Inside Success: Strategies of 25 Effective Small High Schools in NYC

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APPENDIX A: SAMPLE RECRUITMENT EMAILS

Sample Network Recruitment Email

Dear Network Leaders,

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools is conducting a study to learn why the City’s small high schools have been successful at improving student educational achievement and attainment. They would like to visit up to 30 small high schools to learn from their teachers and leaders about the factors they feel are most responsible for their positive impact on students and about the challenges they face in creating and sustaining their schools. The study, being done with MDRC, will begin this spring with research teams conducting the following activities in each high school that chooses to participate:

- One 60-minute interview with the principal
- One 45-minute interview with a focus group of 3-5 teachers
- One 60-minute interview with each school’s Network Leader (or another network member who works closely with the school)

Please see attached list for the schools that MDRC has identified for participation in the study. Also attached: 1) Small Schools of Choice (SSC) study overview, 2) SSC study FAQ, and 3) IRB approval letter.

The Research Alliance is asking for help in establishing communication with the principals of the schools identified in order to gauge their interest in participating in the study. As a next step, they would like to schedule a 15-minute phone call in the next week to discuss the project further.

Some of you may have already been contacted regarding the study; please reply to [name] by phone, [phone number], or email, [email address], with a time when it would be convenient to discuss this project further, should you want to be involved.

Thanks in advance.

Chief Operating Officer

Office of School Support, New York City Department of Education
Sample Principal Recruitment Email

Dear Principal NAME,

New York University’s Research Alliance for New York City Schools is conducting a study of NYC’s effective small high schools. Our research team hopes to include your school in this study because your school has had consistent positive impacts on student outcomes in recent years. We seek to learn about the factors that have played the most important role in the success of effective small high schools like yours.

Volunteering to participate in this study would involve a minimal time commitment on a day that is convenient for you and your staff. At each school, participation would include:

- One 60-minute interview with the principal or an administrator who has been at the school for at least three years (Spring 2011)
- One 45-minute interview with a focus group of 3-5 teachers (Spring 2011)
- One brief, 20-minute survey of teachers (Fall 2011)

The questions for the interviews and focus groups will focus on which factors staff members believe have played the most important role in your school’s success. Participation in the study is confidential, and we will not identify any schools or individual staff members by name in our reports. We have received approval for this study from the New York City Department of Education’s Institutional Review Board (see attached).

The research team is looking to conduct school visits through April and the early part of May. Please let us know by April 8th if you would like to participate by contacting me at this email or by phone at [number]. The attached FAQ sheet provides additional information about the study.

Thank you for your time and consideration!

Sincerely,

NAME
APPENDIX B: SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Statement to Subjects

A recent study by an independent research organization, MDRC, found that New York City’s small high schools that were created since 2002 have been more effective than other high schools at increasing students’ achievement and attainment. The Research Alliance for New York City Schools and MDRC are collaborating on an extension of this study that seeks to learn why small high schools are effective.

We’re speaking with you because your school has had a positive impact on student outcomes in recent years. Thus, your perspective on how this school operates is critical for helping us understand this school’s success. This interview will take approximately 60 minutes and will be audio recorded. The questions will focus on your impressions of various aspects of your school, the areas in which you think your school is succeeding or struggling, the challenges that the school has faced, and where you think the school is headed in the future.

The Research Alliance will use the information you provide for research purposes only. We will keep your responses confidential and will not attribute any comments to any specific individuals or schools. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time. You may also skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer.

Do you have any questions?

Background

To get started, I’d like to ask you a few questions about your background and about how and why you became the principal of this school…

1. First, how long have you been the principal at this school?
   • Were you involved with the creation of the school?

2. What were you doing before your current role as principal of this school?
   • Prior principal experience? If so, where?

3. Please tell me a bit about how you became the principal of this school?
   • Motivation: Why this school?
   • What factors influenced your decision to come to this school?
     • Did the school’s being new, small, or theme-based influence your decision at all? If so, how?
     Please describe…

Ask the following questions if principal was present when school first opened…

You mentioned that you were you involved with the planning of this school prior to its enrolling students… I’d like to ask you a bit more about that…

4. First, please describe how you were involved with the start-up of this school…
   • How did this school secure its location and building?
   • Were any key decisions made during this start-up period that have had a profound impact on the school’s success? Please describe.
   • What were the major challenges the school faced during this period?
     • Were these challenges addressed? How, by whom, and to what end?

