

Running Head: REVISITING CONVERSIONS

Revisiting High School Conversions: What is Sustained After the Funding Goes?

Catherine A. Wallach
University of Washington

AERA 2009 Annual Meeting
San Diego, CA

April 14, 2009

Revisiting High School Conversions: What is Sustained After the Funding Goes?

Abstract: School reformers hope that converting comprehensive high schools into collections of small schools will produce results similar to those realized in freestanding small schools. This study revisits two “conversions” as they complete the grant funding that supported the reform, in order to explore the extent to which changes achieved through the conversion process are sustained. The report focuses on three salient themes—shared decision making, professional community, and personalization—to look at how small school sustainability is affected by the way school and district staff navigate the tensions inherent to the conversion setting. Findings indicate that conversions strive to maintain both small school and comprehensive high school ideals, leaving teachers feeling isolated and frustrated by operating in an “in-between place.”

The last decade saw a national trend in high school reform toward creating small schools. The change is intended to go beyond the structural; reformers hope to create safer, more personalized and equitable schools that promote the academic and social success of all students. For economical reasons, many of this generation of small schools are not freestanding. Instead, a collection of small schools (sometimes called small learning communities) is born of a traditional large high school and shares the same building or campus. These are referred to as conversions.

The idea of creating smaller learning environments actually has a longer history. “House systems” were popular in the 1960’s and early 1970’s where staff and students were divided into clusters that stayed together for most classes and many extracurricular activities (Oxley, 1993). However the national trend toward broadening high school curriculum and increasing the scale of schools meant few house systems survived or were even used as intended. The education critiques of the 1980s sparked renewed interest in organizing high schools into smaller units and strategies such as charter schools, house systems, and schools of choice took hold in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, and

Chicago (Oxley, 1993; Wasley & Fine, 2000). These schools provide much of the evidence of small school success cited today.

More than twenty years' worth of research shows that small schools can offer an interpersonal setting for kids and adults. Researchers have repeatedly found small schools to be superior to large schools on most measures of student achievement and equal to them on the rest, particularly for disadvantaged students (Cotton, 1996; Raywid, 1996). Teachers are better able to engage the intellectual and emotional lives of students in order to improve their academic performance (Wasley & Lear, 2001). Students have higher attendance and lower drop out rates, and small schools create a more equitable distribution of academic achievement (Lee & Smith, 1995; Toch, 2003). But, small school researchers stress that reducing school size alone does not lead to improved student outcomes. In her literature review, Kathleen Cotton (2001) quotes Visher, Teitelbaum, and Emanuel to explain the true value of small school size:

School size should be seen as having an *indirect effect* on student learning. . . . Characteristics that tend to promote increased student learning—such as collegiality among teachers, personalized teacher-student relationships, and less differentiation of instruction by ability—are simply easier to implement in small schools (p. 5-6).

These findings are based on freestanding small schools and do not necessarily consider the dynamics that exist in a “conversion”—an established comprehensive high school that divides into several autonomous small schools. Expecting conversions to achieve the same benefits as freestanding small schools seems problematic. School leaders must navigate a complex internal environment of multiple small schools, but may be treated as one high school by the district and the state. Teachers and students may feel conflicted between identifying with their small school and maintaining the “big school”

traditions and spirit. For these and a host of other reasons, the unique structure of a “multiplex” high school generates issues and tensions within the building that the scholarly field is just beginning to understand. This study explores a number of them.

Years before these issues emerged, the evidence from freestanding small schools was compelling enough to convince the world’s largest charitable foundation to support comprehensive high schools in getting small. Beginning in the spring of 2001, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation awarded five-year grants to districts and schools with the goal of creating more personalized, rigorous, and relevant learning environments. A major focus of this work was to transform comprehensive high schools into collections of autonomous small schools. By June 2006, seventeen high schools had converted and were operating (to some degree) as 72 small schools.

This is a comparative case study of two such converted comprehensive high schools, which I first began studying in 2003. My interest in revisiting them stems from the fact that they have either completed or are completing their final year of the Gates grants. My study rests on an assumption that when the public attention, accountability, and extra funding provided by the grant go away, the schools arrive at a critical time in their reform—when they “decide” (by design or by default) if they will sustain the small schools structure or revert to a comprehensive model. My research questions are:

1. *To what extent and in what form are the changes achieved through the conversion process sustained?*
2. *To what extent does the sustainability of small schools reflect the way staff navigate the tensions inherent to the conversion setting?*

There is a significant literature base documenting the success of new, freestanding small schools (Cotton, 1996; Raywid, 1996) and a growing body of research regarding the phenomenon of small school conversions (Cotton, 2001; Lee & Ready, 2007). However, the bulk of these literatures is written by practitioners¹, reform advocates, and entities hired by foundations that fund the reform effort² rather than traditional scholars. The scholarly research that does exist (see Valerie Lee's work for example) takes a quantitative look at student achievement outcomes. This comparative case study fills a gap in the scholarly literature by exploring the connection between the unique organizational challenges endemic to conversion high schools and the sustainability of changes made during the conversion process.

Thinking About Sustaining Small Schools

The two study sites set out to increase student achievement by creating new environments for teaching and learning—small schools. Between the reform measure and the outcome lie several intermediate goals, including creating processes for shared decision making, strong professional communities, and personalized learning environments. I use these three themes to gauge the extent of change and the current state of small schools at the study sites. Each has a body of supporting literature, which provides insight to why they are salient issues in small school reform.

Shared Decision Making

¹ See, for example, works by Deborah Meier and Nancy Mohr.

² The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation contracted with American Institutes for Research and SRI International to conduct a series of evaluations nationally and with Fouts & Associates, L.L.C. to evaluate the grantees in Washington State.

The creation of multiple small schools from a single, large high school increases the necessity for multiple leaders. This new school structure calls for a view of leadership that moves away from reliance on administrative hierarchies and toward a network of shared and distributed practice, which spans traditional boundaries of responsibility and power (Bennett et al., 2003). One key conception of distributed leadership is the notion that leadership rests on a base of expert rather than hierarchical authority (Bennett et al., 2003; Berman & McLaughlin, 1978). In other words, the expertise to make decisions about teaching and learning resides within the entirety of the professional community, not just the principal. Likewise, the small schools structure is founded upon the theory that substantial decision-making authority should reside in the small schools (Lee & Ready, 2007).

Previous research at the two study sites showed evidence of teachers having more flexibility to make decisions about their small schools and their classes, as well as a louder voice in building-wide decisions (Wallach et al., 2005). In their study of five conversion high schools, Lee & Ready (2007) found a similar phenomenon. They characterized the dual leadership roles as calling “for a balance between autonomy of teachers, on the one hand, and the school’s common organizational needs, on the other” and caution that leaders “must pay attention to the reciprocal influences between individuals and groups (here, teachers and subunits, subunits and the school)” (p. 69).

Professional Community

One of the promised benefits of small schools is the greater opportunity to develop a sense of community, including among adults. Sergiovanni (1994) describes community building as critical for today’s schools because it is “the tie that binds

students and teachers together in special ways, to something more significant than themselves: shared values and ideas. It lifts both teachers and students to high levels of self-understanding, commitment, and performance.” The teacher isolation and lack of shared professional culture that exist at most large, comprehensive high schools threaten teacher growth and learning (Johnson, 1990; Rosenholtz, 1989). In other words, teachers’ professional growth relies on a strong sense of community.

My previous research indicated that teachers within the professional communities used common language when talking about the focus and vision for their small school. This was the first step toward building collegiality and trust among teachers. As teachers collaborated more, they sought advice on student issues and discussed classroom practice (Wallach & Gallucci, 2004).

