

For the Record: Editors' Introduction to a Special Issue on Small Secondary Schools

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The last two decades of secondary school reform initiatives have advocated for the reform and redesign of secondary schools into smaller educational units. Examples of these efforts include the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Carnegie Foundation's work, which focuses on more personalized teaching and learning (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004; Sizer 1992); the Annenberg Foundation's emphasis on reducing students' alienation in schools (Chicago Annenberg Challenge, 1994); and the Child Development Project's focus on restructuring schools to promote caring communities (Developmental Studies Center, 1998). More recently and most notably has been the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's massive effort to create and scale up small high schools to increase achievement, especially among underserved children of color (SRI/AIR, 2002). This last effort has supported, among others, New York City's recent Children First Reform Initiative, which formalized a nearly decade-long movement that has sought to dismantle New York City's large public middle and high schools into smaller entities (Huebner, 2005).

It was within this policy context that we first discussed a guest-edited issue of *Teachers College Record* at the journal's annual board meeting in 2005. Our original intent behind this issue was somewhat poorly conceptualized; we initially sought to examine whether these structures were

“working,” or, more precisely, for whom were they “working” and under what conditions. This goal informed a symposium that we organized the following year at the American Educational Research Association’s annual meeting, cosponsored by Division G (Social Context) and the Sociology of Education Special Interest Group. The four manuscripts presented at this symposium, all of which are included in this special issue, as well as the commentary offered by two discussants, Floyd Hammack and Deborah Meier, pushed us in a slightly different direction. It became obvious to us that our approach to examining small schools was too narrow, focusing solely on a limited range of student-level outcomes. The symposium forced us to broaden our lens, examine effects at various analytic levels, and, more important, to rethink what we meant by *effects*. Rather than focus solely on critical student-level effects such as graduation and achievement, two explicit goals of contemporary small-school reformers, we decided that effects can and should include concepts such as institutional memory, teachers’ instructional strategies, and privatization, among others.

As we reviewed the manuscripts for the symposium in light of this broadened vision, four themes emerged. First, the manuscripts left us with the feeling that we have been here before. They also made clear, however, that numerous aspects of small-school reform were right in front of us but still unexamined. In addition, several persistent themes—for example, stratification—were resurfacing in the context of small secondary school reform. Finally, the symposium demonstrated that not all news is good news: The positive effects of small schools on relevant outcomes, particularly academic achievement, are at best uneven. What’s really going on, especially when we broaden our definition of *effects*?

Floyd Hammack answered this question best in his remarks as discussant when he referred to small-school reform as “Something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue.” The “Off the Record” piece that concludes this special issue is an edited version of these remarks. When additional submissions were being solicited for this special issue, it became even more apparent that Hammack’s metaphorical frame could be employed as the issue’s organizing principle. The 10 articles that constitute this special issue do not exclusively fall into one of these four categories, but the categories serve as a useful starting point to organize our thinking and enable us to examine a broad set of effects, some of which are obvious, others of which are not.

Three articles in this special issue make it quite clear that the historical and theoretical underpinnings of small-school reform are well established. For example, Semel and Sadovnik examine the historical roots of the small-school movement through the use of two progressive indepen-

dent schools founded in the early part of the 20th century, the Dalton School and the City and Country School, and relate them to one of the models of the contemporary small-school movement, Central Park East Secondary School in New York City, founded in the 1980s and reorganized in 2004. McQuillan takes different approach by examining small-school reform through the lens of complexity theory, a heuristic derived from years of cross-disciplinary research in fields as varied as economics, physics, ecology, and mathematics. Finally, as pointed out by Kafka, the mixed effects and motivations of small schools have been persistent themes in the history of U.S. schools. Her contribution explores the ideological roots of small-school reform by examining the political, cultural, and economic arguments used to promote it. She goes on to argue that small-school reform is part of a broader trend in the United States to reduce the role of the citizen in educational governance and define the purpose of public education in private terms.

These historical and theoretical analyses notwithstanding, three notable empirical developments emerging from these articles can be considered “new.” First, Iatarola, Schwartz, Stiefel, and Chellman examine 10 years of recent data from New York City high schools, and their analysis suggests that the systemic impact of small-school reform, although mixed, is ultimately limited because most of New York City’s public school students still attend larger schools. Second, Wyse, Keesler, and Schneider question whether shifting students to small schools is even worth the investment. Using propensity score matching to estimate causal effects, they conclude that (1) simply switching students to smaller school environments does not necessarily raise the mathematics achievements of students in the largest schools, and (2) there does not appear to be an optimal range of school sizes that would provide maximum levels of student mathematics achievement. Third, Maroulis and Gomez employ social network analysis to examine the structure and composition of peer relations within one school-within-a-school model, and their effects on achievement. They conclude that among low achievers, tight, closed peer relations, which are often promoted within small schools, can inhibit achievement growth.

The “newness” of these approaches and results can be attributed in part to the fact that analytic procedures imported from other disciplines and fields have been applied to the study of small schools. This point is clearly evident in the Maroulis and Gomez and Wyse et al. contributions. Through these “borrowed” methods, these authors have been able to isolate and measure effects in ways that will shape future empirical work in school reform.

Our enthusiasm over these “borrowed” techniques and “new” findings,

however, is tempered by the results reported in several articles. These results confirm two aspects of school reform that are paradoxically well known but often unappreciated by conventional wisdom: (1) well-intentioned school reform produces unintended adverse consequences, and (2) significant school reform in such a highly institutionalized environment is a seemingly intractable problem. Evidence for the first point can be found in Ready and Lee's contribution, in which they consider the consequences of student choice within small-school organizational structures. Their field-based study of five schools-within-schools concludes that, to varying degrees within schools, subunits were segregated and stratified by student race/ethnicity, social class, and, above all, academic performance. Further evidence of this first point is provided by Galletta and Ayala, who document the difficulties of creating a future and managing a troubled past in a newly restructured former comprehensive urban high school. Shear and her colleagues pick up this theme in their report on the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's ambitious initiative intended to catalyze the fundamental transformation of American high schools. This exhaustive report summarizes the results of a 5-year national evaluation of the first stage of the foundation's initiative and emphasizes the importance of the local context in shaping the success of small-school reform. Finally, Jaffe-Walter, in her analysis of a set of small schools that cater to immigrant students, highlights how these schools contend with the incompatible external demands of current accountability policies and the internal professional and pedagogical practices of their schools. These four manuscripts provide evidence that suggests that caution, mixed with a healthy dose of realism, should be exercised when adopting new organizational structures that (over)promise favorable results.

This special issue would not have been possible without the assistance of numerous individuals. First, the support of Gary Natriello, the journal's Executive Editor, was instrumental in helping us conceptualize and package this set of articles. Though the entire back-end staff of *Teachers College Record* is exceptional, Jeff Frank, in particular, was a huge help. As Managing Editor, his direct oversight of this issue was invaluable. We would also like to recognize Alan Sadovnik's initial efforts as Guest Editor. Though time commitments pressed him to withdraw from this role, we are fortunate that he and his coauthor, Susan Semel, were able to contribute their manuscript to the special issue.

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