



# *Small Schools and Race*

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**Reflections of an African American  
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Learning Environments: The Role of  
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**Small Schools: From Promise to Practice**

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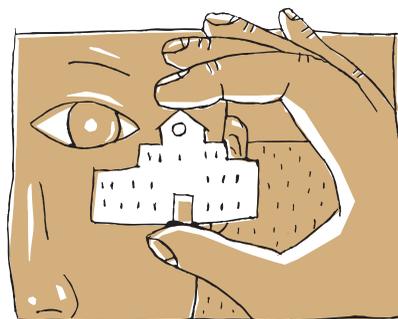
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## Small Schools and Race



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Robert Rothman

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In the last few years the idea of creating intentionally small high schools has captivated the nation's attention. Spurred by research that suggests that small schools produce a range of positive outcomes, policy-makers and funders have launched a number of initiatives to create new small high schools or break down the size of large schools.

Yet even as these initiatives advance, there is concern that they may be insufficient to improve educational opportunities, particularly for children of color. Without explicit attention to issues of race and culture, some educators contend, small schools may end up as previous reforms did, leaving African American and Latino children behind.

In an effort to bring together leading voices from the small schools and equity communities, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and other organizations convened a meeting at the University of Washington in June 2001. Although a daylong meeting is unlikely to resolve complex and contentious issues, the meeting aired concerns from both communities and found some areas of common ground.

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* is an attempt to expand the conversation from the 2001 meeting to a broader group. *VUE* was created by the Annenberg Institute for just such a purpose: to bring together researchers, community organizers, educators, and public officials to present a range of perspectives on critical topics and to invite readers to join the conversation on our Web site ([www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE)).

For this issue, we have invited several of the participants from the Seattle gathering to contribute

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essays and present their perspectives. The essays share the conviction that smallness is not an end in itself; the goal is improved educational opportunities for students who have been poorly served by urban schools. But each of the authors provides a unique perspective on the conditions needed for success.

In an impassioned essay, Theresa Perry reflects on her own experience and that of young people she has known to suggest that despite the evidence pointing to the effectiveness of small schools, such schools may be the wrong answer for some young people. She suggests some additional indicators of success and resources that might make schools more responsive to and effective for children of color.

Patricia A. Wasley, one of the authors of a comprehensive study of small schools, places the idea in perspective by outlining a framework of “authenticity.” Only with authentic equity, authentic learning, and authentic relationships – which small schools can foster – can reform succeed, she argues.

Thomas Toch takes us inside a small school – the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (the Met) in Providence, Rhode Island – to show how the school creates bonds between adults and the student body, which consists largely of youths of color.

A strong connection between schools and the community is essential for schools to succeed. Wendy D. Puriefoy, the president of the Public Education Network, outlines ways in which local education funds have forged such ties by launching effective small schools.

Finally, Warren Simmons, the executive director of the Annenberg Institute, draws on lessons from previous reform efforts to consider the conditions that need to be in place for small schools to become an effective strategy for urban education reform.

We invite you to contribute your perspective as well. Our Web site, [www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE), includes an on-line forum that enables readers to post messages for us and for other readers. We look forward to the dialogue.



# Reflections of an African American on the Small Schools Movement

Theresa Perry

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*Recalling her mother's statement – “Small don't have nothing to do with being good” – the author reflects on her own experience and that of young people she has known to express concern about the value of small schools for children of color.*

I believe in the power and the possibilities of intentional small school communities. I remain skeptical of the “small schools movement.”

I was born and reared in the Jim Crow South, in Birmingham, Alabama. From first to twelfth grade, I attended a small, historically Black Catholic school. Until recently, I had never focused on the fact that my school was small, just that it was an excellent school. There were thirty-two students in my graduating class. I was class president. That same year we won the state basketball championship for the Black basketball league, and we won five out of the six top prizes in a statewide math contest, competing against *all* schools – Black, white, public, private, and Catholic. The competition included a written math examination and the submission of a mathematics research paper. We all were excited about the math awards and wondered how was it that they, “the white folk,” would stand for a Black school to walk away with all of these math prizes. I won fifth place. The topic of my paper was “Boolean Algebra.”

My school, Immaculata High School, offered advanced placement classes in math, chemistry, and English. The school had a well-equipped and state-of-the-art science lab, a wonderful auditorium, and a gym that was a mag-

net for neighborhood children. Parents were attracted to the school and enrolled their children there because it was an excellent school, because it had a great basketball program and a highly touted modern dance program, and because Miss Tidwell and Miss Jewell – African American teachers from the community – worked side by side with the equally stellar and committed nuns from Covington, Kentucky.

The school was successful with *all* students – top students, average students, and struggling students. My best friends and I, who represented the range of academic records, all graduated from Immaculata and went on to college. So did all of my eleven siblings. I recently asked my mother why she chose this school for us. She replied, matter-of-factly, “Because it was a good school, an excellent school.” She continued, “It wasn't just that it was a Catholic school. If it was a Catholic school and wasn't a good school, you all would not have gone there.” I asked her whether the fact that it was a *small* school had influenced her decision to send us there. She thought for a minute and, with a look on her face that suggested that she was trying to figure out why I had asked her this question, she replied, “I never thought about it being a small school.” Then

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she looked up and said, “Small don’t have nothing to do with being good.”

Indeed, throughout the Jim Crow South, small didn’t have much to do with being good. Of course, we knew of small schools with committed and caring teachers, teachers who knew us and our families intimately, who did the best they could, sometimes in two-room schoolhouses, with dreadful facilities and few materials. But we also knew of St. Augustine High School in New Orleans, a historically Black all-boys school that routinely won many of the top places in the statewide competitions – athletic, academic, and artistic. St. Augustine was not a small school. Neither was the famous Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., or the Caswell County Training School in North Carolina.

In the Jim Crow South, for African Americans, “excellence” meant caring and committed teachers, but it also meant schools with gyms and auditoriums and cafeterias, schools with musical instruments and bands, and schools with a challenging curriculum and an ethos of working hard in school and doing one’s very best. And sometimes, notwithstanding the larger society’s ideology of Black intellectual inferiority and limited resources, “excellence” meant schools where African American students performed better than white people, even on the tests that white people themselves had made up and were judging.

### ***Different Races, Different Experiences***

In addition to my own experiences, my skepticism about the small schools movement arises from the experiences of young people I know who have attended small schools in Boston and Cambridge. It also comes from being

African American and understanding that often what is presented as an avenue for educational opportunity for African Americans somehow seems to morph into new and more sophisticated ways of denying and limiting educational opportunity or offering different types of education to Black Americans.

Small schools in Cambridge, many of them grounded in progressive pedagogy, appear to have worked quite well for white children. But these schools have not been able to eliminate the gaps in achievement between Black and white children. Further, Black people who live in Cambridge have had a difficult time getting the system’s teachers and school leaders to pursue an open and sustained conversation about race and achievement, or about the academic achievement of Black children in Cambridge schools. I fear that this silence stems from an orthodoxy that the progressive small schools seem to have adopted.

It was unequal access to eighth-grade algebra at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Open School in Cambridge, a small “school within a school,” that prompted Bob Moses to develop the Algebra Project in the mid-1980s. When Bob’s daughter Maisha prepared to enter eighth grade, Bob noticed that, based on the results of a district-mandated math examination, poor white children

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and Black children were being disproportionately excluded from algebra, while most of the children of middle- and upper-class white families were enrolling in the course. This pedagogical and politically progressive small school essentially reproduced the social-class distinctions evident in the larger society. And the people who led the small schools in Cambridge later came to lead the small schools movement in Boston.

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## Small schools can be locations of white privilege that marginalize and refuse to share power with parents and communities of color.

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I am aware that the data say that students who attend small schools do better than their counterparts who attend larger schools – that small schools are especially good places for so-called “disadvantaged” students. I also believe that small schools offer the possibility of a more personalized learning environment, an environment where students can have frequent and substantive interactions with teachers, in and out of the classroom, on academic and nonacademic matters. They can be places where students receive careful, thoughtful, and frequent feedback on their work and where students are committed to improving their skills, developing competencies, honing their talents, and becoming intellectually engaged.

But small schools can also be places where the teaching is bad, where new teachers receive little supervision or mentoring, or where students experience chaotic conditions. Small schools can be locations of white privilege that

marginalize and refuse to share power with parents and communities of color. They can be places where race is always just below the surface, ever affecting the interactions among the faculty and between the school leader and parents, but where neither race nor culture is acknowledged or discussed.

### ***A Closer Look: Two Students’ Experiences***

When our experiences seem to be at odds with the data, we might need to examine different kinds of data. Consider an example from a different realm. I have a friend who for many years was the senior epidemiologist for the department of public health in a large Midwestern city. Under his leadership, the department began to address the city’s infant mortality problem. His initial look at the infant mortality data revealed that white people had the lowest infant mortality rate, while that for African Americans was quite high. The infant mortality rate for Latinos, though, was just below the rate for the white population.

But this data did not fit with what some of the frontline health workers were seeing in the clinics serving the city’s Puerto Rican community, where infant mortality seemed high. So my friend decided to break the Latino data out and calculate separately the infant mortality rates for Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans. When he did this, he found that the infant mortality rate for Mexican Americans was lower than the white infant mortality rate, whereas the infant mortality rate for Puerto Ricans was very high – higher than the infant mortality rate for African Americans.

The data that I want to look at when I consider small schools are the experiences of individual African Ameri-

can students I have come to know. These students attended high schools that are part of the small schools movement in Boston, and these schools did not work for them. I am fully aware that these students' experiences aren't hard data, that they are anecdotes, that the experiences of these students might well be exceptions to the rule. But I believe that it is more than coincidence that at least these students – whose parents are all college-educated and solidly middle class and who entered these small schools as good students – shared this experience.

### **John: Superlative Outside Support for Learning Didn't Prevent Failure in School**

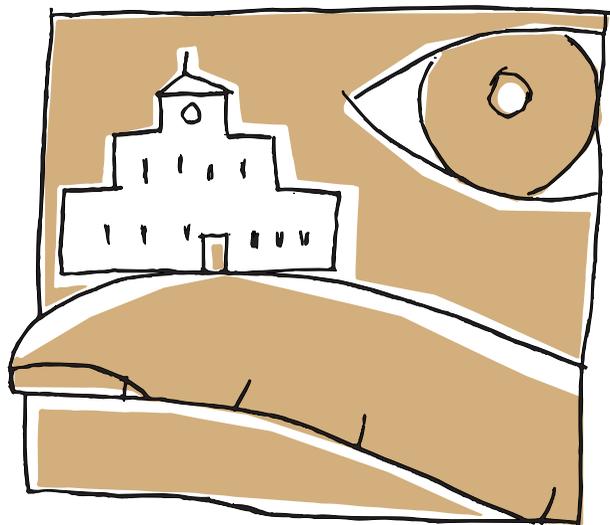
I met one of the students, whom I'll call John,<sup>1</sup> when his father, Robert, approached me at church after Mass in early January. We arranged an appointment, but he was so distraught that right away we went upstairs to the church office and talked for an hour and a half. With high hopes, Robert had signed his son up for one of the small high schools in Boston. He had accepted what the principal and the teachers had said about the school: it would be a place where the students would be known and known well. The teaching would be compelling; the assessment, authentic. It would be a school where the students would be intellectually engaged.

But during the second half of the academic year preceding our talk, Robert had been told that his son would have to repeat the twelfth grade – that he would not be graduating. And now, this year, he was again getting the

same message. How could it be that his son would have to repeat the twelfth grade twice? And worst, he could not make sense out of what his son needed to do to forestall his having to repeat the twelfth grade for a second time.

