

The creation of small schools has received growing national attention over the past three years. In this time, it has grown into a movement, so that, as of January 2003, virtually all major urban districts in the nation are in the process of starting new small schools or “converting” large comprehensive high schools into small learning communities that share the same facility. Most medium-sized districts and many suburban and rural consolidations are engaged in or exploring small schools options as well.

The attention derives from several sources. The federal government’s interest in small schools in the aftermath of the Columbine tragedy and the subsequent Federal Smaller Learning Communities grants have provided legitimacy as well as substantial funding. A new commitment to serving *all* students well has highlighted the failure of most comprehensive high schools to bring about significant improvement in student accomplishment over the past two decades. A closer examination of data shows that this failure includes many schools in smaller towns and suburban areas as well as the usual urban schools serving predominantly poor students of color. The commitment of massive philanthropic resources to the creation of small schools has called attention to a steadily accumulating body of research on the benefits of small schools for almost all students and has spurred districts into undertaking small school projects.

The interest in small schools is about far more than size. Reformers hope to realize the benefits that research suggests are likely to occur: safer, more personalized schools, increased student achievement for all students, higher college-going rates, and increased student, parent, and teacher satisfaction.

For practical reasons, many of the next generation of small schools will not be freestanding. Instead, several autonomous small schools, born of a traditional large high school, will exist within the same building.

While considerable research supports the efficacy of small schools, few examples currently exist of large high schools having converted successfully into several small schools. This paper examines the early steps taken by three such high schools in Washington State. All three benefit from receiving grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Attributes of High Achievement Schools

Common Focus
Time to Collaborate
High Expectations
Performance Based
Technology as a Tool
Personalized
Respect & Responsibility

Components of Powerful Learning

Active Inquiry: Students are engaged in active participation, exploration, and research; activities draw out perceptions and develop understanding; students are encouraged to make decisions about their learning; and teachers utilize the diverse experiences of students to build effective learning experiences.

In-Depth Learning: The focus is competence, not coverage. Students struggle with complex problems, explore core concepts to develop deep understanding, and apply knowledge in real world contexts.

Performance Assessment: Clear expectations define what students should know and be able to do; students produce quality work products and present to real audiences; student work shows evidence of understanding, not just recall; assessment tasks allow students to exhibit higher-order thinking; and teachers and students set learning goals and monitor progress.

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Small School Grants

The Foundation promotes the development of new small schools in Washington State through three major strategies: district grants, school grants, and the Achievers Program. Unlike its national grants, which go to technical assistance providers or other outside agencies, grants in Washington are awarded directly to schools or districts, and go to rural, suburban, and exurban as well as urban areas.

The foundation identified “Attributes of High Achievement Schools” and “Components of Powerful Learning” from the body of school research (see previous page). All grantees are expected to use both the attributes and components to guide their school redesign work.

Model district grants were awarded to increase the capacity of ten school districts and all their schools to improve academic achievement, infuse technology into the learning environment, increase professional development opportunities, and strengthen home and community partnerships. A major focus of these grants (awarded in Spring 2000) is to change district operations in ways that more clearly support school-level work.

Model school grants support high-achievement school designs that are better prepared to help all students achieve. Over fifty K-12 schools have received funding to create and implement new designs that have a common focus, create high expectations, make data-driven decisions, and provide time for teachers to work on shared challenges. The first school grant to a Washington high school was awarded in March 2001.

The Washington State Achievers Program works on school redesign with sixteen high schools serving large populations of low-income students. The grant’s resources are focused on improving college access for low-income students, and combines academic readiness with scholarship opportunities. Students from low-income families are eligible to apply for one of 500 Achievers scholarships given annually to graduates of Achiever high schools for thirteen years by the Washington Education Foundation as a result of a \$100M gift of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The sixteen Achiever high schools received their grants in April 2001.

