



Small Alone Is Not Enough

How can educators recover the purposes of small schools?

Jacqueline Ancess

A panel of recent graduates of small high schools revealed at a conference that they had found themselves inadequately prepared for college. They explained that although their small high schools' test-prep curriculum diet had been rich in what they needed to pass their state's

high school exit exam, it had been starved of the intellectual nutrients required for college success.

They had learned to summarize (a skill that their college professors scorned); to answer multiple-choice questions (which appeared on none of their college tests); and to write a five-paragraph essay (which no college course assignment demanded). But they remembered no opportunities in high

school to compose, write, and revise extended analytical papers. They had never been required to analyze ideas from multiple perspectives and reach thoughtful conclusions supported by compelling evidence. They could recall little opportunity to discuss and debate ideas. They were used to completing short-term, short-attention tasks; they had memorized specialized vocabulary and learned processes for plugging

numbers into formulas. But they had never built the habit of getting engaged in material to make meaning from it: struggling through text, figuring it out, and learning how to persevere.

The comments of these student panelists reinforce what both proponents and critics of small high schools have been saying for some time: Small size alone is insufficient for a school to produce higher levels of student learning (Ancess, 1997; Ancess & Ort Wichterle, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2002; Meier, 1995; Noguera, 2002; Wainer & Zwerling, 2006).

An Unfortunate Detour

Sadly, many leaders of small high school reform initiatives do not seem to under-

stand their mission. Threatened by the consequences of high-stakes, standardized test-based accountability, they feel pressured to focus on low-level knowledge and skills that can be quickly and regularly assessed, measured by numbers, and speedily and simply remediated. As a result, many of today's small schools are substantively indistinguishable from their larger counterparts.

schools represents quite a detour from the intention of the original small-schools movement. This grassroots initiative, begun around 30 years ago by teachers in New York City, had a clear purpose: to serve students who were alienated, disengaged, and failing in traditional secondary schools and to teach them to use their minds well. It was informed by both practitioner knowledge and the ideas of megawatt education scholars and thinkers (such as Thomas Jefferson, John Dewey, Ted Sizer, John Goodlad, and Ernest Boyer) and supported by local and state bureaucracies that welcomed grassroots innovation (such as the New York State Education Department's New Compact for Learning).

traditional schools were available for them to occupy. But it seems obvious that the goals of the new model would not have been achievable in a large setting of several thousand students and hundreds of adults, where establishing trust and knowing one another well would be difficult.

The current small schools scale-up has reduced this new model of education to a matter of size. In the process, we have lost touch with the powerful values, purposes, and ideas at the core of the reform. In many cases, the result has been what Michelle Fine has called "big schools in drag": a collection of educationally correct practices limply implemented with anemic understanding; the form without the



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This current version of small high

The alternative schools created were organized collaboratively as communities committed to a common set of ideas about education. They emphasized community, intellectual and personal engagement, authentic learning and assessment, and trusting relationships among adults and students. Initially, these schools were small in size almost by default rather than intent; only small spaces in leased buildings or in existing

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substance and the strategy conflated with the goal. It is time to recover those values, purposes, and ideas; make them explicit; and place them at the center of the work once again. Let's look at four ingredients that are essential for small high schools to achieve their original purpose: to reach kids and get them to use their minds well.

Caring Relationships

Students report that caring relationships, characterized by unwavering teacher access, support, and pressure, are the most powerful force in getting them to achieve at higher levels and graduate (Ancess, 2003). In small schools, relationships between adults and students can be close and trusting. Teachers can see students frequently, get to know them well, and have ongoing formal and informal conversations with

them about their lives and school work, their problems and successes, and their interests and dilemmas.

As teacher-student bonds solidify, teachers can make greater demands on students, leveraging these relationships to persuade students to transcend self-imposed limitations, forsake self-defeating habits, and try new problem-solving strategies that increase their chances for success. When students resist, teachers persist in their demands and concrete support. Gail Lemelbaum, a teacher at the Urban Academy in New York City, refers to this approach as “nudge and nag, punch and stroke pedagogy” (Ancess, 2003, p. 74).

Also important are caring relationships among teachers, characterized by interdependency, trust, respect, and a sense of collective responsibility for student and school outcomes. Sharing the same students, teaching in proximity to one another, having regular common meeting time, planning and problem solving together, and making their work public to one another can dispel the sense of isolation, discouragement, abandonment, and defeat that teachers sometimes feel when they work alone and anonymously, particularly in challenging situations.

Because caring about someone can be time-consuming and emotionally exhausting (Gladwell, 2000), such supportive relationships are unlikely to exist unless schools are small. But small size does not make such relationships inevitable—not even probable. Their inevitability depends on a determination to establish and sustain such relationships as a norm of the school’s culture.

