Smaller Classes or Better Teachers?
By Lewis C. Solmon and Kimberly Firetag

Abstract - Most educators and policy-makers believe that lower class size means better education. It ain’t necessarily so, according to Solmon and Firetag. In fact, most research is inconclusive, or at least highly situational. As the authors write “At most one can conclude that Class Size Reduction produces gains in the lowest grades, in the poorest schools and in certain subjects,” but there are no more general improvements.

Lower class size is unlikely to bring improvements unless coupled with changes in teaching methods. Further, initiatives to lower class size force school systems to hire more teachers, which may weaken teacher quality. As a charter school operator, your school might work better with 10 great, well paid teachers than with 15 pretty good, pretty well paid teachers. If lowering class size doesn’t work, what can work? In the most intriguing final page of the article, Solmon and Firetag outline a merit pay scheme that might actually improve education in your school.

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Don’t worry: Dr. Robert Maranto, NCSC Review Editor, is on the phone with housekeeping!

Bringing useful ideas, humor, and non-boring scholarship to the charter school community (for over seven weeks).
The flat growth line of student achievement and the USA’s dismal ranking on international comparisons of student achievement have led to decades of flawed reforms intended to reverse these trends. The recent designation by the US Department of Education of 8,652 schools as low performing underlines the failure of most reforms to date. Yet we are in danger of repeating our mistakes.

Class size reduction (CSR), a very popular reform among both teachers and parents, has been tried in California and other states, and recently passed as a ballot proposition in Florida. The reform that currently is giving CSR a run for its (substantial) money is teacher quality (TQ). There is almost universal agreement—rare in education policy debates—that teacher quality is the most important school-related input affecting student learning. In one large study, equally able 5th grade students who had weak teachers three years in a row scored at the 29th percentile, while those who had three consecutive years of strong teachers scored at the 83rd percentile. The disagreement arises when trying to determine how to attract, motivate and retain the best, the brightest, the most knowledgeable, and the most capable into the teaching profession.

We can learn from medical research as we ponder the choices policy makers face. A recent New York Times article (“Mixed Medical Messages” Sunday, August 25, 2002, Section 4) discussed the confusing messages coming from the medical profession recently due to different interpretations of research. For example, mathematical correlations do not necessarily imply a cause-and-effect relationship. Moreover, even the “gold standard in epidemiology”, randomized controlled clinical trials, are difficult to execute and expensive to complete, but they are essential because bad studies only lead to bad information, according to Dr. Kenneth Shine, the former president of the Institute of Medicine.

But Dr. Shine acknowledged that even the best-designed clinical trial can produce misleading data. “Science is imperfect and dependent on an accumulation of information,” he said. “Rather than relying on a single study, we need to draw from the ever-increasing body of knowledge.”

These are lessons that social scientists must heed well. They bemoan the fact that randomized experiments are difficult if not impossible to construct in education. They forget that correlation does not necessarily mean causation. And they often pick the studies that confirm their political views rather than draw from the ever-increasing body of knowledge as suggested by Dr. Shine.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the class size debates. Class size reduction has become a popular education reform; in the past five years, over $25 billion dollars has been pumped into programs to lower class size. The supposed benefits of CSR include more individual attention for students, fewer discipline problems, easier to manage classrooms, and a better working environment, along with more student learning. Despite inconclusive research about its effectiveness, billions of additional dollars are slated for spending on this endeavor, both to maintain already lowered class sizes and to establish additional smaller classes.

Between 1960 and 1995 the pupil/teacher ratios in the United States fell from 25.8 to 17.3 (Mishel, 2002). However, despite this drop in class size there has been essentially no change in standardized NAEP test scores. Smaller classes have an intuitive appeal—almost all parents would prefer their kids be in smaller classes. But no one poses the choice of a class of 37 with a truly inspiring, knowledgeable teacher, or one of twenty with an unprepared teacher who sought the job only because jobs in other fields were scarce.

