



New Small Learning Communities: Findings From Recent Literature

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Kathleen Cotton
Research Associate
School Improvement Program

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Small Is Not Enough

Experience and research make very clear that school size does indeed matter —but they also make clear that “small” is no silver bullet.

— Michelle Fine and Janis Somerville, 1998a, p. 104

It seems to be part of human nature that we are perennially tempted by the prospect of a quick fix, a silver bullet, a simple and powerful answer to our problems. So it is not surprising that current interest in smaller schools has led some people, including some educators, to hope that smallness as such has the power to improve schooling. Researchers and educators with small school experience are quick to point out that it has no such power, while at the same time clarifying what smallness *can* do. Researcher Michelle Fine says, “‘small’ is simply a vehicle for doing other rigorous, accountable work” (quoted in Gewertz, 2001, 4). Wasley, et al. (2000), which includes Fine among others, provide more detail:

We believe...that smaller school size can facilitate leaders’ abilities to lead a school to improved performance and teachers’ abilities to build student skill and knowledge in important ways....It is important to avoid seeing small schools as the sole solution to all that ails education. Rather, we would suggest that it is a key ingredient in a comprehensive plan to improve education. (66)

In a similar vein, Gladden (1998) writes,

[S]maller size establishes the groundwork for deeper school reforms by improving and stream-lining the relationship between faculty and administrators but, in itself, does not trigger these types of reforms...Smallness alone cannot create satisfying relationships or academic focus. (123)

To researcher Mary Anne Raywid (1996),

It appears that downsizing may be necessary to schools’ ability to effectively initiate the changes essential to improvement. While downsizing provides no guarantee that these other changes will follow, it may be a crucial step toward launching them. (51)

One of the best descriptions of what smallness can and cannot do is provided by Visher, Teitelbaum and Emanuel (1999), who write,

Researchers who have studied small schools have stressed that reducing school size alone does not necessarily lead to improved student outcomes. Instead, they have concluded that school size should be seen as having an indirect effect on student learning...school size acts as a facilitating factor for other desirable practices. In other words, school characteristics that tend to promote increased student learning—such as collegiality among teachers, personalized teacher-student relationships, and less differentiation of instruction by ability—are simply easier to implement in small schools. (21)



Defining “Small Schools”

Researchers disagree on what number constitutes “small.”

—Catherine Gewertz, 2001, p. 3

The terminology distinguishing one type from another...is highly idiosyncratic.

—Mary Anne Raywid, 1996, p. 17

Once disabused of the notion that small school size all by itself is somehow magical, educators, students, parents, and others are better situated to appreciate the results that well-conceived and -operated small schools are producing. Before launching into those findings, though, some basic definitions will be helpful. What do we mean by “small” and, for that matter, what do we mean by “schools”?

Not that the researchers and other writers are in complete agreement about these matters. Looking at size, for example, different writers have different opinions about the proper size for a small high school. A few put the maximum at 500 students, but most assert that an upward limit of 400 is best. Others note that the size of the most successful small urban high schools is smaller still, with enrollments closer to 200 than 400. According to Raywid (1999), “In general, those who emphasize the importance of the school as a community tend to set enrollment limits lower than do those who emphasize academic effectiveness, at least as measured by test scores.” (2)

With this in mind, consider the words of veteran small school principal Deborah Meier (1998), who offers an operational rather than numerical perspective:

It helps if schools are of a reasonable size, small enough for faculty members to sit around a table and iron things (such as standards) out, for everyone to be known well by everyone else, and for schools and families to collaborate face-to-face over time. Small enough so that children belong to the same community as the adults in their lives instead of being abandoned in adultless subcultures. Small enough to both feel safe and be safe. Small enough so that phony data can easily be detected by any interested participant. Small enough so that the people most involved can never say they weren't consulted. (86)

This theme of size in relation to collaboration, partnership and community figures prominently throughout the small schools literature. In particular, it reappears as a consideration when researchers and practitioners identify requirements for a successful small school.

It is a testament to human creativity that educators have developed and operate so many different kinds of small learning environments. As Sammon (2000) puts it,

There is no one model for the creation of small learning communities. Their variety is as individual as the schools and school systems in which they are housed. (16)

This variety can be confusing, and the confusion is exacerbated by the fact that different writers sometimes offer different definitions for the same term or subsume some small school categories under others. Raywid (1996) writes:

The nomenclature [for different kinds of small learning units] is awkward—and significant—because the structures range in nature all the way from tentative, semi-units organizationally supplementing a high school's departments to totally separate schools which just happen to be located under the same roof. (16)

Further, for some of the experts, defining is hardly a neutral act; instead, it is suffused with the writers' beliefs about the merits of the different small learning structures.

The following is an attempt to navigate this somewhat precarious territory and bring some clarity to the variety of school types and terminology.

- ***Small learning community.*** Any separately defined, individualized learning unit within a larger school setting. Students and teachers are scheduled together and frequently have a common area of the school in which to hold most or all of their classes (Sammon, 2000).
- ***Autonomous small school.***¹ May be in its own building or in a building with another school(s), but is organizationally, fiscally, and instructionally independent. Its teachers and students are self-selected. In theory, a large school could create small learning communities that would be autonomous, but experience shows that this is difficult to achieve, and therefore most truly autonomous small schools begin their lives with students and teachers who are new to the buildings they inhabit. Many researchers and practitioners regard a high level of autonomy as a prerequisite for school success. Consequently, they define an ideally autonomous school as one that controls, not only its structure, budget, and learning program, but also (1) establishes its own transportation and school-day schedule; (2) has its own teachers and students; (3) has its own classroom space; and (4) once basic agreements are struck with others in the building about schedules and facilities, its use of space and time cannot be infringed upon.

¹ This information is drawn from the work of Ancess & Ort, 1999; Gladden, 1998; Gregory, 2000; Kacan & Schipp, 2000; Lashway, 1998-99; Raywid, 1996; Small Schools Project, 2001a; and Wasley & Lear, 2001. Long lists of sources such as this are likely to be distracting to readers if sprinkled through the text. Consequently, citations in text are used only for quotations or references to specific content. Otherwise, supporting resources are cited in footnotes.

