

Successful School Downsizing

Small schools are racking up an imposing research record. Solid evidence links them to fewer discipline problems, lower dropout rates, higher levels of student participation, steadier progress toward graduation and more learning.

Small schools are especially beneficial in each of these regards for disadvantaged or at-risk students, who appear to depend to a greater extent on school size and organization for succeeding than do more fortunate youngsters.

But the small-school gains don't follow along automatically in the wake of downsizing, and experience to date yields several lessons important to making good on the promise. Changes are necessary at central-office and building levels, as well as at the new small-unit level. Here are a half dozen lessons that are emerging most clearly and importantly at each of these levels.

Systemwide Issues

Given the research evidence on the advantages of small size and the fact that large schools are what most communities have today, how should school leaders proceed?

Fortunately, large school buildings are no bar to small schools, so quite a lot can be done and at relatively low cost. Multiple schools-within-schools or

An authority on the small-schools movement outlines key considerations for moving to smaller units

small schools can be created in large buildings. School districts across the country, including smaller cities and towns as well as larger ones, have moved to do so. Creating small schools—either anew or in newly subdivided school buildings—may be one of the least expensive ways to transform present practice and outcomes. And the process of creating a new school may be the most effective change process yet devised for converting a failing behemoth into a series of smaller successful units or for turning an adequate school into a set of outstanding ones.

● *Impetus and encouragement from the top is essential.*

Make sure all stakeholders—including those who don't know they are—un-

derstand why such a move is important. In Danville, Va., Superintendent Andy Overstreet has done this with the help of a set of overheads he carries around with him, ready for display at any opportunity to familiarize both staff and community with the district's stunning demographics. He sometimes is kidded about it, but people are beginning to grasp why school change in Danville is essential.

As Yale's Seymour Sarason insists, change is impossible unless the people in the situation believe they're in trouble and need to change.

● *Assist those interested enough to volunteer.*

The move toward smaller units works best if the superintendent's office directly and actively supports the small schools initiative by creating opportunities for volunteer groups of teachers to work together. This is the way it worked 25 years ago in the nation's first attempt at systematically encouraging small school development in New York City's District 4. The process calls for support for those who do step forward, in the form of release time or compensated time for elaborating on their designs. The process requires policies to guide those who want to try.

● *Be sure policies governing small-school development are clear and broadly announced.*

The policies should require school planners to substitute interest-based grouping for ability grouping and tracking. This takes at least two policy thrusts. First, each school proposed should have a theme or focus enabling it to attract a set of constituents (teachers as well as students and parents) who share goals and see education in a similar way.

Second, no small school can set itself up through its theme or admissions practices to drain off the ablest, most accomplished or most motivated students. Without such policies, the first groups of teachers to volunteer tend to end up with the strongest, most teachable youngsters—and equity-based complaints are sure to follow.

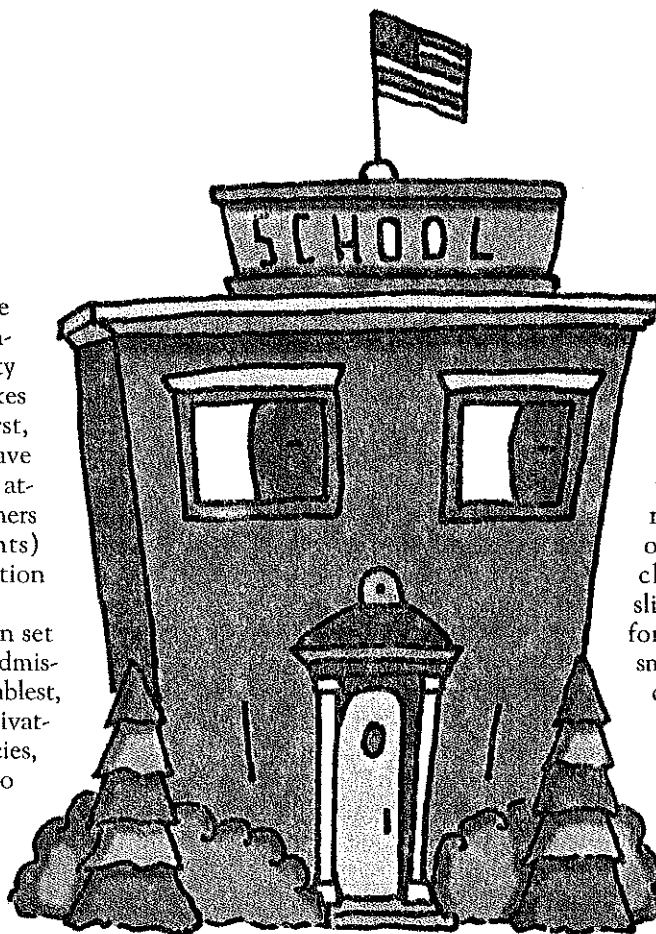
- *Adjust district operating procedures from the start.*

