

Thinking about Conversions

Below are nine important points to consider as you begin to think about redesigning large comprehensive school into smaller learning communities.

New small schools are not small comprehensive high schools.

They are small, focused, coherent, and, over time, distinctive from one another. Whether or not they are deliberately distinctive from the beginning is not important – that can evolve. But they must be small – think in terms of 200, not 400 or 600. They must be focused – don't attempt to be all things to students and parents; families that want comprehensive can always find a school. Instead, say: Out of the universe of things we *could* do, these are the things we *will* do, and we will do them very, very well. And new small schools must be coherent. Everything must fit together so it makes sense to students and parents as well as to teachers. New small schools should be elegant in an aesthetic or mathematical sense, with nothing wasted, nothing extra.

Serious change is held hostage when people confuse the question of why change with how to change.

The first question is *why* make a change. That takes serious discussion and a long and careful look at what you know about your students. If the evidence indicates that your students aren't performing at the level you (or the state) expect and hope for, you must change. Or, acknowledge that you are willing to settle for less than you know your students can do. *How* to change is another discussion that, ideally, follows after the first. In practice, a school staff often agrees to change – intellectually, it's not hard to acknowledge the need – but hasn't struggled sufficiently with the implications of that decision. Then, the *how to* part is held hostage to regular revisiting of the *why* part, though it's often not acknowledged as a “why” issue. Here are some indicators. When people say, “Let's not throw the baby out with the bath water.” Or, when the number of sacred cows – and every school has them – become more than you can count on three fingers. Or, “Why can't we fix the school for the few kids it isn't working for?”

Human issues, not technical knowledge, are the most significant barriers to successful conversions of comprehensive high schools into new small autonomous schools.

Conversion entails substantial intellectual work on the part of a school staff, and shouldn't be underestimated. But it is the personal, human question, “What does this mean for me?” that is at the heart of resistance to change. That question has two partner questions: “Can I do this?” and, “Do I want to?” These questions must be addressed respectfully and successfully for conversions to succeed.

Acknowledge the need for substantial adult learning, and remember that adults, like students, learn in different ways.

Plan for ongoing adult learning, with all the messiness that learning entails. Phasing in the conversion to small schools over a period of 2-3 years can help with this. It's common for a school to decide that juniors and seniors will finish out their high school career in a comprehensive school, but that younger students will be in new small schools. Phasing in is respectful of older students, and it also provides options for adults. Some teachers learn by trying things out; others learn by reading lots of research; still others learn best by watching others. Phasing in a small school can allow those ready to move ahead to do so, while others can go more slowly. The only unacceptable option is not to learn. Be certain you make good on any promises you make about adult learning.

Small school design – the organizational and structural changes that lead to small, autonomous schools – is simply the beginning of the real work.

It is a means, not an end. The real work is about improving student accomplishment substantially, and that means putting to good use what we know about human learning. For us, it means active, engaged learning, with a focus on authentic intellectual work for all students, and regular performance assessment. Skill deficits in reading, writing, basic math, or English language facility are *not* intellectual deficits, and students should not be denied the opportunity to think about intellectually interesting and challenging problems because they lack certain skills. Is it harder to engage in intellectual activity without these core skills? Sometimes – maybe even often. But research shows us that students who regularly engage in authentic intellectual work – regardless of their current skill levels – show greater improvement in standardized test scores than students who do not have that opportunity on a regular basis.

Autonomy is critical.

To be successful, a small school needs autonomy in terms of budget, staffing, curriculum, scheduling, space, and focus. Think in terms of negotiation, not collaboration, among schools sharing the same building – even if they share the same principal, the same cafeteria, the same sports teams. In designing a set of small schools that will occupy the same building, imagine the autonomy each school would have if each were located three blocks away from the others. Take that as the starting point, and work backwards.

High personalization follows closely after autonomy as a key requirement.

It forms the basis for understanding how to proceed. Data – cumulative and disaggregated – provide valuable information, and can point a school in the right direction. In the end, though, schools are filled with particular, individual kids, and only real, particular knowledge of each of those kids – and the freedom to act on that knowledge (the value of autonomy) – can make a school truly successful. This work is about all kids – each individual, particular kid – not about some of them, or even most of them. Every single one of them. Give up a lot to achieve high personalization.

Equity of outcomes must be designed into small schools.

Reducing or eliminating the achievement gap is a key aspect of the current reform effort. That’s what “leave no child behind” really means. We have to plan for that to make it possible – it won’t happen on its own. What does that mean in practice? The answer will vary from community to community, but here are two examples. If you’re planning to do career academies, or some sort of “themed” small schools, design them in ways that are equally appealing to all segments of the student population. The population of each school should be very close to the overall school population in terms of demographics, or you’ll almost certainly create one or more “elite” schools from the start. Second, the goal of getting all kids to a certain level of accomplishment will require unequal distribution of resources, and that unequal distribution may be substantial. It will also require large-scale elimination of tracking. A major task of most schools and districts is helping middle class families to understand that it is in their best interest for children from low-income families to succeed.

Engage parents and other community members early rather than late.

Have the conversation with your school community at almost the same time you’re having it with the staff. You need their support, and they will often have helpful ideas, and sometimes provide political leverage when it’s needed. Assure them that you can figure out what to do about football and prom night – then be sure you do.