Transforming American High Schools: 
Early Lessons and New Challenges

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PREFACE
This report is the product of three summer workshops on high school transformation organized by the Aspen Institute’s Program on Education in a Changing Society. It builds upon the insights of more than 50 leaders of educational policy, practice, and research who participated in these workshops, and it draws from three papers specially commissioned by the Aspen Institute for use at the workshops. The workshops initiated a sustained dialogue that diagnosed the need for high school transformation, called for the building of new policy frameworks, explored the reality of state and district implementation, and identified a host of difficult and unresolved issues.

Schooling is the social justice issue of the 21st Century. An emerging consensus among educational policymakers identifies the greatest task at the century’s beginning as the re-making of the American high school for a new era. The aim is not high school reform but high school transformation. Driven by new academic, economic, demographic, and civic imperatives, and by the combined attention of educators, educational policymakers, and foundations, the old model of the comprehensive high school is slowly yielding to new visions of organizing the high school experience for youth. Several key principles of transformation are now widely agreed upon, such as a belief that all children can learn to high standards, the value of small schools, the need for strong instructional leadership at the school and district level and a focus on professional development, the ability to collect, analyze, and deliver data in flexible forms to schools in order to drive instructional change, the imperative of public engagement to sustain transformation efforts, and the potential of creating system-wide improvements through the stimulus of creating new high schools through new district initiatives or charter legislation.

This report offers the case for high school transformation, identifies key principles of transformation, and reports some early lessons of the increasingly widespread small schools approach to high school transformation. It proposes policy implications and a research agenda for district and state leaders who have adopted a small school strategy. It also addresses policy implications of high school transformation for other educational players such as postsecondary education and teacher unions.

This is an exciting era in high school education. The need for transformation is widely acknowledged. Many states and large districts (Boston, Sacramento, New York City, Philadelphia, and Baltimore among them), and foundations (especially the Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, and Pew Charitable Trusts) have made significant efforts and investments in dislodging and replacing the entrenched bureaucratic structures of the American high school. The Aspen Institute’s Program on Education in a Changing

Society is collaborating with a number of other organizations to forward this work.\(^2\) The choices that policymakers make today will be highly consequential in the years to come; the very foundations of transformation are now being laid, and these will guide the present and future work of educators and reformers. If we are to move beyond random acts of innovation, we must begin now to institutionalize the early lessons of these transformations and to reckon with the new challenges before us.

\(^2\) Collaborators include the Aspen Urban Superintendents Network, the Aspen - Council of Chief State School Officers Network, Jobs For the Future, the Education Commission of the States’ project on accountability, and the National Governors Association’s work on high school redesign.
I. Transforming the Comprehensive High School

A. Why Transformation?
In the opinion of Harvard Professor Richard Elmore, the comprehensive high school is so dysfunctional that it counts among the most pathological institutions in the United States. Its dysfunction stems from the fact that it was created to serve the needs of a different era. In recognizing the new academic, economic, demographic and civic challenges before educational policymakers, and in realizing that high schools prove increasingly resistant to the efforts of reformers at change, it is the structure of the comprehensive high school that has been called into question. The comprehensive high school is the target, and there is now an emerging consensus that it must be transformed not reformed. What is the case for transformation?

New academic challenges
We live in a new era of high expectations and standards for all students. The 2001 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act cemented at the federal level what had already been widespread at the state level: schools will be held responsible for educating all students to high standards. Though the No Child Left Behind statute itself requires testing only in grades 3-8, it is the clearest federal example of the unambiguous message of standards reform: all children can learn, and all must be prepared for post-secondary education without remediation. The proliferation of end-of-year exams such as Texas’s TAAS tests and Massachusetts MCAS tests, the curtailing of social promotion, and the creation of stiffer exit exams such as New York’s Regents test are but a few examples of this new emphasis at the state level.

It cannot be overstated just how revolutionary an idea this is. American high schools have traditionally served a sorting and sifting mechanism, moving a small fraction of students on to higher education, a larger fraction of students into vocational or service work, and failing to graduate a still larger fraction who typically would enter the unskilled labor force, which had plenty of openings. We expect today that high schools will not only graduate all students, but that they will impart to every one a set of substantial academic skills. In 1960 fewer than 50% of adults possessed a high school diploma; today the figure is over 80%. American schools have assumed – and, it must be noted, have been increasingly successful at – the Herculean task of educating all comers, regardless of background.

But this 80% graduation rate is misleading, for we know that due to social promotion and a lack of standards a high school degree bears only a small correlation to the possession of academic skills. The stiff accountability mechanisms coming online – high-stakes tests, new graduation requirements, etc. – demand that high schools focus evermore on academic instruction. As many states have now found, funneling students through the same high school pipeline, accompanied by higher and more aligned standards, is a surefire recipe for astronomical summer school enrollment and higher dropout rates. Indeed, the graduation
rate in some urban areas is abysmally low. In Hartford, Connecticut, for example, the number of teenage girls who became pregnant exceeded the number of high school graduates in 1992. In an era where some postsecondary education is a virtual condition for earning a livable wage, high schools are burdened as never before with the task of educating all children to high standards and preparing them for college-level academic work. This cannot be accomplished merely by increasing standards. It must be accompanied by fundamental changes in the high school environment.

New economic challenges
We live today in a knowledge or information economy. The American workforce requires people with increasingly higher levels of cognitive and symbolic manipulation skills, especially as globalization farms out unskilled work to developing countries. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that there will be a 22 percent increase in the jobs by the year 2010 where some college-level education is a prerequisite. Moreover, the premium attached to knowledge economy jobs is growing; those who possess a college degree earn more than double that of those with only a high school degree, and the gap is growing.

The demand for skilled labor has been and will continue to be a pressing issue that drives education reform. Indeed, sparked in part by the grim 1983 Nation at Risk report, economic concerns have been at the forefront of educational policy, and they will continue to push education reform.

