Leading Small:

Eight Lessons for Leaders in Transforming Large Comprehensive High Schools

Simply carving up a large comprehensive high school into several smaller schools does not guarantee improvement. But Mr. Copland and Ms. Boatright find that key lessons garnered from numerous small-school conversions can guide school leaders through the cultural changes that must accompany the structural ones if small schools are to fulfill their potential.

BY MICHAEL A. COPLAND AND ELIZABETH E. BOATRIGHT

IN A RARE contemplative moment, Steven Gering is scratching his head and thinking. Over the past 18 months, assistant principal Gering has been leading the effort to reshape massive suburban Mountlake Terrace High School into a collection of autonomous small schools, and his frenetic schedule has left him with little reflective time. The school now perches on the precipice of change.

It is late July, and in a few short weeks Terrace's nearly 1,900 students will split into five new ninth- through 12th-grade schools of no more than 400 students, each with its own unique mission, goals, course offerings, faculty, and schedule. Gering and his colleagues continue to work out the remaining details for the transformation, including not-insignificant final decisions about exactly how each of the new small schools will be led. Pondering the question of leadership, Gering notes, "We've changed our view of teacher leadership and administration. Small schools just take more leaders than large schools, more people to step up and provide the knowledge and skills we need at any particular moment. You've heard how it's important to have teachers as generalists in small schools. Well, we also need leaders as generalists."

For school administrators and teachers, the process of change begun by Mountlake Ter-

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race — just one of numerous comprehensive high school conversion projects across the U.S. — raises some fundamental questions for those seeking to create and lead a different kind of secondary school experience for America's young people. How should leadership in a small high school differ from leadership in a large one? What unique leadership opportunities do small schools offer? And what new challenges or old dilemmas remain? Moreover, what leadership lessons can those who seek to transform large comprehensive high schools derive from the knowledge base that is emerging on small schools?

What is certain, to Gering and others like him, is that leadership must adapt if the current movement to downsize high schools is ever to matter much. If educators can learn anything from more than two decades' worth of efforts to "restructure" schools, it is that structural changes alone are not enough to improve schools for the students who attend them or the professionals who work in them.[1] Without key shifts in the emphasis and disposition of leadership, the new small schools that emerge from the transformed large schools run the risk of winding up simply as smaller versions of their former giant selves.

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TRANSFORMING THE BEHEMOTH

Gering and his colleagues at Mountlake Terrace High School are among many secondary educators currently seeking to transform large comprehensive high schools into collections of smaller learning communities, a movement gaining momentum nationwide. Significant investments made in this reform strategy suggest that educators and policy makers place considerable stock in smaller learning communities as a way to improve schooling for students and teachers. Along with grants from the U.S. Department of Education totaling well over $145 million annually, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation initiatives have so far funneled some $375 million toward this end.[2]

Why are so many large high schools downsizing? A progression of studies beginning in the late 1980s and continuing to date strongly suggests that small schools are more productive and effective than large ones. Reviews of research summarize the findings of such studies and the advantages of small schools for students.[3] As one researcher summed it up, "A large body of research in the affective and social realms overwhelmingly affirms the superiority of small schools."[4] Moreover, school size is suggested to exert a "unique influence" on students' academic accomplishment, with a strong inverse relationship linking the two: the larger the school, the lower the students' achievement levels.[5] The research on various indicators of student achievement, involving large numbers of students, schools, and districts, indicates that students may learn more and better in small schools.[6]

Yes, the research on various student outcomes associated with small schools posits an apparently ever-more-impressive case for smallness. Findings suggest, for example, that students in small schools make more rapid progress toward graduation,[7] are more satisfied with their school experience, and are less likely to drop out than students in larger schools.[8] Moreover, findings suggest that disadvantaged students perform far differently in small schools and appear more dependent upon them for success than do more advantaged youngsters.[9] Students included in another study of smaller schools also were responsible for fewer disciplinary infractions than their counterparts in large schools.[10] A comprehensive study of Chicago's small schools found that students in small schools had higher grade-point averages and better attendance records than their peers in larger urban schools.[11] Others have suggested that small schools are a better investment than large schools when the broader costs to society associated with high school dropouts are factored in.[12]