As New York City Public Schools learned, relying on “policy by exception” does not work. The new schools will require different scheduling, different teaching appointment procedures and recognition as separate entities (i.e., being assigned their own number or name). Unless new policies are explicitly framed in these regards, the waiving of existing ones will be left to the discretion of middle-level officeholders who may or may not turn out to sympathize with the venture.

- *Decide what sort of entity the new small schools are to be.*

Are schools-within-schools established by and accountable to the building principal, with their survival tied to his or her tenure? Or are they separate small schools sanctioned and supported by central administration?

The first option, schools-within-schools, risks minimal change (see related story, page 20) and insufficient separateness, autonomy and stability. It also maintains the traditional role and function of the building principal. The separate schools option calls for restructuring building organization, along with the role of principal.



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Site-Level Issues

These issues apply most directly to building-level administrators.

- *Decide early on how to proceed with the downsizing effort.*

Do you want to let the process move gradually with volunteers or to impose it throughout a school, in all schools or in all schools of a particular type (e.g., high schools or failing schools) simultaneously? The gradual effort is slower, of course, but has a better chance of getting off to a good start and building some success stories.

The mandated effort promises greater speed, but more lukewarm and negative adoptions. New York City has tended to follow the gradual route with its high schools and middle schools in some of its community school districts. Philadelphia tried the mandated approach in its 22 comprehensive high schools. Success was more visible and immediate for a larger percentage of schools using the gradual or optional

approach than those taking the mandated route.

- *Encourage the development of distinctive schools.*

Strong leadership from the start will enable new small schools to begin with sufficient distinctiveness to make them worthwhile. In other words, don't settle for minimal change or the results may be too slight to warrant the considerable effort. Evidence from Philadelphia's small school initiative has confirmed quite clearly the reasonable hypothesis that the more piecemeal the implementation, the more that is left unchanged and the more student outcomes resemble those from before.

Given the difficulties of school change, teacher groups need encouragement to range far enough from the familiar and they need help in envisioning how things might be. This puts a premium on leadership.

- *Create multiple units at one site.*

Small schools work better in buildings where there are several of them than in buildings with a single school-within-a-school or even two. The Coalition of Essential Schools has found difficulty with the single school-within-a-school serving as a pilot in a parent school. Meanwhile, a study in Great Neck, N.Y., that looked at the clashes arising in a school with just one, well-established and popular school-within-a-school found that more than half the teachers in the building wanted to be in a similar situation themselves!

Independent studies in Philadelphia and in New York, both of which have been pioneers in the development of schools-within-schools and small schools, agreed on the importance of buildings containing multiple units. Such buildings—dubbed “multiplexes” in Chicago—consist entirely of small schools, and there is no “regular” or “host” school holding the small ones to “guest” status in the building. As New York's District 4 in Spanish Harlem taught the world, *school* need not be synonymous with *building* and a single building may house four or five separate schools.

