Approaches of Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation-Funded Intermediary Organizations to Structuring and Supporting Small High Schools in New York City

Executive Summary

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In 2003, a few years after the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation began implementing its small schools reform agenda, the Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education (DOE) announced a plan to replace large failing high schools in New York City with 200 small schools. In short order, the foundation and the Chancellor became partners with city labor unions, several other foundations, and several intermediary organizations in carrying forward this initiative.

This study examines the role that intermediary organizations, the groups responsible for distributing grant funds and starting and advising new small schools, played in the Gates Foundation initiative. The study is part of a collaborative evaluation effort funded by the foundation and led by MDRC that included the Academy for Educational Development (AED) as well as Policy Studies Associates (PSA). Together the three groups, through four studies, aimed to clarify the characteristics, implementation, and impact of the New York City small schools initiative.

In this study, PSA presents intermediaries' various approaches to school design and capacity-building, answering four descriptive questions:

■ What expertise did intermediary organizations bring to the small schools initiative?

■ What were the key features of their school designs?

■ What pressures and supports did intermediaries apply to encourage implementation of the school designs?

■ What challenges constrained their efforts to establish schools that prepared youth for college and careers?

We also answer an analytic question: Did intermediary approaches to reform reflect the complexity of the challenge as it has been described and understood over the recent history of school reform?

In carrying out this study, PSA researchers conducted 70 open-ended, hour-long, individual interviews with 53 leaders of 18 intermediary organizations (executive directors and senior staff). We also analyzed intermediary reports to the foundation and their online program materials (such as start-up manuals, curriculum guides, databases, evaluations). A summary of key findings and conclusions follows.

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Characteristics of Intermediary Organizations

Anticipating that intermediaries' prior encounters in New York City schools could be relevant to their success with this effort, we asked respondents to describe their earlier school reform efforts. We found that most intermediaries (13 of 18) had at least some experience creating and supporting small schools before joining the Gates Foundation initiative, and most (12 of 18) were located in or nearby New York City.

School Designs

Large-scale "new millennium" education reform efforts have tended to focus on the reorganization of schools and the transformation of teaching practices around explicit design principles (Borman, 2009a). When the foundation became involved in school reform, it too focused on developing schools around design principles. New Visions for Public Schools, a local intermediary, structured the initial New York City process for school roll-out and approval. Consistent with earlier foundation frameworks, New Visions directed prospective school leaders to design New York City schools around 10 principles: a rigorous instructional program; personalized instructional relationships; a clear focus on teaching and learning; instructional leadership; school-based, teacher-driven professional development and collaboration; meaningful continuous assessment; community partners; family/caregiver involvement; youth participation and development; and effective use of technology.

With these principles and other imperatives in mind, intermediaries developed diverse programming options. The range of approaches that resulted caused PSA researchers to seek out a concise conceptual model against which to compare alternative designs. We found that scaffolding in the work of Newmann and Wehlage (1995). These prominent researchers identify the following as central school design tasks: (a) defining the quality of intellectual work required of students, (b) describing pedagogy, (c) clarifying approaches to professional community, and (d) defining ways schools can obtain ongoing support from their environments.

At the time of this study (fall 2008), all but one intermediary could point to an explicit set of responses to the design tasks identified by Newmann and Wehlage (1995). Behind apparent differences in approaches, we identified four consistent principles of operation. In general, intermediaries sought to design schools that did the following:

- Provided all students with a college preparatory curriculum with personalized academic support (e.g., tutoring) and social support (e.g., advisories).

- Exposed students to real-world tasks and expectations (authentic pedagogy).

- Enabled professional collaboration and learning.

- Partnered with external organizations to enrich student and staff capacities.

Intermediaries elaborated on these design principles in unique ways. To encourage college-readiness, some intermediaries revised and increased course requirements beyond New York City minimums. Most added time for instruction to the school day and year. Virtually all required weekly student advisement at least for a year. As part of authentic pedagogy, some intermediaries embraced project-based learning (having students make things, from research reports to community gardens), other intermediaries adopted performance-based assessment (real-world tests that might include public exhibitions or the development of a portfolio of each student's best work), and others created instructional internships for students (work-related learning experiences). Some did all of these things. To enable professional learning, intermediaries encouraged schools to provide teachers with common opportunities to examine student work and plan curricula. Some were explicit about the need to schedule time for collaboration during the ordinary school week. To buttress relationships between schools and external organizations, all intermediaries provided external groups with funding to offset the costs of collaboration.