Personalization

Research and practice point to the size of a learning community as a central factor in creating connections with students and higher achievement (Davidson, 2002). A personalized learning environment is one where: adults know kids well enough to use their knowledge of them to inform instructional practices, students feel known and have a sense of belonging that sustains mutual trust between the teacher and the student, and students trust teachers sufficiently to grant their teachers the moral authority to make greater demands on them as learners (Lambert & Lowry, 2004). However, researchers caution that creating small, personalized schools is not enough. “If the opportunity to develop close relationships with students and know them well is not leveraged on behalf of improving opportunities for their intellectual development, achievement and success, the promise of these new small schools will be squandered” (Aness, 1997).

In my previous research, both study sites provided evidence of personalized learning communities characterized by stronger, trusting relationships between teachers and students. Issues of students “crossing over” to take classes in other small schools and teachers’ need to fill specialty classes threatened the ability to personalize.

Creating and Sustaining Change

In exploring the extent to which the study sites have realized each of these intermediate goals, there is a larger contextual issue about whether or not they are sustaining the small schools structure—not for just for the sake of maintaining a legacy but insofar as it pertains to achieving the three intermediate goals. In other words, how does sustaining small schools affect decision making, professional community, and personalization at the study sites? In turn, how might the realization of those three intermediate goals have affected the sustainability of small schools? The literature on school change provides a frame to explore these issues.

Innovation theory and research dates to the 1960s and concentrates on the phenomena of adopting innovations given “the assumption that systems seek to maintain equilibrium” (Knapp, 1997). In his collection of essays on innovation in education, Matthew Miles (1964) stresses that attention to the “features and consequences of *change processes*” (p. 2) is crucial, rather than focusing on the content of the change. This line of inquiry reveals why certain strategies spread quickly or slowly, what causes resistance to change, and why particular change strategies succeed or fail. Research shows that innovation will rarely succeed without coordinated support and changed beliefs reflected in multiple levels of the educational system (Datnow et al., 2006).

Small school researchers Pat Wasley and Rick Lear (2001) acknowledge that “making real change in the tightly woven structure of high schools is difficult,” and consequently “schools attempting to become small do too little, too slowly” (p. 24). Half-hearted implementation of the small school concept simply does not bring about real change (Cotton, 2001; Lee & Ready, 2007). Organizational learning—defined as “continuous capacity development in...knowledge and skills expansion and...information sharing and processing” (Fullan, 1995, p. 232)—is also implicated in examinations of coherence among small school- and building-level goals, strategies, structures and practices. Levels of coherence between the building and the small schools, as well as between the small schools themselves, highlight the ability of the organization or system to continually adapt to changing needs and external demands.

For transformational, second-order changes to occur, all parts of the system must be involved in the change process (Senge, 1990, Wheatley, 1999, Fullan, 2005). To sustain change, leaders must interact laterally with other schools in order to learn from each other and to identify with the larger purpose of educational reform. They must also integrate vertically, to coordinate efforts and protect against conflicting initiatives within the system (Fullan, 2005). This speaks to the level of shared decision making within the building and the influence of each small school on the others to increase (or decrease) capacity system wide for creating substantive and sustained second order changes (Fullan, 1995, 2005; Spillane & Thompson, 1997; Reynolds et al., 2006).

The creation of small schools is unique within a conversion site because the small schools are significantly interrelated, which is complicated by the fact that the reform effort was fashioned after schools that were autonomous. I characterize the schools as

interrelated because they share elements of infrastructure—the cafeteria, theatre, and student transportation—as well as elements of culture—sports teams and the senior prom. At the same time, the small schools have worked over the years to develop distinct identities and cultures. Some have embraced the opportunities afforded by being small while others maintain qualities indicative of large, comprehensive schools.

Small schools literature is clear that buildings cannot maintain both models (Cotton, 2001; Lee & Ready, 2007; Tharp, 2008; Wasley & Lear, 2001); school leaders must make difficult decisions in the transformation from comprehensive to small schools if they want to successfully move the system from “an ‘initiation’ stage to ‘initial implementation’ and subsequently to ‘continuation’ (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991 cited in Knapp, 1997). In his analysis of five failed school reforms, John Tharp (2008) evokes Seymour Sarason when he concludes that school reforms are doomed to failure until they revolutionize teaching practice and crack the “entrenched structure of American public schools” (p. 132). While I do not predict the small schools reform to be a panacea at either of these sites, I do think it worthwhile to explore what is being sustained and why.

Research Strategy and Design

This is a comparative case study, with “case” defined by Miles and Huberman as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring within a bounded context” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). I am using a purposeful sampling strategy by selecting “information-rich” cases (Merriam, 1998, p. 61)—schools that implemented many structural, leadership, and other changes during the conversion process, including the creation of multiple small schools. By studying the two schools, I hoped to uncover helpful points of comparison, which would deepen my understanding of the phenomenon taking place at each of the sites.

The case study methodology is particularly appropriate for this inquiry because it “offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (Merriam, 1998, p. 41). The design for the case will be *particularistic* in that it focuses on a specific phenomenon and *descriptive* in that it will illustrate the complexities of the situation and the way people experience them. The case is intended to be *interpretive*, using descriptive data to explore the concepts of organizational change and sustainability.

Research Settings

North and South High Schools are located about 50 miles apart in Western Washington. Both high schools are a part of multiple-high school districts, North is in a suburban district and South is in an urban one. Both schools have experienced principal and superintendent turnover since beginning the conversion work, as well as a hands-off approach from the district that was often interpreted by school leaders as a lack of support for the conversion work.

North High School serves approximately 1,600 students, the majority (70 percent) of them are Caucasian and 22 percent qualify for Free or Reduced-Price meals. Just under half (47 percent) of tenth grade students passed three sections of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (retrieved from OSPI). Teachers in the comprehensive high school began researching small schools one year before being awarded the Gates grant. They dedicated their professional development days to exploring reform concepts such as size, autonomy, intellectual focus and student choice. Because of this prior work, teachers had the opportunity to discuss and then vote as a staff to accept the grant— notably, it took two votes to achieve the required “super majority” of 80 percent. Small

schools were designed by teachers and finalized through a “request for proposal” process (Wallach et al., 2005).

South High School serves approximately 1,450 students who represent a more even distribution across ethnicities; 33 percent are Caucasian, 27 percent are African American, and both Hispanics and Asian/Pacific Islanders represent 18 percent of the student body. A majority (68 percent) of students qualify for Free or Reduced-Price meals and only 19 percent of tenth graders passed three sections of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (retrieved from OSPI). A small group of teachers worked in the initial grant proposal. Teachers formed a leadership team to research small schools and developed an RFP process. In the first year of implementation, five small schools served grades 9-10; a sixth one was allowed to implement 9-12. One of the small schools dissolved due to lack of cohesion, but another opened in the subsequent academic year. School leaders considered opening a seventh small school as they spent another year trying to solidify a vision and strategy for the building.

I selected these two high schools from the seventeen conversion schools in Washington because of the significant structural and operational changes they made through the conversion process, their principals’ expressed enthusiasm for sustaining the reform, and the ability to build on my previous research in them. I chose North High School first, as it was the only school whose Gates grant had run out. Like the remaining schools, South’s final two years of funding (which ends in 2008) was a reduced amount meant to cushion the transition, and it bears minimal expectations from the Foundation.

The study sites represent maximum variation sampling (Merriam, 1998) by providing a strong contrast—one building is reverting back to a comprehensive model

while the other is sustaining small schools. The make-up of the student body and the communities they serve also stand in contrast.

