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Small Schools and the Issue of Scale

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Sure it's a good school, but it's a small school. Small schools are not a systemic reform! I need strategies that will improve educational conditions for all the kids in my district, and a lot of them are in big schools.

<div align="right">Urban District Administrator, 1998</div>

We write this essay to respond to the oft-heard claim that small schools are not a systemic reform strategy. We argue, instead, that there is now a broad professional and community consensus for small schools; major policy moves within urban, suburban, and rural communities are being advanced to create and maintain small schools, and substantial social science evidence documents the efficiency and equity potential of small schools. Indeed, small schools could be designed as a systemic reform strategy; that is, systems could go to scale by going small, throughout the district.

There is an odd set of alliances brewing these days *for* small schools. Left/Right political distinctions don't predict well. Progressive educators are joined by conservative and progressive communities eager to reconstitute "community schools," while civil-rights activists and parents struggle for schools that promote racial and linguistic pride as well as educational equity. And policy makers and practitioners are developing strategies to secure small charter schools. Furthermore, recent school violence has led analysts to point out that small schools are safer, that violent outbreaks are occurring in larger high schools where students are more anonymous. Whether we monitor the demands of these diverse reform groups or track the arguments of very differently situated social scientists, we hear echoes of the same analysis: Small schools appear to be cost- and educationally effective; achievement gaps by race and class are much narrower than in large schools (Bryk et.al., 1998). More kids stay in school and there are fewer absences; furthermore, course grades are higher, the rates of college-bound graduates rise, and there is less risk of violence (Fine, 1994; Franklin & Crone, 1992; Gottfredson, 1985; Haller, 1992; Oxley, 1990, 1995; Sares, 1992). Indeed, across the nation's major urban areas, it is within small schools that poor, working-class and middle-class youth engage in educational opportunities that are at once *authentic*, in Fred Newmann's use of the term, and *dedicated to social justice*, in

Maxine Greene's sense of the term. These schools—when they are adequately supported and sufficiently autonomous—typically embody the best that school reformers advocate, and disproportionately produce bright, critical, engaged students and citizens, as Carter Woodson and, more recently, Deborah Meier have noted. We understand that there are terrible small schools, just as there are terrible large schools, and nothing in our argument should be read to defend bad education. On the contrary, we would advocate that small schools be developed as a systemic reform strategy within a rich, meaningful, and deeply enforced accountability system. Schools that aren't educating and schools that aren't equitable—small or large—should be monitored and, if they don't improve, eventually closed. *But it is also true that many of the schools that beat the odds for poor and working-class children, that change the odds, are small. Small is a necessary—not sufficient, but necessary—condition for rich educational opportunities for all to flourish.*

Social scientists have documented the educational achievement and "productivity" of small schools (Fine, 1995; Fine & Somerville, 1998), the heightened safety factor (Gladden, 1998; Zane, 1995), the fiscal efficiency (when one divides costs by graduates; see Fruchter et al., 1998), and the equity power of small schools to reduce the gaps that proliferate between social classes and racial/ethnic groups (Bryk et al., 1998). And yet, small schools around the country are often charged with the same attacks: boutique-like, too precious, can't be replicated, a bunch of prima donnas, charisma driven, and so on.

With substantial evidence suggesting that small schools, compared to urban districts overall, meet and exceed these four standards—academic productivity, fiscal efficiency, safety, and racial/class equity—we ask: Can small schools become a solution for large urban systems? That is, can we take them to scale? And if so, why has no district moved toward small schools as a systemic reform?

THE SMALL-SCHOOLS MOVEMENT

The advantages of small schools have become apparent over time as a number of urban systems have begun to create small-school options. First, it is important to note that private and parochial schools have always been smaller than public schools (especially high schools). Elite private schools have always known they had to be small in size in order to know and respond to students' lives, strengths,

needs, and yearnings. Parents from privileged circumstances have long demanded small schools and small class size as a necessary condition to assure that their children become "smart" (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Powell, 1996). Interestingly enough, the small-schools movement in public schools represents an important new trend. Because these new schools are currently geared toward supporting economically disadvantaged youth in inner cities, there is growing hope that small school size will constitute a real effort to equalize opportunity for all children. Given that small schools have long been the purview of the privileged, we'd like to briefly summarize the growing trend to create small schools within the public system in three cities in recent years.

