

Beyond Size: The Challenge of High School Reform

The effective reform of public high schools depends on size, quality, creativity, accountability, and the will to provide a high-quality education to all students.

Pedro A. Noguera

As educators continue to experiment with numerous strategies for raising student achievement, it becomes increasingly clear that the greatest challenge we face is how to reform public high schools.

Elementary schools have fared better. Studies have shown, for example, that the careful implementation of a variety of interventions—such as Success for

seems to have brought about more than superficial changes, and several communities show signs of a genuine and lasting rise in student achievement at the elementary school level.

When we cast our gaze at the high schools in the United States, however, the picture is far less optimistic. Dropout rates, especially for Latinos, are high, and the figures reported by school districts often underestimate the extent

of the dropout problem (National Education Association, 2001). In several states that have implemented exit exams as a requirement for graduation, large numbers of students are at risk of failing and leaving school without a diploma (Civil Rights Project, 2000). Not only are most students failing to make academic progress, but many public high schools are also beset with violence, poor attendance, and high teacher and principal turnover.

Five years ago, a team of researchers and practitioners and I initiated a comprehensive research-based reform at a large

urban public high school in Berkeley, California. We began by conducting a national survey to identify high schools that had similar characteristics and were academically successful. After closely examining several potential candidates, we discovered that none had found ways to eliminate the achievement gap, those wide disparities in student achievement that manifest themselves along racial and socioeconomic lines.

Since then, I have continued to search for successful high schools, places where the majority of low-



All—at the elementary school level can significantly raise student achievement in literacy and math (Fashola & Slavin, 1997). Some schools have shown sustained and significant progress in elementary schools in communities as dispersed as Compton and Sacramento, California; Houston and El Paso, Texas; and Charlotte, North Carolina (Council of the Great City Schools, 1999). Given the vast resources that have been expended during the past decade to improve U.S. schools, such news is encouraging. At last, education reform

income students of color are achieving at high levels. I have found a small number of schools that meet these criteria—including Far West High School in Oakland, California; Snowden High School in Boston, Massachusetts; and El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in Brooklyn, New York. These schools differ significantly in organization, curriculum, and mission, but they share one important characteristic: All of them are small.

With fewer than 200 students enrolled, these schools provide a level of intimacy and support that is rare in most U.S. high schools. Not only do students at these schools outperform their counterparts at larger high schools in the same districts on standardized

Technical High School. Many of these schools have only been around for a few years, but others have a longer history that allows us to learn from their experience. The available research is not as detailed or systematic as it should be, but several significant findings can help educators who are contemplating similar initiatives.

Size Matters, But Quality Matters More

Researchers have pointed out that the anonymous character of large comprehensive high schools contributes to alienation and a lack of intellectual engagement among students (Newman, 1992; Steinberg, 1996). In the traditional high school, the typical teacher

the subjects that they teach and know how to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. Unless small schools have all the essential features associated with school effectiveness (Edmonds, 1979; Size-more, 1988), they are unlikely to be any better than the big schools that we have at present.

Small Schools Should Be Created, Not Imposed

In the rush to do something about the failure of high schools, several school districts have attempted to require schools to develop small learning communities. Without understanding the reasoning behind this initiative, some administrators have required that changes proceed anyway, largely out of a sense of impatience.

Their frustrations are understandable, but high schools are notoriously resistant to change. Imposing change on educators by administrative mandate does not work. Why have so many past education reforms failed? As Seymour Sarason pointed out more than 30 years ago,

If the more things change the more they remain the same, it is because our ways of looking and thinking have not changed. This should not be surprising when one recognizes that the agents of change from outside the school culture are too frequently ignorant of the culture in which the change is to be embedded. (1971, p. 235)

Schools are not like other organizations—businesses, universities, or the military—that can move and change according to directives from a central executive. Schools are decentralized institutions (Fullan & Miles, 1992); each has its own culture and climate. Unless reformers work with educators to adopt changes, and unless those who work in the school feel ownership of and responsibility for their work, even the best ideas are sabotaged or become unworkable.

Instead of imposing small learning communities on schools, educators should work with teachers to conceive new schools through a process that is

Reducing the size of a school is a necessary—but not a sufficient—step toward improving school quality.

tests, but they also have a clearer sense of where they are going after they graduate, and their schools help them get there.

Perhaps most striking is that these students say they like their schools, and, unlike students in most high schools, they feel that they can confide in the adults who work with them.

