Architects of Achievement focuses on building bridges between educational design and architecture. Bringing knowledge of brain research, effective teaching methods, and sound educational facilities design, we help school districts, foundations, government agencies, charter organizations, and architectural firms think creatively about design solutions capable of fostering higher achievement for all.

Our work has been featured in Architecture Magazine, Architectural Record, Edutopia, The American School Board Journal, and School Planning and Management Magazine and by the Knowledge Works Foundation, the Rural Trust, Stanford’s School Redesign Network, Small Schools Northwest at Lewis and Clark College, the Coalition of Essential Schools, the Colorado Children’s Campaign, the Council of Educational Facilities Planners International, the Small Schools Project, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Architects of Achievement is an educational consulting firm, not a licensed architectural firm.
Thoughtfully-designed school buildings—capable of supporting personalized, learning-focused, collaborative, and community-connected teaching and learning—have the power to transform individuals, schools, and the greater community.

Momentum for high school reform is building as policymakers, opinion leaders, educators, and the general public recognize what visionary school reformers have known for years: American high schools, designed for a manufacturing economy that no longer exists, are failing to prepare our youth for college, career, and citizenship. Across the nation, large comprehensive high schools are being replaced with smaller, more dynamic learning communities.

As leaders responsible for designing powerful small schools embark on facilities planning processes to leverage school improvement, they need to remain focused on student learning. The building itself is not the change. Absent the cultivation of new skills, understandings, and commitments, such schools will fall short of preparing every student for success. However, new and redesigned school buildings can allow for and even encourage positive change.

District leaders, school reformers, and architects frequently collaborate with Architects of Achievement around small school design solutions. Some projects have money, some don’t. Some are building new facilities, while others are renovating existing buildings. Some want to share space with partners to embed school programs into a variety of community spaces; others are reconfiguring with minimal community impact. Regardless of a project’s profile, we encourage planners to focus on building bridges between educational practice and architecture in order to best meet student needs.

Architecture for Achievement: Our Kids Deserve Better arose from our desire to share what we’ve learned about school design. In it, we share design principles and patterns that, in our estimation, have the awesome power to transform places of learning. This discussion and resource guide, designed complement the video, addresses essential questions regarding the creation of powerful schools and educational complexes. Rather than prescriptive formulae for small school design, we view the video and guide as resources for those embarking upon or amidst school redesign.

Our nation’s students are changing. School systems, curriculum and instruction, and facilities must evolve together, to prepare these new learners to lead our nation, and world, into the future. With you, we are honored to be part of this work.

Victoria Bergsagel
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America’s high schools are obsolete . . . By obsolete I mean that our high schools—even when they’re working exactly as designed—cannot teach our kids what they need to know today.

— Bill Gates, National Education Summit on High Schools

Prior to any school or district redesign process, stakeholders—including district leaders and faculty, parents, and community members—need to agree that change is necessary. In the absence of such ownership, the process is likely to be contentious and the tendency to revert back to familiar educational models (what Architect of Achievement calls “nostalgic gravity”) will threaten comprehensive school reform.

Changing Times Require New School Models

When Bill Gates stood before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, and Labor in March 2007 and stated, “Our high schools are no longer a path to opportunity and success, but a barrier to both,” some likely took offense. The large comprehensive high school worked for them. Why can’t it work for today’s learners? Indeed, many of today’s leaders succeeded in large high schools; and chances are, a majority of the key players in any reform process are among this group.

However, changes in our nation’s economy demand that schools prepare all students, not just the high achieving. Fifty years ago, our manufacturing economy provided living-wage jobs to workers with little or no education beyond high school. In today’s information age, this is no longer the case.

While the large comprehensive high school may work...
for some, statistics suggest that it definitely does not work for all. Nearly one-third of American high school students fail to graduate, while just over half of African American and Hispanic students receive their diplomas. Fewer still (approximately one-third) possess the skills needed for success in college or on the job.

The Risk

Failing to prepare our youth has dire economic and social consequences. In 2005, Intel CEO Craig Barrett asserted that “Intel can be a totally successful company without ever hiring another American” while Japanese automaker Toyota chose Canada as the site of its newest manufacturing plant, citing the lack of skilled American workers as key in its decision. High school dropouts constitute 64 percent of the nation’s inmates, are between three and four times more likely to be unemployed than high school graduates, and are less likely to vote and volunteer.

There are moral consequences as well. A fundamental tenet of our democracy – equal opportunity – is violated daily as students across the country are forced to attend schools incapable of preparing them for future success. Can our nation continue to turn a blind eye to a system that fails so many of our students?
DISCUSSION

After viewing “The Problem” portion of the video, research and discuss the following questions as a staff and/or district planning team:

Do you agree with Tom Vander Ark’s statement that “high schools don’t work very well, by and large?”