New demographic challenges
The United States has always been a multicultural society, but the rapid diversification of American society in the 20th century means that there will soon be no majority race or ethnicity in many states (as is already the case in California). The rapid transformation is visible in the fact that Hispanics, not African Americans, are now the largest minority. We are also a much more religiously diverse society than we were fifty years ago. The primary cause of these major changes in American society can be found in the high levels of immigration, especially over the past thirty years. The 21st century demographic face of America gives new urgency to the task of forging a tolerant, active, and unified citizenry, historically one of the central functions of schools.

The most visible change in American schools is the continuing and dramatic increase of minority children. Approximately 35% of all U.S. children are minorities; this figure is projected to rise above 50% by 2040. While California, Texas, Florida, and New York continue to be home to a large percentage of minorities, every state in the union has seen an increase in the percentage of its minority population. The consequence for schools will be a demand for new services in English as a Second Language and, very likely, political struggles over the scope and content of bilingual education.

New civic challenges

Americans vote with less and less frequency, and it is the youngest age-cohort that is least likely to vote. Moreover, Americans of all ages are increasingly unlikely to join voluntary associations and to participate in local, state, and national organizations that structure community life. This level of political participation raises fundamental questions about the very legitimacy of our democratic institutions and, as Robert Putnam has argued, the deterioration of civil society and social capital raises troubling questions about the long-term effects on both individuals and communities.

Beyond the decline in civic participation, which means that fewer community organizations are available for youth, we must also recognize the ways in which new structures of the workplace, the family, and leisure time have profoundly affected what we could call the culture of childhood. Workers now change jobs more often and work more hours, with the consequence that children are frequently uprooted from their neighborhood and school to move elsewhere, and spend less time with their parents. The declining amount of time spent with parents is compounded by the rise of single-parent families and dual wage earning couples. Factor into this equation the staggering number of hours that children spend watching television or playing video games (current estimates of passive media engagement for the average American youth peg the rate at a staggering 6 hours per day). In short, when once children could rely on an array of meaningful and ongoing relationships with several adults in their lives, today they are far more likely to spend time alone and unmonitored with electronic entertainment.

These out-of-school forces cannot be the sole responsibility of schools to redress. But schools have contributed to these developments, and they must respond to these fundamental changes in American society. In order to succeed academically in high school and make a successful transition to adulthood — including but not limited to post-secondary education, work, and participatory citizenship — young people need to form enduring connections with adults and with the real world that traditional high schools have often failed to supply. The attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for robust civic participation are the same as those more generally necessary for healthy youth development, yet most high schools do not provide young people with out-of-school connections or applied learning opportunities.

Transforming high schools can contribute in a number of important ways to addressing these civic challenges, from re-emphasizing civic education, to structural changes that make the school site a central location of school-community services and partnerships, to emphasizing personalization and youth development with a constant eye toward academic achievement. Indeed, literacy and numeracy are a sine qua non for both civic and vocational success.

B. Core Principles of Transformation
There is no shortage of reform models, nor a lack of good intentions on the part of educators, community leaders, and parents. What we lack is a clear understanding of how to overcome the entrenched nature of the institution in order to effect system-wide change. Transformation will not happen overnight. The task of unbuilding and laying new foundations for new school structures will require the collective efforts, good will, and above all else patience of educators, policymakers, politicians, foundations, and the community at large. The time horizon for measuring change must be many rather than few years.

As a first step at understanding how to think about igniting system-wide change, consider the following core principles of transformation. These ought to be guideposts for evaluating the success of any effort.

- Place youth at the center of every policy. All children can and must be expected to learn to high standards. Stay focused on the primary and enduring objective of sustained high academic performance for every student. Nothing should compromise this goal.

- Think beyond the schoolhouse in terms of broad youth development. Forge connections between schools and local communities, linking teachers and youth workers, school buildings and community organizations, formal and informal educational opportunities. While youth are at the center, the broader community and all its attendant institutions and agencies — not the school building or the school district — must be the context in which re-design occurs.

- Act in the interest of all students, but focus clearly on schools that are least successful with low-income students, students of color, and immigrant children.

- Provide time and tools for adults to develop capacity for ongoing, data-driven, multiple forms of assessment, and provide time and resources for in-depth, subject-specific professional development. Support teachers and principals in efforts to collect, analyze, and deliver data in flexible forms in order to drive instructional change.

- Engage the broad public and teachers unions in order to sustain transformation efforts.

- Pursue incremental or short-term and more radical or longer-term change strategies simultaneously.

- Foster pressure for transformation from inside and outside the school system.
These core principles are expressed at a level of abstraction that makes it difficult to translate them into direct state or local policy. However, the concerted and sometimes collaborative efforts of a number of different organizations over the past few years have yielded an emerging consensus on key policy steps to drive high school transformation. These organizations include not only the Aspen Program on Education in a Changing Society, but also the American Youth Policy Forum, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Alliance on the American High School, Jobs for the Future, as well as a large number of urban school districts and foundations.

These key policies are:

1. Create new small schools and break down large schools into small learning communities.

2. Make instructional improvement the key lever to increasing student achievement. Therefore, build strong instructional leadership at the school and district level and focus on professional development for teachers, principals, central office staff, and superintendents.

3. Use standards-based reform as a lever of accountability for all schools.

Much has been written about each of these policies. Standards-based reform has been part of the educational landscape since the early 1990s and, though it has its critics, it is now the language that educators speak; the efforts of exceptional leaders such as Tony Alvarado in District 2 in New York City highlighted how a determined focus on instructional improvement and professional development could yield significant increases in student achievement, even in a large urban district; and small schools have become something of an educational movement since the late 1990s. But how these policies apply collectively to the problems afflicting the American high school, and in particular large urban high schools, is something that educators have only recently begun to consider.

