



Big Buildings, Small Schools:

Using a Small Schools Strategy for High School Reform

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	3
Key Decision Points: The Pace of Change and the Locus of Control	5
The Pace of Change: Incremental or “Big Bang”	5
The Locus of Control: Inside or Outside	6
Trade-Offs to Consider in Selecting a Strategy	8
Emerging Issues in the Proliferation of Small Schools	14
Next Steps	19
References	20
About JFF	21
About the Authors	21

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Executive Summary

A growing number of school districts around the country are using small school development as a central strategy for improving high schools and overhauling the way the district itself does business. Driven by an increasing sense of urgency and frustration with reforms that fail to fundamentally change the quality of instruction or the nature of student-teacher relationships, they are transforming large, under-performing high schools into “education complexes” made up of multiple autonomous small schools under one roof.

For school districts, this conversion process offers a potentially powerful opportunity for a “defining moment” of change—an opportunity to provide the most fertile conditions for excellent teaching and learning. A small schools strategy provides educational leaders with an opportunity to fundamentally rethink such key areas as administrative structures, staff roles, student/teacher relationships, course sequences, subject matter, the use of time, community partnerships, and parent engagement.

Key Decision Points: The Pace of Change and the Locus of Control

Communities undertaking a small schools strategy are developing answers to two basic issues: how quickly to proceed and what process to undertake in developing and managing small schools.

The Pace of Change: Incremental vs. Big Bang: Using the “incremental” approach, Oakland, California, is growing new small schools in the corners of existing large schools; the small schools will supplant the large one when they reach capacity at all grade levels. In this approach, a school district transforms a large comprehensive high school over a period of several years, without a dramatic closing of the existing school, but the district is clear from the beginning that the end goal is a campus of multiple, autonomous small schools.

In 1993, New York City chose the “big bang” approach when it phased out Julia Richman High School, a large comprehensive high school, and then re-opened it with six schools that had been started off-site. Today, the Julia Richman Campus houses four high schools, a middle

school, and an elementary school, along with a day care center and a teen parent resource center.

The Locus of Control: Inside or Outside: Boston initially selected a district-led process for small school creation by “intervening” in failing high schools and, when necessary, replacing the school’s leadership team, reassigning staff, and reallocating resources. In 2000, the first such intervention resulted in the development of four semi-autonomous small learning communities within South Boston High School, each headed by a newly appointed principal. The intent from the beginning was for these small learning communities to become autonomous small schools, a step that happened in fall 2003.

An “outside strategy,” in contrast, relies on “intermediaries” to take on the task of implementing specific school designs. Sacramento, California, which was engaged in a citywide high school reform, turned to one such intermediary when it recognized that Sacramento High School was in danger of being placed on a list for state intervention. To turn the school around rapidly and dramatically, the district awarded a charter to St. Hope Community Development Corporation, a local nonprofit headed up by the popular former NBA star Kevin Johnson, to open multiple schools within Sacramento High School.

Many communities have chosen a “partnership strategy,” working with outside partners that may include a lead educational intermediary and community organizations. As part of the development of small schools, these outside partners and the district co-develop an RFP process that engages a wide range of constituencies, including teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community-based organizations.

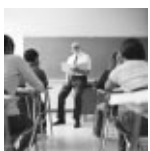
Trade-Offs in Selecting a Strategy: The selection of a strategy to convert large schools into autonomous small schools depends on local context and requires districts to consider a number of issues:

- *Staff and student relationships:* A central reason for moving to small schools is to ultimately foster stronger and deeper learning relationships—student-to-student, student-to-teacher, and teacher-to-teacher. But the process



of going from large to small can also create interpersonal tensions within the building; it requires sophisticated leadership to share data with students, parents, and teachers on the need for change and to assist faculty in determining their readiness and interest in staying in the building.

- *District-community relations:* For residents in the community to participate in reform, they need to understand the evidence base behind small schools and feel that they have a voice in what happens to their local schools and their children. The goal of building community understanding and demand should be central to decisions about the pace of reform and the locus of control. Districts may charge a politically savvy internal high school reform office with this task or rely on a well-respected community organization to broker the process.
- *District or partnering organization capacity:* The success of a small schools strategy depends upon a number of factors—from retrofitting the physical plant to coalescing faculty, students, and the community around a vision of change. These are not changes that a school, especially one suffering from demoralization and under-investment, can be expected to manage on its own. Key considerations in selecting a strategy are the kinds and amount of support that a school will need—and a district and/or partners can provide—in making a conversion.
- *Labor agreements:* The choice of a conversion strategy not only depends upon existing union contracts; it also influences collective bargaining agreements and the district's relationships with the teachers' union. Reformers have to calculate the strength and stance of local unions, the recent history of collective bargaining agreements, and the level of labor-management discord that the political climate will tolerate.



Emerging Issues

Big Buildings, Small Schools describes communities that are leaders in determining how to provide young people with multiple pathways to and through the postsecondary education and credentials they will need for successful adulthood. As the promise of choice approaches reality, new questions arise.

What is the appropriate balance between autonomy and accountability? Advocates of small schools point to a fundamental condition for their success: their flexibility and autonomy allow the people closest to the students—school leaders, faculty, parents, other students—to make school-level decisions about how to organize resources to best meet young people's learning needs. However, many

districts that are pursuing a small school strategy simultaneously centralize authority under a strong district leader who can drive home a consistent message about high standards for all students and the need for instructional improvement, programmatic clarity, and bureaucratic efficiency.

How can a district create and protect a space for innovation within the bureaucracy without isolating innovators from key central office departments and those with line authority? Developing small schools on a large scale requires a central authority to manage the process, coordinate the involvement of central-office staff and community partners, attend to and promote needed policy changes, and support small schools in their planning and start-up stages; however, a high school reform office can become isolated if its functions are not carefully integrated with the rest of the district infrastructure.

How can districts ensure that small schools meet their promise by promoting and assessing the quality of new small schools? The explosive growth of new small schools requires careful attention to issues of both quality and accountability. Moving toward a choice-based system of schools requires that students and their families have access to data on the quality of schools. Data also can be critical to helping students and their families, as well as the district, determine which learning environments succeed and which might constitute a good match for a particular student.

How can districts offer youth and families a choice among a portfolio of high schools without creating a new hierarchy of high schools? The move to transform large high schools into small schools is, at least in part, an attempt to provide more and better choices to the young people and families dependent on public schools. The development of a portfolio of high schools could—and should—create more access to an array of quality options. However, small schools of choice also have the potential to exacerbate longstanding inequities in who has access to which educational programs and services.

What is the role of alternative, “second chance” education in a district that is moving toward a portfolio of high schools? Leaders are beginning to ask how to address the particular needs of the young people who are most disaffected from school and closest to dropping out—those who, for example, are overage for their grade, not on track to graduate, or chronically absent or disruptive. The role of alternative education in a system redesigned around a portfolio of high schools is a critical next-generation question for secondary school reform.

Big Buildings, Small Schools:

Using a Small Schools Strategy for High School Reform

Introduction

Until quite recently, the movement to create small urban high schools and the focus on improving large, under-performing urban high schools have coexisted as parallel and disparate strands of reform, each with its own champions and constituencies. Today, a number of school districts around the country are discovering the potential power of using small school development as a central strategy for improving high schools and overhauling the way the district itself does business.

Small schools are not a new phenomenon, but for the most part they have operated at the margins of school districts. In the past two decades, we have witnessed the growth of new, small urban high schools, some quite well-known. They have ranged from home-grown models, such as Central Park East Secondary School in New York City and the Fenway Pilot High School in Boston, to those that have spawned national networks, such as the Big Picture Company's Met Schools and High Tech High's replication sites. Many of these schools, which operate either as district schools under negotiated conditions of autonomy or as charter schools, have posted promising outcomes for a small portion of students in the country's large urban districts, but they have rarely played a central role in a district's high school reform strategy.

Because these efforts are relatively small not only in terms of the size of the new schools but also in terms of the numbers of schools in any of the networks—even all of them combined—many education leaders and policymakers have viewed the small schools movement as largely irrelevant to the central challenge of high school reform: transforming the large urban high schools that consistently fail to improve the outcomes of their mostly poor and minority student bodies and that lose up to half of their young people before graduation day. Indeed, the accounting of the progress of specific populations of students under No Child Left Behind, along with emerging research on low promotion power and high dropout rates in large urban high schools, has brought into sharp relief the large number of low-performing high schools posting dismal outcomes—and hence the need to make fundamental changes in how schools operate.¹

Since the late 1980s, the most common strategy for changing the structure of the large high school has been to create small learning communities. These operate within large high schools, with a subset of teachers taking collective responsibility for a group of students. Underlying the approach is a belief that this type of structural reform is necessary to building stronger and deeper learning relationships—student-student, student-teacher, and teacher-teacher—and that it promotes greater intellectual focus across the school.