Case Study Schools

The three high schools included in this report were selected for study because they represent somewhat different approaches to the conversion of a comprehensive high school into small schools, yet each has an effective leadership arrangement and sufficient staff ownership of its

efforts to move forward. Each has received a different grant, which changes their contexts somewhat. Each also receives technical assistance from the Small Schools Project and school coaches provided by the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative. (Because the focus of this report is on leadership and the change process within each school, we did not collect data on the role of school coaches.)

None of these high schools is a failing high school. On most measures, they are more or less typical, and serve their communities reasonably well – at least by the standards of the past half-century. Each of them, however, is determined to make significant changes with the intention of serving all their students well.

Eagle Ridge High School (1,849 students), which received a model school grant, is one of four high schools in its district, located in a south Puget Sound suburb. Hillcrest High School (1,603 students), the only high school in its district, received funding through one of the model district grants. Taft High School (763 students), also the only high school in its district, received an Achievers grant. Even though their grant conditions differ, each school has accepted the challenge of creating small schools of 400 or fewer students from its current comprehensive high school.

Eagle Ridge, Hillcrest, and Taft high schools have benefited from good leadership, a generally high degree of trust between and among the staff and administration, and several years of conversation about, or engagement in, school reform prior to receiving their “Gates grants,” as they are commonly known in Washington. Yet, even in these supportive environments, the conversion process has proven to be complex and difficult, and success is not at all certain.

Washington State Context

Washington’s public schools, like those in most other states, are embedded in an ongoing statewide effort to reform and improve student achievement. In Washington, the reform effort both supports and constrains serious work at school redesign. After a decade of uncoordinated efforts following the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983), Washington state reform took serious hold with the passage of House Bill 1209 in the Spring of 1993.

The state reform effort is known informally as “1209” – as in “1209 requires us to ...” – and is notable for its intention to move the state to

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a standards-and performance-based system of K-12 education. When passed, 1209 contained provisions for substantial professional development to accompany the move to a standards-based system, charged the superintendent of public instruction (an elected position) with developing a system of assessment that would provide the state's citizens with evidence that schools and districts were indeed educating students well, and required the state's institutions of higher education to admit students on the basis of competencies as well as credits.

Over the past decade, the state has developed a set of standards known as Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) in reading, writing, communication, math, science, the arts, and health and fitness. Similar to standards in other states, the EALRs are now widely used, especially in elementary and middle schools.

1209 also created what is now known as the Washington Assessment of Student Learning, or WASL, a test that would be administered to virtually all students in grades four, seven, and ten, and would provide the state with a "snapshot" of how the state's schools were doing. For a variety of reasons having to do with the cost of creating the WASL, which is in part a performance-based test and therefore more expensive, the legislature soon turned the WASL into a high stakes test by declaring that students in the graduating class of 2008 would need to pass all components of the WASL to be graduated from high school.

The WASL has been phased in over the past several years, with the science test making its debut in the spring of 2003. While the WASL will not be "high stakes" until 2006, when the Class of 2008 takes the 10th grade test, results are already widely reported in the media, and, in some districts, principal evaluations are based in part on improving WASL scores. Without dramatic improvement, almost two-thirds of students will not graduate from Washington high schools in 2008.

The legislature has been unable, after several years of deliberation, to agree on any sanctions for schools or districts whose students are chronically unsuccessful, based on WASL scores. Nor has the legislature made good on its intention of providing substantial resources for professional development it believed would be necessary to move to a standards-based system. Washington is one of only eleven states without a charter school law.

The Washington State Board of Education is on record as believing that the current system, based on seat time and credits, acts as an impediment to standards-based reform. The Board has repeatedly and

publicly indicated that it will be pleased to entertain requests for waivers from schools, particularly high schools, engaged in substantial reform. One Gates grantee has requested an array of waivers, and they were granted without delay. To date, that is the only school in Washington to request waivers related to school reform.

WHAT WE'RE LEARNING

The work of converting comprehensive high schools is in a relatively early stage. Whether conversions will be more than occasionally successful remains unclear, let alone whether it will become a “movement” that substantially changes the nature of high schools in this country. These are but three schools from among upwards of one thousand schools nationally engaged in, or at least investigating, the potential benefits of conversion. Even at this stage, however, we begin to see some early pointers from these schools that may benefit others who are at an earlier phase of the process.

