Literature Review: Converting Large High Schools into Smaller Learning Communities

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Breaking Up: Converting Large Comprehensive High Schools into Smaller Learning Communities

Introduction

Large schools neither nourish the spirit nor educate the mind . . . . . What big schools do is remind most of us that we don’t count for a lot

--Deborah Meier, 1995

Following from their experience as failing comprehensive schools, some large schools in this country are undertaking projects to break up into smaller schools, or academies. This movement reverses the trend prevalent in the United States from the 1940s to the 1990s, of the widespread consolidation of schools. During the last 50 years of the 20th century, the country experienced a 500% increase in student enrollment, but a 70% decrease in the number of its schools (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2001). According to the US Department of Education, more than 70% of today’s students attend high schools with over 1,000 students (McNeil, 2000).

Brief Overview of Research on Small Schools

The rationale for creating large schools was to offer more resources and a wider curriculum to students while taking advantage of economies of scale. However, research has demonstrated that large schools and high enrollment often create impersonal, institutional environments that make students feel alienated, teachers disempowered, and parents disenfranchised (Lee et al., 2000). In another current study, Bickel, Howley, Williams, and Glascock (2001) found an interaction effect between school size and students’ economic status: as school size increases, performance decreases for economically disadvantaged students. In other words, “school size imposes increasing ‘achievement costs’ in schools serving impoverished communities” (p.2). In addition, bureaucracy and centralization—with their tendency toward institutionalization—make change difficult (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991).

The large-scale quantitative small schools studies of the late 1980s and 1990s established small schools as more productive and effective than large schools, and also presented compelling evidence that small schools benefit the school community: students, teachers, and parents (Raywid, 1999 & 1996a). Reviewing the literature on small schools, researcher Kathleen Cotton concluded, “a large body of research in the affective and social realms overwhelmingly affirms the superiority of small schools” (1996). One response to these research findings that call for smaller schools is to subdivide large, comprehensive high schools into smaller, more personal entities (Gregory, 2001). Reformers view this option as “an effective way to improve education without incurring [the] construction costs” associated with building a new autonomous small school (Raywid, 1996a).
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Breaking Up Large High Schools

The Break-up movement is an attempt to achieve the benefits of smallness by modifying preexisting large school facilities to accommodate smaller learning communities. Due to its recency as a reform model, breaking up large, poorly performing schools is the strategy least documented in the research literature.

Literature

Raywid reviews research on the divisions of large schools into subschools or subunits in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago and describes the impacts of these downsized structures on students and schools (1995). Wasley et al. present research findings that detail the early successes of Chicago's small autonomous as well as downsized elementary, middle, and high schools (2000). The U.S. Department of Education issued An overview of smaller learning communities in high schools, a background paper that provides guidance to large high schools and school districts interested in making high schools smaller (2001). Allen, Almeida and Steinberg discuss key findings from a study of five Boston area high schools that spent the past three years restructuring into smaller learning communities (2001). Ancess and Ort (1999) and Cook (2000) write about the experiences of and the lessons learned from the Julia Richman Education Complex in New York City, a former large, failing high school that was successfully reconfigured in the early 1990s into six separate small schools that serves infants through high schoolers. In a new ERIC Digest, Professor Gregory summarizes some of the literature on school breakups and discusses the types of errors common among attempts to breakup large high schools (2001).

Breakup Models

According to the studies on large school breakups, high schools have implemented a variety of different models to downsize into smaller learning communities, each typically serving 200 to 500 students (Gregory, 2001). Reported models include: house plans, minischools, multiplexes, career academies, learning communities, clusters, charters, and schools-within-schools (Cotton, 2001). The models differ in degrees of separateness, distinctiveness and autonomy, as well as in terms of programs and organizational structure and practice (Raywid, 1995). The nomenclature is awkward and confusing. Researcher Mary Anne Raywid points out that there can be variation within any single model and that the terminology distinguishing one model from another, as well as the practice, can be “highly idiosyncratic” (1996b). In a review of the literature, research and development specialist Sarah Dewees concluded, “the literature on school downsizing has been inconsistent in its descriptions of how large schools are divided into subunits” (1999).
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Despite these problems in terminology, according to Raywid, the different models “established over the years reflect some important practical differences as to the scope and ambitiousness of the downsizing efforts undertaken and the autonomy ceded such units” (1995). Based on this experience, several distinct models for breaking up a large school into smaller learning communities can be identified:

- **House Plans.** In a house plan students and teachers may remain together for some or all coursework. A house can be organized on a one-year or multi-year basis. It is usually overlaid upon the department structure of the traditional middle or high school that hosts it, which restricts the amount of change the arrangement can create.

- **Mini-schools.** This arrangement has some of the properties of a house plan and is also dependent on its larger host school for its existence. But mini-schools almost always serve students over a several-year period, and they usually have their own instructional program, giving them more distinctiveness from one another than houses usually achieve.

- **Schools-within-schools.** These are separate and autonomous units with their own personnel, budget, and program, authorized by the board of education or superintendent. They operate within a larger school, sharing resources and reporting to the school principal on matters of safety and building operation. Both students and teachers choose to affiliate with such a school (Raywid, 1999).