In fact, the evidence that small learning communities raise student engagement and achievement is based primarily on research not on small learning communities themselves but on small schools. A growing body of research indicates that small schools have higher achievement levels, higher graduation rates, lower dropout rates, and more safety than large schools.² Yet small learning communities often bear little resemblance to autonomous small schools, in large part because they are layered onto the existing organizational structure of large comprehensive high schools, with their subject-matter departments, programs for special populations, and myriad stand-alone initiatives. The structural configuration of the large, comprehensive high school has proven remarkably resistant to reforms, and as a result the core challenge of improving teaching and learning in large urban schools has remained largely intractable.³

Beginning in the 1990s and accelerating in this decade, a small number of school districts has begun to complement a small learning community strategy with an effort to create new small schools within existing large high schools. Driven by an increasing sense of urgency and increasing frustration with reforms that do not fundamentally change the quality of teaching and the nature of



Today, a number of school districts around the country are using small school development as a central strategy for improving high schools and overhauling the way the district itself does business.

student-teacher relationships, these districts are taking more aggressive action: they are using a small school strategy to transform large high schools into “education complexes” or “campuses” made up of multiple autonomous small schools under one roof.⁴ Rather than housing one isolated small school within a large high school—an arrangement that allows the large high school to maintain existing bureaucratic structures and instructional practices, and that can ultimately foster resentment of the small school—districts are now attempting to use a “small schools strategy” to completely overhaul their most dysfunctional large high schools.

For large schools, the conversion into small schools within a “multiplex” arrangement offers a potentially powerful strategy for realizing the benefits of smallness. Specifically, conversion provides an opportunity for a fundamental rethinking of administrative structure, staff roles, student/teacher relationships, course sequences, subject matter, the use of time, community partnerships, and parent engagement. A “defining moment” of change into separate small schools allows educational leaders to

address all these areas from the vantage point of what will produce the most fertile conditions for excellent teaching and learning.

For small school proponents, the conversion of large high schools into multiple small schools offers an important opportunity to address longstanding concerns about equity and scale. Although often begun by reformers concerned with the racial achievement gap and other equity issues, small schools usually only serve a small percentage of young people in a district, opening them to the charge of being both exclusive and “boutique” (i.e., difficult if not impossible to replicate). In some cases, small schools have inadvertently become selective as their relative success has made them attractive to students and families with the wherewithal to seek out options. Increasingly, reformers are realizing that starting small schools of choice in a district without a strategy for transforming its large schools can result in an increasing concentration in the least desirable large schools of young people (and families) who are too alienated or disempowered to take advantage of educational choices or advocate for themselves.

Big Buildings, Small Schools examines a range of strategies being undertaken by districts across the country to plan and launch multiple small schools within the walls of large high schools. It also explores implementation issues that arise concerning school-level autonomies, governance, and leadership of high school reform at the district level, and it delves into the challenges for “central office” leaders of managing a system of learning options that offers a broader range of choices for students and parents.



Key Decision Points:

The Pace of Change and the Locus of Control

The first step in transforming large schools into multiplexes of small ones is to choose a strategy for designing and launching small schools. The transformation of a large school into autonomous, effective small schools requires fundamental change in the staff's authority, roles, and relationships, both within the school and between the school and its various "communities"—especially parents and community partners. But how such changes are best accomplished in a particular city, district, and school can vary. Should the district enter change gradually or through a "big bang"? Who will develop and then participate in the governance of new small schools? Who should control the change process: the district and school leadership, an outside agency or organization under a contract or charter arrangement, or a partnership of inside and outside players?

Certainly, districts have operated for decades with top-down directives. This is not only a bureaucratic, control-driven inclination: many would argue that the unwieldiness of large districts has made directive management almost a necessity. At the same time, some districts have experience growing their own stand-alone small schools with a degree of autonomy (such as Boston's in-district charter schools, known as "pilots," or Providence's "site-based management" option that allows some flexibility in hiring and scheduling). Charters have changed the educational landscape as well. Although many districts continue to see charters as unwelcome competition, a few have begun to welcome replications of successful charters into their portfolio of schools, and others, such as Sacramento, have even contracted with a chartering agency to launch charters in existing high schools.

This is a time of experimentation and ferment. Around the country, communities are developing answers to two basic issues: how quickly to proceed and what process to undertake in developing, managing, and controlling small schools. In some cases, communities themselves are trying more than one approach. The next section describes two different ways districts are managing the pace of reform. We then focus on management and control of the change process.

The Pace of Change: Incremental or "Big Bang"

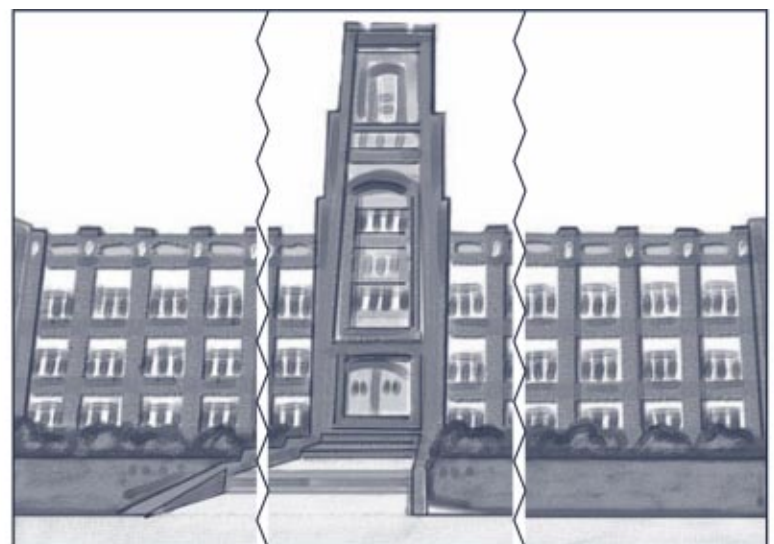
The Incremental Approach: Growing the New Within the Old

New York City and Oakland, California, are growing new small schools in the corners of existing large schools; when the small schools reach capacity at all grade levels, they will supplant the large. In both cities, multiple schools are opening at once,⁵ and the large schools, while retaining some upper-grade students, are downsizing and will eventually be replaced. In schools that are transforming over a multi-year period, a building-wide principal manages the process, both to create a climate of support for the new small schools and to ensure that all students and teachers, including those in the downsized "host" school, feel they are in a viable learning environment. The principal plays a key role in managing the conversion process across the school and may take on the leadership of one of the new small schools.

In this incremental approach (Figure 1), a school district transforms a large comprehensive high school into separate, autonomous small schools gradually, over a period of several years, without a dramatic closing of the existing school. For this approach to work, the district has to be clear from the beginning that the end goal is a campus



Figure 1: The Incremental Approach



Autonomous School

Opens with 9th grade
and adds a grade per year

Downsized School

Autonomous School

Opens with 9th grade
and adds a grade per year

of multiple, autonomous small schools—even though the process starts with the acceptance of a small freshman class for one (or preferably two) new small school(s). These small schools add a grade per year, and the existing school downsizes as the small schools grow. The district may opt to maintain the downsized school as a small school or phase it out as the new small schools replace the existing school altogether.

In this model, how staff are selected for the new small schools depends upon existing labor agreements. In some instances, teachers have retention rights within the build-

ing; in some instances, there is a balance of retention rights and the flexibility to hire from the outside.

The “Big Bang” Approach: Closing the Old to Make Room for the New

In 1993, the Julia Richman High School in New York City was phased out as a large comprehensive high school and then re-opened with six schools that had been started off-site, making this one of the nation’s longest-standing “shared” facilities. In this instance, the school department emptied the building and brought in new students and teachers. Today, the Julia Richman Campus houses four high schools, a middle school, and an elementary school, along with a day care center and a teen parent resource center.

Boston undertook a combined approach: it transformed two of a large school’s existing small learning communities into autonomous small schools, while also moving a two-year-old successful small school, with charter-like autonomy, into a third section of the building. Through negotiation with the Boston Teachers Union, current teachers in the building maintained their attachment rights, but newly hired teachers have attachment rights only to the small school in which they teach.