In addition to commonalities, we found important differences in intermediaries' approaches to school design. We identified six distinguishing factors:

■ Most intermediaries approached school creation with a single school design in mind (e.g. a career academy design), but two intermediaries replicated multiple school designs (e.g. a career academy design, an early college design, etc.).

■ All intermediaries focused on the needs of struggling students, but some focused on a distinct student population, such as English language learners or girls.

■ All intermediaries promoted teaching that would expose students to real-world tasks, but some grounded instruction in classrooms and others grounded instruction in internships.

■ Most intermediaries started new small schools, but one exclusively converted large schools into smaller academies.

■ Some intermediaries designed four-year high schools; others designed serving grades 6-12.

■ Some intermediaries admitted 40-80 students per cohort; others admitted 100-120 students per cohort.

A few factors, in addition to DOE and foundation mandates, were noted by intermediaries as influences on their decisions about school designs. These factors include the organizations' missions, their views about the instructional demands associated with preparing under-prepared students for college, and the scope of the curriculum changes they contemplated.

■ Several intermediaries developed school designs with the special needs of the unique populations they historically served in mind. For example, Good Shepherd Services (GSS), consistent with its social work mission, developed

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schools for older high school students with severe academic lags. GSS described its schools as providing rigorous instruction, keeping youth safe and secure, and linking instruction with learning-related job placement.

■ Several intermediaries (Asia Society, College Board, City University of New York, and Young Women's Leadership Network) expressed a strong commitment to schools serving grades 6-12. Leaders of these organizations explained that extra time was beneficial, if not necessary, in helping under-prepared students to develop the personal traits and skills necessary for success in college.

■ Intermediaries that created schools for grades 6-12 were required by the foundation to admit smaller student cohorts (40-80, compared to 100-120 students per grade) to keep total school enrollments low. The Coalition of Essential Schools and four intermediaries committed to two-day per week work-related learning experiences (internships) also required schools to enroll smaller cohorts. Leaders of these groups explained that their models represented a major departure from common instructional practices. By limiting the total numbers of students that teachers taught, they hoped to contain instructional demands.

Support for Implementation

In carrying out the small schools initiative, some intermediaries needed to expand their capacity for school creation and support; others needed to build that capacity from the ground up. Intermediaries mined three sources of support for their school development efforts: external partners; the wisdom of their internal networks; and promising, if not proven, practices and curricula. They deployed these assets toward similar capacity-building targets, which included helping schools identify needed human resources and manage external pressures, developing planning and assessment materials, and building professionals' knowledge and skills.

■ All intermediaries reported helping school planners to identify principals and partners. Those with strong instructional knowledge and practice networks also reported helping to recruit and select teachers.

■ All intermediaries reported supporting school leaders' efforts to manage external pressures, such as identifying appropriate school locations and facilities. New Visions for Public Schools played a special role in managing district-level pressures by facilitating agreements for more flexible teacher assignment policies.

■ Intermediaries invested in designing evaluation and planning materials to guide school development. Many created software for tracking student performance and developed organizational assessment rubrics. Some developed instructional materials, such as curriculum mapping software that allows teachers to link lessons with state and other standards, websites for sharing curriculum, and proprietary coursework.

■　　Intermediaries typically offered school principals and teachers multiple opportunities for professional development. A few invited prospective principals to spend several months studying instructional processes in model schools (residencies). Sitting principals typically participated in one- and two-day professional development events, monthly network meetings, and weekly coaching. Some intermediaries developed year-long leadership institutes to support new principals.

■　　The professional opportunities that intermediaries developed for teachers were typically less individualized and continuous. They included two-to-four-week summer workshops and one- and two-day professional development events. Some intermediaries provided teachers with group coaching, and some provided select teachers with individual coaching.

