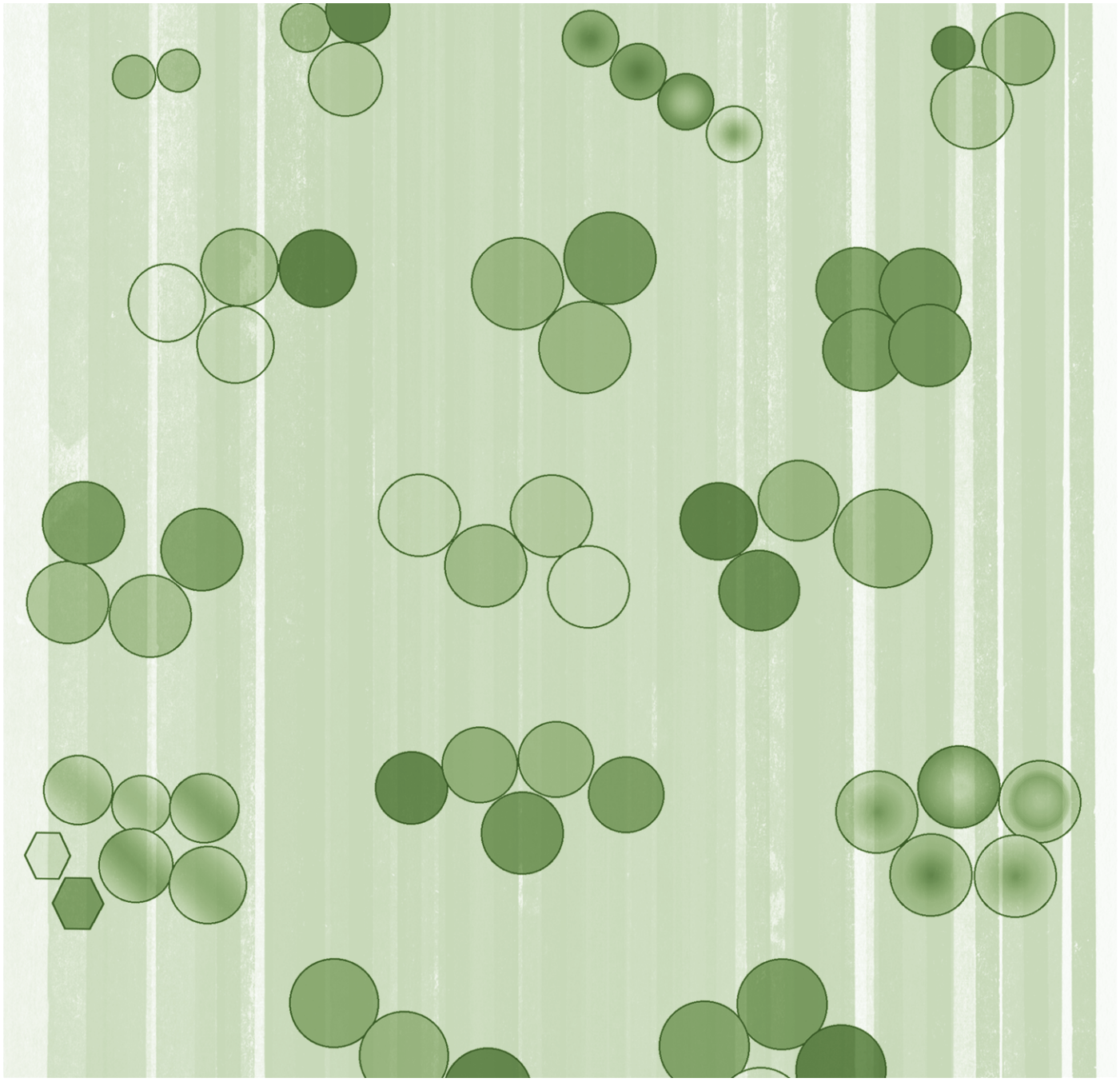

A FOOT IN TWO WORLDS

THE SECOND REPORT ON COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL CONVERSIONS

BY

CATHERINE A. WALLACH

RICHARD LEAR

Autumn 2005

Small Schools PROJECT

A Foot in Two Worlds:

The Second Report on Comprehensive High School Conversions

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Catherine A. Wallach
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The Small Schools Project began in September 2000, and is funded by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The Project provides technical assistance to new small high schools and conversion schools, primarily in Washington State. Assistance is provided in several ways: through our website, professional development activities for educators and school board members, publications (generally available at no charge on our website), consultant services, and the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative. The Small Schools Project currently works with 34 high schools on an ongoing basis, 17 of which are in the process of converting from large comprehensive high schools to small, focused schools.

The Small Schools Coaches Collaborative provides technical assistance in the form of school coaches to schools that receive reinvention grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The Collaborative is a partnership of the Small Schools Project, the Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest Center, and the National School Reform Faculty.

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This is the second in a series of reports produced by the Small Schools Project (SSP) that looks at the progress of conversion high schools in Washington State. The reports will appear over a period of several years as we assist a number of large, comprehensive high schools to make the transition to a set of small schools that inhabit the same building.[1] This report focuses on some of the changes in structure, culture, and teaching and learning practices that are emerging as new small schools replace comprehensive high schools in an effort to improve student accomplishment substantially.

[1] In this report, we use the phrase "comprehensive high school" in its generally understood sense—that is, a high school that attempts to meet the needs of its students by offering a wide array of courses or programs, or both.

In our work with high schools, we use the word "conversion" to mean replacing the design, structure, governance, and operation of a comprehensive 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 comprehensive high school.[2] They are neither new start-ups nor "reconstitutions"—instances where an existing comprehensive school is closed and replaced by new schools with new staffs and, often, new students.

[2] Two of the schools stretch the definition. One is a small alternative school and the other is a new school in a new building designed to serve as either one large high school or a complex housing multiple schools. Because each drew primarily from the existing staff in its district rather than employing new teachers, they are considered conversions in this report.

An Early Report on Comprehensive High School Conversions [March, 2003] looked in detail at the initial steps taken in three conversion schools. This report, drawing on data from the 2003–2005 school years, is more global. We have, in effect, traded the richness of detail available when looking at only three schools for a "high-altitude" picture of what is occurring in 17 comprehensive high schools on their way to becoming 72 small schools.

For most of these conversion schools, the 2003–2004 school year was their first year to undertake substantial structural changes in becoming autonomous small schools. Most schools began with a focus in ninth and tenth grades, which means that making the structural changes will take three years. Beginning in this fashion allows junior and senior students to finish out their high school careers with the same range of course choices available to them when they enrolled in high school.

The small schools vary substantially in size, from just over 100 students to well over 500 students. Autonomy is evolving in different ways across the schools and sites; some schools are well-focused, while others remain comprehensive as they become smaller; in most schools, teaching practices are just beginning to change as teachers come to recognize firsthand the benefits of smallness.

This is clearly a report about work in progress. As such, it is primarily descriptive rather than analytic. We hope the description of what is happening in these comprehensive schools as they transition to small schools will suggest possibilities and identify pitfalls that allow others to learn from their efforts.

The report is organized into four sections: What We're Seeing, What We're Worrying About, What Makes Us Hopeful, and What Schools Might Do.

The description provides an image of a set of schools that have a foot in two worlds—the "old world" of comprehensive high schools and the "new world" of small schools. In that sense, this report captures schools at a pivotal moment in their development.

Seven Attributes of High Achievement Schools

- Common Focus
- Time to Collaborate
- High Expectations
- Performance Based
- Technology as a Tool
- Personalized
- Respect & Responsibility

Essential Components of Teaching and Learning

- Active Inquiry
- In-Depth Learning
- Performance Assessment

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation promotes the development of new small schools in Washington State through three major strategies: district grants, school grants, and the Achievers Program. Unlike its national grants, which go to technical assistance providers or other outside agencies, grants in Washington are awarded directly to schools or districts, and go to rural, suburban, and exurban as well as urban areas.

The Foundation identified "Attributes of High Achievement Schools" and "Essential Components of Teaching and Learning" from a body of school research (see sidebar). All grantees are expected to use both the attributes and components to guide their school redesign work.

Model district grants were awarded to increase the capacity of 10 school districts and all their schools to improve academic achievement, infuse technology into the learning environment, increase professional development opportunities, and strengthen home and community partnerships. A major focus of these grants (awarded in Spring 2000) was to change district operations in ways that more clearly support school-level work; the grants do not place an emphasis on high school redesign.

Model school grants support high-achievement school designs that better prepare all students to achieve. Over 70 K–12 schools have received funding to create and implement new designs that have a common focus, create high expectations, make data-driven decisions, and provide time for teachers to work on shared challenges. The first school grant to a Washington high school was awarded in March 2001.