New York

During the 1970s, in an effort to retain threatened schools and increase student population, teachers in New York City's District 4 aimed to create schools that might better engage children's interests (Fliegel, 1993). District Superintendent Tony Alvarado encouraged these teachers by supporting the formation of schools around a particular theme or focus. The central objective was to retain middle-class parents and to halt flight to the suburbs; if parents from around the city could pick the kind of school their child might attend, and if their kids were powerfully engaged in these schools, more might remain in the inner city.

A well-known example is Deborah Meier's Central Park East schools. She started by developing a single K-6 elementary school that stressed collegiality among adults and a rigorous, caring atmosphere. Teachers focused on developing interesting curricula for children and adults, and stressed getting to know families well. They wanted to build continuity between family and school, continuity from one classroom to another, and continuity from one grade level to another. Based on the success of the first school, two more elementary schools were formed by colleagues in association with it. As students moved through the elementary school, parents asked for a middle school and a high school so that their children could continue their progress. Again, a group of teachers joined Meier to form Central Park East Secondary School. This high school has had an extraordinarily high record of keeping children in school, a high graduation rate, and a very high college acceptance rate. In addition, these schools

have been unscathed by violence, a sobering but critical statistic for black inner-city youth—all of its graduates are still alive. Meier claims, "Schools must be so small that governance does not become the topic of discussion, but issues of education do, so the faculty as a whole becomes the decision-making body on questions of teaching and learning (Meier, 1995).

Although other Manhattan districts began to copy District 4's teacher-created schools, other boroughs did not follow until their own higher performing junior high school students began to desert their home districts in favor of some of the new alternative schools. In an effort to extend the success of the alternative schools throughout the NYC school system, a district superintendency was formed for alternative high schools, the majority of which were small. Many of these were designed to work with students who had been unsuccessful in larger, more traditionally organized schools but, again, many were formed by teachers who wished to create better educational opportunities for students who were not being adequately served by existing superintendencies.

To support the work of small alternative schools, beginning in 1989, a number of independent organizations began emerging to provide support for new small schools, including New Visions for Public Education, the Manhattan Institute, and the Center for Collaborative Education. In 1998, the Board of Education formed an office of small schools and charter schools to further support the development of these smaller schools. Currently, New York has approximately 400 small schools, 170 started since 1993. The development of small schools has successfully spanned four chancellors. In addition, recent charter legislation in New York is fostering the development of another set of 12 small schools—a number that could grow substantially.

Philadelphia

In 1988, the Philadelphia School District, in partnership with the Pew Charitable Trusts, was the first school district to explicitly identify small schools as a strategy for urban high school renewal. Teacher-led teams, as part of the Philadelphia Schools Collaborative, designed a multiple-year effort to divide large, comprehensive high schools largely serving poor and working-class African-American and Latino students into smaller schools then called "charters."[1] Teacher-driven,

relatively untracked, and semi-autonomous within large buildings, these charters were created from within existing high schools, by teachers for students already attending comprehensive high schools. Over the course of almost five years, more than 100 charters were developed. Studied longitudinally over time, with both quantitative and qualitative indicators, these small schools produced improved student achievement and retention, as well as heightened faculty expectations and parental involvement (Clark, 1995; McMullan, Sipe, & Wolf, 1995). Many teachers working in charters decided not to take early retirement, and many more began to demand that all of their students deserved the right to advanced levels of math, science, and foreign language—previously (almost) unheard of in these neighborhood high schools for poor and working-class youth.

As the momentum for small schools spread through Philadelphia in the early 1990s, it became clear that important policy changes would have to take place if charters were to reach their full academic and equity potential as small schools coexisting in a building. In the typical high school building, impolitic questions emerged about whether or not department heads, traditional guidance counselors, deans, disciplinarians, special education departments, principals, and vice principals should be maintained as historically constituted. Teachers would whisper, "Do we really need all these keyboarding teachers when we don't have enough math, science, or foreign-language faculty?" Parents raised the same questions. The small schools were designed to integrate students labeled in need of special education, and wanted all resources to be dedicated to classroom instruction, not adult bodies outside of classrooms. Furthermore, charter teachers began to raise questions about designing their own professional development, hiring their own staff, and needing budgetary autonomy in exchange for accountability. Parents began to challenge the levels of academic rigor their children were not yet receiving.

It is sobering to realize, in retrospect, that despite the powerful data on more than 100 small schools, which demonstrated that small schools/charters had an impact on improved student outcomes and reduced the gap between high and low achievers, both the district and the union resisted the policy implications of small schools as a systemic reform. Both were willing to tolerate small schools as long as they were "alternative," a "pilot," an add-on, or just a minor segment of the

high school structure. But once these teachers, parents, and students started to recognize the power of small size, to challenge the existing bureaucratic structures of large schools and of centralized districts, to demand that they determine how resources be spent (in classrooms, not for disciplinarians!), and to insist that autonomy be exchanged for accountability, resistance within the bureaucracy rose.