Strong, engaged, and positive principal leadership makes a difference. Each site has benefited from strong leadership. The leadership styles vary among the three principals, in some ways quite dramatically. Yet each principal has worked carefully to improve staff sophistication about small schools through site visits, workshops, reading, and research review. Each principal has also maintained a strong vision for success. While each school still has some resisters and some uncertain staff, the prevailing ethos in the three schools is “we can take this on and succeed.” Finally, each principal’s personal integrity is unquestioned; each is viewed by the school’s staff as undertaking the conversion process for the right reasons.

These principals have been engaged fully in the process from the beginning. They decided early on that the work was important – for some, a moral imperative – and that they had no real choice but to proceed, given their growing understanding of their own school’s shortcomings. They have been thoughtful and inclusive, and they have been respectful of both the fears and legitimate concerns of their staff as they move forward. They have also been successful at transmitting their belief that the task could be done, and done well, by their staff. They have built the self-esteem of their staff through a mix of professional development, inclusion in the design process, shared decision-making, and moral argument.

In some other schools we work with, principals have chosen, for various reasons, to remain disengaged from this process. A few have viewed this effort as primarily a teacher-led initiative. Others are tired, or overburdened with the daily demands of running a comprehensive high school. Some have personal reservations about the wisdom of dismantling their comprehensive high school – an environment they have been a part of for most or all their careers. Still others lack the organizational or leadership skills to take on this task.

Looking at data on student achievement helps to make the case for change and builds staff commitment to serving all students. In each of these more-or-less average schools, it has been difficult to acknowledge the unforgiving nature of the data regarding student achievement. Across the three schools, data analysis revealed discouraging information. The particular pieces of data vary, but the message does not: six out of ten 9th graders graduate in four years. Many who do graduate have few marketable skills, or any sense of what to do after high school. Many who go on to higher education must take remedial courses. Current students and recent graduates alike report a lack of challenge or engagement in their high school courses. Forty percent or more of 9th graders fail one or more courses. The first-year GPA of college-going students declines more than that of most other high school graduates who go to college from other Washington high schools.

In spite of general community satisfaction and particular pride in some aspects of the school – the music program in one school, the arts program in another, the jazz band in the third, the occasional student accepted into an Ivy League school – the data makes clear, many, many students do not make it to graduation who should, and many who do have not been well-served academically.

Data such as this does not change the thinking of all teachers. Some believe high schools ought to continue the sorting process that has been part of its role from the beginning. Others do not believe that all students can achieve at high levels. Some blame students and their families for the data, or the state or the district for inadequate funding or poor leadership, or both. Still others believe this reform effort, too, shall pass.

In each of these schools, however, a majority of staff members have come to accept that their charge is to serve all students well, not just some of them. By this standard, analysis of their own student data leads to only one conclusion: school as usual has become unacceptable.

Inclusion and transparency are key contributors to staff ownership. An approach to the conversion work that operates on the basis of no secrets and no surprises, and which welcomes everyone into the process appears to build forward momentum. Each proposal was written by relatively few people and, in one instance, the grant was awarded to the district, not the school.

Each of these principals worked quickly to involve others and to

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provide multiple avenues for that involvement. They were also strategic and persistent about engaging hesitant but key staff members. Such broad inclusion took many forms: positions on leadership groups, data analysis, examining research on high school reform generally and small schools in particular, visiting established small schools and reporting back to the staff, participation in professional development activities, and regular opportunities to talk with colleagues.

