Big Buildings, Small Schools:

Using a Small Schools Strategy for High School Reform

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A number of school districts around the country are using small school development as a central strategy for improving high schools and overhauling the way the district itself does business. Driven by an increasing sense of urgency and frustration with reforms that fail to fundamentally change teaching quality or the nature of student-teacher relationships, they are transforming large, under-performing high schools into "education complexes" made up of multiple autonomous small schools under one roof.

For school districts, this conversion process offers a potentially powerful opportunity for a "defining moment" of change—an opportunity to provide the most fertile conditions for excellent teaching and learning. A small schools strategy provides educational leaders with an opportunity to fundamentally rethink such key areas as administrative structures, staff roles, student/teacher relationships, course sequences, subject matter, the use of time, community partnerships, and parent engagement.

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Key Decision Points: The Pace of Change and the Locus of Control

Communities undertaking a small schools strategy are developing answers to two basic issues: how quickly to proceed and what process to undertake in developing and managing small schools.

The Pace of Change: Incremental vs. Big Bang: Using the "incremental" approach, Oakland, California, is growing new small schools in the corners of existing large schools; the small schools will supplant the large one when they reach capacity at all grade levels. In this approach, a school district transforms a large comprehensive high school over a period of several years, without a dramatic closing of the existing school, but the district is clear from the beginning that the end goal is a campus of multiple, autonomous small schools.

In 1993, New York City chose the "big bang" approach when it phased out Julia Richman High School, a large comprehensive high school, and then re-opened it with six schools that had been started off-site. Today, the Julia Richman Campus houses four high schools, a middle school, and an elementary school, along with a day care center and a teen parent resource center.

The Locus of Control: Inside or Outside: Boston initially selected a district-led process for small school creation by "intervening" in failing high schools and, when necessary, replacing the school's leadership team, reassigning staff, and reallocating resources. In 2000, the first such intervention resulted in the development of four semi-autonomous small learning communities within South Boston High School, each headed by a newly appointed principal. The intent from the beginning was for these

small learning communities to become autonomous small schools, a step that happened in fall 2003.

An "outside strategy," in contrast, relies on "intermediaries" to take on the task of implementing specific school designs. Sacramento, California, which was engaged in a citywide high school reform, turned to one such intermediary when it recognized that Sacramento High School was in danger of being placed on a list for state intervention. To turn the school around rapidly and dramatically, the district awarded a charter to St. Hope Community Development Corporation, a local nonprofit headed up by the popular former NBA star Kevin Johnson, to open multiple schools within Sacramento High School.

Many communities have chosen a "partnership strategy," working with outside partners that may include a lead educational intermediary and community organizations. As part of the development of small schools, these outside partners and the district co-develop an RFP process that engages a wide range of constituencies, including teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community-based organizations.

Trade-Offs in Selecting a Strategy: The selection of a strategy to convert large schools into autonomous small schools depends on local context and requires districts to consider a number of issues:

- *Labor agreements:* The choice of a conversion strategy not only depends upon existing union contracts; it also influences collective bargaining agreements and the district's relationships with the teachers' union. Reformers have to calculate the strength and stance of local unions, the recent history of collective bargaining agreements, and the level of labor-management discord that the political climate will tolerate.
- *Staff and student relationships:* A central reason for moving to small schools is to ultimately foster stronger and deeper learning relationships—student-to-student, student-to-teacher, and teacher-to-teacher. But the process of going from large to small can also create interpersonal tensions within the building; it requires sophisticated leadership to share data with students, parents, and teachers on the need for change and to assist faculty in determining their readiness and interest in staying in the building.
- *District-community relations:* For residents in the community to participate in reform, they need to understand the evidence base behind small schools and feel that they have a voice in what happens to their local schools and their children. The goal of building community understanding and demand should be central to decisions about the pace of reform and the locus of control. Districts may charge a politically savvy internal high school reform office with this task or rely on a well-respected community organization to broker the process.
- *District or partnering organization capacity:* The success of a small schools strategy depends upon a number of factors—from retrofitting the physical plant to coalescing faculty, students, and the community around a vision of change. These are not changes that a school, especially one suffering from demoralization and underinvestment, can be expected to manage on its own. Key considerations in selecting a strategy are the kinds and amount of support that a school will need—and a district and/or partners can provide—in making a conversion.

Emerging Issues

Big Buildings, Small Schools describes communities that are leaders in determining how to provide young people with multiple pathways to and through the postsecondary education and credentials they will need for successful adulthood. As the promise of choice approaches reality, new questions arise.

What is the appropriate balance between autonomy and accountability? Advocates of small schools point to a fundamental condition for their success: their flexibility and autonomy allow the people closest to the students—school leaders, faculty, parents, other students—to make school-level decisions about how to organize resources to best meet young people's learning needs. However, many districts that are pursuing a small school strategy simultaneously centralize authority under a strong district leader who can drive home a consistent message about high standards for all students and the need for instructional improvement, programmatic clarity, and bureaucratic efficiency.

How can a district create and protect a space for innovation within the bureaucracy without isolating innovators from key central office departments and those with line authority? Developing small schools on a large scale requires a central authority to manage the process, coordinate the involvement of central-office staff and community partners, attend to and promote needed policy changes, and support small schools in their planning and start-up stages; however, a central office can become isolated if its functions are not carefully integrated with the rest of the district infrastructure.

How can districts promote and assess the quality of new small schools? The explosive growth of new small schools requires careful attention to issues of both quality and accountability. Moving toward a choice-based system of schools requires that students and their families have access to data on the quality of schools. Data also can be critical to helping students and their families, as well as the district, determine which learning environments succeed and which might constitute a good match for a particular student.

How can districts offer youth and families a choice among a portfolio of high schools without creating a new hierarchy of high schools? The move to transform large high schools into small schools is, at least in part, an attempt to provide more and better choices to the young people and families dependent on public schools. The development of a portfolio of high schools could—and should—create more access to an array of quality options. However, small schools of choice also have the potential to exacerbate longstanding inequities in who has access to which educational programs and services.

What is the role of alternative, "second chance" education in a district that is moving toward a portfolio of high schools? Leaders are beginning to ask how to address the particular needs of the young people who are most disaffected from school and closest to dropping out—those who, for example, are overage for their grade, not on track to graduate, or chronically absent or disruptive. The role of alternative education in a system redesigned around a portfolio of high schools is a critical next-generation question for secondary school reform.