II. Predominant Transformation Strategy: small schools and small learning communities

The context of high school transformation is broad. No change strategy can ignore the federal and state standards and accountability systems. No change strategy can ignore the shifting politics of school governance, especially in large cities where many mayors have wrested control from independent school boards. No policymaker at any level can ignore the enduring public interest in education and school reform. Any comprehensive transformation strategy will have to take into account the broad array of forces at work on high schools.
Nevertheless, researchers and foundations have trained their sights in the past five years on a particular transformation strategy: the small school or small learning community. The most predominant effort, at present, is a small school strategy that assumes standards-based reform and accountability as the environment in which schools operate and sees the small school as a platform for instructional improvement and capacity. Small schools are here defined as freestanding, recognized by the district office as a separate entity with a separate budget. Small learning communities are here defined as schools-within-schools, sub-units within larger school campuses. The jury is still out on whether small schools and small learning communities will be the best change model, but there is growing evidence that decreasing school size and having a coherent strategy on curricular goals and accountability have positive effects on student performance, especially for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Research shows that small schools have an even stronger effect on high school completion rates and postsecondary enrollment.

Small schools are not always high schools, but their promise is perhaps greatest at the high school level. Small size, according to some, may be a necessary condition for a nonselective high school to excel. Small size permits teachers to converse with each other across disciplinary boundaries about instruction, curriculum, student work, and student lives. Small size permits students to know each other and to be known by many adults. Small size allows parental involvement on a more intimate level and encourages parents and teachers to work together. And finally, small size permits a focused approach to professional development and increased instructional coherence and capacity.

A. Why small schools?:
The brief in favor of small schools can be put very simply. Small school size allows for:

**Personalization and shared accountability.** Currently, the median high school size is about 1,200 with approximately 40% of public secondary schools serving more than 900 students. In schools of this size, anonymity is the rule. Teachers do not know other teachers well, teachers do not know their students well, and students do not know each other. With structural features such as subject-based departmentalization and tracks for students assumed to be destined for different pathways, such large schools find it extremely difficult to foster the collegiality and collaboration and consistent high expectations for student performance that support powerful learning. Small schools, however, have been shown to offer more communal environments in which alienation of teachers and students is reduced and engagement in school is enhanced. Further, studies of small schools have found that where teachers, students, administrators, and parents are known to each other, there is a heightened sense of shared accountability.

**Better conditions for teachers.** In an era where demand for qualified teachers exceeds supply in many locations, particularly in urban areas, small school reform strategies have the potential to improve working conditions for teachers. Large
schools are characterized by norms of privacy, high rates of teacher turnover, and substandard physical working conditions. Smaller schools have been shown to create the conditions necessary for improvements in school professional climates and teacher satisfaction which matter for teaching at all grade levels. Cross-disciplinary teacher collaboration is more likely, flexible scheduling is easier to implement, and school-wide professional development is possible. Put simply, in a small school it is possible for the entire faculty to meet in a small room, to know each other well, and to make shared decisions.

Mission-driven school culture. Virtually every good school, large and small, is organized around a particular mission that combines a vision of teaching and learning with some small set of other goals. The creation of small schools and small learning communities is an especially powerful vehicle in permitting educators to create and sustain an intellectual mission, and to attract teachers and students committed to this mission. The substance of the mission is less important than its being clearly articulated and present in the school culture. The mission might be a college preparatory or career academy vision, or it may be built around a pedagogical vision such as the Coalition for Essential Schools or the Talent Development model.

In short decreasing school size and scope can transform high schools and student achievement because small schools lead to more personalized teacher-student relationships and reduced feelings of anonymity and alienation. When teachers know each other and know their students, they are better able to engage in student-centered, high-expectation, collaborative teaching practices. And when students feel known in their schools, they are more connected and engaged in their learning, they are accountable to more adults, and their academic achievement is likely to improve alongside a growth in more general youth development outcomes.4

B. How are districts aiming to transform the large urban high school?

With a growing body of research supporting small schools, several urban districts have taken the lead in attempts to focus reform efforts on the high school by pursuing a dual strategy: create a portfolio of new small schools and break down comprehensive high schools into smaller learning communities. The ultimate aim is to create what some have called a system of schools rather than a single school system. In a system of schools, the district office relinquishes a command-and-control function and instead aims to provide ongoing support, especially for instruction and professional development, for a diversity of schools.

The basic framework of the district strategy begins from the following assumptions:

- The high school requires its own theory of action for change.

- Small schools and small learning communities create the conditions for increasing personalization, reducing alienation, and focusing on and improving instruction.

- Creating and supporting new forms of effective teaching and learning is at the heart of successful high school transformation.

- District and school leaders must define what good instruction looks like and show teachers in real practice the kind of classroom that is sought.

- Districts must locate the sources of professional development at the school site and build a school infrastructure to support teachers as they learn and change.

- Data must drive and refocus strategies and improve outcomes. Easily accessed, inquiry-friendly, student data for all teachers is essential if they are to use it for understanding and improving practice. Teachers learn best from analyzing instruction together with student work and school data at hand.

- Districts should insist that all proposed external partnerships and externally funded projects be tightly aligned with the core mission and strategies for change; diversionary offers of help should be rejected.

C. What is the Theory of Action Behind Small School Size?

Why should we believe that this dual strategy will succeed in driving system-wide transformation in high schools? Let us make the theory of action explicit.

The district strategy of simultaneously creating a portfolio of new small schools and breaking down comprehensive high schools into smaller learning communities rests on four assumptions about what will drive transformation. These assumptions are compatible, but their internal logic will push reform and policy in different directions. For this reason, it is imperative that district leaders clearly articulate their transformation strategy – which assumptions it is making and why – and craft the necessary policies to support it.

1. Small schools are better than large schools.

The basic idea here is simple: small schools are superior to large schools, and therefore the creation of small schools and small learning communities everywhere is the transformation strategy. The district office's function may have to be changed in order to support the
transformation of the high school -- more on this later. But districts have tended not to make any assumptions about if or how schools will learn from each other, or what effect the creation of small schools will have on the preferences of principals, teachers, parents, and students about what kind of school they would like to work in or attend.