This small public high school was Robert's first experience with public education. Robert had gone to Catholic school, and so had his son, from first through eighth grade.

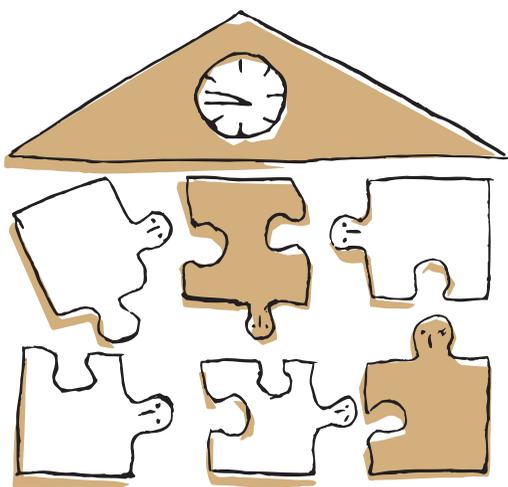
My heart went out to this father, his wife, and his son. Robert is a stalwart member of the Black community. On more than one occasion he has been honored for his work in the community and with children. He is the godfather of two young boys who are being raised by grandmothers, and he spends considerable amounts of time with them. Yet when it came to his own son, he was feeling helpless. I consoled him with the thought that whatever was happening with his son in the school, he knew that his son had no "attitude," that he was a good person,



<sup>1</sup> The names used in these two examples are not the real names of the people involved.

intellectually curious, who had solid academic skills. At Robert's insistence, I agreed to meet with John to see if I could get a handle on the work he was doing and was expected to do, and how he could do this work so that he would not have to repeat the twelfth grade for the second time.

I began to meet with John. I met with him many times. One of the first things I discovered was that this young man was prompt and always followed through on commitments. He always did what he said he was going to do. He was always there for our appointments, even when they were made in the hubbub after Mass. Furthermore, over the last two years, he had had enough discipline to successfully teach three fifteen-week nurturing courses to middle-school and elementary-aged children. I became involved in trying to help John think about how he could complete a project on Reconstruction for his portfolio.



It soon became clear to me that John didn't have the foggiest idea of what Reconstruction was about. I arranged for John to meet two scholars of Reconstruction: Noel Ignatiev, the author of *How the Irish Became White*, who was teaching a course on Reconstruction at Massachusetts College of Art, and Luke Hill, who had studied with Eric Foner, the leading contemporary scholar of Reconstruction.

One day, after school was over, I drove John over to Noel's house. I sat in another room while they were talking. Eventually, after about an hour and a half, John began to tape Noel's responses to some of his questions about Noel's scholarship and about Reconstruction. John also had a long meeting with Luke, who told him Eric Foner's famous story about how he grew interested in Reconstruction when he realized that what was taught in high school differed from what he had learned from his socialist father. Luke gave him one of Eric Foner's easier books on Reconstruction. Noel gave him W.E.B. DuBois's book on Reconstruction and some primary documents.

John completed his project. Some Sundays later, I asked John about how his portfolio presentation had gone. He lowered his eyes. I could tell he didn't want to talk about it. He told me that he did present his work, but that there was so much going on at the time of the presentations that nobody paid much attention to it. I wanted to know more, but I could tell that he didn't want to continue the discussion. Holding onto his arm, I said, "But did you learn a lot?" With a smile on his face, he said, "Yes."

Rather than face the possibility of repeating his senior year for the second time, John dropped out of school. He has since taken the GED. In his junior year of high school, he had taken the

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Gloria was adamant. She would try to finish the last several months of the school year, but she would quit school rather than go back to her small school.

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SAT and had earned a combined score of 980. Occasionally, his father, his mother, our pastor, and I gently nudge him about considering college. Maybe he'll consider it later. But for now, the feelings are too raw. He is still feeling the pains of academic failure at his small school.

**Gloria: No One Said She Wasn't Going to School**

Gloria's story has a happier ending; she has successfully completed her second year of high school at one of Boston's district high schools. Her mother, Janice, is now very happy. Janice holds both a bachelor's and a master's degree. Her people had helped found one of the well-known Black colleges in the south. But during Gloria's first year in high school, Janice had worried that she might have a fourteen-year-old high school dropout.

After spending her elementary and middle-school years in Catholic and independent schools, Gloria enrolled in one of Boston's small high schools. By March of Gloria's freshman year, Janice learned from a neighbor that her daughter had not been going to school. The neighbor called her to tell her that she had seen Gloria in the middle of the day. Janice called her daughter's school and found out that her daughter had missed so much school that she wouldn't be able to get promoted to the tenth grade unless she attended summer school. A colleague and I, who had had a long-term relationship with

Gloria, met several times with her and her mother. Gloria was adamant. She would try to finish the last several months of the school year, but she would quit school rather than go back to her small school.

Now, it is not unusual that a school and a child do not match. But what was unusual was that a student's mother had not been told that her daughter had not been coming to school.

It was late in the semester, so our attempts to help Gloria seek admission to a Catholic or independent school were unsuccessful, even though both of the schools we approached were sympathetic because Gloria had had such a solid academic record in elementary and middle school. Instead, Gloria enrolled in one of Boston's district high schools. In this school, Janice says that she is called even if her daughter is late for school. More importantly, her daughter is back on track academically, even though she doesn't have the same enthusiasm about school as she had in middle school. When asked in one of her independent-school interviews why she didn't like her small public school, Gloria replied, "The school was untamed."

***The Need to Ask More about Race and Culture***

I could describe my interaction with the other students I know, but you get the point. It was my experience with these students, combined with the inability of small schools in Cambridge

to eliminate the achievement gap, that has fueled my nagging worry that the small schools movement might, in the words of Asa Hilliard of Georgia State University, become the latest “one-trick pony” of the school reform movement. I worry that, in five years, we might see a “small schools minority achievement network” trying to think of ways to close the achievement gap.

When reading the data that are used to support the now unquestioned view that small schools work better for students, especially for disadvantaged students, I want more information. Here is what I want to know:

- To what extent and at what schools do students in general, and Black and Latino students in particular, enroll in and complete algebra in the eighth grade?
- To what extent and at what schools do Black and Latino students have access to math and science instruction at the high-school level such that they could matriculate and graduate with a college major that is dependent on a prior level of competency in math and science? (Stated simply, based on an assessment of the curriculum and the course enrollment patterns of Black

and Latino student at small schools, are these students prepared to pursue majors in engineering, computer science, biology, chemistry?)

- What majors do Black and Latino students who graduate from these small schools choose?
- Are the majors they choose based on stated interest, high school preparation, or perceived ability to graduate in the majors?
- Among the graduates of small schools, what is the distribution of college majors pursued and completed by the different racial and ethnic groups?
- What kinds of colleges do Black, Latino, Asian American, and white graduates of small schools have access to?
- How would one characterize the differences in curriculum between the schools where the majority of the students are Black and Latino and the schools where a significant percentage of the population is white and/or Asian American?

Maybe, as Evans Clinchy’s book *Creating New Schools* (2000) suggests, not all children need an academically challenging curriculum. But if Black students are disproportionately channeled into programs that are not academically challenging, small schools could become another tracking mechanism that limits opportunities for Black students. This is what happened at a number of schools that have broken into schools within schools, such as Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School.

Strikingly absent from the small schools literature is a discussion of race and culture. One can fairly conclude that the leadership of the small schools movement in Boston has, from its inception, been disproportionately white. The students enrolled in Boston’s small

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schools, like those in all the rest of Boston's public schools, are predominantly students of color. Leaders of the schools claim that they are democratic places. What does democracy mean in this context? Are schools democratic sites only for the children? What about for their parents, for their communities? Are the locations known and explicit where democracy around education issues is practiced? Most important, does democracy mean the sharing of power? Does it include, as the new South African constitution does, the right to maintain one's culture? Is it true, as I have heard African American parents and teachers say, that African Americans who become involved in the small schools movement must enter and participate on the terms of the white leaders?

As I read the writings of the public leaders of small schools and reports on their accomplishments, I am also struck by the absence of a richly textured conversation about how race and culture affect teaching and learning. It is as if the work of people like Sonia Nieto, Lisa Delpit, Michele Foster, and others were nonexistent. Indeed, the experiences of the children and their families just don't seem to enrich and critically inform the day-to-day work of teachers in these schools. If they do, we have not seen the emergence of a literature that points to how this happens.

If the experiences of being a member of a historically oppressed group – of being a person for whom there is a reigning ideology about one's intellectual competence – are not engaged, if the history and rich cultural formations of a people are not known and deeply and deliberately engaged, then the hope of these schools will be severely compromised. For all of the promise of small schools, can they really

help students of color not only reach their full potential intellectually but also emerge as leaders of their communities?

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*Reference*

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# In Search of Authentic Reform

Patricia A. Wasley

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*Although Americans have tried numerous education reforms over the past few decades, most have failed to narrow the gaps that separate more-privileged students from poorer students and students of color. Authentic reform would include authentic equity, authentic learning, and authentic relationships, which small schools would help engender.*

**E**arly in my education career, I taught in a large urban high school in Australia where one-third of the students were poor white kids. The others were all recent immigrants from several countries in Africa or Southeast Asia. They were all poor, too. The high school was tracked, and the only kids in the college-bound classes were the least poor of the white kids. Because I was a new teacher, I taught the kids in the middle and low tracks. The unspoken assumption was that the “better” kids should get the best, most experienced teachers.

Over several years, those of us teaching in the lower tracks developed a series of experiential activities for our students. We re-created battles on the original historical sites. We sailed for a week on one of the America’s Cup boats. We bicycled five hundred miles along the coast, tracking the placement of small towns and the development of the area. These kids were amazing – just amazing. Students accurately plotted our course on the boat using the algebra and geometry that they had rebelled against in the classroom. When I could hardly walk after the bicycle trip, a sympathetic young man hand-stitched a sheepskin seat cover for me. In the evening, while sitting around the campfire, they read, with feeling and

appreciation, the poetry of soldiers and settlers. They were so very bright, so engaging, and so often defeated inside the walls of the school.

Unfortunately, these kids were part of a system that believed they needed a different and less rigorous curriculum than the one the wealthier kids received. They didn’t always have educators who believed in them or who had the skills to teach them the basic, necessary skills in reading and math. And they sometimes didn’t have families who knew the system well enough to advocate for them. As a result, these kids frequently didn’t do well, and many dropped out. I agree with Michelle Fine (1991), who asserts that dropouts demonstrate their intelligence by refusing to stay in a school system that makes damaging assumptions about their capabilities. My experience in Australia mirrors much of what has happened for well over a hundred years in this country. Privileged kids are well served by our educational system; kids of color are not.

Since I began my education career, many approaches have been initiated to close the gap in achievement between kids of color – mainly Black, Latino, and Native American kids – and their higher-achieving counterparts. The list of efforts is long. During the 1960s, we

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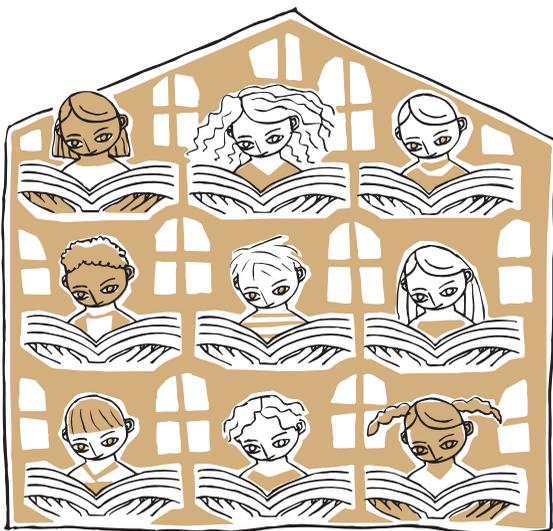
tried to create more relevant curricula, bused kids to integrate schools, and experimented with open classrooms. In the 1970s, we implemented instructional leadership; tried curriculum mapping; developed multicultural curricula; raised teacher expectations, particularly for girls; adopted student learning objectives; and applied lessons from “effective schools.” In the 1980s, we worked on high school reform, performance assessment, outcomes-based education, and site-based decision making. And, in the 1990s, we developed standards at the local/district, state, and federal levels in all the disciplines and began the work of building high-stakes accountability.