These districts opted to transform a high school in one move by closing it altogether and reopening it as an education “multiplex” housing multiple small high schools. There are at least two possibilities for this approach. One is to incubate small schools in separate facilities and then move them into shared facilities (Figure 2). Another option is to shut down an under-performing school and start new small schools in its stead to serve the existing population of students (Figure 3).

Here, as in the incremental approach, how staff are selected for the new small schools depends upon labor agreements, often reflecting a compromise between retention rights of teachers in the building and the ability of new schools to do new hires. Because the shut-down and reopening of a high school eliminates the large school entirely, districts are finding it possible to use this “defining moment” to reconsider which administrative positions are necessary in a small school structure and to redefine key job descriptions of non-teaching personnel (e.g., assistant principal, department chair, and guidance counselor).

The Locus of Control: Inside or Outside

Inside Strategy: District-Created Design Teams

A 1994 district/teachers’ union agreement in Boston created a process by which the district could “intervene” in failing high schools and, if necessary, replace the school’s

Figure 2: The Big Bang Approach with Incubation

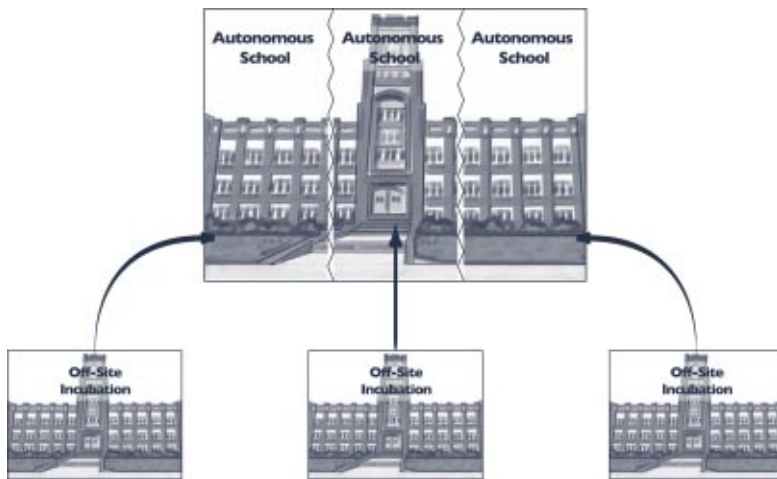
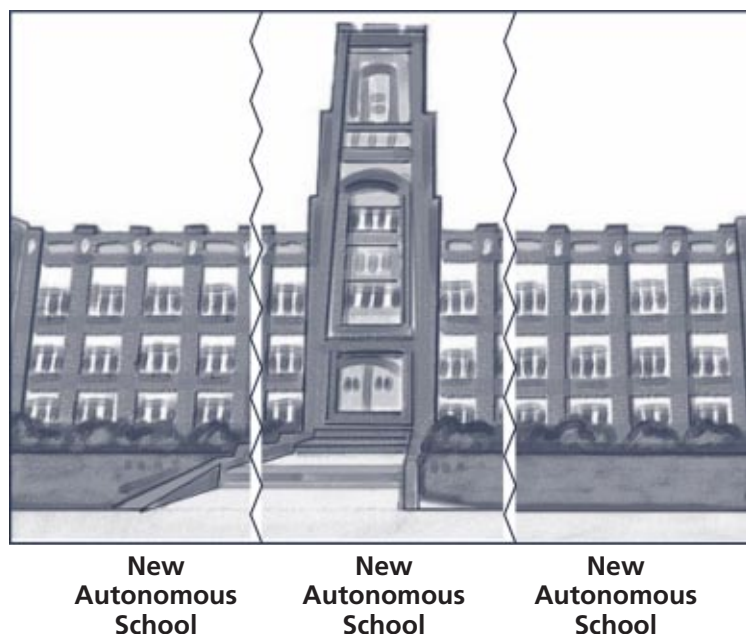


Figure 3: The Big Bang Approach with New Schools



leadership team, reassign staff within the building or to other buildings, and reallocate resources. In 2000, the first such intervention resulted in the development of four semi-autonomous small learning communities within South Boston High School, each headed by a newly appointed principal. The intent from the beginning was for these small learning communities to become autonomous small schools, a step that happened in fall 2003.⁶

Emboldened by the progress being made at South Boston High School, the district intervened at another under-performing high school. Building on the thematic identity and faculty of existing small learning communities in the school, the district set up “design teams” for the creation of two new small schools.⁷ The design teams reflected multiple constituencies, including district leaders, teachers within the building, administrators, community representatives, and students. To help anchor the multiplex and maximize the use of the building, the district invited another small school, which had been incubated for a year elsewhere, to move into the building. All current students had the opportunity to choose between the two newly created, “home grown” schools. All entering freshmen could choose among the incubated school and the two new schools.

This approach allowed the district to move quickly in transforming the school into a new entity, an “education complex” housing three autonomous schools. Design teams were formed in January 2003, designs were developed by later that spring, and new small schools opened in September 2003. The district’s new Office of High School Renewal oversaw the process and helped the new small schools to gain some flexibility in job descriptions and use of resources.⁸

Outside Strategy: Turning to an Intermediary to Operate Schools

In the past five years, a number of local, regional, and national “intermediary” organizations have taken on the task of replicating specific school designs, and they can augment a district’s capacity with skills, experiences, and credibility in creating and operating small schools. Some of these intermediaries have created and/or operate networks of schools that follow specific models. These networks are centrally managed by the intermediary—such as a charter management organization—while others are more loosely affiliated. Several regional or national intermediaries are marketing their designs to school districts around the country.

In other cases, a local organization plays an intermediary role, taking on the start-up and/or management of several charter schools in one community. In Sacramento, California, which has undertaken a district-wide high school reform that includes opening autonomous small schools and establishing grade 9–12 small learning communities within large high schools, the district recognized that Sacramento High School was in danger of being placed on a list for state intervention. St. Hope Community Development Corporation, a local nonprofit headed up by the popular former NBA star Kevin Johnson, applied to the district to open multiple schools within Sacramento High School under an independent charter.⁹ The district determined that the school could be turned around most rapidly and dramatically if it awarded a charter to St. Hope. In the fall of 2003, after political contention, including an unsuccessful lawsuit brought against the district by the teachers’ union and parents of a magnet school within Sacramento High School, an independent charter was granted to St. Hope.

Sacramento High School, which had closed in June 2003, reopened in the fall of 2003 with six autonomous charter schools, serving a total of 1,600 students in grades 9–12. Students who had been attending Sacramento High School were encouraged to attend one of the new small schools, but St. Hope also reached out to draw in new students; as part of the court settlement, students who opted out of the new “Sac High” had enrollment preference in other district schools. Teachers within the building had the opportunity to apply for positions in the new charter high schools, but few did because these positions are non-union under an independent charter. Teachers who did not apply for positions within the school were guaranteed positions in other schools in the district.

Inside/Outside Strategy: Community Partnerships and Community Organizing

New York City and Oakland have worked with two sets of outside partners: a lead educational intermediary as well as local community organizations. As part of the develop-



The transformation of a large school into autonomous, effective small schools requires fundamental change in the staff’s authority, roles, and relationships, both within the school and between the school and its various “communities”—especially parents and community partners.

ment of small schools, these three partners co-develop an RFP process that engages a wide range of constituencies—including teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community-based organizations—in partnerships to create small schools. The particulars of how the partnerships form vary.



In New York City, coalition building across diverse sectors occurred at two levels: at the city level and at the district level. In 2001, New Visions for Public Schools, a non-profit education intermediary, received funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and The Open Society Institute to launch the New Century High Schools Initiative for the creation of new small schools across the city. New Visions, together with the New York City Department of Education, the United Federation of Teachers, and the Council of Supervisors and

Administrators, issued an RFP to invite districts within the city system to submit plans for creating new small schools that would follow research-based design principles.¹⁰

In response, the Bronx superintendent's office partnered with South Bronx Churches, a respected community organization that had previously founded a successful small school. In Brooklyn, the superintendent's office partnered with Brooklyn College. Each partnership solicited proposals for new small schools from school-community partnerships, with a key provision: the lead partner of each design team was to be a non-profit organization—cultural, postsecondary, or community-based.

In 2003 and 2004, another round of planning teams of educators, parents, students, and community-based organizations has been meeting to develop their plans; of 60 teams planning schools in Brooklyn, Bronx, and Manhattan, 35 were selected to open in fall 2004. Community partners engaged in starting the new small schools range from settlement houses and community-based organizations, such as Aspira and the YMCA, to theater companies and museums a borough away.

