



SMALL SCHOOLS, NEXT STEPS:
Voices from the Field

Business and Professional People for the Public Interest
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Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPI) is a Chicago-based law and policy center dedicated to equal justice and enhancing the quality and equity of life for all people in the Chicago region. Today, BPI is at the forefront of a number of the most important issues facing the region, including efforts to transform segregated public housing, improve public education, expand affordable housing and promote sensible metropolitan growth strategies. BPI's staff of lawyers and policy specialists uses a variety of approaches, including litigation, policy research and advocacy, community organizing, and collaboration with civic, business, and community organizations.

BPI is a vigorous advocate of equitable public schools and has supported the movement for small and personalized learning communities since 1992. Through policy advocacy and programs designed for a broad community of educators and opinion makers, BPI has sought to develop and support small schools in Chicago.

This report is part of BPI's ongoing efforts to create, support and strengthen small schools. Beth Valukas, staff counsel, was principal author and researcher. Cindy Moelis, director of BPI's education initiative, and Zoe Mikva, policy associate, were contributors.

Foreword

The movement to create small and personalized learning environments is gaining unprecedented momentum across the nation. In Chicago, new financial and administrative support for the creation of small schools is leading to the conversion of several large high schools into small autonomous schools. Chicago Public Schools has partnered with the private foundation community to guide this conversion process, which is scheduled to unfold over the next four to five years.

The projected 15 to 20 new small autonomous schools established through this public/private partnership combined with over 100 additional small schools of varying types creates a strong and potentially forceful presence within the system. At the same time, however, a growing number of advocates have cautioned that new structures and supports may be necessary to develop and maintain highly functional small schools over an extended period of time. With this in mind, Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPI) set out to explore the specific policies and practices that challenge the long-term stability of small schools in Chicago and to identify strategies to overcome them.

Recognizing the importance of this inquiry at this particular moment in time, BPI worked with the Chicago Panel on School Policy to shape and edit this report. As an organization that regularly offers timely and objective analysis of public school initiatives, including a 1997 report on small schools, this was a natural role for the Chicago Panel.

This report documents many of the challenges that small schools have struggled with for a number of years and continue to face. This information and the recommendations offered within can help inform the current efforts to downsize, provide insight to practitioners and create useful dialogue about the actions necessary to sustain small schools in the long term.

Acknowledgments

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What are small schools?

Small schools, as discussed in this study, do not fit a “cookie-cutter” definition but, nonetheless, share a number of common characteristics and offer similar benefits. Small schools are generally characterized by:

- A small number of students, usually no more than about 200-350 in elementary schools and 500 in secondary schools
- A cohesive, self-selected faculty supported by like-minded parents
- Substantial autonomy as to curriculum, budget, organization, personnel and other matters
- A coherent curricular or pedagogical focus that provides a continuous educational experience across a range of grades, and
- An inclusive admissions policy that gives weight to student and parental commitment to the school mission

Small school size creates an environment that fosters interaction and minimizes isolation within the school community. It creates an environment in which:

- The teacher knows each student well
- The teacher works closely with the entire faculty to plan projects that cross curriculum lines to produce a learning environment that is relevant and purposeful
- The student is both affirmed and challenged in every classroom at each progressive grade level
- The student receives a consistent message that he/she is accepted and appreciated

Numerous studies conducted over the past decade by education experts conclude that schools meeting the definition of “small” produce a host of positive outcomes:

- Student performance improves
- Graduation rates increase
- Attendance rises
- Students feel safer and more connected to their teachers and school
- Discipline problems are reduced
- Teachers experience enhanced professional satisfaction
- Parents feel more involved

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Executive Summary

We know what high quality small schools look like, even and especially for the poorest (and richest) children in America... However, with all the evidence, we have yet to create a district that dares to take the knowledge of quality small schools to the level of full-system reform. It is possible to develop a systemic strategy if districts figured out how to learn from small schools rather than crush them. (Michelle Fine, City University of New York)

As individual schools and districts search for workable strategies to improve public education, the creation of small, personalized learning environments has emerged as one of the most promising solutions. In addition to such powerful outcomes as improved student performance and graduation rates, small schools are known to improve school climate. As schools struggle to fill vacant teaching positions in the face of diminishing pools of those interested in careers in education, small schools have proven to be a powerful tool for attracting and retaining new teachers. Simply put, small schools may be one of the most viable education reform strategies of our time.

Recognizing the potential of small schools, the U.S. Department of Education, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and dozens of other private sources are investing millions of dollars in school redesign to create downsized schools that are better able to meet individual student needs. Together, they have helped spark and support new small schools initiatives nationwide. But increased funding, while critically important, is not sufficient.

A growing body of research and commentary has cautioned that, in addition to funding, system-wide changes are required to support new and existing small schools in the long term. Efforts to downsize will not succeed or will suffer from shallow implementation if school districts do not create new policies and practices that will allow small schools to flourish. Given the millions of dollars currently targeted to school downsizing, the time is right for districts to invest the resources necessary to make these changes.

Against this background, Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPI), a Chicago-based law and policy center, interviewed teachers and administrators who work in Chicago's small schools. The primary goal was to identify system-wide issues that challenge the development and long-term stability of small schools in order to identify new policies and strategies to support them. Motivating the report were the following questions:

- How do teachers and administrators describe the current climate for small schools?
- What specific policies and practices challenge them?
- What policy changes will better support a system of small schools?
- What new resources should advocates, the Board and other entities provide?

Throughout the interview process, we heard many first-hand accounts of the significant ways in which small schools are making a difference in Chicago. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of participants agreed that the system as currently designed does not appropriately support the unique structure of small schools. These practitioners identified challenges in several distinct areas – some resulting from district policies and others driven by site-based decisions. Some issues are relevant to schools regardless of size, but even these often have a disproportionate impact on small schools.

Key Challenges

The seven areas of challenge that emerged throughout the survey process were typically experienced among all small school types, but to varying degrees depending upon the model. They are:

1. Leadership and Governance

The small schools studied often operate with alternative forms of governance, while placing strong emphasis on teacher leadership. These models alter the traditional roles and responsibilities of teachers and principals. Practitioners find it challenging to define, implement and maintain these new roles. Changes in school leadership frequently have adverse effects on progress, including a reduction in teacher input on hiring, curriculum, budget and other matters.

2. Staffing

Staff reductions due to declines in enrollment or the need to share staff due to school size seriously challenge many small schools. Small schools require a stable, collaborative staff, working as a team at every level. Freedom to hire teachers with the right combination of interest and commitment is critical. Lack of adequate teacher input into hiring decisions is a recurring concern.

3. Curriculum and Instruction

Small schools are organized around a common curricular focus, and teachers report that system-wide curriculum and testing requirements often frustrate their attempts to develop an integrated, theme-centered curriculum. Developing projects across subjects is difficult when teachers are required to teach specific subject matter at a particular time during the school year to prepare their students for tests. Although teachers agree that small schools should be held accountable and administer annual city and state tests, they want more flexibility in specific content area tests.

4. Facilities and Space Sharing

Practical considerations require small schools to share buildings. Finding a separate and identifiable space within a shared building is a challenge. Small schools educators encounter difficulties in negotiating space sharing and intra-facility relationships.

