

HIGH TIME FOR HIGH SCHOOL REFORM:

EARLY FINDINGS FROM THE EVALUATION OF THE NATIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT AND NETWORK GRANTS PROGRAM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The vision behind the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's National School District and Network Grants Program is nothing less than the transformation of the American high school experience. The initiative seeks to catalyze a shift from large, anonymous, comprehensive schools to smaller learning communities, in which strong relationships between students and adults are combined with challenging, inquiry-based curricula to offer students a learning experience that is at once highly motivating and rigorous and that provides meaningful preparation for college and work.

To this end, the foundation announced in 2000 its commitment of \$350 million to a variety of organizations across the country to support school reform. The National School District and Network Grants Program promotes a two-pronged approach: the start-up of new small high schools of no more than 400 students, and the conversion of large high schools into smaller, more personalized schools or learning communities. By funding a wide range of intermediary organizations that support school change, the foundation hopes to promote initial demonstrations of successful schooling models in a wide range of contexts, building eventually to large-scale education reform that will result in a system of school choice for families throughout the country. The initiative has a particular focus on underserved communities, with the goal of creating a more equitable system of learning opportunities for all students.

This report is one of a series that will be produced over the 5-year course of the National School District and Network Grants Program evaluation. The evaluation examines the extent to which foundation-supported schools adopt elements of effective schooling and show better, more equitable outcomes for students. It also investigates the factors that promote or impede school change and its sustained success at scale.

Given the early stage of the initiative, this report focuses on the experiences of educators and students in the first year of operation of new small schools. These experiences are contrasted with those in large high schools planning a conversion into smaller units and those in a set of model small schools in operation before the start of this initiative. We also describe the roles played by the intermediary organizations that are receiving Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funding to catalyze school change. Later reports will document the initiative as it continues to unfold, following schools as they mature and evaluating student outcomes as those begin to emerge.

Data Sources

This report is based primarily on data collected in the spring of 2002, the second year of this grant program. Information sources include both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data are based on interviews and observations in 12 grantee organizations and in 5 model, 8 start-up, and 7 converting schools working with those grantees. School visits included interviews with school leaders and teachers, classroom observations, and student focus groups. We also interviewed leaders in several districts that were partnering closely with particular grantees and schools.

Quantitative data were collected through surveys administered to principals, teachers, and students at 5 small model schools, 8 small start-up schools, and 8 converting schools funded by the grantee organizations.¹

Starting New Small High Schools

The eight new small schools we visited in the spring of 2002 were each nearing the end of their first year of operation. Although all were schools of choice in urban districts, they served varied student populations (e.g., between 15% and 98% of their students were eligible for subsidized lunch) and represented varied schooling contexts (e.g., regular district or public charter; in a stand-alone building or housed jointly with other schools or organizations).

Student-teacher relationships in the small schools were deeper and more supportive, both academically and personally, than is typical in larger, comprehensive schools. According to reports from both students and teachers, each start-up school we visited had taken great strides toward creating a positive, caring climate. Students generally felt that, in comparison with their previous schools, their current teachers knew them better, cared more about them, and held higher expectations for their success. As a result, many students told us they were more engaged in schoolwork and the school community than before.

Many of the adults in start-up schools were surprised by the amount of work it took to put such supportive environments in place. Incoming students' negative prior schooling experiences, a high incidence of special needs among these student groups, and lack of readiness for the autonomies that these schooling models offered students all led to the need for focused efforts to establish a positive and orderly school climate.

Many of the small schools were still struggling with putting consistent, innovative instructional practices in place as their first year drew to a close. Our observations within classrooms indicated that some of the instruction in start-up schools was characterized by inquiry-based, in-depth learning; however, these instructional practices were more the exception than the rule. Students were conducting projects in many classrooms, but their assignments varied in the level of student direction and the extent to which inquiry was required. Many teachers told us that they lacked models and ready-to-use curricula for project-based learning and that their students came to the school lacking the basic knowledge and skills that this instructional approach requires. As a result, most of the start-up schools we visited found themselves introducing more structure and direction for incoming students than they had originally planned.