Advocates of CSR point to Tennessee’s Student Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) project to argue that smaller classes lead to greater student achievement, even though there have been enough criticisms of that experiment to make many thoughtful analysts wary of relying on it to determine public policy. STAR is one of the few randomized experiments in education, so those advocating CSR attach themselves to it uncritically.
Yet its conclusions are by no means beyond question. Attrition of below-average achieving students from small classes (20-30% of students left each year) could be one reason why the study reported that students in smaller classes had statistically significantly greater achievement. Although students were randomly assigned to large or small classes, teachers were not randomly assigned, nor were the schools randomly selected. What if the best teachers were rewarded by being assigned to smaller classes? Schools that are interested in reform usually have many reforms going on at the same time, so how do we know which one led to the greater achievement? Do certain other reforms interact better with small than large classes to produce greater student learning?

If randomized experiments are the “gold standard” in medicine, they are the “holy grail” in social sciences. They are so rare that when they are conducted, they are assumed to be the best evidence possible. However, to base policy on this single unreplicated study would be like observing remission of a disease in one patient in a clinical trial, ignoring side effects, and then putting the drug on the market. STAR classes ranged in size from 12-17 to 22-26. Thus part of the comparison is between classes of 12 and classes of 26. If reduction of that magnitude were to increase achievement, does that mean that a reduction from 23 to 18, as is being advocated for the lower grades in Florida, would have a similar effect? Not necessarily.

As suggested above for medical research, “rather than relying on a single study, we need to draw from the ever-increasing body of knowledge.” The class size research began at least as long ago as the first decade of the last century. A study in 1909 categorized classes as less than 40 students (small), 40-49 students (medium), and 50 or more (large)! So apparently in the olden days some kids were taught in classrooms with more students than even the poorest, least concerned schools would allow today. Of course in those days most students wanted to learn and were able to do so, or they would have dropped out, or been kicked out. A recent paper by Edward Lazear argues that students who attend smaller classes learn more because they experience fewer student disruptions during class time (Lazear, 1999). In earlier days the disruptors probably would not have been there. So smaller classes may be an expensive way to avoid having to discipline today’s students.

There have been a number of “meta analyses” that look at hundreds of studies and try to draw a consensus. Most of the included studies are correlational analyses where the authors infer causation from correlation. In 1979, a meta analysis by Gene Glass and Mary Lee Smith found some benefits in smaller classes (Glass, 1979). But more recently, Eric Hanushek’s meta analysis concluded just the opposite. Alan Kruger disputes Hanushek’s conclusion based on technical issues, but Hanushek remains steadfast (Mishel, 2002). There is no general agreement on the value of CSR for student achievement.

Studies of other CSR initiatives have had mixed results. Analyses of California CSR find that no strong connection to student achievement can be inferred (Bohrnstedt, 2002) and that the program created a severe teacher shortage that compromised teacher quality, caused a classroom shortage, and hurt poorest schools the most. The biggest “side effect” of class size reduction is that it exacerbates the teacher quality problem-especially in the most troubled schools. There is a continuum of quality of teachers, with those at the top almost always choosing to teach in relatively high SES, suburban schools. Most effective teachers in urban settings would prefer suburban schools but there are no openings—until class size reduction kicks in. CSR opens teaching positions at high socio-economic schools, exacerbating the flow of quality teachers from poor to rich areas, leaving an even less effective group in the inner cities, along with more openings. The California experience shows that an unintended consequence of CSR when a teacher shortage already exists is drastically decreased quality in new hires. Indeed, during the first year of CSR, teacher hiring in California rose 46% as 28,500 teachers were hired. Uncredentialed teachers rose from 1.8% to 13% of the teaching force.

Some might point out that in the Los Angeles Unified School District, test scores have been rising somewhat in the grades affected by CSR. However, during the same period, bilingual education was abolished, phonics replaced the whole language method of teaching reading, and a stronger accountability system was put in place. So it is not clear that the observed improvements should be credited to CSR.