5. Staff Cohesion and Planning

Finding the time and developing the skills to effectively collaborate on school improvement is a continuing challenge. Common planning time is a particular struggle for teachers in smaller learning communities where principals require them to attend meetings – by department (in high schools) or by grade level (in elementary schools). This leaves very little time for teachers to meet as a small school unit to plan.

6. Budget and Resources

Small schools often struggle to receive an equitable distribution of monetary and physical resources compared to their host schools. Very few believe that they are given an adequate degree of influence over budget. The teachers report that lack of participation in these decisions challenges their ability to develop the programs they envision.

7. Outreach and Communications

Many of the teachers feel isolated, expressing a desire for opportunities to collaborate with other small schools practitioners and to involve the broader community in many aspects of small schools. They believe that organized efforts to reach new audiences would increase opportunities for prospective teachers and students to learn about small schools and ultimately have a positive impact on their own programs.

Strategies to Support Small Schools

The survey participants identified a number of system-wide and school-based strategies to improve the environment for small schools. Although these approaches were offered with Chicago small schools in mind, many of them are applicable to other schools and districts seeking to establish small and personalized learning environments. The following strategies emerged as the priorities:

Small Schools Cluster, Region or Instructional Area

Chicago small schools educators report that multiple and unclear reporting structures make it difficult to address challenges in an effective or timely manner. Participants strongly suggest that an alternative reporting structure — such as a district or an instructional area composed exclusively of small schools — would provide them with the attention and support they need to thrive. The formation of such a structure would help facilitate policies supportive of small schools, identify and address common challenges and provide targeted assistance with curriculum and instruction to schools that experiment with non-traditional approaches.

Opportunities to Support Small Autonomous Schools

Autonomy is a key ingredient in the successful development of a small school and its ability to succeed over time. The opportunity for small school autonomy should be supported by an established process that provides for the formation of independent small schools. An open and regular Request for Proposals (RFP) process for the creation of small autonomous schools could accomplish this goal and provide a critical avenue for smaller learning communities to become independent and secure. Additionally, it would provide interested teachers and communities with the incentive to create and pursue ideas for new schools, and provide the resources, authority and flexibility to implement them. The result would be innovative, quality schools of choice that are created and supported by educators and communities.

Support the Development and Capacity of Small Schools

When a district decides to adopt the small schools model, it requires broad support, adequate resources and proper planning. A comprehensive learning and support center for small schools should be a part of this model. Without such support, current efforts to down-size will always be at risk. A comprehensive support center should provide coaches, mentors and a variety of experts to assist new school startups and help existing small schools move their programs forward.

Support for Lead Teacher Position

The existence of lead teachers has proved vital to the development of small schools in Chicago. Lead teachers assume a critical role within the school community, including instructional leader, mentor and recruiter. Most lead teachers have full teaching loads, new administrative responsibilities and no additional compensation. Districts should provide funding to support lead teachers, and individual schools should prioritize these positions when determining budgetary needs.

Site-Based Agreements for Smaller Learning Communities

The overwhelming majority of smaller learning communities operate at the discretion of their building principal, and the degree of independence they have is not often clearly articulated. Thus, a change in school leadership can lead to drastic changes and negative consequences. Smaller learning communities can enter into a compact or memorandum of understanding with the building principal and local school council that defines the parameters of operation and clarifies the responsibilities of both the host school and the small school. Host schools should be encouraged to enter into such agreements with small schools, and districts should actively endorse and promote their adoption.

Communications and Outreach

Despite the growing number of small schools, many educators feel isolated and lack information about other schools that are similarly situated. School districts and their external partners should create immediate opportunities to reduce isolation and increase communication among small schools. Opportunities for networking and information sharing can include a small schools newsletter, site visits to other small schools and periodic meeting forums around topical issues.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges confronting small schools today, many of the educators report that were it not for the opportunity to work in a small school, they would have long since left the system. In the midst of a national teacher shortage, small schools are viewed as a powerful tool to attract individuals who might not otherwise teach in a large district or urban environment. These educators want the Board of Education to build on the momentum of new leadership, benefit from the lessons learned from Chicago's small schools and adopt new policies and practices that will establish an even stronger system of schools of choice.

Background

“You’re part of this group, this connection. The kids loved being there – they were the first in the building in the morning and the last out the door at the end of the day.”

– *A Chicago Small Schools Teacher*

Research and practice have established small schools as one of the most viable education reform strategies of our time. Over the past decade, well more than 100 small schools have emerged in Chicago in a variety of forms, from smaller learning communities (academies and schools within other schools) to small autonomous schools (multiplex and stand-alone schools).

In 1995, the Chicago School Reform Board of Trustees (the Board) passed a Small Schools Resolution committing to “the goal of assisting the formation and strengthening of Small Schools in Chicago.” Shortly after, the Board issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) that resulted in the creation or strengthening of 24 new and existing schools. From 1996 to 2001, there were no additional RFPs issued to support small schools.

A change in leadership within Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in 2001 produced a notable change in direction in small schools in Chicago. At that time, the newly appointed CEO Arne Duncan created an Office of Small Schools and underscored his commitment to supporting the concept throughout the system. At the same time, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in partnership with several local foundations announced that they would provide \$18 million to support the formation of small schools. The local program, now underway, is known as the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative. Additionally, in April 2002, the Board adopted a new Small Schools Policy authorizing the conversion of existing schools into several small schools and the establishment of new small schools. Most recently, the CPS Education Plan commits to expand school choice in neighborhood schools through efforts to support creative, innovative, research-based schools across the city.

Given the growing momentum to support Chicago’s small schools of choice, there is new hope that the Board of Education will provide the institutional support that these schools require to grow and thrive. Yet recent research and commentary, both national and local, has cautioned that if districts do not adopt new policies and practices to support these unique educational models, they will struggle to succeed in the long term. In light of the renewed interest in small schools, along with the reported challenges to those already established, BPI decided the time was right to conduct a targeted inquiry into the specific needs of Chicago’s small schools and to identify policies and strategies to support them effectively in the future.

Motivating this report were such questions as:

- How do practitioners describe the current climate for small schools?
- What specific policies and practices challenge them?
- What policy changes will better support a system of small schools?
- What new resources should advocates, the Board and other entities provide?

BPI turned to the teachers and administrators currently working in Chicago’s small schools to respond to these questions and to explore strategies to guide the future direction and establishment of additional small schools.

Methodology

During the spring of 2002, BPI conducted 40 one-on-one interviews with a sample of principals, lead teachers and teachers from Chicago's small schools. In addition, 40 written surveys were completed at the annual Small Schools Expo in May 2002. In all, 80 responses were received from 69 individuals representing a total of 33 schools, both elementary and high school.

TYPE OF SCHOOL	NO.
All reporting schools	33
Stand-alone	5
Multiplex	3
Schools-within-schools	12
Hosts	6
Charters	7
High schools	19
Elementary schools	14

POSITION	NO.
Principal	10
Lead teacher (Facilitator, Director)	22
Teacher	27
Other personnel	10
Total	69

For reporting purposes, the high schools and elementary schools are grouped together. The few challenges that are specific to grade level have been noted in the body of the report.

Small Autonomous Schools

The small autonomous schools (stand-alone and multiplex) are grouped together in the findings that follow. Small autonomous schools are schools that have their own institutional identity within the system and operate with more independence than smaller learning communities.

Stand-Alone Schools: A school with its own space, budget and principal that may or may not share a building with another school.