Most start-up schools showed strong evidence of teacher professional community and distributed leadership. Teachers in the new small schools generally described collegial work environments, close collaboration with colleagues, and the experience of working together toward a common vision—a schoolwide professional environment very different from that typically found in large schools. In many of these schooling models, teachers also shared in

¹ Survey data collected from an additional two converting schools were not used because of low response rates. Average survey response rates for schools included in the quantitative analyses were 83% for teachers and 73% for students.

leadership responsibilities and made collective decisions about important elements of school design.

Starting a new small school is an enormously complex, time-consuming endeavor. One of the most common themes we heard from start-up schools was that a personalized learning environment with rigorous learning opportunities for all students takes time to implement. Many of these schools were designed by planning teams that did most of their work in the summer before opening; if planning took place in the preceding year, teachers generally did not receive funded release time for planning activities during the day. The schools described a process of planning and implementation that included a myriad of structural, logistical, instructional, and recruitment tasks, often with a great many unknowns about the specifics of the work that was necessary. Schools whose grantees offered specific models, procedures, logistical help, and curriculum consulting said that these detailed resources were invaluable supports for an otherwise unwieldy implementation process. Those grantees that had a model small school in place before they received their foundation funding were more likely to have such resources available for the schools in their network.

Many issues of human and material capital in schools are still unresolved. Some of the most critical challenges of school implementation and operations involve the development of human and material capital: gathering the resources needed for effective school operations. Significant resources that are often in short supply include finances (small student populations limit the per-pupil funding that schools rely on for ongoing operations), facilities (school design teams found that buildings were difficult to come by and frequently inadequate), and teacher time (in these schools, teachers must balance the roles of instructional leader, personal advisor, and participant in distributed leadership). These issues remain challenging as schools enter their second year.

Converting Large High Schools

The seven large schools in our site visit sample were at different stages of the conversion to smaller communities: one had converted all four grades into small schools at once, one had converted the 9th grade only so far, and the other five were still in planning. This year's analysis of conversions, therefore, focuses primarily on the processes of planning and early implementation, as we do not yet have the data to support a general description of the first operating year of converted schools.

Conversion planning is typically a 2-year process. Design teams for converting schools generally projected a longer planning process than their counterparts in start-ups. Schools that were farther along in the process reported that in the first year they initiated relations with a grantee and organized the conversion effort, forming committees and beginning to formalize their school visions; the second year was generally when specific design activities began. In most cases, however, conversion planning was taking place while school leaders and teachers were still engaged full time in running the existing school. While conversion activities were spread over a 2-year period, funded time to focus on planning was nonexistent or in short supply.

Preconversions are making some small steps toward positive environments even during planning. Most of the preconversion schools had not yet created the kinds of schoolwide structures for personalization (e.g., small teacher-student groupings, advisories) that were

commonplace in the small start-up schools. Teachers who saw up to 160 students each day in these large high schools found it difficult to get to know students individually. Nevertheless, staff in several of the preconversion schools described making some progress in instituting a more orderly and respectful environment, including defining norms of behavior and deliberate efforts to maximize personal interactions between adults and students.

Teachers were often not central to instigating the conversion process, leading to tenuous support for fundamental change on the part of staff. Whereas new schools were typically started by school leaders and a hand-picked group of teachers eager to work in a small-school environment, the decision to convert these large high schools was frequently made outside the school, usually at the district level. Although planning teams included teachers, they typically were only a small proportion of those who worked at the school. As a result, many of the teachers we spoke with felt disenfranchised by the conversion process. Some teachers also questioned the longevity of the school redesign effort, wondering whether this would be simply another reform that comes and goes. Other teachers at these large schools, however, were looking forward to the opportunity to provide more personal and meaningful learning experiences for their students, and had high hopes for the changes to come.

As in start-up schools, planning time in preconversions was generally unfunded. Although conversion activities were spread over a 2-year period, in contrast to the briefer planning periods for start-up schools, funded time to focus on planning was nonexistent or in short supply. In most pre-conversion schools we visited, conversion planning was taking place while school leaders and teachers were still engaged full time in running the existing school. School staff told us that this situation led to higher stress and slower progress than might otherwise be expected.