Our conclusion is that by far, the most studies and the best studies come out on the side of CSR having few significant positive effects on student learning. At most one can conclude that CSR produces gains in the lowest grades, in the poorest schools and in certain subjects. Thus programs like the recently passed Florida proposition aimed at reducing size of all classes in all schools, grades, and subjects are quite simply a waste of money. CSR will not work unless teachers change how they teach—a dreary lecture will have the same impact on a student whether there are 18 or 35 kids in the room. The question is whether CSR incentivizes teachers to change how they teach, and whether many teachers are capable of doing things better even if they wanted to.

While the impact of CSR is uncertain, there is mounting evidence that teacher quality (TQ) is the single most important school-related factor in student achievement. A non-partisan report prepared by the Office of Policy Research at the Florida Department of Education cites research that finds teacher quality and expenditures on professional

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development had a greater impact on student achievement than increased teacher salaries or lower pupil/teacher ratios did (Florida Department of Education, 2002).

Low quality teachers have adverse effects on students in addition to smaller learning gains, creating additional costs to society by causing some students to be held back and thereby shorten their working life, or worse, not to reach their academic potential due to poor quality instruction.

The question is how to attract, motivate and retain the best and the brightest into the teaching profession. Many things have been tried recently to attract new teachers—by forgiving college loans, housing subsidies, public service announcements, new recruiting strategies—and even perks like health club memberships when signing on. But most of these efforts are small, isolated, not school-centered, poorly designed or poorly implemented. They are not systemic changes, but rather, piecemeal efforts that often raise more problems than they solve.

Of course, the most frequently urged solution to the teacher quality (and quantity) problem is to pay teachers more. According to the American Federation of Teachers, the $43,250 average teacher salary [in 2000-2001] fell short of wages of other white-collar occupations (Nelson, 2001). For example, mid-level accountants earned an average $52,664, computer system analysts, $71,155, and attorneys, $82,712. Obviously these gaps are reduced once we adjust for days worked per year and fringe benefits, and allow for extra income that teachers can earn for ancillary jobs around the school like coaching the football or debate teams.

The salary solution is often manifested by the recommendation that “we bring our teacher salaries up to the national average.” Fully 36 states have average salaries below the national average of $43,250. To reach that level, salaries in Indiana would have to rise by $250, and in South Dakota by $12,985. Overall, the 36 states would have to increase salaries by an average of $4,766 at a total incremental cost of $8.3 billion. Would a salary increase for all teachers drive the best talent into the teaching profession, motivate them, and keep them teaching for the long haul? We think not.

We should be eager to grant higher salaries to effective teachers—but do we want to give the same pay raises to the most effective, energetic, motivating, and up-to-date teachers as to the ineffective ones? And everyone-teachers, students, parents—know which teachers fall into each category.

Many of our best and brightest do not choose teaching careers today, because of the terrible environment in most schools, because women have many more opportunities than in the past, and because of the salary structure of the teaching profession. The question after “Can we afford this?” is whether raises in the $5,000 range will attract into teaching those now considering such more lucrative careers as law, medicine, or business. We think they will not. Moreover, such across-the-board increases would do more to keep the least effective teachers in the profession because they have few alternative opportunities.

Salary variance (or range from high to low) rather than average salary is an important attraction to the best, the brightest, the most successful college graduates. The college grad who has won all the prizes, received all the academic and extramural awards, and is used to succeeding does not look at what the “average” person earns. She looks at what is earned by the best in the field because she is highly confident that she will be at the top of any profession she enters. She is willing to compete because she knows she will win. The average lawyer salary is irrelevant; she looks at what the all-star lawyers earn. She looks at the teaching profession and is appalled and repelled by a field where the least energetic, least knowledgeable and least successful teacher earns the same as the one with the same years of experience and college credits who is always current in his subject, works from morning to late at night every day, and has the talent to make kids learn. In sum, there is no financial incentive for teachers to be more productive, that is, to get their students to learn more. If only the effective teachers get performance bonuses, these can be high enough to get noticed by top-notch potential teachers, both new grads and career changers.
There are many rebuttals to the above, all fallacious. First, it is claimed that teachers should not be in it for the money, rather they should love teaching and love their jobs. Many lawyers and doctors also love their jobs but that does not preclude them from earning excellent incomes, if they are successful. Then it is argued that surveys of teachers “prove” that teachers do not want differentiated pay. Of course, that’s why they became teachers. To understand what potential teachers want, you cannot ask actual teachers, but you must ask those who selected other professions.

