CREATING NEW SCHOOLS

How Small Schools Are Changing American Education

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CHAPTER 12

Can the Odds Be Changed? What It Will Take to Make Small Schools Ordinary Practice

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There are numerous stories of schools that have been successful with students who would otherwise count among society's failures. However, such school successes rarely set the stage for Big Reform agendas. These one-of-a-kind schools flicker brightly, a few manage to survive by avoiding the public's attention or by serving powerful constituents, the rest gradually burn out.

THE SEARCH FOR SILVER BULLETS

To the vast majority of serious policymakers, the existing exemplary schools offer no important lessons. Most policymakers define "systemic" change so that it applies only to the kinds of solutions that can be more or less simultaneously applied to all students irrespective of particulars; solutions, in short, that seek to improve schooling by taking away the already too limited formal powers of those closest to the students. Examples range from more prescriptive curriculum, new, more centralized testing systems, fiscal rewards and penalties, or changed school-governance bodies.

School-level folk are as skeptical about the capacity of any of these top-down recipes to impact deeply on the minds of teachers or children as policy-level folks are of the idiosyncratic bottom-up ones. Practitioners—in classrooms and central offices—know at heart of the top-down reforms that "this too shall pass," that is, they can be either skirted or overcome. They wait out the innovators. Policymakers work overtime to come up with ways to circumvent such resistance. The more things change, the more they stay the same.
This is a climate that encourages impatience: Enough’s enough! If we can’t marry top-down and bottom-up reform better, we’re probably in for big trouble. Giving up on the new thought that all children can learn to use their minds well is hard, especially for those of us who know firsthand that schools as designed are hardly suitable for the job, and that vastly more children can be well-educated if we designed schools differently. We’ve “tasted” it. It seems both near and so far. Perhaps if we posed the problem differently, such odd-ball schools might offer us systemic answers. The NYC Network project, like similar projects cropping up around the country fueled by the growing interest in vouchers and charters, has posed the problem from the bottom up: Seek a solution to the systemic by looking at the particular. By posing problems differently, different solutions become possible.

A good school is filled with particulars—including particular human beings; it is these that lie at their heart, that explain their surprising successes. In fact, it is these particulars that inspire the passions of those involved and draw upon the best in each. Maybe what these “special” schools demonstrate is that every school must have the power and the responsibility to select and design its own particulars and thus surround all children with powerful adults in a position to act on their behalf in open and publicly responsible ways. That may be the “silver bullet.”

Will grown-ups all jump at the chance to be such responsible adults? Of course not. Most have never been asked to have their own wonderful ideas much less take responsibility for them. Many will be leery because with the freedom to design their own particulars must come new responsibilities for defending results. But the resultant practice, responsible citizenship, is not only a good means for running a good school; it’s also the central aim of public schooling. How convenient.

In designing a way to make it easier to invent powerful and responsible schools, we can stack the deck in favor of good schooling, so that great schools are more likely, good schools become ordinary practice, and poor schools get dealt with more quickly. It will require us to learn how to make judgments about schools with standards in mind but not with a standardized ruler in hand. We’ve too long acted as though, in the name of standards, we had to treat students and teachers like interchangeable parts. Nothing could be worse for standards and nothing could be more unnecessary.

We already know some of the common features of exemplary schools—public or private—that serve ordinary and extraordinary children well. For example:

- Small. It helps if a school is of reasonable size, small enough for its faculty to sit around a table and iron things—like standards—out, for everyone to be known by everyone else, and for the school and its fami-
lies to collaborate face to face over time. Small enough so that children belong to the same community as adults, not abandoned in adultless subcultures. Small enough to both feel and be safe. Small enough so that phony data can be easily detected by any interested participant. Small enough so that the people most involved can never say they weren’t consulted.

