

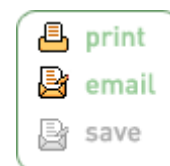
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From Big to Small: An Essential Transformation

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It's obvious I wouldn't be the student or person I've developed into if my traditional high school didn't become a small school. When I envision myself as a senior in a traditional high school, what I can imagine is "okay" grades, several absences, and a "going nowhere" attitude. Yet when I evaluate who I am now, I see the opposite. Because I have become an avid leader at the Academy of Citizenship and Empowerment (ACE), I see a life-long learner, a risk taker, and a role model for my peers.

Three years ago at Tyee, a large comprehensive high school, I was a misunderstood freshman. I felt limitations and "easy way outs" surrounding me everywhere I turned. I was either shrugged off or purposefully neglected by the teachers and students. A complete 180-degree change occurred only when I was placed in ACE High School, one of the three small high schools that resulted from Tyee's conversion to small schools. I was introduced to the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) a haven because it supports small schools. To us, the small school structure means a student body of no more than 400, close relationships with teachers, students as teachers, leadership opportunities for everyone, and several other aspects of a close-knit learning community. Before, at my comprehensive high school, I didn't think of my life after high school. Now, at ACE, most of the work I do is helping me prepare for a higher education. Now I feel I'd be wasting my time and mind if I didn't endeavor to meet that goal.

I did not display that same full potential at school when it was a large high school, because teachers couldn't identify with my needs as easily and comfortably as they do now. Before, they dealt with overloads of students constantly. But teachers at ACE see the same students in longer class periods and sometimes multiple times a day. Also, in small schools, students often are with the same teachers for several or all of the years of their high school career. Familiarizing ourselves with each other for that long keeps everyone in close contact. These hours spent together result in strong teacher-student bonds and relationships that last to support one another's learning. Since my enrollment at ACE, I appreciate my education. For many students, coming to school is an obligation. To me, it's a challenging ladder that dares my mind to ascend above high school milestones.

ACE participates in the CES Small Schools Network Student, and ACE representatives attend Small Schools Project meetings each season to network with other small school supporters. In the summer of 2006, between tenth and eleventh grades, I went to Denver and learned so much about how to structure an advisory class. I took what I learned back to my school and, with the teachers, planned how it would look like the following year. Now in my senior year at ACE, I wrote a proposal for and will be presenting a workshop during Fall Forum about the Social Justice Action plans that ACE students worked on during their eleventh and twelfth grade years. This workshop is the first proposal written by students from ACE and accepted for presentation at a national professional conference, an opportunity definitely not available to us at Tyee.

Building close relationships with teachers and students has played a significant role in my transformation into a leader at ACE. While being a leader at my school feels routine to me now, I can see other, younger students motivated by that eagerness to benefit ACE. Teachers and students have become like a family that support me and want to see me reach my full potential, which is an incentive for even more greatness after high school.

A 17 year old ACE senior looking forward to college, Donna Dockter has lived in Seattle most of her life.

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