The district insisted on centralized control and the union refused to make any concessions vis-à-vis hiring or department-head status—an important issue, since most of the schools were being run by teacher leaders whose roles were confused with the more traditional role of department head. In one school, educators in the charters made an offer: "We have five charters in this building. If the entire building has a budget of approximately $10,000,000, give us each $2,000,000 and we will let you know who, beyond the classroom teachers, we would choose to hire back." Small-school educators were willing, as they were in Chicago and New York, to exchange accountability for autonomy: "Give us the freedom and the resources and hold us accountable for improved student outcomes and equitable outcomes by race and class." Given that there were more than 100 of these small schools, a critical mass, they raised serious and troubling questions about the traditional structures and practices of urban high schools (Fine, 1991). Charters shared a building principal and created a new leadership role for teachers as charter directors or coordinators. As in New York, and more recently in Chicago, the Philadelphia small-schools movement produced an important anomaly: high academic gains by students in the lowest tier of academic achievement and strong demands by faculty for small-school autonomy.

Chicago

The trend toward shifting control of the schools—from a bureaucracy perceived to be bloated and geared toward the status quo to local communities—found voice in the 1986 Education Summit called by Harold Washington, the city's first African-American mayor. A second summit, following the 17-day strike by the Chicago Teachers' Union, brought in parents as major players. A coalition was formed that included community organizations, business leaders, and advocacy groups, and ultimately (following Washington's death) focused its demands for reform on the state legislature. Local control of schools was the watchword. The

legislature responded by enacting the Chicago School Reform Act, which became law in 1988. Drawing on the thinking of the national school-based management movement, the law called for Local School Councils (LSCs) to be formed at every school. The six parents, two community members, two teachers, and the principal had unprecedented power: The LSC had final say over the four-year, performance-based contract of the principal, as well as the annual School Improvement Plan, including the budget. Large shares of dollars previously disbursed by the central office were now part of each school's discretionary funds. With decentralization, businesses, universities, and foundations had greater access to schools and were more willing to commit resources to them.

This was the context in which the Small Schools Workshop, housed at the University of Illinois-Chicago, was formed. They began by bringing teachers together to "imagine" small schools. They organized trips to New York to visit the schools there. They also approached Alexander Polikoff, director of Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPI) who, because of his legal work challenging the racist patterns of public housing in Chicago, was looking at schools as anchors of neighborhood development. In 1991, BPI sponsored a visit to New York to see East Harlem's small schools. Chicago educators met with principals, teachers, foundations, and business leaders, generating interest in starting small schools in Chicago.

A small-schools conference hosted by the Quest Center (the professional-development arm of the Chicago Teachers' Union), the Small Schools Workshop, and BPI brought more educators, particularly principals, into the movement. The early '90s saw the formation of several "schools-within-schools," reflecting a range of instructional approaches such as interdisciplinary and Afro-centered curricula.

BPI was joined on the advocacy front by Leadership for Quality Education (LQE), a business-backed school improvement group. The Small Schools Workshop, BPI, LQE, the Quest Center, and several other organizations came together as the Small Schools Coalition to further mobilize support for the movement.

The "second wave of reform"—the 1995 Chicago School Reform Act—lodged responsibility for Chicago schools' performance in the office of the mayor. The idea of accountability to local communities shifted to an accountability based

on "standards" and centralized management. Mayor Richard M. Daley appointed a five-member School Reform Board of Trustees, with a management team led by a CEO, his former budget chief, Paul Vallas.

Early in its tenure, the new board, responding to the efforts of the small-schools advocates, issued a resolution stating its commitment to "assisting in the formation and strengthening" of small schools in Chicago. This was followed by a Request for Proposals. Since then, both Vallas and board president Gary Chico, as well as the mayor, have publicly endorsed small-school development: "We are proud of what our small schools are accomplishing and hope to see more large schools embrace the small-school philosophy," states Vallas, while Chico says, "We know that small schools are good for our students, our teachers, and our families. They are safe places where teachers can be creative, and they help on all the core issues important to us: They improve attendance, discipline, and help raise student achievement." And, according to Mayor Daley, "Smaller is better. The board needs to look at smaller high schools and schools within schools." [1]

The resolution described small schools as "characterized by (1) a small number of students, usually no more than 100-350 in elementary schools and 500 in secondary schools; (2) a cohesive, self-selected faculty supported by like-minded parents; (3) substantial autonomy as to curriculum, budget, organization, personnel, and other matters; (4) a coherent curricular or pedagogical focus that provides a continuous educational experience across a range of grades; and (5) an inclusive admissions policy that gives weight to student and parent commitment to the school mission."