While not in complete agreement, experts suggest the ideal student population for small schools ranges from 200 to 400 students.[13] Small secondary schools that emphasize collaboration and community tend to construct their student populations with this target range in mind. Small schools pioneer Deborah Meier writes that schools are small enough when

> faculty members [can] sit around a table and iron things out, . . . everyone [can] be known well by

everyone else, and schools and families [can] collaborate face-to-face over time. Small enough so that children belong to the same community as the adults in their lives instead of being abandoned in adultless subcultures. Small enough to both feel safe and be safe. Small enough so that phony data can easily be detected by any interested participant. Small enough so that the people most involved can never say they weren't consulted.[14]

Commentaries on the nature of educational leadership point out the extraordinarily difficult nature of the work, particularly for leaders engaged in widespread, schoolwide reform.[15] And nowhere is reform more appropriately cast as "whole-school" than in reinvention efforts that seek to convert large, comprehensive high schools into smaller, redesigned schools. Such transformations imply changes in how new smaller schools are led and create new opportunities for school leadership that differ vastly from those in large, comprehensive high schools.

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF SMALL SIZE: EIGHT LEADERSHIP LESSONS

In what follows, we synthesize what is known about the nature of leadership in successful small schools in an effort to draw contrasts with the demands of leading the comprehensive high school. The contrasts offer lessons for leaders making the shift from large to small schools and provide keys that allow schools engaged in the transition to capitalize on the differences.

1. *Focus on a clear learning agenda.* Research suggests that successful small schools focus on a few measurable goals and ensure that students reach these goals. In short, they promote high standards for achievement in particular academic areas and provide high levels of support for getting there. The omnipresent and overwhelming management issues associated with larger schools often get in the way of leaders' ability to make learning for students and professionals their highest priority. While some management concerns are always present, small schools offer leaders greater opportunities to develop and home in on a consensus learning agenda for students and for professionals. Small schools researcher Valerie Lee notes, "Our evidence supports the positive values of a narrow and academic curriculum, with a strong organizational push for all students to take (and master) these courses. . . . Results indicate quite consistently that in such 'core curriculum' schools, students learn more, and learning is more equitably distributed."[16]

A narrow learning focus is often coupled with the "generalist" pedagogical strategies that depend on the flexibility required of a smaller school's teaching staff. Some small school leaders exert influence by ensuring that students work with the same teacher for two consecutive years in a process called "looping," a term borrowed from elementary schools.[17] Looping allows teachers to acquaint themselves with their students, grasp a sense of their individual strengths and needs, and work consistently with them over an extended period of time. Students may benefit from a looping structure that enables them to build trust and take more academic risks than they might with a teacher who disappears after one semester or even one school year.

2. *Know and be known.* As Theodore Sizer showed so vividly more than two decades ago in *Horace's Compromise*,[18] the large, bureaucratic organization of the traditional comprehensive high school creates barriers to the development of interpersonal connections between students and faculty members. Tom Vander Ark of the Gates Foundation sums it up, suggesting that comprehensive American high schools "are not failing — they are obsolete. They foster anonymity and stifle learning by systematically inhibiting those things that are most important: powerful sustained relationships; students' ability to address complex problems individually and as members of a team and to communicate in various ways; and the ability of teachers and administrators to take on increasing responsibility."[19]

Successful small school leaders take advantage of a unique opportunity to know every student personally and to be known by every student personally. Researcher Mary Anne Raywid offers this snapshot of Herb, the principal of Urban Academy, a small school in New York City:

> Herb has frequent access to the students, who must pass his desk to go from the office/staff room to the student study/lounge next door. He also stocks two small aspirin bottles on his desk with M&M's. Students stop by constantly throughout the day and help themselves. A student stopping for a handful of candy may well become engaged in an exchange with Herb or another student who is on the same mission. Herb is a father figure to the whole school, and students feel they can ask him for an unusual range of assistance and advice.[20]

Likewise, a staff member at a small charter school explains:

> [In a small charter] you get to know more about kids — everything including their blood type. When you thought about it, there we were with the kids from 7:47 to 2:46 — all those hours, four years, and noth-

ing. It had to be wrong. Knowing a smaller group of students intimately has to change our relationship with them. The charter structure was a place in which we could change and accept our share of the responsibility for student achievement and failure.[21]

