# The National School District and Network Grants Program

## *Year 2 Evaluation Report*

## *Executive Summary*

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The National School District and Network Grants Program of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is based on the premise that organizations external to the public school system can catalyze the creation of small high schools that will produce better and more equitable outcomes for students. Although all the grantee organizations funded under this initiative have subscribed to a set of attributes of effective, high-performing schools and classrooms set forth by the foundation, they bring different organizational histories and apply different approaches toward working with schools to put those attributes in place.

A large number of grants have been awarded for the creation of small secondary schools. Nevertheless, it is still very early to assess the outcomes of the foundation's education reform strategy. When the data analyzed in this report were collected in spring of 2003, the first small high schools created under the initiative were in their second year of operation; most of the small schools created through conversion of an existing large high school were in their first year as small entities; another group of small schools had opened just the previous fall or were still in the planning stage. Although it is still early to look at outcomes, the evaluation does have a growing database that can be used to examine some of the key questions suggested by the foundation's theory of change:

- With foundation funding and a conceptual framework stipulating attributes of high-performing schools, are intermediary organizations able to catalyze the creation of small secondary schools with the desired characteristics?
- Are students' instructional experiences in small schools that embody the attributes promoted by the foundation different from and better than those of students in conventional high schools?
- Are the attitudes of students in schools where the foundation's attributes are firmly in place consistent with the hypothesis that they are more engaged with their schoolwork and more likely to stay in school through graduation?
- Do differences in educational engagement among students from different demographic backgrounds appear less pronounced in small high schools?
- Can successful small schools be created by converting large high schools into smaller independent schools or learning communities sharing the same physical plant?

## Data Sources

This report is based primarily on two years of data collection from organizations receiving Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grants and from their affiliated schools and school districts. A previous report[1] presented analyses of data collected in spring of 2002. Analyses in this report use both those data and data collected in spring of 2003. Sixteen organizations receiving grants to foster the creation of small high schools, either as new entities ("start-up schools") or through conversion of an existing large high school into smaller units, are included in analyses in this report. Some of these organizations are working to promote small schools replicating the design of a "model school" that predated the foundation's educational grantmaking.

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[1] AIR/SRI. (2003). *High Time for High School Reform: Early Findings from the Evaluation of the National School District and Network Grants Program.* Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

**Surveys.** Quantitative data were obtained through surveys of principals, teachers, and students at 5 model schools, 22 start-up schools, and 10 large schools planning conversion into smaller schools or learning communities ("preconversion" schools). Seven of the small schools that opened in fall of 2001 participated in survey data collections in both spring of 2002 and spring of 2003.

**Site Visits.** School site visits were conducted in a majority of the schools in the survey sample. Five model small schools, 16 start-up schools, 8 large schools planning conversion, and 6 small schools created through conversion have been visited. Seven of the small schools that opened in fall of 2001 have been visited twice (once in their first year of operation and once in their second). The school site visits entailed interviews with school leaders and teachers, student focus groups, and classroom observations. In addition, in spring of 2003, parent focus groups were held at a subset of the small schools created through conversion. We also interviewed district leaders in those districts partnering closely with one or more of the grantee organizations to create small schools.

## Key Findings

The data available 2 years into our 8-year evaluation study shed light on a number of the assumptions in the foundation's theory of change.

- *Intermediary organizations are able to foster the creation of small secondary schools with the characteristics that the foundation considers hallmarks of high-performing schools.* On average, personalization, high expectations, and time for teachers to collaborate as a professional community are strong in the small start-up high schools created under this initiative, whether they are compared with existing large high schools or with the model small high schools the foundation identified as examples of the kinds of schools it wants to promote.

- *More reform-like instruction occurs in those small schools that have the effective-school attributes most firmly in place.* We have characterized instructional practices such as requirements for student-initiated research and analysis, examination of real-world problems, deep exploration of topics, hands-on demonstrations and presentations, and multidisciplinary, group projects as "reform-like." Although there is less reform-like teaching in the small high schools started under this initiative than in the model small schools, there is more in the start-up schools than in conventional large high schools. Within the start-up schools, reform-like teaching is more common in those where teachers and students report that the effective-school attributes have been implemented.