- **Focus school (also called “theme” or “theme-based” school).** Small school practitioners and researchers use these terms to describe a type of new, autonomous, small urban school that was created with a “focus”—a theme around which teachers and students coalesce because of their shared interest in it. This distinctiveness, together with autonomy and secured space, is regarded as responsible for the impressive success many of these schools have achieved.²
- **Historically small school.** Researchers Wasley, et al. (2000) use this term to denote a small school that predates the new, small-by-design schools in Chicago that are the focus of their large-scale study. Such a school is also an autonomous small school.
- **Freestanding school.** Despite the term, a freestanding school does not necessarily have its own building. It denotes a school with its own space, budget, and principal that may or may not share a building (Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Small Schools Project, 2001b). As such, a freestanding school is a type of autonomous small school.
- **Alternative school.** The Small Schools Information Center of the Architecture Research Institute (1999) writes that “the word ‘alternative’ is used in different ways in various cities” (2) and goes on to explain the differences. Duke and Trautvetter (2001) offer this definition:

“Alternative school” may refer to any freestanding school or school-within-a-school, but increasingly the term is associated with small schools for students who have been suspended or expelled from a regular school, or who have experienced academic difficulties. A large high school may contain an alternative school, which may operate during regular school hours or as an after-school or evening program. (5)

- **School-within-a-school.**³ A school-within-a-school (SWAS) operates within a larger “host” school, either as the only SWAS in that school or one of several. Schools-within-schools (SWS) represent different degrees of autonomy, but typically have their own personnel and program, and their students and teachers are self-selected. Staff of a SWAS must defer to the principal of their host school on matters of school safety and building operations. Its principal reports directly to a district official. Writers often use the terms “school-with-a-school” and “schools-within-schools” as umbrella terms for other kinds of small learning communities.
- **School-within-a-building.** Conceiving of SWS as autonomous units, both Raywid and Meier have suggested that the term school-within-a-building might be preferable to SWAS, because it reinforces the concept of autonomy.

² See Gladden, 1998; Klonsky & Klonsky, 1999; and Duke & Trautvetter, 2001.

³ This definition is compiled from definitions provided by the Architecture Research Institute, 1999; Duke & Trautvetter, 2001, Kacan & Schipp, 2000; Lashway, 1998-99; Raywid, 1996; Small Schools Workshop, 2001b; USDOE, 2001; and Wasley, et al., 2000.

- **House plan.**⁴ In a house plan, students and teachers are assigned to smaller groupings within the larger school. Students in each house may take some of their core courses together and share the same teachers, and each has its own discipline policies and student government. The house plan usually coexists with the larger school's departmentalized structure and shares that school's curriculum, instructional approaches, and sometimes its extracurricular program as well. Houses may be organized by grade level, such as the "ninth grade house plan" or vertically, encompassing two or more grades. In Sammon's view, a house is the same thing as a small learning community.
- **Career academy.**⁵ A career academy is a school-within-a-school that focuses on a broad occupational area, such as engineering, natural resources, or the hospitality industry. Teachers and students are self-selected. The career academy curriculum directs students' attention to the application of school-based learning by including in its curriculum work-based learning experiences with businesses in the community.
- **Pathway, pod or cluster.** These terms usually refer to a sequence of career-related and/or academic courses that lead toward graduation. Students may or may not be scheduled together in a manner that constitutes a small learning community. According to Sammon (2000), when they are, each pod or cluster contains classrooms for teachers of core subjects and perhaps a teacher workroom. A typical arrangement might involve four classrooms—English, social studies, science, and mathematics—with the four teachers functioning as a team, instructing the same group of 80 to 120 students and planning together. Students usually take additional subjects elsewhere in the school, but at least half of each day is spent in the same pod or cluster. (5)

Career clusters or pathways are broad-based industry areas, which include all careers from technical through professional levels. They provide a structure that organizes students according to their career goals and interests and become the foundation for integration of high academic standards, technical skills and knowledge. Career clusters identify academic and technical skills needed by students as they transition from high school to postsecondary education and/or employment (USDOE, 2001).

- **Minischool.**⁶ A minischool is somewhat more distinctive than a house, but less so than a SWAS, in that it has its own curriculum and instructional approach, but it is still under the authority of the host school and shares that school's resources.
- **Multiplex.**⁷ In a multiplex arrangement, the entire building is made up of schools-within-a-school, usually three of them, according to Wasley, et al. (2000). The term includes new buildings that are specifically designed to house multiple small schools.

⁴ Architecture Research Institute, 1999; Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Kacan & Schipp, 2000; Raywid, 1996; Sammon, 2000; and USDOE, 2001 contributed to this definition.

⁵ See Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Sammon, 2000; and USDOE 2001.

⁶ See Architecture Research Institute, 1999; Cushman, 1999; Lashway, 1998-99; and Raywid, 1996.

⁷ This definition is drawn from the work of Architecture Research Institute, 1999; Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Small Schools Workshop, 2001b, and Wasley, et al., 2000.

- **Multischool.** A multischool is another term for a multiplex.
- **Scatterplex.**⁸ A scatterplex is like a multiplex, except that the two or more small schools that share a principal are in different buildings.
- **Charter School.**⁹ Usually but not always small, a charter school is a public school that operates under a contract which specifies its mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success. Depending on the school, charters may be operated by educators, parents, community leaders, educational entrepreneurs or some combination of these. The principal is granted some degree of decision-making freedom and is held accountable for the performance of the school by the entity granting the contract, typically the state or the local board.
- **Pilot school.** “Pilot school” is the term given to new small schools in Boston which, although they are not charter schools, do have full control over curriculum, staffing, and the school calendar. “Their objective is to provide successful new models. And if successful, influence the entire Boston school system.” (Architecture Research Institute, 1999, 2)
- **Magnet school.** Magnet schools usually have an academic specialization focus and typically draw students from the entire school district (USDOE, 2001). There may or may not be admission requirements to attend. Sammon (2000) provides a reminder that magnet schools began almost 30 years ago for the purpose of desegregation without forced busing (14).

Happily, understanding the workings and virtues of small learning communities does not require memorizing these definitions with all their nuances. For our purposes here, the main point to remember is Raywid’s earlier observation about different degrees of autonomy—that SLCs range all the way from part-time supplements to a large school’s operations to schools that are totally separate.

⁸ See Architecture Research Institute, 1999; Small Schools Workshop, 2001b; and Wasley, et al., 2000.

⁹ Charter school information is from Architecture Research Institute, 1999; Small Schools Workshop, 2001b; and WestEd/USDOE, 2000.



Key Elements of Success

Analyses...are beginning to appear of the essential elements of small schools and the traits associated with success. Lists differ, though common themes are clearly discernible.

— Mary Anne Raywid, 1999, p. 3

This report has noted that some downsizing efforts have failed to improve the quality of schooling and that small size alone is certainly not enough to do so. What small size does is to provide an optimal setting for high-quality schooling to take place. It facilitates the use of organizational arrangements and instructional methods that lead to a more positive school climate and higher student learning. Experienced practitioners and knowledgeable researchers have much to say about the conditions and practices that can enable small schools to achieve their potential—to become true learning communities. These are organized within the categories of self-determination, identity, personalization, support for teaching, and functional accountability.