Twenty-four proposals were approved, with planning and start-up grants awarded to new schools. Small schools in existence before the resolution continued to grow, and others have developed since. The board's Office of Special Initiatives is charged with providing support to small schools, often in the form of professional development services providing guidance through the bureaucracy, and collecting data on their structure and performance. The board now lists more than 175 small schools on its roster.

The small schools have taken many shapes. Some are freestanding, with their own space, budget, and principal. A few share a building and building principal

with other substantially autonomous schools in a "multiplex" arrangement. Still others have their own space and budget, but share a principal with schools at different sites. The majority, however, are "schools-within-schools," which have their own mission and curricular focus but remain subject to the budget and overall leadership of a building principal and LSC. In some cases, entire buildings have been reconfigured into small schools; in others, one or a few small schools coexist with conventional classrooms in the rest of the building.

Some of the small schools have taken advantage of the 1996 Illinois charter legislation to create new public schools free of all central office mandates, other than accountability in finance and in performance as measured by standardized test scores. As of 1999-2000, there are 17 charter schools in operation for the school year—twelve in Chicago, three downstate, and two in the suburban areas.

Across the country, a number of other cities are engaged in small-schools projects. In addition, like Illinois and New York, many states have charter legislation either on the books or in progress.

Those of us involved in these various efforts believe that reducing the size of the school creates the conditions necessary for discourse and action among the adults to be more focused, consistent, and coordinated on behalf of students. We have consistently found that smaller size makes it possible for the adults to know children well, to recognize students' strengths and needs, and to be willing to learn what they need to do as educators to bring student work up to rigorous standards. We hear very little student or parent blame in small schools. This is fundamentally distinct from our studies of large schools, in which students' strengths and needs are structurally inaccessible to faculty, who are beleaguered by student loads far in excess of what is humanly possible, much less authentically possible, and in which student and parent blame often run rampant (Fine, 1991; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985; Sizer, 1984). Further, more small-school faculty are able to make important changes in school structures, instructional practices, and assessment practices that serve students better (Wasley, Hampel, & Clark, 1997). As the number of small-school efforts increases and as the national search for more powerful, safe, and rigorous schools escalates, it would seem logical that small schools might provide a whole-system reform strategy.

What, then, prevents us as a nation from thinking about small schools as a scalable issue?

PAST ATTEMPTS TO THINK ABOUT SCALE

In recent years, there has been much discussion about how to "scale up." Educators and policy makers use the term to think about how they might transform whole systems and sustain more successful educational practices. Going to scale means that a positive educational practice can be put in place in every school and every classroom. Two theories have defined the public's thinking about scale over time.

Theory 1: Bigger is better. The theory that recommended larger, regional schools as opposed to smaller, local schools was a first step in developing the public belief that larger schools would serve students better. From early in the 20th century through the 1960s, school districts across the country consolidated their resources to build larger schools based on the theory that larger schools could provide broader choices in the curriculum, offering such subjects as foreign-language instruction, advanced physics, and calculus at the high school level and more highly tracked systems at the elementary level. Bigger schools presumably offered better competition, helped students encounter a variety of students and teachers, and enabled teachers to teach a more homogenous group of students. Furthermore, large plants, located to serve multiple communities, were developed to include full sports facilities, libraries, and so forth.[2]

In actuality, however, such schools generated a set of unintended consequences that we are just now beginning to understand. Large schools enabled numbers of students to pass through or drop out anonymously. In large schools, students and faculty, as well as parents, report high levels of alienation and bureaucratic policies (Gladden, 1998). Violence and drug use plague higher numbers of students in large schools than in small schools. Moreover, the impersonal and alienating environment of larger schools seems both to encourage high levels of school disorder and to make it difficult to effectively combat existing problems (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Gottfredson, 1985; Pittman & Houghwout, 1987; Zane, 1994). To solve the problems produced by the weak social relationships and the sense of alienation found in larger schools, many are reliant on security guards, metal detectors, and rules to produce safety—trust, knowledge of the

students' behavior, and a sense of community. Recent research on crime convincingly demonstrates the need for strong interpersonal relationships and a sense of community—two of the conditions most absent in large schools to reduce levels of neighborhood crime regardless of the level of poverty found in the neighborhood. Further, with respect to the wide range of choices available, Gladden (1998) documents that only a small percentage of students in large high schools actually partake of the advanced classes, while substantial numbers enroll in very low-level curriculum offerings. That is, tracking systems were developed so that savvy students (or savvy parents) were able to choose a rigorous college-prep curriculum, while far too often, less advantaged students suffered the least experienced and/or least intellectually rigorous teachers and the most uninspired curriculum.