Oakland has followed a similar RFP process, although here a powerful community organization partnered with a respected education reform organization to spearhead the drive for new small schools through a multi-year, parent organizing process. Parents working with Oakland Community Organizations were awakened to the discrepancy in outcomes between smaller schools, serving primarily more affluent Oakland students, and large schools, serving poor and minority students. Along with the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES), parents began organizing for new small schools. In the fall of 2000, the Oakland Unified School District issued an RFP inviting teachers to submit designs for small schools. The RFP indicated that Oakland Community Organizations, BayCES, and the Oakland school district were working in an official partnership.¹¹

Trade-Offs to Consider in Selecting a Strategy

There is no “one right way” for districts to approach the questions framed above. The selection of a strategy to convert large schools into autonomous small schools depends on local context: existing labor agreements, staff and student relationships within the building, relations between the district and the community, and capacity at the district or intermediary level for school support. And in most communities, a large-to-small conversion strategy complements other structural reforms, such as the development of freestanding small schools and the establishment of small learning communities within large high schools.

(The charts on pages 9 and 11 summarize the discussion of trade-offs described in this section.)



The Pace of Change: Incremental or “Big Bang”

Incremental Approach		
TRADE-OFF TO CONSIDER	ADVANTAGES	DRAWBACKS
Labor Impact and Relations	Fewer staff members impacted at one time; time for staff to make decisions about transferring or applying to stay; time to build relationship with teachers in the building and with the union so as to avoid unnecessary grievances	More time for resistance to grow and fester; union can organize against the change; “us vs. them” mentality can bifurcate the faculty
Student Experience	Allows current students to finish program of study and graduate from their “old” school	May lead old and new students to experience an “us and them” situation
Ownership of Reform	Allows time to correct misconceptions about the reform and need for change, to share data on student outcomes prompting a change, and to engage in conversation and study groups about need for change	Takes longer to get a critical mass of faculty who are aligned with the new direction
Community Relations	Allows time to engage and organize community partners’ involvement in the design of new small schools and to engage parents of prospective students	Doesn’t deal with the sense of urgency some community members feel about dealing with an underperforming school
Capacity Building	Less taxing on organization providing support: capacity-building can occur over time	More challenging to make necessary changes in job descriptions, staff roles, and physical plant



Big Bang Approach		
TRADE-OFF TO CONSIDER	ADVANTAGES	DRAWBACKS
Labor Impact and Relations	More support for change among staff who remain once they experience benefits of smaller faculty with more professional interaction, smaller student load, etc.	Can lead to compromised relationships between district and teachers’ union
Student Experience	Makes every student part of the change	May have less support from students who started before the change; could have negative impact on entering students
Ownership of Reform	Awareness among critical mass of staff who stay or are hired that there will be immediate and fundamental changes	Little time to bring along more questioning/skeptical staff
Community Relations	Gives community sense of movement, of addressing urgent situation	Less time to build community engagement and to organize
Capacity-Building	Sharply defines capacity-building tasks	Requires significant capacity-building in a short time at the dramatic “moment” of change

Labor Impact/Relationship with the Union

The conversion of large high schools to autonomous, small schools provides staff with the opportunity to fundamentally rethink both the effectiveness of their instructional strategies and their relationships with students. Going to scale, however, means doing so not just with those staff who step forward to undertake such reconsideration but also with those who may not desire—or who may even deeply resent—the call for new approaches as an implicit judgment of failure. As a result, the choice of a conversion strategy not only depends upon existing union contracts; it also influences new collective bargaining agreements and the district's relationships with the teachers' union. In deciding whether to use an incremental or big bang strategy, or how far inside or outside to sit on the locus of control question, reformers have to calculate the stance of local unions, the recent history of collective bargaining agreements, and the level of labor-management discord that the political climate will tolerate. A district may also engage the union early in the small schools initiative, as in New York City, and forge an agreement specific to the new schools that gives them some flexibility in hiring staff.

Whether done incrementally or all at once, a small schools strategy to transform an existing school has a deep impact on staff, many of whom have taught or worked in the building for much of their teaching careers. An incremental approach limits the number of staff affected at one time, giving people a chance to learn more about and participate in the changes that are occurring, as well as a chance to transfer out or take advantage of retirement offers. However, the longer time span also gives more time for resentment to fester and resistance to grow.

The “big bang” approach of shutting down and reopening a building creates a much bigger labor impact, which can aggravate already tense union-management relations. Small schools have the potential to create better working conditions for teachers, but they can also challenge seniority practices. For example, in Boston, the closing of one large high school became a rallying cry for union leaders in contract negotiations. However, even when the upshot of such negotiation is to guarantee jobs in the building for all of the teachers (as in Boston) or at least 50 percent of them (as in New York's Julia Richman Campus), a big bang creates a defining moment when important changes can be made. Such a moment encouraged the design teams for transforming the Boston high school to be creative in their staffing patterns: they reconsidered which non-teaching positions were necessary in a small school structure and redefined key job descriptions

(e.g., assistant headmaster, guidance counselor).

With regard to the locus of control, the outside approach has a higher potential to lead to contentious labor relations. In 2003, the Sacramento teachers' union brought the school district to court over the reopening of Sacramento High School under outside control through the charter management agreement with St. Hope. The union charged that the charter was illegal because it had not been developed with the participation of teachers in the building. As a result of the suit, St. Hope did not receive the go-ahead to reopen Sacramento High School as a multiplex of autonomous schools until the late summer of 2003. Although teachers were hired on time and the schools opened, a negotiated settlement was not reached until December, and tensions with the union continued due to the board's awarding of the charter to St. Hope.

Relationships Within the Building

A central reason for moving to small schools is to create opportunities for stronger and deeper learning relationships—student-to-student, student-to-teacher, and teacher-to-teacher. But the process of going from large to small can also create interpersonal tensions within the building.

When a school is targeted for conversion, some teachers and administrators may feel that their school is being unfairly singled out—especially if the school, as is often the case in chronically low-performing schools, has operated for years under difficult conditions, including underinvestment and inequitable and disproportionate placement of students who are furthest behind. These feelings can spill into resentments of new staff who come to the building to be part of the change.

The incremental approach of growing new small schools in the corners of an existing high school can lead to an “us vs. them” mentality, with mutual distrust emerging between the new school's students and teachers and those in the still-existing old school. The big bang approach creates tensions of its own, with new faculty working alongside people who have worked there for years and are wedded to particular ways of doing business. This is less likely to happen if the locus of control moves to an “outside” group, like a charter-management organization, and “like-minded” teachers are hired, but, as just noted, that can lead to labor-management strife.

Sophisticated leadership is required to manage tensions within a transforming building. For example, the principal of South Bronx High School, which was being phased out, was also the principal of one of the new small schools growing in its stead. For two years, he provided



The Locus of Control: Inside or Outside

Inside Strategy: District-Led		
TRADE-OFF TO CONSIDER	ADVANTAGES	DRAWBACKS
Labor Impact and Relations	Can quickly engage faculty on design team to address staff roles and working conditions	Potential for existing contracts to constrain reforms and limit autonomy
Relationships Within Building	Engages staff and students in building	May create us/them dynamic between those on and off design teams, depending on relations between school-based staff and central office
Community Relations	Can hand-pick community partners to participate	May be viewed with suspicion by some community partners because district-initiated
Capacity-Building	District roll-out, so can more readily address logistical and start-up issues	Potential for staff in building to feel disempowered and to resist professional development

Outside Strategy: Outsourced to Intermediary or Private Provider		
TRADE-OFF TO CONSIDER	ADVANTAGES	DRAWBACKS
Labor Impact and Relations	Can move reforms forward quickly without constraints of “business as usual”	Can become politically contentious and explosive; can be sidetracked by existing contracts
Relationships Within Building	“Clean slate” for staff and student relations	Potential for mistrust of effort because “outsiders” drive the process
Community Relations	Can be opportunity for significant role for community partner	Requires articulated strategy to engage multiple community partners; may be viewed with distrust by parents/others
Capacity-Building	Can be opportunity to engage outside partner with specific school development capacity	Must specify details of partnership between district and contracting organization

Partnership Strategy: Schools and Community Share Ownership		
TRADE-OFF TO CONSIDER	ADVANTAGES	DRAWBACKS
Labor Impact and Relations	Opens opportunity to engage community partners in significant roles inside the building	Could be perceived as threatening union jobs of partners assume some staffing roles
Relationships Within Building	Brings additional supports and opportunities to students, beyond what schools alone can provide	May be difficult for a community organization to avoid being marginalized by the school staff
Community Relations	Engages and leverages expertise of community partners	Tension between generating broad community support and designating one or two lead partners
Capacity-Building	May bring community partner strengths/skills to capacity-building	May require additional support by school/community partnerships to build collaboration and clarify roles in planning/implementation





leadership and support to the students and the staff of the school that was being phased out, while assuring the new small schools that they would function in an environment that was safe and respectful of what they were trying to accomplish. In this transitional situation, he found that students and staff alike had misconceptions about the implications of the change for teachers and were unfamiliar with the data on student outcomes that prompted a radical change. His strategy, as he describes it, was welcoming of all points of view but clear about the horrific data—a 50 percent cohort dropout rate—that initiated the change process. He shared data on the school's poor outcomes with both students and faculty, engaged faculty in ongoing conversations and study groups about the need for change, assisted individual faculty in determining for themselves whether to apply for positions in the new schools or move elsewhere, and carefully engaged the union so as to avoid unnecessary grievances.