A Unified School Community

Individual relationships are important in reaching students and getting them to achieve. But individual teachers’ efforts to build relationships are multiplied exponentially if the school is a community. Gladwell (2000) describes a community as people knit together by common work. In transformative small

schools, the common work is teaching and learning; teachers and students are unified by shared educational beliefs, ideas, goals, practices, rituals, routines, commitments, and norms. In such schools, all teachers are committed to implementing agreed-upon instructional practices and strategies, and professional development focuses on supporting that implementation. As a result, all students have equal access to effective teaching and successful learning, not just those fortunate enough to land teachers who choose to use those practices.

Education will not improve if schools get smaller and otherwise stay the same.

The Middle College National Consortium High Schools (www.mcnc.us), located on college campuses so that students perceive themselves as college completers, provide a good example of small schools that are true communities. A set of schoolwide pedagogical values and practices brings coherence to each Middle College High School’s efforts to prepare underserved students for college. These values and practices include

- Partnership among the high school, school district, and college, which gives students access to college courses, professors, and resources (for example, tutoring, the gym, theater facilities, and labs).

- Small, heterogeneous classes.

- Real-world learning experiences, such as community service and internships.

- A schoolwide instructional emphasis on rigorous academic inquiry, writing, revision, and literacy development.

- Support structures, such as seminars and advisories with counselors and teachers.

Middle College High Schools use their small size to create a nurturing learning community that supports students academically, socially, and emotionally. All adults see themselves as mentors and advisors. These features contribute to the schools’ 84 percent graduation rate and 83 percent college enrollment rate.

A Strong Safety Net

Conventional high schools compartmentalize and isolate the different functions that serve students. Teachers are responsible for academic functions, guidance counselors for social and emotional functions, administrators for behavioral and discipline functions, and so on. The individuals who occupy these positions may or may not share information with one another. In this compartmentalized system, it is not unusual for students to fall through the cracks—particularly students whose families do not have the social, financial, or intellectual capital to safeguard school success as middle class families do. Transformative small schools connect these services and the people who provide them, creating a safety net that prevents students from falling through the cracks.

One innovative safety net is a system called Distributed Counseling, created by the Institute for Student Achievement, a not-for-profit school redesign organization that partners with about 60 schools in New York, New Jersey, Georgia, and Louisiana. In the distributed counseling system, all adults in the school are responsible for the academic, social, and emotional development of students, and the school uses multiple approaches to safeguard students’ academic, social, and emotional well-being (Allen, Nicholas, Tocci, Hochman, & Gross, 2006).

Through advisories or student advocacy systems, every student is attached

to one adult who takes responsibility for him or her. Other mechanisms for supporting students include close communication with parents; a dedicated counselor who provides one-on-one and group counseling; access to community-based organizations, therapy, and health care; professional development for teachers on integrating guidance strategies in their teaching; and a four-year sequence of activities that prepares students for making informed decisions about college.

At regular meetings, grade-level teams of teachers and a dedicated counselor share information about students who are having problems or demonstrating off-track behaviors, such as frequent absences and incomplete assignments. They use these data to work with the student and family members, developing strategies that the team members use to resolve the students' problems in their early stages. At subsequent meetings, team members monitor these students' progress and the effectiveness of their strategies, making adjustments as needed.

Although a system of distributed counseling requires changes in the roles of teachers and counselors, the comments of one teacher reflect the benefits:

Crises do not occur as frequently because we work to develop and practice strategies to help students solve social problems and because students feel more connected to the adults. (Allen et al., 2006, p. 12)

Distributed counseling requires a small group of adults who know one another, work together, and can interact easily and frequently with one another. Small school size makes it much easier to adopt such a system.

Intellectually Transformative Experiences

Intellectually transformative experiences encourage students to use their minds well. When students discover that they can be successful in school and produce high-quality, intellectually powerful work, they gain a new level of involvement and sense of expertise. They begin to imagine new possibilities for their future.

Getting students to use their minds well means getting them to analyze, reason, mount a logical argument and defend it, solve problems, conduct research, negotiate conflicting perspec-



tives, imagine possibilities, question their own and others' assumptions, and use the power of their ideas to persuade others to change their opinions. Getting students to use their minds well also means conveying to students that ideas are exciting by providing school tasks worthy of their engagement. All too often, the tasks assigned to students—particularly in schools providing a test-prep curriculum concerned primarily with skills and bits of information—trivialize knowledge, are devoid of ideas, and thus are unworthy of students' engagement.