- What are our school’s/district’s biggest strengths and weaknesses?

Tony Wagner asserts that students that don’t have an equal opportunity in education will not have an equal opportunity in life. Are we giving all students an equal opportunity?

- What percentage of students in our school/district is engaged and successful in their coursework?
- How many of our students graduate from high school in four years?
- What happens to those who don’t graduate?
- What percentage of our graduates succeeds in college without needing remedial courses in English and/or math?
- How many of our students graduate from college?
- How do our graduates fare on the job?

Should our school(s) prepare all students for college, career, and citizenship?
Policymakers, education leaders, community members, and parents are beginning to demand better. Research suggests, and successful school reformers concur, that student achievement and attainment can be dramatically improved when schools embrace three new Rs: rigor, relevance, and relationships. Learning must be challenging and connected to real-world experiences, and students and teachers must feel supported.

Small: A Powerful Reform Strategy

While a variety of school structures can result in improved student achievement, school reformers across the country are agreeing that smaller, more dynamic learning communities are best able to support student success.

Essentially all of the research on school size conducted in the last 35 years points to the benefits of small. Smaller schools disrupt the influence of poverty on academic achievement; have lower rates of absenteeism and violence; strengthen student attachment, persistence, and performance; and result in more satisfied teachers, parents, and community members. (See Bibliography for related research.)

When it comes to schools, no single definition of small exists. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has used the criterion of fewer than 100 students per grade. Malcolm Gladwell, in *The Tipping Point*, explores the “Rule of 150” citing research of neuroscientist Robin Dunbar who asserts, “The figure of 150 seems to represent the maximum number of individuals with whom we can have a genuinely social relationship, the kind of relationship that goes with knowing who they are and how they relate to us.” Ultimately, as eloquently stated by school reformer Deborah Meier, “We need schools small enough so that we can attend each other’s funerals as well as confirmations, notice birthdays and weddings as well as haircuts or a new suit.” (Meier, 1995)

In the past five years, thousands of high schools have been built or redesigned as small schools or small learning communities, and small school implementation has become the cornerstone of reform in many of the nation’s largest districts, including the New York City Department of Education, the Los Angeles Unified School District, and Chicago Public Schools.

Small: Necessary but Not Sufficient

While the benefits of small are well-documented, no school structure—large or small—can effect student achievement absent...
effective teaching and learning. To ground school design in sound pedagogy, leaders and stakeholders must establish a set of shared beliefs prior to determining a school’s structure.

Common Vision. First and foremost, the learning community needs a shared vision. This vision informs curriculum, instruction, and facility decisions, and can help build consensus for change.

Program and Instructional Design. Teaching and learning ultimately serve to fulfill the vision. Prior to any school design process, stakeholders should possess a common educational focus. While high expectations should be the norm, and schools should design programs and instruction to prepare all students for success, schools (and small schools in particular) should focus on a few important goals rather than seeking (and ultimately failing) to do it all, as is the case with many large, comprehensive high schools.

Guiding Design Principles. The development of guiding design principles helps ensure that a building’s design supports the shared vision and instructional focus. These principles represent what the learning community values most highly and as such, they can provide focus, serve as a filter, and clarify important decisions when conflicts arise during the design process. (See Appendix 1 for one district’s guiding principles.)

Viewing Reform First-Hand

Study tours to successful small schools can be helpful as individual schools and districts work to refine their mission, program and instructional design, and guiding design principles. Such visitations powerfully illuminate the possibilities, challenge preconceived notions of how schools should work, and illustrate how building design can support high-quality teaching and learning. Given the growing presence of effective small schools, such visits can often be local and thus, inexpensive. Regardless of where study tours occur, an ideal school visit includes opportunities to:

- Speak with school leaders about the school’s vision, instructional focus, and history
- Talk to staff and students about their experiences with a small learning environment
- Visit classrooms
- Witness and interact with students during lunch and/or passing periods
- Survey student work
- Observe unique features of the school such as student exhibitions or advisories

Architects of Achievement frequently works with school systems to design, organize, and facilitate study tours to help districts/schools refine their vision and goals.
DISCUSSION

View “The Opportunity” portion of the video and discuss the following:

What was my most powerful learning experience?

- What were the characteristics of this experience?
- How does this experience compare/contrast with the learning opportunities available to our students?
- How could our school’s instructional program, structure, and facilities support similarly powerful learning experiences for learners?
In terms of location, a school can be housed anywhere—in a stadium, shopping mall, storefront, or office building. Critical design considerations for going small should include planning that clearly identifies the focus of the small school and the teaching and learning styles that will be encouraged there.

**Rightsizing Strategies**

Below are a number of strategies available for capitalizing on facilities planning to “right-size” schools; the first five of these are featured in the video. (See Appendix 2 for specific considerations related to each option.)