Comparison of Small and Converting High Schools

The results of comparative survey analysis across school types indicate large differences on a host of teacher- and student-reported measures. Because these analyses are cross-sectional in design and there are some possible sources of selection bias that could not be controlled, these findings should not be construed as definitive evidence of a causal connection between school size and student outcomes.

Survey responses of students, teachers, and principals in small schools were significantly more positive than in preconversions on nearly every measure of school climate, professional community, and active teaching and learning. Adults and students surveyed in model and start-up schools rated their schools significantly higher on measures of school climate (e.g., the degree to which schools exhibit close adult-student relationships and respectful interactions among students) and teacher professional community and distributed leadership (e.g., the degree to which teachers share a common vision, work collaboratively, and participate in school management decisions) than did the adults and students in large schools that had not yet begun to convert. Teachers in model and start-up schools reported moderately higher use of instructional approaches characterized by student inquiry and in-depth learning (with larger differences in reported instructional practices between models and conversions), and reported significantly less use of traditional instructional approaches and less time spent preparing for standardized tests.

Responses on teacher and principal surveys in model and start-up schools also were significantly more positive than those in preconversions concerning a number of conditions that may support successful change, including self-reported teacher preparedness for implementing new teaching methods and parental involvement in the life of the school.

Several important intermediate student outcomes, such as engagement and academic self-concept, appear stronger at the small model and start-up schools. On the basis of data from student surveys, model and start-up schools excel on several important outcomes that often lead to longer-term improvements in learning: student engagement, social responsibility, sense of belonging in the school community, and student perceptions of themselves as learners. It is important to note that students in these small schools were more likely to be nonwhite and to have languages other than English spoken in the home than were the students in the preconversion survey sample, differences that would be expected to reduce rather than inflate positive outcomes in the start-up schools. Although we cannot rule out differences in the motivation that families and students in these schools of choice may bring to their high schools, these initial data are consistent with the hypothesis that small schools foster these kinds of positive outcomes for students.

The Intermediary Organizations Creating Small Schools

The schools described above are partnering with 12 intermediary organizations receiving grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to catalyze the creation of successful small high schools. The grantees vary in their approach (seeking to promote a design process, design principles, or an explicit school design), their geographic spread (ranging from a single district to a nationwide network), and the number of schools that they expect to support with their Gates Foundation grant (from 4 to as many as 60 high schools). As the initiative matures, it will be possible to compare the relative success of school implementations associated with different grantee characteristics and strategies.

The supports that grantees provide to schools reflect the diversity of their goals and strategies for school reform. Support strategies for schools represent the grantees' beliefs about the most effective ways to influence school reform. Most grantees are providing some level of funding to their partner schools as they begin implementation, and in some cases they are funding planning activities as well; funding is provided either in phases (to allow for accountability) or in a lump sum. Additional types of support offered by many grantees range from strategic assistance (e.g., building support within a community or district) to professional development opportunities for school leaders and teachers. Grantees that seek to replicate a specific school model often provide detailed implementation supports (for example, a student handbook) that schools can choose to adapt; some other grantees feel strongly that schools and curricula should be designed entirely by school staff and based on local needs.

In some cases, grantees appear to have limited leverage with the school teams they expect to implement their models or approach. Whereas several grantees seek to develop a close-knit network of schools with similar characteristics, many others anticipate maintaining looser relationships with the schools they support. Typically, the grantee is one of several sources of school funding and professional development. In many cases, the schools see the grantee as a significant support, but in some cases, the schools view grantee contributions as modest. As a

result, the degree of leverage the grantees have in promoting a particular vision of schooling varies widely, as do their stances on how much to try to enforce their own vision in the schools with which they partner.

Grantees are trying to figure out viable economic models, both for their small schools and for their own organizations. Balancing revenue sources and costs is proving a challenge to both the grantee organizations and their school affiliates. Many of the grantee organizations expect to continue to rely on grant-based funding from a variety of sources for the foreseeable future. Some of the organizations are also exploring the feasibility of creating intellectual property based on their school reform work as a way to sustain their operations independent of continued grant funding.