Multiplex Schools: In a multiplex, the entire building is made of small schools. In Chicago, schools housed in a multiplex share a principal, but operate independently of one another in every other way.

Smaller Learning Communities

Smaller learning communities (schools-within-schools) are schools that operate under the direction of a larger school (host). Any control over budget, staffing, curriculum, schedule and other matters is granted at the discretion of the principal and/or local school council.

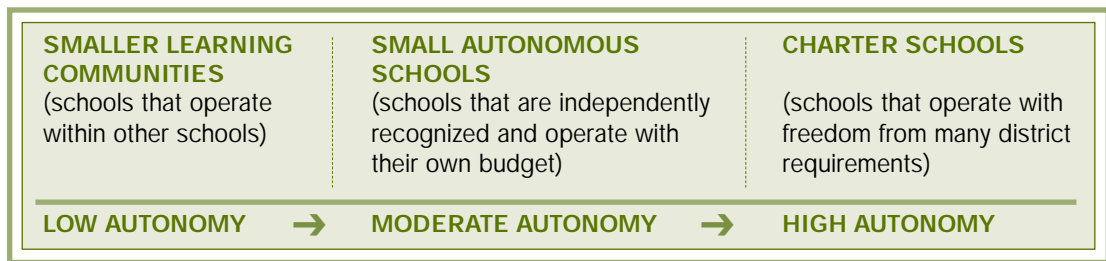
Schools-Within-Schools: Schools-within-schools operate as a sub-unit of a larger host school. Although they typically have their own dedicated personnel and programs, they operate with varying degrees of independence with respect to their host schools.

Host Schools: Host schools are larger schools which house and oversee schools-within-schools. Some host schools are host to several small schools.

Findings: Voices from the Field

What follows is a direct account of the challenges reported by teachers, lead teachers, principals and other personnel who work in Chicago's small schools. Most issues are directly tied to the qualities and characteristics of small and personal learning environments. Of course, every school is unique, and so are its experiences. This report captures the challenges shared across schools and voiced by a significant number of educators.

The fundamental issue underlying many of the challenges facing small schools is autonomy. In this context, autonomy involves control over budget, staffing, curriculum, governance, school calendar, and space. As the graphic below illustrates, the issues of autonomy vary in degree depending on the type of small school – smaller learning community, small autonomous school or charter.



Charter schools operate with the highest degree of autonomy and are treated very differently within the Chicago system. As a consequence, although represented in the survey process, they are not included in the discussion of challenges that follows.

Small autonomous schools (stand-alone and multiplex) operate with a moderate degree of autonomy, and represent a small fraction of the total small schools in Chicago. The overwhelming majority are **smaller learning communities, also known as schools-within-schools**. Both small autonomous schools and smaller learning communities have been well represented in the survey process. In general, many of the challenges identified in this report are experienced by both types of small schools, but to a different extent depending upon the model.

The survey findings fall into seven areas of challenge, some involving district policies and others, site-based decisions. These are the issues identified as most prominent by Chicago's small schools educators.

Leadership and Governance

Small schools often adopt alternative forms of governance with a strong emphasis on teacher leadership and shared decision-making. These nontraditional models often challenge individuals who are unfamiliar with or resistant to shared governance.

Lead Teachers

School systems are generally unaccustomed to viewing teachers as leaders. In small schools, where lead teachers fill a nontraditional but vital position, the issue is compounded. Many lead teachers believe that their roles need to be recognized and free from at least a portion of classroom responsibilities.

"I think the lead teacher is probably the key position, and I think our worst problem here is that it's still a teaching position. I would love to see her be released from the classroom."

"A lead teacher's job is making sure that everyone's working together on a core set of skills or concepts, and that they're teaching students those things in the best, most appropriate way. It's someone with a vision that people believe in, who knows teachers, parents and students and knows teaching."

Eighty percent of the schools report that they have a lead teacher, facilitator, or director (lead) apart from their principal. The overwhelming majority believe the position is critical to the stability and growth of their schools.

"I think leads are the key. They are on the front line dealing with students, dealing with the administration and moving the school forward. I see them as facilitators and mentors."

Q: *How important is the lead teacher to the development or success of your school?*

SCHOOL TYPE	CRITICALLY OR VERY IMPORTANT
All Schools	78%
Smaller Learning Communities	85%
Small Autonomous Schools	65%

Teachers shared detailed accounts of the multiple responsibilities of their respective leads. The leads regularly act as mentors to new teachers, as disciplinarians, and bear primary responsibility for building relationships with external organizations, businesses and community groups. Among other tasks, they often provide college counseling, recruit teachers and students, facilitate professional development opportunities and work to strengthen curriculum and instruction. Perhaps most importantly, the leads keep the school's vision alive.

Many of the teachers report that if they could make only one change to their programs, it would be to release the lead from some classroom responsibilities. They want lead teachers to be free to focus on the overall development of the school. Unfortunately, only 38% of the schools report that their lead has any released time. Securing funding for this position is a serious challenge.

Principal Turnover

Each year, schools across the city experience turnover at the principal level. Small schools are particularly vulnerable when it happens to them.

“Our new principal was very threatened by the small schools in our building and began to take our autonomy away. We left. Even if another opportunity hadn’t presented itself, I still would have left.”

A common story emerged throughout the interview process: Very often, small schools grow slowly out of a shared vision. Teachers work together to nurture their ideas and eventually develop a smaller learning community with the consent of their principal. Then, over time, principals begin to trust the teachers’ leadership ability and allow them to make hiring recommendations, curriculum decisions and propose budgetary needs for their programs.

“Our original principal let us do what we felt was important as long as we could defend it to him. He knew that he didn’t need to worry about us – we were accountable and autonomous. He wanted to see a year’s growth in each of our kids on those exams in May. As long as [that happened] he was willing to give us our freedom.”

However, when a change in leadership occurred, 72% of the surveyed schools report that it challenged or significantly challenged their development. Many of the teachers reported an abrupt end to the autonomies they previously enjoyed, and others cited either temporary or partial loss of control over their programs. They understand that new principals without previous exposure to small schools cannot be expected to immediately pick up where a former principal left off. At the same time, however, one teacher expressed concern for “how much damage is done while waiting for the learning curve to kick in.”

Leadership Development and Governance

Developing and supporting principal leadership is an ongoing challenge for all schools. In small schools, principal development is even more complicated – new leaders must adjust to nontraditional philosophies and roles that are often contrary to past experience. The teachers overwhelmingly report that small schools require a different type of leadership. In order to achieve this, they believe it critical to provide adequate information, resources and training.

“I think you really need to find a principal who understands and believes in the small school concept. I don’t think our new principal was ever out looking for a small school, or even knew what we were about. We’re asking this man to change his philosophy. That’s a lot to ask of someone.”

The teachers explained that many of their principals simply aren't prepared to assume their roles in the nontraditional ways that small schools demand. They felt that some of the most basic assumptions about what it means to be a principal do not apply in a small school environment. Many who responded to the survey believe that their principals resist the small school, teacher-led model. Shared governance is reportedly not easy to achieve.

"The issue of shared governance is central to whether a small school is going to work. Decisions should be made collaboratively and openly talked about, which is not typical of most schools."

"Our new principal doesn't seem to be clear on what his role is. It's unclear in our structure exactly how much is up to the staff and how much is up to the principal. Where is the line? I think this is an issue for a lot of small schools."