In fact, the role of the principal in small schools is critical—not only during the conversion process but as leaders of a different kind of educational institution. Small school principals must lead the staff in determining the fundamentally different kinds of curriculum, assessment, scheduling, partnerships, student-teacher relationships, and teacher-teacher relationships that are made possible in a small school. Lacking the infrastructure of a host of assistant principals to carry out discrete tasks, they must play “jack of all trades.” As one Boston small school leader put it, “I’m registrar, disciplinarian, building manager, nurse, and instructional leader.” Districts would do well to develop an infrastructure for supporting the development of these leaders.

Community Relations

In districts where large under-performing high schools are the main or only choice available to parents and students, community members may feel uncertain and ambivalent about the transformation of these high schools into small schools. For the community to believe and participate in this fundamental reform, they need to understand the evidence base behind small schools and to feel that they will have a voice in what happens to their local schools and their children. In this regard, visits to existing small schools by community members can be critical. The goal of building community understanding and demand should be central to decisions about both the pace of reform and the locus of control.

Certainly, the incremental approach allows more time for conversations and organizing in the community, which can increase support for change. But the dramatic changes

that occur in a big bang can also galvanize support. For example, where a parent night in the old South Boston High School would attract 60 or so parents for the 1,200-student body, nearly 150 parents attended such an event held by one of the three small schools, each of which has about 350 students.

Even more than the pace of reform, the locus of control affects the calculus of community support for change. To community activists, the inside approach seems more like business as usual, with community participation an afterthought. At the other extreme, the decision to contract with a charter management organization, as in Sacramento, may be divisive within the community, supported by those who trust the chartering organization more than the district and opposed by those who are fearful of the potential undermining or even dismantling of public education.

The partnership route opens the possibility for community organizations to be allies in mediating changes in the schools. In Oakland, the partnership with both Oakland Community Organizations, which is a strong community-based organization, and the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools, a respected education reform outfit, has given the small schools effort a legitimacy it would have lacked if the district had acted alone. The community organization built community support for small schools through the use of data showing discrepancies in student outcomes, while BayCES conducted the data analysis and provided on-the-ground support for new small schools.

On the other hand, many communities lack a single community partner that will both buy into and lend credibility to an effort to create new small schools. In the first two years of its small schools development, New York City created a district-level partnership with a respected community organization in the Bronx and with a local college in Brooklyn, but it also chose to grant school start-up funds to community-school partnerships as an explicit strategy to build ground-level ownership of the new schools. In the third year of this process, as part of district reorganization it eliminated the district-level partner and instead placed staff in the regional offices to develop and support the involvement of community.

Opening new small schools in partnership with diverse constituencies can bring its own set of dilemmas. In New York City, the participation of community partners has strengthened community support for many of the emerging small schools. At the same time, parents and others in a community are frequently concerned about what will happen to the students in the schools being

phased out. They also want assurances that the new small schools will be an improvement over the existing large ones. As a result of such concerns, both the N.Y.C. Department of Education and New Visions have intensified their efforts to inform the community about proposed changes, encouraged the involvement of community members on planning teams, and provided them with opportunities to visit existing small schools so they can better understand the kind of educational changes that are being proposed.

Operating in concert with both the union and community partners involves ongoing communication and negotiation. Districts may charge a solid, politically savvy internal high school reform office with this task or rely on a well-respected intermediary to broker the process, or it may involve both in the process of building community engagement and understanding.

Capacity Building

The successful transformation of a large under-performing high school into smaller, more engaging, more effective schools depends upon a number of key factors—from retrofitting the physical plant to coalescing faculty, students, and the community around a vision of change and new job descriptions, roles, and relationships within the school. These are not changes that a school, especially one suffering from demoralization and under-investment, can be expected to manage on its own.

Consequently, key considerations in deciding both the pace of change and the locus of control are the kinds and amount of support that a school will need in making such a conversion. The incremental approach is less taxing on the organization supporting the change, whether this is an office of high school support within the district, a school reform organization, a lead intermediary, or a combination of these groups. In phasing out a large school and incrementally “growing” new small schools, additional support must be given to the school being phased out to ensure that its quality improves at the same time. But a

slower roll-out can also make it more difficult to achieve the appropriate physical changes in the school plant or the changes in job descriptions and roles that help a small school become a distinctive learning environment where students feel known, safe, and supported in their learning.

If a district chooses a more dramatic conversion process (especially if this occurs in multiple schools at one time), it is essential that adequate support is available. The central office must dedicate personnel to “capacity-building”—that is, to creating processes and cross-functional teams (e.g., capital planning, human resources, curriculum and instruction) to address conversion needs, troubleshoot when problems arise, and provide or oversee coaching and other capacity-building activities for new small school leaders. Reform support organizations, such as New Visions in New York and BayCES in Oakland, do much of that capacity-building work in concert with the district.

The district also needs a strategy for engaging the community around the need for change and opportunities to support reforms. Here, too, outside organizations can play an important role in expanding the district’s capacity, in partnership with someone within the district responsible for supporting community engagement.

With an outside strategy, the charter management organization must be fully cognizant of, and have the capacity to support, the necessary changes. A district conferring with a potential charter management partner must determine what model of school the organization will implement, what services the intermediary has determined are essential for successful implementation of the model, what core capacities the services require (e.g., staff expertise, curriculum materials), what strategy it will undertake to engage parents, students, and community partners in the reform effort, and whether it has a financing strategy in place to deliver those services.



Emerging Issues in the Proliferation Of Small Schools



The urban school districts discussed here are approaching the point at which young people and their families will expect to have choices among a “portfolio” of public high schools. These choices include small, often thematically based schools—some of which are freestanding in locations ranging from college campuses to malls, and others grouped together in multiplex arrangements—as well as more traditional large comprehensive high schools with their array of electives and rituals. Oakland had six comprehensive high schools in 2000; in 2004, thirteen small high schools are in place or slated to open, while four large high schools remain. In that

same period, Boston went from nine comprehensive high schools to seven and now has plans for converting two more to small schools by fall 2005, for a total of nineteen small schools.

As the promise of choice approaches reality, a new set of questions arises:

- What is the appropriate balance between autonomy and accountability?
- How can a district create and protect a space for innovation within the bureaucracy and support for new schools without isolating innovators from key central office departments and those with line authority?
- How can districts promote and assess the quality of new small schools? What should it do about those with unsatisfactory results?
- How can districts offer youth and families a choice among a portfolio of high schools without creating a new hierarchy of high schools?
- What is the role of alternative, “second chance” education in a district that is moving towards a portfolio of high schools? How should the portfolio address the needs of youth who are disconnected from high school?

These questions center on the relationship between the schools and “downtown,” the organization of the school district, and the role of the district in ensuring both quality and equity of access to all schools in the portfolio. In the section that follows, we describe some of the strategies being tried in communities that are front-runners in developing a portfolio of high schools.

What is the appropriate balance between autonomy and accountability?

Advocates of small schools point to a fundamental condition for their success: their flexibility and autonomy allow the people closest to the students—school leaders, faculty, parents, and other students—to make school-level decisions about how to organize resources to best meet young people’s learning needs. It is the desire for such autonomy that has led some educators and families to start charter schools that, in turn, add pressure on districts to allow similar kinds of autonomy to new small schools within the district itself. As a result of the charter movement and the development of small district schools, some communities now contain schools with varying contractual and policy relationships to the district, specifying varying degrees of autonomy (see, for example, the description of Oakland’s

Oakland’s Small Autonomous Schools

Oakland describes its new small schools as “Small Autonomous Schools.” They have control over budget, governance, calendar and schedule, and curriculum/instruction (as long as these decisions are consistent with California State and District Standards), as well as staffing and facilities design. These schools also control their own budgets and can reallocate funds to increase staffing. “Autonomy includes hiring and evaluation of teachers and staff consistent with labor contracts. If a school shares a site with other programs, the school does not have to seek permission of the site’s cohabitants in order to change its programs though it may have to negotiate site usage issues” (Oakland Unified School District, New Small Autonomous Schools District Policy, May 2000).