Overall Impressions of the School
Later in the interview, I’m going to be asking you specific questions about different features of this school, but before that, I have some questions about what makes this school effective.

5. First, does anything set this school apart from other public high schools in New York City?
   - From other small high schools? (Probe for details and examples. Probe for comparisons to other schools that principal is familiar with.)
   - How does this school measure its success?

6. Of all of the things that contribute to making a school work, what are the two or three factors you think are most responsible for the successes that you just described?
   - Probe for examples if not offered: How do these factors influence the school’s success?
   - Is there evidence that these are the most important factors or is this a hunch? (e.g., “Teachers tell me this matters…”)
   - Have these always been the most important factors or are they recent developments?
     - Other important factors in the past?
   - Probe for process and steps: I’m interested in understanding the process that led to these factors contributing to the school’s success…
     - What had to happen? What decisions were made? What made this possible? Was this difficult?

Human Resources

I’d like to ask you some questions about your teachers and your HR policies…

7. Please describe the hiring process at this school.
   - How do you recruit teachers?
   - Who screens applications? Who makes decisions about which teachers to hire?
   - What are you looking for when you hire a teacher to work at this school?
   - What kind of teachers seem to do well in this school?
   - Does the union influence this process?

8. How are teachers evaluated? How are decisions about terminating teachers or not renewing teachers’ contracts made at this school?

9. Please describe the teachers in this school…
   - Listen for…
     - Mix of veterans and novice teachers?
     - Primary strengths of the teaching staff?
     - Areas for improvement?
     - Probe for: Role teacher characteristics play in contributing to the school’s success?
     - Time in their schedules to work together?
     - School norms that promote teachers working together?
   - Probe: Is there anything about the way the teachers in this school work together that plays a critical role in this school’s success?
Learning Environment

Let’s turn our attention to the learning environment in this school.

10. Are there aspects of the learning environment that have a big impact, positive or negative, on the school’s success?
   • Listen for: Safety/discipline; relationship between staff and students; academic expectations; student engagement.
   • How important are these characteristics relative to those already described?

11. What is the theme of this school? How, if at all, does the theme influence the way this school operates?
   • Influence community partnerships? Curriculum?

Intermediaries/Community Partnerships

13. Does the school have any other relationships, past or present, with external partners that play a big role in the school’s success?
   • Which ones?
   • Networks, intermediary organizations, community-based organizations, others?
   • What role have these organizations played?

14. Does this school share the same building with other small high schools?
   • If so: How, if at all, does the presence of this school(s) in the same building affect your school’s success?

Challenges

15. What are the biggest challenges facing this school today?
   • Looking ahead, what major challenges, if any, do you anticipate this school facing in the future?
   • How do you think these challenges will be addressed?

Follow-up on Impressions of the School

Earlier in the interview, I asked you about your impressions of the school and about the factors that you think are responsible for this school’s relative success…

16. Has talking about specific aspects of this school prompted any other thoughts about the factors most responsible for this school’s success?
   • How important are these relative to the factors mentioned earlier?

17. In closing, is there anything else that I should have asked you about your school, or that you’d like to share, to help us understand this small school operates and why, as a group, small schools have been successful?
APPENDIX C: TEACHER FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Interview code (e.g., WM01): __________
School: ____________________________________________________________
Date: _________________
Interviewer: ________________
Interviewees: ________________________________________________________

Statement to Subjects

A recent study by an independent research organization, MDRC, found that New York City’s small high schools that were created since 2002 have been more effective than other high schools at increasing students’ achievement and attainment. The Research Alliance for New York City Schools and MDRC are collaborating on an extension of this study that seeks to learn why small high schools are effective.

We’re speaking with you because your school has had a positive impact on student outcomes in recent years. Thus, your perspective on how this school operates is critical for helping us understand this school’s success. This focus group will take approximately 45 minutes and will be audio recorded. The questions will focus on your impressions of various aspects of this school and what makes this school successful.

The Research Alliance will use the information you provide for research purposes only. We will keep your responses confidential and will not attribute any comments to any specific individuals or schools. We also ask that you not share the responses of your colleagues with anyone outside this room. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time. You may also skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Motivation, Start-up and Professional Culture

To begin, I’d like to ask you each to describe how you came to this school and what it’s like to teach here…

1. First, please tell me each of your grades, subjects, and how long have you been teaching at this school?
   - Were any of you full-time teachers prior to coming to this school? If so, where and for how long?