- *Students who attend schools with stronger implementation of the effective-school attributes and more reform-like instruction have more positive educational attitudes.* These students report being more interested in what they are doing at school and more persistent in their schoolwork, as well as describing stronger academic self-concepts. They do not credit their schools with doing a better job of preparing them in areas of academic and social skills, however.

- *Students' attitudes toward school are less related to family socioeconomic status in small schools than in large conventional high schools.* Analysis of the relationship between students' educational attitudes and home socioeconomic status (using mother's education as the proxy for SES) found that the type of school makes a difference. Students' attitudes toward school are positively associated with the level of their mothers' education, except in model small schools, where students express highly positive attitudes regardless of their mothers' education level. Although data patterns are less definitive when attitudes for students of different races/ethnicities are compared, student

attitudes again appear consistently positive, regardless of ethnicity, in the small model schools.

- *A larger sample of small schools created through conversion of a large school and more time for these schools to mature are needed to assess their level of success in meeting the foundation's goals.* Qualitative data from the small schools that were created through conversion of a large school suggest that converting schools find their attention absorbed by issues of facilities, schedules, and staff assignments in both their planning year and their first year after conversion. Converting schools are struggling to find ways to achieve equity without sacrificing perceived excellence. Many parents, students, and teachers remain skeptical that the same class or small school can serve the needs of students at the two ends of the achievement distribution as well as separate ability-based classes do in comprehensive high schools. The evaluation will address these issues through quantitative analyses once survey data from a sample of small schools created through conversion efforts are available.

The early findings for the start-up schools are consistent with the foundation's theory of change and suggest that it is reasonable to look for future differences in student achievement and other outcomes at these small schools. These analyses will be conducted on a district-by-district basis as sufficient numbers of small schools in this initiative mature to the point where they are adequately represented in district and state databases.

## Issues Identified by the Evaluation

The experiences of the first small high schools developed under this initiative point to a number of issues that continue to challenge school staff and the grantee organizations working with schools.

*Instructional strategies is an area where small schools would like more support.* A recurring theme throughout this report is the schools' struggle to implement instructional approaches that are effective for the diverse needs of their students. Although survey responses of teachers in the small start-up schools indicated more confidence in their ability to use reform-like teaching approaches than did those of teachers at preconversion schools, start-up school teachers were candid in their interviews about (1) their need to gain a better grasp of how to execute project-based learning well and (2) their struggle to find the right combination of more reform-like approaches stressing interdisciplinary projects developed around student interests and more conventional approaches focusing on basic skills and content. Small-school teachers realize the need for further development in this area, but only a minority of schools under the initiative appear to get specific, concrete assistance around pedagogy as part of the professional development supported by their grantees.

*Curriculum content is an issue in need of greater attention.* Although our data suggest that teaching approaches are more reform oriented and students are academically more engaged in start-up schools where the foundation's effective-school attributes are strongly in place, questions have arisen at a number of schools concerning the coverage of essential content and the rigor of the material students are learning through their projects and internships. Some teachers in these innovative schools argue that it doesn't matter if students graduate without an understanding of the concept of gravity or knowledge of the dates for World War II as long as they have "learned how to learn." Accountability systems, college admissions offices, and many parents don't agree, however, and staff at many of the start-up schools are struggling with finding the right balance of teaching approaches and with establishing practices that ensure that their students learn essential content. Although many of the grantees' school models or principles stress building a curriculum around student interests, these innovative schools are still operating in a world where states have accountability systems built around specific standards and where institutions of higher education

look for documentation that certain content has been mastered. The mismatch between school philosophy and capacity and the broader education system is most apparent in the area of mathematics. Some of the small schools have hired "generalist" teachers, who are more likely to have academic preparation and teaching experience in language arts or social studies than in mathematics or science. Some of the small schools have turned to educational software for their mathematics curriculum; some encourage students to take math courses at community colleges. We came away with the impression that these are "Band-Aids" rather than a coherent solution to the problem of providing a high-quality mathematics program compatible with school designs, state standards, and college entrance requirements.

