

TO: Districts interested in converting large schools

FROM: Carmen Lopez

RE: Small School Conversion Work

DATE: November 1, 2004

Context:

In response to the literature about how to design effective secondary school systems Superintendent Thomas Payzant approved a policy requiring all comprehensive high schools to convert to either small schools or smaller learning communities. 2 high schools chose to shut down and convert their buildings, staff, budgets and students into seven new, small schools. Five high schools chose to remain as large schools and break their structures down into smaller administrative units, referred to as small learning communities. They will offer themed academic or career-based pathways for their students.

Based on conversations with teachers, students, and parents, the mandate to “go small” has been received by different schools in different ways. I would like to briefly discuss my work with Hyde Park High School, taking into account this context.

Is “small” the way to go?

The need for change is clear

Hyde Park High School has a history of violence, low academic achievement, and struggle. Hyde Park has a reputation as a rough school and the teachers will tell you that although they love many of their kids and fellow teachers and administrators, HPHS is a hard place to work. Name calling and violence are not uncommon and the bathrooms are scary places for teachers and students alike. The desire for change at HPHS is

intense. The knowledge that it needs to change is well-known by associated stakeholders.

The will to change is present

A sufficient number of faculty, students, outside organizations, and parents are willing to use the change process to make HPHS better. There are 5 teams that formed voluntarily that are competing to open 3 new, small schools in HPHS's place. I have worked with two of the teams to develop visions, curricular frameworks, governance and staffing plans, ideas about how to include student and community voice, and how to ensure that students graduate with the skills to achieve great things in their lifetime.

Do we have the right set of components to improve teaching and learning?

A serious question that remains in my mind is whether the schools will form with the right set of plans to make use of the options that a small school will make available? Are these schools being created using the best available research about what works in classroom practice and structure? Will they be able to create and use common planning time well? How will the quality of teaching and learning improve? Will the faculty and headmaster have the flexibility to implement the innovative ideas that have had success in other districts or will a small group of anti-change naysayers be able to stop the process?

Another set of questions remains about how much autonomy the district and the union are willing to give the new schools. It would be ironic and disappointing if all this innovation and energy festered due to inaction, unwelcome action, unsmart action by the district and/or the union.

Conclusion

Small Schools are only as good as the practices that they allow for. There are a panoply of other elements that we must pay attention to, using the change to small schools as the medium. We do need to think about small school autonomy, student assignment, professional development for faculty, student teacher ratio, common planning time, personalization, structure, and many conditions for success. Ultimately, though, we have to figure out how to change the antiquated, low expectations-based, twentieth century teaching practices in the classroom and create a system that engages and honors the intelligence, lives, and aspirations of students and teachers. We can use small to get there but we must remember that small is the vehicle, not the destination.