Self-Determination

Autonomy¹⁰

Autonomy gets first mention because those who study small-school restructuring agree that it is vital. New small learning communities must be able to create a vision and bring it into being, and the experts insist that this will not happen without broad decision-making authority. Best of all, they say, is the authority to make decisions in all key spheres of activity—space, schedule, budget, curriculum, instruction, and personnel. They also recognize that this is often not feasible, but they do recommend that the subunits within a subdivided school have as much autonomy as possible. “No school’s autonomy is total, of course,” writes Raywid (1996, 31), “but unless subunits are granted some degree of freedom to determine how to manage them-selves, they will find it almost impossible to establish a distinct identity.” Of the scores of small Chicago schools they studied, Wasley and others (2000) write:

When the small schools were guaranteed enough autonomy to bring their ideas to fruition, they were more invested in the school and its students. Many of the teachers and principals in these small schools were intellectually strong and found the problem-solving that came with creating their own schools very compelling. Ensuring

¹⁰ See Ancess & Ort, 1999; Architecture Research Institute, 1999; Cross City Campaign, 2000a; Cushman, 1999; Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Gewertz, 2001; Gladden, 1998; Lear, 2001a,b; Meier, 1998; Mitchell, 2000; Raywid, 1999; and Wasley, et al., 2000.

that they have the opportunity to bring their ideas to fruition is an important incentive to encouraging teachers to undertake renewal and improved accountability within the system. (65)

Duke and Trautvetter (2001) draw the same conclusion: “Units that enjoy a high degree of autonomy are more likely to generate a unique culture and an inspired commitment to the success of the program” (8). Regarding the New York schools with impressive student achievement and an 89 percent college-going rate, Aness and Ort (1999) attribute much of these schools’ success to the fact that “each school is organizationally fiscally, and instructional independent and autonomous...” (1). Concerns about central office intrusion were raised by many of the researchers and practitioners whose work I consulted, for example:

A critical lesson from the past decade of small-school creation is that such schools need autonomy to succeed. Tom Vander Ark, the executive director of education for the Gates Foundation, maintains that to personalize learning, small schools need charter school-like freedom to govern their own budgets, curricula, and staffing. Centralized district systems and school boards can undermine that independence by keeping control over everything from textbooks to school schedules. (Gewertz, 2001, 4)

Rick Lear of the University of Washington-based Small Schools Project, which provides technical assistance to Gates grant recipients, writes,

Autonomy is critical. To be successful, a small school needs autonomy in terms of budget, staffing, curriculum, scheduling, and focus...In designing a set of small schools that will occupy the same building, imagine the autonomy each school would have if each were located three blocks away from the others. Take that as the starting point, and work backwards. (2001b, 2)

Deborah Meier remarks on the relationship between autonomy and accountability:

It helps if those most directly involved have sufficient autonomy over critical decisions. Only then will it be fair to hold people accountable for the impact of their decisions. This will entail creating democratic adult communities that have the power to make decisions about staffing, leadership, and the full use of their budget as well as about the particulars of scheduling, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. (1998, 87)

Together with autonomy, Raywid has identified—and other researchers have confirmed—the importance of two related elements: separateness and distinctiveness.

Separateness¹¹

In her 1996 review of different kinds of small learning communities, Raywid has this to say:

“Separateness” is both literal and metaphoric. It is a matter of physical space: a group of contiguous rooms set off in some perceptible way from the rest of the building....It is also a matter of psychic distance, consisting of the freedom to pursue a set of values differing from those of the host school....It is also the distance to establish a school climate...and a set of procedures...which differ from those of the host school. (31)

Duke and Trautvetter (2001) stress that, along with its own curricular focus and administration, a small school that shares a building should “have a distinct physical identity” (8). Yet, in a concession to the reality of most school downsizing, they also state that,

where existing facilities have been reorganized into subunits, the most popular approaches have been to designate particular corridors, wings, or floors for particular subunits. These options may not always provide complete separation, but they offer a sense of common identity without major adjustments to the physical plant. (5)

The main point here seems to be that school downsizing planners should establish such physical and psychological boundaries as they can between units, so that the teachers and students begin to identify themselves with the small unit rather than the overall building. Among the “best practices” identified by the Cross City Campaign (2000b, 1) is that “the high school is small or *feels small*” (italics mine). Separateness is an important element in fostering a feeling of smallness.

Distinctiveness¹²

In order for students and teachers to become part of, and cohere around, a small school/learning unit, it must also have a positive attribute or attributes that set it apart from its host school or other “building-mate(s).” Raywid (1996) remarks that “to attract students and to promote a sense of affiliation, the units need to reflect the same sort of individuality and distinctiveness that people do.” She gives as examples “the prominence of humor and/or the featuring of collaboration” (32). Meier writes:

Good schools are filled with particulars—including particular human beings. And it is these human beings that lie at their heart, that explain their surprising successes. In fact, it is these particulars that inspire the passions of those involved and draw upon the best in each. (1996, 86)

¹¹ See Duke & Trautvetter, 2001; Kacan & Schipp, 2000; Raywid, 1996; Visher, Teitelbaum & Emanuel, 1999; and Wasley, et al., 2000.

¹² See Ancess, 1997; Lear, 2001b; Meier, 1998; and Raywid, 1996.

According to Ancess (1997),

Being special has enabled new school starters to break from the deadening uniformity and anonymity of bureaucracy and invigorate the process of schooling...Being special can mean being committed to a specific identity...Being special can be a way new schools distinguish themselves and try to provide an education of distinction for their students.... It can be how a school becomes visible, knowable, and accountable. (8-9)

Self-Selection of Teachers and Students¹³

The most successful restructured learning units are those whose teachers and students have both chosen to be there. This makes sense intuitively, and the Architecture Research Institute researchers make the reasons explicit:

A self-selected staff and constituency results in a school community that is cohesive and committed to common goals. Ideally, therefore, small school teachers must volunteer to work in the school. Similarly, students benefit most when they elect to enroll, and when the student body is assembled on the basis of shared interests. (1999, 3)

In their article promoting small size as a means to decreasing the likelihood of school violence, Raywid and Oshiyama (2000) propose self-selection as an alternative to current methods of student placement: “Why not try interests as the basis for grouping? Why not let teachers who share an interest—in the arts, or in the sea, or in sports, or in critical thinking—band together to offer a program that will attract students with similar interests?” (448).

Flexible Scheduling¹⁴

Many researchers have pointed out that the rigid scheduling of teacher and student time in the typical comprehensive high school has more to do with controlling students’ behavior than with providing meaningful learning experiences for them. By way of contrast, Gregory (2000) points out that

Issues of control seem to disappear in these [small] schools; teachers tend to have equalitarian relationships with their students; and change is a familiar quality of their lives; they seem to be able to respond much more flexibly to new circumstances. (10)

¹³ See Architecture Research Institute, 1999; Cross City Campaign 2000a,b; Gladden, 1998; Klonsky & Klonsky, 1999; Meier, 1998; Raywid & Oshiyama, 2000; Small Schools Project, 2001a; and Small Schools Workshop, 2001a,b.