**Build Small.** Many argue that building physically distinct small schools from the ground up is the best way to institute good small schools. Small by design, they are physically autonomous enough to create a sense of community and possibility, and when developed with thoughtful attention to educational programming, become wonderful places for personalized learning.

- The Truman Educational Complex in Federal Way, Washington houses two 9-12 public schools, of approximately 100 students each. Truman illustrates how the creative use of community resources, including a neighboring childcare facility, youth development center, and city park, can enable a freestanding small school to offer a variety of opportunities to students.

**Design a Multiplex.** Given situations when new school construction is called for, but it is not logistically, politically, or environmentally possible to build distinctly separate small schools, planners can take advantage of the opportunity to “rightsize” by building schools that allow for small autonomous groupings within a larger campus.

- Todd Beamer High School in Federal Way, Washington opened with three small academies and now houses four. The building was designed with enough flexibility to convert easily to eight small schools. All academies share a cafeteria, theatre, music rooms, physical education facilities, and sports fields. Students participate on common athletic teams and in campus-wide extracurricular activities.

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*Architects of Achievement works with educators, facilities personnel, architects, and even communities to bridge the gap between education and architecture to pursue high achievement for all students.*

— Victoria Bergsagel, Architects of Achievement

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_Educators ... are creating small schools because they believe that public education is critical to a democracy ... These educators believe that, while school size is not sufficient in and of itself, it is an essential first step in creating productive, equitable places where all young people can actually flourish._

— Small Schools, Great Strides: A Study of New Small Schools in Chicago
Build a Village of Small. Some choose to build autonomous small schools on campuses that may share common resources such as athletic facilities, food service, auditorium, and/or libraries. Buildings housing each small school are designed to be physically separate, to reinforce the notions of autonomy and individual distinction.

- High Tech High Village in San Diego, California houses six small schools: three high schools, two middle schools, and one elementary school. Although the six schools are completely autonomous, they do share a common educational philosophy focused on personalization, project-based learning, adult-world connections, and the seamless integration of technical and academic curriculum.

Adapt and Reuse. Rather than procuring new land and constructing new buildings, a variety of school systems are entering partnerships with existing community organizations to adapt and reuse buildings. Partnerships can be established with health clubs, community libraries, parks, and restaurants to provide necessary services to such schools.

- The Tacoma School of the Arts, in Tacoma, Washington, is housed in three renovated buildings in the city of Tacoma’s downtown core. Focused on the arts, this small high school takes advantage of the many cultural institutions and the University of Washington branch campus in Tacoma’s revitalized downtown. Students have unlimited access to nearby art, history, and glass museums; perform in various downtown theaters and concert venues; and utilize public transportation on a daily basis to access the city’s educational resources.

Convert from Large to Small. Another strategy is to convert comprehensive schools into smaller learning communities, retrofitting existing buildings with very limited funds. Some convert buildings with the existing staff and students. Others reconstitute their schools by allowing upperclassmen to graduate and “growing” a number of small schools to replace the existing comprehensive school.

- Tyee Educational Complex in SeaTac, Washington converted one comprehensive high school into three completely autonomous small schools of approximately 400 students. Each school has their own contiguous space, administration, and identity. Students participate in campus-wide sports programs, share a common lunch, and collectively utilize the school’s social services.

Reconsider Grade Span Configurations. Many who worry that building “small within big” will make it easier to revert back to the large comprehensive high school model suggest instead the construction of “span schools” with nontraditional groupings (e.g., K-12, K-8, 6-12) that encourage longstanding relationships and fewer students per grade.

- The Inter District Downtown School in Minneapolis, Minnesota serves 600 K-12 students from nine public school districts. The model is designed to bring together a diverse student body from both urban and suburban areas. Agreements to share resources with a variety of local neighbors eliminated the need to build a separate gym, auditorium, or library. Teachers share a staff lounge with professors from an adjacent college of education.
Use Satellite Campuses. School systems can take advantage of the opportunity to use nontraditional facilities to initiate and/or house their programs. Many “hothouse” programs operate in temporary spaces with the intention of moving the small school into new or existing school buildings once a small school identity is established. Storefronts, churches, warehouse spaces, business parks, and surplus school sites can all be adapted to accommodate new small schools.

- In the Marysville School District in Marysville, Washington, four small learning communities were created to be eventually housed on a new high school campus. These SLCs will reside within one of the district’s comprehensive high schools until construction on the new building is complete. Doing so will allow the SLCs to become well-established prior to occupying their new space.

Support Charters and Pilots. The support of charter schools can foster innovation and provide models of positive change. Free from many bureaucratic constraints, charters are often inventive and responsive to the needs of the students they serve. A number of school systems have worked with teacher unions to develop pilot schools (in-district charters). Freed from certain district requirements (e.g., staffing, budgeting, governance, calendars), these schools can become district models for innovative teaching and learning. Other charter schools operate outside of school districts, accountable to the state.

