

The Big Benefits of Smallness

By Deborah W. Meier

As New York's celebrated Central Park East schools have shown, small schools work--for seven good reasons.

Small schools come as close to being a panacea for America's educational ills as we're likely to get. Smallness is a prerequisite for the climate and culture that we need to develop the habits of heart and mind essential to a democracy. Such a culture emerges from authentic relationships built on face-to-face conversations by people engaged in common work and common work standards.

A good school is a work in progress: a place to tinker, fix, and sometimes even to throw out and start over. Creating such a school requires keeping in mind both visionary ideas and mundane daily details. A good school is never satisfied with itself. As a result, there's never enough time. But it turns out that everything is easier when we get the scale right. Getting the size right is the necessary, though not sufficient, first step.

Until my own school days, small schools were the rule rather than the exception. In a few places, like New York City, rapid population booms and high-priced land produced America's first truly big school buildings. They didn't work then any better than they do now. I have friends who swear they did. When I show them the statistics, they are startled: "But everyone I knew graduated, I'm sure of it." True, but they just never knew all those others who didn't.

Big school buildings are mistakes that are hard to undo, but fortunately, big buildings can house small schools. Of the four Central Park East schools we created in East Harlem's District 4, none ever had its own separate building. The district used every available extra space for the new small schools, while it gradually downsized the larger ones. If four teachers had a good idea, the district said "Go to it." In the end, 52 schools occupied the original 20 buildings.

Big Buildings and Small Subschoools

If one looks closely, big high schools are, in fact, always made up of small schools. The kids create them for survival's sake. The trouble is, only two groups of kids--each a small minority--are able to join the subgroup where the adults are significant people to them. These are (1) the academic stars--who are in the honors and advanced placement classes, leaders of the student government or debating society, or editors of the school newspaper; and (2) the star athletes who belong to various sports teams. The faculties know these kids well; they share common

values and aspirations; and the kids and teachers thrive on their mutual admiration and respect. Occasionally there are subschools for musicians or artists or actors.

But the vast majority of kids--probably 70-80 percent--belong to enclaves that include no grown-ups. A few loners belong nowhere. In the good old days, most of this latter group dropped out along the way to join real grown-up occupations. The problem is, there are no longer grown-up occupations for the dropouts to join. So they stay with us--at least officially. Half in, half out, disconnected from the culture that schools are intended to impart. In short, the schools we've invented aren't organized to assist this other 70 percent. They make do as best they can. And the specialty schools--the honors tracks of one sort or another--have had to organize themselves against the grain of the school's dominant peer culture. What we small school fanatics are working for is schools that do for all kids what we now do for a few. We want to make that the dominant culture of the school.

Seven Reasons

There are at least seven reasons that smallness--300-400 students--works best and offers probably the only chance of carrying out serious reforms in pedagogy and curriculum.

1. Governance. Ideally, a school's total faculty should be small enough to meet around one common table. Whether it's hammering out a solution to a crisis or working through a long-range problem, sustained attention over time is required of everyone. Studies in group efficacy suggest that once you have more than 20 people in a group, you've lost it. Some people will be marking papers, some writing their lesson plans, and others silently disagreeing.

I'm always puzzled when I hear that a staff of 100 went off for a one-day retreat with parents, district personnel, and sundry others, and came up with a vision, a mission, and some objectives. The power of the ideas behind these rushed jobs is not likely to go far in the tricky business of educating kids. Committees can do useful spade work, but in running a school, committees work only for relatively unimportant decisions. Unless we're all committed to the goal, what we do behind our closed doors won't be implemented just because a committee of our peers decided on it. Further, only in a small school can we try something on Monday, put it into effect on Tuesday, and change our minds on Wednesday.

We teachers went into teaching because we love working with kids, not going to meetings. We thus need a faculty small enough so that knowing one another's ideas and work is feasible within the normal constraints of a 24-hour day, and without putting kids in second place.

2. Respect. Students and teachers in schools of thousands cannot know one another well. And if we do not know one another, we may mishear one another. Families, teachers, staff, and students may assume disrespect where none was intended. ("She looked at me." "He didn't even say hello.") The more diverse our students' backgrounds, and the greater the gap between the faculty's and kids' cultures, the greater the misunderstanding may be.

We will think we have made our point when in fact we've been thoroughly misunderstood. We will sabotage one another thoughtlessly, because we didn't know better. We will be lax and permissive when we need to be tough and demanding; we will nag when that's bound to cause trouble. Toughness that comes from respect and toughness that comes from fear and scorn produce opposite results. A culture of respect rests on mutual knowledge, and even then it's hardly automatic. Small schools make such knowledge a possibility.

3. Simplicity. One of the first things Ted Sizer told us when we started Central Park East Secondary School in 1985 was to keep the organizational side simple. Otherwise, he said, you'll be tempted to simplify the minds and hearts of the children and subject matter you intend to teach. In most schools we've chosen just this; we've created a complex bureaucracy, and then simplified--or standardized--the kids, teaching them a one-size-fits-all curriculum so that we can more easily grade, measure, and categorize them. The larger the school, the greater the temptation to treat one another like interchangeable parts, and our subject matter as discrete and unconnected.

4. Safety. Anonymity breeds not only contempt and anger, but also physical danger. The data are clear that the smaller the school, the fewer the incidents of violence, as well as vandalism and just plain rudeness. Strangers are easily spotted, and teachers can respond quickly to a student who seems on the verge of exploding. Small schools offer what metal detectors and guards cannot: the safety and security of being where you are known well by people who care for you.