But the creation of small schools and small learning communities present a host of new policy questions for districts.

\[a. \text{ Creating SLCs}\]

It is easier to recruit and select a staff dedicated to the school mission when establishing a new school which generally can draw from all staff in the district as well as from teachers not currently employed in the district. New schools are often created as charter schools, freeing them from certain hiring constraints, depending on the particular state charter laws. In contrast, SLCs often are comprised almost entirely of staff already employed in the host high school. It is easier to build a strong, supportive culture from the ground up in a new school, while SLCs often must go through the more difficult, painstaking and lengthier process of transforming an existing school culture. This is especially true in low performing high schools that are being transformed into SLCs as part of an improvement process; these schools often have highly dysfunctional and deeply engrained cultures that are extremely resistant to change.

It is therefore more difficult to create successful SLCs than successful new small schools. Many districts have found that a precondition of a successful SLC launch is an initial “jolt” or hard-nosed intervention, most often the replacement of the principal. But more generally, the creation of smaller learning communities requires thinking through what infrastructure at the school and district level needs to be in place to manage the transition. Simply layering the structural features of a SLC onto the existing structure of a comprehensive high school is a sure recipe for confusion and dysfunction. Creating autonomous or semi-autonomous small learning communities from a large high school demands that the previous organizational structure not only be re-thought but replaced. A baseline indicator of success in this endeavor is, when asked, do students in small learning communities know that they are in small learning communities. Districts also need to decide whether to pursue a mandatory or voluntary transition to SLCs.

Districts must therefore identify what essential characteristics a small learning community must have to serve as a platform for improving teaching and learning. Questions include:

- How does the way students are recruited/assigned to small learning communities matter?
• What about ways in which teachers join, form or are assigned to small learning communities?
• What do the practical decisions about scheduling mean for how small learning communities can develop a mission, vision and culture?
• How will resources be allocated among small learning communities?
• What do different decisions mean for the ability of small learning communities to form pathways and community, higher education linkages?
• How will small learning communities be lead?

These questions indicate that the gap between goals, design and implementation can be the making or breaking of the success of high school transformation.

b. Creating New Small Schools
Districts realize that the difficulty of breaking down large comprehensive high schools into smaller learning communities should be complemented by the creation of new small schools. New, freestanding small schools present their own set of policy needs and questions. For the small schools strategy to succeed on district-wide level, district leaders need to have answers to the following questions:

• Should new high schools begin with one grade, usually the ninth grade, and build out, or should they begin with all grades? Which strategy leads to better outcomes?

• What is the upper limit of students in a small school? Should the district place a cap, or formally define what student-teacher ratio constitutes a small school?

• In creating new small schools, should districts pursue an internal RFP strategy to allow local teachers, parents, and community leaders to create small schools; or should districts import so-called "off-the-shelf" models of small schools that often are part of larger networks?

• In creating small schools, should districts use charter schools as the vehicle for their creation? Or should they pursue some other model, such as pilot schools?

Questions for Future Research
The set of policy issues raised by the dual strategy of small school and SLC creation point to questions for future research. If a first wave of experimentation and evaluation suggest that small schools can be more powerful learning environments than large schools, we now need a second wave of research on best practices of small schools. What district policies will result in the creation of better rather than worse small schools and small learning communities?
It is crucial to recognize that creating new small schools is a fundamentally different endeavor than breaking down large schools into smaller learning communities. District policies must differentiate between the two models, and provide different kinds of supports, incentives, and consequences for failure.

Another important question is the extent to which the creation of small schools and SLCs must be accompanied by a coherent curricular and instructional approach in order to yield high student achievement. Small school size is not a silver bullet. Though small schools often do produce greater personalization simply by fostering greater contact between students and between students and adults, they only create the conditions for improving student achievement. A more collegial environment and greater personalization are undeniably good things, but they don’t add up to better instruction. Small schools and SLCs are the platform for building strong learning environments. Without strong leadership, district support, a transformed central office, and a focus on instruction, a small school may turn out to be indistinguishable in everything but size from a large comprehensive school. This point cannot be overemphasized. The small school strategy requires a complementary strategy of instructional improvement – coherent professional development and coaching, a district-wide literacy and numeracy curriculum, an effort to provide data to drive improvement, and so on.

Finally, it is important to think beyond the district, even when the district is driving high school transformation. Districts are not the only creators of small schools. One promising trend in the small school movement that bears closer examination is the creation of networks of small schools that have similar philosophies of teaching and learning. Examples of these include Aspire Public Schools in California, Jobs for the Future’s Early College High Schools Initiative, KIPP Academies, and La Raza charter schools. Networks of small schools might also be fostered by districts and states through some kind of new chartering agency.
The network strategy

The second Aspen Institute workshop on transforming the American high school made some proposals for radical change that would fashion new governance structures to support the creation of networks of schools. These networks would diminish, or possibly even supplant, the role of the district. There is good reason to doubt the capacity of urban districts to be the drivers of school transformation, for they confront not only the most difficult educational challenges but are also saddled with deep-seated bureaucratic intractability and an ever-changing political climate. The famously short tenure of urban superintendents, frequent conflict between the district and the local school board or the mayor, a shortage of qualified teachers and principals, history of conflict with employee unions, and, increasingly, deep budget cuts combine to make it very difficult for the district to pursue a coherent set of reform policies over time.

The goal in this radical change strategy would be to create a system of small, mission-driven, autonomous and accountable high schools operating under specific performance contracts. In this system, all schools would in effect be charter schools and the traditional function of the school board would be replaced by a community-based governing board responsible for issuing, managing, and reviewing the charters.