- Perspectives Charter School in the South Loop Neighborhood of Chicago was the brainchild of two Chicago public school teachers who believed that students deserved more out of the public school system – more personalization, more rigor, and more connection to the community. Their dream became a reality in 1997 when Chicago Public Schools granted them a charter to create Perspectives. Since then, a second school has been chartered. By 2014, the organization hopes to have ten schools in Chicago.

Renovate. The need for modernization provides opportunities to “rights-size” schools. When capital project funds are available for extensive renovations, planners can make bold architectural gestures toward teaching in new and different ways.

- The Julia Richmond Educational Complex in Manhattan represents a fairly inexpensive high school renovation project ($2.5 million). While the basic floor plan was left unaltered, changes were made to accommodate six small schools. The existing comprehensive high school program was phased out as students graduated.

The Importance of Autonomy

Whether they stand alone, share a building with other small learning communities, exist in a multiplex, or share community space, particular attention must be paid to establishing school autonomy to create a powerful sense of place, positive sustained relationships, a shared academic focus, and the ability to respond to individual student needs. Autonomy is best established through:

- Dedicated, contiguous space. A school’s learning space should be connected and physically distinguishable from...
neighboring schools or community functions. Regardless of the size of the facility, students should be able to point to a place and say, “This is my school, my home.”

- **Mixed student and adult spaces.** When students and adults see one another working, collaborating, and socializing, personal relationships develop and respect for dedication and hard work increases. Student commons and teacher work areas designed in adjacent spaces can accomplish such transparency.

- **Adjacent science/project labs.** While some small schools may not have the ability to build specialized science and project labs, smart planning can result in space that can serve multiple purposes. Designing such a space is preferable to having students from one school share lab space with peers from other small schools.

- **Disallowing crossover coursework with other learning communities.** Small schools must make difficult program choices and accept that they cannot offer the coursework selection present in larger schools. Rather than seeking to mitigate this by allowing students to take courses at other schools, small schools should feel comfortable with the tradeoff of less choice for greater personalization.

- **Separate restrooms.** While shared restrooms are often favored for the sake of efficiency, they compromise small school community and autonomy. Building smaller restrooms in each small school on a multiplex campus, shared by students and staff, is one solution.

- **Separate eating and gathering spaces.** When resources are scarce, it can become tempting to create common cafeterias and common areas for a series of small schools. However, doing so diminishes the sense of autonomy, community, and connection established when small learning communities dine together. Creative solutions might include small, café-type eating areas and multi-purpose common areas.

- **Separate and distinct entrances (and if possible, parking lots).** Identity is strengthened when students and teachers park, enter, and gather in space unique to their school.

- **Variety of learning spaces.** Each small school should have space conducive to whole-school gatherings, small- and large-group discussion, project-based instruction, one-on-one tutoring, and individual endeavors. Well-designed spaces can serve a variety of functions throughout a school day/year.

- **Discrete traffic and circulation patterns.** Small school identity is enhanced when students primarily circulate among their small school community. When several small schools share a campus, care must be taken to establish traffic and circulation patterns for each school, so students from one school never have to pass through the space of another.

- **Distributed administrative and counseling functions.** Personalization is created when adults know students. Such personalization is compromised when several small schools share administrators and/or counselors. In schools that house several small learning communities, administrative offices should be distributed into each SLC’s contiguous space.
DISCUSSION

After viewing the “Strategies to Achieve Small” portion of the video, examine Appendix 2 and discuss:

- What are the pros and cons of each rightsizing strategy for our school/district?
- What community resources and partnerships could help with the development of a small school environment?
- What obstacles could stand in the way of “rightsizing” efforts?
- What schools could we visit to help us better understand the various rightsizing models?
- When we set aside our “traditional” notions of high schools, what creative options emerge?
When you build a thing, you cannot merely build that thing in isolation, but must also repair the world around it and within it.
— Christopher Alexander, A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction

Principle-Driven Design

Regardless of the rightsizing strategy employed, research suggests that high-achieving schools share several common principles. Districts, schools, charter organizations, and foundations can keep these universal design principles in mind as they work to determine their own guiding principles. Architects of Achievement has identified the following five principles. (Worksheet 1 can help schools and districts discuss these principles in context.)

- **Personalized.** All students are known well and encouraged academically, and sustained relationships among students and adults are promoted. Responsible behavior and relationships based on mutual respect are modeled, taught, and expected from all members in the learning community; these norms enhance the safety of its occupants. Student voice and input, needs and dreams underpin the every day happenings of the school. All students flourish.