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● Don't let people begin operating a small school without adequate preparation.

Prospective staff members must spend enough time together upfront to have credible plans for addressing the major issues in school design—curriculum, goals, pedagogy, assessment and arrangements for carrying out their plans, such as role assignments, schedules, decision-making procedures, collaboration and networking. Otherwise what is virtually guaranteed is either re-invention of the traditional school on a smaller scale or failure. Groups that plan to evolve broad-scale redesign once a new school has opened rarely do.

● Recognize that small schools pose unique challenges to site administrators.

Building principals must reorient their management priorities from coordinating and controlling in the interests of order and coherence to encouraging and supporting multiple, distinct learning communities, each with its own program. Where building principals fail to make this shift, the new small schools must struggle to sustain sufficient separateness, autonomy and distinctiveness to succeed. Some fail and close when an enervated faculty simply gives up.

● Provide supportive conditions, as well as autonomy.

A building administrator who denies a school-within-a-school contiguous space or teacher schedules that permit collaboration or insists on the consistent priority of all-school rituals and decorum smothers the small school by denying it the essentials of survival.

Implementation Concerns

These issues apply mostly to those involved in setting up a small school or schools-within-schools.

● Start small and grow year by year.

It is easiest to start small—in a high school, even perhaps with just the four teachers necessary to cover the four main subjects.

Four teachers, plus student enrollment representing the district's student-teacher ratio, might yield 100 youngsters for the first year. Starting with a single grade—perhaps 9th grade for a high school—and adding another grade each year is much easier for new managers than beginning a full range at once.

● Aim for distinctiveness.

Make your school distinctive to attract
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The Theory Behind Small Schools

It's not size alone that creates the benefits in small schools. It is the personalization and responsiveness and the sense of community that smallness and less formal structures permit.

These are the qualities and features rendering small schools far more user friendly to all of their constituents than other contemporary public schools typically prove to be. Smallness has benefits that combine in intricate ways to make these schools more successful—for instance, the user friendliness yields increased parent involvement and hence support, the positive climate yields more student engagement, the two enhance teacher efficacy which in turn enhances teacher effort.

But, at root, the benefits all rest on small school and school-within-a-school capacity to generate a strong sense of identification and affiliation on the part of everyone associated with them. Unless this happens—unless the identification potential is fulfilled—the gains will not be realized.

To make it happen, the schools-within-schools or small schools must be recognizably different and distinctive from others. In important ways, each must represent a world of its own. These worlds reflect many of the features associated with restructured schools: strong professional communities, a distinct school culture and climate and adaptive modifications in the core technology of teaching.

The distinctiveness that attracts students, parents and teachers emerges from a wedding of structural and organizational to programmatic features. Without both, the potential is limited. Thus, the biggest single mistake designers can make is restricting their changes to one type or the other, organization or program, and the constraining of their creations in other ways.

New schools-within-schools and small schools are far more likely to disappoint as a result of their similarity to the old ones than as a result of changes that are too extensive and risky.

— Mary Anne Raywid

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constituents who share an educationally related interest or orientation. That provides valuable help in articulating the program and rendering it coherent rather than fragmented. At least initially, students respond more readily to content themes (for example, the humanities or a high school for public services) than to pedagogical ones (Montessori, inquiry method) or broadly orientational ones (progressive education, fundamental schools).

But in the long run, the pedagogical or orientational focus may lend more coherence than the content focus, which is often hard to sustain across a full curriculum.

- Provide continuing chances for sustained staff discussion.

Regular and frequent staff collaboration time is essential if teachers are to operate and sustain an innovative program. This need does not end when the school design is completed, as traditional practice would recommend once the planning phase was finished. The time spent together is for continual collective attention to assess what is working well and what is not and for which students. Only on such a basis can informed improvement and renewal continue and the professional communi-

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ty so central to success be sustained.