How this has played out in Oakland has varied. In the first round, the small schools were freestanding and had autonomy to hire new staff. The question was more complicated in the second round of schools, which were conversions of existing, low-performing large schools. In this case, existing staff, while granted continued employment in the schools, knew that the alternative to small school conversion was a state take-over. Sources close to the conversion process indicate that converting wholly with existing staff required very close attention to, and management of, the politics around such a monumental change: those staff resistant to the conversion had to be carefully brought into the process, through an internal RFP process (existing staff developed proposals for new small schools). The next two rounds of small school development were the result of a public RFP, and staff were a mix of existing and new faculty.

Oakland is now moving more expeditiously toward budgetary autonomy for all schools than are the other districts described here. In 2003-2004, the state-appointed district administrator, brought in when the district faced a budget crisis in 2003, has aggressively sought to implement system-wide policies to support autonomous decision-making at all schools as specified in the small schools policy, starting with budget autonomy. He is working with the district budget office to redesign the way schools are funded, moving toward results-based budgeting system-wide: all schools are granted per-pupil dollars based on a base allocation, with extra dollars attached to students with greater needs. Schools will have an incentive to retain students because their actual allocation will be based on attendance throughout the year rather than on one date in the fall, as is typically the case.

Small Autonomous Schools policy, in the box at left).

However, it has simultaneously become more popular—especially in large, struggling districts—to centralize school district authority under a strong leader who can drive home a consistent message about high standards for all students and the need for instructional improvement, programmatic clarity, and bureaucratic efficiency.¹² While particular leadership styles may differ, many of these leaders seem to share an underlying philosophy: top-down directives are needed to bring the disarray of a dysfunctional school district under control.

These two trends—toward greater autonomy for small schools and more central control over large ones—are both in play in districts that are replacing large, under-performing schools with new small schools. The districts are grappling not just with how much autonomy to grant to new small schools but also what implications this might have for district and union policies for all schools.

The Boston Pilot Schools

Boston has had the union-negotiated architecture for autonomous small schools on the books for almost a decade; its “pilot” schools (currently 19 of 131 elementary, middle, and high schools) have autonomy over hiring, schedule, budget, curriculum, and governance. Based on this experience, district leaders and community partners are developing an RFP for creating new small schools, grappling with which non-contractual autonomies should be granted and how to reconcile those autonomies with the district’s recent push to institute system-wide literacy and mathematics programming. In the meantime, new small schools are taking advantage of policies that already allow for some flexibility but are hard to invoke in the complex political environment of large comprehensive high schools (see box, this page).

Providence

In Providence, new small schools have the option of seeking more school-level flexibility by petitioning a committee made up of representatives of the school district and the teachers’ union. On an individual basis, a school develops a plan with a rationale for specific waivers from contract provisions and district policy. In practice, the committee disallows waivers around staffing; site-based management schools must interview all applicants from within the district and, if hiring from outside the district, give a rationale. They also must accept staff “bumped” from other schools, in which case their junior staff may lose their positions.

New York City

In New York City, a core team that includes union representatives and school department leadership has negotiated a range of hiring autonomies for new small schools. New schools are granted per-pupil dollars instead of staffing positions, and they have control over their budgets. For example, a school might elect to direct funds to its community partner to hire a staff person to provide guidance services. New small schools that are conversions of existing large high schools can design staffing positions based on the needs of the school; hiring is governed by a regulation that requires the participation of the principal designate as well as representatives of the union and the community. Given a pool of top candidates, the hiring committee must select the most senior staff from that pool. New schools also have control over scheduling, but they must follow both state regulations and union contract provisions regarding the overall number of instructional minutes.

With regards to curriculum, New York City schools operate within a complicated accountability context: students must pass the Regents, five examinations pegged to college entrance standards, and the lowest-performing students must be offered a common “balanced literacy”



Boston’s Pilots and the New Small Schools

Through a union-negotiated process, including a two-thirds faculty vote, Boston schools can gain pilot status and obtain autonomy over hiring, schedule, budget, curriculum, and governance; teachers remain union members. Pilot status is comprehensive: once a school votes to operate as a pilot, it gains full autonomy. As new small schools develop, however, questions are arising as to how much autonomy the district will grant to the schools, even prior to a faculty vote for pilot status. At present, Boston’s new small schools and the district comprehensive high schools operate under the same conditions.

Even without formal autonomies, Boston’s small schools differ from large, comprehensive high schools in the extent to which their size allows them to take advantage of the flexibility granted to all high schools over the conversion of staffing positions. For example, the district allocates staffing positions to all schools, giving each school the option to convert those positions to meet its own needs.

A number of the new small schools have used staffing flexibility to create alternative positions. For example, one new small school determined that it could use the salary allocated for a single administrator overseeing discipline to pay for two “community field coordinators” who could spend more time monitoring hallways and providing student support. Several other small schools developed job descriptions to allow for different staffing patterns, such as “student development associates” whose role differs from that of traditional guidance counseling in their focus on coordinating student advisories, mental health services, partnerships with parents and community-based organizations, and electronic portfolios of student work.

curriculum, launched as part of the overall reform effort by the former deputy superintendent. New small schools are adapting the curriculum by incorporating books that speak to their individual school themes. Similarly, New York City schools are working toward using the state-mandated Regents exam as a starting point for developing projects.

How can a district create and protect a space for innovation within the bureaucracy without isolating innovators from key central office departments and those with line authority?

Developing small schools on a large scale requires a central authority to manage the process, coordinate the involvement of the central office bureaucracy and the community partners, attend to and promote needed policy changes, and support small schools in their planning and start-up stages. If a partnering organization is delivering start-up coaching and support to new small schools, this office must also coordinate its involvement in schools. Many districts with a systemic high school reform effort have assigned an individual within the district to lead the effort, but in several communities the launch of a new small school effort has spawned a central office infrastructure devoted to high school transformation.

Several tensions are inherent in creating such an office, however. These regard the relationship between the internal high school reform leadership and central office departments, the authority the office has to push for new ways of doing business in central office departments, and the relationship between the high school office and those with supervisory responsibility for high schools. In many communities, authority is organized vertically, with district leaders overseeing K-12 schools. Inserting a high school-focused initiative into this bureaucratic infrastructure can open questions as to whether the existing lines of authority and accountability should change.

In Providence, Rhode Island, the launch of a district-wide high school reform initiative prompted the hiring of a staff person who oversaw all high school reform efforts but had no authority over high school principals. When she left, the district converted her position into a Director of High Schools with supervisory authority over all high schools.



Developing small schools on a large scale requires a central authority to manage the process, but there are tensions inherent in creating a “driver” of reform within the school department bureaucracy.

Other districts have kept their “driver” of reform separate from the existing lines of authority. This approach frees up the high school-focused office to coach and support new small schools, but it can be confusing to schools when they get mixed signals from different district offices and counterproductive when reforms promoted by one office are not aligned with or reinforced by those with direct supervisory authority over high schools. This separation also can hinder efforts to make the central office more responsive to needs in the schools.

Boston created an Office of High School Renewal that functions parallel to both central office departments and the existing school support and accountability structure, through which three deputy superintendents oversee all K-12 schools. The office reports directly to the superintendent and works with the district’s community partners to design small school RFPs, coach new small schools, oversee the redesign of existing high schools, and raise policy and logistical issues that arise in the development of small schools. While this has allowed for considerable momentum in the redesign of high schools, the reform partnership still seeks to achieve greater alignment with central office departments and those with supervisory authority in the schools.

New York City has undergone dramatic changes in its administrative infrastructure at the same time that it has aggressively pursued the development of small schools. The previous infrastructure, primarily borough-based, has been replaced by ten regions; within each region a Local Instructional Support Superintendent has supervisory responsibility for about ten to twelve schools and principals.

To address the need for regional “drivers” of small school development while the school department has undergone this change, New York City’s New Century Schools initiative has enabled each of the city’s regions to create an Office of Small Schools, through the use of foundation dollars. The leaders of these ten offices guide small school roll-out and oversee day-to-day planning. As the system reorganizes, New Visions is working closely with these staff to help it and the school system administration determine how to configure such support in the long run, with a goal of integrating that work more closely into the offices of the Local Instructional Superintendents.

