A BIG IDEA:
SMALLER HIGH SCHOOLS

>> Dr. Sharif Shakrani, Co-director, Education Policy Center

Growing concern about the quality of public education in the United States has driven numerous educational reform efforts across the last three decades. These reforms include increased accountability as exemplified by various requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, the introduction of new curriculum and instructional methods in response to the standards movement and, in recent years, the redesign of public high schools—including an increased focus on creating small schools and small learning communities.

In her 2008 State of the State address, Michigan Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm proposed the establishment of a "21st Century Schools Fund." The $300 million investment would help Michigan school districts replace large, impersonal high schools that have low academic achievement and high dropout rates with smaller high schools that use strong personal relationships, consistent discipline and real-world relevance to help at-risk students achieve high academic goals. These environments, then, would better prepare students for success in postsecondary education or the workplace. Granholm said the new small high schools will be "free from red tape and bureaucracy, (and) will deploy the new three Rs—rigor, relevance, and relationships—to keep students in high school and then get them to college or technical training." The governor's proposal would allow high schools with more than 800 students that fail to meet the academic goals of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) for two years or more to create smaller high schools of about 400 students.

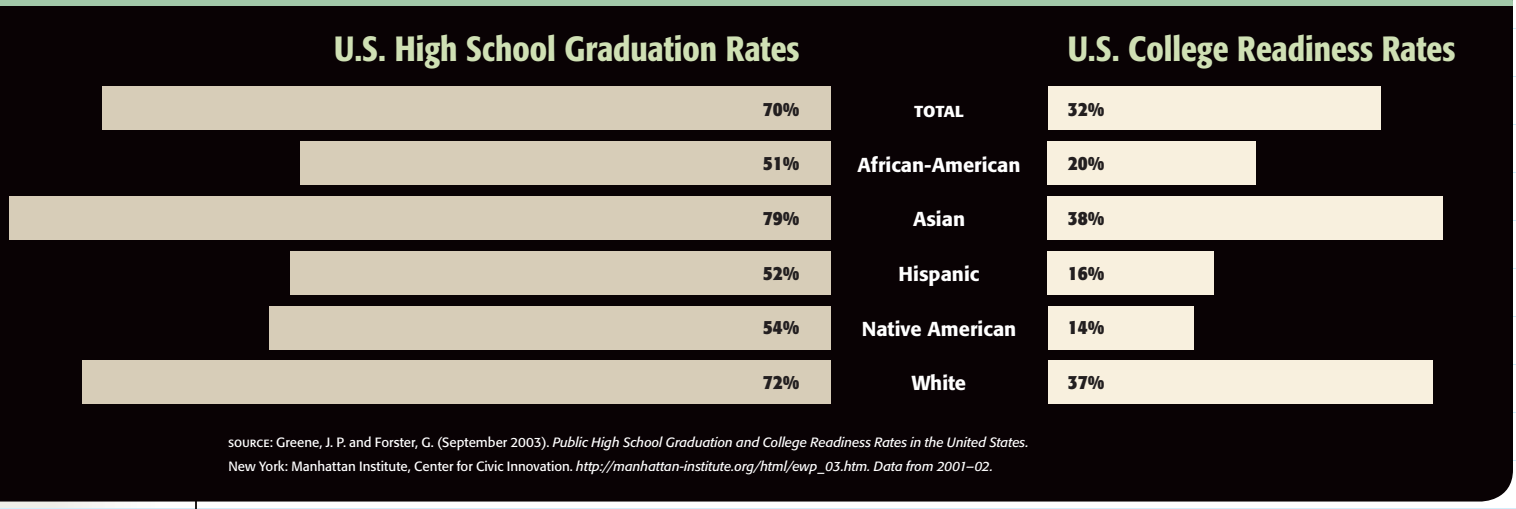
Are Small High Schools the Answer?

Presently, the majority of U.S. high school students attend schools of more than 1,500 students; most of these schools are located in large urban or suburban areas. Urban high schools often enroll up to 4,000 students on one campus. Traditional high schools are too large and impersonal to nurture teenagers through the often tough period of adolescence. Students in large high schools report having few significant interactions with teachers, mentors or counselors, in large part because professionals see so many students daily. It becomes almost impossible to build meaningful relationships that meet the individual needs of students. These large, impersonal institutions are not succeeding in teaching many young people what they need to know to lead meaningful lives, succeed in college and earn a decent living. This is disproportionately true for students from low-income neighborhoods and historically disadvantaged minority students.

About $84 billion will be dedicated to constructing new schools within the next three years. Many educators, policymakers, researchers, parents and students believe those funds would be better spent converting large "mega schools" into smaller schools-within-schools as well as creating new schools with fewer students. Starting over with thousands of new small, stand-alone high schools is often seen as expensive and impractical. As a result, many districts are pursuing the more economical option of simply converting their large high schools into small schools within the existing structure.