Of course, as Diane Ravitch (2000) points out, America has been engaged in some form of school reform for well over a century. The above list makes clear that the efforts in the last four decades have been intense and sustained; one constant theme of those efforts has been the search for new strategies that would reverse disaggregated data showing that poor students and children of color are doing less well than affluent and white children. Another constant theme of our recent

reforms has been our belief in the “silver bullet.” Educators, myself included, will remember that advocates for any one of the approaches claimed that discovering the exact “it,” the panacea, would drive everything else toward improved performance for all the lucky kids who encountered “it.”

We are currently experiencing the latest silver bullet: the belief that standards coupled with high-stakes assessments will do the trick and eliminate the achievement gap. Across the country, policy-makers and educators have invested enormous time and substantial resources in developing standards and assessments, claiming that these strategies will, once and for all, eliminate achievement gaps.

Given all the effort, and America’s “can-do” reputation, one might wonder why we haven’t managed to close the gap by now. The answer is not so hard to divine: there has never been universal agreement about equal opportunity for kids of color. If there were, we would not waste our time and resources on simplistic solutions. Our investment in standards is a case in point. Unfortunately, the creation of standards and tests is insufficient to the



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There are a lot of good reasons for small schools, but there is no reason to believe that reducing the size of high schools, *by itself*, will raise achievement and eliminate gaps.

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task. Teachers and the underprivileged children they teach need more than a high bar – one tool is simply insufficient to cause the broad policy changes needed to effect major improvements. Suggesting that setting standards will raise achievement is like suggesting (as some did decades ago) that if we just created an electric car, we would immediately reduce our dependence on fossil fuels (in which case we might not have fought the recent war in Iraq).

Some educators are now talking as though small schools are the latest silver bullet in education. There are a lot of good reasons for small schools, as I will discuss below, but there is no reason to believe that reducing the size of high schools, *by itself*, will raise achievement and eliminate gaps, any more than setting standards will accomplish those goals.

We have gained important information from all of our reform efforts over the past forty years, including standards and small schools, to help us understand what it will really take to improve education. Ensuring that Black, Latino, Native American, and poor students achieve in equal measure to their white and more advantaged counterparts is a complex problem, and it deserves a complex solution.

### ***Authenticity: A Framework for Reform***

The first step in developing such a complex solution is to place reforms such as the small schools movement in

a larger context by identifying a framework that might provide some realistic hope of serious success in reducing the achievement gap. I believe that “authenticity in reform” offers just such a framework. Authenticity is an antidote to the superficial, one-shot approaches we have attempted over the past forty years. And authenticity can be corroborated with evidence. Such evidence is essential to convince the many skeptics who legitimately question the results of the reforms.

The term *authentic* began to appear in the school reform literature during the 1980s, when Grant Wiggins (1989a, 1989b) wrote about “authentic assessment.” In contrast to traditional assessments, which are by and large *proxies* for the knowledge and skills we want students to demonstrate, an authentic assessment *itself*, in Wiggins’s terms, provided three things:

- a legitimate measure of the skills and knowledge it was designed to assess;
- real information for the student and interested adults about the student’s strengths and weaknesses (the performance of the assessment task itself provided concrete evidence of a student’s understanding or lack thereof);
- a genuine learning task that directly contributed to student learning (the doing of the assessment task itself furthered a student’s learning).

Wiggins’s work initiated a national focus on authentic assessment and inspired many districts to require high school senior projects or exhibitions as a

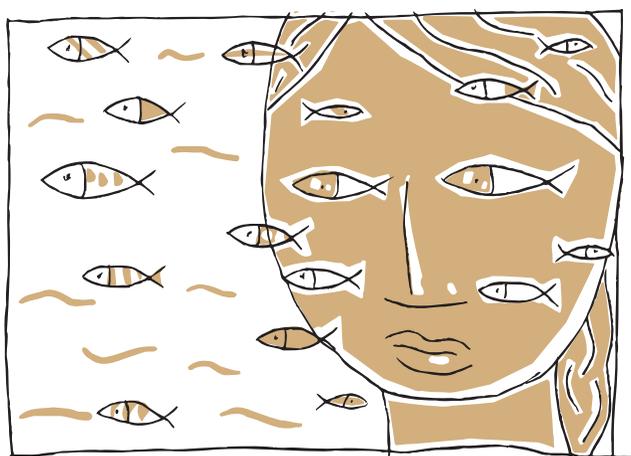
means by which to determine whether students could demonstrate real knowledge and skill. Authentic assessments, examined by teachers, parents, and community members, provided revealing information about individual student performance, which allowed concerned adults to make important decisions about a youngster's capabilities.

Picking up on the idea of authentic *assessment*, Fred Newmann and his colleagues at the Center on School Organization and Restructuring at the University of Wisconsin (Newmann 1992; Newmann, Bryk & Nagaoka 2001; Newmann et al. 2001) began writing about authentic *instruction*. They suggested that if school reform strategies are to improve children's learning, the work that students do each day needs to be challenging and rigorous. In their conception, authentic *instruction* has five major components: higher-order thinking, depth of knowledge, connectedness to the world beyond the classroom, substantive conversation, and social support for student achievement. Their research provided interesting and useful information that helped educators evaluate the quality of instruction they were using in their classrooms.

Given that education has tried and abandoned so many approaches, perhaps it is time to look toward solutions that have an "evidentiary warrant" – solutions having built-in criteria. Perhaps we should be looking for "authentic reform." As I see it, authentic reform has three dimensions: authentic equity, authentic learning, and authentic relationships. Each of these dimensions, in turn, has its own criteria.

### **Authentic Equity**

One of the clearest understandings to emerge from the standards movement is that authentic equity simply does not yet exist. The tests states are using have



brought into high relief the fact that the performance of poor children and children of color still lags behind that of affluent and white children.

But equity means more than equivalent performance. It also means equivalent educational *opportunities*; on that score, the U.S. education system remains highly inequitable. In order for a reform strategy to demonstrate authentic equity, it must provide evidence of the following:

- *Equitable teacher preparation and experience.* Low-performing schools often have the least experienced teachers, the least well-prepared teachers, and the greatest teacher turnover (Roza 2001). In order to ensure that children of color achieve high standards, they must have access to highly qualified, experienced teachers. Further, they need to work with a stable population of teachers.
- *Equitable professional support for teachers.* Poor-performing schools have fewer resources for providing teachers with context-embedded professional development, early-career mentoring, and ongoing subject-matter learning. These conditions make a significant difference in a teacher's ability to serve diverse learners well.



- *Equity of expectations.* The adults in poor-performing schools often do not believe that their students can and will achieve at high levels. And without adults who believe in their students and have deep convictions that their students can learn regardless of class, ethnicity, or race, children are purely and simply handicapped. Low-achieving schools must have teachers and administrators who are convinced that their students can and will learn and who are willing to provide evidence of their own ability to work successfully with disadvantaged students.
- *Equity of diversity.* Poor-performing schools often have more children of color but insufficient numbers of teachers from the same ethnic and racial backgrounds. The teaching force of the school should reflect the diversity of the children in the school. Children need to be in school with at least some adults who look like them and share their cultural experiences. Naturally, we wish children to become as comfortable with diversity as possible; however, they need an appropriate number of teachers who identify with their experiences, and who know their parents and their neighbors, in order to complete the circle of positive adult influence.
- *Equity of opportunity to learn.* Substantial research suggests that learning opportunities are not always structured equitably. For instance, in a school with tracking, a child placed in the lower track is more likely to experience a watered-down curriculum, repetitive tasks, and little engagement (McNeil 1988; Oakes 1985). Thus, her actual opportunity to learn is diminished. Schools must reverse this historical pattern and demonstrate

that the quality of work required of every student is equitably rigorous.

- *Equity of leadership.* Poor-performing schools frequently have the least-experienced principals or those with less substantial credentials. Without visionary principals who know how to establish challenging learning expectations for all students, and then know how to mobilize people and resources to make that happen, children will continue to be handicapped.
- *Equity of parental involvement.* Poor-performing schools often make parental involvement less of a priority. Common excuses are that parents are unavailable because of work, or that parents don't speak the same language, or that parents don't want to be involved because they haven't had an education themselves and are uncomfortable in the schools. The reality is that kids who are not performing well need both their teachers and their parents to help them get a good education. Deborah Meier, whose career has been spent creating high-achieving public schools in the poorest neighborhoods for children of color, reminds educators that parents are their students' most important advocates (Meier 1995). We need to ensure parental involvement regardless of the barriers. (Teachers in high-performing schools will attest how parents expect them to work around parents' schedules, their languages, and their educational levels.)
- *Equity of resources, from texts to computers to libraries and labs.* We know that world-class athletes from countries such as the U.S. or China receive significantly more support and resources than those from Eritrea – and we know it makes a difference. Can schools provide less

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and expect to get more? Yet, low-performing schools often have outdated and insufficient numbers of texts, old lab equipment, and under-equipped computer labs and libraries. We also know that schools that work with poor and minority children do not often get as much foundation support, nor are they as likely to have well-resourced business partners. Extra funds and influential partners (community, foundation, higher education) can contribute incredible resources to a school and its ability to educate kids well. Parents can contribute, too: in one wealthy suburb, parents are adding over \$100,000 in discretionary money to school coffers through auctions and fund-raisers.<sup>1</sup> How can poor families do that?

- *Equity of facilities.* Poor-performing schools too often are rundown, dilapidated, and unsafe. The worst conditions I have ever seen in public buildings have been in inner city schools: no doors on the bathroom stalls, broken windows, poorly lit hallways, filthy lunch rooms. Children need to feel safe and to

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<sup>1</sup> From a personal exchange with the principal of a K-5 school in a high-income community in the Bellevue School District in Washington State.

believe that the building in which they are educated is well cared for simply because *they* are in it. How can they learn in an environment that is continually depressing, rather than one that is cheerful and bright?

Although the national patterns of inequitable opportunities and performance are pervasive, there are examples of schools across the country that despite the odds have provided high-quality education for poor and minority children. These schools demonstrate important combinations of the factors listed above – strong leadership, shared high expectations on the part of the

National Research Council (Bransford, Brown & Cocking 1999) concludes, such learning is

- learner-centered, to take into account prior knowledge, young people's interests in the world around them, and their personal contexts;
- knowledge-centered, based on the content we want students to learn;
- context-centered, to provide information on the context from which the children come and the context in which the school resides;
- assessment-centered, to provide both formative and summative evaluations of students.

The work that students do on an everyday basis reveals the extent to which teachers structure learning activities to incorporate these characteristics. Student work also provides evidence of student performance and adds information on how the school is structured in order to support student learning.