How can districts promote and assess the quality of new small schools?

The explosive growth of new small schools requires careful attention to issues of both quality and accountability. How can districts and intermediary organizations build the capacity of new small schools to organize in funda-

mentally different ways? How can they ensure that new small schools take advantage of their small size to create more focused, distinct, and coherent learning environments? What early indicators should be used to judge the effectiveness of new small schools?

Fortunately, there is a significant body of research that indicates what features of “small” pay off in better results for students,¹³ as well as much expertise on the ground about critical stages in the development of new small schools. Intermediary organizations across the country—from New Visions in New York City to BayCES in Oakland—have developed a high level of sophistication regarding the specific coaching and support that design teams, school leaders, and new school staff need to create effective small schools.¹⁴ For example, BayCES has developed the Small Schools Incubator, a training and scaffolding system for design teams and schools at all stages of growth. New small schools receive targeted coaching as they move through stages of development: inspiration, conception, development, planning, gestation, formation, and maturation. BayCES has identified the work of the new school design team at each stage, along with indicators that signal readiness to advance to the next stage.¹⁵ Many other intermediary organizations have the infrastructure for complementing district support for small schools with coaching and technical assistance.

At the same time, moving toward a choice-based system of schools requires that students and their families have access to data on the quality of schools and that districts ensure that all choices are good ones. While most school systems publish information on student outcomes, test scores should not be the sole data upon which parents make decisions—especially because small schools that result from large school conversions do not yet have a track record of improved student achievement, and because some schools have high concentrations of lower-performing students and students with special needs. Because few districts publish longitudinal data by student, parents cannot ascertain the “value-added” of a particular school. Additional data can be critical to helping students and their families, as well as the district, determine which learning environments show success and which might constitute a good match for a particular student. “Early indicator” data might include: ninth-grade pass rates, failure rates in major courses, indicators of student satisfaction, student voice, and student engagement; parent involvement measures; attendance; and intermediate progress toward attainment of competencies.

Developing and implementing performance measurement systems and using the data to guide student choice

as well as program change carries a price tag—for purchasing hardware and software, for training staff, and for staff to maintain the system and provide data in a timely manner. As one program leader bluntly stated, “Everybody wants data but no one wants to pay for it.” Both the quality and the longevity of small schools depend on an investment in this area.

How can districts offer youth and families a choice among a portfolio of high schools without creating a new hierarchy of high schools?

Long before the advent of current reforms, including small schools, certain high schools in most urban districts disproportionately held the most vulnerable and hardest-to-serve young people—a result of a combination of district policies, community disinvestment, and neighborhood segregation. The move to transform these large high schools into small schools is, at least in part, an attempt to provide more and better choices to the young people and families dependent on these public schools. The development of a portfolio of high schools could—and should—create more access to an array of quality options.

However, small schools of choice also have the potential to exacerbate longstanding inequities in who has access to which educational programs and services. In districts that are moving toward an array of choices, school and community leaders are finding it necessary to be diligent both in interrogating the equity possibilities and addressing the equity challenges created by offering a portfolio of high school options. Specifically, they have begun to ask hard questions about and make adjustments to a range of policies and procedures, such as those governing student choice and assignment, the placement of special education and ELL staff and programs, and the reentry of court-involved youth.

One key challenge is how to ensure that small schools in the portfolio do not become still another sorting mechanism, dividing those best positioned to take advantage of choice from those too alienated or disempowered to do so. It is by no means obvious how best to engage students and parents—especially those who have traditionally been least likely to choose—in a choice-based system of schools, or how to ensure that all schools are truly equally accessible to students with a range of learning styles and abilities.

A second challenge is to determine and put in place a systemic infrastructure that ensures that particular schools do not become the repository of disproportionate populations of young people with special academic, social or emotional needs. The communities described here are undertaking a range of approaches to ensure that those



youth who are least likely to choose in a choice-based system have a range of solid educational options and are not excluded from the innovation under way.

In Oakland, the district policy on new small schools explicitly states that “priority for admissions will be given to children from attendance areas designated as overcrowded and children from low-performing schools. . . . New Small Autonomous School admissions must reflect the demographics of the district as a whole and must not manipulate admissions to drain off the most accomplished, easy to teach or most motivated students.” The district is in the process of implementing a plan that will ultimately offer a choice among three types of schools: theme schools, focused around a particular mission or instructional strategy; neighborhood schools, to serve a geographic area; and alternative schools, to serve a designated population. As the district’s core partnering intermediary, BayCES is concerned that even a well-articulated policy will not ensure that low-income and linguistic minority parents and students have choice among schools; its strategy is to organize to create a “culture of choice” that fully engages parents and students in planning, developing, and selecting schools.



In Boston, the conversion of one of the lowest-performing schools into separate small schools provided an opportunity to rethink district-wide student assignment practices and policies. Because of a range of district policies, specific populations of students—such as court-involved youth and students with special needs—had been overrepresented at this school. When the Office of High School Renewal began to scrutinize the school’s student demographics in preparation for the conversion, it elevated the issue of over-representation to a policy level. When capping these student populations at the school resulted in an overrepresentation of these students populations in another school, reform leaders quickly recognized the need to address student assignment system-wide.

The district is now addressing this challenge through several means. First, it is implementing an initiative with the Department of Youth Services that both builds capacity in all schools for integrating returning DYS-involved students and gives returning court-involved students a

range of school choices so that no one school is over-taxed. In addition, the district is helping new and existing small schools to design inclusion programs for special needs students so that serving this population does not automatically mean a “pull-out.” Third, it is identifying over-age students in district high schools and, using a case management process, assisting them to enroll in schools specifically designed for an older population. Finally, it is revisiting the student choice/assignment system overall so that more students are prepared in eighth grade to choose their high school.

What is the role of alternative, “second chance” education in a district that is moving toward a portfolio of high schools? How should the portfolio address the needs of youth who are disconnected from high school?

Reformers have reason to be hopeful that youth who have been “hanging by a thread” will benefit from the smaller, more personalized schools being created in Oakland, New York, Boston, and the other citywide initiatives described here. But some young people with learning and/or socio-emotional needs and life circumstances will still require alternative institutional arrangements, programming, and services.

As districts move to portfolios of high schools that include a number of small schools, leaders are beginning to ask how to address the particular needs of the young people who are most disaffected from school and closest to dropping out—those who, for example, are overage for their grade, not on track to graduate, or chronically absent or disruptive. Should special schools be developed for these young people? If alternative high schools already serve such students, should these schools be considered part of the portfolio of high schools? How should districts measure the effectiveness of alternative schools, given that they serve youth who are furthest behind and most disengaged? As districts rethink their approaches to school assignment and school choice, what reenrollment and assignment mechanisms should they consider regarding second chance schools?

These questions have serious financial and governance implications. Part of the challenge lies in the fact that the “second chance” sector is made up of disparate, fragmented, and under-resourced programs, constituting a “non-system” of learning options with varying relationships with the school district itself. Many alternative programs were founded by community-based organizations or other non-district entities and, in some districts, operate under contract to serve a portion of the district’s dropouts and most vulnerable populations. These alterna-

As districts move to portfolios of high schools that include a number of small schools, leaders are beginning to ask how to address the particular needs of the young people who are most disaffected from school and closest to dropping out.

tive schools often receive a smaller percentage of district dollars (i.e., Average Daily Attendance or per-pupil allotments) than do mainstream high schools, and they may be patched together with a combination of funding sources that results in a staffing profile that includes both district (i.e., union) teachers on assignment and non-district, lower-paid staff.

A separate second chance sector becomes more obvious and harder to justify as districts undertake systemic reform. Despite the fact that alternative schools serve those who have not succeeded in district schools, such schools tend to operate with fewer resources, fewer well-trained staff, and less access to critical resources such as technology, facilities, or professional development. Furthermore, no governmental infrastructure even counts the numbers of young people who fall off the educational pathway, let alone advocates for better coordinated, higher-quality learning options to get them back on track.

A few districts are in the process of trying to invent a more systemic approach to second chance learning opportunities. For example, in Portland, Oregon, the district created an Education Options department that coordinates and holds accountable all alternative learning options, including the district's own alternative schools, as well as schools operated under contract with the district by community organizations and Portland Community College. Oregon's weighted per-pupil funding mechanism grants alternative schools a relatively high proportion of state funding—80 percent of ADA—and provides schools with additional per-pupil funding for students who are English language learners, pregnant/parenting, or special needs. In Chicago, Boston, and other cities, recent systemic reviews of in-district alternative programming have raised both quality and equity issues that districts are struggling to address.