Then there is the point that if only the more effective teachers were more highly compensated there would be jealousy, lack of cooperation, and nepotism; it would destroy teacher morale. But wouldn’t a system that encourages teamwork and prepares teachers for high performance enhance morale? Such negative results are not highly evident or destructive in virtually every other field where effectiveness gets rewarded.

Many people accept additional pay for National Board certification, which may be fine. However, some justify this because it involves extra work and training unrelated to student performance. Why should voters pay for new certifications or extra work if these do not result in enhanced student performance? Why would teachers do these things if not to help students learn? If they get certified and their students don’t learn better, is the certification of any use?

Merit pay is criticized as something advanced by people who want to run schools like a business. Businesses are accountable and look to the “bottom line”. Shouldn’t schools be held accountable for a bottom line of student learning? In virtually every other profession effectiveness gets rewarded.

Finally, there are claims that previous attempts to institute “merit pay” in schools failed. Often that was because it was not implemented properly, that is, it did not gain teacher acceptance, but rather it was imposed from above. Performance standards must be clear, and teachers must be prepared for the assessments they will have to undergo to prove that they are effective. Also, the rewards for all the extra effort must be substantial enough to make it all worthwhile. In most cases, these requirements were not met.

This is surely not an argument for performance pay alone. The opportunity for high pay for high performance would attract more top people into teaching. But if they find themselves in the same old profession with no induction programs, little collegiality, little respect from the community, and unpleasant, often dangerous surroundings, they will soon leave. That is what happens now, especially to the best young teachers.

A successful teacher quality initiative must change the school ethos and environment. It must enable capable teachers to progress through a job hierarchy and be rewarded for extra responsibilities without having to move into administration. It must develop an evaluation system with heavy teacher input that educates and then evaluates teachers on the most effective, research-validated teaching techniques. That evaluation should have consequences in that teachers’ compensation should be based in part on how well they perform in their classrooms. And a complete TQ model has to provide professional development at the school site to help teachers improve their techniques, prepare for their evaluations, and solve the teaching and learning problems that they face regularly in their classrooms. This would enhance collegiality by enabling teachers to work and learn together.

Most important, the model should base at least part of its performance award on student achievement. It should look not at how smart the kids are when they start, but at how much they have learned this year. Such an approach encourages collaboration by rewarding teachers in part based upon learning gains of the whole school. But it also should base part of one’s compensation on how much his or her own students learn. It makes teaching more like every other profession where people are compensated for what they produce.

Such programs require fundamental changes in a school, but can provide benefits at least similar to those alleged to come from CSR. In Florida, state economists estimate the cost of CSR phased in over 10 years to be between $20 billion and $27.5 billion. This is a very expensive way to change schools, especially given the results we have seen so far. The costs of systemic reform to enhance teacher quality are much less. The estimated costs of CSR are too low because they fail to account for the scarcity of quality teachers. They assume, incorrectly, that people who will enter teaching are at the same level of quality as we currently see, which is not high to begin with.

The choice is not class size reduction or no reform at all. CSR takes money away from teacher quality initiatives and results in lower quality teachers being brought into the system. Investing in high quality teachers costs much less and produces more student learning gains and other benefits, and that makes TQ the preferred policy choice.

Epilogue

If class size reduction is not the way to increase student achievement, and teacher quality improvements offer more hope, how do we go about achieving higher teacher quality?

The Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) is a comprehensive school reform developed by the Milken Family Foundation with the goal to attract, retain, and motivate quality teachers. Through the implementation of five principles? (1) Multiple Career Paths, (2) Ongoing Applied Professional Growth, (3) Teacher Performance-Based Accountability, (4) Professional Development through the classroom, (5) Student and Teacher Involvement in Professional Development, the TAP was able to improve teacher quality. The TAP was successful in improving student achievement, and teacher quality.
(4) Market-Driven Compensation, and (5) Expanding the Supply of Quality Teachers? TAP schools changed their structure to better support their most valuable asset, quality teachers.

The most controversial part of TAP is its performance pay component. Quite frankly, performance pay, or merit pay in earlier incarnations, has rarely worked. Everyone knows the reasons offered for those failures: the merit pay system was imposed on teachers without their consent, lack of consensus about who is a good teacher, competition among teachers, nepotism and favoritism by those doling out the awards, and a lot of work for small potential incremental gains (Solmon, 2000). In designing TAP, we attempted to deal with all of these issues. TAP involves teachers every step of the way, and requires at least 75% of faculty to vote to adopt the program. It is implemented slowly in order to gain and solidify teacher support. TAP has developed an extensive research-based teacher evaluation system with detailed protocols and rubrics, at least six classroom visits a year, and multiple evaluators. This makes the evaluation system fair and honest. The professional development system—which takes place in the school during the school day on a daily or weekly basis, and deals with problems teachers are facing in their classrooms—prepares teachers to be assessed and then rewarded. The performance pay does not replace the traditional salary schedule, but rather supplements it. Nor is the TAP awards system a zero sum game—the bonuses are criterion referenced rather than relative, so any teacher who meets a standard receives a bonus. And even the least effective teachers earn no less than they would have without the performance pay system.

Rather than bonuses in the hundreds of dollars that we see in other plans, we suggest performance pay that averages $4,000–5,000. This makes all the hard work worth it. In general, 50% of the bonus is awarded for skills and knowledge as demonstrated in the classroom during the multiple visits by evaluators trained by TAP staff. The other 50% is awarded for student achievement (measured by value added or learning gains), 30% based on school-wide achievement and given to all teachers; and 20% for achievement of the individual teacher’s own students. Teachers who score high on the skills and knowledge part can receive bonuses even if their students do not show gains.

Teachers get paid well for teaching well, and that is appealing to good teachers. Thus we see TAP schools, even those in low SES areas, attracting excellent teachers from other schools, even high SES schools, because they want to be rewarded for their accomplishments. Teachers in TAP schools are generally more content and feel more professional than is usually the case. These are “intermediate outcomes” that we have observed in TAP schools.

We also have analyzed the growth in achievement of students whose schools implemented TAP compared to the growth in achievement of students from similar schools (Schacter, 2002). In addition, this study analyzed the effects that TAP had on teacher attitudes and satisfaction. The results demonstrate that

- All TAP schools made achievement gains in both years they implemented the reform. The highest performing TAP school gained 56% to standard while the lowest performing TAP school gained 11% over two years.
- TAP schools out-gained comparison schools by a total of 13% over two years.
- 48% of TAP teachers’ classrooms realized student achievement gains compared to 38% of classrooms in comparison schools.
- Finally, those schools that rigorously implemented TAP produced student achievement gains that were 51% larger than control schools.

Providing teachers with a career path and opportunity to advance; compensating expert teachers for their skills, knowledge, and responsibilities; restructuring school schedules to ensure time during the school day for teacher lead professional development and coaching; introducing district, state-wide, and cross state competitive hiring, and paying teachers based on how well they instruct and how much their students learn led to increased student achievement. Moreover, the results persisted in Title I and non-Title I schools, in initially high- and initially low-achieving schools, and in schools in large and small urban communities.