There would be heavy incentives here for the creation of networks of schools or the issuing charters to a particular network of schools. The continual chartering of individual schools must overcome the problem of professional capacity within the district, especially on its supply of instructional leaders, and is anyway inefficient. Over time, the community-based governing board and chartering agency would stimulate independent but publicly accountable networks of like-minded schools. The networks would serve as the coordinating mechanism for a set of schools, but unlike the typical school district office, networks are customer-oriented, market-driven service providers. Ideally, these networks would be numerous enough to offer meaningful educational choices to parents and students but few enough to be manageable.

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5 Michael Cohen’s Transforming the American High School: New Directions for State and Local Policy (Jobs for the Future and Aspen Institute, 2001), describes these proposals in more detail.
2. Creating small schools unleashes market energies that create competition which will improve all schools

Some districts believe that the creation of small schools and small learning communities will permit public school choice policy at the high school level, which will in turn create market energies that will result in system-wide improvements. This theory of action views the introduction of small schools as a lever to trigger district-wide change, even in schools that are not small. Here a diversified delivery system of choice is the ultimate goal of small school creation. The core assumption is that competition among schools for students and the dollars that flow from enrolling them will provide strong incentives for all schools within a district to improve. When new small schools and SLCs begin to attract students from other schools, lowering the enrollment and therefore budget in the latter, these schools will begin to compete for students. Districts can attempt to institutionalize these incentives and enhance the effects of competition by tying principal evaluations to student recruitment and retention.

Advocates of the forces of the market as a lever for district-wide improvement also point to the effect of small school and SLC creation on the labor force. The market energies unleashed by the creation of new small schools and a district choice policy also apply to principals and teachers. Past research indicates that principals and teachers who desire a mission-driven, high-intensity school environment will be drawn to new small schools, despite the high work load that accompanies the creation of any new school. In short, district capacity for school improvement in the labor force is likely to be spread disproportionately among the new small schools. Districts can capitalize on this by using new small schools as laboratories for cultivating instructional leadership and capacity that can later be brought back to existing schools.

Questions for future research.

Whether through private scholarships, vouchers, charter schools, small schools, or some combination of these, the introduction of market energies into education through school choice is at the forefront of educational policy debates today. The evidence to date on how choice affects academic achievement is mixed, and there is very little research on the effects of choice on system-wide improvement. Nevertheless, it is clear that without a robust system of choice, the idea that incentives for schools to compete will drive system-wide improvement is dubious at best. Districts need to know under what conditions school choice will have system-wide effects, and what the district can do to enhance these effects. For instance, is there a "tipping point" at which the percentage of students lured away from existing schools into new small schools will begin to stimulate existing schools to compete for student enrollment? Or will existing schools deteriorate and collapse?

There are several reasons, however, to worry about the choice rationale for small school creation. First, in urban districts there is almost everywhere a problem of overcrowding. When new small schools are created and siphon off a small number of students from the
larger schools, the reaction is typically one of relief rather than fear of competition. Second, breaking down large high schools into small learning communities is unlikely to create the same kind of market energies as the introduction of new small schools. Competition for students requires that new schools open or that existing schools expand. Finally, since the raison d’être of small schools is that they be small – typically no more than 400 students – it will require a radical and comprehensive strategy of small school creation for any urban district to create a system of choice that is anything more than an assembly of new small schools and a familiar catalogue of large schools or small learning communities. Few urban districts have incentives, or the political will, to undertake the radical strategy.

All this is not to disparage the promise of small schools. It is only to suggest skepticism that small school creation will act as a mechanism for creating district-wide improvement because it will introduce the ameliorative effects of public school choice and the marketplace.

3. **In-house R&D and professional development.**

A third rationale for the small school strategy is that creating a portfolio of new small schools establishes in the process an "in-house" research and development team that can develop best practices for high school instruction which can be shared district-wide. Small schools can serve as laboratories for innovation. The typical model here is that new small schools will become sites of high quality instruction and that teachers from across the district can be brought in for observation and training in these best practices. Another option is for small schools to be the training ground for high performing teachers and instructional leaders who then move on to other schools in the district, or whose schools will be replicated in the future.

There is no shortage of small school models – think of the MET in Providence, Rhode Island, High Tech High in San Diego, Coalition of Essential Schools, the Early College High Schools started by Jobs for the Future – and this approach suggests that districts ought to solicit proposals for new schools from a wide variety of providers, both from inside and outside the district.

In addition, districts can use a diverse portfolio of small schools to address the particular needs of certain populations of students. For example, Early College high schools may help to serve students whose prospects to graduate from their traditional comprehensive high school are bleak. Using charter provisions to create small schools will lead to similar niche-schools that serve particular populations.

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6 For more on this point, and more generally on the impact of competition on urban school districts, see Frederick Hess, *Revolution at the Margins* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2002).
Moreover, small schools tend to generate business and community partners more readily than large schools. Fostering business and community partners for every small school can stimulate new forms of material and human resource support for each school, and can help engage and build a public constituency for reform efforts more generally.

Questions for future research.

- What district models of professional development can best take advantage of best practices within small schools?

- How can districts avoid the creation of "random acts of innovation" where teachers and principals elsewhere attribute success to structural features of new small schools that cannot be duplicated in already existing schools?

- How can districts avoid creating a small universe of new and exciting small schools with a parallel and larger universe of small learning communities overlaid on comprehensive high schools?

4. Something is better than nothing.
At worst, districts and states can plausibly argue, the creation of high quality small schools is a better investment of resources than continued efforts at reforming the comprehensive high school. A small schools approach at high school transformation becomes a strategic hedge.

But it is a reasonable concern, in light of the cyclical nature of so much school reform, that the small school movement is simply the reform du jour. If the small school movement is to succeed at dislodging the institutional structure of the comprehensive high school on a large scale, it will have to demonstrate not only its superiority in producing better academic achievement but also in winning the support of the broader public. District and state reformers pursuing the small schools approach must therefore undertake a public engagement strategy as well.