When teachers and school administrators are entrusted with the education of just a few hundred students, as opposed to several hundreds or even thousands on a single school campus, they have a real opportunity to invest personal time in each learner and to seek meaningful interactions with them outside the classroom. While Thomas Sergiovanni explains that the "undermanned" status of faculties in small schools puts a greater demand on teachers' time than in large schools, it also enables teachers to lead in previously unimagined ways and to learn more about the complex personalities of their colleagues and students.[22] Teachers in small schools may serve as advisors, mentors, or tutors in a variety of subjects. While smaller schools may require faculty members to take on new responsibilities and wear more hats, doing so may also help them broaden their understanding of the young adults they care for every day.

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Leaders have a great deal of influence over the degree of personalization in a school; how they develop relationships with families, students, and faculty members sets the tone for everyone else. As Nel Noddings points out, "students will do things for people they like and trust. This is a fact that we must acknowledge."[23] The endorsement of young people, however, doesn't guarantee that a person is a great teacher. Leaders in high-performing small schools know that caring for students means caring for their intellectual development. Patricia Wasley and her colleagues maintain that academic rigor and caring can — and should — coexist, quoting Valerie Lee and her colleagues, who claim that "students learn substantially more when they experience high levels of academic press and strong social support together, but they learn much less when they experience only one of these conditions."[24]

3. *Walk the talk of social justice and equity.* Large comprehensive high schools reflect a mentality of sorting. Some kids will make it; others won't. A percentage of students routinely benefit greatly from this approach; another percentage is "expected," if only implicitly in the design of factory schools, to fall by the wayside and never graduate. Even in the best school districts, this percentage can reach 25% to 30%, and in the inner city, figures range much higher.[25] Because the staff of small schools can focus attention on a well-defined learning agenda and because staff members and students can know everyone and be known by everyone, small schools offer a real chance to ensure success for every student, regardless of background, ethnicity, or social status.

While many educators and parents prefer to view schools as "great equalizers" of opportunity for young people, there is a more inequitable reality. Scholars agree that classroom rules typically mimic a white, middle-class value system by rewarding a particular type of work ethic and praising students who successfully navigate through, armed with this brand of social and cultural capital.[26] However, not all students possess this form of knowledge. Large comprehensive high schools act as a sorting mechanism for children, dividing learners according to their social and cultural capital.[27] Working-class and ethnic minority youths constitute the majority of students in the large comprehensive inner-city high schools that have the often well-deserved reputation of being the lowest-achieving schools in the nation.[28] In these schools, students from lower-socioeconomic-status homes are often placed in lower academic tracks with less-experienced teachers and larger classes.[29] They routinely receive neither the resources nor the individualized attention that their middle-class peers receive.

The small school movement responds to this issue of educational inequality by offering historically underserved populations an opportunity to flourish and grow in settings where teachers know and care about them. In successful small schools, where teachers are collectively responsible for meeting the needs of far fewer students, there is a greater emphasis placed on effectively addressing the learning needs of every student. Wasley and her colleagues claim that "small schools appear to be more educationally equitable in closing the achievement gap(s) [that separate] students by social class and racial and ethnic groups."[30] Other findings lend support, showing that low-income students in small schools outscore low-income students in large schools on standardized tests[31] and that smaller schools have a noticeably positive effect on the achievement of disadvantaged students.[32]

However, just because a school is small doesn't mean

it is well conceived or skillfully operated in the service of narrowing ubiquitous achievement gaps for poor and minority students. It is widely asserted that school size directly affects the cohesiveness of the school community, but smallness alone does not guarantee an equitable, personalized, and rigorous learning environment.[33] In order for a small school to engender successful learning experiences for all students, it must foster a sense of autonomy, possess a compelling vision, have a personalized atmosphere, support teaching, and hold itself accountable to students and district standards.[34] Small learning communities, by virtue of their size, offer leaders a potentially powerful vehicle for achieving these conditions for success.