The Washington State Achievers Program works on school redesign within 16 high schools serving large populations of low-income students. The grant's resources are focused on improving college access for low-income students, and combine academic readiness with scholarship opportunities. Students from low-income families are eligible to apply for one of 500 Achievers scholarships given annually to graduates of Achievers high schools. This opportunity is available for 13 years and administered by the Washington Education Foundation as a result of a $100 million gift of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The 16 Achievers high schools received their grants in April 2001, and the first scholarships were awarded that same spring.

Changing the Structure

This section describes three aspects of the structural change large complexes have undertaken to convert to sets of small schools: the projected sizes of the small schools they have designed, the processes they used to move from large to small, and the administrative and leadership changes the large complexes have begun to make.

How Small is Small?

In school redesign work, "small" is often a matter of perception, with figures ranging from 200 to 900 students identified as the cap on a small school's size. While grant details between grantees and the Gates Foundation vary somewhat, 400 was the maximum number of students per small school for 14 of the 17 grantee schools.

Enrollment in the conversion buildings ranges from about 200 to a projected 2100 students. The projected size of the small schools created at the seventeen conversion sites ranges from 105 to 565 students. The two figures on the following page provide different views of the projected enrollment of the small schools being created.

Figure 1 shows the range of small school sizes in ascending order, and provides mean, median, and mode. Figure 2 organizes the schools by the campus to which they belong, and shows the range of size within each site.

Figure 2 illustrates the prevalence of what we have come to call the "Rule of 400" that 14 of the grantees used in preparing their proposals. The "Rule of 400" refers to the grant guidelines for most of the schools which placed a limit of 100 students per grade level for four-year high schools. All but the first three grantees (A, B, and C in Figure 2) used the rule when developing their proposals.

Three additional grantees (D, K, and P) later changed their plans as they became more familiar with small schools research. Some of their design teams embraced a vision of small schools decidedly different than a comprehensive high school—highly personalized, less conventional, and smaller than most other schools being developed.

Figure 1: Projected Small School Enrollment

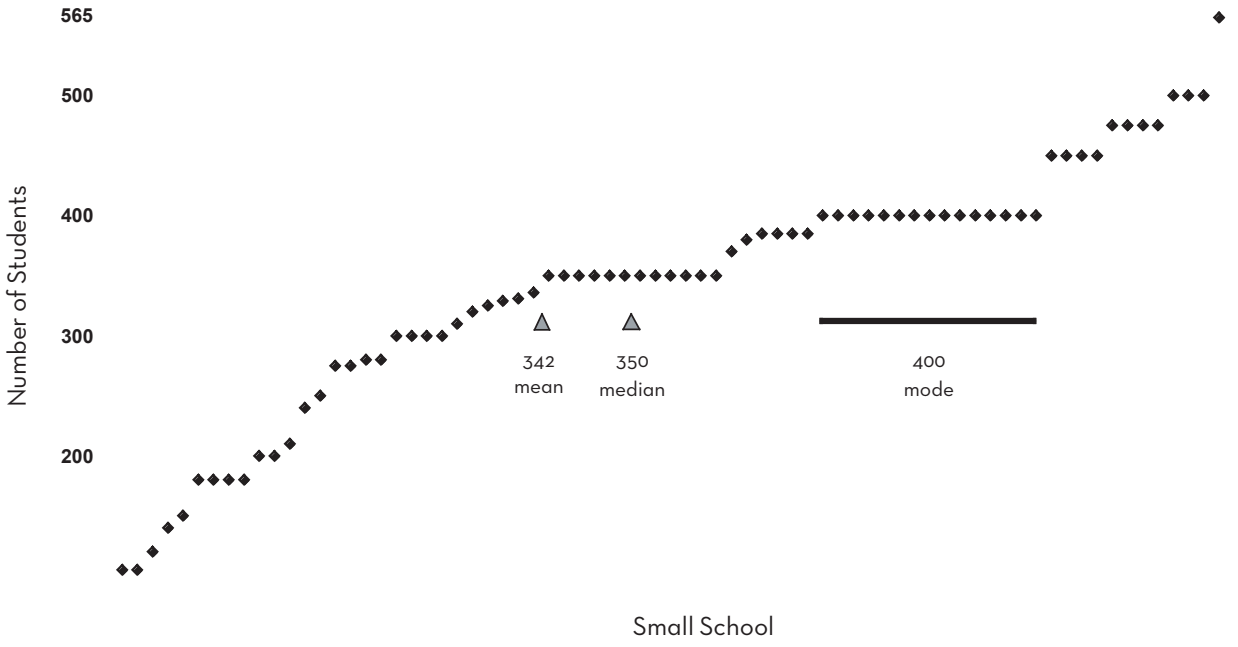
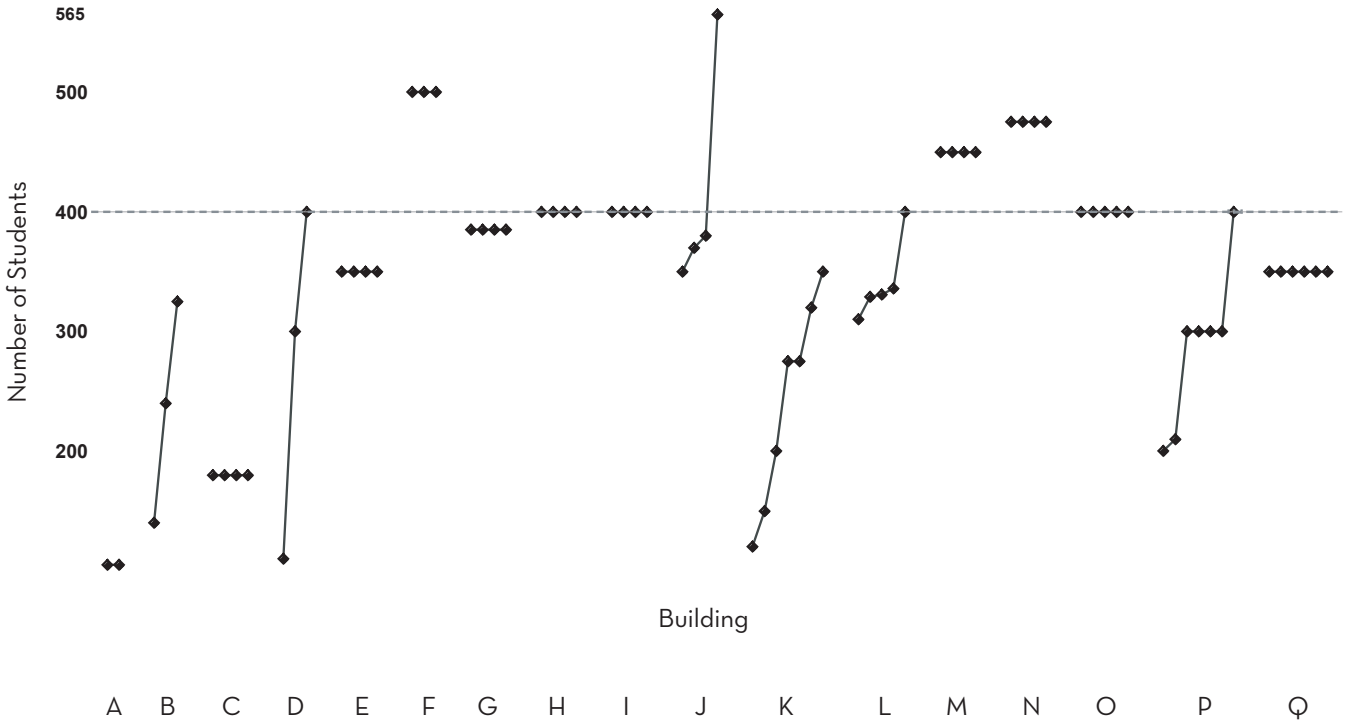