2. Next, please tell me a bit about how you came to teach at this school?
   - What factors influenced your decision to come to this school?
     - Did the school’s being new, small, or theme-based influence your decision at all? If so, how?
     - Please describe.

3. Were any of you involved with the planning of the school prior to its enrolling students?
   - If yes, please briefly describe how you were involved.
   - Please tell me about any major challenges the school faced during this start-up period.
     - Were these challenges addressed?
     - If so, how and by whom?
     - How successful were these efforts?

4. I’m interested in learning what it’s like to teach at this school… To begin, please describe how, if at all, teachers work together at this school…
   - When and in what capacity?
     - Formal or informal collaborations? Time set aside in the schedule for teachers to collaborate?
     - Focus: instructional, non-academic (e.g., students’ social wellbeing), or both?
School norms re: autonomy vs. collaboration. Are classrooms open? Do teachers regularly observe and critique one another’s work?

Factors Responsible for School’s Success

As I mentioned at the beginning of the interview, our collaborators at MDRC have identified this school as one that has been relatively effective. This does not necessarily mean that the school is succeeding in every regard (though that may be the case), but rather that the school has been successful overall in recent years. Next, I want to ask you to share your thoughts about what makes this school successful at preparing and graduating students.

5. Of all of the things that contribute to making a school work, what two or three factors do you think are most responsible for this school’s success?
   - Probe for examples about how these factors influence the school’s success.
   - Have these always been the most important factors or are they recent developments?

Put bulleted table tent on the interview table so participants can see it.

This next question has several parts, so we’ve created this bulleted table tent to help you keep track of the components of the question… When new small high schools were being created, the theory behind why they would be effective is that they would provide: 1) personalized learning environments that enabled close relationships between teachers and students; 2) they would emphasize high academic expectations for all students; 3) they would have a curriculum focused on a particular theme and that provided students with a real-world learning opportunities; and 4) they would have partnerships with external organizations to support the school’s objectives and enhance teachers’ and students’ development…

6. How does your school compare to this general description of small high schools?
   - Are there any notable differences between your schools and this hypothetical description?
   - Is one or several of these characteristics more important than the others?
   - How important are these factors at influencing the school’s success relative to the factors you identified early (e.g., in response to question 5)?

Challenges and Personal Plans

7. What are the current challenges that this school is facing today?
   - What challenges, if any, do you foresee this school confronting in the future?
   - How do you think these current and future challenges will be addressed?
   - Note: May need to focus teachers on challenges unique to this school, as opposed to challenges facing all schools. i.e., may need to quickly clarify and refocuses if teachers start identifying system- or profession-wide challenges.

Follow-up on impressions of the school

Earlier in the interview, I asked you about your impressions of the school and about the factors that you think are responsible for this school’s relative success…

8. Has talking about specific aspects of this school prompted any other thoughts about the factors most responsible for this school’s success?
   - If participants provide additional thoughts: How important are these relative to the factors mentioned earlier?

9. In closing, is there anything else that I should have asked you about your school, or that you’d like to share, to help us understand how this small school operates and why it has been successful?

Thank you very much for your time.
APPENDIX D: PRINCIPAL REFLECTION MEMO TEMPLATE

General Information:

| Interview Code: |
| Interview Date: |
| Date this thematic summary was completed: |
| School: |

Principal background, what brought principal to school?

Creation of the school (if applicable):

Characteristics that distinguish this school:

Factors responsible for school’s success:

Teachers and human resources policies:

Learning environment:

Intermediaries and community partners:

Challenges:
APPENDIX E: TEACHER REFLECTION MEMO TEMPLATE

General Information

Interview Code:

Interview Date:

Date this thematic summary was completed:

School:

Physical description of school and/or other informal observations:

What brought teachers to this school?