Research Participants & Data Collection Strategy

I began my research as a single case study, with North High School. When I discovered after my first round of interviews that the building was reverting to a comprehensive model in the coming year, I decided to add South as a comparison case. I collected almost all my data from North before beginning data collection at South, due to the timing of the discovery and a delay in obtaining permission from South's district office.

Within both school sites, I used criterion sampling to select what I consider the school leaders. My data sample includes the building principals at both sites and the assistant principals at North, each of whom has direct authority over small schools. I did not interview South's assistant principals due to insufficient time and because their roles were described as traditional and disconnected from the small schools. I also interviewed at least one teacher leader (either formal or informal) in each small school. I employed a snowball strategy (Merriam, 1998) during the principal interviews to identify these teacher leaders—those who could aptly represent the culture in their respective small school—and to ask for other suggestions of “key informants” (Merriam, 1998, p.85) with whom I should speak. For example, I interviewed a school counselor at North and the School Management Team chairperson at South.

I felt the principals provided a logical starting point for data collection as the formal positional leaders of the buildings and the conduits to the district offices. They spoke to the overall vision and strategy for their respective buildings, as well as issues or

decisions that may affect small schools' sustainability. The teacher leaders represented the interests of their respective small schools, and provided the variety of perspectives about the small schools reform that exists in each building. North's assistant principals had their own unique perspective working between the dual functions of a traditional school-wide administrator and a small school leader, and their testimonies served as a way to corroborate data collected from the other informants.

While collecting data from all three perspectives helped triangulate information obtained from each interview, I also remained mindful of my role as a researcher for the Small Schools Project (SSP). SSP provided technical assistance and coaching to Washington high schools that received grants from the Gates Foundation, from 2001-2006. Because of previous research that I conducted in these schools, I have relationships with some of the informants and a familiarity with the schools' conversion histories.

Merriam (1998, p. 158) talks about "epoche" as a process by which the researcher tries to uncover her own assumptions regarding the phenomenon in question. This resonated for me when it became clear during some interviews that my understanding of the reform's intermediate goals was different from those harbored by an informant. I was challenged to occupy a different perspective and remain open to their personal experience. I did so by focusing on the variety of perspectives that I could collect, rather than looking for consensus, and digging deeper on the experiences that formed those perspectives. I employed the method of triangulation to form a "holistic understanding" (Merriam, 1998, p.204). Below, I outline the data collection and analysis strategies that I used to help minimize my potential bias.

Interviews

My primary data source was one-on-one interviews with the school leaders outlined above. I conducted one interview per person, lasting approximately one hour each, using a semi-structured interview strategy. I prepared questions in advance, but the semi-structured format allowed me to “respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74) by improvising additional questions. The questions were worded as neutrally as possible, which allowed the respondent to guide the discussion according to his or her view of the reform and intermediate goals. I audio recorded all of the interviews at North and half of my interviews at South—because my recording device froze, I relied on notes for the remainder of my teacher interviews at South. I will discuss my method of interview analysis later in this section.

Observations

I observed and collected artifacts from one School Management Team meeting at North High School to ascertain the topics being discussed by the building-wide representatives. It was the first meeting after the announcement that the building would return to a comprehensive model. I was looking for more insight into peoples’ understanding and commitment to sustaining personalization, professional community, and shared decision making in the building. As a non-participant observer, I was able to transcribe much of the meeting on my computer, including direct quotations and my comments. People did not appear to be uncomfortable with my presence, which is probably a testament to the number of researchers that have been in the building over the past several years.

I was unable to attend any of South's School Management Team meetings since they were sporadically scheduled and none were held during the period of my data collection. However, I did review several documents regarding the by-laws and the back-and-forth comments and changes people suggested when they were being formed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began during the data collection process. I reviewed written reflections and interview notes after I had finished the first seven interviews with the principal and teacher leaders at North, all of who had been working at the school long enough to have experienced the conversion experience. This preliminary analysis helped me revise my interview protocol for North's two assistant principals, both of who were new to the building this year. I wanted to capture their unique perspectives of the small schools, including how teachers define and operationalize the three intermediate goals. Before beginning data collection at South, I read and coded a number of transcripts from North. Using methods of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2001), I used this preliminary analysis to help me identify general analytic dimensions and think about specific contrasts (Emerson et al., 1995) that I wanted to pursue in my questioning at South. My process for coding included several steps, which I outline below.

You will remember that the original goal of this study was to look at the extent to which schools are sustaining the small schools structure and realizing the potential intermediate benefits that research indicates are encouraged by the structure. To approach these issues, I began coding my interview transcripts in terms of how people described the school structure, the qualities of personalization and professional community, and processes for making decisions. In addition, I looked for data that revealed peoples'

interpretations of these structures and processes. First I read through a transcript, highlighting sections that were relevant to these issues and anything else that jumped out as interesting. I wrote notes in the margins to capture my thoughts, emerging themes, questions, and opposing data points. After this initial read, I went back and read through the highlighted sections, refining my notes into shorter labels, or codes.

I used the “constant comparative method” (Merriam, 1998, p. 159) in my analysis to understand the breadth of interpretations about specific incidents and processes that occurred in the reform process and about the reform’s intermediate goals. I compared first within cases and then looked across the two cases. The within-case comparison of interviews from North led to initial codes, as I moved back and forth between transcripts to compare similar comments and see how I had previously coded them. My process mirrored that described by Glesne (2006) as “putting like-minded pieces together into data clumps...[to] create an organizational framework” (p.152).

This process of “subsuming particulars into more general classes” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 256) led to discoveries of larger themes. For example, I found that teachers at North articulated different expectations for the reform and had different views on building leadership and decision making. Using methods of grounded theory, I developed “more abstract conceptual categories to synthesize, to explain, and to understand” these disparities. My analysis concerned decision-making processes, since focusing on what people are doing “leads to understanding multiple layers of meanings of [peoples’] actions” (Charmaz, 2001, 339). The emerging theoretical categories included the effect of decision-making processes on teacher support for small schools and how these processes affected teachers’ buy-in to the reform at North. The themes of

transparency in decision-making and consistent expectations became part of my interview protocol for South and the basic framework for my cross-case analysis.

Limitations

The limitations to my research design pertain to sampling, both in terms of the study sites and the informants within them. I was not sure at first how the lack of parity in the two schools' grant cycles might affect a cross-case comparison, but it became clear during data analysis that extra pay for teachers was a factor in sustaining the extra work of leading small schools. However, the decisions that people made earlier in the conversion process, which led to the current conditions, are not affected by the disparate funding situations that existed at the time of this study.

One teacher indicated that I might not have a representative sample from each small school—claiming that many “hate it” and “feel left out.” In fact, I have only the teacher leaders' testimonials to draw on, except where I included additional interviews based on the principals' recommendations. Another limitation to my sample is that none of my informants taught outside the core subject areas; elective teachers often harbor a different point of view.

One last disclaimer is that there is plenty of commendable work going on in both the study sites that was not included in this study. For example, it was not within the scope of my design to look at instruction, team teaching, or other initiatives related to classroom practice.

In the following section, *Revisiting Conversions*, I describe the state of the small schools at each of the study sites and the decisions that brought them to these points. In *Looking Across the Sites*, I explore the impact of these decisions on teacher leadership,

professional community, and personalization in both buildings. In the next section, *An In-Between Place*, I discuss factors that helped shape the current state of small schools at each site, including tensions between small schools, examples of external pressures on the sites, and issues related to trust, decision making, and isolation. In the final section, *Choosing Sides*, I consider some lessons learned regarding sustainability of small schools in conversion sites.