¹⁴ See Ancess, 1997; Cross City Campaign, 2000b; Fine & Somerville, 1998a; Gregory, 2000; Legters, 1999; NASSP, 1996; Sammon, 2000; and Wasley, et al., 2000.

Small size allows school personnel to make shifts in their schedules as needed to support practices the school deems important, such as curriculum integration, common planning time, sustained blocks of learning time, and community-based learning experiences for students. “Flexible scheduling and faculty teamwork allow for a level of depth and an interdisciplinary approach that provides students with a much richer educational experience,” write Fine and Somerville, in the course of identifying essential attributes for successful small schools (1998a, 106).

Aware of these virtues, the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching included the matter of scheduling among their recommended principles for high school reform: “High schools will develop flexible scheduling that allows for more varied uses of time in order to meet the requirements of the core curriculum” (1996, 45).

Small size does not, of course, insure that a school or learning community will have the control needed to create flexible scheduling; in fact, without concerted effort, it probably will not. But since such control is identified among the reasons that downsized units need maximum autonomy, planners are well-advised to build into newly downsized units as much scheduling autonomy as possible.

Identity

Vision/Mission¹⁵

“There must be a sense of ‘where we are going,’” write Fine and Somerville (1998a, 106). Small school restructuring experts insist that those starting up a new school/learning community must go through the process of creating a vision and mission that can guide and inspire those associated with it. The vision, according to Ancess,

frames discussions on the business of school-keeping and is the foundation on which members of the school community construct common ground and the school culture.
(1997, 3)

Further, it must be able to “coalesce the members of the school community so that they work coherently and collaboratively on behalf of the students toward the achievement of agreed upon goals” (3). Wasley, et al. (2000) also stress the importance of broad-based involvement in the school’s vision, indicating that “all invested stakeholders, including administrators, faculty, students, parents, community members, and external partners, should be in accord and involved in the process of forming, implementing, and sustaining the vision” (64). Differentiating successful from less successful schools in terms of their *application* of the vision, they go on to offer a cautionary note:

¹⁵ See Cross City Campaign, 2000a; Fine & Somerville, 1998a; Mohr, 2000; Sammon, 2000; Small Schools Workshop, 2001a; and Wasley, et al, 2000.

When small schools used their vision or mission as a tool to measure their own progress, they tended to get further than those who rarely referred to it after their initial planning stages. (64)

Thematic Focus¹⁶

In addition to their cultural particularities, successful small schools/units typically have a thematic focus. This may be a specialized curriculum such as a career area, an instructional approach such as project-based learning, a broad topic such as the sea, or some other organizing principle. Typically, students and their parents make decisions about what school the students will attend based on those schools' different areas of focus.

The other meaning of focus is that, in terms of schools, it is the opposite of "comprehensive." A "focus school" does not attempt to be all things to all people; it goes for depth rather than breadth. Lear describes the strategy of such a school in this way:

Out of the universe of things we could do, these are the things we will do, and we will do them very, very well...New small schools should be elegant in an aesthetic or mathematical sense, with nothing wasted, nothing extra. (2001a, 1)

Focus on Student Learning¹⁷

Since the days of the early "effective schools" research, it has been documented that the most successful schools practice a kind of cheerfully unrelenting push for high achievement for all of their students. Sometimes called "academic press," this collective focus says, in essence, that it is not enough to care about students—or rather, that "caring about children means caring about their learning and being quite serious about it" (Mohr, 2000, 156). Mohr goes on to say that "many of the early small schools—alternative schools—got the reputation for creating pleasant climates but not fostering serious academic work" (156).

A supportive social environment is rather like small size itself; it is an important precondition for productive schooling, but does not guarantee it. Gewertz (2001) quotes Fine as saying that

Small...will produce a sense of belonging almost immediately, but hugging is not the same as algebra. Rigor and care must be braided together, or we run the risk of creating small, nurturing environments that aren't schools. (4)

Ancess (1997) issues a similar exhortation to those involved in the contemporary small schools movement:

¹⁶ See Architecture Research Institute, 1999; Lear, 2001b; Small Schools Project, 2001a; Small Schools Workshop, 2001b; Wasley, et al., 2000; and Wasley & Lear, 2001.

¹⁷ See Ancess, 1997; Ancess & Ort, 1999; Gewertz, 2001; Mohr, 2000; and Wasley, et al., 2000.

[I]f all these new schools are is small and humane, that will not be enough. And if the opportunity to develop close relationships with students and know them well is not leveraged on behalf of improving opportunities for their intellectual development, achievement, and success, the promise of these new small schools will be squandered.
(1)

Finally, Wasley, et al. (2000) quotes the Consortium on Chicago School Reform findings indicating that “students learn substantially more when they experience high levels of academic press and strong social support together, but they learn much less when they experience only one of these conditions” (65).

Detailed Planning¹⁸

Out of the experience of seasoned small-school practitioners comes the observation that, while the prospect of starting a new school is exciting, the detailed planning that it requires can be tedious. Nevertheless, such planning is essential for success.

Attending to details is grueling, focused work devoid of the glamour that draws many into school founding. But clear, concrete, and detailed underpinnings and procedures are behind every powerful idea that schools faithfully implement. These develop over time through trial, error, self-scrutiny, and relentless revision by those individuals responsible for their implementation. (Ancess, 1997, 14)

The appendix to Ancess’s paper provides detailed guidelines for developers of downsizing plans.¹⁹ Suffice it here to include key elements. “A useful plan for implementing a school” writes Ancess, “needs to include a vision statement and a description of the following components:

- The proposed student population and the recruitment, admission, and acceptance/rejection process
- The projected school organization when it is complete
- Administrative procedures
- The instructional program
- Student and school assessment plans
- Staffing categories, roles, level of experience, and hiring procedures
- Governance structure
- Parent involvement
- Mechanisms for professional development
- Mechanisms for internal and external communication
- Methods for assessing how well the strategies for implementing the vision are likely to achieve it

¹⁸ See Ancess, 1997; Legters, 1999; Sammon, 2000; and Wasley, et al., 2000.

¹⁹ See also Sammon (2000), which is a book offering guidelines for planning and implementing smaller learning communities. In addition, see Wasley, et al. (2000), who identify conditions for startup and for ongoing development.

- A student program for the first term
- Sample student and teacher schedules for one week
- A budget for the first year
- Space needs for the first year and a projection for the complete school, and
- A detailed plan for the first day, first week, and the first term” (5)

The researchers at the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR) recommend that schools spend a full year on the planning process (Legters, 1999, 21).

