

*Arguing that the comprehensive high school that has dominated American education is no longer effective, high schools are transforming themselves into smaller units to enhance learning and strengthen relationships.*

## Transforming High Schools into Small Learning Communities

When John Hyland became principal of North Hollywood High School in 1996, he realized the school would have to change. Student achievement was low—some 80 percent of students performed below the twenty-fifth percentile on standardized tests—and the school was severely overcrowded, with nearly 4,000 students in a space built for half that many.

Moreover, the community had changed, and the practices that once made the school highly regarded were no longer effective. Located in what was formerly a solidly white middle-class community, the school now had a large population of English-language learners, many of whom lacked the advantages the previous student body had had.

“These are bilingual kids who are poor, who don’t have food, whose parents don’t understand the American education system,” says Hyland. “If you try teaching them the way you taught kids with different backgrounds, it won’t work.”

As a first step, Hyland and his colleagues tried to ease students’ transition into the school by creating small groups for ninth-graders.

These groups, called Husky Dens (the school’s mascot is the Husky) provided the students with guidance in study skills and an adult advocate who could help them navigate through the difficult passage into the large school.

Although the Husky Dens were enormously successful, the school had to drop them after a year because the district shifted North Hollywood to a year-round calendar, which made the system unmanageable. Nevertheless, Hyland remained convinced of the value of breaking up high schools into smaller units, and with help from the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP), he and his colleagues began to study the idea of small learning communities. Through LAAMP, school leaders attended a conference on small schools in Washington, D.C., and visited schools in New York City.

Armed with this information, Hyland and his colleagues set out to create a small learning community in North Hollywood. Acting on a belief that high school should prepare students for life in the community, they established a School for Social Justice, which would help students understand the conditions of their neighbor-

hood and perhaps motivate them to seek careers as lawyers, social workers, or neighborhood activists. The school then, on teachers’ initiatives, established additional small learning communities focused on science, the environment, entertainment and media, health and nutrition, and other topics—nine in all.

Although the idea of the small learning communities met some resistance from the school staff, Hyland says such opposition melted away once teachers and administrators saw the data. Looking at standardized-test scores, grades, attendance rates, and student attitudes, the school found that students in the small learning communities were much better off.

“I believed in this on faith,” says Hyland, who retired from the school in 2001. “Now we have substantial evidence; we know this is a good thing to do. Kids do better in these types of settings.”

North Hollywood High School is one of a growing number of schools that are beginning to transform themselves by changing their structure and teaching methods. These efforts reflect an increasing recognition that the large compre-

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by Robert Rothman

*In most cities, too many youth are attending high schools where they are anonymous and not challenged to work to their potential.*

hensive high school that has dominated the landscape for the past 40 years is no longer appropriate. These reforms are attempting to create smaller learning communities that provide closer relationships between teachers and students, to design instructional strategies that address the needs of each student, and to create closer connections between schools and communities.

In an attempt to bring about this kind of high school transformation on a large scale, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has launched a \$60-million initiative that provides grants to seven urban districts to spur the redesign of high schools. Three of the sites involved in the initiative, known as Schools for a New Society, are Annenberg Challenge sites: Boston, Chattanooga, and Houston. (The other sites are Providence, Sacramento, San Diego, and Worcester, Massachusetts.)

Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education has provided \$42 million to 149 districts to assist them in creating small learning communities in large high schools. The funding is part of a three-year program that is expected to increase to \$125 million this year. And the Gates Foundation, along with the Carnegie Corporation and the Ford and W. K. Kellogg foun-

dations, pledged \$40 million to create 70 small schools that would combine high school and college, enabling students to graduate with a high school diploma and two years of postsecondary credit.

Michele Cahill, formerly a senior program officer for the Carnegie Corporation and the designer of the Schools for a New Society initiative, believes high school transformation is essential. "No city has effective schools for all its students," she says in a 2001 Carnegie publication, *Creating a New Vision of the Urban High School*, "and, in most cities, too many youth are attending high schools where they are anonymous and not challenged to work to their potential."