We also surveyed teacher attitudes towards various components of TAP. In particular, we were interested in how teachers felt about TAP’s accountability and performance pay after these became a reality in their schools. In fact, after implementation, teachers felt less positively about these two innovations than they had indicated feeling prior to implementation, although they still were more positive than the “typical teacher” is presumed to be. However, despite lower levels of support for performance pay and accountability; teachers are reporting high levels of collegiality. This finding is contrary to many who argue that performance pay leads to increased competition and divisiveness. TAP teachers’ attitudes confirm that the implementation of TAP requires a commitment to change what has traditionally been taking place in classrooms; however, the payoff in terms of collegiality and professional support is clear. This is the type of climate that we believe will motivate high quality teachers to stay in teaching and will attract new teachers to the profession. For a reform that cost $415 per pupil, approximately 5% of the average cost to educate a child, TAP appears to be paying large dividends.

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Lewis C. Solmon, an economist and a former dean of education at the University of California, Los Angeles, is currently senior vice president of the Milken Family Foundation in Santa Monica, Calif., and director of the foundation’s Teacher Advancement Program. Kimberly Firetag is a research associate at the Foundation.

For example, Krueger argues that Hanushek gives a disproportionate amount of weight to a single study that contains a large number of estimates. Krueger claims that with an appropriate weighting it would show that class size is a determinant of student achievement.

Although it is not clear that a credential assures a quality teacher, the necessity to hire teachers quickly will likely result in the need to bring in people with characteristics less conducive to being a good teacher. It seems certain that increasing the numbers of teachers will force school systems to hire those they previously would have rejected.

Note that the voters in Florida passed the Class Size proposition passed in the November 2002 election. As state officials start planning for the implementation of class sizes they have been able to reduce costs from the original estimate, however, they are still substantial. For example, original estimates of the costs in year one were $3 billion and revised estimates are closer to $628 million.

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Dr. Lewis Solmon, Senior Vice President and Senior Scholar for the Milken Family Foundation and Senior Vice President and Director, Teacher Advancement

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HORROR STORY

DEATH BY PROCESS; OR SPECIAL ED BLACKMAIL

Compiled by Dr. Robert Maranto and Dr. April Gresham Maranto

After fighting a principled battle and losing, these operators wise up. Special Ed should be about enabling a child with disabilities to learn successfully. Sadly, sometimes it’s just about unfair preferences, parents working the system, blackmail, and kangaroo courts.

EDITORS’ NOTE: This horror story is true, presented here as the charter school operator told us. We have changed certain details so as to protect the innocent and the guilty.

THE OPERATOR’S STORY:

It was our second year, so we were still finding our way. A ninth grader entered in October, a little late. The student’s father told us she was in Special Ed back in the district, and we made the mistake of believing him, so we put her in Special Education.

WHERE’S THE BEEF?

Our suspicions began when the student and her father could name the numerous and highly varied accommodations for her disability, but not the actual disability itself. The accommodations were many, and included never disciplining her when she interrupted class, insulted teachers or made fun

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of other students: Father would intervene, saying it was a violation of her IEP. Of course it goes without saying that her un-named disability meant she could have as much time as she wanted on exams.

Perhaps most unusually, and certainly most expensively, young Jane had what we began to call, for lack of a better term, the “nine-word disability”: her father claimed that she was only capable of writing nine words! She had to type everything else! Naturally, that meant that our school had to buy her a laptop on which to do all assignments and to use for notetaking. This is what one might call a rather Talmudic learning disability.

Yet strangely, whenever she was sent to the of discipline—which was often since both she and her father tended to insult people—young Jane would claim to be writing notes to prepare for her lawsuit against the school. Young Jane was really a very, very unpleasant child. The local district this kid came from had refused to classify her as Special Education, and she lost the hearing there. Between our psychologist and theirs, Jane had been evaluated NINE TIMES and never been found to have a recognized disability of any kind, except for chronic rudeness and something of a Napoleon complex.

But I digress…

WE DECIDE TO TRUST THE WHEELS OF JUSTICE

Eventually we are tired of Jane and her father threatening to sue. We checked with some friends at her previous school district, who said that she had been found not to need Special Education. So finally, we hired a very expensive lawyer. He and our psychologist prepared a brief and all sorts of exhibits for the long-awaited hearing.