Others reported that their principals are simply not interested in small schools and dismiss them as a temporary initiative.

"Ours has already told us, it's a pilot program for CPS, it's going to come, and it's going to go."

Many teachers recognized the need for targeted professional development for new principals that includes strategies to identify and cultivate future small schools leaders.

"Innovative training programs should be funded, reinforced and supported. That's where the new leadership and ideas are going to come from."

Conclusions

- The nontraditional roles of lead teachers and the unique roles of small schools principals need to be better defined and supported.
- Lead teachers should be released from at least a portion of their classroom responsibilities in order to focus on overall school development.
- Candidates for principal positions should be rigorously interviewed and screened for their specific interest in and commitment to small schools.
- The Board and other entities should design and implement effective strategies for identifying and training new small schools leaders, while providing regular technical assistance and networking opportunities to support and organize them.

2

Staffing

Small schools, by their very nature, require a stable and collaborative staff dedicated to common goals. It is important that teachers are given the opportunity to make an informed decision to work in a small schools environment. The addition of an individual who does not wish to collaborate, or the departure of one who does, can seriously affect the development of a small school.

Control Over Hiring

Deciding who should be part of the hiring process and what criteria should be used are important decisions for all schools. Small schools face the additional challenge of finding teachers who are willing to work as a team and eager to collaborate on all matters from curriculum and instruction to governance.

“Teachers should be sitting in on the interviewing process. If candidates are willing to go to a small school, they had better know what they’re getting into, because there’s more work, period.”

Lack of adequate input into hiring decisions is a recurring issue – small schools teachers want to be part of the process. Those at smaller learning communities reported that their input was solicited at the principal’s discretion. Some leads were invited to sit in on interviews and to make hiring recommendations. But even in these cases, the principal sometimes limited the selection process to include only teachers from the host school. Furthermore, a change in school leadership could bring an abrupt end to participation by the small schools team.

At some of the small autonomous schools – those independently recognized and with their own budget (unit) numbers – lead teachers screen résumés, interview candidates and make hiring recommendations to the principal. On limited occasions, some teachers noted that their principals had hired staff without seeking any input.

The educators overwhelmingly agree that choice – both on the part of teacher-candidates and those already working in the small school – is essential. They believe that teachers should have a specific interest in working in a highly collaborative and nontraditional environment.

“Small schools are intended to be a group of teachers who’ve selected to be together, a group of students who’ve chosen that academy or that small school as where they want to be.”

“Some people want to go in and close the door and be left alone, which you can’t do here. The minute you accept the job, you have to be willing to give and share ideas.”

Staffing Formulas

Concerns about staffing formulas and class size are common among many CPS schools. Educators report that these policies frequently have a disproportionate impact on small schools.

"This year, when we started out we were looking at it like the stock market. You can go from 400 to 395 students and it might mean that you lose a teacher."

"In a big school, you've lost a teacher and you can move kids around, but here, where everybody's up at the max already, when you take a teacher out, you're taking a person who teaches every student."

Educators noted that because staffing formulas require a certain number of students per teacher, occasional drops in enrollment can lead to the loss of funding for a teaching position. Because they feared losing teachers, they sometimes over-enrolled classes.

"I think that a lot of people assume that when we say 'small school' we mean small class size. That's a huge misconception."

Several small schools had experienced slight declines in student enrollment leading to layoffs or to "buying" a position with discretionary funds. Some had to buy positions for core subjects such as math because enrollment had dropped from 28 students per teacher to 25. Participants emphasized that it is much more difficult to absorb these losses in small schools than it is in a traditional setting.

Finally, some of the teachers described the need to pair up with another school in order to get a full-time position for certain subjects. Doing so, however, significantly impacts staff cohesion because teachers are required to work at two different locations with competing needs.

Conclusions

- Small school staff should have an active and collaborative role in recruiting, interviewing and selecting teachers for their programs, with an opportunity to discuss the mission, philosophy and expectations of their schools with teacher-candidates.
- Throughout the staffing process, small schools need to be recognized for what they are: innovative alternatives for individuals seeking to teach in nontraditional environments.
- Because current staffing formulas have a disproportionate impact on small schools, the Board should explore special alternatives that would apply specifically to small schools.

3

Curriculum and Instruction

Small schools seek the freedom to structure curriculum, instruction and assessment practices according to their particular visions and goals and tailored to their students' needs. Developing and sustaining these alternatives is challenging; testing mandates compound the difficulty.

The Effects of Testing on Curriculum

Survey participants believed that adequate control over curriculum and instruction is critical to the development of a highly functional small and personalized learning community. The educators at both elementary and high schools reported, however, that system-mandated curriculum and testing requirements often frustrate their attempts to develop a strong, integrated and focused curriculum.

"I think a lot of teachers get pushed into doing curriculum that they hate because the principal is scared of bad test scores, instead of being excited about good teaching that results in good test scores."

"There's always the prospect that your principal will think that you don't have a structured curriculum because you don't have a textbook. You don't have a rigorous math program because you don't use the skill and drill workbooks. You're not using the recommended test prep materials, so your students aren't ready for the test."

At the elementary schools, educators agreed that pressures associated with testing detract from their ability to develop focused and cohesive smaller learning communities. High school teachers, however, felt that curriculum development is particularly restricted by the subject matter-based Chicago Academic Standards Exams (CASE). In contrast to standardized tests, they voiced concern that subject matter exams limit their freedom to develop creative curriculum; it is even harder to develop projects across subjects. They do not reject testing as a form of assessment but explained:

"Subject matter exams don't take into account how small schools approach education. We do a lot of collaborative, interdisciplinary work."

The educators agreed that small schools should be accountable for annual city and state tests. But, they believe that their programs would benefit from more flexibility concerning specific subject area tests.

Fortunately, some schools grant teachers the freedom to experiment and create alternative approaches to curriculum and instruction. Project-based learning is a common occurrence. Teachers often work to tie content areas to everyday life, believing that students retain and apply information better when it is presented in practical terms.

"Much of what we do is group-based work. That's how it is in the real world, and it's a great way to learn."

Developing Alternative Curriculum

Developing curriculum and instructional practices is a substantial undertaking for all teachers. At small schools, where teachers often experiment and turn to nontraditional sources, curriculum development is an ongoing process.

“Most [of us] came from schools where we had to teach from textbooks and had direct instruction manuals. Here, we choose to develop our own curriculum. We have to decide what materials we want to use and how we’re going to introduce themes and integrate them across subjects.”

Creating and experimenting with curriculum is one important factor that draws teachers to small schools. At the same time, they acknowledge that developing such alternatives is challenging, time-consuming and in many cases uncharted territory. The teachers explained that creating new approaches is only the first challenge; sustaining them is equally demanding.

“Small schools have to reinvent themselves yearly. We experiment with different strategies and instructional approaches. Teachers need to reflect on what has worked from year to year and what hasn’t.”

In order to meet these challenges, small schools require ongoing training and professional development opportunities. Some have benefited from technical assistance for curriculum development and instruction from external partners, including universities and nonprofit organizations.

Conclusions

- Small schools should have the freedom to structure curriculum to best meet student needs.
- The Board should create opportunities for small schools to enter into agreements, similar to those used by charters, that include alternative forms of assessment such as student portfolios and attendance, promotion and graduation rates.
- The Board and other entities should collaborate to provide expanded training opportunities for alternative curriculum development.

