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

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

For many decades, New York City’s high school graduation rates hovered at or below 50 percent. The City’s large comprehensive high schools, each typically enrolling more than 2,000 students, had earned a bad reputation as “dropout factories.” In response, the NYC Department of Education enacted a series of aggressive reforms—a centerpiece of which was the creation of hundreds of new “small schools of choice” (SSCs). A rigorous evaluation by MDRC has shown that these schools substantially improve graduation rates and other student outcomes. These benefits accrue for various student subgroups, including low-income students, students of color, English Language Learners, and special education students.

Our report, *Inside Success*, illuminates the perspectives of educators in 25 of the most successful SSCs. Based on interviews conducted with more than 100 teachers and principals in these schools, the paper answers questions about why and how they have been able to produce positive impacts for students, year after year. What decisions—made by the educators who created, supported, and operated these schools—have proved critical to their success? What challenges do these schools face as they try to maintain success over time?

*Inside Success* provides a rare and textured look at the work the SSCs we visited. We were able to meet with educators who had been at these schools since they opened, allowing us to learn about both the creation and ongoing operation of these highly effective SSCs. Our findings reveal the features of the SSC theory of action that educators see as most responsible for their school’s success; importantly, they also paint a picture of how these features have

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**MDRC’s Ongoing Evaluation of NYC’s Small Schools of Choice**

The findings in this report serve as a precursor to additional analyses being undertaken by MDRC, to determine the extent to which various quantitative measures of the school learning environment can be linked to positive impacts on student performance and engagement, across a wide range of SSCs.

This ongoing work will draw on a survey the Research Alliance conducted, as well as the DOE’s annual citywide School Survey.

For more information about MDRC’s study, visit: [www.mdrc.org/project/new-york-city-small-schools-choice-evaluation](http://www.mdrc.org/project/new-york-city-small-schools-choice-evaluation)
been developed in practice. Major findings and recommendations from the full report are summarized on the following pages.

What features did principals and teachers see as most responsible for their schools’ success?

To identify key success factors, we analyzed principals’ and teachers’ responses by two different criteria: 1) the frequency with which they reported these factors, and 2) the frequency with which they identified these factors first in response to an open-ended question about the features most responsible for their success. According to this analysis, three factors emerged as the most salient:

- **Personalized Learning Environments.** Teachers and principals overwhelmingly identified personalization as a key—or as the key—to their school’s success.

To develop personalized learning environments, SSCs created structures to foster strong relationships within the school community, forged connections with students’ families, collected data that went beyond grades and test scores, and hired key support staff (e.g., social workers). Educators explained that these strategies promoted students’ success primarily by preventing them from falling through the cracks and enabling teachers to provide supports to meet individual student needs. However, principals and teachers reported that, as schools grew over time, it was becoming more difficult to operate with the level of personalization they believed was responsible for their success.

- **Academic Expectations.** Interviewees cited the importance of teachers and principals having high expectations—both for their students and for one another.

The educators we spoke with emphasized focusing on each student’s individual benchmarks and growth, creating an instructional program aligned with those goals, and conveying to students that, with support from the school, they can graduate and succeed in college or work. According to respondents, high expectations facilitated SSCs’ success by providing clear objectives for school staff to work toward and prompting them to develop strategies for particular student sub-groups. At the same time, principals and teachers defined high expectations somewhat differently from school to school. Many were conflicted about how to reach their own benchmarks for success, while also meeting DOE accountability standards, particularly when students enter high school performing far below grade level.
• **Teachers.** Educators highlighted the importance of teachers’ flexibility and willingness to take on multiple roles, sometimes outside their areas of expertise.

Given the small size of these schools, there are fewer staff to cover the range of subjects and the myriad tasks required. Thus, respondents explained, part of SSCs’ success hinges on finding teachers who are talented, versatile, and willing to stretch themselves to fit their school’s needs. Educators described specific recruitment and hiring practices that helped identify the best teachers for the job, such as committee-based hiring processes; interview practices that help determine which teacher candidates are the best match; and pipelines that bring strong candidates to their school. One of the reported tradeoffs for expecting teachers to regularly go “above and beyond” was teacher burnout. Principals, in particular, wondered if it was possible for staff to maintain the same level of energy they had exerted in their school’s first few years.

**What features of SSCs did principals and teachers see as less important to their success?**

The theory of action behind SSCs highlighted two other features that were intended to buttress their effectiveness—a thematic focus and a supporting network. But, according to principals and teachers in the 25 SSCs we visited, neither of these features was critical to success. In response to an open-ended question about the factors most responsible for their school’s strong outcomes, not one principal or teacher identified any topic related to the school’s theme as being important. When we asked about themes specifically, educators at some schools reported advantages (e.g., helping attract students), but others said the theme had limited the curriculum in ways that were not helpful.