Lessons from Small Learning Communities

Several large school districts across the country—including Boston, Baltimore, New York, and Chicago—have embarked on initiatives to reform high schools by creating smaller learning communities. Some of these new ventures are in untraditional facilities, such as the Boston Arts Academy and Fenway Pilot School, both located in warehouse spaces adjacent to Fenway Park in Boston. Other new learning communities are smaller units within larger traditional high schools that are organized around a career-oriented theme, such as Communication Arts and Sciences at Berkeley High School and the Health Career Academy at Oakland

may see as many as 175 students during six 50-minute class periods. In such a context, teacher-student relations and the overall quality of the academic experience invariably suffer.

The structure and organization of large comprehensive high schools make them prone to a host of problems, including disengagement, violence, and fragmentation. Small schools, however, are not necessarily better than large ones. In fact, too many small schools are bad. In Berkeley, for example, I worked closely with a small school that served as a dumping ground for students who were regarded as undesirable by traditional schools. Despite its size—officially 160 but barely 100 on most days—the school showed no evidence of providing its students with the education opportunities that they deserved.

Reducing the size of a school is a necessary—but not a sufficient—step toward improving school quality. Beyond size, all schools must have a clear mission that the teachers, students, and parents understand and find meaningful (Meier, 1995). Teachers must be skilled and knowledgeable in

To disrupt the cycle of failure and provide our most vulnerable students with the support they need, we need to reform our schools.

voluntary, creative, and organic. Educators who unite around a common theme or idea, as they have done at several charter schools, feel an enhanced sense of ownership and responsibility. Rather than passively complying—or not complying—with directives from district-level administrators, empowered educators bring a sense of passion to creating new schools and can make extraordinary things happen (Clinchy, 2000; Meier, 1995). When creating new schools, we need to improve opportunities to explore and innovate.

Small Schools Need Accountability, Too

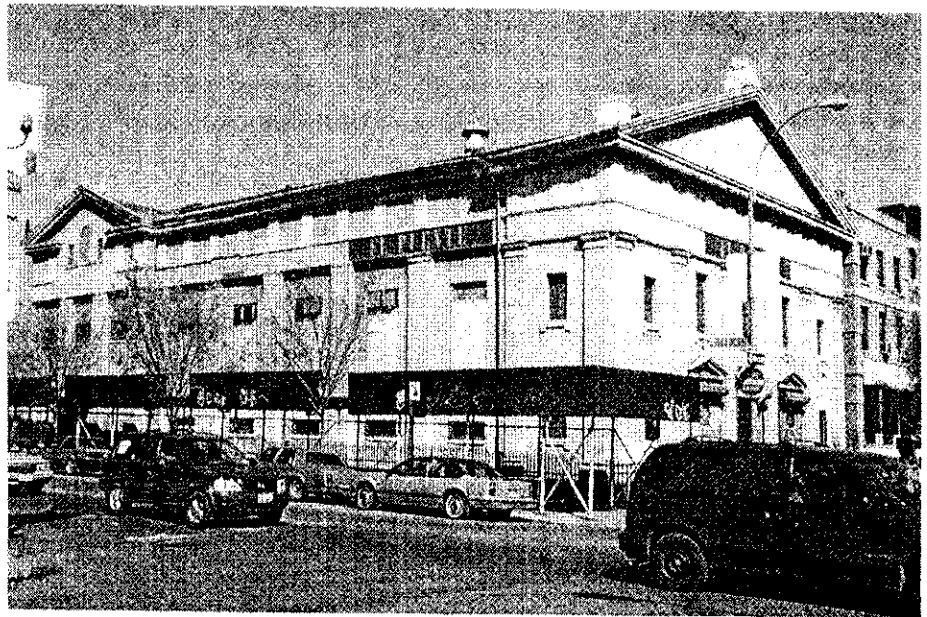
Of course, even as school systems embark on small school initiatives, district leaders must still ensure quality control, equity, access, and the maintenance of academic standards. Although advocates of new schools do not agree on the need for mechanisms of accountability, I believe that schools that gain greater autonomy must be held accountable for their students' academic achievement. Site councils or school boards—with parents as members—can hold these new schools accountable. Professional educators can also ensure that academic standards and student achievement do not decline as autonomy increases.

As we have already seen with many charter schools, the creation of new schools can easily lead to more segregation for students by race and class (Wells, 1998). Many districts use magnet schools to draw students from affluent families into public school systems even though doing so often means that their education takes place under separate and different circumstances than the education of students from economically disadvantaged families (Fuller & Elmore, 1996). Unless administrators take steps to ensure that resegregation does not occur, new small

learning communities can become isolated enclaves defined by race and class.