- Seek assistance beyond your borders.

Teachers in small schools today can find moral support and practical assistance from national or regional networks if their ideas are in sufficient sync with those of one or another of such groups. The Coalition of Essential Schools provides a great deal of assistance to those who accept its nine broad guiding principles, and numerous other networks, collaboratives and centers now make it possible for teachers launching new programs to maintain connections with similarly minded schools trodding the same path. The help can prove invaluable.

- Identify and toss out the bad while welcoming the good.

As the Annie Casey Foundation learned painfully from its attempts to change high schools, genuine improvement is not just a matter of adding things that are beneficial. It also entails discarding arrangements and practices whose effects are negative. Thus, what is necessary is not just new small schools, but replacing the department structure; not just adding advisories to permit sustained student-adult connections but

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FOR FURTHER READING

Readers interested in consulting additional information on the small schools or schools-within-schools movement should consider the following resources.

- *High Schools as Communities: The Small School Reconsidered*, by Tom Gregory and Gerald Smith, 1987. Available from Phi Delta Kappa, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, Ind. 47402-0789, or by calling 800-766-1156.

- *High Schools With Character*, by Paul Hill, G.E. Foster and Tamara Gendler, 1990. Available from Rand Corp., P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, Calif. 90407-2138.

- "Organizing Schools Into Smaller Units: A Planning Guide," by Diana Oxley, 1993. Available from Center for Research in Human Development and Education, Temple University, Ritter Hall Annex-9th Floor, Philadelphia, Pa. 19122, or by calling 215-204-3000.

eliminating whatever may be causing adversarial relationships between teachers and students; not just adding new programs to respond to difficulties, but tackling the attitudes that made the new programs seem needed.

● *Expect tradeoffs.*

Although small schools can bring many benefits and few who partake appear willing to return to prior circumstances, be prepared to make tradeoffs. Identification with and loyalty to the small unit means less loyalty to the building as a whole; new professional relationships mean attenuation of the old; empowerment for teachers means less for the administrators who previously made the decisions; positive change will bring exhilaration, but it also brings fatigue.

A teacher at one small school in Philadelphia summed up her experience this way: "It's put a smile on my lips and bags under my eyes."

A New Culture

These three sets of recommendations add up to more extensive elaboration of the downsizing effort than previous rounds of house plans and mini-schools have undertaken. Among the major lessons emerging is that such scale is necessary if the effort is to succeed in changing much of anything.

Those who set their sights lower, aiming at less radical change or more narrowly defined improvement, usually fail to alter the way school is experienced by its teachers and students. That, in turn, leaves levels of commitment and effort unaffected.

● "Focus Schools: A Genre to Consider," by Mary Anne Raywid, 1994. Available from ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, N.Y. 10027-6696, or by calling 212-678-3433.

● "Taking Stock: The Movement to Create Mini-Schools, Schools Within Schools, and Separate Small Schools," by Mary Anne Raywid, 1996. Available from ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education.

● *Building Community in Schools*, by Tom Sergiovanni, 1994. Available from Jossey-Bass Publishers, 350 Sansome St., San Francisco, Calif. 94104-1342, or by calling 800-956-7739.

The downsizing of schools provides the conditions that *permit* and *invite* many of the items on today's reform agenda—fashioning schools as communities and as communities of learning, authentic learning, responding to growing student diversity and more. But small size only provides the necessary conditions and those wishing to claim such benefits must pursue them.

The pursuit also must be carried out in particular ways. For instance, successful downsizing must affect the circumstances of all of a school's students, not just a targeted few. And it must affect a student's entire day, not just a period or two.

The restructuring must be accompanied by a "reculturing" that has those involved in digging deep—questioning and replacing old assumptions, beliefs and values undergirding previous arrangements. In short, downsizing offers considerable promise, but fulfilling it calls for more than new building assignments and rearranged enrollments. ■

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