



Big Ideas for Downsizing Schools

By Mary Anne Raywid
From *The School Administrator*

SOLID, imposing research now links small schools to fewer discipline problems, lower dropout rates, higher levels of student participation, steadier progress toward graduation, and more learning. They are especially beneficial for disadvantaged or at-risk students, who appear to depend more on school size and organization for succeeding than do more fortunate youngsters.

It's not size alone that creates the benefits in small schools. It is the personalization, responsiveness, and sense of community that smallness and less formal structures permit. These render small schools far more user-friendly to all of their constituents.

Smallness has benefits that combine in intricate ways to make these schools more successful. For instance, user friendliness yields increased parent involvement and hence support, the positive climate yields more student engagement, and the two en-

hance 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 strong identification and affiliation on the part of everyone associated with them. Unless this 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 dis-

Mary Anne Raywid, Professor Emerita of Education at Hofstra University, is on the Graduate Affiliate Faculty, College of Education, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1776 University Ave., Honolulu, Hawaii 96822. Condensed from The School Administrator, 54 (October 1997), 18-23. Published by the American Association of School Administrators, 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, Virginia 22209-1813 (phone: 703-875-0772).

tinctive from others. In important ways, each must represent a world of its own. These worlds reflect many 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.

Of course, small-school gains don't follow along automatically in the wake of downsizing, and experience 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 lessons emerging most clearly and importantly at each of these levels.

We start with **systemwide issues**. Given the research on small size and the fact that large schools are what most communities have today, how should we 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 small schools can be created in large buildings. School districts across the country, in smaller cities and towns and 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 are essential.** Make sure all stakeholders—including those who don't know they are—understand why such a move is important. Danville, Virginia, Superintendent Andy Overstreet has 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. Change requires that the people in a 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 teach-

ers to work together. It worked this way 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.**

They 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.** 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 office-holders 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 the principal's tenure? Or are they separate small schools sanctioned and supported by central administration? The first option, schools-within-schools, risks minimal change 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.

Turning to the area of **site-level issues**, these concerns apply most directly to building-level administrators:

● **Decide early on how to proceed with the downsizing effort.** Do you want to let it 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 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 com-

munity 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 development of distinctive schools.** Strong leadership from the start will enable new small schools to begin with sufficient distinctiveness to make them worthwhile. 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 confirms quite clearly 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 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 Great Neck, New York, study looked at clashes arising in a school with just one, well-established and popular school-within-a-school and found that more than half of the teachers in the building wanted to

be in a similar situation themselves!

Independent studies in Philadelphia and New York—both pioneers in developing 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. New York's District 4, in Spanish Harlem, taught the world that *school* need not be synonymous with *building*, and that a single building may house four or five separate schools.

● **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.

Turning now to the area of **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 ninth 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 the school distinctive to attract constituents who share an educationally related interest or orientation. That provides valuable help in articulating the program and render-

ing it coherent rather than fragmented. At least initially, students respond more readily to content themes (e.g., 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, 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 and isn't working well and for which students. Only on such a basis can informed improvement and renewal continue and the professional community 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 much assistance to those who accept its nine broad guiding principles, and numerous other networks, collaboratives, and centers