Theory 2: Innovations and replicability. In the 1970s, concern about how to change schools led to a great deal of work focused on the implementation of innovations (Huberman & Miles, 1984). Then, as now, the concern was about how to generate more powerful educational outcomes, how to avoid the expense in both time and money of repeatedly reinventing the wheel, how to spread positive outcomes so that many more children could benefit. Consequently, researchers and practitioners worked to identify successful innovations and then implement them on a broader scale. In those days, thinking about implementation meant that one needed to be concerned about fidelity—how closely adopters adhered to the original model. Elaborate implementation plans were constructed. Mission, purpose, and classroom strategies were all made available to the adopting parties. In the most ambitious projects, teacher-proof materials were designed to eradicate differences among individual teachers.

Another dimension of the theory of innovation is the issue of replicability. Some forms of scientific inquiry require replicability as a measure of an experiment's value. If an experiment can be replicated—repeated by different scientists in different settings with the same results—it has greater promise of generalizeability; that is, of being effective in a variety of settings. Nationwide, many believed that this theory, if applied to schools, was promising. If what has been successful in one school—a new reading curriculum, say—could be replicated in all schools, despite different geographic locations and cultural backgrounds, students would

be better served. Equality of opportunity would be ensured and it would be easier for families that were relocating to move their children from one school to another.

Again, the unintended outcomes of this theory have become apparent from numerous implementation efforts. Replication of one innovation to a new site always encountered cultural and other contextual variations. Few thinking teachers do or should adopt innovations precisely as prescribed. Some make the materials more powerful by blending them with previously valued materials to suit their students more closely. Other teachers adopt the descriptive terminology only, making few changes in their own practices—more talk than action. Others adopt but transform new practices so that they more closely resemble those that teachers have used for many years. (Cohen, 1990; Popkewitz, Tabachnick, & Wehlage, 1982). And, as Seymour Sarason always reminds us, the power relations that constitute large schools were never altered in these reform efforts. Indeed, they were typically shored up. Teacher proofing is a way to dumb down faculty and encourage the flight of our most talented educators. Good schools require teachers who see themselves as intellectuals.

Influenced by these theories, many currently believe that "scaling up" means that policy makers and administrators should mandate that all schools implement the same innovations in the same way so that we are assured of both conformity and equity in our schools nationwide. We believe that, taken together, these theories have promoted a belief in standardization that has, in part, produced the widespread failures evidenced in urban schooling. And indeed, we believe that the lights of hope, the pockets of innovation and educational effectiveness, tend to come from a variety of small schools that have challenged the regulations in the name of educational quality and equity.

THE CHALLENGES OF GOING TO SCALE WITH SMALL SCHOOLS

Creating small schools in large urban systems is, unfortunately, exceedingly difficult. These systems are steeped in the traditions of bureaucracies that sustain them-selves through commitments to standardization, not innovation; central control, (not local-school decision-making; and Xerox models of replicability, not principled

commitments to the building of local-school community and distinctiveness. One might surmise that districts permit small schools to exist because they appeal to, recruit, or maintain an elite sector of students (note that many magnet schools are much smaller than neighborhood schools), or that district bureaucracies permit small schools to exist as long as they are unique, specialized, and boutique-like (though they are often criticized at the same time for being precious). However, as the Philadelphia story suggests, once a serious critical mass emerges, a threshold is approached, and the challenges arise regarding how resources are distributed and managed; who hires and fires faculty; curriculum frameworks and appropriate assessments; where instructional decisions are made; how special education, bilingualism, and community engagement, among others, are implemented. Then the resistance is palpable—and sometimes deadly.

It is almost as if the wonderful features of "small" are, writ large indeed, too disruptive for a system to manage. If a district operates through a focus on hierarchical control, management, and compliance, and not so much through a focus on instruction, equity, and creativity, then it makes sense that small schools would seem chaotic in an otherwise smoothly functioning (if perhaps ineffective) educational system.

The troubles with going to scale, of course, are those concomitant assumptions that usually get tied to "scale." In the process of going to scale, districts typically sweep in assumptions about the need for standardization, centralized control, and uniform accountability systems. Herein lies the problem.