Summary
The creation of new small schools and small learning communities is the predominant high school transformation strategy in many urban districts today. But educational leaders must be clear about the theory of change, or rationale, for the small school strategy. Districts must be able to articulate how and why the small schools strategy will lead to district-wide improvement and not just to the creation of a few tiny islands of excellence. The four rationales offered here are not mutually incompatible, but their respective logic can lead in very different policy directions.

III. New Challenges
The predominant change strategy of small school size holds much promise, even if many new and unresolved questions remain. Districts that have adopted a small schools
strategy as the centerpiece of their reform approach have also discovered a larger set of unresolved policy questions. These questions are conceptually distinct from the creation of small schools and small learning communities – they are questions that any district must face – but they arise with special force and new meaning as a result of the small school strategy that districts are deploying. The experience of districts who are at the cutting edge of implementing a small schools approach suggest that policymakers pay greater attention to: special populations of students (especially English Language Learners and special education students), reconfiguring the district central office, engaging and involving the teachers union in transformation, and how to open up multiple pathways to postsecondary education.

A. Special populations of students, such as English language learners and special education students.

Educational leaders and researchers need to pay more attention to English language learners (ELLs) and special education students. Small schools research and charter schools research indicate that ELLs and special education students are often not well-served, and frequently are segregated into their own cocoon. If small schools succeed by further marginalizing ELLs and by ignoring special education students, it is a highly questionable form of success.

Dealing effectively with special populations of students requires an integrated strategy as part of the process of improving achievement for all. In order to ensure that transforming the large urban high school does not lead to new forms of educational inequity, we must therefore ask:

- How can small schools provide ELLs and special education students access to the same standards as other students?
- How can small schools share responsibility for these students among all educators?
- How might districts and state appropriately modify accountability systems?

These are large questions that have implications for teaching and learning, curriculum, standards and accountability, and school organization. But a significant part of the problem in many districts is the district governance structure. Since the 1960s, districts have created categorical programs and funding streams for ELLs and special education that result in a diffusion of responsibility that ultimately makes principals and teachers accountable to too many masters: deputy superintendent, district special education leader, district bilingual education leader, etc. Similarly, principals have to find a way to get teachers to take ownership of all kids in the classroom, regardless of how they might be "coded". The district infrastructure cuts against such ownership. When schools diagnose a kid in a certain way (e.g., ADD, disciplinary problems, bilingual, gifted, special ed, etc.), then the kid is owned by someone else in the system. The end game must be for
a single teacher to own all kids, able to access other resources as necessary. Avoid the familiar problem of a teacher beginning the school year with 50 students, who then starts to “farm out” several students a month – some for special education, some for behavioral problems, some for bilingual education – until the end of the year arrives and the teacher feels ownership and accountability over only half the class.

Research on ELLs yields the following set of best practices:7

- **ELLs should have access to the same high standards as all students.** Supplement these standards with English as a Second Language standards.
- **Shared responsibility among all educators for ELLs.** ESL and bilingual teachers should not responsibility for all ELL instructional needs.
- **Provide modified instruction for transitional period** (average should be 3 years).
- **Appropriate accountability systems.** All ELL students should be included in school district accountability system. While ELL students may be exempted from an English version of assessments (and then tested annually for English language proficiency) they must be assessed for English and content knowledge using native language assessments or assessments with accommodations. Practically, district leaders probably need to make separate decisions for Spanish language students and others, since there are typically enough students and robust programs for native Spanish speakers.
- **Extended time for learning.** Many ELL students require extra tutoring, extended classes, and perhaps partnerships with higher education and/or community organizations to give them the time to acquire English and master content knowledge.
- **Programs for parents.** Information should be provide to educate parents about US school expectations, including how to begin planning early for college.
- **Appropriate use of funds.** Bilingual money is there from ESEA Act, but many ELLs are also Title I eligible and those funds often aren't used for bilingual kids.
- **Short term newcomer programs.** For those children without any formal education in home country, a transitional period in a newcomer center may be necessary.

B. **Reconfiguring the central offices of districts.**
The central offices of large urban districts are typically overstaffed, entrenched bureaucracies that operate in a command-and-control mode, aiming to ensure compliance rather than acting as support. There are good reasons to think that the central offices of districts require reconfiguration independent of the need for high school reform. But the early lessons of high school transformation centering on a small school approach point out the need for central office change in dramatic ways. Some of this change must be geared toward providing new kinds of support for small schools and SLCs. And some of

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7 For more on ELLs in high school, see *Serving English Language Learners in High School*, NABE News Magazine, Vol. 25 (3), January/February 2002.
this change must be geared at ensuring that categorical programs, such as bilingual
education and special education, are fully integrated into the small school approach.

In general, transforming the high school requires a shift in the central office mission from
compliance to support. The central office should see its purpose as building capacity and
view the schools and their staff as clients. To be sure, there is an appropriate balance to
be struck between permitting total school autonomy and cross-site needs for coherence,
alignment, equity, and economies of scale. But at a minimum, districts would have to
address the following key policy areas in their central office structure:

_Human resource systems_

The creation of new small schools and SLCs requires that urban districts redesign their
human resource systems in order to provide appropriate support for teacher and
administrator preparation, recruitment, induction, and allocation. These systems are
traditionally constructed with centralized control as the governing principle, and represent
an amalgam of federal and state policies, higher education practices, and district policies
shaped by their respective collective bargaining agreements. In light of these multiple
constituencies, the re-design process should include multiple stakeholders. The aim
should be to maximize the ability of new small schools and SLCs to select a team of
teachers, administrators, and specialists who share a common vision and possess the
array of expertise and experience needed to improve site-specific teaching and learning
goals.