By 2008, the point of this data collection, many intermediaries offered schools nominally similar forms of support for implementation. What differed, we suspect based on respondents' incidental statements, were the organizations' internal capacities to support this work. As we were told, everyone partnered, but some intermediaries understood partnership better than others. Good Shepherd Services could, for example, "…draw on its social work professionals' knowledge of group work." All intermediaries had internal networks, but some intermediaries had strong local teacher networks and structured schools in ways that provided explicit means for teacher-sharing within and across schools. Internationals Network for Public Schools (INPS), a network of (mostly) local schools and teachers could, for example, "…engage highly qualified teachers from across the City in staff recruitment, staff selection, and curriculum development efforts while teacher-mentors continued to function primarily as pedagogues in their home schools." Finally, some intermediaries had already developed and tested curricula they could deploy in this reform effort. As one intermediary leader noted, "Having strong curriculum frameworks in place, took some of the burden off teachers. We didn't have to invent everything."

Challenges

We asked leaders of intermediary organizations to describe the challenges they faced in implementing small schools. The core challenge was developing school professionals and, through those professionals, the curricula and pedagogy necessary to motivate under-prepared youth to achieve college-readiness standards. "The delicacy of the process," as one respondent said, "requires high-capacity individuals. It's not written in stone how you balance imperatives like acquiring and applying knowledge and respecting yourself and other people."

Intermediaries also faced several challenges that were not about instruction. Years into the new schools push, many intermediaries were, for example, still struggling to find adequate physical facilities (buildings) for their schools. Intermediaries also reported feeling burdened by the school system's repeated reinvention of complex operating procedures.

We expected to find differences in the extent if not the kind of challenges reported by intermediaries based on their prior experience creating small schools in New York City and the complexity and comprehensiveness of their school designs. It seemed reasonable, for example, that intermediaries that aimed to introduce major instructional innovations would face greater difficulty in program implementation than intermediaries following traditional paths. We didn't find these patterns in our data, however. At the nominal level, at least, instructional challenges appeared to be distributed across groups. A respondent from one intermediary organization offered a compelling partial explanation for the relative constancy of challenges across groups. "The issue is having a model. If you have a model you can tinker with it, you can invite others who share your values to work with you. The problem we had was in not having a model. That made everything more difficult. There were too many moving parts…no basis for collaboration."

Conclusions and Recommendations

In concluding, we address one issue: Do intermediaries' approaches to school design and capacity-building reflect the complexity of the reform challenge as characterized in today's professional literature? As of 2008, most intermediaries featured school designs that took account, in general terms, of the challenges identified by Newmann and Wehlage (1995). Intermediaries articulated clear instructional aims; specifically, preparing students for college. They championed authentic pedagogy and building professional learning communities, and they provided financial and other resources to enable schools to work with external partners. Ongoing design challenges included making college-readiness expectations more explicit, aligning those expectations with real-world standards, balancing "proven" with teacher-tailored curricula, and setting aside adequate time for teacher collaboration on instruction.

As of 2008, most intermediaries had varied ways of supporting school leaders in implementing school designs. Intermediaries typically helped school leaders identify human resources and manage external pressures. They provided materials for school planning and for student and program assessment and they worked to build professionals' knowledge and skills through coaching and networking. Perhaps the biggest implementation challenge that intermediaries faced was attending adequately to the learning needs of individual teachers.

We conclude that intermediary approaches to school design and support were multi-dimensional and coherent overall. Intermediaries also offered interestingly different perspectives on college-readiness, on balancing "proven" with tailored-made curricula, on organizing school time, and on enabling teacher learning. Based on these considerations, we make the following recommendations.

■ Because intermediaries have developed reasonable approaches to school design and support, we recommend that local and national education stakeholders continue to engage these organizations in ongoing reform efforts. Intermediaries are capable of integrating multiple supports for school development and change.

■ Because intermediaries are approaching school design in importantly different ways, we recommend that districts and states examine intermediaries' work *in situ* when selecting partners. Districts and states may want to charge particular offices with responsibility for studying the work of intermediaries and for developing relationships and program initiatives with these organizations.

■ Because few intermediary models have been rigorously evaluated, we recommend that stakeholders support intermediaries' efforts to study program implementation and impacts. These data will serve to strengthen organizational problem-solving and development.

■ Because intermediaries have developed alternative approaches to solving complex instructional problems, we recommend that education stakeholders support inquiry across intermediary organizations. These data will serve to build sector knowledge.

■ Because the empirical meaning of college-readiness is still unclear, we recommend that education stakeholders support ongoing efforts to identify factors that make a difference in low-income students' college persistence and graduation rates. Increasing understanding of readiness factors will help to focus intermediaries' school designs and instructional supports.