Mandating one solution for all just doesn't work, because children are different, teachers are individually creative, and schools are located in such different cultural and economic circumstances. The current effort to implement higher standards nationwide has already demonstrated that we need to provide differential support in order for *all* children to meet higher standards. In urban contexts in which students come from disproportionately disadvantaged circumstances, raising the bar to the same level as high-performing suburban districts will not alone achieve higher standards. Without serious financial support, professional development, and radical reorganization, high standards alone are insufficient in equalizing opportunity (Wasley, Hampel, & Clark, 1997).

Furthermore, small schools are vulnerable to centralized personnel

decisions—educators are placed, sent, dropped, bumped, or mandated to work in a particular school. So much for distinctiveness and creation of community over time. People are not widgets, nor are they replaceable. There is no formula for building an emotional or an intellectual sense of community.

The standards movement is also heavily reliant on centralized assessment systems—having to teach to a test that distracts from interdisciplinary curriculum, that privileges the "right" answer over thoughtful questions, that suggests that "truth" in a standardized response is a more valuable measure than deep writing that allows students to explore multiple alternatives. It is no great secret that standardized test results are better *predicted* by class and race than they are *predictive* of performance knowledge or necessary skill—and yet as a nation we keep administering these same tests as if they were not predictable (by race and class) and as if they were predictive of actual skill and knowledge. Small schools—those that work hardest and most successfully at bringing all children to their academic potential—know that there are many ways to teach, and more ways to learn, and that it is necessary to have multiple forms of assessment to ascertain students' development of real skills and knowledge.

In other cities, there are non-negotiable, centralized policies about how bilingual education, special education, or Chapter 1 services will be delivered. School-based attempts to integrate, improvise, or innovate are deemed an "inappropriate use of federal dollars," and shut down. Sadly, our most profound learning is that once the number of small schools is up, so too—and reliably—is the resistance and the insistence on standardization and centralized policy.

What is most reliably replicable, unfortunately, is the familiar educational disaster—the poor-neighborhood, shopping-mall high school in which faculty, students, and staff are alienated; parent involvement is almost nil; and, though some students may get a fine education, most are learning that they will never amount to much of anything (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). Why is there such a fierce effort to replicate what hasn't been working for kids, especially for poor children of color, for a very long time?

REDEFINING ISSUES OF SCALE

Based on what we've learned from previous considerations of scale, we need to redefine the means to achieve full-scale change so that young people are better served, especially poor and working-class youth of color. As a contemporary solution, scaling up must be a generative, locally engaging, collaborative endeavor within a strong accountability framework. First, we need new underpinnings to foster our understanding of generativity as it relates to scale. Rather than relying on theories of fidelity and replicability, we might instead benefit from thinking about individual entrepreneurial spirit as the backbone of scaling up. For centuries, this nation has fostered a solid belief in an individual's capacity to solve intractable problems. Examples abound: transcontinental railroads, flight, automobiles, telephones, vaccines, electricity, microchips, computers, graphing calculators, the Internet. All of these inventions have improved the quality of American life, and all developed because of the ingenuity of a persistent individual or a small group of people. Perhaps we need to think of American ingenuity as the compelling force that might fuel generative, whole-scale solutions to our failing educational system. If we have accomplished such miracles in other fields with a dogged faith in the entrepreneurial spirit, why not in education? And fortunately, small-school examples exist, ready to inspire and contribute competitive impetus to thousands of other educators, students, and parents who are trapped in failing systems. It is clear that a number of policy makers, including two presidents and education secretaries, have believed this possible, because we've seen successive efforts to provide opportunities for small groups of educators to innovate in the New American Schools Design Initiative, in charter legislation, and in the current Obie-Porter Bill. While we love many small schools, we wouldn't want anyone to xerox the Parker Charter School at Harvard, or the Urban Academy in New York City, or Telpochcalli in Chicago. Educators don't want to "inherit" a model they can't shape. Communities don't want to "import" a design. *Instead we would argue that we should strive for generativity that includes locally engaging and collaborative effort with attention to equity and accountability rather than what we have now: replicability with no accountability and substantial inequity.*

Another theory that might undergird this new definition of scale explains that the participation of those affected is critical to the success of the effort, (Friere, 1995). Thus, going to scale by creating a whole system of small, personal, locally constructed small schools requires the necessary participation of teachers, children, their parents, and the local community. It encourages adults to utilize their prior experience and put their best intellectual effort forward to convey the best of what they know about teaching and learning. It is much more reasonable to believe that those in close proximity will be willing to fight for and to provide equitable opportunities for their children. Current small schools have demonstrated that teachers constitute an enormous reawakened force on behalf of their students. Harnessing such deep-seated teacher commitment provides no small source of energy to fuel significant improvement. In addition, parents newly involved in the small schools their children are attending have demonstrated their willingness to work on behalf of a school where they have a viable voice in the decision making. Thus, we must think of collaboration between parents, administrators, teachers, and community members as an essential component of an effort to generate small schools for an entire school system and draw on the theory of social action.

