



# Policy Statement

## SMALL SCHOOLS AND SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform recommends that national, state, and local policymakers provide resources and support to create small schools at the middle-grades level. In those cases where small schools are not feasible, the National Forum recommends that district and school leaders break down large middle-grades schools into smaller schools or small learning communities that create a personalized environment for teaching and learning. "Smallness," whether small learning communities or small schools, is a necessary but not sufficient organizational structure that enhances teaching and learning at the middle level.

### WHY SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND SMALL SCHOOLS?

A majority of the 14 million young adolescents (grades 5–8) enrolled in U.S. public schools continue to fare poorly on national and statewide performance assessments. Many eventually tune out or drop out of school.

One reason for this low level of achievement is that too many middle-grades students attend large, impersonal schools where substantial numbers of students are not purposefully engaged in learning, lack meaningful relationships with adults, and are increasingly alienated from school. Creating small schools and small learning communities represents a giant step toward personalizing middle-grades education and establishing the right conditions for enhanced teaching and learning.

Although currently embraced by high school reformers, small learning communities were first identified by middle-grades leaders nearly 30 years ago as conducive to young adolescents' learning. While "smallness" is not an end in itself, it does help create conditions for student success by fostering a shared vision, shared leadership, a professional collaborative culture, and structured time for teachers to talk about instructional practice, as well as time to visit each others' classrooms (Louis & Kruse, 1995). Smallness also allows educators to design and implement individual learning plans that meet the full spectrum of student needs, smaller student/teacher ratios,

and more opportunities for students to engage actively in both courses and extracurricular activities.

For these and other reasons, an extensive body of research suggests that small schools and small learning communities have the following significant advantages:

- Increased student performance, along with a reduction in the achievement gap and dropout rate
- A more positive school climate, including safer schools, more active student engagement, fewer disciplinary infractions, and less truancy
- A more personalized learning environment in which students have the opportunity to form meaningful relationships with both adults and peers
- More opportunities for teachers to gather together in professional learning communities that enhance teaching and learning
- Greater parent involvement and satisfaction
- Cost-efficiency

Ultimately, creating successful small learning communities and small schools at the middle level increases the chances for students to be successful in high school and beyond.

## DEFINING SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND SMALL SCHOOLS

There are many ways to achieve “smallness” at the middle level, including the following:

- **Small learning communities in a larger school:** Divide a larger school into clusters or houses in which teacher teams create small, personalized learning environments. These interdisciplinary teams share the same group of students, usually no more than 80 students per team. The teams are responsible for their students’ core academic courses and sometimes their elective courses. Teaming structures may vary in many ways (e.g., by grade level or multiyear and by size). Effective teams regularly schedule common planning time to discuss teaching and learning; adjust the schedule to create optimal learning times; and design flexible, tailored approaches to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Research suggests that smaller teams with two to four teachers on a team show better results than larger teams with five or more teachers (Felner et al., 1997). Moreover, the longer teams stay together, the greater the gains for students.
- **Distinct small schools in one building:** Create separate, autonomous, small schools (maximum population of 300 students) within one large building or campus. Each school has its own dedicated administrators, faculty, and students, with a student assignment process that ensures equitable distribution of students by race/ethnicity, SES, language, gender, prior educational achievement, and disability. While each school has its own personalized culture and identity, the principal is ultimately responsible for the entire school. In some cases, these schools-within-schools share a common schedule, curriculum, extracurricular activities, and sports teams, while others are largely autonomous. In all cases, they share common spaces such as the auditorium, cafeteria, library, and gymnasium. As in large schools, distinct small schools that share one facility can create interdisciplinary teams of teachers that share a common set of students to further personalize the learning environment.
- **Small, freestanding schools:** Create small, freestanding schools (ideally with a maximum population of 400 students) with their own facilities and staff. Small schools may also create inter-

disciplinary teams that share a common set of students to further personalize the learning environment. The state of Florida recognizes the benefits of small schools, and in 2000 its legislature passed a statute that prohibits construction of large schools. As of July 2003, new elementary schools will be limited to 500 students, middle schools to 700, and high schools to 900 (New Rules Project, 2003).

When districts have an option, the National Forum recommends, and research supports, creating small schools rather than small learning communities within a larger school.

## RESEARCH-BASED BENEFITS OF SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

An extensive body of research demonstrates numerous positive benefits of small schools and small learning communities, especially for those students who are at greatest risk of educational failure. Indeed, in a synthesis of research on small schools, Raywid (1997/1998, p. 35) concludes, “there is enough evidence now of such positive effects—and of the devastating effects of large size on substantial numbers of youngsters—that it seems morally questionable not to act on it.” Below we synthesize the major research findings (see also School Redesign Network, 2004; Small Schools Workshop, 2004; Howley, Strange, and Bickel, 2000; and Galletti, 1998).

### INCREASED STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND “HOLDING POWER” Student Achievement

Several large-scale studies have compared student performance in large and small schools (McMullan, Sipe, and Wolf, 1994; Huang and Howley, 1993; Fowler, 1989; Heck and Mayor, 1993; Lee and Smith, 1994; Lee, Smith, and Croninger, 1995). While these studies have focused more on high schools than middle-grades schools, their findings reveal that students at all grade levels learn more in small schools than in large schools. Several researchers have also examined middle-grades schools with interdisciplinary teams and found that students in this type of small learning community outperform similar students in schools without such organizational arrangements (Mertens and Flowers, 2003; Mertens, Flowers, and Mulhall, 2001; George and Lounsbury, 2000; Lee and Smith, 2000; Felner et al., 1997; Lee and Smith, 1993).