Research some colleagues and I conducted during the early 1990s suggests ways to examine student work to determine whether learning is authentic. We followed 150 students through three years of high school. They described school as “difficult” or “hard,” because they were expected to do so much work; the sheer quantity was problematic. But the work they were asked to do was often routine and unchallenging. When they were asked to do legitimately challenging work, though, they described the work with both enthusiasm and seriousness.

Our experience in students' classes confirmed these accounts. We, too, often observed students doing “busy work,” rather than being asked to think seriously about contemporary problems or past discoveries. Most of the classes followed a routine: in science, do the vocabulary, read a chapter, do a lab with

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## We must provide authentic equity before we hold all children accountable to the same set of standards.

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faculty, and access to supplemental resources through statewide grants or foundation support. In such schools we see children flourishing, performing as well as or better than privileged white children. We must provide authentic equity before we hold all children accountable to the same set of standards.

### **Authentic Learning**

One of the problems with reform efforts of recent years stemmed from the fact that many of those efforts focused on teaching but not on learning. The assumption was that improved instruction would improve learning. While this may be true, the only way to know is by examining learning.

We know a lot about the characteristics of what we might call authentic learning. As a recent report from the

a predesigned outcome, take a test; in math, review the homework from the night before, learn a new dimension of the algorithm, begin the homework for the next day; in English, read a book, poem, or short story, have a discussion, write a paper. Because students very quickly figured out these routines, they developed coping habits that let them get away with minimal performance: they would split the math homework; read just the highlighted chapter headings in science; or write their papers just using notes from the teacher's lecture rather than by completing the reading assignment.

When fresh approaches and meaningful assignments appeared, the teenagers appeared enormously relieved and appreciative of the break from the tedium. More importantly, these refreshing activities stimulated them to learn about different intellectual approaches to solving societal and world problems. So when students examined primary-source documents to piece together a realistic view of times past in history, and when they collected data about tides and the relationship to the moon in science, and when they drafted, revised, and rewrote pieces for real audiences in English, their experiences became more authentic and, consequently, more instructive (Wasley, Hampel & Clark 1997).

One of the studies in Chicago (Newmann et al. 2001) used a particular framework to determine whether children were doing intellectually rigorous work, one that adheres to the findings of the National Research Council report. To be authentic, such work needed to apply basic knowledge and skills to solve new real-world problems; find adequate solutions to these problems by organizing, interpreting, synthesizing, and evaluating informa-





tion; ground solutions in solid information, concepts, and principles from the academic disciplines; and effectively communicate conclusions to others. For each criterion, researchers collected samples of daily lessons and challenging lessons and examples of student work. They then scored the work based on evidence of the kinds of skills students need to demonstrate in authentic work. They determined that the overall level of challenging work increased over the life of the study, except in written math assignments, where the overall level of challenge remained low.

The importance of the findings from this study is clear: to significantly improve students' capabilities, students need to be doing important, challenging work each day that they are in school. Through the examination of student work, we can obtain an authentic indication of whether that is happening.

### **Authentic Relationships**

The final component of authentic reform is authenticity of relationships. In schools, healthy relationships among adults and between the adults and students are critical to ensuring powerful learning. Pam Grossman, Sam Wineburg, and Stephen Woolworth (2000) claim, however, that the relationships among

adults in schools more often than not reflect "pseudo-communities" rather than authentic communities of learning. What they call a pseudo-community values individualism over communal identity; interactions are controlled and members often deny differences, suppress conflict, and engage in surface friendliness. Authentic communities, in contrast, assume communal responsibility for the growth of both the adults and the children. They develop new norms so that the whole community can take responsibility for group behaviors; they appreciate and acknowledge differences; they accept conflict as an expected feature of group life.

Authentic relationships are critical if the adults in the school are to continue to learn. Instead of valuing privacy, these relationships inculcate in their members a constant need for shared scrutiny and reflective practice. Authentic relationships allow both the adults and the children to engage more fruitfully in the examination of teaching, learning, assessment, and the structure of their schools. They also enable teachers and students to receive appropriate feedback, which is essential for learning and professional growth (Wasley 1994, 1991).

To illustrate the value of feedback to learning, consider how learning takes place in other realms. I have a niece who attended Parsons School of Design in New York City. She painted all week and on Friday had "studio," during which a visiting professional artist and other students would provide critical commentary on her week's work. While these studio sessions were painful at first, Megan learned to value them as tremendously growth-enhancing. She learned which students offered the best advice, and she learned to listen carefully to the visiting artist and to ask questions to be sure that she understood.

Her brother, a journalist, also values the feedback he receives every day from his editors. It is seldom delivered in a sensitive and caring manner, because journalists and their editors are constantly working under deadlines. Yet, my nephew, too, believes that as a result of these critiques, he has become stronger and stronger as a professional.

In recent years, the teaching profession has developed some tools and approaches to provide teachers with feedback; far too often, however, conditions in teaching are not designed to promote the kinds of relationships that compel teachers to examine their curriculum, instructional methods, and assessments and the structures they have built to support student learning (Allen 1995; Lewis & Tsuchida 1998).

### ***Authenticity and Small Schools***

Recent research has shown that small school size contributes to authentic relationships. The issue of school size has been debated for many years. Starting in the early twentieth century, policy-makers increased the size of American schools, partly to increase efficiency and partly to allow schools to offer a wider array of curricula for students, from college prep to vocational opportunities. However, we now know that there have been some clear unintended outcomes of these policies and that the relationships in large schools are anything but authentic.

Currently, many of the poorest-performing high schools in this country are large urban schools with high drop-out rates, low attendance rates, and low graduation rates. Most of the terrible school violence that has occurred in the U.S. has been in schools with over 1,000 students.

There has been a national movement over the past few years to inten-

tionally decrease the size of the nation's largest schools. The idea is to personalize learning experiences for young people and to create the authentic relationships that make such personalization possible. New York City has over 400 small schools and is creating more. Chicago created some 150 small schools in a four-year period. Philadelphia worked to break its lowest-performing schools into smaller units. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is currently providing grants to schools and districts across the country that are willing to invest in the creation of smaller schools.

There is good research to support this movement. For example, Arthur Powell (1996) found in a multiyear study of the country's best independent schools that school size is a key factor in their success. The best private schools are generally small so that all the adults can get to know all the children in a school. It is important to note that while public schools tend to be smaller at the elementary level and become larger at the secondary level, private schools are larger at the elementary level and smaller at the secondary level. Powell suggests that this is because adolescence is a more difficult time for youngsters and thus requires a lower adult-to-student ratio.

Other research shows that small schools are associated with improved outcomes in public schools. Mary Anne Raywid (1995) reports that on standardized basic-skills tests, disadvantaged students in small schools significantly outperformed students in large ones. Small schools appear to be more educationally equitable in closing the achievement gap that separates students by social class and racial and ethnic groups (Lee & Smith 1994; Lee, Smith & Croniger 1995). Elementary school

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It seems clear that small schools can provide students with more personalized attention, which in turn influences their ability to persevere and be successful.

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size affects both reading and math, even when taking into account demographic and teacher characteristics (Bryk et al. 1999). Small schools help to decrease the detrimental effects of poverty on student achievement and close the achievement gaps between less-affluent students and their more-privileged counterparts (Howley & Bickel 2000). Small schools are also reported to be safer places with fewer incidents of violence (Franklin & Crone 1992; Zane 1994).

Colleagues and I did a study (Wasley et al. 2000) of the small schools movement in Chicago. We first established a database to track the individual performance of the newly developing small schools and their students, compared with their counterparts in larger schools. The small schools in Chicago serve a population made up predominantly of children of color and children growing up in the poorest neighborhoods. We found that students' attachments to school, persistence in school, and performance are all stronger in the small schools, compared with the system at large; that various conditions affect student achievement, including a heightened sense of safety, greater variety in instructional approaches, and stronger accountability between teachers, students, and parents; and that teachers feel more committed to and more efficacious in small schools.

Given the scope of previous and continuing research on small schools, it seems clear that small schools can provide students with more personalized

attention, which in turn influences their ability to persevere and be successful. The research, taken as a whole, suggests that small schools pay more attention to establishing such authentic relationships inside of these schools.

Advocates of small schools acknowledge that the strategy, like many of those tried in the last forty years, is no silver bullet. Smallness, by itself, is no guarantee of excellence. There are many poorly performing small schools, in both cities and rural areas. But the goal is not smallness for its own sake. The goal is to create authentic relationships and to foster authentic learning and authentic equity. Only then will we have authentic reform and a real shot at eliminating achievement gaps.

Authentic reform is possible. Over the last twenty-five years, we have learned enough about what works and what doesn't. We have learned that authentic reform reflects the simultaneous achievement of authentic equity, learning, and relationships. All of these areas interact to either enhance or impede learning for students. Embedded in such reform are strategies and approaches such as creating small schools that will allow us to strengthen student accomplishment in ways that can be documented. I believe we need to concentrate on authenticity – on what it is and how it manifests itself with regard to issues of equity, learning, and relationships. If we can do this across school systems, we will succeed in coming that much closer to serving

all the kids in our public schools, most especially those who, historically, have been the least well served, just like the Australian kids I taught early in my career.

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# Spinning a Web of Relationships

Thomas Toch

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*By treating its students with respect and connecting them with committed adult advocates, a small urban high school in Rhode Island that serves predominantly youths of color fosters learning by creating a close community.*

**B**ianca Gray, a deputy policy director to Mayor Vincent Cianci Jr. of Providence, Rhode Island, wasn't a teacher. But she was among the most important people in Tawana Ruiz's high school life.

Tawana (not her real name) recently graduated from the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center – the Met for short – an alternative public high school in Providence serving mostly troubled students that has taken the radical step of organizing its instruction around internships that its students do with Providence-area professionals. As a junior, she spent two days a week at city hall, where Gray was her mentor.

Despite its name, the Met isn't a vocational school and doesn't train students for particular types of work. It requires students to do internships, instead, because the school believes that many students are more motivated and are more successful when they learn through "real world" experiences that they're excited about. No less importantly, the school believes that internships build strong bonds between students and adults – bonds that the school argues are a critical ingredient of successful secondary education.

Many students enter high school alienated, apathetic, and often angry.

They simply don't care about school. The Met's response has been to create an education environment where every student is well known to a range of adults during the four years of high school, where students sense that they are cared about, and where they believe their work is valued. Breaking down students' disaffection in this way, the Met believes, is the key to motivating them to learn. The school's motto is "One Student at a Time."

The Met is the culmination of the long and often controversial career of Dennis Littky, a high school principal and onetime New Hampshire state legislator who has been the subject of two books, a made-for-television movie, and coverage in the *New York Times* and nearly every other major American media outlet.

Littky and the school's cofounder, Elliot Washor, are strong advocates of the progressive principles of John Dewey, who wrote that students learn best when confronting challenges that arise in the course of pursuing personal interests. But they have gone further than other progressive educators. There are no classrooms at the school. There are no textbooks. There aren't even any teachers.

Instead, there are "advisors," who spend their days working with a group of fourteen students assigned to them

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as ninth-graders and who stay with those students through graduation four years later. They guide the students through a series of internships and independent projects and ensure that they complete the school's learning requirements. It's a highly personalized system.

It was Tawana's advisor, Kristin Hempel, a petite, twenty-six-year-old Swarthmore graduate with a flinty resolve to help her students achieve, who brought Tawana and Bianca Gray together. When I visited the Met she was nearing the end of her third year with Tawana, a tall, outgoing girl with brown eyes, blue nails, and a gold necklace engraved with her name.