5. Parent involvement. Schools are intimidating places for many parents--parents feel like intruders, strangers, outsiders. And nothing seems more foolish than going to parent night and seeing a slew of adults who don't know your kid, have very little investment in him or her, and whose opinions and advice make one feel less, not more, powerful. When kids reach high school, schools usually give up on parents entirely (except to scold them). But high school students don't need their parents any less, just differently.

When the school is small enough, probably someone there knows your kid well enough, and maybe also likes him or her enough, to create a powerful alliance

with you. Smallness doesn't guarantee such an alliance, but it makes it reasonable to put time into creating one.

In small high schools like those in our New York City network, each staff member is responsible for knowing well a group of fewer than 15 students over several years. The schools schedule opportunities for the student, family, and advisor to meet--often. The student's work is at the center of these meetings, and the meetings end with an understanding and a plan for what comes next. In large urban schools, by contrast, such meetings are often not useful to any of the parties. This could be why some parents don't show up; they're reserving their time for more important things.

6. Accountability. No one needs long computer printouts, statistical graphs, and educational mumbo jumbo to find out how a teacher, kid, or school is doing when the scale of the school is right. Parents can simply walk around the school, listen to teachers and kids, look at the young people's work, and raise questions. It's not hard to know how many kids graduated, who went on to college, and how many dropped out along the way. (Try finding this out in any big urban high school!) In a small school, the principal doesn't have to rely on bureaucratic data or the grapevine. In a glance, he or she can take the temperature of the school on a given day--see how the substitute is doing, check on a particular kid, and follow up on yesterday's conversation.

How likely is it that a principal of a school with 100 teachers knows how they really teach? Only in small schools can we figure out how to hold a faculty responsible for the work of the school as a whole; to create a responsible community instead of a collection of classrooms. There's no guarantee, of course: teachers can use their greater collegiality to make one another feel good instead of encouraging good teaching (teaching is hard, and we long for a friendly word). But there is a good likelihood of peer accountability--a hallmark of a serious profession.

Finally, scandals and outrages may be no less likely in a small school, but they're a heck of a lot harder to hide. Padded payrolls, ghost students, or missing equipment won't go unnoticed. As in a small town, phony data stick out; secrets are hard to keep. At Central Park East Secondary School, there are no closed meetings. Visitors are invited in almost daily (they're a real-life check on our standards). Schools that are small can more easily take seriously their public character. In doing so, they go a long way toward being accountable.

7. Belonging. In small schools, the other 70 percent belong. Every kid is known, every kid belongs to a community that includes adults. Relationships are cross-disciplinary, cross-generational, and cross-everything else. Kids don't just know

the adults they naturally like, or the ones who naturally like them. They may hate some grown-ups and love others, but they recognize everyone as members of the same human club. The good news is that kids like to be members of such cross-generational clubs. (Or at least most do, at least some of the time!) And, if parents are part of the process, they like to join, too--even part-time.

In small schools, we're more likely to pass on to students the habits of heart and mind that define an educated person--not only formally, in lesson plans and pedagogical gimmicks, but in hallway exchanges, arguments about important matters, and resolutions of ordinary differences. We're more likely to show kids in our daily discourse that grown-ups--models outside their homes--use reasoning and evidence to resolve issues. We can teach them what it's like to be a grown-up--bring them into our culture, but only if we're part of a world that they find compelling, credible, and accessible. And only if we're better able as adults to make sense of and appreciate the varied cultures our students and their families are committed to. If they can't join our club and we don't know theirs, we're unlikely to influence each other.

No Idle Dream

That, after all, is what school is all about: It's a way one generation consciously tries to influence another--and in turn is influenced. For that to happen, both grown-ups and kids have to see themselves as members of a common club, or at least overlapping ones. Those who try to create such shared communities where they don't exist will run into resistance aplenty--from faculty, family, and kids themselves.

But it's not an idle dream. In New York City, nearly 50,000 youngsters now go to small schools, and the number is growing every day. Recently, New York supported the phasing out of several big comprehensive high schools and gradually replaced them with new smaller schools. In several cases, these schools mix age groups, so that a big building now houses schools for students ranging from infancy to adulthood. The Annenberg Foundation, through its Challenge Grant, proposes not only to help foster such small schools but also to tackle the systemic issues they bring to the fore.

The routes that can take us from big to small are as varied as the communities and schools are. In New York, for example, some of the new schools that share a building keep close ties with one another and share a single administrative leader. In other cases, they act like co-tenants of the World Trade Center. Some are located in a wing or a floor with an otherwise "unreformed" school.

No single formula works best, but postponing a decision until everyone in the building agrees on change--at the cost of educating kids better--is a mistake. One

starts wherever one can. Young people are eager for grown-ups to be grown-up enough to stick with what matters, however uncomfortable it may be. Growing up to be smart, thoughtful, and responsible citizens is a lot easier in schools organized in favor of such principles.

If it's the right thing to do for our kids, they'll recognize it. It's adult resistance that's hardest to overcome. Once we do, we will see that small schools allow us, too, to put our effort into what matters most to us: building a true community for teaching and learning.

Deborah W. Meier was founder and director of several small New York City public schools--Central Park East Elementary School in 1974 and the Central Park East Secondary School from 1985-95. She is now a Senior Fellow of the Annenberg Institute at Brown University and works with the New York Networks for School Renewal, 1573 Madison Ave., Room 318, New York, NY 10029.