4

Facilities and Space Sharing

Small schools require their own separate and identifiable spaces in order to create personalized environments. Practical considerations, however, require schools to share buildings. Small schools need assistance with negotiating space sharing and intra-building relationships.

Separate and Identifiable Space

Each of the 33 schools surveyed shared a building with one or more schools. Many had their own separate and identifiable space within the larger building. The overwhelming majority of teachers at these sites believed that such discrete space is vital to create a personalized learning environment.

The teachers were clear that practical issues make moving an entire small school to the kind of space it needs a challenge. Not all spaces had necessities such as science labs or building entrances and exits to accommodate more than one school's needs. Resistance to change often compounds the facilities problem: even when a suitable physical space was identified, some teachers from host schools resisted moving out of their classrooms to make room for a small school.

"We have had to spend an inordinate amount of time on...finding the right building space when we should be spending our time on planning instructional practices. I think that has really challenged us."

Small autonomous schools had their own separate space – in some cases, a building was essentially divided in half; in others, each school occupied its own floor. In the smaller learning communities, teachers utilized a wider array of space configurations. Some smaller learning communities had their own floors, wings or hallways, while others had classrooms spread throughout a building. A number of the schools placed in hallways reported that they had to contend with general building traffic that adversely affected their attempts to create a personalized learning environment.

Teachers visually distinguished their space in order to create an independent and familiar identity. Along with their students, they created logos, decorated hallways and painted stairwells, often with images that reflected their school's curricular theme.

Equitable Distribution of Space

Many schools reported that they are challenged to find a mutually agreeable distribution of space.

"We're having space problems right now. We're one classroom short. We have lunch at 10 in the morning, and getting into the gym is tough. It's a strange arrangement, but we're working on it."

The schools took a variety of approaches to scheduling the use of common space: some negotiated agreements; others used sign-up sheets on a first-come, first-served basis; many deferred to their principals to allocate space. A few had to receive permission from the host school. Often, they felt that their access to common space was inequitable.

These schools shared gyms, auditoriums and lunchrooms with others in the building. Most described current arrangements as somewhat challenging, but not debilitating. A small number of the schools reported that they previously entered into space agreements that didn't accurately project their needs.

"We were inexperienced with this and didn't realize what our space needs would be. It's hard to look at a building and project what you're going to need several years down the road."

Intra-Building Relationships

Educators agreed that there is tension inherent when creating independent learning communities in shared buildings. At the same time, they want to ensure that the separate schools peacefully coexist.

"There are times that we clash with the other school and, as the adults in the building, we need to be able to sit down together and talk through our problems. Someone needs to make sure that there is harmony in the building."

In the small autonomous schools, tension usually results from conflicts over common space, or a sense that classrooms are not equitably distributed. In the smaller learning communities, host school teachers felt that the small schools distanced themselves from the rest of the building.

Many of the educators are optimistic that they can overcome the tension. Some of the schools instituted regular building meetings with designated representatives in order to encourage communication and facilitate better relationships. Other teachers had recently made efforts to address misconceptions about their programs and to balance their desire for autonomy with the need to productively coexist. Unfortunately, many reported ongoing tension with the schools with whom they shared buildings despite efforts to the contrary.

"We're very separate entities here. That's something we have to work on."

Conclusions

- A separate, contiguous and identifiable space is vital to small school development and cohesion.
- All schools should be guaranteed equal access to common spaces, equitable distribution of classrooms and have mutually agreed upon building-wide practices for space sharing.
- Small schools need technical assistance on space usage.
- Regular intra-building meetings between school leadership and staff should be held to address building and space issues before problems arise.

5

Building Staff Cohesion

Small schools work to develop a cohesive staff that collaborates on all aspects of school development, from curriculum to governance. Finding the time and developing the skills to effectively do this, however, are common challenges.

Collective Decision-Making

Many teachers are drawn to small schools because they want to be in a teacher-led environment with a democratic decision-making structure. Ultimately, however, many found that open communication and consensus building do not always come naturally. They revealed that although wanting to collectively pursue program goals through shared governance, they were not always sure how to achieve this.

“I think that we need help with learning how to make decisions collectively and what consensus looks like; how to work as a team with differing personalities; how to work together as thoughtful teachers to create and to recreate a school each year.”

Despite reported challenges with collective decision-making, most teachers described their professional communities as cohesive, tight-knit groups. The teachers who came from large schools felt it was significantly easier to sit and talk with their colleagues and to discuss particular student needs in their new, smaller communities.

Common Planning Time

Lack of adequate planning time is a recurring concern for teachers throughout the system. At small schools, the teachers reported that finding common planning time is critical to the development of a cohesive staff that collaborates across subjects.

“We worked to develop integrated units, so that topics would carry over from one room to the next on the same day. It got to where it was hard to go into class not having met.”

Some teachers reported that they met informally almost every day; others reportedly conferred from an hour weekly to bi-weekly half-day meetings. A few teachers met together once or twice a month or not at all. At several schools, teachers arranged alternative schedules to facilitate common planning time. They banked preparation time, then took it at the same time each week.

Finding adequate common planning time is a particular challenge for the teachers at smaller learning communities. For the most part, staff at both elementary and high schools see their principals as the determining factor. Because principals require them to attend meetings – by department (in high schools) or by grade level (primarily in elementary schools) – in addition to those of their smaller learning communities, there is little time for the teachers at small schools to meet. A small number of teachers reported that their principals had permanently excused them from attending department or grade level meetings, in order to free their time to meet as a small school.

In high schools, programmers – those responsible for arranging student and teacher schedules – sometimes helped to solve the common planning issue. They have the ability to organize schedules so that all teachers have common free periods and can use them to work on curriculum and instruction. Some teachers commented that their programmers had received special training in order to be better equipped to meet the needs of small schools.

Conclusions

- Small schools educators need enhanced training on collective decision-making and shared governance to better prepare them to participate in collaborative, teacher-led environments.
- Small schools should have the opportunity to develop alternative schedules that maximize common planning time; high school programmers should be encouraged to facilitate common free periods for small schools teachers.
- Principals at host schools should allow small schools teachers greater flexibility with regard to building-wide grade level and departmental meetings in order to free their time to meet as a small school.



Budget and Resources

Lack of adequate resources is a challenge for the overwhelming majority of Chicago's schools; small schools are no exception. They, however, also struggle with inadequate input with respect to budgets and inequitable distribution of resources that are available.

"How do you divvy up resources – physical and monetary – in the building? We don't want anything more than our fair share, but we don't want anything less either."

Control Over Budget

Each of the small autonomous schools has its own budget whereas only one of the smaller learning communities has this control. Some of the teachers at smaller learning communities commented that they are given some degree of control or influence over budget. As in other areas, principals decide whether to grant teachers input into these decisions. The teachers noted that the way resources are divided significantly shapes their programs. They expressed a strong interest in exercising greater input into budget and resource decisions.

Equitable Distribution of Resources

Many of the teachers in smaller learning communities report that they don't always receive budget allocations equal to the number of students served by their programs. Similar reports were made with regard to physical resources. Concerns were voiced about the division of computers, textbooks, desks and chairs.

"We have 500 of 1500 students in the building. We should get one-third of the computers and one-third of the textbooks, and so on. We shouldn't have to buy our own. We're real concerned about that."