The new attention on the high school reflects a widespread concern that traditional high schools are no longer functioning adequately for all young people. At a time when the world beyond high school demands higher and higher levels of knowledge and skills, too many adolescents leave high school ill prepared for higher education, the workplace, and democratic participation—if they graduate at all.

Achievement levels have increased in mathematics but not in reading, and by one estimate, only half of 17-year-olds possess the academic skills needed for a job in an automobile plant. Some 29 percent of college students take at least one remedial class. These students are far less likely to earn a college degree.

And a large number of students drop out of high school, particularly in large cities. According to a study by Johns Hopkins University researchers, a substantial

number of urban high schools have a very high attrition rate; in about 300 schools in 35 large cities, the graduating class was less than half the size of the entering ninth-grade class four years before.

Moreover, many students are disengaged in high school. In one survey, 40 percent of students said they were going through the motions in school, and a third said they spent their time "goofing off" with friends.

At one time these statistics might not have mattered much. Young people could secure a productive future without working hard or achieving at high levels in school. Even dropouts could find a place in society. But this is no longer the case. The world and the economy have changed dramatically, and the consequences of failing to prepare all young people for these changes are severe. "Businesses want graduates to be more well rounded, to have team skills, technology skills," says Armando

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Alaniz, who is directing the Schools for a New Society initiative in Houston. “It goes beyond reading and writing. It’s a holistic approach, what students need in the twenty-first century.”

**D**istricts and schools that have started to transform high schools undertook these efforts after looking at the data from their own schools and concluding that too many students were not receiving the preparation they needed to succeed. At Reagan High School in Houston, for example, where Alaniz was principal before taking on his new role, the reform effort started when school leaders realized that the ninth-grade class was three times the size of the senior class, meaning that large numbers of students were leaving the school each year. At Santa Monica High School near Los Angeles, the effort began when data showed wide gaps in achievement and instructional practices.

“We had a two-schools phenomenon,” says Kirsten Hibert, the school’s former co-principal. “One school, which was largely white and advantaged socio-economically, was making huge gains in achievement. The second school, which was not as advantaged and was largely Latino and African American, was not as successful.”

In response to these findings, schools and districts have tried several strategies. One of the most popular is reducing the size of high schools. Traditionally, districts have built large high schools in order to operate schools more efficiently. As James B. Conant argued in his influential 1959 book *The American High School Today*,

“comprehensive” high schools also have the advantage of enabling schools to offer a range of academic coursework, vocational and technical studies for students not bound for college, and advanced coursework for gifted and talented youths. Currently, according to the U.S. Department of Education, about 70 percent of the nation’s high school students are enrolled in schools of 1,000 students or more, and 5 percent—more than 700,000 students—are enrolled in schools of over 3,000 students.

In recent years, however, reformers have argued that these large schools are ineffective and in some cases harmful. They are too big to allow close relationships between teachers and students, and as a result, students feel alienated. They do not get the kind of personalized attention that would help them learn and develop as they should.

At Santa Monica High School, the sense of alienation students felt came out dramatically in a survey school leaders conducted of students, parents, and school staff. When asked if counselors knew each student well, only 15 percent of counselors and teachers said no. However, fully 50 percent of students and parents responded that counselors did not know students well. “That hit the staff in the face,” says Hibert. “They saw that this is real. We had been piloting programs, but it was clear we needed whole-school change.”

**T**o create more welcoming conditions, reformers in a number of cities have designed intentionally small schools, either by building new schools at a limited size or by

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carving up large schools into smaller units. In New York City, the drive to create small schools was led by the pioneering efforts of Deborah Meier and other educators in East Harlem. Currently the nation’s largest school district has some 400 small schools, nearly half created since 1993. In one notable case, educators from the Center for Collaborative Education replaced the Julia Richman High School, a low-performing school, with six small schools located in the same building.

In Chicago, meanwhile, the school board adopted a policy of supporting the creation of small schools and has provided start-up funds and professional development assistance to the schools. There are now some 175 small schools in Chicago.

The Gates Foundation has provided more than \$250 million to support the creation of small schools in New York, Ohio, Colorado, and other states. Tom Vander Ark, the foundation’s executive director for education, says that small size is an essential element of high school reform. “Though size is only one component of what makes a good school,” Vander Ark wrote in the February 2002 issue of *Educational Leadership*, “it is a necessary one and one with tremendous ripple effects.”