- **Learning-Focused.** All learners are consistently engaged in a rigorous course of study that prepares them for further education, work, and citizenship. Students and adults feel that their school is a unique reflection of their shared learning philosophy and of the culture of the community it serves. Students actively participate in their own learning; hands-on, research-rich projects and performance assessment, where students present their work to real audiences.

- **The Met: Principles in Action**

  The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (The Met) in Providence, Rhode Island, serves approximately 600 diverse students in six small, theme-based schools. Core to the school’s philosophy is personalization, described as “one student at a time.” Curriculum consists of individual learning plans based on student needs and interests.

  At The Met, there are no formal classes. Rather, students spend three days a week in small advisory groups (approximately 15 students and one advisor) and two days working in community-based internships. Real-world learning is the focus and students are assessed through quarterly exhibitions.

  The Met is a college-preparatory school and requires all students to apply to college. Students are taught to be their own advocates and learn to support their peers through a mentorship program that pairs younger and older students.

  Source: Big Picture Schools, www.bigpicture.org
are commonplace. Technology is integrated into curriculum, instruction, and facility, allowing students to take high-tech tools as much for granted as they do pens and paper.

- Collaborative. Students and adults work together and interact in positive, productive ways. Family and community members are engaged and welcome. Professional work areas allow adults and students to both individually and collectively pursue academic excellence.

- Community-Connected. Community members participate in the life of the school and students participate in the life of their community. Learning becomes more relevant and community connections to local schools grow.

- Adaptability and Flexibility. Buildings—and their students, educators, leaders, and curricula—are willing and able to change. Learning remains dynamic.

Design Patterns

A school’s physical space can and should support, even encourage, the adoption of guiding principles. Careful consideration of important design patterns allows this to occur. The video highlights thirteen such patterns for those thinking about the building needs of dynamic schools and more specifically, of small schools and small learning communities. These patterns, and thirteen additional patterns, are highlighted in Architects of Achievement’s book, *Architecture for Achievement: Building Patterns for Small School Learning*. (As you view the “Design Principles and Patterns” portion of the video, Worksheet 2 can be used as a note-taking tool.)

“*What are we doing as a school? What are we trying to teach? How are we trying to teach that? How will we take these spaces and then adapt them so that they best meet those needs as opposed to designing a space and then having to adapt to it?*”

— Jon Ketler, Small School Founder and Administrator

*Architecture for Achievement: Building Patterns for Small School Learning* can be ordered on Amazon.com.
**Worksheet 1**
**Principles in Context**

Use this worksheet as a guide, adapting it to reflect your own adopted guiding principles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Current (1 low, 10 high)</th>
<th>Rationale Evidence</th>
<th>Goal (1 low, 10 high)</th>
<th>What Will It Take?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Personalized</td>
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<td>Learning-Focused</td>
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<td>Collaborative</td>
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<td>Community-Connected</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adaptable and Flexible</td>
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**Reflections**

Review your rankings to consider:

1. What are our strengths?

2. What are our biggest growth areas?

3. How do our facilities support and/or undermine the pursuit of these principles?
## Worksheet 2
Building a Vocabulary of Principles & Patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>How does this video illustrate this pattern?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personalized</td>
<td>Human Scale</td>
<td>e.g. Comfortable furniture, smaller scale of spaces</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Greeting</td>
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<td>Wayfinding</td>
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<td>Streetscapes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Distributed Resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning Focused</td>
<td>Transparency</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Display</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>Varied, Flexible Spaces</td>
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<td>Optimal Light</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Clusters of Learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gathering Space</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Connected</td>
<td>Siting in Context</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Community Resources</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

After viewing the “Design Principles and Patterns” portion of the video and completing Worksheet 2, discuss:

Which design patterns are present in our current facility? Which are absent?

Which patterns are we excited about incorporating in a new/redesigned facility? Which patterns make us uncomfortable/nervous?

What questions do we have about these patterns? How can we explore the answers?
In most communities, true commitment to school redesign grows as success stories emerge. Even skeptics are converted when positive change can be demonstrated. In order to capture such improvement, school leaders must be committed to ongoing, rigorous data collection. The community is typically attuned to traditional measures of success (test scores); a variety of additional measures can be captured and publicized by the school to build support for change.

**Indicators of Success**

**Student Achievement.** Grade point averages and standardized test scores are typically the easiest data to collect and they do, in part, document student achievement. However, it is crucial to use multiple measures. For instance, the quality of student projects and exhibitions can be monitored to capture improvement. Student portfolios are another avenue to track student growth over time. A small school setting facilitates the tracking of individual student achievement as a small group of teachers knows each student over the course of his/her high school career.