### ***“Future Life Journey”***

The Met doesn't treat internships lightly. First, students draft “Future Life Journey Maps,” in which students discuss what they want their lives to look like in two, five, ten, and twenty-five years. Then they identify internships that would help them achieve their aims. The school sends students out to do oral histories to help them gain insights into the lives and work of people they admire. Met advisors take their students on field trips to such diverse places as air traffic control towers, organic farms, and the Providence courts to stir students' interests. And for the same purpose, the school invites a wide range of guest speakers to morning assemblies to talk about their work.

These steps helped Tawana settle on internships (or LTIs – Learning Through Internships – as the school

calls them) that would give the eighteen-year-old an opportunity to help urban teenagers like herself. Typical of the Met's racially diverse, mostly “high risk” students, she had fared poorly as a student before entering the Met, missing a third of her eighth-grade year to absenteeism.

Tawana decided she wanted to work in city government, in the hopes of finding a way to help Providence teens. She had worked as a counselor to junior high school students through a previous internship at the Rhode Island Children's Crusade. And in conversations with Hempel and Jill Olson, a former director of volunteers at two Providence-area hospitals who now manages the Met's 220-member mentor network, she hit on the idea of city government as another vehicle for working on behalf of teenagers.

Hempel started to cast around for city hall staffers who might mentor Tawana. Another Met advisor suggested Gray. Tawana sat in Gray's office and quizzed her about her work as the mayor's counselor on youth issues, drawing on the training the Met gives its students in conducting “informational interviews” and “organizational anthropologies” so that students get a clear sense of their mentors' work and thus are less likely to be disappointed once an internship starts. To the same end, Tawana spent a day “shadowing” Gray at work.

Tawana and Gray, a native of Italy, clicked, and Tawana began spending Tuesdays and Thursdays throughout the school year at city hall. At first she

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The Met's response has been to create an education environment where every student is well known to a range of adults during the four years of high school.

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spent time learning the rhythm of Gray's job as Mayor Cianci's education aide. She attended staff meetings and press conferences and talked with Cianci's speechwriters and other staffers. Since Met internships are organized around three types of student work – a product for the host organization, research to produce the product, and students' reflections about their research – Tawana then began to help Gray on a study of whether Providence should place adolescent health clinics in the city's schools or elsewhere in the community.

Tawana studied other cities' programs, conducted focus groups of Met students, and sought out the mayor's priorities in a personal interview.

Gray helped at nearly every turn, readying Tawana for her discussion with Cianci, introducing her to focus group experts, even having Spanish speakers in the mayor's office tutor her in Spanish. Tawana spent the other three days of the school week working with Hempel on reading and math. She also enrolled in a Spanish class at a

together to events at the Met and around the city, Tawana began to trust and confide in the mayoral aide. She would talk about the racism she faced in her daily life, about her absent father, and about how sad she was to read in the newspaper that the father of her friend's child was being sent to prison. To Tawana, Gray was an adult who cared. And that helped erode the apathy toward school that had contributed to her terrible pre-Met attendance record.

Yet the year Gray spent mentoring Tawana represents only one strand of a larger web of relationships that the Met spins around its students to keep them tightly connected to the school and pushing ahead academically.

The school's advisors play a key role in the process. As leaders of "Learning Teams" that the Met establishes for every student, they work with mentors and parents to draft individualized quarterly educational plans for students. Then they work to ensure that the plans get executed. A couple of years ago, 64 percent of Met parents told the Rhode Island Department of Education that they had spoken with their children's teachers "many times" during the school year, while only 6 percent of the parents of Rhode Island high schoolers as a whole reported that level of teacher contact.

### ***Sending a Message of Caring***

Hempel was friendly but firm with Tawana at city hall.

"Give me an update on your work," she requested of the teenager, as they sat side by side in Gray's office, Hempel taking notes on a keyboard attached to a Palm Pilot as Tawana narrated.

When Tawana responded that she hadn't been able to find much about Milwaukee's teen health clinics on the Internet, Hempel straightened in her

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Nearly every element of the Met's educational design seems to strengthen the school's message to students that they and the work they do are important.

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local community college and under Hempel's guidance wrote a student guide to dealing with relationships, sex, drugs, and other adolescent challenges.

Before long, the relationship that developed between Tawana and Gray extended beyond the substance of their work. As they spent time together in Gray's office, over lunch, and driving

chair. Gray urged Tawana to “use the telephone.” She also suggested that the Council on Mental Health “has a lot of data” that would be germane to Tawana’s project. And she urged the student to contact members of a mayoral Council on Drug Abuse.

“OK,” Hempel said, typing rapidly. “Here are the things you are going to do in the next couple of days: draft your focus group questions, call Milwaukee, and read *Kids Count*,” she said, helping Tawana prioritize her work.

Tawana pledged to do the work. But Hempel continued to cajole Tawana. After leaving Gray’s office we had lunch at a nearby deli. “Let’s follow up on today’s meeting with Bianca, at school, tomorrow, at 11:00,” Hempel suggested between banter about haircuts and a recent movie outing the two of them had with Tawana’s younger sister.

Hempel’s persistence is typical at the Met. And given that many of the school’s entering students lack self-discipline and a sense that school’s important, it’s frequently necessary. Nearly every element of the Met’s educational design seems to strengthen the school’s message to students that they and the work they do are important. Oral exams are a big part of the way the Met measures student performance, partly because they build students’ speaking skills and self-confidence, but also because they signal to students that the school community cares about what they have to say. It’s not uncommon to have as many as three dozen students and advisors in attendance at the “exhibitions” that every Met student delivers four times a year.

Toward the same end, every graduating senior delivers a valedictory address in the final week of school, the school has replaced report cards with detailed narratives of student progress, students



are given a role in drafting and enforcing the school’s discipline code, and advisors are expected to take trips with their students once or twice a year (shortly after I visited the school, Hempel and her advisees went camping together on the Rhode Island coast).

### ***Getting Involved in Students’ Lives***

In reaching out to students in these ways the Met has flouted the traditional prohibition in public education against teacher involvement in students’ personal lives. In a particularly striking example, Littky requires students to write regularly in journals about what they are learning, their internships, and other subjects. Advisors read the students’ work, both to improve students’ writing and to signal to them, again, that adults are interested in what they’re thinking. The Met’s advisors believe that it’s simply the school’s job to help students with problems that surface through journals or in other ways. “A lot of stuff gets in the way of learning,” says Littky. “We can’t pretend it doesn’t.”

Last year, for example, the school’s parent newsletter announced that “The families of two Met students are in crisis. If any family would consider taking in these students, please call Jill

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To Littky, the key is an atmosphere of conviviality, “where people are known and valued for who they are, not just for the work they do.”

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or Anita in the main office.” Within a week, two other Met households had volunteered to take in the needy students.

The size of the Met contributes to its strong sense of community. In sharp contrast to traditional public high schools of 1,000 students or more, schools where anonymity is often pervasive, the Met’s enrollment of only 200 is split between two locations. One’s on the fourth floor of a renovated downtown department store. The other’s in Providence’s gritty West End, next door to a Providence Fire Department training facility. It’s a single-story, square structure that has the look of a community center lacking athletic facilities (there are none at the Met). That’s what Littky had in mind. “I wanted it small enough so that it didn’t seem like a school,” he says.

The whole student body can assemble in the building’s common area, and does, every morning, for what’s called a Pick-Me-Up, an admixture of announcements, performances, and presentations. A local string quartet has performed at Pick-Me-Up. A Met parent has talked to students about her career as a corrections officer.

The day I was there an advisor delivered a pep talk. “You have to believe in yourselves,” she declared as she walked the room with a wireless microphone. Later, as Charlie Plant, the campus principal, was making announcements, a student walked into the building.

Plant called her up to where he was standing and, at his urging, the gathering sang “Happy Birthday” to the blushing sixteen-year-old sporting super baggy pants and lots of earrings.

Then Plant turned the mike over to a student who made a scheduled presentation to the fifty or so students and teachers present on her senior thesis, a project about racism in Providence.

“I want you to be strong and independent,” she told her audience. “I don’t want you to go through what I’ve been through,” she said, recounting a troubling racial incident that she had endured. Later, she answered questions from the assembled students.

The Met promotes public discourse, says Littky, because it builds speaking skills and self-confidence, but also because it engenders trust among the school’s students and connects them to the school community. If students fight or are suspended they must discuss their transgressions in a Pick-Me-Up presentation.

What was particularly striking about the Pick-Me-Up I attended was the casual but pervasive air of respect that students demonstrated toward one another. The Met, it seems, treats students in adultlike ways, and students respond with adultlike levels of maturity.

### ***Bonds among Teachers***

Littky and Washor also work hard to forge strong bonds between their teachers, believing that they are the foundation of the school’s powerful sense of community. Every Met teacher plays an active role in selecting new staff members. And Littky and Washor have extended the staff’s school year ten days beyond that of the school’s students, in order to hold staff retreats. They also pay teachers extra to attend two weeks of Met-run summer work-

shops. “What a school is depends more on how people treat each other than on anything else.” To Littky, the key is an atmosphere of conviviality, “where people are known and valued for who they are, not just for the work they do.”

The Met’s faculty is, as a result, tight-knit and highly loyal to the school’s students. In a nod to traditionalist teaching, Littky and Washor permit students to take courses at local colleges. When Tawana struggled in a community college anatomy class that she had worked into her schedule, Hempel had the student over to her house on Saturdays to study. The school’s staff takes students on tours of college campuses. And lest there’s any doubt about the school’s valuation of its students, the Met holds its graduations in a stately, ivy-covered building at nearby Brown University.

There are plenty of challenges to creating the degree of advocacy for students that’s present at the Met.

Even with an intern director and a large network of mentors, it’s often difficult to place students in productive internships. There have been instances where half the students in an advisory haven’t been placed in internships until the middle of the school year. In response, the school last year began having incoming ninth-graders go to “summer camp,” where they get a head start on launching their internships.

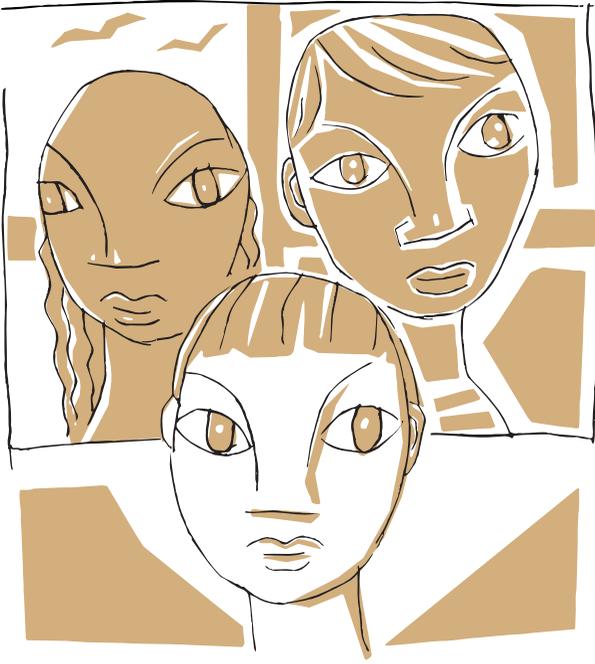
## **Struggles Remain**

The Met also struggles to teach traditional academic skills through its internships (Met students must take Rhode Island’s graduation tests in reading and math).

It doesn’t lack for a plan to help students acquire such skills. Each LTI, in theory, moves students closer to achieving the school’s “learning goals” in five areas: “communications” (where the learning goals range from studying a second language to writing clearly); “social reasoning” (resolving conflicts, participating in civic activities); “empirical reasoning” (testing hypotheses, interpreting data); “quantitative reasoning” (arithmetic, algebra, estimation, number sense); and “personal qualities” (respecting one’s self and others; managing time effectively). Met advisors weave tasks to achieve the learning goals into students’ quarterly learning contracts, end-of-year exhibitions, and graduation projects.