*Most schools receiving funding under the initiative are serving significant proportions of high-needs students, but equity issues remain in the areas of student recruiting and differential course offerings.* On the basis of available demographic data, we do not see indications that the start-up schools, as a whole, are "creaming" the best students from their districts or geographic regions. The fact that students and parents must go through a school selection and application process does suggest that the level of student motivation or parental support may be a source of potential selectivity, however. Start-up schools, by and large, are serving students with low-income backgrounds and risk factors such as needs for special education or English language learner services, but many of the small schools may not be serving the students most at risk from the standpoint of low student motivation and parental involvement.

Struggles around equity are more obvious at the schools that are undergoing conversion. Thus far, most of these converting schools are working with the same student bodies and sets of teachers they had as large schools prior to conversion. The task of student selection or assignment to small schools brings into play questions of how to meet students' needs and desires for a particular curricular emphasis and teaching approach while also achieving both racial/ethnic and ability-level diversity within each of the smaller units. Students and parents at some conversion schools cite a lowering of academic standards and express concern about access to fewer high-level courses.

In one sense, this equity issue ties back to that of teaching and learning. The lack of a clear, compelling demonstration that higher-achieving students can be challenged and well taught in diverse classrooms leaves the schools vulnerable to criticism from parents and the students themselves. Until teachers are adept at reaching all parts of the achievement distribution within the same classroom, many students and parents are likely to press for the old system of separate classes for high achievers. To provide guidance around achieving equity as well as addressing other challenges, reformers working on school conversion see a great need for a successful "model conversion," both to prove the viability of the conversion strategy and to provide specific guidance in the way that model small schools have done for start-up schools.

*The smaller the school, the harder it is to finance a secondary education program with per-pupil general education funds.* Foundation funding to grantee organizations provides support for small schools in the form of professional development services and some discretionary funds for conversion or start-up costs. Different grantee organizations have different formulas and schedules for providing in-kind and cash support, as described in *High Time for High School Reform*. In any event, by the conclusion of the grant period, the small schools are expected to be financially viable, operating primarily with their allocations based on average daily attendance (ADA). The smaller the school, the lower the ADA and consequently the less of this type of funding the school will receive. In states with low per-pupil allocations (California being a prime example among the states with many foundation-supported schools), several grantees have raised serious questions about the feasibility of operating a high school of 400 students or fewer on the ADA provided through the state. Although the data available to us thus far suggest that radically

small schools (fewer than 100 students in total) are those most likely to have the foundation's attributes firmly in place, these are also the schools most in financial jeopardy, given funding formulas based on head counts.

***Partnerships with districts add layers of complexity and limitations in the short term, but may prove beneficial in the long term.*** A number of grantees seeking close working relationships with urban districts have found that districts will go only so far in granting hiring, budget, and governance autonomies to small schools or in supporting full conversions, as opposed to creating small learning communities that are more like programs or "schools-within-a-school." Negotiating with districts and teachers' unions and dealing with district political issues place heavy demands on grantee resources. In the long run, though, the short-term burdens entailed in developing and maintaining strong partnerships with districts may be worth incurring. Given the challenge of keeping a small high school alive on the basis of per-pupil funding allocations, the small schools and learning communities created with active district involvement and financial support may have the highest likelihood of survival after their grant funding ends.

## Recommendations

On the basis of our evaluation findings and prior experience with education reform efforts, we offer a set of recommendations for refinement of the initiative.

- ***Focus on classroom instruction and curriculum.*** Both grantees and schools recognize the need to put more of their effort into developing strong curricula and effective instructional practices. Schools are struggling with these issues, and concrete guidance, supporting materials, and professional development from their grantee organizations could be an important enabler of their academic success.