**Graduation Rates.** On-time graduation rates can be compared to those prior to a school’s redesign; to district, state, and national averages; and to those at schools with similar demographics. While a variety of methods are used for calculating graduation rates, the cohort method, which tracks the number of ninth grade students who end up graduating four years later, is considered the most reliable. (Graduation Counts: A Report

**Small School Success in Chicago**

The small schools movement in Chicago Public Schools began in the 1990s.

A 2000 research study, Small Schools, Great Strides: A Study of New Small Schools In Chicago, concluded that, as compared to their larger counterparts, small schools experienced:

- Higher attendance rates
- Lower dropout rates
- Higher teacher expectations
- A broader range of teaching strategies
- Increased accountability for teaching and learning
- Teachers who felt more committed and efficacious
- Greater collaboration
- More community partnerships

College Acceptance and Retention Rates. A high school diploma may not indicate college readiness. In fact, across the nation, college-readiness rates are significantly lower than high school graduation rates. Students should graduate high school prepared to succeed in college. Tracking your school’s acceptance and retention rates can help you determine if this is, indeed, true. Through data analysis, many high schools discover that their graduates are dropping out of college and/or spending time and money on remedial college courses. Such results suggest a more rigorous course of study during the high school years.

Career Readiness. Employers complain that high school graduates are woefully unprepared for career success. The American Diploma Project’s Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts (2004) reports that “A majority of workers give high schools a grade of C, D, or F for their success in preparing students for success on the job.” Employers interviewed for the report stated that literacy and critical thinking skills were crucial for career success. While tracking student success in the work force is a significant task, schools and districts can develop relationships with local employers that allow them to assess how well-prepared employers feel their graduates are.

Student Attendance. Students who feel safe, challenged, and known typically attend school more frequently. Student attendance rates are a good barometer on student perceptions of school reform efforts.

Discipline Issues. Data on referrals, suspensions, and expulsions can also illustrate an improved environment for learning and greater student engagement.

Teacher Retention. School restructuring often requires more of teachers, at least in the short run, and some schools do experience higher-than-average teacher turnover rates in the first years of restructuring. However, in successful schools, teachers (like students) feel known, challenged, and supported. Increased teacher retention, in the long run, is one benefit.

Student, Teacher, and Parent Satisfaction. Climate surveys can document how various stakeholders feel about their school. Baseline surveys can be administered at the outset of school reform efforts and then repeated yearly to gauge how the reform is impacting school climate.

Parent and Community Involvement. Exciting schools attract excited volunteers and partners. An increase in parent and community involvement demonstrates faith in the change. Such involvement can be invaluable from a public relations standpoint; local media can help tell powerful stories of school-community partnerships.
Publicize Your Successes

Regardless of the data a school/district chooses to track, it is important to keep in mind that school reform efforts take time. Researchers insist that longitudinal studies are essential to accurately assess the impact of any significant change initiative. Nonetheless, early promising results are valuable and can build buy-in for the change; be creative on how to get these results to the school/district’s stakeholders in an on-going fashion. Work with your district’s communication department and/or enlist parent volunteers with public relations experience to help publicize your achievements.

Avenues for sharing your school/district’s story include:
- Local media outlets: newspapers, television, radio
- Education publications
- Trade publications
- School newspaper
- School and community newsletters
- PTA meetings
- Neighborhood councils
- School Board meetings
- City fairs and parades

DISCUSSION

After watching the “Promising Results” portion of the video, discuss the following:

What data do we collect and share with our community?
- Do we go beyond the standard measures of success (test scores, graduation rates)?
- How could we expand our measures of success?

What have we told the community about our school over the past 12 months? (Think about the various forms of outreach you have used and what the stories have been told.)
- What avenues for telling our story have we NOT explored?
- Who could help us better utilize these untapped outlets?

“One of the best things I’ve seen with my kids is that they’ve become so much more independent and responsible.”
— Monika Scheffe, Parent
Consensus Building

Effective change requires the commitment of key stakeholders. These individuals and organizations must participate in all phases of a redesign process: vision development, planning, and implementation.

District Leaders. Because superintendents and school boards maintain ultimate control over budgets, personnel decisions, district standards, and curriculum and instruction, their commitment to rethinking the traditional high school is essential. Ideally, individual school redesign plans are part of a larger, systemic district plan, focused on improving educational outcomes for all.

Educators. Student achievement is inextricably connected to quality teaching. Teachers need to feel that their school reflects their teaching philosophy and supports high-quality instruction. When schools reinvent themselves, individual teachers may choose to leave; however, change that alienates a significant percentage of the staff is likely to struggle and potentially fail. In addition, teachers’ unions play a central role in negotiating work agreements between their members and district officials. Because school redesign often influences factors such as staffing, work hours, and calendar, union representatives should be involved in the planning process. Finally, teachers need reassurance that appropriate professional development opportunities will be available to set them up for success.