Personalization

Knowing Students Well²⁰

Small school/learning unit proponents typically declare that a major reason these schools are safer and more successful than large schools is that staff members are much more likely to know all of their students well. When teachers and students are able to build relationships, both are motivated to work and to make a success of the schooling enterprise. Teachers, moreover, can become knowledgeable about students’ learning strengths and needs and identify ways to respond to them in a way that is not possible in the typical large high school. Lear (2001a) regards knowing students well as being second only to autonomy among critical elements for success:

High personalization follows closely after autonomy as a key requirement. Schools are filled with particular, individual kids, and only real, particular knowledge of each of those kids—and the freedom to act on that knowledge...can make a school truly successful. (2)

Personnel in the new generation of small schools seek to capitalize on the possibilities offered by small size by building into their structures ways for staff to know all students well. Writing about successful small schools in New York City, Ancess and Ort (1999) note that,

Each school has strategies that enable teachers to know students well, to closely monitor their progress, and to provide academic and social supports and interventions necessary for success. (3)

Of the Chicago small schools they have helped to start and maintain, Klonsky and Klonsky observe that “each has...a commitment to knowing each student as an individual” (1999, 38). As a practical matter, what this means to the Small Schools Project people in Washington is that every student is known well by more than one adult in the school and has an

²⁰ See Ancess & Ort, 1999; Cross City Campaign, 2000b; Gregory, 2000; Klonsky & Klonsky, 1999; Lear, 2001a; Mohr, 2000; Raywid & Oshiyama, 2000; Small Schools Project, 2001a; USDOE, 2001; Wasley, et al., 2000; and Wasley & Lear, 2001.

advisor/advocate who works closely with him and his family to plan a personalized program (2001a, 1).

Heterogeneity/Nontracking²¹

Many researchers, external service providers and experienced small-school practitioners tell us that the positive achievement and very positive equity results they see are due largely to the fact that the schools with which they are involved do not practice academic tracking. For a long time researchers have been reporting that minority and poor young people are overrepresented in low tracks in conventional large high schools.²² They have also found that the learning content and methods offered to low-track classes are typically far less stimulating to students than those of higher-track classes. Researchers and practitioners have also known for many years that, ordinarily, once placed in a given track, a student's fate is sealed: the system is not sensitive to changes in students' intellectual development and does not review placements for appropriateness. Probably for the foregoing reasons, research has been reporting for decades that placement in a low or "average" track has a negative impact on students' academic performance and self-concepts—and that tracking confers few benefits even for those in high tracks. Yet, despite these repeatedly corroborated findings, most high schools continue to track their students. Sometimes this obduracy is based on lack of understanding about the negative effects of tracking, but just as often, school personnel simply do not know what else to do. And it may be that so long as we continue to send students to large comprehensive high schools, there will be no real alternative.

Small school practitioners, however, have found that heterogeneous groups of students—those that large high schools do not seem to be able to serve effectively—can be accommodated and educated productively in small learning environments. After spending considerable time "in the trenches," Mohr observes that,

Many effective small schools are organized in heterogeneous groupings within which individual needs are met.... Teachers can begin to learn how to meet multiple needs of students with multiple abilities through the use of groups, anecdotal evaluations, and individual conferences. This means knowing students in a way that is much more thorough and much more personal than is possible in large high schools.... (2000, 150)

There is deliberate tracking, of course, but there is also inadvertent tracking. Even when our intentions are good, Legters (1999) and others warn that "the forces of academic differentiation run so deep in high schools that tracking may be sustained in subtle ways" (19) and gives as real-life examples creating some career academies that are geared to college

²¹ See Gladden, 1998; Lear, 2001b; Legters, 1999; Mohr, 2000; NASSP, 1996; Oxley, 1996; Raywid, 2000; and Small Schools Project, 2001a.

²² See Oakes, 1985.

prep students, while others are geared to those who are “less motivated.” Fine and Somerville (1998a) write that “small schools must transform the entire school and school system, not become either magnets or a euphemism for tracking” (112). Lear (2001b) echoes this concern and insists that

...the population of each school should be very close to the overall school population in terms of demographics, or you'll almost certainly create one or more “elite” schools from the start. (2)

Looping²³

In Fine and Somerville’s article on essential small-school elements, they state that, “To support high achievement for all students, creative educational options—such as having one group of teachers remain with the same students over time—are made available to teams” (1998a, 108). And indeed, experienced practitioners and researchers typically note that in successful small schools a given group of students often remains with the same teachers for multiple years. This arrangement assures that students will be known well by more than one adult and is conducive to the formation of a community of learners. Oxley’s study of downsizing efforts led her to conclude that

Small-unit organization...allows teachers and students in large schools to form bonds of familiarity, identification, and support. In small units, comparatively small numbers of students and teachers interact with one another; these groups are stable across years, and the range of activities they share is expanded. Under these conditions, students and teachers are more likely to get to know one another, to respect and support each other. (1996, 46)

Finally, the Texas Education Agency researchers found that one of the main strategies used “to create a community of learners” in their study is “academic teaming, in which an interdisciplinary team of teachers shares a common group of students” (1999, 27).

Parent and Community Involvement²⁴

The research base on the importance of parent and community involvement with elementary and middle schools is larger than that pertaining to high school. The recent literature on small learning communities, however, identifies parent and community participation in the life of the school as both needed and easier to achieve than it is in large schools. For one thing, parents are often the driving force—or one of the driving forces—for establishing small learning communities, and they often have an ongoing hand in both governance and instruction. In addition, like school staff and students, parents respond favorably to the smaller-scale and more personalized climate.

Nearly every report consulted in preparation for this paper mentions the key role of parents in these small school communities. Among the characteristics of successful

²³ See Cross City Campaign, 2000; Fine & Somerville, 1998; Oxley, 1996; Small Schools Project, 2000a; and Texas Education Agency, 1999.

²⁴ Aness, 1997; Cushman, 1999; Fine & Somerville, 1998a,b; Gewertz, 2001; Gladden, 1998; Lear, 2001b; Meier, 1998; Mohr, 2000; Oxley, 1996; Sammon, 2000; Small Schools Project, 2001a; Small Schools Workshop, 2001a; and Wasley, et al., 2000.