And the school is successful in using internships as the cornerstones of this work. Eliot Levine, the author of *One Kid at a Time*, a book about the Met, recounts how a largely unengaged student’s interest in hairstyles and a beauty parlor internship led to her reading the story of C. J. Walker, a wealthy African American entrepreneur and civil-rights activist who made her money in hair care products – a story





that prompted the student to enter an essay contest on the civil-rights movement and then, after she won the contest, to travel with her advisor to Little Rock, Arkansas, to explore the history of school desegregation. The student went on to do projects at the Met on diabetes and domestic violence. “I went from hair care to human repair,” she remarked in her “valedictorian” address.

But at times the enormous energy that the Met’s mentors and advisors expend on students isn’t rewarded – at least not by traditional academic measures. Despite Hempel’s and Gray’s efforts to motivate Tawana, she let her project on teen clinics languish, focusing instead on her twenty-hour-a-week job at McDonald’s and becoming preoccupied with buying the right clothes for a school prom. She made her year-end presentation, but it was, to Gray, perfunctory.

“The lack of sophistication of student work,” Littky acknowledges, “is a challenge.”

Some skills, moreover, including “empirical reasoning” (the scientific method) and particularly “quantitative reasoning” (math), are tough to teach through internships even if students are enthusiastic. “We haven’t been able to make math work for enough students,” says Littky. “We aren’t doing it very well.” The Met students who have excelled in mathematics have done so in traditional ways: I met a senior at the school named David Greenberg who was interning as a software developer and hardware technician at a local computer company while taking advanced math courses at Brown University.

### ***A Safe, Caring Culture***

Littky and his colleagues could never have created such an extraordinarily student-centered school if they hadn’t freed themselves from many traditional school-system structures.

The Met is a state-funded regional institution that is largely independent of the Providence public school system. The Rhode Island legislature has given Littky and Washor the authority to hire teachers who share the Met’s educational philosophy instead of having to take whoever happens to be at the top of the Providence schools’ seniority list. They have been able to create a school without coaches or band instructors or assistant principals, allowing the Met to afford the school’s fourteen-to-one student/advisor ratio. And they have been able to sidestep state course requirements that would have quashed the school’s internships and union work rules that would have blocked its longer school year for teachers.

And because the Met was a new school, Littky and Washor didn’t have

to win over a building full of traditional teachers to their one-kid-at-a-time philosophy.

The Met simply wouldn't work without teachers who are as dedicated as Hempel to the school's philosophy. Juggling the highly idiosyncratic studies of fourteen students day after day is demanding work, requiring Met advisors to learn new subjects quickly, be highly organized, and spend long hours with often trying students. During my visit Hempel ended a ten-hour stint at school by climbing into her car at 5:00 p.m. and driving forty-five minutes to discuss schoolwork with an advisee who had checked himself into a drug treatment center. Hempel says that the Met's "relentless intimacy," in particular, is "draining," the "best but hardest" part of working at the school. Like Hempel, the school's dozen or so other advisors tend to be young, bright, and idealistic.

But the relationships that the Met engenders between students and adults have created a school culture that stands in stark contrast to that of the nation's predominantly large, impersonal public high schools.

West Providence isn't a safe place at night. But the Met's campus has no fences and no bars on its windows – and no vandalism. Nearly 90 percent of Met parents report to Rhode Island education authorities that the school is "a safe place."

Students' strong sense of belonging at the Met has produced average daily student attendance rates of 93 percent, sharply higher than the 80 percent average rate at Providence's other public high schools. And of the 241 students enrolled at the Met during the school's first four years, only 8 percent dropped out. The city's other high schools lost an average of 27 percent of their

students during the same period. "They start taking themselves more seriously because they are taken seriously," says Washor of his students.

And if the Met doesn't routinely turn out students with test scores that match those of students in affluent suburban high schools, it nonetheless makes substantial academic strides with students who frequently enter the Met, as Littky puts it, "with lots of baggage." Every one of the ninety-three students in the school's first two graduating classes has been admitted to at least one postsecondary school, and collectively they have won \$800,000 in scholarships to places ranging from the Community College of Rhode Island to the University of Rhode Island and private institutions like Marlboro College in Vermont, where Tawana is now a freshman; Curry College; and, in two instances, Brown University. The truth is that many of them probably wouldn't have finished high school if they hadn't gone to the Met.

"My survival mantra," says Littky, "is 'Compared to what?'" Compared to where they are when they enter the school, he says, Met students "move a long way."

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The relationships that the Met engenders between students and adults have created a school culture that stands in stark contrast to that of large, impersonal public high schools.

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# Linking Communities and Effective Learning Environments: The Role of Local Education Funds

Wendy D. Puriefoy

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*Believing that small schools are more likely to possess the attributes of effective learning environments, local education funds in a number of communities have supported the development of small learning environments as a means of providing diverse opportunities for higher achievement and connecting schools and their communities.*

**T**here is growing evidence that students attending small schools stay in school longer, learn more, get higher grades, are more positive about school in general, and are more likely to graduate. Research also shows that smaller learning environments add to the social, human, and community dimension of schools in ways that deepen and accelerate academic improvement. Effective small schools – like all effective schools – raise teacher and parent expectations, support collaborative teaching, offer fair and consistent discipline, and create authentic community-based learning efforts.

But the key to small schools is not smallness. It is the presence of conditions that put high achievement in reach of children, no matter the size of the school. These conditions include high-quality teachers, a rigorous curriculum, high expectations, assessments that are diagnostic rather than punitive, environments that are physically and psychologically safe, and adequate resources. Intentional small schools are more likely than larger ones to possess these attributes and to create better environments for students, their families, and people in the community. For this reason, the Public Education Network and its local education fund

(LEF) members have created and supported effective small learning environments as a means to provide more and diverse opportunities to increase student achievement.

Since their creation in 1983, LEFs have played multiple roles in public school reform. As “critical friends,” LEFs both push and support school districts to make the fundamental changes in policy and practice needed to reduce the achievement gap between poor and minority students and their more affluent white peers. It should come as no surprise, then, that LEFs were among the first education advocates to create small schools that address some of the most pressing issues confronting poor urban schools – low teacher expectations; the quality and quantity of professional development opportunities; unacceptably high student-to-teacher ratios; weak relationships between the school and the community; and, perhaps most saliently for our organization, the absence of a knowledgeable and engaged public.

In urban school districts around the country, where resources and capacity are stretched to meet higher standards, the ongoing support and leadership provided by LEFs in planning and implementing small schools make

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is president of the Public  
Education Network.*

a critical difference. They help ensure that these schools serve the children – predominantly children of color – who attend them, their families, and their communities.

### ***LEFs and Small Schools***

LEFs support districts in developing small schools in three ways: providing support for academics by articulating instructional or curricular areas of need and providing professional development to address these needs; enhancing community engagement by more directly involving community members in school affairs; and bringing resources to bear on school improvement efforts by leveraging and brokering new resources and relationships.

### **Support for Academics**

LEFs have promoted and helped to articulate high standards for student and teacher performance and have provided sustained learning opportunities for teachers and administrators to help students meet these standards. These learning opportunities take several forms: LEFs have sponsored extended training workshops and summer institutes, provided support for attendance at national and local conferences, created independent teacher networks in various subject areas, and enabled follow-up support through

on-site coaching and mentoring. Through these efforts, LEFs have helped create strong professional communities in thousands of schools where teachers now share accountability for their own learning and have opportunities for increased communication and collaboration – attributes associated with increased instructional effectiveness and academic achievement.

A recent study by the American Institutes for Research and SRI International (2003) shows how critical the professional development can be for the development of small schools. The findings of the study suggest that many new small schools have been able to create more personalized, caring environments, but that they are nonetheless having difficulty introducing student-centered teaching practices. Moreover, schools are encountering many of the same obstacles to changing instruction that are present in larger traditional schools, such as a lack of time for joint planning and a lack of models and ready-to-use curricula for project-based learning. Clearly, if small schools are to be effective, they must integrate these attributes into their structures or they will be no more effective in addressing the learning needs of students than large schools have been. And, more important, when it comes to urban

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In urban school districts around the country, the support and leadership provided by LEFs in planning and implementing small schools help ensure that these schools serve the children who attend them, their families, and their communities.

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schools, they will be no more effective in addressing historical barriers to achievement such as race, poverty, and language.

A few examples illustrate the ways that LEFs have supported teacher learning in small schools.

In Houston, the Houston A+ Challenge helped Reagan High School adopt a three-stage school-improvement model to restructure teaching and learning, reorganize the roles and purposes of faculty and programs, and reexamine the values, beliefs, and behaviors of faculty and students.

The Boston Plan for Excellence in the Public Schools is working with the Boston school district to transform the city's large high schools into separate "schools within a school," creating opportunities for career exploration, mentor relationships with community leaders, and learning activities outside school walls. South Boston High School, for example, was broken up into three separate schools, each with its own principal and each with its own organizing, career-driven theme. Odyssey

High School introduced an experiential learning program based on in-depth, out-of-school study of urban and marine ecology. The Boston Plan for Excellence is also working to provide each school with an instructional coach so that teachers can implement better instructional techniques for each school's specific population. To make the coaches' work more effective, the schools are organized to give faculty time to address teaching and learning issues, thus building a collaborative culture focused on student learning needs.

In Baltimore, the Fund for Educational Excellence divided a local high school into three career-based academies. Through these small learning communities, new instructional strategies were implemented with a focus on creating a literacy-rich environment with more books for independent learning. All teachers, whether they teach English, math, or science, participate in balanced literacy training provided by the LEF. This program stresses peer learning and coaching through regular visits to other teachers'

classrooms and frequent peer-led instructional demonstrations.

With support from the local Public Education Fund, the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (the Met) in Providence, Rhode Island, develops individual learning plans for each student, using teams consisting of a student, an advisor, a parent, and a community mentor (see article on pages 24–31). Instead of traditional classes, the students work on projects and present “exhibitions” to demonstrate that they have achieved appropriate levels of understanding and ability. Members of the community are part of the evaluation process.

### **Community Engagement**

Believing that communities must be accountable for helping to improve public schools, LEFs work to ascertain public opinion and concern over the most pressing education challenges and then work to inform and engage the public through information campaigns, community assessments, and forums. In their work with districts to develop small schools, LEFs have helped members of the public to become directly involved in planning for small schools and in developing a long-term vision for what small schools should accomplish.

In launching its small schools initiative in New York City, which created

forty new schools serving 500 to 700 students each, New Visions for Public Schools brought together hundreds of school leaders, teachers, parents, and community members in weekly meetings to plan the transformation or creation of these new high schools. Bringing together the various players in the city’s huge school system and enabling them to unite proved to be crucial to the success of these schools.

Houston A+ brought together twenty-five teachers from a large, urban high school, along with other external partners, to plan a pilot program for creating small learning communities out of the “cafeteria-style” approach in use in the school at the time. The success of this effort prompted Houston A+ to engage the business community, school district leadership, members of the public, and other community leaders to develop a composite profile based on accomplished local graduates and to help schools see how their school transformation plans could help all students meet this exemplary profile.