Schools’ partnerships with networks were also viewed as relatively less important to these SSCs’ success. Since every SSC was planned and created in conjunction with an intermediary support organization, we anticipated that schools might attribute part of their success to the assistance these organizations provided. This did not turn out to be the case (though it is possible that intermediary organizations may have played a more prominent role during schools’ startup years). Educators at a small number of schools did describe constructive, fruitful relationships with their networks. However, even in these schools, respondents rated the importance of their networks well below the core success factors described above.
Lessons for Schools and Districts

Based on SSCs’ strong results, other schools and districts beyond New York City may be interested in adopting core elements of their approach. The Research Alliance’s look inside these successful schools provides useful insights and lessons that can inform their efforts.

- **Create enduring structures that promote strong relationships with students and their families.** Small size alone is unlikely to produce such relationships.

A careful look inside successful SSCs highlights the fact that relationships are nurtured and strengthened by formal structures for staff and students to meet and discuss both academic and non-academic issues. Other schools can create similar structures by, for example, building smaller learning communities within larger schools, providing opportunities for teachers to lead student advisories, and establishing the expectation of regular communication with families. Given the inevitability of some teacher turnover, it is important to establish structures that will endure when leaders and teachers move on.

- **Establish more balanced work expectations over time.** Teachers’ willingness to go above and beyond traditional instructional responsibilities runs the risk of burnout and turnover.

A careful look inside successful SSCs illuminates the importance of strategizing about how to retain teachers without compromising on the core values that enabled success. Schools need to temper the expectation that teachers will fill multiple roles and work tirelessly to support students. One of the SSCs provided a strong example of this approach by setting limits on how long teachers could stay after school and by intentionally hiring teachers with external commitments and responsibilities, as a way to create a more balanced work culture.

- **Improve the fit between schools and external partners.** Effective SSCs had a variety of external partners, but didn’t see them as essential to their success.

A careful look inside successful SSCs reveals a general lack of enthusiasm about external partners relative to the emphasis placed on other success factors. Rather than concluding that external partners are not valuable, we suggest two other, related interpretations of this finding. First, external partners are not a substitute for school-based staff, such as the social workers and guidance counselors who SSC educators
said were central to creating effective personalized learning environments. Second, for external partners to make a difference, it is important that they be well integrated into the school community and address a compelling need that school staff aren’t able to address on their own. When SSC partners were loosely related to the school’s theme, for example, interviewees didn’t find them especially useful. But when they helped provide a targeted service, especially around fostering student engagement and well-being, respondents were more likely to describe the partners as contributing to their effectiveness.

- **Value other dimensions of success (in addition to test scores and graduation rates), at the school and district level.** Effective SSCs emphasize a “whole child” approach to education, including students’ social and emotional well-being.

A careful look inside successful SSCs offers insight into the potential for expanding current notions of accountability and what it means to be a successful or high-performing school. Respondents were critical of policies that pressured them to “push” kids through to graduation and college before they are ready. They talked about defining success differently for different students (including some who may need six years to graduate), providing students with critical life skills that might not show up on a standardized test, and preventing negative life outcomes, such as early pregnancy or incarceration. These educators also highlighted the importance of collecting a broad range of student data—on attendance, social and emotional well-being, coursework, etc.—to improve and differentiate instruction, track students’ progress in real time, and intervene when necessary. The experience of these SSCs seems to call for creating additional measures of success at the district level—for example, by using school surveys to capture more kinds of information about students’ experiences in schools.

The findings presented above are part of an ongoing study that will continue to assess the impact of SSCs and examine the keys to their success. MDRC’s next report will provide a systematic analysis of the extent to which variations in SSC’s effects on students can be tied directly to some of the features examined in this report.

Looking forward, the strategies gleaned from principals and teachers and described here may represent critical steps toward sustaining and building on the gains these schools have made and possibly replicating their success. Our hope is that these
findings might be used by a range of educators and policymakers here in NYC and other urban areas, as they work to improve high schools and produce better outcomes for youth.

Executive Summary Notes

1 For information about New York City graduation rate trends prior to 1999, see New York City Department of Education (2012). “New York City Graduation Rates, Class of 2011 (2007 Cohort).” For information on graduation rates across the country, see Chapman et al. (2010).

2 For an overview of the dropout crisis in the U.S., see Balfanz & Legters (2004).

3 Principal leadership emerged as an important success factor as well, but we decided not to report on this topic separately, in favor of highlighting how leadership played a critical role in the other three key factors.

4 Each NYC school belongs to a network of approximately 20 schools. The network teams “support schools in meeting all of their instructional and operational needs while ensuring that schools can reach their accountability targets.” See http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/410CD054-2B4F-496B-AFF1-E84D7D4A297C/0/EmpowermentSchoolsbrochure.pdf.

References


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.