Revisiting Conversions—What has Sustained?

The study sites changed in significant ways since beginning their reform to small schools in 2001. Most of the obvious changes are structural, but decision-making processes and structures are inextricably linked to these changes. The following descriptions explain the current state of small schools at North and South High Schools with the issue of shared decision making embedded therein. The data show that teachers in both schools have differing opinions about who should make building-level decisions and how trustworthy the decisions are. Both principals have reclaimed some decision-making authority—even though the old “shared” decision-making structures remain.

North High School

The last time I visited North High School, it was operating as five small schools, each of which had an elected teacher leader who participated in a building-wide School Management Team (SMT). Students and teachers remained mostly in their small school, though certain classes were designated as “Super School” classes where anyone could enroll. These were typically Advanced Placement or specialty classes that students could not access in their own small schools and teachers could not fill from within their small school.

When I collected data for this study in spring 2008, North's principal described their structure as "a modified version of where we were when we started all of this." Students take all their classes within their small schools for the first two years, and then move into a "more comprehensive high school experience" for their last two years. A district "budget crunch" and a mandate to reduce staffing by five full time equivalent (FTE) teachers required some changes. But the decision to shift to a two-year small school model came from the principal. He explained:

It really came down to preserving small schools or preserving electives. ... We didn't have enough FTE to be able to do both. And so we reached the decision...because that preserved programs and really allowed us to do it without having to lay anybody off.

The conversation and decision to change the school's structure occurred over the course of a month, which the principal felt "didn't [provide] a chance to process it as a School Management Team. ... So it was an administrative team decision." He announced the change at a staff meeting and found that teachers generally agreed it was "the best of bad choices." While teachers were stunned by the news, the principal said it was a transparent process replete with staff meetings and "lots of opportunities to communicate."

Some teachers talked about the change as a "morphing" over the years, where the original vision of autonomous small schools eroded and the "non-negotiable" rules that used to preserve autonomous cohorts of students and teachers gave way to concern for struggling programs—or perhaps a waning support for the reform. The following quote from Jed, a former teacher leader, suggests that some adults in the building take the rules less seriously now that the small schools structure has shifted.

When we first started, [autonomy] was pretty rock solid. Pretty much everything was in your small school and there were parameters that had to be strictly followed for you to take classes outside, and those have eroded a lot over the years.

The principal agrees that small school autonomy has eroded, but says that was the reality before the shift, and that fact contributed to his decision.

I just want to name what we're doing and admit it's what we're doing and move on. I said, "We already have kids crossing over all over the place. Why do we keep saying that we're this four-year small schools model when we're really not?"

When the grant ended, the school lost funding for teacher leaders and subsequently lost their building-level decision making team. For one year, the principal said, "We were just kind of acting in a vacuum because we really didn't have a system in place." Jed described it this way, "There was no voice for staff; it was really weird. It became this rumory—there was no chance to talk about anything."

In 2007, the SMT formed with an elected representative from each small school. The group meets monthly with the administrative team. Based on a staff vote, SMT members do not have decision-making authority, only advisory authority. Both the principal and teachers attribute this to a general fear of shared decision making and teachers lack of confidence in SMT members to make decisions on their behalf. But, some people are still confused about the decision.

Jed explained, "I don't understand the purpose of the current Steering Team other than as a clearing house. They still have to go to the whole staff or an administrator to make a decision." Another teacher, Dylan, described the old SMT as a "really important communication tool," "a strategic group for long-term thinking," and "an assessment group". Reflecting on the current SMT structure he added, "I can't understand why we

would want to give up the degree of desired staff decision-making power that was here.”

However, a teacher who I was not interviewing chimed in with an answer, which

revealed a different opinion of teacher leadership at North:

I just like...principals to make decisions and I just go with it. ...The School Management Team in this building can kind of be the hand-picked power, and then they're kind of steering the ship, and I'm not a big fan of that. I don't mind if they go up there and listen to things.

This quote highlights a salient issue at North—trust. Teachers have different degrees of trust in decision-making at North, which in part is formed by their impressions of the other small schools in the building. The principal explains that there are disparate factions in the building—those who view the recent structural change as a victorious “step back toward a comprehensive high school” and those who view it as “a real blow to the small schools model.”

As part of this latter group, Dylan scoffs at colleagues who prefer “an authoritarian principal model” describing them as “the group who I don't believe were really ever in support of small schools” and accusing them of taking the easy way out, “You can go do your thing and let somebody else make all the decisions.” But not everyone sees letting the principal make all the decisions as a bad thing. One teacher, Max, explained that it generates more trust among teachers in the building, “You can't blame it on 'them.' Now we can only blame it on [the principal]. I think that helps.” The majority of teachers seem to trust the principal to make good decisions, but Jed provided a strong dissent:

I don't feel like we have a principal who is a leader and who has a vision for what we want to do and to me sends mixed messages...[he] isn't being very clear about what decisions are being made. [He says] he supports small schools and then his actions speak otherwise on certain things.

According to North's principal, there has been some positive progress since moving to a two-year model. "This year especially, there have been a lot of conversations in small schools about what the 9th and 10th grade experience is going to look like. ... As we have gotten more focused, there is some renewed energy and emphasis on the work that we are doing here." During our interview, he maintained that the small schools need more time and that "to walk away from it now I think would be admitting failure. I don't think people are ready to admit failure yet." Unfortunately, one month and another round of district budget cuts later, he made the decision to return to a comprehensive model in the coming year.

In terms of where else he might have made changes (counseling staff, administration, tech support, classified staff, etc.), the principal could not see making cuts anywhere. He explained, "I did not want to cripple the building's function in order to preserve small schools." Once more, the decision was not a collaborative one. The principal felt it would be inappropriate for teachers to make recommendations or decisions about their colleagues' jobs; "To me that would create awkward tension for people on staff." Of the decision, he said:

I think teachers realized that there wasn't a choice. ... [Nobody] wants to say, "My small school is more important than your art program, so therefore your art program goes." ... So we were trying to split the difference and preserve those programs. Maybe some people would say that was a cowardly decision. I don't think so. I think it was the right decision to preserve programs and cut back on the small schools model.

North's goals for the coming year still include maintaining a "personalized learning experience for all kids." Considering the changes to professional community and personalization that have occurred this year, which I discuss in the following section, they may face an even greater challenge as a comprehensive high school.

South High School

When I last visited South High School, they were preparing for a complete renovation of their building, which was designed to accommodate multiple small schools. South was operating as five small schools that sent at least one representative to a 16-member School Management Team. Students took classes primarily in their small school, though some were too small to offer all the classes students needed to graduate. The building's guidance counselors divided the student body alphabetically and commonly assigned students to classes across the small schools, whether it was necessary or not.

By spring 2008, South had consolidated into three small schools. According to the principal, the shift was necessary to accomplish three things: create and maintain strong small school themes, keep teachers in one small school, and keep students in one small school (though they currently take core classes in their small school, they can take world language and elective courses anywhere in the building). The idea to consolidate had been brewing in the principal's mind for some time, but a teacher who had co-authored the original grant application was the one who presented it to the SMT. The principal considered this to be an important distinction:

He brought it up and he was a little fearful. But it was good that he brought it up as opposed to me, just because this had been owned very dearly by the teacher leaders. We said...“Think about this and let's meet again in a week. Give us feedback.” People came back and said this sounds like a really good idea. Then it was just a question of the process. One small school's teacher leader said, “We can fold. We're struggling...” and we checked with that small school and they said, “That's okay.”