_Facilities_

The development and integrity of new small schools and small learning communities
requires the resources necessary to acquire new buildings and redesign existing ones. The
development of SLCs, in particular, has sometimes been undermined by a lack of
resources necessary to ensure that the school space conveys a particular and individual
identity. In concrete terms, this means ensuring that entrances, classrooms, instructional
materials, and supplies all reinforce collaboration, teaming, and a sense of community and
mission among educators, students, and parents in new small schools and SLCs.

_Data Provision_

The autonomy and accountability of small schools and SLCs is greatly affected by the
district’s data systems. If the district provides student, staff, and budget information
according to old categories and units (e.g., school buildings), the mismatch between pre-
existing and new data requirements sends mixed messages about the integrity of the
reform and the system’s commitment to change. Moreover, it signal the existence of two
or more systems that compete for resources and primacy. But most important, a new
data system is necessary in order to permit educational leaders and teachers, especially at
the school level, to drive both professional development and to make flexible use of state
and federal resources to tailor instruction to meet the needs of specific student groups.
Data must be readily available in disaggregated form, not only according to the
requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, but also in the form desired by new schools and SLCs.

**Professional Development**

As elaborated earlier, the small schools strategy is no panacea itself. Small schools and SLCs are the platform for creating powerful instruction. Any improvement in instruction requires a coherent and sustained professional development strategy. The central office of urban districts is instrumental in guiding instructional improvement. Teachers and administrators at the school level must have assurances that professional development will be part of the eternal tapestry of transformation. It cannot be short-lived. Staff must be able to rely on professional support delivered at or in the context of their specific site. Efforts should be made to ensure that instructional support maps onto the specific mission and vision of the school or SLC.

**Public Engagement**

Many districts aiming at transforming their schools have organized a comprehensive community engagement effort to define their community’s educational assets, deficits, and priorities, and to construct a plan of action. The breadth of engagement during planning, however, is typically followed by a return to business as usual during implementation. The turnover in communications and feedback leads to a significant feeling of loss among stakeholders who became accustomed to new roles and knowledge during the planning phase and assumed continued involvement. The shift also reinforces a mistaken belief that reform is linear, that problems are defined, plans are developed and implemented, and improvement results in an unbroken and continuous fashion. But reform requires a constant cycle of inquiry, and continual efforts at public engagement. It is also worth noting that communications systems at the central office which support a cycle of inquiry and broad-based distributed engagement provide opportunities for feedback as well as dissemination.

**Categorical program staff**

Specialized staff who work in the central office should develop a set of proven models for effective integration of specialized programs – English-language learning, special education, etc. – into the overall school learning environment, each of which is compliant with federal laws. Schools should be permitted the autonomy to select from a range of appropriate models. The role of the central office staff is to help schools deliver high-quality instruction based on site- and student-specific needs and preferences. Central offices should also help to bring together the knowledge gained at the school level by networking principals and key staff. In order to create institutional incentives for categorical program staff to provide a support rather than compliance role, districts should consider giving school principals a role in evaluating central office staff, especially those responsible for categorical programs. Make the accountability structure for categorical staff rest in part at the school site. Individual principals should play a role in evaluating the categorical staff working in their schools.
Fiscal equity
The central office should provide maximum flexibility in the use of local, state, and federal funds, and cross-site equity in funding based on the needs of students and communities. The more flexible the use of categorical funding for special populations, the better teachers, principals, and specialist staff can tailor use of these monies for the particular needs of students and student groups. One option that several districts have begun trying is weighted-student funding formulas.

C. Engaging and involving unions in transformation efforts.
Unions are undeniably powerful agents in schools and education policy. Unions no longer, if they ever did, confine themselves to seeking to improve the contracts and working conditions of teachers. In many places they are also deeply involved in education policy and school reform. TURN, the Teachers Union Reform Network, for instance, is active in many school districts, working with district leadership to improve education for students in addition to conditions for teachers.

It is commonplace to view teachers unions as one of the primary obstacles toward school transformation. Many people, especially superintendents and principals, believe that rules written into collective bargaining agreements bind the hands of the school and district administrators, restricting the authority they have over many aspects of school policy.

The adversarial history of acrimony between districts and unions is counterproductive to school reform efforts generally and high school transformation more specifically. Teachers unions are more productively viewed in two ways. First, they are traditional trade unions, responsible for safeguarding and improving working conditions, wages, benefits, and so on. But second, they are craft guilds, responsible for moving the teaching profession forward and training its newest members. The task of district leaders must be to engage the craft guild aspect of the union. District leaders should urge union leaders to take responsibility for policing their own ranks, work collaboratively on professional development, and use the common threat of vouchers as a spur to common efforts at reform. District and community leaders can help to cultivate a reform arm of the union, such as has been done with the Quest Center in Chicago. The dual identity of teachers unions can be seen in the Quest Center’s mission, as articulated by the president of the Chicago Teachers Union, Deborah Lynch: “The Chicago Teachers Union is charged with negotiating contracts and protecting the rights of our members in the workplace, but it is also necessary for our Union to provide teachers and support staff with the professional tools they need to improve education in Chicago. We support the efforts of teachers to change the schools to make them better places in which to teach and learn.”

Another key point is to urge both districts and unions to view collective bargaining as an ongoing dialogue, not just a periodic showdown that is painful for both sides. Since
improving instruction is a top priority of both the district and the teacher union, forging a
dialogue about instructional improvement (e.g., best practices, professional development,
the role of coaches, etc.) ought to be paramount and even a part of collective bargaining.
How is it possible for instructional improvement to take a central place in district-union
dialogue? One option is to commission a joint district-union poll about what teachers
want, working conditions, reform initiatives, their views on high quality teaching and
learning, and so on. This can be part and parcel of a larger data-driven reform effort.

It would also be helpful to move beyond the district-union relationship as that of two
command-and-control organizations entering into negotiations. An important step toward
engaging unions is to emphasize the necessity of parallel management transformation of
both the district and the union. The old command-and-control, hierarchical structure of
both district and union must move toward a facilitative, collaborative, evidence-and
performance-based model. By bringing other players to the table, it is sometimes
possible to move beyond two person negotiations. It is possible to use the media and
community partners to make the agenda larger than signing a contract.