Vander Ark and others say that research shows that small schools are more effective than large

schools. A study of small schools in Chicago found that students in the smaller schools had better attendance rates, lower dropout rates, and higher grade-point averages than larger schools. In addition, the small schools had fewer incidents of violence and greater involvement by parents, community members, and business leaders.

A study by Valerie Lee and Julia B. Smith, entitled *Restructuring High Schools for Equity and Excellence*, which analyzed the

relationship between school size and student achievement, found that students gained the most in reading and mathematics achievement in schools with between 600 and 900 students; the largest schools (over 2,100 students) showed the least improvement.

These and other studies suggest that the size of the school does not create better teaching and learning, but smaller schools create the conditions that improve classroom performance. Specifically,

the studies point out, small schools enable closer collaboration among teachers and closer relationships between teachers and students, factors that improve instruction and make schools more welcoming environments.

Schools have found that small learning communities are effective when they become just that—learning communities. At Santa Monica High School, for example, teachers in the small communities spend their time together reading and discussing research on teaching and learning and sharing student work, and they visit one another's classrooms to observe and document instructional practices. These practices help raise expectations for student performance by making the practices visible. By sharing the data and discussing its implications, the teachers collectively work toward improving instruction across the learning community.

Despite the evidence of the effectiveness of small schools, some educators and parents remain skeptical of the concept. Some advocates for African American and Latino youths have expressed concerns that the small schools do not address issues of race and culture and could lead to further segregation of schools. Others contend that small schools are unable to provide some of the academic programs and extracurricular activities that made comprehensive high schools popular in the first place.

And a survey of parents and teachers found that small schools are not a high priority among the public. Although most of the respondents agreed that small schools offer advantages, and that large schools present a number of

## Transforming Instruction in Boston: Literacy Coaching

**D**istricts and schools have taken various approaches to changing instruction in high schools. In Boston, for example, the district has focused on literacy, in the belief that strong reading skills are essential for learning in all subjects. Building on an effort already under way in elementary and middle schools, the district has assigned instructional coaches to each of its 12 comprehensive high schools. The coaches' goal is to enable all teachers to employ a workshop approach to reading and writing instruction, in which students learn and practice the strategies effective readers and writers use. The approach is tailored to each student's reading and writing level and is less teacher-directed than conventional practice.

One major aspect of the coach's job will be to assist teachers in analyzing student-performance data and using it to inform instructional decisions. As part of its reform strategy, Boston is helping coaches perform this function effectively. Over the next two years, Richard Murnane, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is working in the district half time *pro bono* to help the central office and schools understand the information schools need and how to analyze it. He will also help build the capacity of the central office to support schools in analyzing test data.

In addition, the district is also testing in a handful of high schools a new software tool that will allow teachers and administrators to analyze results from the state testing program, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), and to use the results more productively as diagnostic tools. The software, known as MiDAS (MCAS Data Analysis System), permits analyses of groups of students, to detect patterns, and analyses of groups of test items, to help identify possible misconceptions.

disadvantages, relatively few thought creating small schools was the most important reform strategy. Moreover, among parents who could choose their child's school, 55 percent said school size was not an important factor in their decision.

Bill Kennedy, the director of Chattanooga's high school reform initiative, says the schools in the suburban part of his district have been reluctant to reduce their size, one of the "nonnegotiable" conditions of the initiative. "These schools have been successful," he says. "They have to see that they have the opportunity, through smallness, to become even greater."

In addition to changing the size of the schools, high school reformers are also transforming the learning environment within them. Traditionally, high schools have been like smaller colleges: organized by disciplines, with a heavy emphasis on lecture as the primary mode of instruction. High schools have also tended to segregate academic coursework and career preparation, so that students bound for the workplace after high school seldom receive much academic instruction and students bound for college receive little guidance or knowledge about career options.

Recent advances in learning research suggest that these structures and instructional approaches may not be the most effective for many students. The rigid disciplinary structure has made it difficult for students to see connections among their classes that might enhance their learning. And the structure has inhibited interactions

among teachers. In other countries, such as Japan, teachers work together to develop lessons, which improves instruction.