- Each school created an inclusive process for staff involvement. While they varied, each process engaged teachers and other building staff early and substantially in the study and planning so that work could move forward. Two of the plans also provided sufficient checkpoints early on so parents and students were aware of changes being contemplated and had intermittent opportunities to comment. At the third school, students and parents have been involved in a more continuous manner from relatively early in the process. Each school took from six to eighteen months to move from discussions that focused primarily on “why change” to “how to change.” In that time, most staff concerns were addressed (or at the least, acknowledged), and a process that led to broad consensus was developed and formed the basis for ongoing work.
- Each school developed a transparent decision-making process. These schools are notable among the conversion schools the Small Schools Project works with for the high degree of trust around decision-making in the school. Again, the processes themselves are different, but in each instance, they are known, understood, and accepted as reasonable by that particular staff. Acceptance of the process is due in no small part to the respect each staff holds for its principal.
- Each site has shared design authority among all staff members. In each building, staff members have been involved in designing their small schools. In one, where small schools will be differentiated from the beginning, the process has been lengthy, detailed, and characterized by high collaboration. When structural implementation begins in September 2003, it will take place over two years. At the other two sites, small schools, by design, have opened looking alike – “getting small” was the critical issue in these schools. The design process in both schools now moves in tandem with implementation, and will spread over four years, with differentiation occurring more gradually.

Not all staff members have chosen to be deeply involved in constructing the small school designs, but authority has been shared, and widely exercised by staff in all three schools.

A new, public commitment to equity sustains groups and individuals at difficult moments. A significant part of the “right reasons” for undertaking the conversion process in each school has been the recognition that their current comprehensive high school has served many students poorly and left many others unchallenged. At each site, that recognition has been painful, challenging both longstanding practice and personal philosophies.

The proof of this commitment to equity, of course, will not be known for some years. This commitment, which may contain a whiff of political correctness, stands in sharp contrast to often low expectations that many Washington teachers have for students (Fouts et al., 2003). Nonetheless, when key design questions have arisen, when staff assignments were determined, and when student placements were decided, the question of what decision would best promote equity has been the determining factor thus far.

Balancing teaching and learning issues with design and structure issues is critical. In most conversion schools, design and structure issues have seemed at times to be all-consuming. In some instances, it has led to frustration and confusion; in others, to ill-conceived solutions that are unsupportable or unimaginative, or both. (The observation, attributed to both Winston Churchill and Buckminster Fuller, that “first we shape our buildings, and then our buildings shape us” seems particularly appropriate to school conversions.)

Each of the three sites has tried to remain focused on increasing student accomplishment, even as they struggled with issues of design and structure. Two of these schools have taken explicit steps to place instructional issues at the forefront. One did so by “elevating” a curricular design process to the level of a design principle. The other, using the same approach to curriculum design, has used a high number of its weekly late start days to focus on instruction, and by insisting that the ongoing design and implementation process take account of current data on student achievement. The third school moved quickly to partial implementation to promote circumstances where the early implementers could begin to see the potential of high personalization and work to take advantage of that design element.

WHAT WE'RE LEARNING

After watching schools struggle with priorities for most of a year, we were convinced schools had made a serious tactical error by focusing so strongly on design and structure – as had we at the Small Schools Project, in initially supporting the schools in that focus. From the vantage point of another year, our sense is that what the schools (and we) had believed to be a strategic choice between focusing on teaching/learning on the one hand and design/structure on the other is in fact a dilemma. That is, the problem is not resolvable in favor of one or the other. Schools, like these three, that have worked to balance the focus have made the most steady, if uneven, progress precisely because they have recognized the two areas are deeply interdependent. Design is critical to school change precisely because it has a profound impact on the possibilities for teaching and learning it supports or confounds. At the same time, a change in design without a change in curriculum and pedagogical approach is unlikely to have the desired effect.

The following three case studies reflect works in progress. Though we have identified similarities between and among their approaches, each school has forged a path suited to its unique school context. The three schools exist – they are not composites of several schools. While their work to date has been thoughtful and their progress impressive, they are only in the early stages of what will be a five-year process simply to put their structural changes in place. We have therefore provided pseudonyms for the schools and individuals who work in them in the hope that they may continue their work without undue attention or distraction. Minor details have been changed for the same reason.

The chart on the following page illustrates the broad path these three schools are on in their work. More detailed charts are included in each case study and at the conclusion of this report.