- **Self-governing.** It helps if those most directly involved have autonomy over critical decisions. Only then will it be fair to hold people accountable for the impact of their decisions. This will entail creating democratic adult communities that have the power to decide on staffing, leadership, and the full use of their budget, as well as particulars of scheduling, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

- **Choice.** It helps if there are sufficient available choices for parents, children, and teachers so that schools can be different from each other, have a definite character, special emphases and styles of operating that appeal to some but not all. Responsibility flows more naturally from willing and informed parties. (If schools are small, they can share big, old buildings and choices can be easily available).

These three qualities—schools that are small enough in size, sufficiently self-governing, and self-chosen—offer a good beginning. They won’t in themselves solve anything, although together they could help solve everything.

Two different historic developments in New York City—Community School District Four’s 22-year experiment with schools of choice and the city’s Alternative High School division’s 12-year history creating dozens of small-school alternatives, came together in the 1990s to create a potential alternative to business as usual; they challenge “business as usual.” These developments caught the public’s fancy, creating a movement on behalf of small schools of choice for all ages and types of students. The genie was out of the bottle and hard to put back. The idea attracted the attention of families who did not see themselves as “at risk.” Word of mouth suggested that students in these schools matched their counterparts academically and surpassed them on many critical dimensions: college attendance, work preparedness, ability to perform socially valued tasks, and improved scores on typical academic assessments. The research community gradually confirmed such impressions. The studies suggest such schools provide for the possibility of a community powerful enough to be compelling to young people, a club worth “enlisting” in.

The skeptics say: It can’t work en masse. Whether we create another 100 or 200, some starting from scratch, others carved out of existing schools, it can’t be built to last. All agree that under present circumstances such
schools have a limited future. The reformers argue, however, that “present circumstances” are not writ in stone.

WHY EXCEPTIONS CAN’T BECOME THE NORM (UNDER PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES)

Without deep-seated changes in the system that surrounds these small schools of choice, history suggests that the critics will be right: Most will water down their innovations or give up. As their numbers increase so, oddly enough, does their vulnerability. This is one case in which there may not be more safety in numbers. For one thing, they tax the capacities of the existing institutions—both the formal system and the godfatherly individuals and organizations that spring up to provide nurturance and cover. Second, as their numbers increase they’re more noticeable. This, in turn, created new demands to bring them into compliance. Why are they allowed to “get away” with this or that? mainstream colleagues ask. Who do they think they are? Third, as new roadblocks appear requiring Herculean responses, school folks begin to complain of weariness; the original fire in the belly that fueled the pioneering spirit begins to wane. Doing the new and the old at the same time seems more and more unfair, an imposition rather than an opportunity. (Critics call this the loss of the charismatic leader or the loss of the “Hawthorne” effect that surrounds innovative enterprises.)

The existing system is simply not designed to support such oddball entities. It believes in its mission of control and orderliness. The people who man the present systems do not see themselves in the business of trying to best match teacher to job, child to school. Nor could they do so if they wanted. Instead, whenever they look at a problem, they’ve been trained to seek, first and foremost, ways to solve it by rule. If it’s not good for everyone, it’s not good for anyone. To make exceptions smacks of favoritism and inefficiency. Each exception thus must be defended over and over again. How else can we hold them accountable?

The results of such rule-boundedness are well documented, above all by the critics of public education like Chubb and Moe (1990) in their thoughtful book on the limits of public education. (We all know that the expression “work to the rule,” for example, describes a form of job sabotage.) Except for small enclaves in the large institution, where special constituencies carve out their own intimate sub-schools (those little sub-schools designed for the top students or for the most vulnerable), the school as a whole remains remarkably anonymous and unchangeable, the model for a nonlearning institution. But there is an alternative. It means changing the “circumstances” so that those three magic bullets—small, self-governing,
self-choice schools described earlier—can be at the mainstream, not the sidelines, of the system.