Figure 2: Projected Small School Size, Displayed by Building



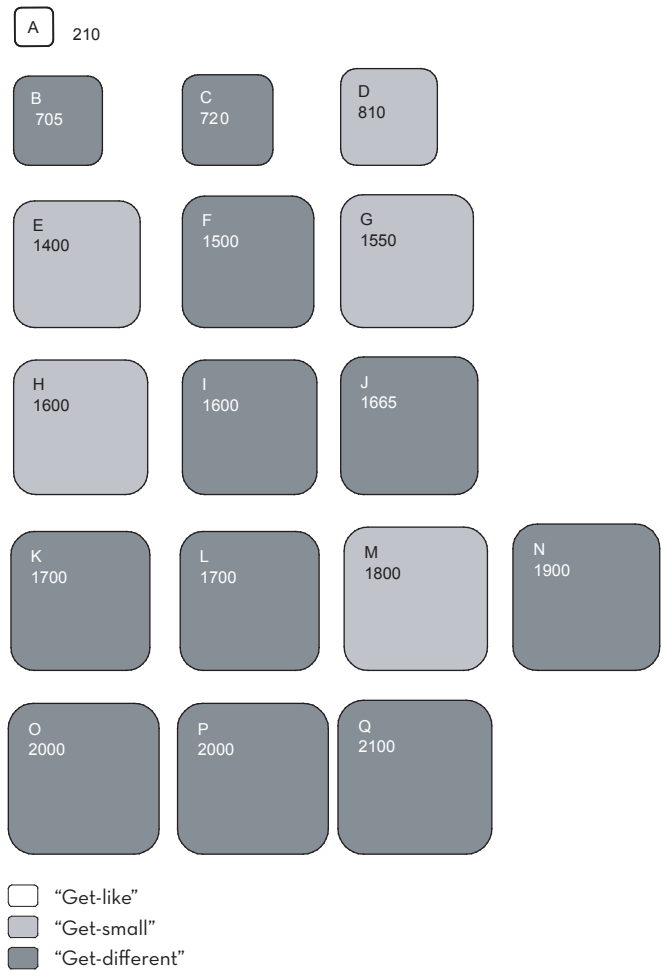
Getting to Small

The 2003–2004 school year marked the beginning of substantial transitioning from comprehensive to small schools. By June 2006, the 17 schools will have completed the structural transition to 72 small schools.

They will have done so by one of three processes: adopting an existing small school design ("get-like"), placing staff into small schools with no initial differentiation ("get-small"), or designing thematically-different schools ("get-different") and then placing staff in the schools. Figure 3 shows the buildings, organized by size, and their 2003–2004 enrollment data. Figure 4 shows to-scale images of the small schools superimposed on their larger buildings.

"Get-like." Since the creation of the New American School Design Corporation (now New American Schools, or NAS) in the early 1990s, one strand of school reform in the United States has been an effort to create or identify specific school designs intended for adoption by other schools. The federal government has supported validated school designs—beginning with the NAS designs, but expanding rapidly to include designs from other popular reform efforts—through its Comprehensive School Reform Design grant program for nearly a decade. Interested schools or districts purchase the design and substantial technical assistance from the design group.

Figure 3: Conversion School Sites, Displayed by Size and Grouped by Transition Process



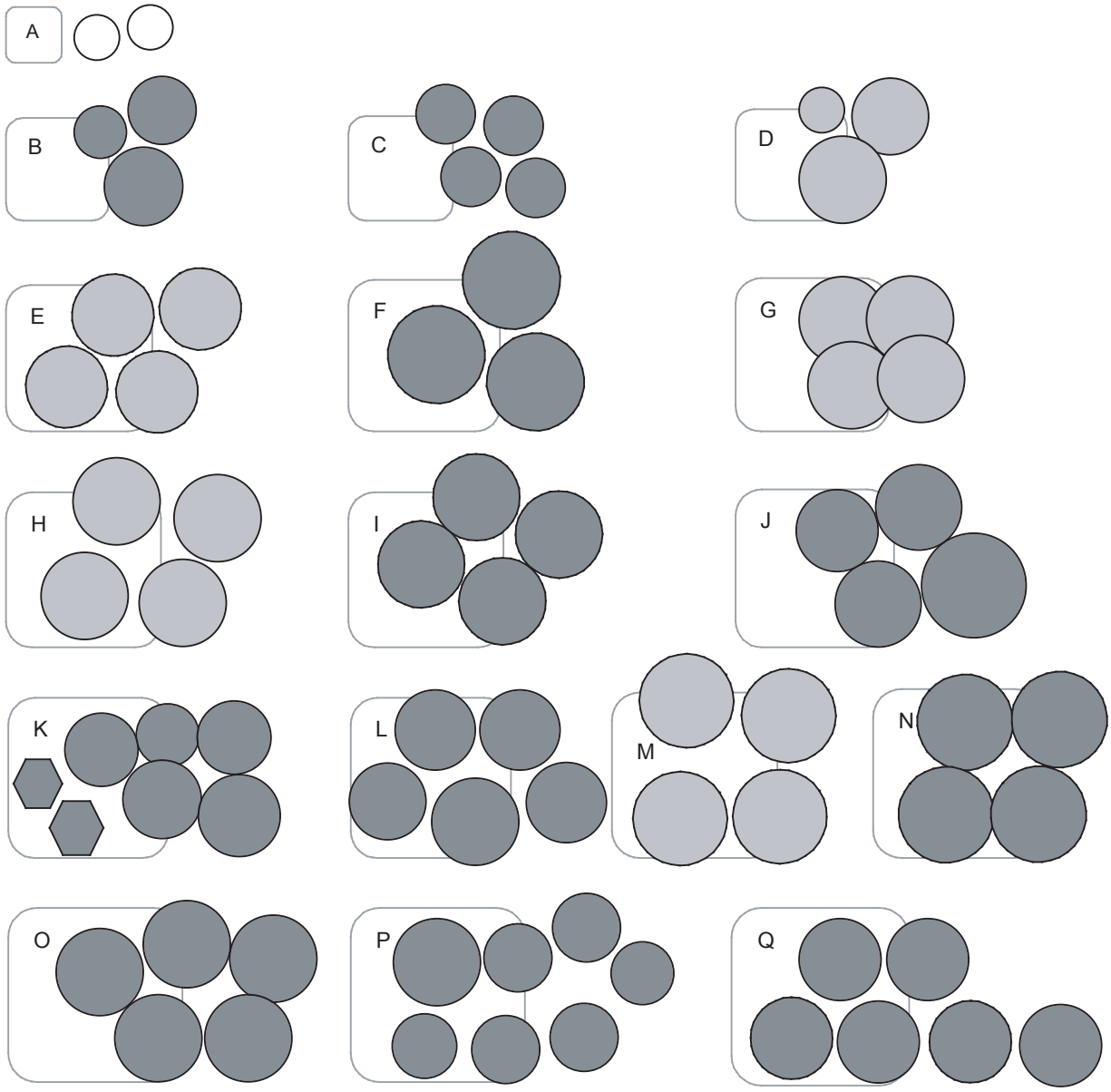
Since the Spring of 2000, the Gates Foundation has awarded several replication grants to innovative small schools across the country, with the expectation that school developers will negotiate with districts to open one or more of their schools in the district. Once agreement is reached, the design group provides technical assistance and "regrants" funds to the small school for professional development and planning support. The majority of these replication schools are charter schools. Replication grantees, with the exception of New Tech High School in Napa, California, have resisted placing their designs as one of several small schools in a conversion school, anticipating that their designs will not thrive with the constraints on autonomy they believe are inherent in being a part of a conversion.

One of the 17 Washington conversion schools, a small, unsuccessful alternative program, elected to redesign itself by adopting a replication design—a step that required the school to split into two small schools of just over 100 students each.

"Get-small." School leaders in five comprehensive high schools, with enrollments of 800 to 1800 students, started with the belief that aligning their staffs into small schools was the most crucial step, and chose to begin their redesign process that way.

At each of these schools, teacher preferences were taken into account in placing teachers. While teacher assignments were sometimes made informally, several schools

Figure 4 Small Schools, Displayed by Conversion School Site



The shading differences reflect the process each building used to move from large to small, as shown in Figure 3.

Ten sites (A, B, C, E, F, H, L, M, P, and Q) plan to have full curricular and scheduling autonomy when they finish their structural transition to small schools. They are depicted with some spaces between their small schools. The remaining seven sites either expect to be partially dependent on other small schools at their site, or are as yet undecided. The dependence is most frequently defined in terms of permitting students to "cross over" to another school to take one or more courses. Thus far, six of those seven sites have required their small schools to operate on the same daily schedule to make crossovers easier to schedule.

Site G is represented by four overlapping circles of the same size, indicating that building's intent to have the small schools remain fundamentally alike in their design elements, with a focus on "best practices" in the classroom.

Site K is represented by five circles and two hexagons. At this site, five schools were part of the original design. School and district leaders responded affirmatively to a request by two sets of teachers to design smaller, less conventional, and less interdependent schools. These schools (hexagons) opened a year before the other schools at this site.

used elaborate processes to ensure placing teachers in well-balanced small schools with a mix of teaching and work styles as well as a range of experience. (See *An Early Report*, pp. 27–56, for more detail involving one such process.)