4. *Share power to get results.* Most large comprehensive high schools operate under a bureaucratic chain of command, in which power resides at the top in a few formal leadership positions. This traditional model of top-down leadership, while efficient on the surface, can work to the detriment of teachers' professionalism and threaten schoolwide morale. By contrast, a culture of shared decision making pervades many successful small schools. Their leaders often recognize that involvement in decision making leads to community action and group accountability. When parents, staff, students, and teachers are invited to the table, school communities can reach decisions about the issues that concern them most. A principal of a small restructured elementary school explains that imposing authority just does not work: "I don't see my role as a decision maker. I have a leadership role, but it is as a facilitator. My role is to empower other people."[35]

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Leaders who nurture a culture of shared decision making — and shared leadership — involve all interested parties in building the forward momentum of the school, thus providing fertile ground for long-term positive change. Accomplishing this successfully, however, involves nothing short of a Herculean effort. Moreover, principals are often reluctant to give up their responsibility for having the "final word" and for executing quick decisions when necessary. Consequently, successful leaders make strategic choices about when and how to involve members of their communities in key decisions. As one faculty member from a restructured small school described it: "I see the principal coming to us more and conferring with us and making it seem as if she wants us to decide together, but there are times when it is solely her decision. Sometimes it is a matter of time. I understand that; it's not a problem. On important issues, we sit down together."[36]

Perhaps the greatest difference between decision making in large schools and in small ones is how colleagues communicate. Small school founder and principal Nancy Mohr says, "Building a small school is too much trouble unless an integral part of its mission is creating new ways of working together and shifting power and authority."[37] Teachers who make administrative decisions about matters involving their students have opportunities to communicate to one another their concerns and differences of opinion. The culture of "happy talk" disappears, as one faculty member from a small school explains: "[Communication] is an up and down issue, but I can't imagine it going back to like it was before. Now we are confronting each other. People are speaking up. There really is communication . . . and people are seeing everybody's perspective more. More people are trying to make it work."[38]

5. *Lead through inquiry, not by edict.* In successful small schools, the student body is small enough for teachers to quickly collect data on learning gaps, and faculty members are few enough to gather around a table to establish schoolwide priorities for teaching and learning. Size matters because it determines the feasibility of holding frequent, pointed discussions that focus on collective improvement in teaching and learning. In a comprehensive high school with 75 to 100 faculty members, discussions of teaching and learning may happen — but only in disaggregated small groups or departments. Reaching consensus on the most critical instructional problems facing a large comprehensive high school is virtually impossible. The notorious inability of large faculties to reach common agreement is often coupled with greater centralization of decision making by the district or building administration.

By contrast, in successful small schools, faculty members have the flexibility to ask where the greatest needs exist for students and to figure out, as a whole group, how to

address them effectively. Smaller numbers of teachers have at least a fighting chance of reaching consensus. Leaders in small schools have the opportunity to involve all teachers meaningfully when important decisions about the school need to be made. They can also encourage inquiry-based reflection by all members of the instructional staff. In their study of Chicago small schools, Wasley and her colleagues found successful leaders "looking for evidence of problems from real sources of data within the school," which led to a stronger "resolve of both faculty and administrators to take meaningful steps to improve student conditions."[39] One teacher from a successfully restructured small school describes how the transition from large to small changed her view of leadership: "During that first year, I remember thinking, if they'd just tell us what to do, I know we'd do a great job. But they never did tell us. We finally realized that it was up to us. We'd been given an opportunity, but we had to initiate something. It became something we believed in, something we internalized, rather than something someone else believed in."[40]

6. *Approach problems as opportunities*. Schools never run smoothly day in and day out, perhaps simply because they are essentially human places, and humans are woefully imperfect. Regardless of the school's size, staff members are routinely frenzied because of the workload, and students demand near-constant attention. Administrators and teachers rarely have time to prepare for the next surprise or catastrophe. At times, there simply isn't enough energy or imagination to spend trying to guess where the next blow will come from. For these reasons, school staff members — in both large and small schools — will forever be reacting to problems as they arise.