What does it mean to convert a large, comprehensive high school into a set of small schools in the same building? Researchers define school "conversion" as replacing the design, structure, governance and operation of a large high school with a set of small, largely autonomous, focused, distinctive and deliberately "uncomprehensive" schools that share the same site and employ mostly the same teaching and administrative staff as the original large high school. Conversion schools are neither start-ups nor "reconstitutions," in which an existing large school is closed and replaced or re-opened as a new school or "academy" with new staff and often many new students.

Since the 2001–02 school year, about 1,800 new small high schools have been created in the United States by converting large high schools into several small schools. Most schools begin with a focus in ninth and tenth grades, which means that a full conversion takes three years. This approach allows juniors ▸



SOURCE: Greene, J. P. and Forster, G. (September 2003). *Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates in the United States.* New York: Manhattan Institute, Center for Civic Innovation. *http://manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_03.htm. Data from 2001–02.*

and seniors to finish their high school careers with the same range of course choices available to them when they enrolled.

These smaller schools vary substantially in size from just over 100 students to about 800 students; the modal size is about 400 students. Some schools are well-focused on specific themes such as arts, business and commerce, health services, technology or culinary arts, while others maintain comprehensive offerings as they become smaller. In most new schools, teaching and instructional practices are just beginning to change as teachers come to recognize firsthand the specific needs of students in the small learning environment.

What Research Tells Us

Recent studies suggest students in small public high schools perform better academically, have higher attendance rates, feel safer, experience fewer behavior problems and participate more frequently in extracurricular activities. Additional studies show students who stand to benefit most from small school environments are those most in need, namely low-income students in low-achieving high schools in large urban areas, where graduation rates and low attendance are major problems. A recent study by New York University's Institute for Education and Social Policy (2007) reported that small schools have been shown to provide a positive social as well as academic environment for students and more effective interaction between students, teachers and administrative staff, which contributes to higher attendance and graduation rates.

Researchers attribute this positive social and academic environment to the fact that educators in small high schools interact with fewer students and are thus able to tailor their teaching to meet students' academic needs and provide personalized assistance to students who need additional help.

A number of empirical articles document that students in small public and private high schools have higher achievement levels than those in large schools. Studies found higher student gains in reading, mathematics, science and social studies at small high schools than at large schools. Moreover, small schools are more likely to have fewer incidents of violence and misbehavior and that, in turn, has been found to contribute to higher attendance and lower drop-out and truancy rates.

Smaller Schools in Bigger Cities

If small schools are the answer, why do large high schools function effectively in other contexts, such as affluent suburbs or in industrialized nations like Japan, Korea or Germany? It is suggested that these schools have a more comprehensive curriculum, better trained staff and more resources and support available to their students, both in and out of school. In affluent communities in the United States, where more students come to school ready to learn, large schools tend to do well and there is little motivation for converting them into small schools. However, in low-income areas, large schools face paralyzing problems with discipline, dropouts and low achievement. A growing body of evidence indicates that small high schools offer a number of benefits

for economically disadvantaged urban areas and low-achieving high schools with large numbers of minority students from low-income families. Students in these schools particularly benefit from positive, encouraging relationships with teachers and are sensitive to teachers' support.

Small high schools have the potential to improve learning, but size alone is not enough. Educators must teach differently in order for the smaller school and its more personalized learning opportunities to achieve the objective. Students in small schools learn more when teaching is focused on active learning in real-world contexts and where teachers know how to help students engage in higher-order thinking and more authentic problem-solving tasks. Rigorous courses in mathematics, science and language arts require teachers with sophisticated knowledge of their fields; relevance in the classroom requires teachers with the flexibility and creativity to teach that subject in different styles to meet individual needs. Engendering productive relationships requires teachers committed to students' growth. Teaching and learning must be organized and supported in new small high schools that have leadership, professional development, facilities and resources, empowerment and time needed to teach well in this context. Researchers argue that small size is a "facilitating factor for creating organizational features of schools that have shown to be important determinants of learning."

What Do Small Schools Look Like?

The new small high schools now operating in New York City, Chicago, Milwaukee, Kansas City and San Diego are not identical; they have different pedagogies, governance structures, schedules and calendars. They do, however, share similar characteristics:

- They are small—about 400 students;
- Building relationships with students is a priority. Teachers know the names of their students and meet often to discuss academic progress and problems;
- They function autonomously, and teachers play a large, if not decisive, role in school decision-making.

Most small schools converted from large high schools also are four years ▸

SNAPSHOT

Wyandotte High School, Kansas City

Four years ago, Wyandotte High School, located near downtown Kansas City, Kansas, served more than 1,500 students; more than 90 percent African-American and Hispanic. The school had the highest drop-out rates and lowest reading scores in the district. Graduation rates, attendance and achievement were quite low. The parent income level is the lowest in the entire state. Wyandotte was in an extremely troubled place. Inside the school were bloody fights between students while kids roamed the halls. The school lacked effective leadership, direction, vision and support. Teacher turnover rates were very high.

