



Center for Innovative School Facilities

Attributes of Successful Small Schools

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The research on the small schools movement points to positive gains across the board in regards to teacher/student interaction, faculty interaction, and attendance, but these factors are not transferring to improved achievement scores and graduation rates. The exception to the lack of results is the work done by New York's *New Visions for Public Schools*. Using data from *New Visions* and the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative (which is comparable to New York in size and scope and reflects the disappointing results of most efforts around the country) it is clear that the reform needs to encompass facilities and teaching practices, not just school size.

Positive Gains

The *Chicago High School Redesign Initiative (CHSRI)* has transformed struggling large high schools into smaller schools. During their first 3 years they have found positive gains in relationships amongst teachers and students. There is a

- **60% increase in teacher's positive expectations of student futures,**
- **30% increase in student's positive expectations for their own future**
- **21% increase in classroom personalism ratings**

There are also significant gains in attendance at all grade levels. A strong correlation has been shown between attendance and student success. From 2002-05, *CHSRI* schools observed

- **Freshman with 6 fewer absences per year**
- **Juniors with 5 fewer absences per year**

Shortcomings

Conventional wisdom tells us that increased attendance and positive interactions between teachers and students should yield greater student achievement, but the experience of the *Gates Foundation* and *CHSRI* suggests otherwise. The *CHSRI* found

- **No statistically significant difference between *CHSRI* students and students in comparable, traditional schools in reading and math scores (Math PSAT 145 *CHSRI* vs. 144.6 Traditional)**
- **The percentage of students on-track to graduate was slightly higher in *CHSRI* schools (56% vs. 54%)**
- **The dropout was not significantly different than comparable schools (6.8% Traditional vs. 5.7% *CHSRI*)**

CHSRI noted that teachers reported "improved communal culture," but unless there was a "strong instructional leader" on campus, the instructional focus and methods were not altered.

New Visions for Public Schools

New York's *New Visions for Public Schools* reform program has achieved the same increases in learning atmosphere and a corresponding jump in student achievement. **In New York, the citywide four-year graduation rate is 51%. In the lowest-performing schools, the four-year graduation rate drops to 31%.** *New Visions* set out to reform the lowest-performing schools and has enjoyed dramatic success.

After 4 years, *New Visions* students

- **Had a 79% graduation rate from 2002-06**
- **9th Grade promotion rate of 92%**
- **An attendance rate of 89%**
- **A Dropout rate of 3%**

Their success is even more striking when their students incoming achievement scores are considered. **Upon entry, 82% of *New Visions* 9th graders did not meet state standards in Reading and Math.** The *New Visions* students averaged **682 on their Reading (667 is city average) and 686 on Math (666 in city).** Of the cohorts from 2002-06:

- **81% applied to college (85% of those students were accepted)**
- **53% were accepted to a four-year college**
- **53% reported they would be the first member of their family to attend college**

The Difference

New Visions has done more than shrink school sizes. Education and facility reform have always preceded other changes. They have received significant infrastructure investment from the City of New York (\$13.1 billion over 5 years). The physical restructuring of the schools involve students, community leaders and teachers, who are given the chance to tell the architects how to design the schools to support learning. Design is geared toward ease of instruction. Community partnerships are actively sought out, making the classes engaging, and relevant to the students' futures (whether that be 21st century industries or college).

Small schools do not magically increase student ability. Rather, they create the opportunity and relationships necessary to enact reform. Each school is required to follow a strict set of guidelines, designed to create the atmosphere necessary for reform.

New York Small Schools Initiatives

New York has embraced the small school model as a means rather than an end- small is not a destination in and of itself and big does not mean bad. Smaller schools have evolved into a cornerstone of New York's secondary reform efforts to better engage high need students through capturing student interest and creating personalized learning environments. An academically needy 8th grader, over-represented in this district of 1.1 million pupils, now has significant choice when selecting their high school. Prior to 2002, when this small school movement began in earnest, most neighborhoods had large schools, many of which had been providing substandard experiences for decades, evidenced by on-time graduation rates of 20-45%.

The City of New York has worked with a set of intermediary organizations to manage the transformation, often leveraging additional resources and relationships to support the schools and ground them in a set of research-based design principles.

These schools, as a whole, have outperformed district high schools as evidenced by a 20% differential on graduation rates, with the new small schools attaining rates in the upper 70%'s while city-wide rates hovered in the upper 50%'s. The graphic below provides a clear juxtaposition from some of the schools against performance of the host building.