Lack of adequate resources is a collective challenge across schools. Concerns range from inadequate funds for critical staff positions to a lack of necessary supplies. All of the teachers reported doing the best they could under the circumstances.

Conclusions

- Small schools educators should have a reasonable degree of input on the allocation of monetary and physical resources for their programs. Principals should consult with small schools teachers regarding their budgetary needs.
- Small schools should always receive their fair share of resources and there should be systems in place to ensure this occurs.

Communications and Outreach

All educators are interested in learning about each other's work, collaborating with other schools and involving and educating a broader community to help children learn. Small schools educators welcome the same opportunities.

Combating Isolation

Many of the small schools educators expressed a strong sense of isolation within the system. Those in smaller learning communities often feel disconnected from the teachers in their host school, but were not aware of any opportunities to connect with other small schools. Although some had partnered or networked with others in past years, they were not even sure "who was still out there."

"We need more opportunities to learn about what others are doing, to reflect on our work and to continue to build commitment and energy around small schools."

Site visits were reported to be a useful way for teachers and administrators to share ideas and to connect with one another. Many previously participated in visits to small schools in other cities, and others had hosted trips locally. The overwhelming majority of survey participants would like site visits to be part of an annual plan for raising communication levels across the city.

Many teachers felt hopeful that the new CPS Office of Small Schools will help to combat isolation. They want it to provide information as well as to facilitate communication among small schools. The teachers repeatedly suggested that basic strategies like quarterly newsletters, a local small schools listserv and workshops would help to connect teachers and schools. They also expressed interest in a regular meeting forum and new technical assistance publications targeted to Chicago's small schools.

Promoting Small Schools

The teachers have a strong desire to involve a broader community – including other teachers, parents and community members – in small schools. They believe that organized efforts to reach out to new audiences would have a positive impact on their programs and communities.

"People – teachers, parents and students – need to understand that 'small schools' means much more than size. They need to understand the philosophy, to learn about team teaching and collaborative planning."

Some of the teachers explained that they just stumbled upon small schools; others actively sought them out. In either case, most believed that there are few opportunities to hear about attending or working in Chicago's small schools. They want more opportunities to increase the likelihood that teachers, parents and students can find these schools or even start new small schools in their communities.

Finally, some of the teachers described a compelling need to reach out to broader and more diverse communities if small schools are going to permanently take root and grow in Chicago. They explained that in some circles, small schools are seen as a passing fad, at best. At worst, they are viewed as something that is being imposed on select communities and schools, in contrast to something that is being freely chosen by them.

“Parents and communities want places where their kids are safe, won’t fall through the cracks and will have the opportunity to go on to college. Explain small schools in real terms, and they’ll love them.”

Conclusions

- Small schools educators feel isolated and would benefit from new opportunities to share information and network on an ongoing basis.
- The Board and other entities should continue to organize annual site visits to small schools in Chicago and other cities.
- A sustained outreach and communications program should target diverse communities and promote working in, attending and starting small schools.

Strategies to Support Small Schools

We have created small schools and schools-within-schools by the thousands in the past few years. But for many of them, the going has not been easy – for the simple reason that we have yet to create the structures and policies that they need to thrive. We continue to bind these new organization entities within old organization structures, shackle them with outmoded practices, and impose regulations designed for another time and place – while denying them the particular supports they need for success. (Mary Anne Raywid, University of Hawaii)

If small schools are going to succeed to the full extent of their potential, it is clear that a number of new policies and practices are needed. Size is only the first step toward creating a small and personalized learning environment. As the survey findings demonstrate, small schools commonly struggle with challenges that range from defining nontraditional roles for teachers and principals to creating and sustaining alternative curricula focused on a particular theme or philosophy of teaching. In addition to funding, there are many strategies that individual schools and districts can adopt to ensure the viability and sustainability of small schools. The following strategies emerged from the survey process as those most likely to effect positive change. Although based on Chicago's experience, they are relevant to other districts and schools currently working to create small, personalized learning environments. Some of the identified strategies will require significant collaboration among school districts, external partners and educators as well as substantial financial resources. Others can be implemented with little additional cost to the system. All have the potential to improve the environment for small schools and increase the likelihood of their long-term success.

Create a Small Schools Cluster, Region or Instructional Area

Recent commentators have concluded that districts may need to seek new and different ways to govern small schools in order to realize the goals of downsizing. (Raywid, 2002). One suggested strategy is to reconfigure by forming a district composed entirely of small schools:

If we agree that a building is not a school, we need to rethink our definition of school district and just how a district functions. A district, as we know it today, is determined by geography, but that may not be the most appropriate factor for governing schools, especially small schools. (Fine, 2001)

The creation of a small schools region (cluster, sub-district or instructional area) would help to facilitate policies supportive of small schools, identify and address common challenges and provide targeted assistance with curriculum and instruction. A small schools region or district would also facilitate the flexibility that small schools require – something that is frequently difficult to achieve within a large bureaucracy. Additionally, a small schools region would better support alternative curriculum development, alternative forms of assessment, and the development of accountability agreements similar to those used with charter schools.

Although every small school is unique, small schools often share similar approaches to curriculum, instruction and governance. These common structures lead to many shared opportunities and challenges. For example, many small schools grapple with questions of how to define and implement the

nontraditional roles and responsibilities of teachers and principals. In the area of curriculum and instruction, practitioners must learn how to effectively integrate a particular focus across subjects, or how to develop and sustain alternative forms of assessment. In terms of facilities, questions of how to fairly and efficiently divide a school building to accommodate multiple small schools need to be addressed.

Issues such as these could be addressed through a small schools cluster, region or sub-district that would provide a critical base of experience to trouble-shoot problems, address challenges, advance thinking and share opportunities. This alternative configuration would also provide a natural springboard for new initiatives to enhance small schools, and provide a venue for principals and teachers to network and jointly participate in professional development.

Other districts have attempted to accommodate the differing needs of small schools on a case-by-case basis. Critics have noted that this sort of “policy by exception” harms, rather than supports, small schools because waivers may be granted or withheld arbitrarily, and because the need to request repeated exemptions puts them at a disadvantage. (Raywid, 2002)

Some districts have sought to foster an environment for new school development through the creation of alternative reporting structures. New York City, for example, created an Alternative Schools Superintendency, designed to encourage innovation in schools, to represent innovative schools within the system, and to oversee them with more flexibility. (Raywid, 2002) Unlike the other superintendencies, which were defined by geographic area, the Alternative Schools Superintendent was granted direct responsibility for schools scattered throughout the city – any school that affiliated with the office was removed from the jurisdiction of its former superintendent. Although the schools that initially affiliated with the office were strictly alternative – designed to serve students who were not succeeding in traditional environments – the intention was to cultivate and nurture small schools as well. Eventually, many small schools chose to affiliate with the Alternative Schools Office and continue to do so.

The New York model recognizes that while districts may work to encourage innovation and creativity in every school, most large bureaucracies require new and distinct strategies to sustain small, personalized learning environments. In Chicago, the Board of Education recently announced that it would reorganize its six regions into twenty-four instructional areas. The goal is to provide more direct support for schools in implementing instructional programs. This new configuration is a positive first step, but it should go further. Chicago Public Schools, as well as other large districts, should consider organizing schools in a way that recognizes and supports alternative approaches to school development and organization.