If good schools in the private sector nearly all share these three characteristics, why can't we do it publicly for all students? Because, it's said, it's politically not feasible where public monies are at stake. If that’s the rub of the argument, then we should either roll over and admit defeat or make it politically feasible. That means inventing a system of accountability for public monies and educational results that doesn’t require bad educational practice. It’s as simple as that—and as hard as that.

CHANGING THE "PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES"

Small, self-governing schools of choice could be encouraged to flourish, grow like Topsy, spread like weeds if we built our system for them, not them for our system. To create highly personalized schools we have to be willing, however, to shift both our practices and our mind-set cautiously and relentlessly over many years. Present practice isn't inevitable. What we have, after all, is a human invention that’s only 100 years old. But just because it’s one of those new-fangled ideas that doesn’t work doesn’t mean it will fade away naturally. In fact, it’s got a tenacious hold. But what it’s not is the inevitable product of our human nature. In fact, its particularly in conflict with our humanity and everything we know about the rearing of the young.

Until the relationships between all people—parents and teachers—responsible for raising our children are changed—which is what the magic three are all about—changing the parts (curriculum, pedagogy, assessment) won’t matter very much. But it's precisely because, in the long run, these professional "details" matter a great deal that we need to create a system of schooling that allows us to spend our time and energy honing them, close to home. As Ted Sizer wisely said when Central Park East Secondary School was started, "Keep it simple, so that you can focus on what will always remain complex—the mind of each individual learner and the subject matter we're trying to help her master." We've done the reverse far too long.

We shouldn't declare all schools independent tomorrow. We shouldn't remove all rules and regulations by fiat. We shouldn't even downsize all schools by fiat. Until we have more parents clamoring for change, teachers with the skill and confidence to try them out, and living examples of how we'd make schools that opt for greater independence also more accountable, we need to keep our ambitions in check. We're aiming at change that sticks, not another fad.
On the immediate agenda, for example, is creating a series of large-scale pilot “laboratories” to see how it might work if we let the existing idiosyncratic schools, with their already eager stalwarts, officially break loose and be different. Add to them all those interested in staffing new schools to replace the worst of our current enterprises. Then we’ll need a lean master contract between these schools, the union, the city, and the state, covering the most basic contractual obligations as well as those unwavering local, state, and federal rules pertaining to health, safety, and equity. If those on the sidelines can sit back and watch, not rush in as the pioneers develop their own answers, including mistaken ones, we’ll learn something. The present system of schooling and accountability is chock full of mistakes, after all, not to mention disasters that are perpetuated year after year. Of course, we’re accustomed to them, so we barely notice. This time, let’s notice both—with equal clarity. As a way of noticing, let’s honor forms of accountability that support rather than sabotage the very qualities such independence is trying to achieve: accountability through the responsible exercise of collective human judgment.

The magic three—smallness, self-governance, and choice—provide some of the necessary basic ingredients for more responsible individual schools and thus for more accountability. Smallness creates self-knowledge, self-governance allows for a range of voices now often missing, and choice permits disgruntled parents and teachers to vote with their feet. But while these three qualities appear to undercut some of the pressure for ever more external accountability, there’s a strong argument for adding several other ingredients that will support the development of a more responsible community of schools. And not just because it’s politically smart, but because without a powerful system of public accountability, good individual schools can too easily become stuck in routines, parochial, smug, and secretive—even tyrannical. Smallness, for example, makes it harder to hide from the impact of bad leadership as well as good leadership.

There are several forms of public accountability that are not only compatible but actually supportive of school-based initiative. One way to improve the odds, compatible with good schooling, is to increase constituent voices about the work not only of their own school but also of other people’s schools in terms of student outcomes, equity, and fiscal integrity. Experience suggests that networks of schools can offer us an opportunity to have the best of both worlds: individuality and close external accountability. We need ways to hold schools up to a mirror, to ask “Is this what you meant to be doing?” We need to tackle professional myopia and defensiveness. We assume that school children learn by being exposed to criticism, but we have not transferred that to the way teachers and schools learn. For this to happen, we need to create instruments that are consistent with the very qualities that led us originally to propose small schools: instruments re-
sponsive to often nonstandard ways to maintain high standards. What strong democratic schooling needs are new forms of horizontal accountability—focused on the collective work of the school.