In four of the sites using the "get-small" strategy, school leaders saw an advantage to having the small school theme or focus emerge over time as the respective staffs planned and worked together. The fifth school seeks to have the advantages that come from smallness, but with small schools that are essentially the same, and with "best practices" constant across the schools. As one consequence of that strategy, professional development at this site is building-wide rather than school-specific.

All five "get-small" sites began by assigning students to small schools rather than offering students a choice, reasoning that their small schools, for the time at least, were the same in all important respects. At four of the sites, students were assigned in ways that maintain demographic similarity across the schools. At the fifth school, where differences began to emerge as the schools were planning the transition, middle school counselors placed students based on a sense of where the students were most likely to succeed.

The expectation at four of the sites is that students will be able to choose their schools as the schools become differentiated over the first few years of operation. Indeed, incoming students at one of the five sites were given the opportunity to choose their small school for the 2004–2005 school year.

"Get-different." Eleven of the comprehensive high schools decided to identify the focus or theme of their small schools before placing either staff or students in them.

The most common means for determining the theme or focus involved an internal "Request For Proposal" (RFP) process. While the details varied, sometimes dramatically, the RFP process involved inviting members of the school staff to submit proposals for a small school (see box on next page).

Teacher placement in "get-different" buildings varied somewhat, but virtually all of these sites made some provision for teacher preferences when assigning teachers to small schools.

The RFP processes typically stated that participation on a particular design team did not ensure assignment to that small school if it became one of the accepted proposals. Some processes allowed design team members a weighted preference if their design was accepted; other processes were less formal. While most teachers ended up on a small school staff of their choosing, some teachers were assigned to their second- or, in rare instances, third-choice school.

Not all teacher placement processes were carefully outlined. In some instances, teacher satisfaction was the top priority, based in part on the presumption that teachers would work more effectively in a school they had selected. In others, teacher compatibility was taken into account, and some shuffling of placements occurred in an effort to ensure harmonious staffs.

Some teacher placement processes required that schools be staffed in such a manner that students could graduate from their own school without taking "crossover" courses—that is, courses offered in another school. Other processes

Typical Steps in a "Request for Proposal" Process

- **Design teams formed** At some schools, each staff member was required to be part of a design team working on a small school proposal; at others, participation was optional. Occasionally, student or parent representatives were invited to join design teams, but such practices were exceptions.
- **Time for study and design** Timelines varied widely, but each site set aside professional development (PD) resources for design teams to learn about small school possibilities. Most often, design teams utilized PD time during the day, in the form of late arrivals or early releases for students, and stipends for some of the time design team members spent for their work beyond the school day.
- **Feedback loops** Schools built in some form of feedback loop for design teams, usually well before the proposal deadline. Most often, these loops involved feedback from other staff members. Occasionally, early designs were made available to parents and students for feedback. One school repeated the feedback loop when designs were nearer completion.
- **Design team consolidation and membership change** Most design processes included a formal point where design teams could merge when they understood that their designs had significant overlap. Occasionally, a design team would disband as it became clear there was little energy for continued work. Additionally, most processes permitted changes in design team membership for reasons of changed interests or personality or workstyle clashes.
- **Proposal review** Each RFP process involved a review of proposals by a review board, often using a rubric that asked reviewers to look for and rate key elements of the school designs. Board membership always included outsiders—typically community members, a district office representative or two, and outside "experts"—often school coaches working at other conversion sites in Washington. Review boards occasionally included student or parent representatives, but most schools considered the design process a staff task.
- **Review board recommendations** In every instance, the review board was charged with recommending elimination of some proposals and acceptance of others. Those recommendations were typically made to either the building's leadership team or to the school staff as a whole.
- **Final decisions** Once recommendations were made, one of two processes was used. School staffs were asked to vote to accept a set of small schools proposed to them, or they were invited to choose from among two or three "slates" of small schools. Some RFP processes included this final staff vote as part of the plan. In one instance, the school's leadership group, which was vested with the authority to make the final decisions regarding the number and nature of small schools, decided the schools would enjoy more support if the staff made the final choice from among three different sets of schools. At another site, the principal overrode the recommendation for three schools and added a fourth school.

Sample RFPs may be downloaded from **www.smallschoolsproject.org**; look under "Starting a Small School/Large School Conversions."

established no such parameter, thereby ensuring that some, or even all, of their students would spend at least part of the day in other schools.

Student placement in "get-different" schools was by student choice. At most sites, formal or informal placement rules were developed to ensure that the demographics of each small school reflected the demographics of the larger building. A few schools have watched for inequitable distribution of demographic groups informally, while two schools have no formal or informal process in place.

Thus far, the two notable instances of a "skewed" population have been at sites where the math-science-technology schools had upwards of 75 percent male enrollment in the 2003–2004 school year. In both instances, changes in recruiting practices largely redressed the imbalance in the 2004–2005 school year.

Leadership and Administrative Redesign

Each of these 17 conversion sites has undertaken some changes in its leadership design. Changes are occurring in the areas of teacher-leaders' roles, administrative responsibilities, and site councils or leadership teams.[3]

[3] To read more about the changing nature of leadership in redesigned small schools, see *Distributing Leadership: Moving from High School Hierarchy to Shared Responsibility*, which can be downloaded from **www.smallschoolsproject.org** under "Small Schools in Action/What We Are Learning."

By the end of the 2003–2004 school year, 11 of the conversion sites had partially or fully reorganized one or more of their leadership teams to reflect the move to small schools. In eight buildings, the shift has occurred at the level of administrative or leadership roles in staff-only groups. Only three sites had begun to reorganize their site councils, which call for student and parent representatives as well as teachers. A year later, all but one school had begun to change both its staff and site council membership and roles.

Principals' responsibilities have begun to shift at the conversion sites, but unevenly. To date, each site retains a building principal, although 15 of the 16 sites with assistant principals have given them responsibility for leading one or more small schools. Figure 6 illustrates the administrative arrangements present during the past two school years in the 17 conversion schools.

Teacher-Leaders

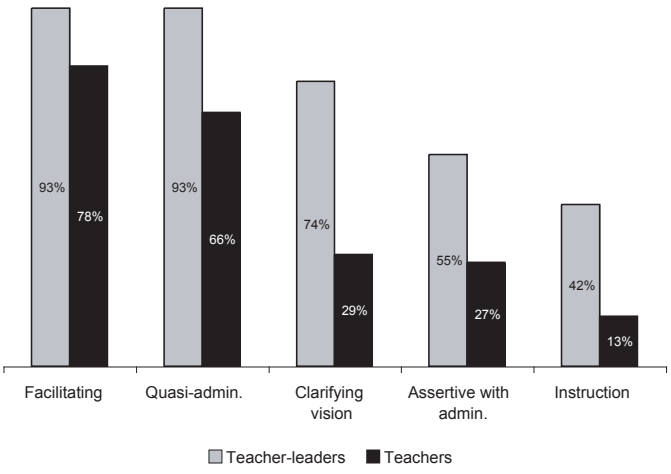
At all sites, the concept of distributed leadership has taken hold to some degree, and is evident in formal as well as informal ways. Most notable has been the emergence of formal teacher-leaders' roles in small schools.

All of the 17 conversions have created teacher-leadership roles in their small schools, although the roles continue to evolve in each of the small schools. Few written job descriptions existed in this transition period;[4] indeed, understandings or agreements between and among teachers and building administrators appeared to be less important than daily routines in shaping teacher-leader roles.

[4] To look at one building's teacher-leader job description, see Appendix D of *Distributing Leadership: Moving from High School Hierarchy to Shared Responsibility*.

No clear picture of teacher-leaders' roles has yet emerged. Across the sites, the role includes scheduling, planning, and facilitating small school staff meetings; managing budget expenditures within the small school; helping to focus staff efforts on planning rather than responding to immediate needs; coordinating hiring needs with the principal; representing their small school on the building leadership team; coordinating recruitment of incoming students; boosting and supporting staff morale. No teacher-leader is involved in evaluating colleagues.

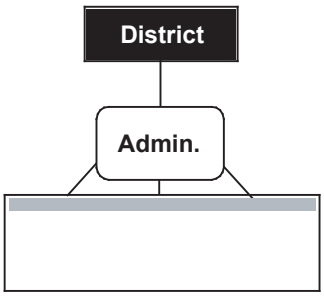
Figure 5: Primary Teacher-Leader Responsibilities



Teachers and teacher-leaders participated in separate online surveys in February and May 2005 regarding various aspects of the teacher-leader position. Their response to questions about the primary responsibilities of teacher-leaders is shown in Figure 5.