Early Findings and Implications

At this early stage of the initiative, data on student outcomes such as graduation rates are not yet available, and the process of change has just begun. Nevertheless, the organizations taking on fundamental school change under this initiative are amassing experiences that offer important implications for ongoing reform efforts.

Implications for Grantees and Schools

- ***In structuring their work with schools, grantees should consider the leverage they will have with a potential school partner as well as that partner's capacity.*** The extent of a grantee's influence with its school partners depends in part on the extent of philosophical agreement between the two groups. But influence is also increased when the grantee offers resources—financial, intellectual, and practical—that the school views as valuable. Grantees providing more significant funding supports, more specific guidance, and more hands-on continuous coaching are likely to see a greater influence on their schools' designs and outcomes. Mechanisms for keeping abreast of school plans and activities and for establishing accountability further enhance the grantee's effectiveness.
- ***Schools need specific resources and tools.*** School design teams and the staff in new small schools are finding that the nuts-and-bolts issues of school implementation and operation can require tremendous amounts of their time. To the extent that grantees can provide specific materials, procedural descriptions, and tools that their partners can adapt for initial school operations, school staff can turn more quickly from logistical concerns to issues of teaching and learning.
- ***New small schools should expect to devote considerable energy to establishing a positive normative climate during their early years.*** Staff at the start-up schools expressed some surprise at the amounts of time and focus required to put in place the positive, personalized schooling environments they envisioned, in part because of the lack of preparedness among many of their entering students for the kind of instruction and degree of responsibility built into their school designs. Many of the start-up schools and conversion planning teams are moving to models that treat 9th grade as a transitional year, with greater direction and academic support from teachers and a gradual transition to more freedom and self-direction.

Implications for the Foundation and the Field

- ***In structuring future grants to intermediary organizations, the foundation should consider options such as planning grants or gradual ramping up in cases where the proposed work requires organizational capabilities that are not yet in place.*** As grants are negotiated, a grantee’s organizational capacity—its human, social, and material capital—is important to consider in light of the nature and scope of the proposed work. Some grantee organizations may need a year for planning and capacity building before starting or converting schools, particularly if their strategy is dependent on the formation of partnerships that are not yet in place. In addition, beginning small-school creation efforts with just a few schools allows for testing and refinement of school models and support strategies before grantees attempt to broaden their reach.
- ***Funders of reform should look closely at the amount of planning time they are funding for the creation of new or converted schools.*** The foundation and its grantees have exhibited sensitivity to the need to provide school teams with supported planning time. School staff report, however, that the activities required for effective school start-up and conversion far exceed the time available. For many, the need to plan new small schools or school conversions while working full time in an existing school has been extremely stressful. Release from at least a portion of their school duties during an extended planning period would be a welcome support for a core of teachers, as well as the prospective principals, for these new small schools.
- ***The ability to make rapid progress by working around the system in starting new small schools may decline as the initiative unfolds.*** Some early activities under this initiative have benefited from being able to work outside the realm of district control or from working with unusually supportive districts. As the initiative scales up, these strategies may become more difficult to implement. Time will tell whether systemic change will be increasingly enabled by successful demonstration of effective models for schooling and supportive district practices, or whether reformers working under this initiative will find the established system more intractable as their work impinges on its core.

As one might expect, our data indicate that 1 year is not enough for full implementation of the kind of learning environments envisioned by the foundation and its grantees. Nevertheless, it appears from these early findings that small high schools of choice do provide an environment with greater personalization and sense of community, even at their outset. Students in these small schools already report being more engaged, feeling more cared for, and having a more positive academic self-concept than their counterparts in large schools. Although we cannot disentangle the role of school size from the role of student choice with the school samples at hand, we can conclude that the early findings described in this report are consistent with the foundation’s hypotheses about the benefits of small-school environments that stress close relationships and academic rigor.

The early findings reported here, however, also document how complex and difficult the work of small-school reform is. This report points out several areas, including funded planning time and

detailed implementation supports, that may smooth the future path of reform to some degree, particularly as the knowledge base concerning small schools and school conversion continues to expand. Nevertheless, it is important for reformers and funders to set expectations appropriately, and to anticipate a need for extended financial, policy, and intellectual support as school leaders and teachers embark on the important and challenging journey of school improvement.