This is hardly surprising. Leaders of major change efforts face problems all the time, both planned and unplanned. As Michael Fullan reminds us, "Problems are endemic in any serious change effort; both within the effort itself and via unplanned intrusions. Problems are necessary for learning, but not without a capacity for inquiry to learn the right lessons."[41]

Accepting that schools are generally reactive, successful small high schools differ from their large counterparts in that they have the luxury (and perilously hard work) of reinventing their norms and expectations for academics, behavior, and professional work. Each problem that arises is an opportunity to reinforce those expectations. Take the following example shared by principal Mohr:

> In a small school [graffiti] can cause the community to believe that things are falling apart. However, in the smaller school, the subject can be addressed by schoolwide conversations about the meaning of disrespecting the community. As a principal, I constantly talked about the disrespect that graffiti represented, and at the same time, I went around and cleaned it up, making it clear that I cared about the school environment. In a small school it is also more likely that the culprits are known and can be identified by most students, making it more important that there be a schoolwide response — outrage and a sense of "We don't do that around here." . . . If everyone is upset, not just the administration, then there is a strong group norm developing, and that can be a powerful deterrent.[42]

When a school is small, the administration and staff can intentionally craft and maintain a common message about appropriate behavior more effectively than in a large school. Teachers in successful small schools tend to have more contact time with their students; these occasions may present opportunities for students to discuss the norms and expectations of the school or for teachers to reinvent their small school identity with their students. So when staff members invest time in creating and reinforcing positive messages for teaching, learning, and behavior, daily glitches will emerge as learning opportunities.

7. *Nurture, build, and support professional community*. Generally understood as one key to school improvement, professional learning receives a great deal of attention in local and state arenas. The development of a sense of a professional community within a school signals that staff members are reflecting together on their work — a formidable accomplishment. In professional communities, staff members regularly open their teaching practices to the scrutiny of their peers. Over time this process builds trust, confidence, and a focus on the improvement of teaching and learning practices that permeates the community and binds it together. However, the work can be time-consuming and potentially a turnoff to staff members who think they're doing a "good enough" job without the critical reflection of others.

There is emerging evidence from successful small schools that having a small number of staff members greatly facilitates the creation and sustenance of a professional community. The shift from large to small led one high school teacher to change sides on the future of professional learning:

> That was the moment that I knew things were going to be different. I felt the energy of the group in the front of the auditorium, and I knew that I wanted to be part of it. For me, this was a major turning point. I had been completely shut down for the past 10

> years, and I never would have believed that I'd ever feel that there was any hope of things really changing around here. I was prepared to simply wait it out until retirement.[43]

Smaller staffs can support interpersonal relationships more effectively. In successful small schools, professional development experiences capitalize on these relationships between faculty members by employing teaming and small-group task forces.[44] In addition, staff development in small schools often employs peer-coaching methods, such as "critical friends" groups,[45] and this approach enables teachers to understand their colleagues, their students, and their teaching practices more thoroughly. At another level, ongoing professional learning is perhaps easier to achieve in some small schools because teachers can worry less about large-school demands (such as heavier emphasis on completing bureaucratic chores and extracurricular coaching responsibilities) and focus more on student learning and their teaching practices.[46]

8. *Foster deeper, more robust connections with families and community.* Successful small school leaders take advantage of a unique opportunity to touch every parent and every family in their communities and to involve these parties in ways that are simply impossible for the staff of large, comprehensive schools. Since the transformation of large high schools into smaller learning communities affects students and parents, school leaders put themselves at a clear advantage by involving these parties at the start of the change process. Kathleen Cotton explains:

> The recent literature on small learning communities . . . identifies parent and community participation in the life of the school as both needed and easier to achieve than it is in large schools. For one thing, parents are often the driving force — or one of the driving forces — for establishing small learning communities, and they often have an ongoing hand in both governance and instruction. In addition, like school staff and students, parents respond favorably to the smaller-scale and more personalized climate.[47]

When it comes to including parents in a school's redesign plans, however, school staffs tend to be cautious. "Most school staffs have little experience working collaboratively with parents on what is surely an open-ended task. Most teachers are themselves engaging for the first time in a school design process. Most school personnel spend considerable time convincing communities that their schools are doing a good job."[48] Furthermore, the conventional outlet for parent involvement in schools — the parent/teacher organization — may prove insufficient for gathering support from a wide constituency, since typical groups represent a very small percentage of the total parent community.