The preponderance of lectures has also meant that students have few opportunities to pursue hands-on activities that might be more engaging and would enable them to construct their own knowledge, rather than simply receive it from the teacher. Such activities are particularly effective in combining academic coursework and career preparation; students can learn the content by applying it in workplace settings.

Educators in Chattanooga saw vividly the dichotomy between their instructional practices and student learning when they polled high school students as part of their initiative. When asked how they learned best, and how their classes were organized, 75 percent of students said they thought the way they learned best was different from the way they were taught. "That could have been data from national research," says Kennedy, "but when our teachers looked at what their kids were saying, that slapped them in the face."

The smaller learning communities that schools are creating as part of their reform initiatives help them improve the learning environment by enabling teachers to work together. Teachers in small learning community teams jointly develop interdisciplinary lessons or collaborate to coordinate their lessons—for example, ensuring that students in history study the Great Depression at the same time they read *The Grapes of Wrath* in English.

In addition, the teams enable teachers to focus collaboratively on

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the needs of each student. "The period 4 teacher knows Jose didn't do his work in period 1," says Hyland of North Hollywood High School. "Kids feel all teachers are interested in what's happening in all of their classes."

The collaboration in small learning communities also extends to professional development. High schools that are reforming themselves have revamped teacher learning by bringing teachers together to focus on improving instruction. "Professional development does not remotely resemble what it did seven years ago," says Debra Dettrick, the school improvement facilitator at Reagan High School. "We had the traditional 'cram everybody into the library, cram information into them,' but the impact was relatively low. Now we are looking at ways to make [professional development] more personal. We talk about personalizing learning for kids, but we weren't modeling it with teachers."

As its new strategy, Reagan now has teacher-led groups of no more than 20 teachers who spend blocks of time on instruction. This year, for example, the focus is on literacy. This effort not only has improved teaching, Dettrick says, it also has shifted the way teachers work together and learn. "It has

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helped us move down the spectrum toward a professional learning community," she says. "Teachers are collaborating; I don't know they would have" before.

Such efforts require substantial amounts of time, and there never seems to be enough. And carving out blocks of time requires changes in school structures, which can be difficult. Santa Monica High School, for example, proposed establishing time for teachers to work together each week by taking advantage of a district policy that enabled them to add a few minutes to the beginning and end of the school day and "banking" the additional time for a pupil-free period once a week. However, this proposal fell just short of the 70-percent vote needed to implement the plan, setting back the school's reform effort.

**T**o help maintain support for their efforts, reforming high schools are also taking steps to engage the community. While community engagement is a high priority for reform at all levels, it is particularly important in high schools, where parental involvement tends to be less strong than in early grades. In addition, since high school represents a transition from schooling to the wider world, the community plays a critical role in helping to determine what graduates should know and be able to do.

One way schools have attempted to forge stronger ties to the community is by providing opportunities for students to perform community service. Maryland in 1992 became the first state to require all students to participate in community service, requiring students to perform 75 hours of service in order to graduate from high school. A number of districts have adopted similar requirements, and schools have adopted a wide range of programs to enable students to serve their communities.

Some of the most effective programs integrate service learning with the curriculum, so that the community becomes a classroom in which students learn academic content. In Chattanooga, seven schools are requiring students to complete a project during their senior year on a topic of interest to the community. The plan, based on a proposal by the National Commission on the High School Senior Year, is aimed at engaging twelfth-graders at a time when many seem to slack off while enabling them to learn outside the walls of their schools.

Similarly, schools have formed links with businesses to provide mentorships and internships for students to help inform them about and prepare them for career options. Many of the small learning communities that schools are creating have career themes, and these frequently link academic content with the ways such content is used in the workplace.

In Boston, the district has had longstanding partnerships with businesses, which have provided support to schools through the well-known Boston Compact. Under its new strategy, businesses

will form links directly with the small learning communities within high schools and engage students early in their high school careers.