The first step involves creating stronger internal accountability systems, such as those pioneered in places like Central Park East Secondary School, Urban Academy, and International High School, which use both peers and external critics—college faculty, parents, community members, and other high school teachers—to examine their students' work. It's the job of the faculty, for instance, to grade its own students and determine when they meet its school-wide standards, a task too few schools take seriously today. But the faculty, in turn, needs to be publicly accountable for such judgments—to both its internal constituents and the larger public as well.

At the next step, schools must answer formally to each other for the quality of their work. Through the creation of networks of sister schools, not uncommon in private schooling, we can learn how to look at each other's work as critical friends—with the accent on both criticism and friendship. (Such networks can also serve to make up for any problems of scale, if schools choose to use them that way.) Schools that provide feedback on the work of sister schools are creating built-in professional-development tools as well as a powerful form of parent and community education. There is nothing better for one's own learning curve than having formally to observe and provide support to others.

Thus networks in addition need "cooler" non-collegial audiences to answer to. For this we need formal review panels—public auditors—composed of both critical friends and more distanced and skeptical publics to attest to the credibility of networks and the work of their schools. It is such bodies that must demand convincing evidence that the network of schools under review is doing its job, is on the right track, is acting responsibly. Such review panels must ultimately be responsible to the larger, democratically chosen public authorities.

And finally, all of the above—teachers, parents, assessors, legislators, and the public—need a shared body of credible information, actual student work as well as statistical data, as evidence upon which to build their reflections and judgments.

These are the essentials for creating public credibility, but they are also the essentials for producing good schools. The task of these varied groups of observers—the school's immediate community, the networkers, and the external review panels—is not to find the one "right answer" but to push those closest to the action to act with greater enlightenment.

It's no idle dream. In New York City alone, with the support of funds from the Annenberg Challenge, nearly 100 small schools have broken down into 20 such self-chosen networks and begun the work of shared support.
and accountability to each other. Nearly 100 more are in planning stages. Simultaneously a review-panel system to accredit such networks and to maintain audits of their work is in formation. Also under way is the creation of a system for collecting credible and accessible data. Meanwhile, the kinds of freedoms and financial flexibility schools will obtain in return for heightened accountability are being examined, as the system explores ways to reinvent its operations. The largest city in the land may end up with the biggest experiment on the potential of smallness.

**CONCLUSION**

We periodically imagine that we can avoid the messiness of human judgments and create a foolproof “automatic” system to make everyone good or smart or intelligent—or at least, pretend to. Then we get upset at the bureaucracy it inevitably spawns. But if juries of our peers will do for deciding life-and-death matters of law, why not juries of our peers to decide life-and-death matters of education? As Winston Churchill once said about democracy itself, nothing could be more flawed, except for all of the alternatives. Of course, juries need guidelines, a body of precedents, rules of procedure, evidence, and the requirement to reach a publicly shared decision. This will not come easily or overnight; and like democracy itself it rests on restoring levels of mutual trust we seem inclined to abandon altogether. To our peril.

The principle we need to keep forefront in our minds is clear: How will this or that policy impact upon the intelligent and responsible behavior of the people closest to the students (as well as the students themselves). That’s the litmus test. Creating forms of governance and accountability that are mindful first and foremost of their impact upon effective relationships between teachers, children, and families will not be an easy task; it may not even show a blip on next year’s test scores, but shortcuts that bypass such relationships are inefficient.

If we do it right, we might in the process help create responsible and caring communities that are more powerful than those adultless subcultures that dominate far too many of our children’s lives and that endanger our larger common community. The problem we face is, after all, more than “academic.”

**REFERENCE**