Teacher-leaders and their colleagues agree strongly about the two most important roles for teacher-leaders: facilitating their meetings and carrying out "quasi-administrative" functions such as distributing information, scheduling meetings, and so on. Both groups identify other important responsibilities, such as forming or clarifying the small

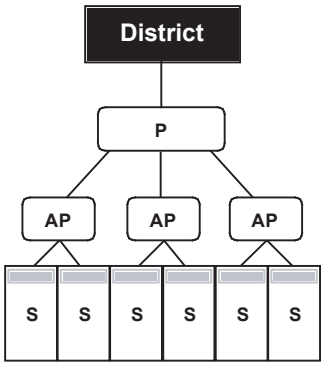
Figure 6: Administrative Arrangements in Washington Conversion Schools



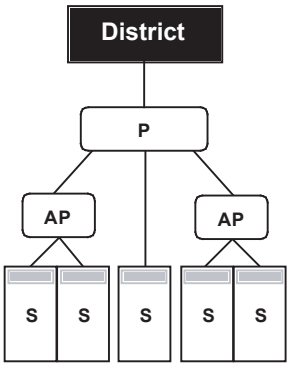
Drawing A

Drawing A represents the typical comprehensive high school administrative design and relationship to the school's district office. It also represents administrative arrangements in four Washington conversion sites.

Administrators—usually a principal and multiple assistants, and possibly one or more deans—share responsibility for administrative leadership. Each person typically has specific areas of responsibility across the entire school: one person handles discipline, for instance, another athletics and activities, another instruction, and so on. Teacher evaluation is most often shared among administrators, often by departments. Teacher-leaders are most often confined to academic department chair positions (gray bar in drawing).



Drawing B

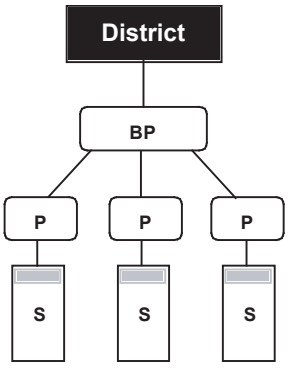


Drawing C

Drawings B and C represent administrative arrangements in 11 Washington conversion sites.

Assistant principals—and in some instances, principals—take responsibility for each small school. At many sites, the administrator assigned to the school handles virtually all aspects of the school's operation. At other sites, some duties—discipline most often—are still handled building-wide.

The engagement of assistant principals with their small schools varies widely, and appears to be in part related to the extent of their involvement in the original planning process, which was uneven across the sites.



Drawing D

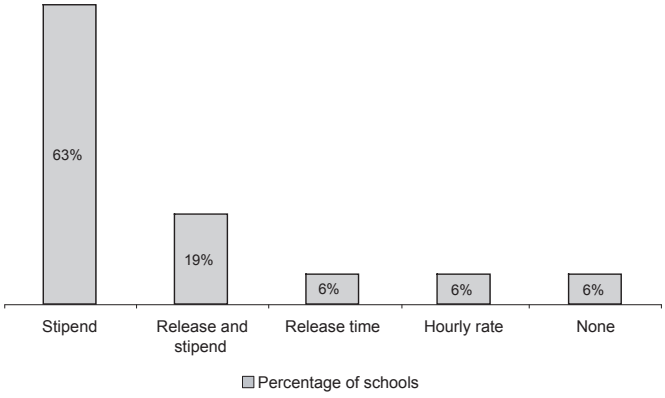
Drawing D represents the one significantly different administrative arrangement to have appeared thus far. At this site—the building designed to hold from one to eight schools—three principals report to a building principal, who reports to the district office. The three small school principals' salaries are that of assistant principals, making the administrative costs for this configuration slightly less than the other high schools in its district.

Teacher-leaders in each small school have both release time and a stipend, and their responsibilities are specifically focused on supporting and strengthening instruction.

school's vision, being assertive with building administrators regarding their school, and coaching or modeling instructional practices.

A quarter of the teachers responding to the survey believe their teacher-leader is "highly effective" in the role—a reflection of teacher-leaders' self-assessment. At the same time, one-third of the teacher group believes the teacher-leader position is untenable, in part because it lacks sufficient authority to be effective. In the companion survey, one-fifth of teacher-leaders themselves agree they lack the necessary authority to be effective.

Figure 7: Teacher-Leader Compensation



At 10 of the sites, some or all of the small schools had more than one formal teacher-leader. While shared roles appear to have been decided upon informally in a half-dozen of the sites—and the number of teacher-leaders varied from school to school at these sites—four of the sites planned for multiple teacher-leaders. In some instances, the choice was pragmatic and seemed tied to teacher reluctance to assume this new role alone. At other sites, the emergence of shared teacher-leader roles was driven by a desire to distribute teacher-leader roles more broadly within the small schools.

Compensation for teacher-leaders varied widely across the 17 sites. Stipends, which ranged from modest to substantial, were the sole form of compensation in 10 of the sites. Another three sites combined stipends with release time—usually one period of the school's schedule. Three of the four sites that provided release time had only one teacher-leader per small school.

Teacher-leader turnover has been high over these transition years. In addition to the normal turnover of teachers, reasons most commonly given are the additional workload, tensions with teacher colleagues related to the new role, the lack of role definition, and lack of preparation or skills required for the position. In the February 2005 survey, 55 percent of teacher-leaders reported receiving little or no training since becoming a teacher-leader.

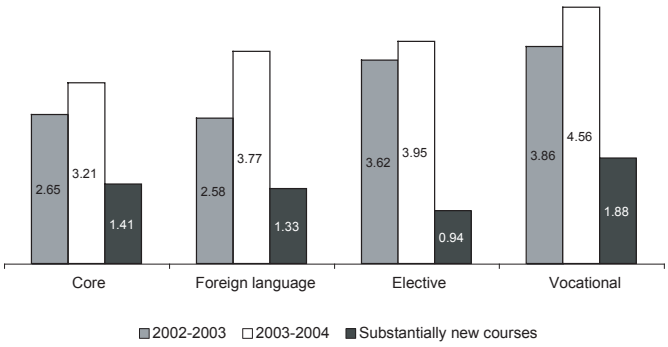
Teacher Workload

One expectation regarding the move to small schools is that a teacher's workload will change. Because most of the small school designs are based on conventional images of schools—classes that meet frequently if not daily, a commonly prescribed set of activities for students in the same course, a largely teacher-directed classroom (at least in the beginning)—class size is unlikely to decrease. We were curious about other changes that might have taken place, and inquired about teacher preparations, student load (how many students a teacher works with), and length of time that teachers expect to work with the students they currently have in their classes.

In the 2003–2004 school year, teachers from 67 percent of the small schools completed surveys regarding daily life in their new small schools. The respondents to our survey constituted about 25 percent of the teachers working in the 16 larger conversion schools. We did not include the smallest school since it offers no conventional classes.

In 2004–2005, approximately 1000 teachers participated in three online surveys, with a response rate of approximately 40 percent. When the same or similar questions drew similar responses both years, data from the 2003–2004 survey has been used.

Figure 8: Average Number of Different Courses (Preps) Taught



The average number of different classes teachers taught (commonly referred to as "preps") each semester or trimester increased in the first year of implementing small schools (see Figure 8). The increase likely stems from the decision of many small schools to maintain a comprehensive array of course offerings. While core subject teachers have fewer preps than elective and foreign language teachers, a slightly higher number of their classes were substantially new to them in 2003–2004.

Figure 9 shows several aspects of a teacher's student load during the 2003–2004 school year. In general, the data reveal that student loads have not yet begun to decrease. Data from the 2004–2005 school year show essentially no change in student loads.

Nationally, many small schools adopted or combined two curriculum-related structural practices to sharply reduce a teacher's student load: "looping" and integrating curriculum. Neither practice has yet found its way into many of Washington's conversion schools.

Looping is the practice of keeping students with the same teacher for two or more years to take advantage of the mutual knowledge students and teachers acquire of one another in a year's work. Looping does not reduce the student load in any one year, but has the effect of halving the number of students a teacher works with over a two-year period, and reducing by two-thirds the number of students over a three-year period. While looping may take place in several ways, teachers and students most frequently remain together in the second (or third) course in a standard sequence (algebra and geometry, for example).