Creation of the school (if applicable):

Professional culture of the school (collaboration, level of support):

Factors responsible for school’s success:

Degree to which school conforms to the small schools model:

Challenges (current and future):

Personal decisions regarding staying in teaching/school:

Other:
### Appendix F: List of Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Category/Code Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MOTIVATION</td>
<td>What brought an individual to the school/what factors influenced his or her decision to come to the school</td>
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<tr>
<td>EXPERIENCE</td>
<td>Individual’s experience prior to current role at the school</td>
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<tr>
<td>STARTUP-DECISIONS</td>
<td>Key decisions made during start-up period that have had a profound impact on the school’s success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STARTUP-PARTICIPATION</td>
<td>Nature of individual’s participation in start-up process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STARTUP-CHALLENGES</td>
<td>Challenges school faced during start-up process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STARTUP-SUCCESS</td>
<td>Whether and how challenges during start-up process were successfully addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLLABORATION</td>
<td>Degree to which teachers work together</td>
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<tr>
<td>STRUCTURES</td>
<td>Description of organizational structures/systems critical to school’s work</td>
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<td>RAPPORT</td>
<td>Presence of rapport and/or collegiality among staff</td>
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<td>AUTONOMY</td>
<td>Valuation of independence or autonomy within the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEASURE-SUCCESS</td>
<td>Ways in which the school defines or measures success</td>
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<tr>
<td>SUCCESS-STRUCTURES</td>
<td>Presence of systems or structures that facilitate school’s success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUCCESS-TEACHERS</td>
<td>Teacher qualities responsible for school’s success</td>
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<tr>
<td>SUCCESS-PD</td>
<td>Teacher development opportunities linked to school’s success</td>
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<tr>
<td>SUCCESS-AUTONOMY</td>
<td>Teacher autonomy/independence linked to school’s success</td>
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<tr>
<td>SUCCESS-PERSONALIZATION</td>
<td>Personalized environment linked to school’s success</td>
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<td>SUCCESS-ACA[DEMIC] EXPECTATIONS</td>
<td>High expectations around students’ academic performance linked to school’s success</td>
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<tr>
<td>SUCCESS-COLLABORATION</td>
<td>Collaboration among teachers linked to school’s success</td>
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<tr>
<td>SUCCESS-EXT[ERNAL] PARTNERS</td>
<td>Partnerships with external organizations linked to school’s success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUCCESS-LEAD[ERS]</td>
<td>Actions taken by, or qualities of, past or current leaders linked to school’s success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUCCESS-TEACH&amp;LEARN</td>
<td>Teaching and curriculum linked to school’s success</td>
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<td>SUCCESS-OTHER</td>
<td>School’s success due to factors other than those captured by the other “SUCCESS-X” codes</td>
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<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>MODEL-PERSONALIZATION</td>
<td>Personalized environment consistent with/diffs from SSC Theory of Action (TOA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MODEL-ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS</td>
<td>Emphasis on high academic expectations for all students consistent with/diffs from TOA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MODEL-THEME</td>
<td>Curriculum focused on specific theme that provides students with real-world learning opportunities consistent with/diffs from TOA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MODEL-PARTNER</td>
<td>Partnerships with external organizations to support the school’s objectives and enhance teachers’ and students’ development consistent with/diffs from TOA</td>
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<td>CHALLENGES-CURRENT</td>
<td>Challenges currently faced by school</td>
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<td>CHALLENGES-FUTURE</td>
<td>Challenges anticipated for the future</td>
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<td>CHALLENGES-ACTIONS</td>
<td>Actions taken or that individual thinks will be taken to address challenges</td>
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<td>HR-EVALUATION</td>
<td>How teachers are evaluated and how decisions about terminating teachers are made</td>
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<td>HR-TEACHER HIRE</td>
<td>What principal looks for when hiring teachers</td>
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<td>Description of teachers that do well in the school</td>
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<td>LE-DISCIPLINE</td>
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<td>Learning environment linked to academic expectations</td>
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<td>LE-PERSONALIZATION</td>
<td>Learning environment linked to relationship between staff and students</td>
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<td>LE-THEME</td>
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<td>LE-TEACH&amp;LEARN</td>
<td>Learning environment influenced by curriculum and pedagogy</td>
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<td>EXTERNAL PARTNERS</td>
<td>Relationships with external partners that play a big role in the school’s success (past or present)</td>
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<td>How the presence of other schools in same building affects school</td>
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<td>Description of how school uses data</td>
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<td>Description of school’s work/relationship with network</td>
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<td>Description of school’s student population</td>
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## APPENDIX G: SUPPLEMENTAL TABLE

Table A-1: Student Enrollment in 25 Small High Schools of Choice, 2004-2014

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*Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data collected from the NYC Department of Education.*

*Notes: All school names are pseudonyms. Data was not available for four schools in the 2004-2005 school year.*
The Research Alliance for New York City Schools conducts rigorous studies on topics that matter to the city’s public schools. We strive to advance equity and excellence in education by providing non-partisan evidence about policies and practices that promote students’ development and academic success.