We need to rethink our ideas about scale in architectural terms, too. Rather than large regional plants requiring enormous and prohibitively expensive land (especially in urban contexts), small schools can be located in all kinds of settings, using space that currently exists and venturing into more unusual arrangements. One thing we can do is redesign big high schools into multiplexes. Multiplexes are large school buildings that have been restored to house a number of individual schools, each with its own focus and purpose. The Cregier Multiplex in Chicago and the Julia Richman complex in New York are both excellent examples. In the same building you can find small high schools, middle schools, elementary schools, child care for infants, a professional development center for faculty from across the city, and a center for imagination and the arts. Alternatively, freestanding small schools can be housed in office buildings, in community centers, and in salvaged and reconstituted warehouses, providing young people with greater proximity to the adults that they so desperately need. Smaller schools create safer places for young people to work with trusted adults. A similar movement is afoot

by those who are working for affordable housing for low-income families. Rather than creating huge housing projects that turn into breeding grounds for violence and despair, smaller spaces are being constructed and mingled with housing for middle- and upper-income families.

Small schools are characteristically and consciously distinctive, compelling, and coherent. Small, intimate, nested communities of adults and children set out to produce an intellectual context in which what is taught, who is taught, who is teaching, and how this is assessed are aligned, meaningful, and locally generated. This means that small schools need *control* over who teaches in them, what is taught, how resources are spent, and how learning is assessed. These conditions are set forth not as a dodge from accountability but, to the contrary, as the *necessary conditions* for accountability.

This is to say that *how* the basics of math, history, language arts, music, art, and science are taught needs to be determined by each school community. Likewise, *how* learning will be assessed can be determined by these schools and/ or networks of like-minded schools—subject to external review, peer reflection, and even spot "validity" checks. Just as the world economy floats on many different monetary systems and we have globally determined how to establish a correspondence mechanism, so too small schools need to be able to determine who teaches in them, what is taught, and how it is assessed—all within a broad set of accountability guidelines enforced to assure quality across variety rather than sameness.

For many years, private schools have eschewed standardized measures and state accountability regulations, instead preferring performance-based, rigorous systems of assessment that give teachers, parents, and children real and specific information about skills and knowledge development. Currently, a compact of some 30 schools in New York City is negotiating with Commissioner Mills and the Regents to build an alternative, but Regents-approved, accountability system in which each of the schools will be held accountable for student performance by its peers in conjunction with a Regents-appointed oversight committee. This possibility does not deny the need for accountability but allows for educators and parents alike to build what they believe will be a more accurate, rigorous, meaningful, and telling system of assessment.

In order to assure that accountability is built into a theory of generativity, we would suggest three worthwhile goals: (1) critical elements for sustaining small schools—elements that can be articulated and can take very different forms across very different contexts; (2) widely diffused images of possibility shared among educators, and widely shared conversations about the challenges of educating youth in small schools; and (3) an insistence that small schools generate meaningful, accessible, and public standards for academic accountability.

We think some of the *critical elements* for sustaining small schools might include the following:

- Small schools need adequate resources to support faculty who can spend time focused on student work, instructional improvement, and reducing equity gaps between top- and bottom-achieving students.
- They need sufficient autonomy to make critical instructional, personnel, and budget decisions
- They need administrators who will either enhance the work of faculty or get out of the way.
- They should be accountable to a broadly conceived accountability framework that can be assessed with metrics developed locally.
- They must allocate appropriate resources so that the school contributes to the ongoing growth and development of its staff, faculty, and parents, keeping abreast of new developments in teaching and learning.
- They should function within larger systems of *reasonable size* that are designed to foster generativity rather than centralization.

We would argue that the varied budgetary, structural, pedagogical, and assessment practices of small schools need to be shared broadly so that other educators can learn from, borrow, revise, review, try out, reject, and imagine themselves engaging in or departing from similar practices. The search for sameness and cookie-cutter replicability is a search that is hopeless, anti-intellectual, and deadly to learning. In contrast, the public proliferation of images of possibility to provoke educational imagination, as well as a public conversation about the struggles small schools are engaged in, would do well as strategies of generativity—to improve educational practice and restore popular faith in the challenge and potential of public schooling.

