and practices that have developed over the years to serve district purposes are likely to pose problems for small schools. Most districts with multiple high schools, for instance, “behave” as if each high school operates the same program – indeed, in some districts that is the goal – and has therefore the same needs. Few districts at this point seem prepared to provide separate budget lines for each small school, or to consider different administrative arrangements for these schools. For instance, in multiple high school districts, conversion schools are still expected to submit course descriptions for a course catalog in early January, even though most established small schools have no real need to do so.

Moving into the arena of high school conversions is moving into new territory, so it seems reasonable that many district-school issues will only be resolved over time. We see little evidence to date, however, that districts are moving proactively to anticipate, let alone enact, changes that will provide support to small schools. No district has been willing to consider developing a set of prior agreements that would establish parameters and provide support for the new small schools now under development. Only one district has thus far seen fit to develop a district policy recognizing the development of small schools.
WHAT WE’RE WORRYING ABOUT

Parent and community support will be critical to the success of small schools. The development of small schools to replace existing comprehensive high schools in most communities will be perhaps the most significant change in high school education in the past fifty years. For the change to be successful, parents and other community members will need to understand the reasons for this change. We believe as well that parents and communities can contribute to making the change successful by helping schools solve some of the technical problems that exist.

Each of these three schools has made successful efforts to keep parents and the community informed of its activities, and this has been sufficient thus far. What seems unclear is how broad and deep understanding of the proposed changes is, and whether communities will be supportive when the inevitable problems associated with change and implementation surface.

When it comes to including parents and the community in an ongoing way in small school design matters, the schools have been more hesitant. Most school staffs have little experience working collaboratively with parents on what is surely an open-ended task. Most teachers are themselves engaging for the first time in a school design process. Most school personnel spend considerable time convincing communities that their schools are doing a good job. In Washington, most school districts depend on local levies to supplement an inadequate and still-unequal state funding formula – another reason why it is difficult to talk candidly about any significant school problem related to long-standing assumptions about the purpose and organization of American high schools. And, after twenty years of widespread criticism of public schools nationally, most educators are understandably reluctant to present a problem to their community without having the answer well-defined. Nonetheless, avoiding early engagement of parents and other community members in the discussion and problem-solving appears to be a missed opportunity and a potential land mine.

Equity is a primary filter through which the redesign work is viewed, and may raise complex issues that the school is not fully equipped or prepared to address. To their credit, each of these schools has, at moments of greatest uncertainty, confusion, or hesitation, used equity as the lever to continue its work. At the same time, it raises, in each community, matters of privilege that are difficult to discuss. The unavoidable reality is that, in virtually all comprehensive high schools, some students are
WHAT WE'RE WORRYING ABOUT

advantaged. That advantage is often tied to social class, race, and influence. When those advantages are challenged, conflict is inevitable.

Moving to small schools will mean that some of those structural advantages will be diminished, or disappear altogether. Thus far, as Professor Tom Gregory of Indiana University points out in an unpublished paper, leaders in many conversion high schools find themselves assuring anxious (and mostly middle class) parents that everything they value in the present arrangements of schooling will remain, when in fact that will be all but impossible. It is unclear whether schools and communities will be willing to confront these issues directly and openly. But it seems certain that those engaged in conversion efforts must take this on directly and openly to be successful.

Changing teacher practice and expectations may take more time than is available in a society accustomed to quick results. Small schools that serve all students well operate on a different set of beliefs about learning and typically have a substantially different set of relationships and pedagogical practices associated with them.

Teachers in effective small schools depend on reciprocal and ongoing relationships with students (and often their families) to adapt and customize curriculum for their students. They typically work in collaborative teams with other teachers who teach the same students, sharing information about students, planning ideas, and curriculum. Grant agreements with the foundation include the expectation that students will engage regularly in active inquiry rather than passive absorption of information, in-depth learning rather than settling for broad, superficial surface knowledge, and that they will have more authentic opportunities to show what they know and are able to do than is common with most paper-and-pencil tests.

These changes will take substantial time. While some changes in relationships and teacher practice will be apparent in early implementation stages, several years will be required for the changes to be both broad and deep, and for students to realize the most significant benefits. “Implementation dips” – common when new programs or practices are introduced – may pose more significant barriers if parents and other community members are uneasy about the changes taking place.

Few schools have as yet provided concrete support for teachers to acquire the skills necessary to make these deep changes. Nor have they