How are successful small school leaders doing it? Consider the example of Paula Evans, who as principal initiated the conversion of a large and high-performing Boston high school into five small schools. The majority of her parents did not push for change, despite data that revealed that a significant portion of nonwhite students were failing multiple classes. After all, the school was already better than most in the area. For major changes to occur and be embraced at the school required parent involvement and support. Evans explains her strategy:

> The base of parent support, no matter which way I looked, seemed thin. We continued to meet often and to engage in straight talk about the school, about our kids, and about the larger community. The deans became critical organizers of potluck suppers and get-togethers to celebrate student achievement. They organized and nurtured a base of parent support in each small school. Over the two years I spent at CRLS [Cambridge Rindge and Latin School], the parent support base solidified. Several of our most virulent detractors even came over to our side.[49]

Tireless, frequent interactions with parents allowed Evans to repeatedly explain the purpose of the school's changes. Above all, she stayed accessible every day to meet the immediate concerns of parents — whether by phone, via e-mail, or in person.

The creation of smaller learning communities from a single high school will inevitably cause tensions with regard to the management of resources. Beyond engagement with families, partnerships with businesses and community organizations can sometimes provide new small schools with additional funds or facilities, as school reformer Jacqueline Ancess explains: "Neighborhood organizations, businesses, social agencies, local colleges and universities, and the central/district office are among those that constitute the extended community. When the new school reaches out to forge alliances and establish relationships, it can generate good will, confidence, local support, and resources, all of which contribute to its development."[50]

CONCLUSION

Leadership lessons gleaned from studies of successful small schools offer insights for those engaged in converting large schools, particularly at a time when many schools

and districts are seeking alternatives to the "sort and select" model of comprehensive high school education. From the history of school reform, it is clear that attention only to changes in size and structure will be insufficient for achieving excellent results for all students. For those leading structural change of this nature, a host of other concerns merits attention to ensure that new small high schools aren't simply miniature versions of their former selves. Fundamentally, this requires a shift in the professional culture of the school, moving from a hierarchical organization in which only a few lead and most follow, to a place where, as Mountlake Terrace High's Steven Gering suggests, everyone shares the responsibility to lead in important ways.

Finally, while it may be true that small schools offer unique opportunities to exercise leadership in service of improving teaching and learning, other schools of various shapes and sizes can also learn from the lessons noted above. All schools, regardless of size, can benefit from leadership that seeks to create greater clarity in focus, to strengthen interpersonal relationships between adults and students, and to build professional communities focused on the improvement of teaching and learning. Moreover, the current climate of accountability has created a situation in which all schools, no matter their size, face the increasingly difficult challenge of ensuring that all students learn to high standards. Teachers and administrators who inhabit traditional large comprehensive high schools can no longer excuse failure on the part of significant numbers of students within their schools. They might do well to pay attention to the leadership lessons that can be learned from close examination of their small-school counterparts.

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15. See for example, Michael Copland, "The Myth of the Superprincipal," *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2001, pp. 528-33.

16. Lee and Smith, p. 268.

17. Cotton, *New Small Learning Communities*; and Wasley et al., op. cit.

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19. Tom Vander Ark, "The Case for Small High Schools," *Educational Leadership*, March 2002, p. 56.

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21. Virginia Vanderslice and Shirley Farmer, "Transforming Ourselves: Becoming an Inquiring Community," in Michelle Fine, ed., *Chartering Urban School Reform: Reflections on Public High Schools in the Midst of Change* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994), p. 89.

22. Thomas Sergiovanni, "The Case for Smaller Schools," in idem, *Leadership for the Schoolhouse: How Is It Different? Why Is It Important?* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), pp. 98-118.

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24. Valerie E. Lee et al., *Social Support, Academic Press, and Student Achievement* (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1999), as quoted in Wasley et al., p. 71.

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43. Vanderslice and Farmer, pp. 91-92.

44. Michael Klonsky, "Small Schools and Teacher Professional Development," ERIC Digest, available at www.ericdigests.org/2003-4/small-schools.html.

45. See, for example, Kathleen Cushman, "How Friends Can Be Critical as Schools Make Essential Changes," *Horace*, May 1998, pp. 1-5.

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