SLCs with which the Washington Small Schools Project works, is that “they view parents as critical allies, and find significant ways to include them in the life of the school community” (2001a, 1). In Ancess’s experience as a small school principal who has participated in the startup of several small schools, “the integral involvement of parents in the formation of a new school can have a powerful impact on parents personally and on conditions at the school” (1997, 11). The Architecture Research Institute’s researchers state that “parents must be more involved in [the school’s] operation and in their children’s performance there” (1999, 3). Mitchell (2000) writes optimistically about the role of parents in the deliberately small contemporary school:

Small schools may revive the role of parents and neighbors in the governance of their school. Over the years, large, centralized school systems have steadily eroded this role... In many of the new generation of small schools, parents and community members are actively involved in running the school. (6)

In a section of their report called, “What Makes a Small School Work?” Wasley, et al. (2000) include as a key component that, “Relationships with parents are strong and ongoing.” Within the successful small schools they studied, advisors and parents communicate regularly, and some of them schedule individual advisor-student-parent meetings several times a year (23).

Based on the experience of successfully downsized schools, Ancess (1997) offers advice to those who are just beginning:

Neighborhood organizations, businesses, social agencies, local colleges and universities, and the central/district office are among those that constitute the extended community. When the new school reaches out to forge alliances and establish relationships, it can generate good will, confidence, local support, and resources, all of which contribute to its development. (11)

One type of SLC, the career academy, is especially dependent on relationships with the surrounding community. Along with a broad-based career theme and an integrated sequence of courses, Sammon (2000) writes that “each academy has work-based experiences [and] strong partnerships with business and community partners” (13). Service learning projects also involve interacting with community groups. Wasley, et al. (2000) provide a window into school-community relations in Chicago’s successfully downsized schools. Their observation about reengagement of the community parallels Mitchell’s comments above about the reinvolvement of parents:

External partners, whether they are cultural institutions, businesses, or community advocacy groups spend time inside schools, and could know teachers, administrators, children, and their families. To reengage these constituents in our most important public institutions is by itself a tremendous boon. (63)

In addition to the support provided by community groups, individual community members also make contributions, such as reviewing and responding to students' work portfolios and exhibitions (Wasley & Lear, 2001, 24).

Researchers as far back as Barker and Gump (1964) observed that, in small schools, the participation of all students is needed to populate teams, clubs, student government, and so on—no one is redundant. It is likewise true that the small learning community can make productive use of the talents of as many parents and community members as wish to be involved.

Support for Teaching

Leadership/Decision Making²⁵

Describing the function of leaders in small learning communities, Aness (1997) waxes poetic:

Effective leaders feel the pulse, sing the song, and beat the rhythm of their school. They get to know it inside-out so that they can negotiate the competing priorities of the different stakeholders and mediate the inevitable tensions. They do what is necessary to make the center cohere. (16-17)

She goes on to say that these leaders “strive for the authority of competence and commitment rather than hierarchical status. They seek respect rather than fear” (17).

Leadership cannot be the exclusive purview of principals—many SLCs don't even have a full-time or on-site principal—but is assumed by teacher-leaders as well. Wasley, et al. (2000) found that, in Chicago's many successful small schools, principals often teach and teachers make administrative decisions about matters directly involving students (23). Aness identifies benefits associated with such an arrangement:

Leaders who also teach have direct access to the pedagogical challenges and dilemmas that confront the staff on a daily basis. They can stay in close touch with the classroom. They can understand intimately the working conditions teachers need in order to be effective. They can use their firsthand experiences and knowledge of the school's learners to participate with the faculty in fashioning solutions. When new school directors can do the thing they are asking others to do, when they can be instructional as well as administrative leaders, they enjoy greater credibility with their staff and so does the pedagogy they want staff to implement. (1997, 18)

Cushman (1999), together with the principal of three small schools that each have a teacher-director, elaborate further:

²⁵ Aness, 1997; Cross City Campaign, 2000b; Cushman, 1999; Gladden, 1998; Mohr, 2000; Small Schools Workshop, 2001b; Wasley, et al., 2000, and Wasley & Lear, 2000.

The new administrative arrangement not only empowers teachers but frees up more of [the principal's] schedule, allowing her to work collaboratively with her faculty on important issues. "I spend more time in shared decision making with the leaders of the small learning communities," she says. "I'm in classrooms more, helping teachers with instructional matters. I have time to make stronger connections with our community partners." (2)

Oxley's 1996 research led to this observation: "The research on school size... suggests that one way in which large schools produce negative student outcomes is through their adverse effect on school management, particularly on consensus-building and staff involvement in decision-making" (46). By contrast, successful SLCs are characterized by decision making processes that are broadly inclusive. Principals and teacher leaders, other staff, students, parents, and other community members come together to reach decisions that will affect the entire school community. Among the best practices identified by the Cross City Campaign (2000b) is that "both students and teachers exercise choice and make decisions in all aspects of school life" (22). Mohr's take on the issue of shared leadership and decision making is that "[b]uilding a small school is too much trouble unless an integral part of its mission is creating new ways of working together and shifting power and authority" (2000, 147).

In addition to being shared, decision making in successful SLCs is also based on—and motivated by—the review of data about the effectiveness of current practices. The large-scale, book-length study Wasley and others (2000) conducted with Chicago's small schools led them to offer this finding:

...looking for evidence of problems from real sources of data within the school strengthened the resolve of both faculty and administrators to take meaningful steps to improve student conditions.... When the whole group was working on a solution, students within the school got a more coherent message about what they needed to do to improve. (64)

These researchers also encourage personnel in colleges and universities to "engage with small schools in action research to enable data-driven decision making [and] conduct reciprocal research that will help the small schools understand their strengths and weaknesses" (68).

Professional Development and Collaboration²⁶

Mohr (2000) identifies some of the features of the kind of professional learning community at work in successful SLCs:

Teachers who work on teams not only improve their craft but also begin to see the patterns in their work and relationships. They learn together, critiquing one

²⁶ See Ancess, 1997; Ancess & Ort, 1999; Lear, 2001b; Legters, 1999; Mohr, 2000; Oxley, 1996; Sammon, 2000; Small Schools Workshop, 2000a; Wasley, et al., 2000 and Wasley & Lear, 2000.

another's practice by looking at student work. Principals who have their own networks learn from and with each other, building professional knowledge. Having a regular time to talk with other school leaders about their work means improving their craft, developing intellectually, and seeing the similarities across schools. (148)

The key features of a professional learning community, as identified in this literature, are the related elements of professional development and teacher collaboration.

Like the general effective schooling research, research on SLCs has demonstrated the importance of strong programs of professional development. For successful SLCs, Legters (1999) writes:

New models of professional development are needed—models in which teachers take an active role in their own growth and experience learning opportunities that are coherent, long range, and closely linked to immediate classroom contexts, school goals and real curricula. (21)

In the SLC research, the most effective professional learning activities are provided primarily within the schools or their networks. Ancess and Ort (1999) found that,

If there is smart staffing, where a core of experienced teachers can mentor and socialize new or inexperienced teachers, a school can conduct much of its own professional development reinforcing interdependency and staff expertise. (11)

Wasley and Lear (2001) make a similar observation. In their experience with high-performing SLCs, “Professional development is ongoing, embedded, and site-specific” (23). Most of these schools design their own professional development, which is focused on how to work more effectively with students. School staff review students’ work using protocols developed with external service providers (23-24).