- ***In planning for a start-up school's second year, use a deliberate strategy for school expansion and anticipate the need to work on spreading the school culture to a larger group of students and teachers.*** As the excitement of the first year fades, leaders of small start-up schools need to inspire continued commitment to their new approach to high school, often in a school that has doubled in size with the addition of a new grade level. This task will be much easier if the school has been careful in recruiting staff and new students who are supportive of the school's mission and culture.

- ***Examine school conversion plans for substance and equity.*** Subdividing the student population of a large high school, especially when done entirely on the basis of student choice, poses the potential risk of fostering segregation by achievement level or race/ethnicity. Converting schools need to develop procedures for balancing students' preferences with the goal of obtaining diverse student bodies within each of the small schools or learning communities created through the conversion. Further, the small schools or learning communities created through conversion need to have distinctive academic structures and curricula in place if they are to be more than "the same old wine under new labels."

- ***Press for recognition of small schools as separate entities in district and state databases.*** Small schools created through conversion are finding that bureaucracies can be slow to recognize their status as separate schools (as opposed to the single large school they once were). This issue is important in establishing their public identity and in providing the schools with data relevant for assessing their progress and planning improvements. The foundation can help extract this commitment from districts.

- ***Help grantees and schools figure out the economics of sustaining small schools.*** Given the current pressure on state education budgets and the increased difficulty of finding grant funding to supplement general education funding based on enrollment, the

economic viability of extremely small high schools is in question. Some small schools are feeling pressure to enroll more students than they would like; others have concluded that annual fund-raising will be a prerequisite for survival. Guidance from the foundation might help point school leaders, who may or may not have fund-raising experience, to viable alternatives.

- ***Provide concrete, compelling models of how to serve low- and high-achieving students well within the same classroom.*** An effort should be made to identify best practices for teaching low- and high-achieving high school students together in the same class. Curricular materials and videotaped lessons illustrating these practices in various academic subject areas (e.g., mathematics, language arts, science) would be a valuable resource for professional development activities with staff at schools participating in the initiative.

- ***Help innovative schools deal with accountability pressures by supporting the demonstration of the relationship between student performance in these schools and valued education outcomes.*** Many of the schools funded under this initiative assess student performance through portfolios, exhibitions, and the products of long-term projects. Although such demonstrations are convincing locally (for teachers, students, parents, and judges brought in from the community), they are less convincing on a broad scale from the perspective of policy-makers concerned with accountability. The foundation could help its schools deal with accountability pressures by funding intermediaries to work with schools to develop assessments of student performance with the psychometric quality needed to permit analyses of their relationship to outcomes such as achievement test scores, school retention, and graduation.

- ***Continue exploring strategies for working with districts.*** Working with districts poses many challenges, and it is doubly difficult to try to change a system while also creating effective schools. Nevertheless, in the long run, schools receiving district support may prove the most viable financially, and these schools may ultimately serve to inspire and support other small-school efforts and to catalyze system-level change.

With its focus on school structure as a strategy for instituting school environments that are both personalized and rigorous, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's approach to education reform is a departure from reform strategies that stress specific academic content, embodied in standards and testing systems. Our data showing that the first start-up schools established under the foundation's initiative are quite successful in putting in place a school climate characterized by close relationships, high expectations, and strong teacher communities suggest that the school-structure approach is a potent one.[2] So far, however, it is less clear how successful the foundation's new-small-school approach will be in terms of providing high-quality curriculum and instruction for all students.

Small high schools that have opened or are in the planning stage as part of this initiative are changing the secondary school landscape in urban districts like Baltimore, Chicago, and New York City. Early evidence from the new small schools that opened in 2001 or 2002 suggests that students in these schools will have a different kind of school experience. As the small schools mature and student achievement, graduation, and college entrance data become available, it will be possible to discern whether the final link in the foundation's chain of reasoning—the connection between a caring environment with high expectations and positive student outcomes—has been forged.

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[2] The small start-up schools, however, are schools of choice. We will have a stronger sense of the relative importance of (1) school size and academic structure versus (2) the fact that students and teachers have chosen to be in these small schools after we have a sufficiently large data sample for small schools created through conversion (which typically draw their students from the neighborhood enrollment area).