One of the intermediaries, New Visions for Public Schools, has opened over 90 of these small schools with grade ranges from 9-12 to 6-12 to 7-12 since 2002. Its first graduating cohort of 14 schools in 2006 posted a graduation rate of 78.5%; the following year, 37 schools graduated with an average on-time graduation rate of 77%. The profile of students in these schools was needier than city-wide averages, with 75% free and reduced lunch eligible, indicating economic need; and 70% coming in to the 9th grade reading and doing math below grade level.

So, what are the keys to the initiative's success?

New York City Small Schools:

- **Maintain Small Size:** High schools (grades 9-12) maintain an enrollment of under 500 students. This allows for the personalization necessary to bring struggling students up to speed.
- **Reuse Existing Facilities:** This measure is a necessity in crowded New York, but also allows the new schools to inherit the history and community relationships of the old campus buildings. Significant public investment has gone into reshaping these buildings in alignment with the reform. This, plus significant investment above and beyond from public officials have given these buildings inspirational and innovative touches.
- **Hold High Expectations for all Students:** *New Visions* designs programs to prepare students for all types of success after high school. Not every student is expected to pursue post-secondary education, but all must leave the school with specific skills for their intended future along with the soft skills that will make them viable candidates for a variety of fields.
- **Establish a College Preparatory Environment:** All students are encouraged to pursue more than just a high school diploma. College access and awareness supports are a feature of every school.
- **Engage the Community:** Schools are restructured with input from community businesses and organizations. These groups in turn provide expertise and opportunities outside of the school for the students. Each school is co-created and supported with explicit outside partners.
- **Provide Choice to Families and Students:** Prior to the small school movement in New York, choice was limited for students and families. Now, there are a portfolio of options, and students have the entire city at their disposal, not limited to geographic zoning at the high school level.
- **Partner with Intermediaries:** During predevelopment and development, the schools work with outside experts to design facilities and curriculum. There is a recognition that the best schools are the result of collaboration.
- **Culture of a Movement:** While New York has not stemmed the national tide of teacher retention, there is significant human capital attracted to New York. The schools have leveraged this body of talent and the small schools have engendered something akin to a social movement. Young schools with charismatic leadership are tapping into a desire to reform, which pushes a set of labor intensive reforms.

Each school is designed with an emphasis on academic rigor, relevant content, teacher/student relationships, preparation for life after high school and accountability.

Academic Rigor

More than 90% of New Visions high schools offer advanced placement courses. The schools have advanced math courses, and agreements with local colleges to allow students to attend upper-level

courses in most fields. New York State has a Regents program that allows students to take extra course work to earn a higher degree than the standard high school diploma. New Visions students are encouraged to achieve a Regents degree.

Before and after school tutoring is available to all students, and is strongly encouraged by the administration. Students who enter with scores below grade level are required to complete a remediation program that includes summer orientations and after school programs.

Relevant Content

The curriculum uses student experiences to motivate learning. For example, in areas with high immigrant populations, the students are encouraged to use their own family's story as a writing subject. The math classes use real world, business applications. At one school, students were encouraged to interview community members about a contemporary issue, and chart their responses using mathematical equations and graphs.

Class projects attempt to create links between the students and the community. Students are encouraged to work with community businesses/experts to craft projects. If a student is interested in film, a collaboration is arranged with a local production company.

Operate in a Setting that Allows Strong Teacher/Student Relationships

The small size of these schools is just the first step toward creating stronger relationships. Each small, autonomous school has a clearly defined identity that is tied in with the larger campus. The physical layout of the school is designed to allow collaboration in classes. Areas are designed where students and teachers can interact in a setting that resembles a café or meeting space rather than a classroom. Even furniture purchases are made based on their ability to encourage a variety of interactions.

At *New Visions* schools, parents received frequent updates on their child's progress and recent events at the school. The schools create events that allow parents to help and become involved. Also, the parents are frequently allowed opportunities to express their opinions about the school and the child's experience.

Prepare Students for Post Secondary Options

New Visions encourages students to achieve post-secondary degrees but understands it is not an option for every student. New Visions schools offer professional programs that are geared toward growth industries. With help from community businesses, they teach the students industry specific skills and the soft skills that will prepare them for a variety of professions.

Accountability

At each school, the leadership is treated like a CEO. They are responsible for meeting set goals and must answer to the community. Performance benchmarks are set for all staff members. When goals are not met, staff are put on probation or removed.

References:

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4. Rubin, Adam. *Aligning Space to the Education Reform Efforts: Driving Higher Academic Achievement*. Deliver to Leaders Roundtable 4/1/08.