**Key Findings and Lessons Learned the Literature**

In her review of the research on the breakups of large schools in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, Raywid (1995) concludes:

> [It] is clear that reducing the size of schools can increase student participation, reduce dropout rates, enhance academic achievement, and enhance teacher efficacy. It is also apparent that downsizing stimulates the move toward personalized, ‘communal’ schools, which bring independent benefits with respect to enhancing student engagement and achievement . . . . . It appears that downsizing may be necessary to making it possible for schools to effectively initiate the changes recognized essential to improvement . . . . Such success depends in large part on the extent to which the small schools concept has been adopted in principle and implemented. Those units designed so as to permit them to become separate, autonomous, distinctive entities have a much better chance than those which have not been (46, 44).

Similarly, Irmsher, in a review of school size research, comments, “putting several small schools into an existing large school building can rejuvenate the school and enhance educational possibilities.” She notes that the most successful school transitions “have been based on the principles of cohesion, autonomy, focus or theme, and a constituency assembled on the basis of shared interests. While the reasons for downsizing failures are still sketchy, reports usually cite one of three shortcomings: insufficient faithfulness to the small-school concept, insufficient autonomy and separateness, or failure to couple changes in the school culture with the structural changes” (1997).
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In the U.S. Department of Education’s background paper, *An overview of smaller learning communities in high schools*, (2001) the authors conclude:

Researchers emphasize that conditions designed to simulate small schools must be authentic; that is, the more independent they are, the more likely it is that smaller learning communities will match small schools’ benefits. “Schools-within-schools, pods, house plans are administrative arrangements to simulate school size,” Ohio University researcher Craig Howley cautioned.\(^\text{xxi}\) “The problem with [some] simulations is that they don’t respect reality” (Robelen, 2000).\(^\text{xii}\) Without a separate space, autonomous administration and budget, designated faculty, and distinctive philosophy, small school simulations likely offer diminished benefits, or none at all. (16).

In their study of five Boston area high schools that restructured into smaller learning communities, Allen, Almeida and Steinberg (2001) present five key “tensions or challenges” the schools faced during their restructuring process:

1. Schools are finding it challenging to focus their efforts simultaneously on implementing new district initiatives directed at preparing students for high stakes tests and on restructuring the school into small learning communities using inquiry-based, contextual learning strategies (9).
2. Schools are struggling with tensions resulting from how to fully cluster students and teachers into small learning communities (12).
3. A strong curricular leader is essential to developing a strong and effective small learning community. Schools are using a variety of approaches to ensure effective leadership (13).
4. In going wall-to-wall with small learning communities, schools are balancing the desire of teachers for input into staffing decisions with the need to ensure that students have equal access to a range of pathways (16).
5. As schools have formed more small learning communities, bilingual programs within those schools have struggled to maintain basic services to bilingual students and to ensure equitable access to upper grade pathways; inadequate levels of staffing have compounded the problem (17).
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Studying the Julia Richman Education Complex (JREC) seven years after the restructuring process began, researchers Ancess and Ort (1999) present seven lessons learned from the JREC conversion experience:

1. **Campus self-governance**: The leaders of each of the schools and programs in the building formed a Building Council to govern the campus by consensus (23).

2. **Individual school autonomy**: “Individual school autonomy supports effective school development and facilitates cross-school cooperation and collaboration” (23).

3. **Anchor School**: “The maturity of the Urban Academy enabled it to anchor the reform.” The Urban Academy became responsible for building-wide issues, allowing the newer schools to focus on their development (23).

4. **Building manager**: “The conceptualization of the building manager as a facilitator and an administrative coordinator who implements the decisions of the Building Council has supported individual school development, cross school trust, cooperation, a collaboration, and commitment to the success of the campus”

5. **Mixed-age and mixed-use campus**: Both students and staff report on benefits “cross-school interactions and from services offered in the building. The building’s broad diversity is a lesson in respect for difference and has contributed to the building’s sense of community” (23).

6. **Accountability as Commitment**: “The JREC Complex model demonstrates that strong complex and school-based autonomy in governance can produce a high level of professional commitment and accountability to high standards of performance for students and schools” (24).

7. **The Relationship between the Local Education Authority, the Campus, and the Schools**: “New model schools require new model school systems” (24).

In *Breaking Up Large High Schools: Five Common (and Understandable) Errors of Execution*, author Gregory argues that the breaking up is not only a restructuring process but also a reculturing process for the school, “Five common errors—of autonomy, size, continuity, time, and control—bar many schools from crossing the big/small cultural divide” (2001).

**Conclusion**

Like the small schools movement, then, the break up movement is designed to bring personalization to teacher-student relationships and focus in academic activities. Although evidence to date is still limited, as more large high schools break up into smaller learning communities, Professor Gregory predicts that “In the next 10 years we should know whether creating truly new small schools out of existing large high schools is even possible” (2001).

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1 Julia Richman was completely closed and new small schools were “hot-housed” in temporary spaces until the campus was ready to re-open. This strategy allowed the new schools to develop their own culture, “unaffected by the negative tone and climate of the downsizing school” (Cook, 2000, 104). This also allowed construction work to proceed uninterrupted. When the campus reopened and the new communities moved in, the Urban Academy, a 14-year-old coalition school was established as the anchor school in the complex. It should be noted that this very strategy that contributed to the success of the Julia Richman Education Complex differentiates it from most large school breakup models, making it more closely resemble the autonomous small school model.
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