One teacher leader described the consolidation as “a real big shuffle” with a transparent process. Every staff position was open and people picked where they wanted to go. In order to make an informed decision, teachers had a waiver day to shadow

teachers in one or two of the surviving small schools to get a better understanding of them. The principal said that most people got their first choice. A quick look at the current small school staffs reveals that several people chose to move as a group with their former small school colleagues.

South's SMT is comprised of representatives from each small school, classified staff, and administrators. Additional non-voting members include the student body president, a parent, and the SMT facilitator (a teacher). The group is used to disseminate information and make decisions on behalf of small schools. Cara explained, "The information that goes there is then brought back to the academies. If we need to have a vote, then we vote in our academy and then those reps vote accordingly. It's very democratic in that way." But, the amount of decision-making activity at the building level seems to affect the level of communication within small schools. According to Cara, when there are fewer SMT meetings, there is less to "report out" and so "we don't need to meet as a small school as much."

The principal described the sort of issues the SMT deals with as student of the month, curriculum, professional development, and how best to handle a process like the "high school and beyond" plan. He said the biggest issue this year was advisory, "with one small school split and not really on board, and the other two ready to go. It could've been a more efficient and expedient process on part of the one small school." Cara, one of the "ready-to-go" teacher leaders agreed:

We're on deadlines, right? ... If each academy is responsible for bringing a piece of the puzzle together and one doesn't do it, it totally throws off everything. And so deadlines are pushed back. ... There was one instance when we were voting on something and an entire academy abstained from the vote and that created some conflict.

But the offending small school's teacher leader, Nancy, saw the situation a bit differently. She was trying to maintain a tenet of collaborative leadership.

Sometimes SMT people are not happy with me because I refuse to make a decision without input from the rest of the academy. ... [The teachers in my small school] have remained very collaborative. I don't make decisions without consulting the whole group.

Nancy talked about feeling singled out by the SMT and how, in her opinion, the behavior brews competition and mistrust between small schools.

If someone names a concern, it becomes what's the matter with [that small school]? ... There is no trust because of the lack of collaboration between small schools. And the sense of competitiveness doesn't help, because the principal says, "send me an email and we'll take care of your request." So it's a vague sense of "we're not all on the same page."

Once again, Cara had a different view; she does not see competition for resources and thinks the small schools all get basically the same. But Nancy feels it "makes the building weaker because three schools are competing for an unknown amount of limited resources." Scott told a similar story about the budget. "Last year, it was real clear on how much money we had... this year, I don't know the numbers."

Cara says the administration "took back" a little bit of decision making on building-wide issues. Last year, teachers created a schedule for each department within each small school and then the teacher leaders had to "come together and compromise" to combine them into one master schedule for the building. This year, one of the assistant principals is putting the master schedule together. Cara has "full faith in her" and admits that in light of all the other pressures on her, it was "cool" for someone else to take it on. Nancy sees it differently, citing a desire for more building-wide collaboration:

There is no real collaboration on the building level the way there was before. ... The principal's style is for teachers and teacher leaders to focus on teaching and learning and he'll handle the management of the building.

... We make requests as a small school, that go to some dark and distant place and we may get a response back.

Nancy says that the principal usually brings things to the SMT that are already put together, that he just wants them to approve. The third teacher leader, Scott, agreed, “Issues get brought up and we give our two cents. The principal runs with it or not. It’s kind of a joke.” Scott and Nancy contend that during the conversion process, when the building was making “radical” changes, decisions were more formal. But, now Scott sees the role of the SMT as “just maintenance.” He thinks people should have input, but dislikes “the tension between small schools that was built up through some of the decision making.”

Determining how shared or transparent leadership is at South very much depends on which event you are talking about and with whom you are talking. The SMT facilitator, Maria, claims that the principal “has been really explicit about needing to divide up leadership in the building if it’s going to be successful.” She adds, “He says leadership, but I add power because that’s how I see it. I’ve gained power in the building by being involved in certain processes. It’s an ability to ask questions.” Who gets that power is unclear. Even though he is a teacher leader, Scott says he has, “no idea how decisions are made. ...I just want to know who is doing what. I bring up a concern and it just disappears into the ether.”

The principal admits that, “In terms of how things work from the main office to small schools...we could be more transparent. I think we’re all equally accessible to staff but I could probably go back and say, ‘Wow, I should’ve checked in on that decision.’” A primary example of this came up the day I conducted interviews with the teacher leaders. Staff had received an email the night before saying that they would have a co-principal in

the coming year. In a tone of sarcastic humor, Scott summed up everyone's surprise by saying, "Granted, I'm not a big meeting guy, but this sounds like a major change." He added, "No one knows what's going on."

Similarly, staff found out about a new program for South's freshmen in a newspaper article. The principal said he intended to go through the SMT with the decision, but the superintendent got excited and mentioned it in the paper first. He added, "I had been talking about this type of thing for a while and hadn't heard anything negative from teachers."

The principal says the new program will be in "some academy" but people have a feeling that the principal already knows which one. Scott predicted, "We won't know until September when it will already be in place." Surprisingly, he did not seem too bothered by the lack of information, claiming that he and others are used to it by now. "We're all running blind. I'll be told what to do next year. . . . We're so used to change, people are comfortable enough that it will figure itself out."

While teachers seem to cope with the continual state of change at South, the lack of transparent leadership and decision making has left some teachers feeling resigned to working in small schools. Nancy claims they are "treading water" in terms of their classroom practice, having no incentive to push it farther since they can not trust in a future with small schools. For his part, the principal still feels accountable to continuing small schools and honoring the work that they have done. However, this is the final year of the grant money that compensates teacher leaders and provides extra pay for teachers' extra work. He admits, "I've lived in my own fantasyland of having money because of the grants. Next year will probably be pretty ugly."

It remains to be seen if South can sustain small schools without additional financial support. As the following discussion reveals, North's teacher leadership, professional community, and personalization suffered once the grant ended and they shifted away from the small schools model. The data also suggest that the political will among teachers to sustain the model at South may be waning in light of perennial change—as Cara has heard teachers say, “When the grant's done, we're done.”

Looking Across the Sites

Each site's structural changes, and the decisions that led to them, affected leadership, professional community, and personalization within the building and the small schools. This section looks across the two study sites at common successes and challenges.

Teacher Leadership

The role of teacher leaders in small schools bridges the issues of shared decision making and professional community. At North, their disappearance affected how decisions were made at the building level and the ability of small school staffs to function as they once did. During their heyday, North's teacher leaders had .75 FTE release time for the position. They were responsible for day-to-day leadership in small schools, including planning the staff meetings, coordinating professional development, and taking a role in instructional leadership.

Several of the teachers I interviewed at North agreed that one of the biggest effects of losing the grant is the loss of formal teacher leaders. Without release time to plan professional learning activities, Dylan said the meetings “tend to be all nuts and bolts.” He added that small school meetings are now more administrator-driven than

teacher-driven. While all three administrators are “phenomenal,” he says it creates a “different tone.” “The professional community is not as strong at all and that’s kind of a disappointment.”

This held true in varying degree across North’s five small schools. According to the principal, Jed’s school practically runs itself. “I could never show up to another meeting, and they would be fine—although they might feel neglected.” He said Dylan and Marianne’s schools are “doing better” running themselves because “some teachers have kind of stepped forward and taken on some more of the leadership role.” But teachers in Max and Anita’s schools—the first of which is reportedly the most ideologically like a “mini-comprehensive” high school—will not meet unless an administrator plans the agenda. “There isn’t a teacher in [Max’s] small school that will step up and take on that leadership role.”