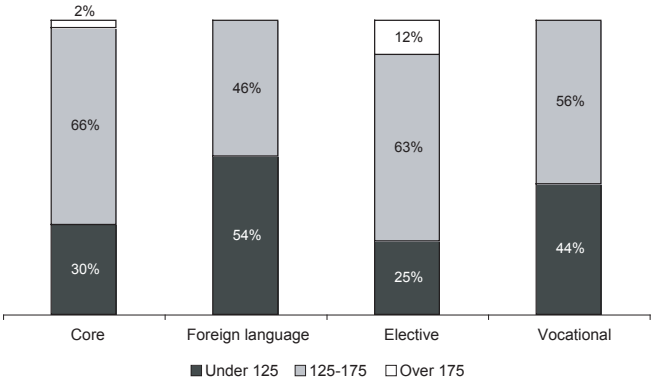
Our surveys reveal that only 30 percent of teachers expect to teach 80 percent of the same students the next year—a percentage that reflects a common occurrence in world languages, vocational courses, some other electives such as band or choir, or upper-level math courses. While teachers may, in fact, teach the same students for two consecutive years, looping is not yet a design element in conversion small schools. (In other words, teachers have the same students again only by chance.) Teachers across the small schools gave similar responses as to why (multiple responses were permitted):

- **35%** "We have never discussed looping in our small school."
- **16%** "It would disrupt our roles within departments."
- **25%** "Teachers are attached to teaching at the same grade levels."

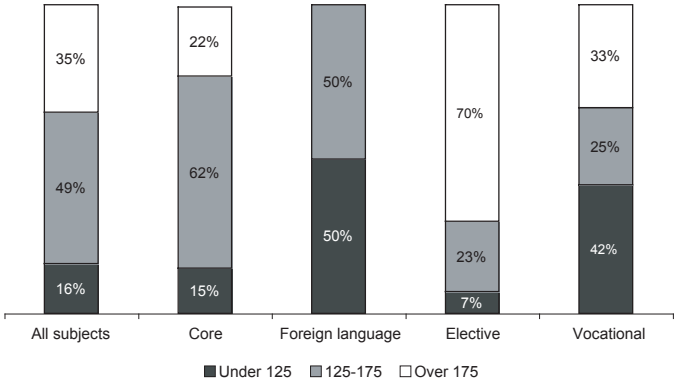
Integrated or interdisciplinary curriculum may take many forms: teachers of two subjects planning together to coordinate both content and process of instruction for the same students; jointly taught classes spanning two disciplines; and blending content from two disciplines into one course taught by a single teacher for twice the length of time as a single course.

Figure 9: Aspects of a Teacher's Student Load

A: Average Student Load per Semester



B: Average Student Load per Year



Teachers' student load didn't look very different in the first year of implementing small schools than student loads look in conventional comprehensive high schools. Seven out of ten teachers responding see over 125 students per semester or trimester (A).

However, teachers' average student load per year is very different (B), with 70 percent of elective teachers seeing more than 175 students over the course of a school year, compared with 22 percent of core subject teachers and zero foreign language teachers. In fact, 37 percent of elective teachers see more than 225 students per year, as compared to 5 percent of core and zero foreign language or vocational teachers.

Even though the number of preps and the average student load may not have decreased since implementing small schools, teachers are seeing the same students for longer periods of time (C). The majority of foreign language and core subject teachers have over 80 percent of their students all year, rather than one semester or trimester. Not surprisingly, elective teachers still have the greatest student turnover each year. With careful planning, all teachers could have the same students throughout the school year as well as repeatedly over four years.

C: Percentage of Students Teachers Have in Class All Year

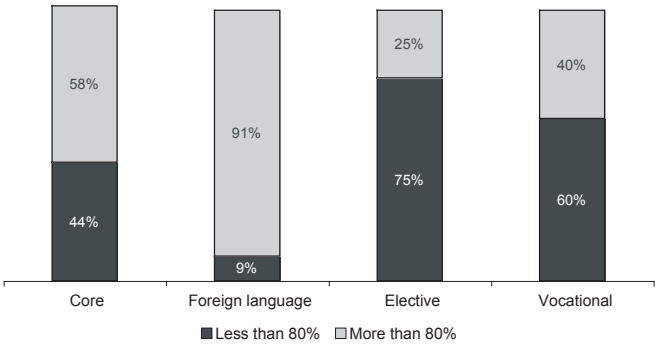
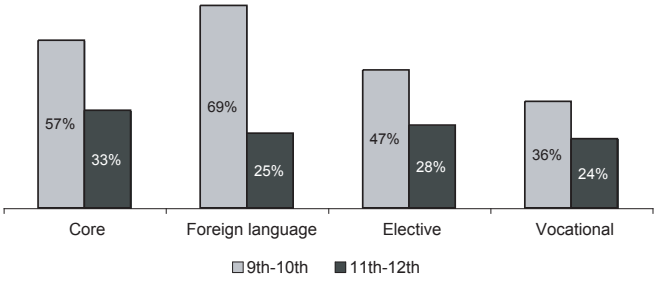


Chart D shows how many students in a particular class are from the same small school as the teacher. Because most of the conversion sites concentrated on the two lower grades in the first year of transition, more freshmen and sophomores spend more of their day within their small school than upperclassmen. Many schools permitted older students to "cross over" (take courses in other small schools) and expect to continue to do so, at least during the transition period. Crossovers are more prevalent in elective and vocational courses for students in all grades. (Informal reports suggest that the percentage of ninth and tenth grade students taking core courses in their own small school increased somewhat in 2004–2005, but confirming data was not available in time for this report.)

D: Students and Teacher from Same Small School



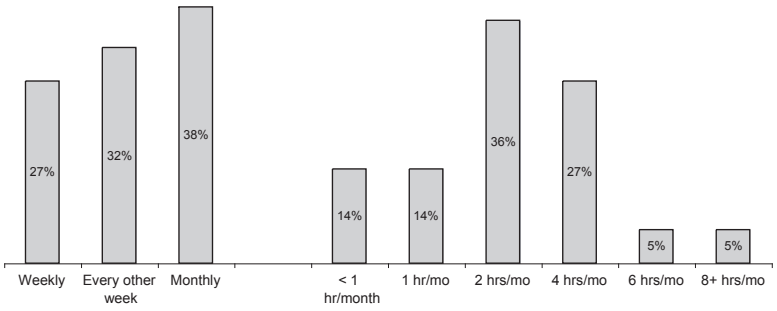
Because the class meets for more time and awards more credit, integrated curriculum has the added benefit of cutting a teacher's student load in half. Just six percent of small school teachers report that certain classes are integrated and taught by one teacher. Teachers identified a number of reasons why this kind of integrated curriculum is so rare (again, multiple responses were permitted):

- **35%** "We have never discussed reducing student load through offering integrated courses."
- **33%** "We have talked about it, but the conversation never translates to implementation."
- **31%** "People just want to keep teaching what they have been teaching."
- **28%** "It's an endorsement issue. We can't teach integrated courses because staff do not have multiple endorsements."
- **15%** "The feeling is that content rigor would be lost in integrated courses."
- **14%** "We have tried to do this, but the building (or district) administration does not support it."

Teacher Collaboration

The Gates Foundation views time for teacher collaboration and common planning as a characteristic of high achievement schools (see Attributes, p. 2). Teachers in conversion small schools appear, on balance, not to have substantial time for collaboration and common planning (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Frequency and Length of Teacher Planning Time

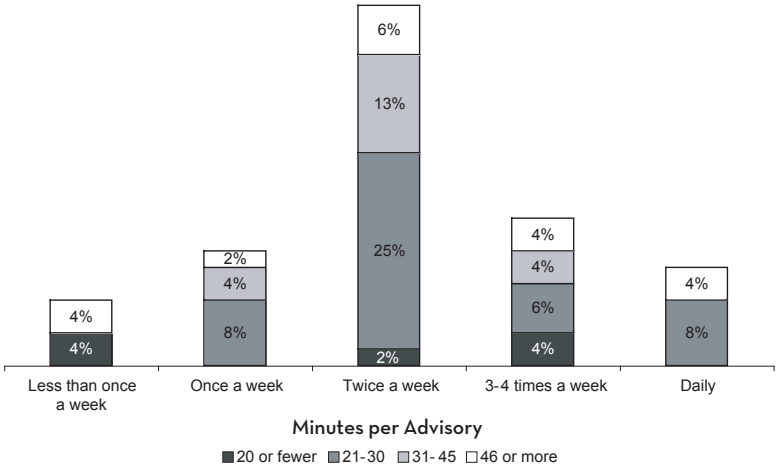


Most conventional comprehensive high school staffs meet twice a month—once school-wide and once in departments. About 75 percent of the new small schools appear to meet no more frequently. Meetings do appear, however, to run slightly longer than might be expected in conventional comprehensive high schools.

Increased Knowledge of Students

Two-thirds of the small schools have some form of advisory—an additional responsibility for teachers in every school that has created an advisory system. The most common schedule for advisories is to meet twice a week for between 20 to 45 minutes (Figure 11). There doesn't appear to be a correlation between frequency and length of advisories. In the 2004–2005 school year, just over 80 percent of teachers report an advisory structure that keeps students and advisors together for more than one year.