Past experience with some of the educational reforms of the 1960s and 1970s has shown that unless schools are held accountable for maintaining academic standards, some new experimental schools will run adrift (Kirp,

Those charged with designing and creating new schools should have the freedom and flexibility to do so with as few restrictions on their creativity as possible. The new schools and district leaders can negotiate the criteria by which they will measure student success, but establishing clear criteria is crucial. Without clear measures related to student performance outcomes, no one will be able to ascertain whether the new schools are successful, and replication of successful schools will be much more difficult.



El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, a small public high school in Brooklyn, New York, is a model of successful education reform.

1982). Without some monitoring of the quality of academic programs, some educators will pursue fads and gimmicks that harm students in the long run. The good intentions of educators may not be good enough to ensure quality, and the notion that unsatisfied parents can take their children elsewhere places too much of a burden on parents to monitor school quality.

District leaders have a responsibility to monitor academic quality at newly created schools. Monitoring does not mean dictating the content of the curriculum, controlling hiring practices, or requiring new schools to administer district or state assessments.

Race, Equity, and Small Schools

As policymakers and education leaders consider various ways to improve and reform schools, we should keep in mind what is at stake and why schools need to change. In many schools and districts, especially in communities where the majority of families are poor and nonwhite, students do not receive the education opportunities that they need and deserve. A broad range of academic performance indicators suggests that many of these students will not attain the skills that they need to attend college or get a decent job. Education is the only hope that most families have of breaking the cycle of

Site councils or school boards—with parents as members— can hold these new schools accountable.

poverty that reproduces itself across generations, and too many schools do not nurture or realize this hope.

To disrupt the cycle of failure and provide our most vulnerable students with the support they need, we need to reform our schools. Research shows that investments in education are the most effective means to deter crime and lower incarceration rates (Currie, 1993), to reduce poverty and unemployment (Danziger, Sandefur, & Weinberg, 1993), and to combat disease and promote public health and welfare (Auerbach & Krimgold, 2001). We have the resources and technical capacity to deliver high-quality education to all students. The only unanswered question is, Do we have the will?

The answer to that question will determine whether current efforts to reform schools will lead to sustained improvement or just produce cosmetic changes that have little impact on academic outcomes. Public cynicism and frustration with the pace and progress of reform are growing, and calls for the complete dismantling of public education through various privatization schemes are gaining momentum. Those of us who believe that public education is an essential feature of a healthy democracy must undertake our work carefully but with a sense of urgency. As we do so, we must also recognize that the outcome of our current efforts will determine the future of our society. ■

References

- Auerbach, J., & Krimgold, B. (Eds.). (2001). *Income, socioeconomic status, and health: Exploring the relationships*. Washington, DC: National Policy Association.
- Civil Rights Project. (2000). *Implications for high stakes testing in grades K-12*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clinchy, E. (Ed.). (2000). *Creating new schools: How small schools are changing American education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Council of the Great City Schools. (1999). *Making the grade*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Currie, E. (1993). *Reckoning: Drugs, the cities and the American future*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Danziger, S., Sandefur, G., & Weinberg, D. (1993). *Confronting poverty: Prescriptions for change*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Edmonds, R. (1979, September). Effective schools for the urban poor. *Educational Leadership*, 37(1), 15-27.
- Fashola, T., & Slavin, R. (1997). Promising programs for elementary and middle schools: Evidence of effectiveness and replicability. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 2(3), 251-307.
- Fullan, M., & Miles, M. (1992, June). Getting reform right: What works and what doesn't. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 73(10), 745-752.
- Fuller, B., & Elmore, R. (1996). *Who chooses? Who loses?* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kirp, D. L. (1982). *Just schools*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Meier, D. (1995). *The power of their ideas*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- National Education Association. (2001). *School dropouts in the United States: A policy discussion*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Newman, F. (Ed.). (1992). *Student engagement and achievement in American secondary schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Sarason, S. (1971). *The culture of the school and the problem of change*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Sizemore, B. (1988). The Madison elementary school: A turnaround case. *Journal of Negro Education*, 57(3), 243-266.
- Steinberg, L. (1996). *Beyond the classroom*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Wells, A. S. (1998). *Beyond the rhetoric of charter school reform*. Los Angeles: University of California at Los Angeles. Available: www.gseis.ucla.edu/does/charter/pdf

Pedro A. Noguera is the Judith K. Dimon Professor of Communities and Schools, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138; pedro_noguera@gse.harvard.edu.