Unions and small schools
The union is an important player in small school reform. In New York City, the United
Federation of Teachers supported the revised teacher assignment procedures that the
small schools requested, whereas in Philadelphia and Boston the union was more resistant
to the changes in hiring and placement some small learning communities wanted. If a key
feature of small schools is cohesive faculty sharing a similar educational philosophy
where principals enjoy the authority to hire and fire teachers, engaging and obtaining
union support for atypical staffing arrangements is necessary. The same holds true for
flexible scheduling.

D. Opening up multiple pathways to postsecondary education.
One of the most powerful reasons that high schools require transformation is that, as
never before, they are charged with educating all students to high standards and preparing
them for postsecondary education and, beyond, to productive work and able citizenship.
In such an environment, a central problem is to build a seamless K-16 system with
multiple pathways from high school to postsecondary education. Postsecondary colleges
and universities are of great significance, then, to the structure and performance of high
schools. Yet an enormous obstacle to reform is that there are very few incentives for
postsecondary education to pay any attention to K-12 or high school reform. Indeed,
there are very few initiatives or policy proposals designed to build mutually constructive
and beneficial relationships and activities between high schools and postsecondary
schools.

High school transformation therefore has direct implications for postsecondary education:
how to develop appropriate admissions standards, how to prepare and provide ongoing
training for highly qualified teachers, how to resolve the problems of remedial instruction,
and how to collaborate on structuring multiple learning pathways from high school to college.

Some of these multiple pathways have already begun to emerge. Consider Advanced Placement tests, the International Baccalaureate, the proliferation of dual enrollment and credit programs, increasing use of technology such as distance learning and virtual classrooms, the Early College initiative, Massachusetts’s Diploma Plus program, and other programs that blur the boundaries between secondary and postsecondary.

It is very easy for policymakers and the public to think about this problem as one bearing most dramatically on selective institutions of higher education. How can high schools prepare students for entry into the best colleges and universities? And how can colleges and universities increase the enrollment of poor and minority students? Faced with attacks on the constitutional status of affirmative action programs, several state legislatures have passed laws offering admission to flagship state universities for finishing in some top percentile of one’s high school class. And popular newspapers and magazines are filled annually with articles about the struggle for admission to the most selective universities in the country.

But this obscures the problem, which appears most dramatically at less selective institutions – community colleges, two year colleges, and broad access four-year institutions. Fully 85% of high school graduates first enroll in non-selective colleges and universities, and these institutions are the ones most directly affected by inadequately prepared high school students. The number of high school graduates who require some kind of remedial coursework is distressingly high. Moreover, the completion rates for students entering college and university are not good. Overall, one-fourth of the students who enter four-year colleges and universities and almost half of those who enter two-year colleges do not return for their second year. At NCAA Division I institutions, only 60% of white students and fewer than 40% of African American and Latino students graduate within six years.

A consideration of high school transformation indicates a range of the policy concerns that would be necessary to address in order to create multiple pathways to postsecondary education.

- The standards for graduation from high school are not aligned with entry requirements for postsecondary institutions, nor are they sensitive to the diversity of postsecondary options. The place for alignment is in teacher training institutions and in admissions.

- However entry requirements are set, how will colleges deal with high school graduates and dropouts who show up unprepared for college level work?
• It is a real problem for K-12 reformers to say that the goal of K-12 reform is to prepare every kid for postsecondary education. This allows postsecondary institutions to remain as is, and K-12 adjusts to that. But this makes difficult any small school or SLC that implements progressive pedagogy, for what awaits them at college is traditional lecture-style pedagogy.

What can postsecondary education do to support high school transformation? At least the following:

• Pay greater attention to economic necessities while students are enrolled in higher education. The reality is that most students are enrolled part time and work part time to support themselves.

• Give earlier signals to high school students so that they can gauge college readiness.

• Build and sustain partnerships between postsecondary education and urban districts.

• Provide data from postsecondary institutions to high schools about student readiness and performance

IV. Conclusion: All Schools Can Learn

The commonplace view of high schools, especially large urban high schools, is that they are sclerotic bureaucracies that have accumulated layer after layer of reform atop an organizational skeleton that dates back to the early part of the 20th Century. Teachers are understandably skeptical of new waves of reform after seeing so many before be ingested without effect, principals too are dubious of their own power when top-down reforms are dictated from above and when their authority over their own staff – hiring and firing power, the ability to schedule faculty meetings – is sharply constrained by union regulations, and superintendents come and go through a revolving door that rotates on average every 4 and half years. All the while, students in many high schools are crammed into overflowing buildings, are often alienated from learning, and drop out at alarming rates. Those who remain and graduate frequently have failed to learn to high standards and require remedial instruction in college or struggle to find employment. In these circumstances, it is reasonable to ask: can high schools learn to change?

Those concerned with the American high school must believe that the answer is yes, all high schools can learn. To do so, the aim must be to transform the structure of the high school. Teachers, administrators, policymakers, community leaders, and grantmakers naturally have different ideas about how to do this, but that there is consensus on the need for transformation is a necessary and remarkable first step. The predominant small school strategy represents a second step in the direction of transformation.
Transformation, like learning to high standards, demands effort and endurance. The century-old foundation of the comprehensive high school will not be dismantled overnight, nor will the new foundation be erected in a week. The task of unbuilding and building takes years. And since we cannot rely on the heroic efforts of a few visionary leaders, transformation also requires that systems be put in place to support the work of mere mortals.

The first steps in the right direction have already been taken. This report has aimed to provide a compass for helping to make better rather than worse decisions as the next steps come. To make real the promise of transformation, we must harvest the early lessons and prepare for the challenges, opportunities, and obstacles ahead that are just coming into view.