The role of teacher leaders at South remains a large one. Scott said they “do a little bit of everything, “Keeping the focus of the academy, trying to bring in professional development, managing the budget... If I don’t do it, no one will. ...When I asked my staff, ‘What is the role of the teacher leader?’ they said, ‘the crap we don’t want to deal with.’” In addition to this list of responsibilities, Nancy described teacher leaders as responsible for working with the principal on building-wide initiatives. She also added that it “doesn’t really matter who the teacher leader is in my small school because we have such distributed leadership.” The theme of sharing leadership responsibility came up with Cara as well:

Because we don’t really know if the grant money is going to be around, we started spreading out responsibility a little bit. We have a historian, an advisory point person, a data person, a literacy person, a budget person, a

community person...there is a stipend for each of these people. (Cara, South)

If South receives no more grant money to fund teacher leaders, the principal plans to “look at the contract and see if we can shuffle money away from department heads,” since they no longer play a critical role. It will not be as much money as teacher leaders earn now, but he does not think it is an issue. “There is the specter out there that once the money is gone then people will stop doing the extra work and I don’t think that’s the case.” Although, lack of funding was an issue for teachers at North.

Professional Community

Teachers variously defined their professional community by small school, department, school building, or some combination of the three. While some teachers prefer to focus their energy and attention within their small schools, others value building-wide collaboration and camaraderie. But teachers in both sites talked about overcoming a sense of separation from the other small schools in the building.

Since the grant has finished...the school-wide professional community feels better to me. Because I think to some extent we’ve stopped trying to protect our own. ... I think a lot of it is due to the change in administration. But I think it’s also a matter of time. We got so tired of it. (Max, North)

There’s a select group of people who are the true believers, but most people are waiting to go back to a comprehensive high school. (Scott, South)

North’s principal arrived during the third year of small schools implementation. Part of his charge from the district was to reunite the building’s staff. He recalls that in his first year, he was told by the outgoing principal, “Don’t ever have an all-staff meeting” because teachers will fight. But, what he “figured out after four years now is that they actually want to get together. They want to talk.”

Moving to a two-year model pleased people who missed the spirit of a unified North High School, but it did not support professional community within small schools. A bell schedule change concurrent with the shift to include only 9th and 10th graders afforded more frequent small school meeting time, but the teachers had less in common to discuss. As the principal explained, teachers with junior and senior classes “really aren’t affiliated with any small school anymore, except that they pick a small school to go to for meetings.”

The students of concern so far have all been 9th graders. I don’t know any of them! I don’t have a clue. . . . We could discuss anyone else, but then, what? By the time you’re an 11, you’ve got to go figure out, “Is this a student from this small school or not?” (Anita, North)

The same issue exists with elective teachers at South, where students take only core classes in their small schools. Cara hears elective teachers say, “I don’t have those students. I don’t know who my kids are—is this person in this small school?” She also said that teachers outside the core find it really difficult to implement the small school’s curricular theme “because not all the kids are getting the background information.”

The data also show that South’s consolidation of small schools put pressure on the three remaining professional communities. South’s teachers talked about some of the challenges of blending small school staffs, including morale, camaraderie, and, collaboration.

Back when we had smaller staffs, people could really team and get stuff done. New people were brought in who had different ideas than I do. Different teaching philosophies don’t get blended, so staff is fragmented. Teachers have fewer choices with only three small schools, whereas before you could really find like-minded teachers. (Scott, South)

The principal said that the consolidation process provided an opportunity to re-envision each small school’s theme and outcomes. He provided time for each small

school to say, “Here’s how we’ve done things, but what do you have to bring, what do you think we can do differently? What are your experiences that can make this a stronger academy?” Nancy felt that “the small schools each tried to be welcoming to people and incorporate that. So in individual small schools, there was more positive interaction and community building.” She said that, in the end, people were okay with the consolidation because, “there was the sense that we’re not moving again.” This hardly sounds enthusiastic, and reiterates her observation that “people are happy, but in a resigned way.”

Personalization

The ability to develop relationships with students was one of the most compelling reasons for the two study sites to create small schools. Since doing so, teachers say they know students better, discuss students of concern with colleagues, and sometimes leverage this knowledge to improve their instructional practice. The two principals agree:

Something that we still believe in very strongly here is our ability to personalize for kids. ... It’s very strong. (Principal, North)

Within small schools—where they are personalized, kids are known, and teachers are known—I think we can do more courageous work with kids. There is a different level of accountability with kids and adults and a willingness and safety in stepping out and doing things differently. (Principal, South)

Part of the reason for consolidating small schools at South was to increase personalization. Cara explained that, “If you only have a staff of ten, it’s hard to keep all your kids in your small school,” which meant they were “losing the whole notion of relationships.” But she also thought that consolidation compromised some students’ experiences, “especially the kids who were in the small schools that got disbanded, they really felt like they were being shuffled.” Even students with the most chaotic of small

school experiences managed to make connections with teachers. Several followed Maria through four different small schools over their four years, which she said helped her make the transitions too.

As North returns to a comprehensive model, some students have demonstrated a similarly strong affinity for their small school. Jed said he does not know of one student he had in 10th grade last year that is not in his colleague's class this year. He credits this to a sense of community and school culture.

They've been in these classes together now for two years. [It's] not just friends, but that community piece. ... Shared experiences. Shared vocabulary. Moving up is a big thing.

But, in North's two-year small school model, students may need to go to extra lengths to make this happen. This year, administrators used the auto-schedule feature for juniors and seniors, which according to the principal, "basically just throws kids into classes without looking at any kind of preferences." And while his goals for next year include maintaining a personalized learning environment for all students, the principal added, "I think we probably will do it the same way again, simply because it's pretty easy."

This leaves teachers in Jed's small school feeling like they are fighting for their ability to personalize. I have added emphasis in the following quote to highlight his sense of the threat:

...*We've put up a wall* by just being unique in [our schedule] and we're really glad. It's actually *protected* 9-12. ... Others in the building *may applaud the loss* of keeping kids within a personalized environment, working with a set of kids over two or three or four years; we're *holding on* to that. (Jed, North)

Whether or not teachers' ability to personalize is contingent on being in small schools is uncertain. Teachers such as Jed, Dylan, and Anita at North agree with Cara at South when she says that small schools have enabled her to form long-term relationships with students and use that knowledge to inform her teaching practice in a way that would not have been possible before.

I think everyone is seeing what these small schools do. ... We loop in our academy. ... I've had the same students for three years and that wouldn't have happened in a comprehensive high school. ... They're my kids. ... The good thing about that is that I can cater to what they're ready for or interested in rather than working off what the district says, and still cover all the material in four years. (Cara, South)

North's Marianne does not credit small schools for stronger relationships with students, as evidenced in the interview excerpt below. In addition, North's Max does not think that long-term relationships are necessarily an important part of personalization.

Q: Do you find it helpful in teaching them, when you have them for two or three years?

A: Sure, but let's not pretend that that didn't happen before small schools. (Marianne, North)

I don't need three years to make a relationship with a kid. I can do it in a month or a week or a day, if it needs to be. ... But a lot of kids don't want that relationship. Particularly in chemistry, they're not looking for a bud. They're looking for a good, solid education. (Max, North)

Max's comment points to another disparity within the issue of personalization—how people understand it. He characterizes the goal of personalization as becoming a student's buddy. Small school researchers are clear that increased rigor is the ultimate goal. (Small school supporter Michelle Fine famously said, "Hugging is not the same as algebra.") However, teachers across both study sites revealed different perceptions of personalization. At South, Cara defines it as dealing with students' "identity" and "catering curriculum to their likes, dislikes...and needs," while Scott relegates the issue

of personalization to the advisory period. Cara admits that even within her small school, “Everybody goes about it differently and we all do it to different degrees.”