There are many dimensions of the American ethos that stress and value such generativity. We are a nation of many, recent attempts to demand English only notwithstanding. Families thrive in many forms; universities and colleges breed distinctiveness; community-based organizations take different shapes depending on context and purpose. The entrepreneurial spirit is valued in all aspects of our professional landscape. Innovation is encouraged and, once established, is reshaped over and over again by other companies that can see ways to improve on the original design. Small businesses are encouraged; innovators are valued and touted as an important dimension of American know-how.

Indeed, we would conclude, it is only with the capacity to imagine, to self-reflect, and to revise one's own practice that a school remains alive to the possibilities in its youth and its adults. It is these features of small schools that should be replicated.

IN CONCLUSION...THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

As researchers, writers, and educators connected with small schools, we can tell you many wonderful stories about educational success and educator delight, parent engagement, and student thrill in small schools. However, we can tell no stories about full districts having committed themselves to a systemic, "going to scale" transformation via small schools. If entire systems remain glued together by power, control, existing job arrangements, low expectations for children of poverty and children of color, and commitments to standardization and old-fashioned replicability, then the shelf life of productive, radiant, and consciously distinct small schools will remain short.

If, however, systems are indeed willing to attend to the data and revisit the achievement gains and the engagement hikes in small schools, then questions of standardization will be replaced with invitations for generativity, and demands for replicability will be replaced with systemic support and widely discussed images of possibility for improved practice.

Small schools are today the most exciting places in which the next generation of educational issues are stirring—in which the next generation of educational conversations is already taking place. This is true of both public and private small schools. In the form of alternative schools, charter schools, and small

private schools, the structure of "small" has been critical to innovation, teamwork, accountability, and equity. It is time to invite "small" out of the urban educational closet and into the spotlight.

If we are to have a shot at reinvigorating public urban districts, can we interrupt the predictable process by which districts seem to kill off their young (small schools and small children) in order for the system to survive? Wouldn't we all be better off reviewing small schools as the percolating laboratories of invention, equity, and instructional energy they promise to be, and work to assure that they are sufficiently supported to carry our children forward in this millennium?

NOTES

1. The term "charter" has taken on different meanings in recent years. Philadelphia began this effort before the charter school legislation was begun. In this first instance, a charter was defined by a group of interested teachers who targeted a particular focus for their school so that their students might be better skilled. Examples included the Multicultural Charter and the Coalition of Essential Schools Charter. A small group of teachers was given responsibility for 400 or more students and allowed to build courses within the charter that would fill students' schedules. Charter schools shared a building with other charters.

   Shortly thereafter, the term was used in various states as they promoted school innovation. According to Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPI): "Charter Schools are public schools open to all students. However, they are freed from the complex regulations that often constrain schools by a 'charter,' or contract, between the school and school district. Charter schools are held strictly accountable to this charter, which also identifies the school missions, objectives, and methods of documenting progress."

   The National Education Association's Web site states: "Across the country, more and more groups of parents, educators, community members and other entities are creating and/or running public schools known as charters. These schools are deregulated, autonomous, and independent of the rules and regulations that govern traditional public schools. States have passed laws that permit the creation of charter schools in record numbers since 1991, and more than 1100 charter schools were in some stage of operation as of the beginning of the 1998-1999 school year. The theory that underlies charters is that such freeing of some public schools will hasten educational innovation, improve student achievement, create greater parental involvement, and promote improvement of public education in general. And in theory it follows that if there's no educational improvement, the school will be held accountable and the school's charter will not be renewed. Thus, careful public oversight and accurate accountability measures are critical to the whole hypothesis of charter schools."

According to the Illinois State Board of Education: "While 13 schools were in operation in 1998-1999, 17 schools should be in operation in 1999-2000, with one more already chartered for 2000-2001. There are 27 remaining charters available in Illinois. With the passage of Public Act 91-407 (HB230 of 1999), school districts may now be sponsors of charter schools as well as not-for-profit organizations. Illinois was just notified of receipt of a second three-year federal grant award for public charter schools. The grant award for 1999-2000 is $1.14 million; for 2000-2001 it is $1.2 million; and for 2001-2002, it is $1.25 million."

2. Please see Hampel (2000) for a more thorough discussion of the issues that led us to see bigger as better.

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