The Wasley, et al. researchers write that,

In some of the strongest small schools, we saw that faculty members worked hard to identify professional-development opportunities that helped improve the school, that strengthened their own professional skills, and positively affected student achievement...collegial interaction while learning new things can extend the depth of everyone's understanding. (2000, 65)

The need to provide adequate time for teacher collaboration and planning appears over and over as a critical feature in the SLC literature. “From the beginning,” writes Ancess, “time must be set aside for faculty to meet regularly, converse about students and inquire, problem solve, learn, and grow their pedagogy thoughtfully and critically together” (1997, 11). In successful SLCs, according to Fine and Somerville (1998a), “time is given for common planning and exchanging valuable information about students—and there is well-funded time for professional development” (108). By providing time and encouragement for improvement work, writes Gladden, “constant proactive small-scale change becomes the norm of the institution” (1998, 112).

Integrated Curriculum/Teaching Teams²⁷

The discussion of curriculum quality earlier in this document established that even very small schools are able to offer a solid core curriculum comparable to that of larger schools. The small schools research also shows that a small school is able to do this by having teachers abandon traditional subject specialization in favor of integrating the curriculum around the school's thematic focus and forming teams to work with students on learning projects. "With their teachers, young people engage in challenging inquiry into topics that matter," says the Cross City Campaign's (2000a) best practices listing, and Fine and Somerville (1998a) provide further description:

The curriculum is cohesive—the many subject and course offerings fit together and create a solid, well-rounded education. Flexible scheduling and faculty teamwork allow for a level of depth and an interdisciplinary approach that provides students with a much richer educational experience. (106)

Gladden adds that the curriculum is cohesive over time as well, providing students "a continuous educational experience across a range of grades" (1998, 116).

Large Repertoire of Instructional Strategies²⁸

Smaller learning environments make it possible for teachers to identify and respond to the individual needs of their students in ways that often cannot even be attempted in large schools. Consequently, teachers in successful small schools/units develop and use a larger repertoire of instructional strategies than is commonly practiced in large schools. Most researchers and practitioners cite teachers' ability to tailor instruction to the individual student among the virtues of small schools.

According to Fine and Somerville (1998b), "the individualized approach to teaching and learning in small schools allows for the use of a variety of teaching methods to ensure that all students are exposed to rigorous curricula and achieve high standards" (106). Along with factors such as greater safety and a strong sense of accountability between schools and families, Wasley and others (2000, 33) identify "a greater variety in instructional approaches" as a key reason for the successes of the Chicago small schools they studied. "[A] more varied instructional repertoire for working with students" is also identified among the reasons the teachers in small schools felt a greater sense of self-efficacy than those in large schools. In particular, small size facilitates the use of active instructional techniques, such as inquiry learning, cooperative learning and work-based and other project-based learning (Legters, 1999, 19; Architecture Research Institute, 1999, 3).

Functional Accountability

²⁷ See Ancess & Ort, 1999; Cross City Campaign 2000a,b; Fine & Somerville, 1998a; Gladden, 1998; Legters, 1999; Mohr, 2000; NASSP, 1996; Oxley, 1996; Small Schools Workshop, 2001a,b; and Wasley, et al., 2000.

²⁸ See Architecture Research Institute, 1999; Fine & Somerville, 1998b; Legters, 1999; Oxley, 1996; Roellke, 1996; and Wasley, et al., 2000.

Multiple Forms of Assessment²⁹

Apropos of active learning, small school practitioners and researchers also claim that having students *demonstrate* their learning (in addition to taking the obligatory standardized tests) extends both students' learning and teachers' understanding of their students' learning needs. Even though "standardized test scores rule the political roost," as Small Schools Workshop staff put it, small school practitioners also need to "develop assessments that take advantage of personalized learning" (2001a, 2). Fine and Somerville (1998a) stress that schools "need to measure what students can do as well as what they know [and] this requires creative assessment techniques—not just multiple choice tests" (112). They also remind us that these assessments need to connect with values beyond the school: "It is important for performance-based standards and content-rich assessments to reflect communitywide consensus and have meaning in the community" (112). Wasley and Lear even recommend bringing the community into the process of assessing students' work by creating opportunities for them to review and comment on students' portfolios and exhibitions (2000, 24).

Each of the successful New York small schools studied by Ancess and Ort (1999), "has developed a performance assessment system that enables teachers and students to assess their work using multiple indicators and multiple instruments and that facilitates continuous improvement" (4). The use of assessment data to check the progress of the school as well as that of the individual students is also cited by the Small Schools Project. Among SSP's "core of common characteristics" exhibited by viable small schools is that "they use multiple forms of assessment to report on student accomplishment and to guide their efforts to improve their own school" (2001a, 2).

Accountability/Credibility³⁰

Ultimately, of course, schools will be held accountable for results, and that is as it should be:

Accountability must be authentic and interwoven throughout the school by the people at the school level. Teachers, parents, administrators, students, and community members must be held accountable for students' achievement of rigorous curricula, graduation, and future success in postsecondary education and careers. (Fine & Somerville, 1998a, 110)

Yet, schools require time to bring about improvements in student results—some researchers say three years or more, although many new small schools have seen such changes much sooner than that. In any case, there are indicators that can demonstrate accountability and establish credibility with stakeholders in advance of dramatic changes in student performance. Ancess (1997) writes

²⁹ See Ancess, 1997; Ancess & Ort, 1999; Fine & Somerville, 1998a; Legters, 1999; Small Schools Project, 2001a; Small Schools Workshop, 2001a; Wasley, et al., 2000; and Wasley & Lear, 2001.

³⁰ See Ancess, 1997; Fine & Somerville, 1998a; Lee & Loeb, 2000; Mohr, 2000; and Wasley, et al., 2000.

Although the percentage of graduates and the list of schools to which graduates are accepted are two of the most powerful credibility tests, other indicators develop a school's credibility prior to its delivering a graduating class. These include: a safe and orderly environment; accessible, responsive, and caring leaders and teachers; good teaching; delivery on critical aspects of the vision; instruction that is interesting, exciting, demanding, and supports students' success; and a steady stream of evidence attesting to student learning, progress, and achievement. (12)

Several researchers place particular emphasis on one accountability indicator: a teaching staff with an attitude of efficacy, commitment, and collective responsibility for student learning (Lee & Loeb, 2000, 23-24; Mohr, 2000, 156; Wasley, et al., 2000, 38). Meier (1998) adds that schools can become more accountable by (1) creating strong internal accountability systems; (2) being accountable to other schools in their networks for the quality of their work through, for example, acting as one another's critical friends; (3) having their operations reviewed by neutral, "noncollegial" parties, such as formal review panels and public auditors; and (4) providing a shared body of credible information as a basis for reflections and judgments (89).