For example, South Boston High School is dividing itself into three autonomous small schools, each with its own theme and business partners. The Monument School, with a public-safety theme, is partnered with the Boston Police Department; the Excell School, with a traditional college-preparatory theme, is linked with the Federal Reserve Bank; and the Odyssey School, which has a marine science and expeditionary learning theme, will work with the Gillette Company.

Boston is also taking steps to engage parents in the high school reform effort. The district has enlisted Pedro Noguera, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, to organize parents at two high schools to support instructional improvement. Noguera had led a similar effort at Berkeley High School in California.

**I**n changing high schools, districts and schools have faced significant challenges. Change of any kind is difficult enough; changing an institution that is part of the American landscape, such as high school, is a formidable task. Educators have faced resistance from teachers, from parents, and from other members of the community. And making all high schools effective for all young people requires substantial resources.

One way schools have sought to overcome resistance and implement significant change is by using data effectively. As many schools have found, presenting data clearly can show in a dramatic way the

need for change. “We identified the problems by looking at the data for the first time,” says Bill Kennedy of Chattanooga. “The district and state traditionally had good data on elementary and middle schools. But no one had taken the initiative to take all the data available for high schools and make a profile for each school.”

When they did, he says, they realized that “30 to 40 percent of the kids are not making it. We focused on personalization—not letting kids fall through the cracks.”

Another effective strategy is listening to the voices of students. As schools have found, students can express articulately the problems they see and possible solutions. And some of the most dramatic findings have been the discrepancies between how students and how school staffs perceive the school. These discrepancies by themselves suggest that there are problems schools need to attend to.

Schools have also found that listening to students helps ensure that reforms take root. At University City High School in Philadelphia, school leaders made sure to gather student input in developing disciplinary rules that have dramatically changed the climate at the school, according to Florence Johnson, the principal. “It’s easy to turn a school around if you get students to buy in,” she says. “You have to solicit their input and be consistent—no exception to the rules, ever.”

**L**eadership is as critical to implementing high school redesign as it is to implementing any other school reform. And in many cases, principals and

superintendents with vision have taken the lead in carrying out the reforms. Yet leadership is more than just developing a vision and pushing it through—as important as that is. Leaders also understand the culture of their schools and districts and know when to push forward and when to hold back.

Although school leaders now face a great deal of pressure to change—the No Child Left Behind Act makes steady improvement imperative—faculties may rebel if they are asked to do too much too fast. This resistance may have been behind the vote against banking time for teachers at Santa Monica High School.

But as John Hyland of North Hollywood points out, principals are not the only leaders in schools; in his school’s case, teachers took the initiative to create and lead each of the small learning communities. This is essential, he says, because a large organization cannot function effectively if only one person is responsible for developing and implementing programs. Teachers have expertise and they deserve the opportunity to bring it to bear and carve out their own leadership roles. The principal’s job, in part, is to build teachers’ capacity to take on those roles by providing support for their professional development and giving them the flexibility they need.

“A principal cannot manage a large high school without a team whose members will accept their authority, accept their role as leaders,” Hyland says.

Leaders also recognize and rely on the expertise and experience of others outside of their buildings, and such shared expertise is critical to the success of high

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school reform. In Houston, for example, the Houston Annenberg Challenge has established a network of high school principals who meet frequently to discuss dilemmas, share strategies, and give each other support.

In the long run, educators say, district support is critical for the success of high school reform, and many districts that are part of the Schools for a New Society initiative have revamped their own operations to support the redesigned schools. Houston, for example, has created a new assistant superintendent position to oversee high school reform and has placed all high school resources under one umbrella. That way, “all high school grants are working toward the same goal,” says Armando Alaniz. “We have a common focus, instead of random acts of kindness.”

At the same time, district support helps ensure that the reform reaches all children. “We might have one or two successes,” Alaniz says, “but if we want all 24 high schools to be successful, we need district support.” **GJ**

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The following Web sites offer additional information about programs described in this issue:

- [www.lausd.k12.ca.us/North\\_Hollywood\\_HS/](http://www.lausd.k12.ca.us/North_Hollywood_HS/)
- [www.bpe.org](http://www.bpe.org)
- [www.pefchattanooga.org](http://www.pefchattanooga.org)
- [www.houstonannenberg.org](http://www.houstonannenberg.org)
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