Parents. Schools are healthier when they possess broad-based parental support and given parents’ deep understanding of their children, they are perhaps best able to identify the needs that a school must meet. Despite this knowledge, parents don’t always possess the latest thinking on effective curriculum, instruction, and school structure. Consequently, opportunities for parental input and parent education must be built into any planning process.

Students. Ironically, students are frequently the least-included constituency in district and school redesign processes. And yet, they possess a unique lens into any school. As much as possible, district and school design committees should include student representatives. While student governing organizations and bodies should be invited to give frequent input, so too should disenfranchised and at-risk students.

What Does It Take?

Involving Stakeholders for Systemic Change

The process of creating better schools is hard work. There is no progress without struggle.

— Linda Darling-Hammond, Redesigning Schools: What Matters and What Works

What does it take to forge “what has always been” for “what can be”? What will it take for schools across the country to create smaller, learning environments worthy of every student’s potential?
Community Members. As previously noted, partnerships are essential to small school success; they leverage resources, expand offerings, and increase buy-in. Such partnerships should be fostered at the outset of any planning process as they may expose new possibilities and reduce perceived obstacles. Community input can also guard against the school being isolated from its surroundings. Throughout the design process, planners should ask, “What’s important to our community? Do our schools respect these priorities?”

Changing in Phases

Comprehensive change is risky, can be messy, and is often contentious. Given the complexities involved, many find it tempting to change in phases. In attempting to personalize learning environments, educators in recent years have organized advisory periods, implemented block schedules, worked to integrate the curriculum, offered grade-level house systems, and developed theme-based academies—all in an effort to improve student learning. These various degrees of personalization can be organized on a continuum, with the comprehensive high school at one end and the autonomous small school at the other. (See Appendix 3.)

Leaders must be intentional as to where their schools will fall on the small schools continuum. Issues related to autonomy and control over instructional programs, budget, and personnel must all be considered, as every step along the continuum is increasingly more difficult to execute. And yet, the more reversible the change is, the more likely it is that nostalgic thinking for “what was” will pull the system back to the “reset” position of a comprehensive school.

When school designs are viewed in light of a continuum, it becomes apparent that some designs are more able to adjust to the needs of learners. At one end are designs that make it very easy and inviting to operate a conventional comprehensive high school, characterized by a large number of course offerings available to students, a high degree of specialization on the part of teachers, and low personalization. At the other end of the continuum are designs that provide high personalization—perhaps individual learning programs rather than courses as the primary learning mode. Such designs lead to intimate learning communities of one hundred or fewer students, with the primary adult role becoming that of advisor rather than teacher.
DISCUSSION

After viewing the entire video, use Appendix 3 to:
- Plot where your school currently stands on the Continuum of Small School Reform.
- Plot where you would like your school to be on the Continuum.

Following this exercise, discuss:
- How far apart are our two points?
- What will it take to get our school where we would like it to be?
Highline Public Schools, a school district south of Seattle, serves a highly diverse student population. Galvanized by its 2002-2003 standardized test results, the district concluded that its traditional high schools were not successfully preparing students, especially low-income and minority populations. In response, Highline adopted a policy to convert its four, large high schools into small schools or small learning communities. Supported by grant funds from the U.S. Department of Education and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the district created a redesign team made up of parents, students, teachers, union representatives, staff, and community members. At the outset of its planning, this representative team adopted this set of guiding principles for the design of each of its small learning environments.

- **Personalization:** Every student is known well, respected, and appreciated. Emotional and intellectual needs are met. Every student has an adult advocate and personal plan for progress.

- **Equitable, Inclusive, and Multicultural Schools:** Each student's cultural background and experiences are respected and connected to the curriculum. Resources are equitably distributed to ensure success for every student, regardless of background.

- **Clear and High Expectations:** High expectations are clearly communicated to all students. Students are engaged in an ambitious, rigorous course of study and leave school prepared for future success.

- **Authentic Curriculum and Assessment:** Students are challenged to increase and apply knowledge, analyze information, produce quality work, make presentations, and think critically.

- **Democratic Learning and Choice:** Students and adults work together and interact in positive, pro-teacher, parent, and student work together to create a common vision for where the school is going, and make decisions that result in student success. A system of “choice” allows parents and students to choose from the best educational opportunities available to them.

- **Distributed Leadership, Focused on Instruction:** The school board, staff, and community share responsibility to ensure the success of every student. Schools are given autonomy, but are held accountable for enabling all students to achieve at high levels.

- **Time and Space for Collaboration:** Staff and students are given the time and space to collaborate and develop skills and plans to meet the needs of all students. Teamwork is expected and encouraged.

- **Community and Citizenship:** Parents are recognized as partners in education. Partnerships are developed with businesses and higher education to create authentic projects and opportunities for students. Students become responsible citizens through critical thinking, civic engagement, and an understanding of democracy.