Opportunities to Create Small Autonomous Schools

Research shows that autonomy is vital to the development of a small school and its ability to exist over time. In Chicago and other districts, however, the opportunities to create small autonomous schools have been limited. Small schools educators and their community partners should be encouraged to pursue their ideas for new schools and then be provided with the resources, authority and flexibility to implement them.

When the small schools were guaranteed enough autonomy to bring their ideas to fruition, they were more invested in the school and its students...Ensuring that they have the opportunity to bring their ideas to fruition is an important incentive to encouraging teachers to undertake renewal and improved accountability within the system. (Wasley in Cotton, 2001)

Like charters and contract schools, new small autonomous schools should have the opportunity to create innovative educational programs with fewer bureaucratic constraints. Of course, all schools must comply with legal and contractual requirements and be held accountable for their academic performance.

In the context of small schools, autonomy includes site-based control over the following:

- Curriculum, instruction and assessment
- Budget
- Staffing
- Schedule
- Governance
- Facilities

Districts should establish an open and regular Request for Proposal (RFP) process for the creation of high quality, small autonomous schools. The RFP should provide support to a variety of small schools models. An RFP could:

- Support start-up “schools of choice” that promote more personalized learning environments and build on a small schools philosophy.
- Provide opportunities for existing smaller learning communities to become autonomous.
- Support the conversion of large schools into small autonomous schools.

As part of the RFP process, the district should provide the necessary resources for design and planning, assist with site location, and provide adequate funds for start-up. Additionally, the district should work with schools to identify appropriate and reasonable accountability measures.

An RFP that is offered at specific and regular intervals, such as a biannual basis, can stimulate the creation of new small schools and spur the involvement of a variety of interested parties. New school starts are generally acknowledged to have a higher probability of success, with the potential to attract new business partners and to engage the community in building a new school. In addition to stimulating local grassroots efforts, successful small school prototypes from other parts of the country, such as the MET school in Providence and the national Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) would have the opportunity to participate.

One example of a comprehensive and ambitious approach to the creation of small autonomous schools can be found in the Oakland Unified School District. The District, in partnership with Oakland Community Organizations and the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) recently released a comprehensive RFP for the creation of several new small autonomous schools. The RFP encourages “any interested parties with a worthy idea for equitable and effective education to develop their vision for a new school.” Schools selected through this process are awarded funding equal to that given other public schools in the district, additional funding to purchase an initial allocation of supplies and furniture, and technical support from the Oakland Small Schools Incubator. A copy of the RFP can be found at www.bayces.org.

In 1995, the Chicago Board of Education created an RFP process that was open to teachers and principals, local school council members, parents and others. The RFP invited the planning and formation of new small schools, and the expansion of existing small schools. Over 80 applicants applied, and 24 schools were selected; several of the grantees were smaller learning communities that were given the opportunity to become small autonomous schools. In 2002, the Board passed a resolution stating that “small schools can provide an effective means for enhancing students’ academic achievement and personal growth,” and authorized the conversion of existing schools and the establishment of new small schools. In partnership with the private foundation community, the Board supported an RFP process focused on large scale conversion of existing schools. The Board should take the next step and issue an RFP for new small school starts, which would complement and expand its efforts to convert large schools into small autonomous schools.

An open and regular RFP is a meaningful strategy that school districts can use to increase the number of new small autonomous schools, to invite new partners to participate in the public school system and to provide the opportunity for smaller learning environments to grow into stable autonomous schools. District officials should work with educators, advocates and community members to establish such a process.

School Development and Capacity Building

Starting a new small school is extraordinarily difficult; maintaining a well functioning small school without strong support structures is equally challenging. The most stable small schools have developed over a period of five to ten years with substantial outside support and funding. When a district decides to adopt the small schools model, it must be done with adequate resources and planning. A comprehensive support center for small schools should be part of this approach, providing coaches, mentors and experts to assist new school startups and existing small schools.

In Chicago, the notion of such a center has been advanced with ideas variously referred to as “an incubator,” a “small schools university,” a “small schools design center” and a “leadership training academy.” Common to most of the formats is the notion that such a center be funded by both the school system and outside partners, and equipped to perform long-term mentoring as well as one-on-one coaching and group instruction in most of the following areas:

- Understanding and managing change
- Team and community building
- Planning
- Developing a vision
- Developing leadership skills
- Building program content
- Making effective use of evaluation tools

The value of such a center is undisputed among small schools advocates. Educators commonly struggle with implementation issues ranging from leadership and governance to alternative curriculum development. National research has cautioned that some districts, in their haste to downsize, have struggled with issues of “shallow implementation” and failed to create functional models. Successful smaller learning communities must make a “clean break” with past practices, but doing so requires tremendous effort and support. (Cotton, 2001)

Therefore, in addition to creating a policy environment that supports small schools, districts must partner with the academic community and school reform groups to create a coordinated support system. A comprehensive support center for small schools will help educators to successfully implement their programs and avoid the common pitfall of shallow implementation.

Private, nonprofit support centers have been introduced in a few cities. New Visions for Public Schools in New York is one such organization. Broker, convener, facilitator, incubator, advocate for policy change and resource provider, New Visions has created 35 theme-oriented small learning communities and provided them with constant coaching and support. In Oakland, the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES), employs coaches, school designers, program managers, researchers and administrators to support small schools and to work with community partnerships at the school district level. BayCES has designed an extensive five-stage development program, from “Inspiration” to “Maturation,” for new small schools and provides staff support throughout this development.

In Chicago, small schools have been able to garner leadership support from both university-based experts and advocacy groups. Academic partners such as the Small Schools Workshop at the University of Illinois at Chicago, The Center for City Schools at National-Louis University and The Center for School Improvement at the University of Chicago have provided expertise and support to educators and communities working to establish small schools. In every case, however, the arrangement was made between a particular school and the mentor institution. Money was raised through a patchwork of grant proposals and fee-for-service arrangements, and there was no unified effort to smooth the way for coordinated technical assistance for small schools within the bureaucracy of Chicago Public Schools. Although there is no question that partner organizations have made a tremendous difference in helping develop and sustain small schools in Chicago, it is equally true that without a coordinated and comprehensive support system moving forward, current efforts to downsize will be at serious risk of “shallow implementation.”

School districts, in Chicago and across the country, are looking to small schools to raise academic achievement, increase graduation rates, combat school violence and improve school climate. It will take a sizeable investment to create the schools that achieve these results. The commitment to downsize is an important milestone, but the long-term success of new schools requires comprehensive financial, administrative and technical support.

Support for Lead Teacher Position

The overwhelming majority of small schools in Chicago have a lead teacher (facilitator or director) who assumes a critical role within the school community, including instructional leader, mentor and recruiter. Lead teachers often assume some of the responsibilities previously reserved for principals while maintaining close ties to the classroom, other teachers and students. In smaller learning communities, in particular, a lead teacher can provide the vision and persistence necessary for a small school to survive in the face of challenges.

In some schools, the lead teacher is released from classroom responsibilities in order to meet the demands of this role. In others, lead teachers have been granted some released time or a salary increase to compensate for additional responsibilities. However, most lead teachers have full teaching loads, new responsibilities and no additional compensation or support. The result is that lead teachers are often stretched too thin, more likely to experience burn-out and the inability to fully implement many of their good ideas.