## **Closing the Achievement Gap**

The studies mentioned above also indicate that low-income, black, and Latino students and English language learners who attend small schools as opposed to large schools are far more likely to succeed academically, graduate from high school, and enroll in college. “The fact that these mostly poor, mostly ethnic minority children have notably higher achievement in small learning environments is extremely encouraging to those who have previously searched in vain for an educational approach that could narrow the ‘achievement gap’ between those students and their white and higher-SES peers.” (Cotton, 2001, p. 14)

## **Greater “Holding Power”**

Small schools and small learning communities tend to have greater “holding power” than do large middle-grades schools. Middle-grades students in small schools have higher attendance, lower mobility in transferring to other schools, and higher graduation rates. One significant reason for these findings is the increased personalization at small schools and small learning communities—teachers know students well. Students in small learning environments also have more opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, including social events, which help bind them to school (Cotton, 2001).

## **MORE POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURE**

### **Safer Schools**

Small schools and schools-within-schools create communities in which teachers and students know and value each other as individuals. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (2000) refers to this phenomenon as “human-scale” schooling, which increases school safety by reducing anonymity and isolation while increasing students’ sense of belonging. Studies show that small learning environments are characterized by fewer incidents of violence and disruptive behavior, less school graffiti, lower crime levels, and less serious student misconduct.

### **More Personalized Learning Environment**

Small schools and schools-within-schools create a more intimate learning environment than large schools. When teachers know their students well, they can more easily identify individual talents and unique needs and offer a more tailored learning experience. Being known well and acknowledged is essential to students’ psychological well-being and learning, especially for those students who are typically overlooked in large and impersonal settings. In “Reflections of an African American on the Small Schools

Movement,” Perry (2003) notes that small schools provide the opportunity for a more personalized learning environment in which students interact more often and more substantively with their teachers, formally and informally, on both school and non-school issues.

## **More Active Learning and Equitable Instruction**

Because of greater personalization, instruction in small learning environments tends to have a greater focus on active learning and problem solving, with students more engaged in project-based and community-based learning experiences. Additionally, students in small schools are usually grouped more in heterogeneous and flexible arrangements, with all students receiving the same challenging core academic curriculum. Finally, teachers tend to feel greater efficacy about their teaching in small learning communities and small schools (Cotton, 2001; Wasley et al., 2000).

## **Professional Learning Community**

Small learning communities and small schools provide the structural conditions that support a learning community: physical proximity, a sense of intimacy, and increased opportunities for communication. Schools that are learning communities provide regular opportunities for teachers to engage in conversations about students, teaching and learning, and related issues. Through collaborative inquiry and reflection, teachers representing various subject matters and grade levels can decide what is really important for students to learn, determine whether students are indeed learning, and apply new ideas and information to better meet the needs of all their students. Numerous studies have found that professional learning communities are a major factor in promoting student achievement, especially in schools with large numbers of low-income and low-achieving students (Louis and Kruse, 1995; Hord, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1992; Felner et al., 1997; Mertens and Flowers, 2003). In addition, teacher turnover tends to be lower in small learning communities and small schools than in larger, more impersonal schools.

## **Parent Involvement and Satisfaction**

Levels of parent involvement and parent satisfaction are greater in small school environments than in large ones. Communication between parents and teachers tends to be more substantive given the fact that the teachers often know the students better in the smaller learning environment (Cotton, 2001).

## **COST-EFFICIENCY**

### **Greater Control over Resources**

Small schools tend to have more autonomy over how to use their resources to best meet student needs—including flexibility over staffing, budget, curriculum, assessment, governance, policies, and time. This control enables middle-grades schools to create more innovative staffing patterns, schedules that maximize student learning time and faculty collaborative planning time, curricula that are more engaging and meaningful, and assessments that are better able to measure the learning and understanding of a diversity of students (Wasley et al., 2000; Center for Collaborative Education, 2001).

### **Cost-Effectiveness**

One rationale that policymakers use to build large schools is that larger schools are more cost-effective than smaller schools. Yet, research shows that if one looks at the cost of education by the number of students who actually graduate from high school, then small schools are cost-effective. Furthermore, small schools can and have been built cost-effectively (Lawrence et al., 2002; Stiefel et al., 2000). Because the literature on school size indicates that small schools are more effective, especially for low-income, black, and Latino students, policymakers might do well to support the creation of more small learning communities and small schools at the middle-grades level.

The economic argument for small schools becomes even more compelling when one factors in that a significant majority of people who commit crimes and are in prison are former school dropouts. Large schools tend to have substantially higher dropout rates than small schools.

## **CONCLUSION**

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform recommends the creation of small learning communities and small schools at the middle-grades level. “Smallness” is a critical first step in creating high-performing, middle-grades schools that are academically excellent, responsive to the unique needs of young adolescents, and socially equitable.

While the federal government and several private foundations have awarded Small Learning Communities grants to high schools, middle-grades schools have not enjoyed the same level of support. The National Forum recommends public and private funding to create small schools and small learning communities at the middle level. With or without external grants, however, middle-grades schools and districts across the nation should look for ways to establish small learning communities in a cost-efficient manner. The benefits for teachers, students, parents, and the community-at-large far outweigh potential costs.

## **THE NATIONAL FORUM TO ACCELERATE MIDDLE-GRADES REFORM**

is an alliance of educators, researchers, national associations, and officers of professional organizations and foundations, dedicated to improving education in the middle grades. The Forum seeks to improve student learning dramatically by advocating that schools provide strong academics, respond to students’ needs and interests, and ensure equal access to high-quality classes.

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