

Sharing Success

Research Brief

Summary of new research on topics of interest to New York State educators

Spring 2003

Small High Schools

The conversion of large high schools into small learning environments is rapidly gaining attention as a potent education reform strategy. This reform push has been fueled, largely, by research indicating that small high schools generally have higher achievement levels, higher graduation rates, and lower dropout rates than large high schools, and are safer. Moreover, small high schools have been found to make the greatest difference for low-income and minority youth, helping to close the achievement gap. Until recently, however, there have been few guidelines on how best to reorganize large high schools into small units. The November 2002 publication of *From Large to Small: Strategies for Personalizing the High School* provides this needed information. Jointly prepared by Jobs for the Future and the Northeast Regional Educational Laboratory, *From Large to Small* offers eight strategies and guiding questions for assisting school leaders in implementing smaller, more focused and personalized learning communities. The eight strategies and sample questions are summarized below.

1. Develop and communicate a clear vision and mission.

How can the move to smaller learning environments...

- help us to address our core goals?
- promote caring and respectful relationships between students and adults?
- increase the level of cognitive challenge and academic achievement in the school?
- improve students' access to postsecondary education and training?

2. Conduct a needs and resource assessment.

Who are the students?

- What is the profile of incoming 9th graders? What are their literacy levels? What percent are special needs? What percent are bilingual?
- What percent of the student body is in each grade level? What percent at each grade are retained? How are specific populations doing? Who is making progress, holding ground, and losing ground?
- What is the profile of the bilingual and special needs populations?
- What is the school's dropout rate both annually and by cohort?

Who are the teachers?

- How many adults are in the building? In what roles? How many teachers teach in each subject area?
- How many faculty are expected to retire over the next year? Two years? Five years?
- What percent of the faculty are teaching within their area of certification?
- What professional development has the faculty undertaken?
- How many faculty have experience with team teaching within and outside their discipline? How many have experience integrating academics with real world issues?

3. Engage the district office and teachers' union.

- Does the district's capital planning for the school align with school goals?
- What resources are available from the departments of curriculum and instruction?
- What additional resources will be needed to develop the human capacity and physical infrastructure for smaller learning communities? What are the potential sources for these resources?
- Does the union contract provide for teachers to move to another building if they are not satisfied with the school's plans? Do union work rules need to be amended to hire interested teachers?

4. Build community support and mobilize resources.

- Who are the respected community leaders?
- How can parents and community leaders be informed about/provide input into the school's plans?
- Who else in the community works with students? In what roles? In what settings?
- What types of learning environments should students be in beyond school walls? Which partners could offer such environments? What current partnerships could serve as models?

5. Tackle the difficult issues of autonomy.

- Who will lead each small learning community? What degree of autonomy will each small learning community have over budgets? Hiring? Curriculum? Governance? Scheduling?
- Will each small unit have its own floor? Section of the building? Separate entrance?
- What administrative offices will support each small learning community?
- What school resources—such as auditorium, gym, cafeteria, library—will be shared?
- How will the school building be governed? How will safety be addressed?

6. Address equity issues for bilingual and special education students.

- Will bilingual and special needs students have access to all small learning communities or only to those with special themes or structures? What staffing structure will support this plan for equity?
- To what degree will inclusion be used as a strategy for integrating special education students?

7. Create a school schedule that supports the goals of personalization.

- What percentage of the day will students/teachers spend in the small learning community? Will different learning communities be on the same or different schedules?
- How long will classes be? Will they be of varying lengths or the same duration?
- When and how will teachers have common planning time?
- Does the school have appropriate software and expertise to realize the goal of scheduling teachers and students into discrete, small learning communities?

8. Develop a process for continual improvement.

- What are reasonable progress benchmarks to set for achievement and engagement?
- Are particular populations performing to their potential in particular small learning communities?
- Are subgroups gravitating to a particular small community, resulting in inequities?

From Large to Small is available on the Web at: <http://www.jff.org/jff/PDFDocuments/Largetosmall.pdf>