Then a new principal came to help make improvements, spending the first year listening to students, teachers, parents and community members. After reviewing research on small schools and listening to a variety of people from across the country, the new principal worked with faculty to convert Wyandotte into several small distinct schools in the building. Each small school offers different opportunities to students, increasing the odds that the needs of students with a variety of learning styles and interests will be met. Each school has a different theme, such as business, creative arts, technology, humanities and health/medicine, that students choose based on their interests. By specializing, each school can have focused curriculum, learning and instruction. Yet, while students take most of their coursework in their selected small school, housing the small schools together in one large building allows them to easily access courses being taught in the other schools.

The 2006–07 results are heartening. Attendance, achievement, graduation rates and behavior have improved dramatically. In addition, teachers report that Wyandotte is a far more satisfying, rewarding place to work.

> **"In an increasing competitive, global economy, the consequences of dropping out of a high school are devastating to individuals, communities and our national economy. At an absolute minimum, adults need a high school diploma if they are to have any reasonable opportunities to earn a living wage . . . Yet, with little notice, the United States is allowing a dangerously high percentage of students to disappear from the educational pipeline before graduating from high school."**
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> —Gary Orfield, The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University

SNAPSHOT

"New Century High Schools," New York City

In 2002, New York City initiated an ambitious effort to transform many of its public high schools, which, on average, had been graduating less than 50 percent of their students. The lowest performing large "comprehensive" high schools were replaced with new, small schools intended to prepare students for effective postsecondary endeavors. In total, New York has opened 180 small schools since 2003 as part of the "New Century High Schools" project.

According to a recent evaluation, 78 percent of students attending the city's New Century schools graduated in four years. These schools enroll unusually high proportions of economically disadvantaged and minority students and students with weaker academic skills. In addition to outpacing the citywide graduation rates by about 30 percent, New Century High Schools also produce graduation rates nearly 20 percent higher than 10 high schools with demographically similar students that were chosen by evaluators as a comparison group. The New Century students also had a higher rate of average daily attendance and lower rates of discipline and suspension. The study, however, showed no significant differences between the test scores of the New Century high schools and the comparison schools.

old or less. Many of the stand-alone small schools are charter schools; if they fail to perform, they can be closed quickly.

Most of the small-school initiatives in the five cities noted above also received funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has allocated nearly $1 billion to help convert existing large urban schools into small high schools. This fall, 175 new small schools opened in 47 different states. There are now more than 1,800 small high schools that have been created in the last five years with support from public and private sectors.

Early results are promising: Teachers report increases in attendance and improved student attitudes and behaviors. Many of the new small schools in urban areas are now offering Advanced Placement (AP) classes for the first time. They are creating a culture of high expectations and providing support programs to help students stay in school and succeed in graduating.

In New York, Chicago and Milwaukee, each of the new small high schools have created their own approach to helping students succeed, using innovative models and a relevant focus. Whether they focus on the arts, technology, health sciences or mathematics and science, these schools must meet or exceed their state curriculum requirements. Private funding helped pay for the school conversion or start-up process and extensive technical and coaching assistance for the new school staff.

Academically, though, the change has been significantly slower. There is very little research-based evidence to show students in newly converted urban small high schools outperform their peers in larger, traditional schools. Educators involved in the small high school movement contend that most of their students came from failing schools and thus started with lower achievement levels than the average students in traditional schools. It must be noted that the vast majority of the conversion schools studied were schools created from large urban schools that were on academic probation at the time of conversion. The teachers and administrators in the conversion schools mainly came from these large schools and the students were largely drawn from the pool of students who had low achievement scores on the 9th-grade assessments of basic skills.

However, many research studies show that small high schools converted from larger ones have shown significant improvement in average daily attendance, higher graduation rates and a decrease in incidents of violence. Students and teachers also reported being more satisfied with their educational experience in the small school environment. These outcomes, by themselves, make the small school initiative worthy of consideration. Students cannot learn if they are not in school. Therefore, we can hope that increased attendance and decreased dropouts may improve achievement for these students in the future.

Small Schools a Big Step

Converting large, failing high schools into multiple small schools is a place to start. These schools offer the best of public education—commitment to enable all students to reach high standards while providing different educational options designed to serve the individual needs of each student. Their goal is to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared for a meaningful postsecondary experience, whether a four-year or community college degree or a technical school or apprenticeship experience. Every high school student deserves the opportunity to graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills to succeed in college, career and life.

Michigan Gov. Granholm's proposal for the establishment of 100 small high schools to replace failing schools is not a panacea, but it is a step in the right direction and worthy of consideration. The problems of low graduation rates, low achievement and public dissatisfaction with public education will not just go away—correcting these issues is an economic and societal necessity that must become a state priority.

Implementing the "21st Century Schools" proposal in the face of a tight state budget will be difficult. It will take strong will and courage for the people of Michigan and those who represent them to take a hard look and act on reforming high schools in light of the changing economy of the state in the 21st century. The challenge is real, but the rewards for future generations are endless.