In Boston, efforts by the Boston Plan for Excellence to solicit community input have been a major factor in creating a citywide plan to subdivide all general high schools into schools within schools or semi-autonomous small learning communities within schools. The Boston Plan brought

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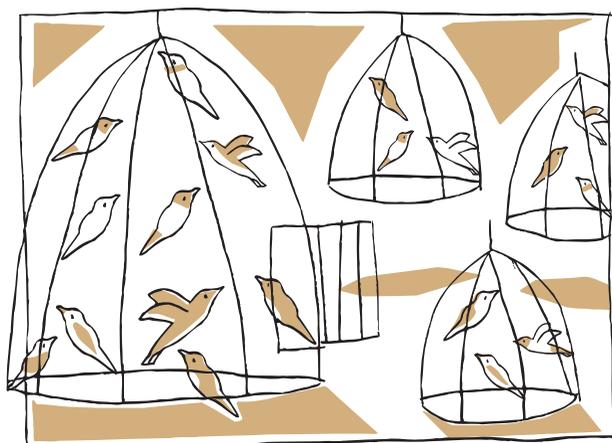
together parents, community members, administrators, teachers, and students over the course of one year. They determined that high schools in Boston faced two serious obstacles to success: teacher capacity to address low levels of literacy among students, and student alienation. With community input, the Boston Plan developed a plan for reforming high schools and improving instruction based on personalized student learning.

### **Resources and Relationships**

LEFs support school reform by creating varied partnerships with national reform organizations and bringing resources from these partnerships to bear in local communities. With their fiscal and operational independence from school districts and their role as community brokers, LEFs have become the conduits of choice for major national foundations seeking to fund educational reform efforts, including the creation of small schools. This external support, in turn, encourages district buy-in and commitment of district resources, as well as support from local organizations and funders.

Relationships cultivated by LEFs also help sustain reform efforts by bringing a wide array of organizations and individuals – teachers, parents, district and union leaders, members of local government, university professors and researchers, business groups, museums and arts institutions, and funders – to the same table. These individuals and groups are often represented on LEF boards of directors, in LEF-sponsored task forces and advisory groups, and in LEF-led collaborative work groups.

These relationships, and the trust and revenues they have generated, have boosted small schools initiatives in



several communities to the benefit of the children and community members in those locations. In Cincinnati, for example, the KnowledgeWorks Foundation is leading a statewide initiative to reconfigure forty-two large high schools in seventeen urban districts into autonomous smaller schools of approximately 100 students per grade level and no more than 400 per learning community. In addition to the foundation's own funds, KnowledgeWorks raised funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Ford Foundation, as well as from state and federal coffers. The initiative also requires a significant ongoing commitment from participating local districts and their community partners.

New Visions for Public Schools raised \$30 million from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Open Society Institute to fund its New Century High Schools Initiative to create new small high schools in New York City. New Visions manages this initiative in collaboration with the city department of education, the United Federation of Teachers, and the Council of Supervisors and Administrators.

The Philadelphia Education Fund (PEF) played a critical role in bringing the Talent Development model to Philadelphia city schools by partnering with Johns Hopkins University and Howard University, designers of this comprehensive school-change model based on self-contained, small career academies. Thus far, ten middle and six high schools in Philadelphia are implementing the Talent Development model with funds raised by PEF from the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Carnegie Corporation. Using federal funding, PEF continues to work with Johns Hopkins to develop additional components, such as technology-based

“extra help” reading and mathematics laboratories, for the Talent Development model.

Through these three strategies – academic support, public and community engagement, and resource and relationship development – LEFs' work provides powerful evidence of the impact of small schools and learning communities. The results achieved in New York, Boston, Houston, Philadelphia, and other LEF communities across the nation show that nonprofit, intermediary organizations such as LEFs have an important role to play, not just in planning small schools but

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Relationships cultivated by LEFs also help sustain reform efforts by bringing a wide array of organizations and individuals to the same table.

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in increasing their effectiveness and public support for this intervention. The direct professional support LEFs provide to teachers and principals makes it possible to implement a vastly enriched curriculum, and the support LEFs elicit from external partners makes it possible to expand school reform efforts programmatically and fiscally.

Thanks to their close relationships with school district leaders, LEFs are able to help ensure that district officials back the initiatives. By brokering the necessary relationships among the district administration, unions, principals, and teachers, LEFs help bring all stakeholders on board. And, by virtue of their independent status, LEFs can exert pressure on districts to persevere with small school reform despite

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Small schools establish a canvas on which an overall plan for a brighter future can be painted. [They] can be a powerful lever to improve underperforming schools and offer more opportunities to students lost in the current system.

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changes in school board membership or superintendencies.

All of these efforts bridge the divide between schools and communities that too often characterizes urban education and dooms attempts at reform. The public – particularly those communities that have historically not been served well by the education system – deserves schools that work. LEFs bring community resources to help districts achieve that goal.

### ***Next Steps***

While “small” may not be the complete answer to the problems of large urban schools – “small” will not work without high standards, high expectations for students, quality teaching, and other aspects of effective schools – small schools establish a canvas on which an overall plan for a brighter future can be painted. Ultimately, small schools can be a powerful lever to improve underperforming schools and offer more opportunities to students lost in the current system. What are some of the critical next steps that must take place to ensure that this promising reform strategy works as intended and continues to expand?

More research and dissemination efforts are clearly in order. Recent polling data from Public Agenda (Johnson, Duffett, Farkas & Collins 2002) show

that even though the students and the parents of students who attend small schools like small schools better, fewer than half of parents and teachers favor breaking up large schools, and 60 percent of students oppose it. These findings suggest that more needs to be done to explain the advantages of small schools and how they fit into a balanced reform strategy. Community-led efforts and organizations such as LEFs can help parents and others realize that the large schools they remember from childhood are not necessarily the best options for the children of today. LEF-sponsored community dialogues, town meetings, and media campaigns have proven to be effective tools in educating the public on this issue.

Other new and important questions about establishing small schools have emerged from the latest research. How does starting a new small school differ from converting an existing large school into small learning communities? What challenges and advantages do these distinct approaches present?

Dissemination of information on the impact of small schools to parents and voters creates an informed electorate. Pressure can be brought to bear on policy-makers and elected officials to adopt small schools as a mainstream, standards-driven model for addressing issues related to race, such as tracking,

special education referrals, and teacher expectations that limit the opportunities available to some students.

Finally, those who operate small schools, and those who advocate for them, must work together to support a common standard of school success and then demonstrate how small schools do (or do not) meet the standard, raise test scores, and improve student and faculty motivation. In this regard, LEFs and other community-based organizations must keep a watchful eye on the results of small school initiatives by documenting best practices.

In a similar vein, students, parents, teachers, and administrators in small schools must become reflective participants in this collective effort so that we can discern and describe the success we seek and the standards by which small schools can be held accountable.

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# Small Schools: From Promise to Practice

Warren Simmons

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*Small schools represent a promising reform for urban education. But they will only reach their potential if advocates heed lessons from previous experiments and avoid oversimplifications, recognize that districts matter and that race and ethnicity matter, and acknowledge that success requires political as well as technical support.*

**T**he small schools movement has risen to the upper reaches of an already ambitious reform agenda in many urban school districts. In addition to efforts focused on leadership, literacy, research-based school designs, extended learning opportunities, and supports for English-language learners, a growing number of urban districts have now added the development of small high schools or small learning communities within larger high schools to their crowded reform plates.

## ***Causes for Optimism***

The early experience with small schools suggests that the idea holds promise as a reform strategy in urban districts. A small but growing body of evidence indicates that small schools have higher student attendance and graduation rates, retain fewer students in grade, and have fewer disciplinary problems when compared with larger schools serving students from similar backgrounds. These findings offer compelling evidence that small schools do a better job of fostering student engagement and persistence than their larger counterparts (Wasley et al. 2000; Fruchter 1998).

However, while student engagement is a major precondition for student success, student achievement has

become the primary criterion for success of a specific strategy. This is particularly true now that the No Child Left Behind Act has made student performance on high-stakes, state-administered standardized tests the ultimate litmus test for schools and districts. And on this litmus test, small schools fare less well. At this point, the achievement advantage for small schools is somewhat modest and appears to be greatest at the elementary level rather than at the secondary level, where most of the interest in small schools is focused.

The relative modesty of the achievement gains is understandable; the standardized tests are aligned poorly with the curricular approaches pursued in many of these schools. In contrast, greater improvements are apparent when achievement is evaluated by other measures – student grade-point averages or some forms of assessment pioneered in small schools such as assessment based on projects and exhibitions (Fine & Somerville 1998). Moreover, the small but positive achievement gains made by students in small schools compared with their counterparts in traditional schools are a notable accomplishment, given the start-up status of many small schools. These schools manage to produce

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modest improvements in student achievement as they struggle to acquire and adapt new facilities, recruit and develop new faculty, and develop new curricular and instructional materials.

Nevertheless, the small magnitude of these gains threatens to erode support for small schools as a reform strategy, especially given the pressure for continued improvements in standardized-test scores under No Child Left Behind. Without a means of securing support and raising achievement levels, small schools are unlikely to realize their promise for large numbers of urban children.

Moreover, the history of education reform suggests that ideas tried out in a few schools seldom do well when adopted on a large scale. Urban education is littered with “best practices” whose promise faded when faced with implementation beyond limited pockets of willing and ready participants, let alone districtwide. The challenges of educating English-language learners, students with disabilities, and students performing two or more grade levels behind in reading and mathematics are daunting, even for so-called “best practices.” Tragically, these students represent a sizeable portion, if not the majority, of students attending urban schools, and they approach 50 percent of the students enrolled in a typical comprehensive urban high school. For small schools to realize their potential for large numbers of students in urban

districts, their sponsors and supporters must find a way to take success to scale.

Fortunately, there are places to look for guidance. Districts and their partner organizations can learn from previous efforts, such as Philadelphia’s bold attempt to transform all of its comprehensive high schools into small learning communities, beginning with the work of Michelle Fine and Janis Somerville in the early 1990s; the pioneering work to create public school choice in New York City’s Community District 4 under Anthony Alvarado; and the various efforts to create small schools in Boston, Chicago, the San Francisco Bay Area, and New York City under the umbrella of the Annenberg Challenge. Several important lessons can be gleaned from these initiatives.

### ***Lesson 1: Avoid Formulaic Oversimplifications***

The small schools movement must avoid conflating the form of the strategy, on the one hand, with the means for accomplishing it and the ends the strategy should obtain. Reforms that confuse forms with means and ends often fall prey to impoverished implementation (versus design) strategies, which foster the familiar lament in education reform: “We tried that and it didn’t work.”

Creating small schools sounds deceptively simple, but actually it involves a complex set of strategies that

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For small schools to realize their potential for large numbers of students in urban districts, their sponsors and supporters must find a way to take success to scale.

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requires changes in school governance, curriculum and assessment, school facilities, teacher selection and assignment, professional development, grade-level organization and promotion criteria, fiscal resource acquisition and allocation, parent and community engagement, student assignment and engagement, and information management and dissemination, among other areas. In most instances, each change at the school level requires a corresponding alteration in central office policies and practices or an exemption from these rules.

Oftentimes, districts and their partners veil the complexity involved in implementing small schools by attending to guiding principles focused more on the form of the strategy than on the means for achieving it and the ends it is intended to fulfill. For example, Philadelphia's early effort to transform its large high schools into clusters of small learning communities was guided by the following principles (Christman & Macpherson 1996, pp. 4–5):

- A focus on essential skills, habits of mind, and bodies of knowledge needed to become a constructive member of society.