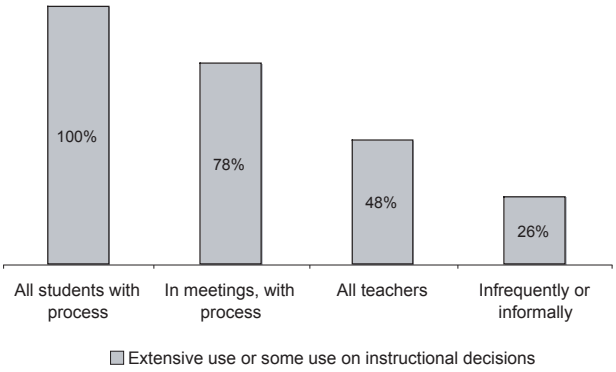
Figure 11: Advisory Frequency and Length



Schools have begun to build processes for improved communication between and among teachers, and with families, even though most small schools have students spending part of the day with teachers in other small schools.

In the 2003–2004 school year, slightly more than half the schools reported they had created a process for teachers to exchange information about students they share. A year later, only 29 percent of teachers responding to our surveys reported discussing individual students or groups of students "regularly as a part of meetings and with an agreed-upon process." Processes for discussing students varied across the small schools that adopted formal procedures. Most of them, however, focused on "students of concern"—students who, for one reason or another, drew teacher attention because of their struggles to learn.

Figure 12: Use of Process to Share Information About Students



Regardless of the specific process, teachers report that having—and using—a process influences their use of knowledge about students to inform their instruction (see Figure 12).

Teachers who said they discussed students "infrequently or not at all" were about half as likely (26 percent) to see "some" or "extensive" changes in practice triggered by having greater knowledge of students from their counterparts. Indeed, 37 percent of this group reported knowing students no "better than we did as a large school."

Almost half (48 percent) of all teachers reported that "some difference in" or "extensive use of" their knowledge of students influenced decisions about classroom practice. Examples included choice of projects or other assignments, student groupings, types of assessment, and other forms of differentiated instruction. Of teachers who reported discussing students "regularly as a part of meetings and with an agreed-upon process," that figure rose to over three-quarters (80 percent). Teachers also believe knowing students will increasingly inform instructional practice in the coming years.

A small number of teachers responding to the survey (15) reported that their agreed-upon process was used to discuss "all students," not only students of concern. In this small group, 100 percent reported "extensive use" or "some use" of knowledge about students to shape instructional decisions.

Schools also appear to be making headway in their connections with parents and families. Ninety percent of schools report having some systemic way of contacting families, including scheduled conferences, phone calls and e-mail, small school mailings, and open houses. In the 2004–2005 surveys, one third of teachers reported having more contact with families than prior to the implementation of small schools. One-third also reported having "more effective" interactions with families. Slightly more than half of the teachers responding indicated that phone calls or e-mail to discuss a student's academic performance "best describes" their contact with families.

Changes in teacher practice

During the planning that preceded the transition to small schools, most of the focus was on three areas: learning about small schools, creating a more collaborative culture, and rethinking the structure. While some time was spent during this period imagining different ways of working with students—different pedagogy, assessments, and relationships most typically—relatively little attention or profes-

Figure 13: Teaching Practices

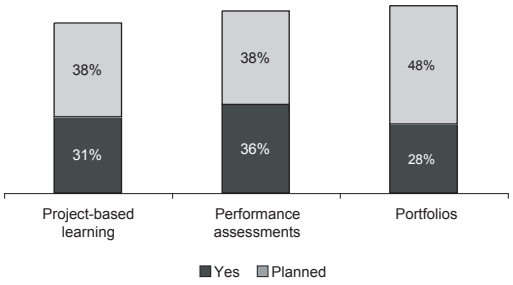
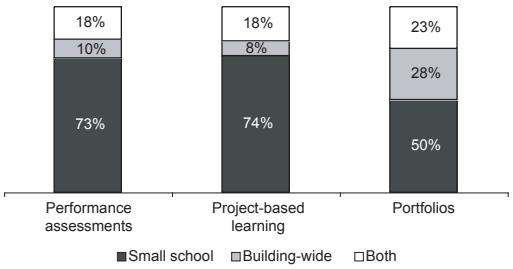


Figure 14: Project Organization



sional development resources were devoted to building new skills or knowledge related to teacher practice.

Nonetheless, teachers and their small schools are taking steps toward changing their classroom practice. Two areas that received considerable attention during the planning period were the use of project-based learning and performance assessments—areas that represent the essential components of teaching and learning that the Gates Foundation espouses (see p. 2). The use of student portfolios to reveal progress over time or as a means of graduating students, or both, was also an area of strong interest during the planning stage.

About a third of the schools have begun to use project-based learning, performance assessments, and portfolios; over one-third more schools plan to do so.

How schools have arrived at decisions about changing practice is important. The expectation is that, over time, each small school will have authority to make key decisions related to its own operation. Some of that authority appears to reside with the small school even in the early transition, yet the comprehensive school still exerts some control across sites. Nearly three-quarters of the small schools organize their own assessment and project-based initiatives, whereas portfolios are a building-wide initiative for almost half the schools.

The landscape of school redesign in Washington State looks substantially different now than four years ago, when the first of the conversion high schools received their grants. Most notably, 72 small schools have emerged from 17 comprehensive high schools. At all but two of the conversion sites, the number of staff committed to making small schools successful, in some form or other, is far greater than those who continue to oppose the development of small schools. Leadership arrangements and expectations are changing. At most conversion sites, students identify increasingly with their small school and its staff. In all but a few small schools, the staff has turned its attention to changing their teaching practice to take advantage of their changed circumstances.

Nonetheless, we worry about many things we see at the 17 conversion sites. From the perspective of four years of observing and working with teachers and administrators in these schools, it is relatively easy to see the ripple effects of many of the early decisions made at each site. What follows is our sense of how key early decisions—understandable at the time—now pose threats to the continued development of the small schools that are replacing comprehensive high schools. The observations are offered as description, not criticism, and with the conviction that each decision was a good-faith attempt to move the school's redesign efforts forward in its particular context.

The core premise of the small school strategy is that highly personalized and focused schools will serve all students better; that is, small schools will be better able to raise the overall level of student achievement as well as decrease or eliminate the achievement gap while increasing the cohort graduation rate. In practice, that will mean far fewer course offerings, with choice for students residing within courses taught by teachers who know their students well.

At this point, however, many of the small schools—most of them perhaps—are grounded in a set of beliefs and practices drawn largely from comprehensive high schools. At the same time, they have transitioned in some substantial ways to small schools. They have, metaphorically, a foot in two worlds—worlds that have quite different sets of assumptions and strategies at the core of their design.

Our primary worry is whether small school staffs, their administrators, district office leaders, families, and communities will be able to move beyond the "old world" beliefs and practices common to comprehensive high schools to a "new world" orientation of small schools, which places personalization and relationships at the heart of schooling for both students and teachers.

Most of the conversion schools made a critical early decision to think of the new small schools as miniature comprehensive high schools. They almost certainly did so for a number of reasons: the Foundation's limit of 400 students in a 9–12 school provided a ready figure to settle on; a short timeline between the foundation's invitation to apply for a grant and the proposal deadline, which left little time for investigation into existing successful small schools; the experience of virtually all administrators and teachers in grantee schools as comprehensive high school educators, which made it difficult for most to imagine a high school designed on the basis of something other than the twin pillars of specialization for teachers and course choice for students.

Perhaps most importantly, these schools were "early inventers"—akin to the "early adopters" that innovators in all fields seek out—in that they decided to

seek a grant asking them to do something that had been done only occasionally elsewhere. They had no real images of what a conversion school might look like. In such instances, most people choose some variation of what they know. Understandably, the statement, "Small schools are different in kind, not in degree," would have been—and was—met with uncomprehending looks.

The tension between comprehensive and highly personalized schools may not be resolved in favor of personalization. Nothing in the recent history of American high schools suggests that the successful combination of "comprehensive" and "personalized" is anything but occasional or anomalous. Given that most high school teachers and administrators have little understanding of or experience with personalized teaching (or learning), they are far more likely to continue to think and act like teachers in a comprehensive high school. We see several indicators that this is the case at most conversion sites in Washington to date.

Most small schools and their "parent" large school have been slow to reduce the range of course offerings available to students. Some hesitancy to reduce the range of course offerings has been out of concern for older students, who will not be beneficiaries of small schools. Such a concern does not account for the slowness with which schools have begun to narrow their curriculum. For the most part, old beliefs about course choice seem to trump emergent understandings about the benefits of personalization. Most conversion sites have also been unwilling to engage in this conversation with their communities; in several instances, district leaders have been reluctant to address this issue as well.