The Urban Academy, an alternative high school for students who have not succeeded at other schools, uses inquiry

pedagogy to get students to use their minds well. Codirector Ann Cook explains that adults at the Academy listen to students and take what they say seriously. The school provides students with experiences that invite them into the conversation of an intellectual community. For example, in encounters with guest speakers, students have opportunities to engage experts as well as their peers and teachers in debates on issues the speakers present. After students studied the film *Pocahontas* in a film course, the school invited an American Indian guest speaker to discuss the film's portrayal of Pocahontas. For 90

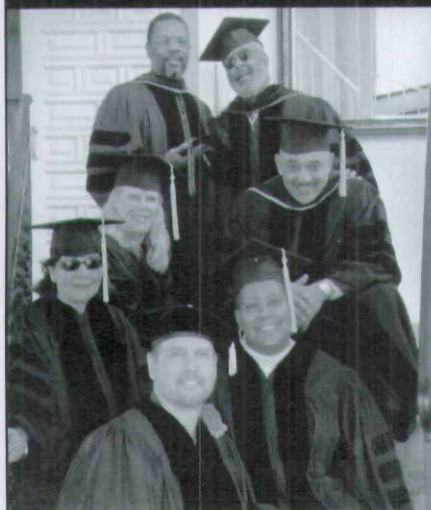
minutes, students and the speaker debated the harm or irrelevance of the film's narrow and inaccurate picture of this historical figure.

In their classes, Urban Academy students examine primary source data, such as slave diaries, U.S. presidents' speeches, and articles written during the historical eras they are studying. Then teachers ask students to draw conclusions just as adult historians do and to

support their conclusions with evidence. These experiences motivate the students to accept responsibility for rigorous intellectual work. Despite the fact that Urban Academy students have not succeeded at traditional schools, more than 90 percent of them graduate and enroll in college.

Another example of intellectually transformative experiences is the Student Press Initiative at Teachers College, Columbia University (www.publishspi.org/About.asp). This student publications project is built on the idea that students are highly motivated by the opportunity to produce a publication that authentic audiences of their peers and the broader community

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will read. The initiative partners with schools to produce "publication-rich school communities" that encourage all students to publish one or more books on topics that interest them. After selecting a topic, students generate questions for research, make phone calls to schedule interviews, meet with and e-mail experts, draft and revise their piece, design their book, and participate in a publications event, which may be held at a local bookstore. The book then becomes a resource for other students.

One student publication project was conducted at Pablo Neruda Academy, a small New York City high school. Seniors did their inquiry on small schools and published *Small Schools, Big Questions: A Student-Led Inquiry into High School Redesign* (Student Press Initiative, 2007). To gather information for the book, they conducted student surveys and visited other small schools in New York City. A core group of students regularly attended a research methods course at Teachers College. Students connected with members of the education reform community across the United States in live, phone, and e-mail interviews. Among others, they questioned Jeannie Oakes on tracking, Mike Klonsky on small schools as the new Civil Rights movement, and Ann Cook on portfolio assessment.

The final report presents interviews the students conducted with these experts on such topics as teachers, facilities, assessment, funding, standards, and college preparation. Students also contributed their own commentaries on issues raised in the research. Examples include "Are Small Schools the Key to Success?" "Why No Textbooks?" "Why Detrack Schools When Society Is Tracked?" and "The Future of Graduates from Small Schools."

Even before publication of the book, teachers reported positive changes in student behavior. Students' reflections revealed that they felt connected to something beyond themselves and the Bronx—to a national movement that

they had not known existed. One student wrote that the book was an opportunity to use her learning to give back to other students. The project released potential that had been dormant, convincing students that their voices counted and that they could write.

Intellectually transformative experiences like these don't need to happen every day. But schools need to provide

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enough of them so that students enlarge their sense of their potential and possibilities and have the confidence to move forward in previously unimagined directions.

Changing the Conversation

Small size is important because it allows the four ideas discussed here to take hold in a school. But education will not improve if schools get smaller and otherwise stay the same. This reform is not just about size. It's about making a cultural change in schools and school systems—in the roles, responsibilities, and relationships among educators, students, and administrators.

Perhaps we need to move the conversation from size to substance—to look at how schools use their small size to reach kids and get them to use their minds well. As our metric, we need to use not test scores, but college-going rates, college-completion rates, graduates' evaluations of how well their high school prepared them for college and

work, and measures of how well graduates analyze, problem solve, collaborate, reason, evaluate evidence, and defend their points of view. Perhaps we need to stop talking about whether school size makes a difference and start focusing on what happens in small schools that *does* make a difference. **EL**

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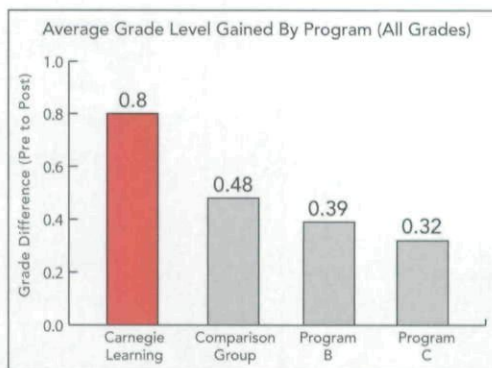
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