Districts, Boards, and Legislatures³¹

No school reform effort can succeed without the support of the school district administration and other key entities beyond the school. Ancess (1997) devotes considerable attention to this topic. She notes that state and local bureaucracies are often regarded "as obstacles instead of the supports they were intended to be" (16). A realist, Ancess goes on to point out that these entities "are crucial to the survival of new schools because they control information and access to resources" (16). Moreover,

since access to information and the acquisition of resources are critical to new school development, new school founders who develop a sophisticated knowledge and understanding of their bureaucracy and learn how business gets done, who is who, and how to network and negotiate put their school at a clear advantage. (16)

She suggests that school people identify and connect with those individuals within bureaucracies who will interpret regulations to the advantage of the school and help to locate needed resources.

"Obtaining the support of the superintendent, school board, and school principal [who presides over multiple SLCs] is also essential," writes Dewees (1999, 2), in the context of discussing the requirements for a school-within-a-school to be successful. Ancess and Ort (1999) provide detail about the nature of this essential support. They indicate that the successes achieved by recently created small schools-within-schools in New York are partly due to a new kind of relationship with the board of education. From their involvement with creating a dozen new SLCs from large, failing high schools, they suggest that such a change requires that the board negotiate a new regulatory relationship with the campuses and individual schools. Specifically, they say, the focus needs to shift from compliance monitoring to support, technical assistance, and collaboration. The

³¹ See Ancess, 1997; Ancess & Ort, 1999; Dewees, 1999; Gewertz, 2001; Wasley, et al., 2000; and Wasley & Lear, 2001.

board needs to formulate policies for building and school self-governance, school size, enrollment, and safeguards against administrative discontinuities. Their experience suggests that it is also necessary for the board to develop allocation formulae to insure sufficient funds for resources, staffing positions, and management (4).

Wasley, et al. (2000) also note that the contemporary, deliberately small school is a new kind of creature for which existing policies and procedures do not work well. “Some board policies and procedures [in Chicago] that were designed with larger schools in mind...clash with the new policies and procedures being developed for the new small schools” (51). Consequently, “[a]ny system considering a move to small schools will have to confront the need to rethink and redesign major policies and common practices, since most of those principles were designed for larger schools” (66). The researchers make the following recommendation for districts that want to see the new SLCs succeed:

Provide waivers for smaller schools that release them from conflicting district policies; schools should be freed from policies requiring a particular curricular approach until such time as the school has demonstrated that its own approach isn't working. Separate schools-within-schools from their host schools, so that they are not subjected to the same kinds of policies as their larger, failing counterparts. Allow schools to negotiate student admissions procedures in keeping with the district's policies regarding equity. Redesign support for professional development that is building based and focused on the particular skills and knowledge students need. (67)

Finally, according to Wasley and Lear (2001), “[s]chool boards or state legislators often insist that the reform efforts provide data about improvements quickly—data that the larger [host] school is rarely requested or able to provide” (25). There are accountability indicators that are reasonable for boards and legislatures to request and that they should request during a school's initial operations (more below), but researchers insist that dramatic changes in student performance is not one of them.

Networking with Other Small Learning Communities³²

Passing mention has been made of networking among SLCs, both fledgling and well established, for purposes such as professional development. Researchers and experienced small school staff identify networking as a powerful source of support and encourage SLCs to improve their chances of success by connecting with one another. Together with efforts to build a strong internal community, Ancess (1997) notes that “networking with like-minded schools provides external support” (10). Specifically,

Networks that connect new schools to other like-minded schools mitigate against the pain and vulnerability of isolation inherent in school-starting and school-keeping. There can be both political and educational safety and freedom in numbers. Membership in the network can give a school the legitimacy and freedom to pursue

³² See Ancess, 1997; Ancess & Ort, 1999; Meier, 1998; Mohr, 2000; and Wasley, et al., 2000.

an innovative course. It can broaden the new school's learning context by providing it with access to experienced schools as well as other new schools. (12)

Meier (1998) sees participation in networks as a way that SLCs can increase their accountability. She argues that “schools must answer to one another for the quality of their work” and advocates the creation of “networks of sister schools” whose members utilize one another as critical friends (89). Mohr (2000) agrees and encourages schools to build “networks that provide genuine accountability, the kind that comes from commitment, not compliance” (157). Wasley, et al. (2000) even encourage those who fund SLC development to make it their business “to network new schools so that they can learn from one another” (67).

Thoroughgoing Implementation³³

Finally, having learned that unsuccessful downsizing efforts are often the result of shallow implementation, experienced practitioners and researchers strongly recommend that those launching new SLCs install as many of the foregoing practices as they can, as soon as they can. Gladden (1998) writes,

By defining the important characteristics of small schools and understanding how small schools affect educational quality, educators and reformers can help create effective small schools and avoid school “reform” that means nothing more than insignificant reductions or freezes in school size. (114)

Gewertz (2001) quotes Gates Foundation’s education director, Tom Vander Ark as voicing a similar concern: “Large, comprehensive high schools will often do window-dressing reform. Not going far enough is the typical problem” (5). Further, according to Dewees (1999),

The school-within-a-school model has met with varying degrees of success in different settings. The most critical factor for success is a commitment to implementing the program fully....very few school-within-a-school models have been fully implemented. (2)

Wasley and Lear (2001) acknowledge that “making real change in the tightly woven structure of high schools is difficult,” and consequently “schools attempting to become small do too little, too slowly” (24). Raywid (1996) describes a downsizing effort that failed because “the changes had occurred as incremental supplements or add-ons to existing arrangements, rather than replacements of them” (37). Since half-hearted implementation of the small-school concept simply does not bring about real change, Wasley and Lear’s advice is to go for broke: When mired in bureaucracy, habit and resistance to change, “schools need a clean, bold break with practices that have served many students poorly— not a conditional and timid incrementalism” (25).

³³ Dewees, 1999; Gladden, 1998; Meier, 1998; Raywid, 1996; Wasley, et al., 2000; and Wasley & Lear, 2001.

5. Implement schedules flexible enough to accommodate teaching strategies consistent with the ways students learn most effectively and which allow for effective teacher teaming and lesson planning.
6. Institute structural leadership changes that allow for meaningful involvement in decision-making by students, teachers, family members and the community *and* that support effective communication with these groups.
7. Align the school-wide comprehensive, ongoing professional development program and the individual Personal Learning Plans of staff members with the content knowledge and instructional strategies required to prepare students for graduation.