The number of teacher preps at any one time appears to be increasing due to the continued commitment to a broad array of course choices. Self-reported data suggest that core academic area teachers and foreign language teachers have from one-half to more than one additional preparation per year in their small school than they had in their comprehensive high school. In our judgment, such an increase is not sustainable over a long stretch of time. This issue seems resolvable only through some serious rethinking of curriculum offerings and sequencing.

Most conversion sites are using crossover courses as either a necessary step during the extended two to three year transition process or as a desirable feature of a conversion high school. Some conversion sites, or small schools within a site, have placed clear limits on the use of crossovers, such as permitting older students to complete a course sequence begun before the transition to small schools, or permitting only one elective course out of their small school to be taken by upperclassmen. At other sites, few or no restrictions have been placed on the use of crossovers, so students may be assigned even to core courses outside their small school.

Crossovers preserve the old-world values of a range of course choice for students and teacher specialization for adults. They also hinder the development of small schools in significant ways:

- Teachers have difficulty constructing integrated or interdisciplinary courses, or are hindered in otherwise developing unique curricula in their small school because they cannot count on having the same students in the appropriate courses;

- Teachers do not have a way to share information about some of their students with colleagues because some students in their courses belong to other small schools, and vice versa;
- The development of a small school culture is hindered when students are out of their small school for a portion of the day;
- The infrastructure necessary to support crossovers almost always requires a common schedule at the conversion site, thereby not permitting a small school to develop a schedule better suited to its focus or its instructional framework;
- When students who take crossover courses are counted on a school's roster, many small schools serve well in excess of 400 students. More importantly, when a student is on more than one school's roster (and some students take classes across several small schools at a site), no one appears to take responsibility for that student—a defining trait of comprehensive high schools.

Each of these constraints works against the goal of developing schools that are small, focused, unique, and deliberately uncomprehensive—where a small group of teachers takes responsibility for the learning and growth of their students.

Many small schools are not staffed appropriately to graduate their students. This is a "chicken-egg" issue connected to the use of crossovers. Some schools were staffed presuming the ongoing use of crossovers as a way to ensure students would have the courses they need to graduate—an example of "old-world" thinking. In other instances and for a variety of reasons (such as developing a strong discipline-based theme, or wanting to work with close colleagues), some schools did not take into account the need to staff so that students could be graduated from their own small school without taking crossover courses. If schools are to be free to develop their own culture and take charge of their students' learning, they will need to re-staff to graduate their students from their own small school.

The student load for teachers in most small schools remains at or near its pre-transition level, making genuine personalization impossible. In most schools, most teachers continue to see 150 students or more a year. Only a few schools have taken steps, such as looping or multi-year courses,[5] to ensure that teachers have the same students for more than a year. Teacher self-reporting indicates that fully one-third of the schools have never even considered such measures to reduce their student load (see pp. 15–17). Moreover, very few small schools consider working with the same students for more than one year as a design element—that is, an intentional part of the school's plan.

School designs that reduce student loads for teachers to half the typical number are commonplace. Using one of those design elements, however, requires that the school let go of its commitment to a large course offering and to some degree of teacher specialization. Until teachers work in conditions where their student load is considerably reduced, and where they work with the same students for two or more years, we do not believe students, families, or teachers can realize the benefits of personalization.

Changes in leadership arrangements and operation, particularly for administrators, have received little careful thought. While the bulk of planning time was focused on structural changes and how they might affect the daily lives

[5] For a specific example of how to reduce student load, see *The Humanities Connection: One High School's Approach to Integrating English and Social Studies Curriculum*, at **www.smallschoolsproject.org** under "Publications/Our Publications/Design Series."

of teachers and students, far less attention was given to considering ways that leadership structures and expectations would need to change. The development of teacher-leader positions has most often proceeded independently of any rethinking of administrative leadership roles and responsibilities. The result has been more tension and confusion than necessary and some important missed opportunities for leadership development in many small schools. Teacher-leaders and assistant principals are not uniformly given authority for small school decision making; as a result, teachers still perceive principals as where "the buck stops." Assistant principals are still mired in building-wide issues, especially discipline, instead of acting as instructional leaders to one or two small schools.

One other notable factor provides reason for worry, though it is not directly related to the decision to keep schools at or near 400 students:

Few small schools have adequate time for collaborative planning. A number of districts provided additional planning time, usually in the form of late arrival or early release days for students, during the initial year of planning. In some instances, full days of professional development were provided. With few exceptions, however, those days were viewed as necessary for planning the move to small schools, not as a necessary condition of a successful school. By the fourth year of the grant, most schools had returned to their pre-grant level of collaborative planning or professional development time.

Good small schools depend heavily on a strong culture of sharing, a high degree of coherence, and a sharp focus on doing a few things very well. Consequently, small school staffs need time during their normal working day to plan together and share information about students as well as to work together on their curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment strategies and practices. Until schools and their districts view regular, ongoing collaboration time as critical to developing and maintaining a collaborative culture for teachers and administrators, small schools are unlikely to thrive.

While the number and nature of things that worry us is substantial, we see several key shifts that make us hopeful about the transition from comprehensive to small schools.

Teachers are beginning to imagine the power of personalization. That is, they are beginning to see that personalization extends beyond knowing students well and being trusted by them. It includes changing what happens in classrooms based on specific knowledge of students, and, in some schools, it includes teacher commitments to pushing students harder than they have done in the past. This is occurring even though teachers, because of their high student load, are experiencing only the tip of the iceberg in terms of personalization. Of particular note are the teacher survey responses that indicate the use of a systemic way of sharing information about all students, not just those who struggle, leads to adaptation of classroom practice to support individual student learning.

Small school staffs are developing a deeper understanding of the role of autonomy in building their small schools. In the planning for small schools, issues of autonomy often served as a lightning rod for teachers, administrators, and district leaders. On all sides, autonomy issues were construed largely as issues of power and control—so much so that use of "the A-word" was, by tacit agreement, not allowed at some sites during the planning stages.

As teachers are able to imagine more clearly what a deep level of personalization could contribute to their teaching and to their students' success, they are better able to understand that "autonomy" in practice means taking responsibility for their students' successes and failures. They understand as well that, if taking responsibility is to have meaning, they need authority to act on behalf of their students. While it remains unclear that this understanding about autonomy will be shared by administrators and district leaders, it is a hopeful sign, and one worth observing over the coming months.

A growing sense of agency often accompanies staff acceptance of responsibility for student learning. Teachers are more likely to advocate for their students' needs. They know their students better, they see possibilities, and they want to act on those possibilities. They are often proactive in making contact with parents, they are clearer with their students about high expectations, and they understand that their students have begun to grant them the moral authority to make greater demands of them.[6]

This sense of agency is neither widespread across the set of small schools nor common across any one staff. But it is no longer a rarity. Based on the concept of "increasing returns," in the language of complexity theory,[7] it is the sort of self-reinforcing action that leads to improvement and growth rather than stagnation or decline.

Some school cultures are becoming "learner-centered" rather than teacher-centered. As teachers know students better and share insights and understandings with one another about their students—and about their own practice—the culture begins to shift. In brief, culture becomes more about learning, about sharing and collaboration, about common skills and shared success, and about taking joint responsibility for the success of students.

[6] To read more about personalization in the redesigned small schools, see *Knowing & Being Known: Personalization as a Foundation for Improving Student* Learning at **www.smallschoolsproject.org** under "Small Schools in Action/What We Are Learning."

[7] Waldrop, M. M. (1992). *Complexity: the Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Each small school is embedded in a unique context shaped by its community and district, the conversion site it is a part of, its sister small schools at the site, and, most importantly, the hopes and dreams of the staff for their school. Some commonalities have emerged across the 17 conversion sites and 72 small schools, however, that make it possible to offer a set of five actions that schools (and their districts) might take to move the transition to small schools forward. They are offered as a connected set of actions, not as isolated steps, and are based on the presumption that the three areas where substantial change needs to occur—culture, structure, and practice—are woven together tightly. Most can be substantially implemented by the opening of the September 2006 school year.

1. Staff small schools so that each student can be graduated from her own small school.
2. Insist that all professional development be focused on instruction that is planned and led by each small school and is specific to each school's focus.
3. Determine how to reduce student load dramatically for teachers in each core subject area through such design strategies as looping or integrating curriculum, or both.
4. Design leadership structures, relationships, and incentives to support and nurture small schools.
5. Provide each small school with at least as much authority and responsibility for decision making as the comprehensive high school currently possesses.

SMALL SCHOOLS PROJECT

7900 E. Green Lake Dr. N, Suite 212
Seattle, WA 98103
phone: 206.812.3160 | fax: 206.812.3190
e-mail: info@smallschoolsproject.org | web: www.smallschoolsproject.org