It is not altogether surprising that teachers would interpret and implement a reform element, such as personalization, differently. But, returning to the question of how the switch to a two-year small school model facilitates personalization, the controversy deepens. At the outset, most people believed that converting to small schools would “create the conditions” for this and other “good things” to happen. Now, some teachers at North have come to think that small schools created a system of “tracking” in their building and that allowing students to take classes outside of their small school will actually increase their ability to personalize.

Because students get to choose where they go, we’ve had an apartheid-like system. . . . We have some small schools that perform really well and we have others that have struggling students across the board. . . . We’re tracking now. (Marianne, North)

If I have a kid in my small school and there’s a class in another small school that’s perfect for my kid, are you telling me that he can’t step over the invisible line to take it? It’s hard to justify that. I’ve had parents argue to me that that’s not personalization. (Dylan, North)

Part of the problem lays in the way the small school reform was implemented in the two study sites. Much of it has to do with reformers’ attempt to straddle two high school models—small school and comprehensive—leaving teachers, students, and administrators to operate in an “in-between place.”

An In-Between Place

Like the rest of the seventeen conversion sites, these two buildings never achieved a collection of fully autonomous small schools. But trying to realize the benefits of small schools while holding on to the values of a comprehensive high school ultimately meant

failure at North. This section explores the complexity of the small school conversion model, and takes its name from an observation made by North's Marianne. When I asked her if she thought that the two-year small school model was the best of both worlds (between small school and comprehensive), she said, "I don't think anybody is happy, to be honest, because if you really like the small schools model, we are not doing that. ... I want us to be in that place where we can be creative and enthusiastic again, rather than being in this sort of in-between place."

Living in an "in-between place" at North created a dichotomy between sustaining small schools and sustaining programs and structures linked to the old status quo. North's principal felt "a polarity" and questioned, "How do you promote small school autonomy and decision making and identity, and at the same time promote building? ... How do you balance that autonomy to make decisions with the realization that they're part of a system too?" Trying to maintain the variety of options for students during a time of shrinking budgets and growing federal, state, and district demands put too much pressure on an already fragmented system.

How did North High School become fragmented? Teachers talked about a sense of isolation in their small school. Jed viewed it as a good thing, protecting his school. But the others saw that people had "gone off in our own little worlds" and problems between small schools were "built up over the years". Two of the most salient problems are staffing small schools and innovating within small schools. Each of these relates directly to the three themes—decision making, professional community, and personalization—and each is indicative of an in-between place. The final straw was when the money for small schools was gone.

Staffing

Because there is no perfect way to do it, some school is always going to get the benefit, and that leads to some serious backbiting. ... After a while, no one trusted anybody anymore. (Max, North)

Teachers and administrators blamed staffing issues for the changes in small school structures at North and South. Everyone agreed that it is difficult to staff five small schools, which creates the justification for “cross-overs” (often an anathema in small schools that seek personalization). They also talked about the “complexities” and “inefficiencies” that occur in the upper grades. For example, in order to offer fourth-year French, you have to have a couple sections of first-year French. One small school may not be able to fill two sections of French—and then there are the students who want to take Spanish!

Even before the schools recognized the problem of upper-level courses, there were staffing issues. Part of the problem is that the size of the faculty is based on the building’s total enrollment, rather than that of each small school (Lee & Ready, 2007, report similar findings in their study sites). A related issue is that teachers were allowed to choose their small school based on interest and professional community. In several cases at North, and before the consolidation at South, this resulted in poorly balanced staffs. The effort to reduce the number of students “crossing over” further exacerbated the issue by creating larger class sizes for some teachers and causing some to teach outside their area of expertise. Max explains how it looked at North,

[My small school] had the two physical science teachers... thus guaranteeing that we would both have to teach biology, which neither of us wants to teach. ... [The tech school] got all the technology teachers. ... The problem is, you can’t all teach technology. So you [say] “... You have to teach some senior project. And we’re going to give you a freshman math class.” ... The thing is, we knew that going in. We told everyone,

“Look at small schools. ... You all have to be generalists. People thought, “I could be a generalist, but I’m sure I won’t have to.”

Max said, “It was teachers having to teach stuff they had never taught before” that led to the high staff turnover since beginning small schools (reported by several sources at fifty percent). Alternatively, those who left were teachers who wanted to innovate.

You lost the two ends. You lost the really sort of structure-oriented people, who had been teaching a subject really well for 10 years, and they were some great teachers. And then we lost a bunch of the new ones who came in thinking...that they could do anything they wanted, and it was all about the kids, then finding out that it was not quite that easy. ...And they were some really good teachers. (Max, North)

South did not suffer the same rate of teacher turnover, but they did start off with a lot more crossing over of students. Consolidation helped maintain “pure” small schools for core subjects, but left electives open to everyone. The challenge of innovation within small schools, however, is the same in both sites.

Ability to Innovate

If you get a group that really wants to do something innovative or try something new, and they get told “No”— you do that a couple of times, and then you just stop. (Max, North)

One of the factors that led North to apply for the small schools grant was the success of a 9th grade team that was operating as a small learning community. The language Max used to talk about it seems to express an attitude toward the current small schools model, “They made sure they *weren’t stepping on anybody else’s toes* when they did it. It was sort of *natural and organic*. It worked really well” (emphasis added).

Part of what causes people to step on others’ toes is the nature of making change in interrelated small schools. Because each small school contributes to a building leadership team that creates building policies, each small school wields influence over the

others. Joint decisions impact each school's ability to make choices and maintain autonomous learning environments. Marianne explained that teachers were promised autonomy. They "were told that they would be able to make decisions and they would be honored. Then they haven't been able to be honored." The reason is that what works for one school may not work for another. Max recalls his past attempts to innovate:

[When I was the teacher leader] I found it really frustrating because you would make decisions that made sense for your small school, but then they could get torpedoed because of its effects on the large school—and vice-versa, they can make decisions that affect you. ... Everyone is making decisions based on what they think is best for kids. But you don't always agree on what that is. ... It becomes [easy] to say, "They're wrong and we're right." Then if you have two passionate groups that are convinced that they're right, you're at an impasse. So what generally happens is you don't get change. Because when you can't come up with a compromise, then you tend to revert back. (Max, North)

Max said that having to bring ideas to the SMT "adds a layer of bureaucracy, nonsense, or whatever...sometimes it's that last layer. It's paper thin, but it's enough to block you." Max credits the problem to teacher leaders being "chosen to not agree with each other" when they were elected to represent their small school on the SMT. The inability of teachers to find common ground may also stem from the fact that at least one small school in each of the study sites was purposely designed by teachers to be a "traditional" or a "mini-comprehensive"—another indication of being in an in-between place.

When the Money Goes

There was the impression among some in the community that once the funding ran out the program would end and we'd go back. (Dylan, North)

As I mentioned earlier, North was the only conversion high school in Washington State whose funding ran out after the initial five-year grant from the Gates Foundation.

All of the others, who fell under a different grant category, received an additional two years' cushion in which to transition from receiving outside support. School leaders at North felt they deserved similar compensation. Coincidental with the grant's end, Tom Vander Ark, the Foundation's outgoing executive director of education giving, was quoted in the newspaper saying that small school autonomy was no longer a part of their funding strategy.