Teachers and students set learning goals, and students must demonstrate their competency in order to advance.
## Rightsizing Strategies

### Advantages and Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>ADVANTAGES</th>
<th>CHALLENGES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Build Small</td>
<td>Easy to establish school autonomy</td>
<td>Initial start-up costs can be higher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Typically most personalized environment</td>
<td>Buy-in can be harder to obtain</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building can be designed to best support educational programming</td>
<td>District policy may not support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design a Multiplex</td>
<td>Building design can be flexible to support future change</td>
<td>Land acquisition for a large campus can be expensive and hard to obtain</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Accommodates some large school functions</td>
<td>Nostalgic gravity can cause school to easily revert back to a comprehensive model</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shared resources may reduce costs</td>
<td>Relieves overcrowding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build a Village of Small</td>
<td>Resources can be shared across schools</td>
<td>Can make use of existing facilities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual school autonomy can be maintained</td>
<td>Encourages innovation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Builds support for small schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopt and Reuse</td>
<td>Reduces building costs</td>
<td>Land acquisition for a large campus can be expensive and hard to obtain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provides increased opportunities for learning</td>
<td>Can be more costly to maintain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning in real-world context</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Convert from Large to Small</td>
<td>Existing facility can be repurposed</td>
<td>Shared space agreements necessary</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can be less costly</td>
<td>Community partnerships can be complicated</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change can happen in phases</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Building may pose challenges</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Community buy-in can be a challenge</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tendency to revert back to comprehensive model</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>ADVANTAGES</th>
<th>CHALLENGES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reconsider Grade/Span Configurations</td>
<td>Reduces chance of reverting back to large comprehensive school</td>
<td>Complex set-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fever students per grade</td>
<td>Represents a significant change from the traditional “high school”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize Satellite Campuses</td>
<td>Relieves overcrowding</td>
<td>Shared leadership can be challenging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can make use of existing facilities</td>
<td>Transportation issues can arise if public transportation is not accessible</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support Charters and Pilots</td>
<td>Allows for the adoption of successful models</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encourages innovation</td>
<td>Obstacles can include state, district, and teachers’ union policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increases available options</td>
<td>Quality control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renovate</td>
<td>Capital funds often available</td>
<td>Need to create support for a new model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need for modernization</td>
<td>Existing building may make small structure challenging</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


### Continuum of Small School Reform

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comprehensive High School</th>
<th>Separate Schools Within a Building</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization:</strong> (level of separateness)</td>
<td><strong>Organization:</strong> (level of separateness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- No SLCs, but advisory or block scheduling may be used to personalize students’ experiences</td>
<td>- SLCs encompass all 4 grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Students take classes with mixed groups of students from throughout the large high school</td>
<td>- Students take all of their classes in an SLC, and classes do not include non-SLC students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teachers teach mixed groups of students from throughout the large high school</td>
<td>- Teachers teach all of their classes in an SLC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teachers’ professional development is school-wide or organized by departments</td>
<td>- Teachers do collaborative planning and professional development with their SLC team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Physical space is not sub-divided</td>
<td>- SLC’s physical space is dedicated and contiguous; shared space is managed by building council</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governance: (level of autonomy)</th>
<th><strong>Governance:</strong> (level of autonomy)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Large school is governed as one unit, under supervision of the principal</td>
<td>- SLC coordinator has some authority and reports to the school’s principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Academic departments generally have some limited authority over curriculum, budget, etc.</td>
<td>- SLC staff has some control over program design and curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- SLC staff is limited in hiring</td>
<td>- SLC staff has some role in hiring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Budget is determined by the larger school</td>
<td>- SLC staff controls schedule for SLC classes, in the context of the larger school’s schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- SLC staff has some role in determining budget</td>
<td>- SLC staff creates budget</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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APPENDIX 3


This continuum is adapted from the work of Mary Ann Raywid (1996), Jacqueline Ancess & CeCe Cunningham (2001), and Victoria Bergsagel (2003). It is intended to represent the range of strategies in the field; there are many small learning communities that do not fit neatly into any of these categories.
Small Schools Bibliography


The Schools We Need: Creating Small Schools that Work for Us. (2003). Available at: http://www.archachieve.net/Resources2/Reports/SchoolsWeNeed.pdf


Additional resources are available on Architects of Achievement’s Web site at www.archachieve.net
Public schools did not exist forever. They did not come out of the forehead of a Greek or Roman god. They were contrived by ordinary men and women ... and for just this reason, they can be rebuilt or reconceived, dismantled or replaced, not by another set of gods, but by plain men and women ... You and I can leave school as it is, change it slightly, or else we can turn it inside out and upside down.

— Jonathan Kozol