

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To capture the benefits of small schools, a growing number of large traditional high schools are breaking into smaller units. Mountlake Terrace in Edmonds, Washington is one example of a comprehensive high school converting into several autonomous small schools, which will exist within the same building. This paper is a case study of the initial stages of Mountlake Terrace's change process and reflects a work in progress.

Small schools research shows that youth in schools designed to serve 400 students or fewer have higher academic achievement, better attendance and graduation rates, more extracurricular involvement, and a better sense of belonging. But few examples exist of successful school conversions. As with other comprehensive school reforms, the conversion process is extremely complex. In order to provide a model for future school conversions, this paper recounts the first two years of Mountlake Terrace's change process, examines how the staff dealt with its most difficult aspects, and provides general recommendations to schools, districts and funders supporting conversions.

Lessons Learned from the Conversion Process

Mountlake Terrace's conversion process raised difficult questions about changes in leadership, the equitable distribution of staff and students among the new small learning communities and the use of school resources. The need to build buy-in and support among the staff, parents, students and district office posed more challenges. The most salient features of successful school change are reflected in the following lessons about decentralized control, a multi-level approach that engages the entire school community, and professional development that focuses on desired student outcomes.

Decentralized Control

- School leaders must foster a trusting environment for change through shared decision-making and by encouraging people to share their concerns.
- Teacher leaders and administrative leaders must exercise the authority they have been given and remain steadfast when others express doubt.

Engaged School Community

- School leaders must engage parents and students in the change process early and in meaningful ways. Encourage them to advocate for small learning communities on behalf of the school.
- School leaders must educate their district office about small schools as they educate themselves, in order to create a shared vision for success.

Professional Development

- School leaders must improve staff sophistication about small schools through site visits, workshops, research review, and design development.
- The change process must balance between focusing on the student-centered goals of conversion and the logistical tools for achieving it.
- Small school designs must incorporate supporting evidence, evaluation and accountability components.

Recommendations for Schools, District & Funders

Mountlake Terrace's experience provides example and insight into the process of enacting comprehensive change. Lessons highlighted in this case study are echoed by the research on school change. They can be applied to schools embarking on a conversion as well as the districts that house them and the funders who support them.

Complex comprehensive reform requires a deliberate and thoughtful process. School leaders should:

- Begin by looking at student data, demonstrating the need for change and developing a shared vision for success.
- Dedicate one full-time staff member to coordinate the complex conversion effort, including directing communication and organizing long-term planning.
- Create shared leadership, where teachers and managers engage in shared decision-making and risk taking.
- Be supportive, engaged and knowledgeable about small schools.
- Allow people to feel safe about sharing their concerns.
- Support the conversion with professional development.

Schools can not achieve this kind of comprehensive change independent of their district. District leaders should:

- Talk to other districts attempting a similar reform.
- Support schools in the same way that school leaders support their communities, by being engaged and knowledgeable about the school's conversion process.
- Promote school autonomy by sharing the authority for traditionally district level decisions and union negotiations.

Terrace had already established much of the critical conversation about teaching and learning that must take place before a school can embark on this kind of change, and it is still a difficult process. To better prepare future grantees, funders should:

- Require a joint application between a school and its district in order to promote shared buy-in and accountability for the conversion effort.
- Require a plan for improvement that delineates problems, plans to address them, and ways to measure progress.
- Re-consider the funding formula to reflect the costs associated with school change rather than the size of the student body.