This one comment, taken with what was perceived as unfair treatment of the school, turned the foreseeable end of a grant into a sense of loss and personal affront. North's principal commented that it was palpable "in terms of the abandonment that the school felt. People were really upset." Unfortunately, the state of living "in-between" and a lack of coherence across the small schools deprived the system of the requisite strength to endure this blow.

Choosing a Place

Both schools started off with a more autonomous model in mind. Whether because of complexities in implementing the model or an inability to shift thinking away from a comprehensive high school perspective, the buildings were unable to achieve small school autonomy. This affected teachers' ability to make decisions, nurture professional communities, and personalize the way reformers intended. Teachers felt like they were less involved with building-wide governance as principals either took back (as in South) or were given back (as in North) much of the decision-making authority. In this journey to revisit the two study sites, South's principal described the building as a comprehensive high school with three individual themes, rather than individual small schools. North's small schools were buckling under the pressure of lost funding.

The idea that conversion schools are caught “in-between”—implementing small school structures while operating under a set of beliefs and practices that are grounded in the comprehensive model—is not new to me. I previously referred to this phenomenon as having “a foot in two worlds ” (Wallach & Lear, 2005), ones “that have quite different sets of assumptions and strategies at the core of their design” (p. 17). Revisiting these two sites reinforced my hunch that at whatever point pressure is applied, which came sooner for North than for South, the building would have to “choose” to fully be part of one world or the other.

Researchers warned that half-hearted implementation would not result in real change (Cotton, 2001; Lee & Ready, 2007; Tharp, 2008; Wasley & Lear, 2001). At the two study sites, this is characterized by living in an in-between place. The data show that this state of existence is untenable for the people working in the schools as well as the school structures. Research also warned that goals, strategies, and practices need to be consistent across the building in order for the organization to adapt to changing needs and withstand external pressures (Senge, 1990, Wheatley, 1999, Fullan, 2005). The data show inconsistent interpretations of the intermediate goals and a waning support for the small schools structure. While there are some people who said they could not go back to working in a comprehensive high school, teachers at both sites predicted that, if put to a vote, the majority would abandon small schools.

This study confirms previous research findings, but it also begins to uncover something more. Operating multiple, interrelated small schools can create tensions between the schools and among the teachers that affect everyone’s ability to make decisions and change practice. Rather than interpreting the state of living “in-between” as

a failed attempt at producing small schools, I consider it as an (perhaps unwitting) attempt to have it all—create conditions to achieve the intermediate goals and preserve the ideals of a comprehensive high school. The data show that this model may not be sustainable without consistent funding. It may also prove to be the worst of both worlds, as teachers' sense of isolation and mistrust bred discontent across these two buildings. The data signal that teachers value shared decision making, but that many prioritize course selection over personalization and autonomous classrooms over professional learning communities. Without a change in beliefs, teachers will not likely achieve changes in practice.

One area for further research is a comparative case study between these sites and one whose small schools would be characterized as autonomous—having distinct principals and individual school identification numbers (used for district and state funding, reporting data, etc.). It would be valuable to see if teachers working in that setting feel differently about the intermediate goals and the sustainability of small schools. It would also be beneficial to delve more deeply into issues regarding classroom practice and the impact of the small school reform efforts on student outcomes at all of the study sites.

As part of the first generation of conversion schools, the challenges faced by the two study sites are understandable. Without models to follow, people may have been unable to completely depart from what is familiar. Perhaps the next generation of conversions will do better.

References

- Ancess, J. (1997). *Urban dreamcatchers: Launching and leading new small schools*. National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools & Teaching. New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Bennett, N., Wise, C., Woods, P., & Harvey, J. (2003). *Distributed leadership* (full report). Oxford, UK: National College for School Leadership.
- Berman, P., & McLaughlin, M. W. (1978). *Federal programs supporting educational change. Vol. VIII: Implementing and sustaining innovations*. Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation.
- Charmaz, K. (2001). Grounded theory. In R. M. Emerson (Ed.) *Contemporary Field Research*, (p. 335-352). Long Grove, IL: Waveland.
- Cotton, K. (1996). School size, school climate, and student performance. *Close-up #20*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Library.
- Cotton, K. (2001). *New small learning communities: Findings from recent literature*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Library.
- Datnow, A., Lasky, S., Stringfield, S., & Teddlie, C. (2006). *Integrating educational systems for successful reform in diverse contexts*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Davidson, J. (2002). Elements of smallness create conditions for success. *Horace*, 19(1). Retrieved December 5, 2007, from <http://www.essentialschools.org>.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). Processing fieldnotes: Coding and memoing (Chapter 6, p. 142-168). In Author, *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Fullan, M. (1995). The school as a learning organization: Distant dreams. *Theory into Practice*. 34(4). 230-235.
- Fullan, M. (2005). *Leadership and sustainability: System thinkers in action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. (3rd Edition). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Johnson, S. M. (1990). *Teachers at work: Achieving success in our schools*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Knapp, M. S. (1997). Between systemic reforms and the mathematics and science classroom: The dynamics of innovation, implementation, and professional learning. *Review of Educational Education*. 67(2). 227-266.
- Lambert, M. B., Lowry, L. K. with Copland, M., Gallucci, C., and Wallach, C. A. (2004). *Knowing and being known: Personalization as a foundation for improving student learning*. Seattle, WA: Small Schools Project.
- Lee, V. E. & Ready, D. D. (2007). *Schools within schools*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Lee, V. & Smith, J. (1995). Effects of school restructuring and size on early gains in achievement and engagement. *Sociology of Education*. 68(4), p. 241-270.
- Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. (Rev. and expand ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miles, M. B. (1964). *Innovation in education*. New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University, Horace Mann—Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation.

- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). Chapter 10: Tactics for Generating Meaning, pp. 245-262. In Authors, *Qualitative data analysis* (2nd Ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Oxley, D. (1993). Organizing schools into smaller units: A planning guide.
- Raywid, M. A. (1996). *Taking stock: The movement to create mini-schools, schools-within-schools, and separate small schools*. New York, NY: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Reynolds, T., Murrill, L. D., & Whitt, G. L. (2006). Learning from organizations: Mobilizing and sustaining teacher change. *The Educational Forum*. 70(2). 123-133.
- Rosenholtz, S. (1989). *Teachers' workplace: The social organization of schools*. New York, NY: Longman.
- Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Sergiovanni, T. J. (1994). *Building community in schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Spillane, J. P. & Thompson, C. L. (1997). Reconstructing conceptions of local capacity: The local education agency's capacity for ambitious instructional reform. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. 19(2). 185-203.
- Tharp, J. M. (2008). *Breaking the cycle of failed school reform*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Toch, T. (2003). *High schools on a human scale*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Wallach, C. A. & Gallucci, C. with Copland, M., Lambert, M. B., and Lowry, L. K.

(2004). *Elevating the conversation: Building professional community in small high schools*. Seattle, WA: Small Schools Project.

Wallach, C. A., Lambert, M. B., Copland, M., and Lowry, L. K. (2005). *Distributing leadership: Moving from high school hierarchy to shared responsibility*. Seattle, WA: Small Schools Project.

Wallach, C. A. & Lear, R. (2005). *A foot in two worlds: The second report on comprehensive high school conversions*. Seattle, WA: Small Schools Project.

Wasley, P. A., & Fine, M. (2000). *Small schools and the issue of scale*. New York: Bank Street College of Education.

Wasley, P. A., and Lear, R. J. (2001). Small schools, real gains. *Educational Leadership*. 58(6). 22-27.

Wheatley, M. J. (1999). *Leadership and the new science*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.