Although the responsibilities of lead teachers vary among school types, the existence of lead teachers has proved vital to the development of all models.

Effective leaders feel the pulse, sing the song, and beat the rhythm of their school. They get to know it inside-out so that they can negotiate the competing priorities of the different stakeholders and mediate the inevitable tensions. They do what is necessary to make the center cohere. (Ancess in Cotton, 2001)

Every small school must define its own needs for the role of lead teacher, but all will benefit from a lead position that is formally recognized and supported by the district through the provision of time outside the classroom and additional compensation for new responsibilities and time committed beyond the regular school day. Districts should provide additional funding to support lead teachers, and individual schools should prioritize these positions when determining budgetary needs.

Site-Based Agreements for Smaller Learning Communities

Most Chicago small schools are smaller learning communities (housed within other schools) and operate at the discretion of the building principal. The ability of teachers to act with some independence respecting matters such as curriculum and instruction, scheduling, recruiting and hiring, and budgeting is not guaranteed. Moreover, the degree of independence with which a smaller learning community can operate is not often well defined. As a result, principal turnover can lead to drastic changes in this regard.

The policy environments of schools-within-schools typically depend on principals. The major policy difficulties with this arrangement stem first from instability. In

many, if not most schools, a thriving program may die when a principal supportive of the schools-within-schools organizational structure is replaced by an indifferent or even hostile principal. (Raywid, 2002)

In Chicago, smaller learning communities have sought to stabilize the existence of their programs through contract-like agreements among the small school, the building principal and the Local School Council (LSC). (In Chicago, every public school has an LSC composed of parents, educators, community members, and, at the high school level, a student. Each LSC is authorized to develop school improvement plans, hire and evaluate the principal, and make budget decisions). These agreements describe the goals of the small school and the strategies to be utilized. They also specifically delineate the degree of autonomy granted to the smaller learning community, including the ability to develop and implement new curriculum, recruit and hire teaching staff, maintain separate space, seek funding and recruit students.

New small learning communities must be able to create a vision and bring it into being, and the experts insist that this will not happen without broad decision-making authority. Best of all, they say, is the authority to make decisions in all key spheres of activity – space, schedule, budget, curriculum, instruction and personnel. (Cotton, 2001)

Site-based agreements can play an important role in the future of a smaller learning community. They not only memorialize a common understanding of the mission and goals of an individual small school, but they can also serve to inform a new building principal of previously guaranteed policies and practices. Ultimately, these agreements have the potential to minimize the negative impact that changes in school leadership have historically had on smaller learning communities. Host schools should be encouraged to enter into such agreements with small schools, and districts should actively endorse and promote their adoption.

Outreach and Communications

Despite the growing number of small schools, many practitioners feel isolated and lack information about other small schools. These teachers and administrators would benefit from opportunities to share information and to address challenges collaboratively. In the long run, such opportunities can help to build a strong network of small schools.

Networks that connect new schools to other like-minded schools mitigate against the pain and vulnerability of isolation inherent in school starting and school keeping... [they] can broaden the new school's learning context by providing it with access to experienced schools as well as other new schools. (Ancess in Cotton, 2001).

School districts and their external partners should create opportunities to reduce isolation and increase communication between small schools. Opportunities for networking and information sharing include a small schools newsletter, site visits to other small schools and periodic meeting forums on topical issues. The growing number of newly established small schools creates an important opportunity to share lessons learned and strategies developed.

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Tools for Schools

Defining the Roles of Lead Teachers and Principals

Many small schools struggle to define and implement the roles of lead teacher and principal. Creating a job description for these positions is an important step toward fostering a common understanding of roles and responsibilities. The process of creating these descriptions can lead to productive dialogue about school governance and help lay the groundwork for a smoother transition when changes in staff occur.

For more information or a sample job description contact:

Aiko Boyce, Lead Teacher
Best Practice High School, Chicago
773.534.7610

Facilities and Space Sharing Agreements

Necessity requires most small schools to share buildings with other schools. Dividing building space and negotiating shared spaces, such as gyms, cafeterias and lunchrooms is not always an easy process. The creation of a written space sharing agreement can help schools come to consensus on the best use of space and identify a process for ongoing dialogue when changes are needed. For a list of best practices for space sharing visit www.bpichicago.org.

For more information or a sample agreement contact:

Cindy Moelis, Director,
Education Initiative
Business and Professional People
for the Public Interest
312.641.5570

Smaller Learning Communities Memorandum of Understanding

Creating a Memorandum of Understanding (a written agreement), among a small school, the building principal and the local governing council is one strategy to help guarantee the stability of a smaller learning community. Such agreements should include a description of the mission, goals and objectives of the smaller learning community and an enumeration of specific guarantees, such as the ability to:

- Develop and implement curriculum
- Recruit and hire teaching staff
- Maintain classrooms in close proximity to one another
- Seek funding from public and private sources
- Recruit students
- Operate as a separate and distinct program

For more information or a sample agreement contact:

Matt Olson, Small Schools Coordinator
Harper High School, Chicago
773.776.3829

Site Visits

Site visits to small schools are a great way to learn about what others are doing locally or in other cities. A trip to another school provides an opportunity to ask questions of educators who have faced similar situations and to gather information and ideas. Site visits can help educators gain insight into their own work, develop a fresh perspective and create opportunities to network with other teachers and administrators.

For more information on organizing site visits contact:

Zoe Mikva, Education Initiative
Business and Professional People
for the Public Interest
312.641.5570

Selected Resources

In Chicago

Business and Professional People for the Public Interest

Cindy Moelis, Director, Education Initiative
25 E. Washington, Suite 1515
Chicago, IL 60602
(312) 641-5570
www.bpichicago.org

The Center for City Schools, National-Louis University

Steve Zemelman
18 S. Michigan Ave.
Chicago, IL 60603
(312) 621-9650

Chicago High School Redesign Initiative

Pat Ford, Executive Director
111 E. Wacker Dr., Suite 1400
Chicago, IL 60601
(312) 616-8000

The Chicago Panel on School Policy

Barbara Buell, Executive Director
180 North Michigan Ave., Suite 1870
Chicago, IL 60601
(312) 372-5035
www.chicagopanel.org

Chicago Public Schools, Office of Small Schools

Jeanne Nowaczewski, Director
125 S. Clark St., 5th Floor
Chicago, IL 60603
(773) 553-2197
Listserv: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/CPS-smallschools>

Leadership for Quality Education

John Ayers, Executive Director
21 S. Clark St., Suite 3120
Chicago, IL 60603
(312) 853-1200
www.LQE.org

Small Schools Workshop

Michael Klonsky, Director
1640 W. Roosevelt Rd., 6th Floor
Chicago, IL 60608
(312) 413-8066
www.smallschoolsworkshop.org

In Other Cities

Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES)

1720 Broadway Ave., 4th Floor
Oakland, CA 94612
(510) 208-0160
www.bayces.org

Coalition of Essential Schools

1814 Franklin St., Suite 700
Oakland, CA 94612
(510) 433-1451
www.essentialschools.org

New Visions for Public Schools

96 Morton Street
New York, NY 10014
(216) 645-5110
www.newvisions.org

The Small Schools Project, Center on Reinventing Public Education

7900 East Greenlake Drive North, Suite 212
Seattle, WA 98103
(206) 616-0303
www.smallschoolsproject.org



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