- A personalized course of study that is rigorous and coherent.
- Curricula that are interdisciplinary, multicultural, and rich in applications to issues and problems students confront in society.
- Communities no larger than 400 students that allow teachers to know each other and their students well.
- Active learning on the part of adults and students, and nurturing and respectful centers of inquiry.
- Authentic, performance-based assessments that allow students to reveal their competence.
- School-based decisions, with teachers given the authority and responsibility to govern their own practices and control their budget.
- The voluntary commitment of students and adults to the community.
- The full range of racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds that are present in the broader district and community.
- Input into school policies and practices by parents and the broader community.

These principles outline the form small schools and learning communities should take; they also sketch some of the means for guiding adult behavior (local decision making, inquiry) and student behavior (active learning) toward a desired student outcome (rigorous learning). But they do not specify the outcomes the reform is intended to achieve.

Moreover, the list also contains principles that could work at cross-purposes. For instance, creating small learning communities composed of people committed to shared values, purposes, and themes could and often does undermine attempts to create diverse settings with regard to race, economic circumstances, ethnicity, and culture. How reformers weigh these

competing principles has important implications for how the reform plays out. In their initial phase, many reform initiatives draw on voluntary groups of teachers, administrators, and, to some extent, students – i.e., groups of highly motivated “true believers” – who often share the reform’s espoused values and beliefs and possess many of the prerequisite skills and knowledge. The design of the reform might be built around this cohort. But such a design will result in a weak scaffold for educators, students, parents, and communities with divergent values and beliefs, different skill and knowledge sets, and less motivation.

Many of the original school designs nurtured by New American Schools suffered from this predicament. To a large degree, these designs were developed in settings that lacked the kinds of challenges faced by urban schools – i.e., large proportions of inexperienced teachers, English-language learners, students with disabilities, students from diverse cultural backgrounds, and students with major gaps between their current and desired levels of achievement (Berends, Bodilly & Kirby 2002). But when urban schools were encouraged to adopt their designs through resources provided by federal legislation, districts and the design groups were forced to augment what were previously described as “comprehensive” models to address “missing” design elements and inadequate supports for the kinds of educators and students present in urban schools (Hatch 2000).

In sum, clear principles and evidence-based designs are necessary but not sufficient. Clear thought must be given to the nature of implementation in contexts that differ sharply with respect to the capacity, performance, and needs of adults and students, or,

as Jolley Bruce Christman and Pat Macpherson (1996, p. 86) put it:

[R]eforming education calls for learning how to manage the complex predicaments that arise from restructuring as policies, programs, and people sometimes work in concert, but often bump up against each other.

### ***Lesson 2: Districts Matter***

In developing clearer understandings and plans for both the design and implementation of small schools, reform support organizations (e.g., national and local school networks, local education funds), funders, and districts must pay more attention to the local infrastructure needed to support change across a community of schools. For public schools operating within a school district, this means examining how central office policies, structures, and practices must be altered to ensure the fidelity and ultimately the effectiveness of small schools.

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**Reform support organizations, funders, and districts must pay more attention to the local infrastructure needed to support change across a community of schools.**

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While this may seem obvious, the bulk of education reform strategies and research has ignored the role of districts, focusing instead on the individual school as the unit of change. Districts, if they are considered at all, are thought of only as agents of compliance with regulations and as vehicles for the dissemination of comprehensive school designs. In many cases, districts are considered only impediments to reform; indeed, many national and

local reform support organizations and networks choose to work around the district through agreements that exempt “their” schools from certain district policies and agreements. And, until the enactment of No Child Left Behind, districts even managed to escape the scrutiny of state accountability systems that measured school and student performance but not the performance of the district.

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## Left unresolved, tensions around race, ethnicity, and class seep into and distort discussions about factors central to the creation of small schools and their support by central offices and external partners.

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These trends are harmful. The work done by the Annenberg Institute’s School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts; by the Council of the Great City Schools (Snipes, Doolittle & Herlihy 2002); and by researchers affiliated with the evaluation of Annenberg Challenge projects (Annenberg Institute 2003) suggests that large-scale, equitable results require the support that a district can provide. Avoiding or ignoring districts results in a weak lever for change.

In addition, district policies and practices now create obstacles that make it more difficult for reformers to succeed, and attempting to bypass districts is far more costly than confronting these obstacles head on. For example, central office policies and contractual agreements that foster high rates of teacher and administrator mobility and that place inexperienced

teachers in classrooms with students who have the greatest needs are obvious threats to the creation of small schools and learning communities grounded in trust and mutual respect and whose staff share values and practices (Maclver & Balfanz 1999).

Similarly, districts that continue to allocate resources to schools based on average rather than actual costs for teacher salaries and in categories that restrict local decision making will undermine the ability of small schools and learning communities to adapt their human, material, and fiscal resources to fit their approach to teaching and learning.

As frustrating as these obstacles can be, advocates for small schools need to confront them if they expect the reform to succeed beyond a few favored or maverick schools. This means working with districts to modify and reinvent human resource and fiscal operations to enable schools to choose appropriate staffs and receive the resources they need.

At the same time, district planners must also address how professional development, information management, curriculum and assessment, research and evaluation, and categorical programs (bilingual/ESOL programs, special education, vocational programs) and special programs (advanced placement, magnet schools, exam schools, etc.) must be modified to exist alongside or within small schools and learning communities or be replaced by them. In short, districts must develop a plan for central office units, working in collaboration with external partners such as colleges and universities and reform support organizations, to support a portfolio of schools. To help districts in this endeavor, the Annenberg Institute’s School Communities that Work task force has outlined the elements of a

new “smart district” (School Communities that Work 2002 – available at <http://www.schoolcommunities.org/portfolio>), and work is under way in several communities to develop and implement incremental and radical plans of action.

### ***Lesson 3: Race and Ethnicity Matter***

Urban school reform occurs in school and community settings where racial and ethnic conflicts simmer beneath a surface layer of “acceptable discord” around jobs, contracts, seniority, leadership, and control over schools. The deferred, episodic, and unresolved nature of conversations about race, ethnicity, and other social and cultural forces undermines efforts to create communities of trust, common values, and respectful relations within schools, among schools, and between schools and the broader communities they serve (Payne & Kaba, forthcoming; Fine & Powell 2001). Left unresolved, tensions around race, ethnicity, and class seep into and distort discussions about teaching and learning, leadership, governance, professional development, student engagement, resource allocation, teacher selection, and other factors central to the creation of small schools and their support by central offices and external partners.

In the face of continuing conflicts concerning race, ethnicity, and class, the shift toward local decision making and the creation of small schools can easily be construed as a threat to some group’s notion of equity, rather than a remedy. Whatever the stated intentions of the founders of the small schools, communities of color might view with suspicion a reform started and led by whites who appear reluctant to place issues of race and ethnicity on the



table. These communities may fear that reforms that do not explicitly address issues of race and culture are doomed to replicate existing resource inequities and patterns of ability grouping and segregation by race, income, ethnicity, and neighborhood. To avoid this, schools need some guidance, supports, and interventions beyond the school or small learning community to ensure results and equity across a community of schools. Moreover, these actions must be informed by direct conversations about historical, current, and future challenges and opportunities presented by the racial, ethnic, and social-class dynamics at work in schools and their surrounding communities.

### ***Lesson 4: Sustained Progress Requires Political As Well As Technical Support***

Like the vast majority of the research, the bulk of the discussion about small schools has focused on the technical side of school reform. Yet, many reform efforts come undone, not because of technical flaws, but because of political ones. The political landscape in a district can foster change, or it can undermine it, through changes in leadership,

fiscal resources, contractual agreements, and governance. The politics of race, ethnicity, class, region, and other forces, in particular, have as much to do with the struggles of reform in urban areas as do the clarity and capacity of particular approaches.

As the small schools movement moves beyond the committed to the wary, it must cultivate a leadership (teachers, students, administrators, network directors) and an approach that can speak directly to the concerns of historically disadvantaged groups (the poor, African Americans, Latinos) and of privileged ones as well (affluent parents, political elites, business leaders, etc.). In essence, the configuration of policies and practices in urban school districts is the result of agreements and compromises made over the course of decades in response to demands from various constituencies. Altering one part of this web sends signals throughout that can activate opposition and support from unforeseen quarters of the community.

One example shows the strong effect of politics on school policies. Under David Hornbeck's leadership, the School District of Philadelphia sought to reconstitute three high schools with a very long and public

track record of failure. To the district's surprise, the proposal sparked heated opposition from the local community, including alumni, students in successful programs, local religious leaders, and community leaders, who saw the change as a threat to the ability of these schools to serve as a source of social and political capital for their neighborhoods. Similar racially and ethnically tinged conflicts over school reform erupted in Baltimore, Atlanta, and other urban environments (Stone et al. 2001; Orr 1999).

Viewed through a lens colored by racial, ethnic, and class struggle, dividing large schools into small autonomous schools or learning communities could fragment and thereby weaken the voice of minorities and the disadvantaged, particularly if schools attended by the affluent and well connected remain unchanged. To address these concerns, the leadership of the small schools movement must do a better job of engaging poor communities and communities of color as active participants in the reform rather than groups in need of conversion.

There are good examples of how this process can work, as long as all the participants are willing to engage in self-reflection and accommodation.

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The leadership of the small schools movement must do a better job of engaging poor communities and communities of color as active participants in the reform rather than groups in need of conversion.

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The work of the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools, for example, exemplifies how a reform effort grounded in the tenets of John Dewey, Ted Sizer, and other white progressives can resonate with communities of color when they are engaged as partners and when their values and beliefs are reflected in the work. Similar interactions are at work in the New Century High School design work in the Bronx and Brooklyn, in New York City. By creating small schools in partnership with community-based organizations, the movement has expanded and diversified its constituency as well as its approach to small schools. This expanded and engaged constituency will be an important voice in the forthcoming political skirmishes and battles that will inevitably occur as the expansion of small schools threatens existing norms, values, and agreements.

### ***Lesson 5: We Need More Knowledge about Community Engagement for School Reform***

For the most part, those involved in community engagement and those involved in school reform have had little to do with one another. As a result, there is a dearth of information and knowledge about the interface between the two and about what outcomes we can expect when these strategies are intertwined. This is beginning to change; the Schools for a New Society initiative, launched by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, integrates community engagement in its education reform design. But the evaluations of this and similar initiatives will do more to advance our knowledge about outcomes than the means by which they were accomplished. All too often, documenting the processes, tools, and intermediate outcomes involved in

linking engagement with reform design and implementation falls between the cracks that exist between the work of those doing the reform on a daily basis and the evaluators who stop by periodically and at an appropriate distance to examine its outcomes.

Organizations that blur the line between researchers and practitioners, such as the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University, the Consortium on Chicago School Research, Education Matters in Boston, and Research for Action in Philadelphia, are among the best sources of information about the nature and role of community engagement and its growing role in the small schools movement. However, far more work needs to be done and new partnerships and funding streams need to be created to support knowledge development in this arena.

### ***Including Urban Voices to Make School Reform Work***

In the last decade, governors, chief state school officers, business leaders, and federal education officials have coalesced around standards-based reform. They have done so with a view of the role of education as an instrument for strengthening the economy and families through workforce preparation. Education reform has suffered from the absence of the urban voice – a voice that would emphasize social justice alongside economic development, and one that would make equity an equal partner with excellence.

Small schools are not a panacea, or a pot of gold, and they will not prove effective for large numbers of students without a lot of hard work. But the powerful ideas underlying the small schools movement have the potential to galvanize and unify urban school

reform in a way that hasn't happened before. By heeding lessons from previous reform attempts, reformers, working in concert with community organizations, can redesign schools in ways that offer real opportunities for urban children. If the small schools movement meets its challenges, the urban voice could join the reform choir.

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