Ultimately, districts will have to address the question of whether the district is the best system to oversee this sector, especially given the long history of community-based organization involvement and the growing prevalence of charter management organizations with contracts to operate multiple schools. For example, Minneapolis' Federation of Alternative Schools is the contracting agency for 20 of the 27 "contract" alternative schools within the Minneapolis Public Schools. While 13 different organizations operate the 20 schools, the federation is the accredited body by the North Central State Accreditation Association, serves as fiscal agent, negotiates with the district for per-pupil allotments (currently 95 percent of per-pupil dollars), advocates for state policies that are supportive to alternative schools, engages school

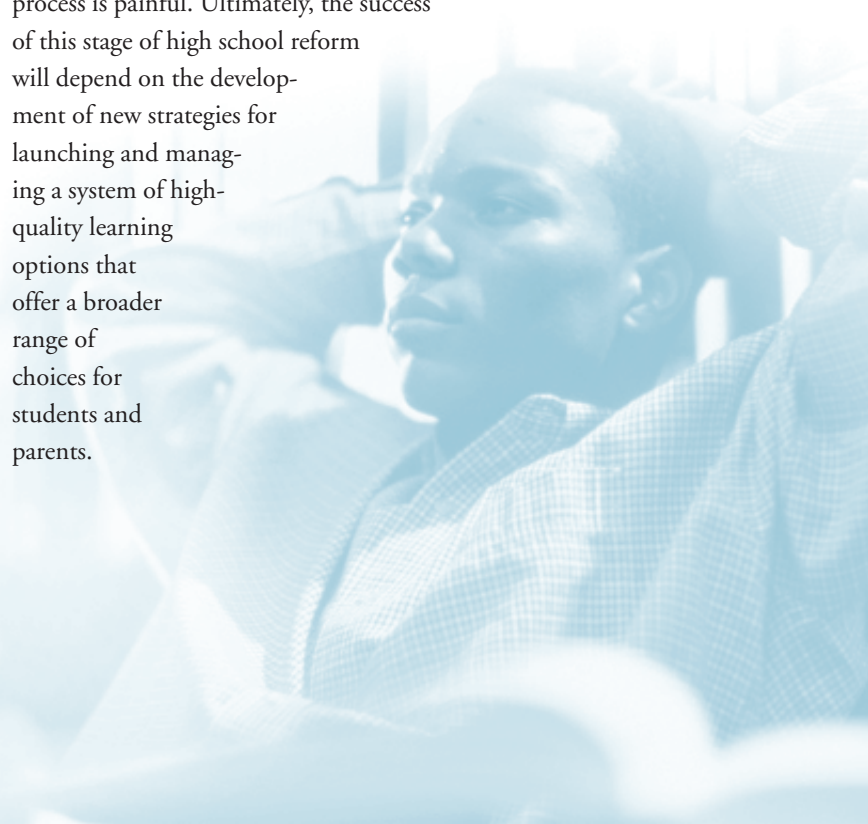
directors and teachers in cross-site networking, and coordinates federation-wide initiatives such as one that provides health care professionals free of charge to alternative schools.

The role of alternative education in a system redesigned around a portfolio of high schools is a critical next-generation question for secondary school reform. More research is needed on communities that are on the front lines of inventing more systemic approaches to alternative education and experimenting with new governance and financing arrangements.

Conclusion

Big Buildings, Small Schools describes communities that are leaders in determining how to provide young people with multiple pathways to and through the postsecondary education and credentials they will need for successful adulthood. To achieve this type of reform at scale and with equity considerations at the forefront, these communities are implementing a range of strategies for planning and launching multiple small schools both within and outside of the walls of large high schools.

The front-runner position is often not an easy or comfortable place to be. Implementation is surfacing new issues and challenges—from how best to retrofit the physical plant of large high schools to how the district augments its capacity through partnering with school reform intermediaries and community leaders. These challenges are described by some reformers as akin to peeling off a band-aid: whether undertaken slowly or quickly, the process is painful. Ultimately, the success of this stage of high school reform will depend on the development of new strategies for launching and managing a system of high-quality learning options that offer a broader range of choices for students and parents.



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Endnotes

¹ See Balfanz and Legters (2004).

² See, for example, Darling-Hammond (2002), Gladden (1998), Howley, Strange, and Bickel (2000), Lawrence et al. (2002), Lee (2000), Lee and Burkham (2000), Raywid (1996), and Wasley et al. (2000).

³ See Steinberg and Allen (2002).

⁴ A decade ago, the campus model was pioneered in New York City with the Julia Richman Campus, which has remained as one of the sole exemplars of this model ever since. See Ancess and Wichterle (1999).

⁵ New York City has opened 76 small schools in Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan.

⁶ In this first effort to create small schools in place of one large school, the district did not provide the needed up-front policy supports, such as leadership support, separate staffing patterns, separate budgets, separate budget codes, and resources and conditions for staff development. More targeted assistance in 2001-2002 resulted in a more coherent plan and better support for the eventual conversion to three, instead of four, autonomous small schools in 2003.

⁷ Boston has since changed its strategy and is undertaking an RFP process for new small schools, starting in the spring of 2004. Design teams for creating new small schools at two comprehensive high schools are forming in response to the RFP.

⁸ Jobs for the Future is a core partner in Boston's high school renewal effort and the fiscal agent for the district's grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

⁹ In California, independent charters receive Average Daily Attendance (ADA) directly from the district coffers, do not have to hire union faculty, and are not required to purchase services from the district. Dependent charters are a legal arm of the district and can be required to purchase district services.

¹⁰ For a description of the initiative, see www.newvisions.org and Solomon (2003a).

¹¹ For a more complete description of the genesis of small schools in Oakland, see Solomon (2003) and the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools' website: www.bayces.org.

¹² Several districts have even brought in private-sector leaders or leaders with a military background or changed the title of the leader to CEO.

¹³ See, for example, Darling-Hammond, Alexander, and Prince (2002).

¹⁴ For more information, see www.newvisions.org and www.bayces.org.

¹⁵ For more information, go to www.bayces.org.

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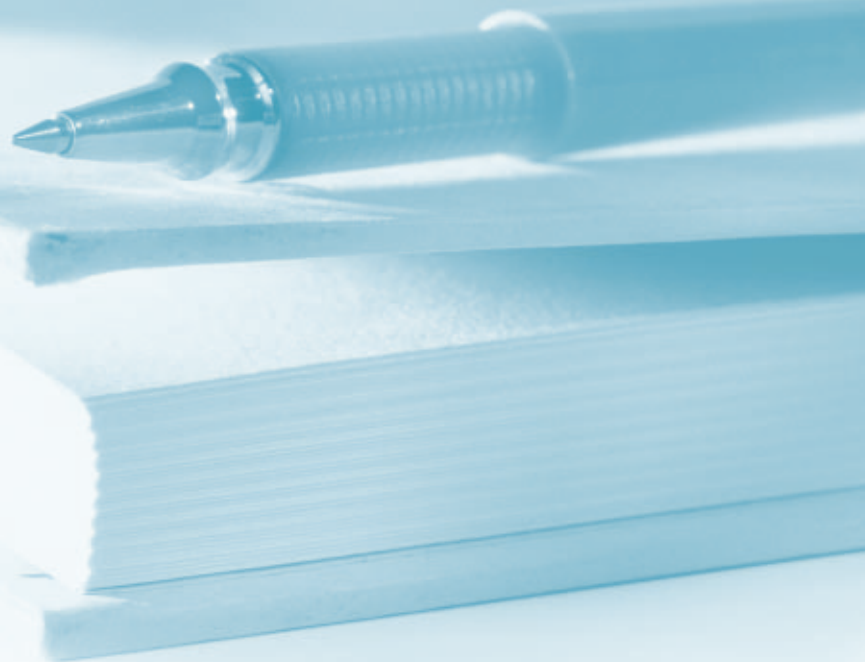
Lili Allen manages several Jobs for the Future projects related to youth education and transitions. She has conducted research on break-the-mold designs for schools, particularly designs that include education/employment and secondary/postsecondary blends. She co-leads JFF's work as a core partner in the Boston Public Schools' district-wide high school renewal, and she leads work with the U.S. Department of Labor on effective systems and learning environments for older, out-of-school youth. She is a member of JFF's Early College High School team. She is also conducting research on systemic approaches to addressing the learning needs of out-of-school youth and documenting district redesign in cities across the country.

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