We had already changed the hearing date once to accommodate Jane’s father, so the hearing came at the start of our Christmas break. It was 9 a.m. on the first day of our winter break. We longed to be out of town, anyplace warm. The hearing room was open, and in the hearing room in addition to me were the principal, our psychologist, our lawyer, and the hearing officer. The parent was…missing!

Everyone in the room was being paid overtime by our school, so we called up the father, who explained that he couldn’t come because his work was tied to the Christmas season. Presumably he was Santa Claus, so there would be no Christmas and all the little kids would miss their toys if this guy took off two hours that morning to attend a hearing he had known about for two months!

Now in a normal hearing, when this sort of thing happens, you try the case in absentia. That might work for murder, but not for Special Education. So instead, the hearing officer agreed to hold the hearing at 2 p.m., to accommodate the father, who of course had every incentive not to show again since he was not paying for the hearing.

Amazingly, he finally did show. We presented our exhibits. The hearing officer next asked our attorney to give the father our exhibits, so he could also have some exhibits. In other words, we had to give him our attorney at several hundred dollars an hour to do his preparation. Everyone on our side could not believe that now we were paying for the offense. The next hour became even more surreal as we listened to him weep and tell sad stories about how he’d been maligned and how our school was the worst institution on the face of the earth for his child. In cross examination, whenever our lawyer pointed out that her achievement was among the best in the school, the father argued that still, our school kept her from achieving her absolute best!

In fact, the Special Education laws do not guarantee excellence. If it did, then anyone who did not get a full scholarship to Harvard could sue. Rather, it guarantees adequacy. You have to be able to succeed, not to exceed. Yet the hearing officer ignored this major point, which should have told us that we had an enormous problem. After the hearing closed, the hearing officer “suggested” to us and to our attorney that it might be helpful if we had a further briefing. Another briefing meant another day for our lawyer, costing us thousands more dollars, so we were now into this case for $20,000!

IT’S THE PROCESS, STUPID!

We got the decision after the first of the year. We lost on every count and it was all procedural—it never went to whether this kid should be on Special Ed! Instead, we lost on such weighty issues as the number of days notice we gave the family (which depended on how you counted up the days). The hearing officer absolutely refused to address the central question: does this child need Special Ed? And we received a bill from the hearing officer for $8,000 for the privilege of having her hear our case.

Thus, we faced the awful prospect of these terrible people coming back. We could actually have lost the school because this idiot kid and her father had this piece of paper saying they could hold us up for anything, claiming that anything violates the IEP, and this hearing officer might just give it to them.

IF YOU PAY THEM, THEY WILL GO.

Finally, at this point, we had our first good idea: to pay the student and her father to go away. It turns out payment was all they wanted in the first place. We ended up buying a computer for them, paying for credits at the junior college, and paying the father some money for his time and trouble. It cost only $5,000. So now we know just to find out what
they want in advance and accede to the blackmail, because the total process cost us $30,000. We could have paid SIX blackmials for that. And otherwise you could lose your school. We could have been forced to focus all of our resources on this one child. As it was, it cost our school a teacher’s wages. It hurt all of our students.

LOOK AT OUR CASE

Look at our case. This is a case where the student had lost a due process hearing before in district school, had an unknown “disability,” and was one of the best students in the school. It’s a strong case for the school, and a weak one for the parent. If you can’t win on that case, you can’t win. The question is, should we appeal? What would you do?

EDITOR’S POSTSCRIPT:

1. Is there anything else the operators could have done to minimize the damage earlier, before it came to a hearing? If not, how could they have prepared for the eventual hearing?
2. Are most Special Education hearing officers like the one in Jane’s case? How much freedom do they have to interpret the law?
3. How might this read differently, from the viewpoint of Jane and her father?
4. How can one identify and deal with problem parents generally, without stereotyping all parents?

HORROR STORY is regular feature. Please submit your own horror story, which must be based on fact, to Robert.Maranto@villanova.edu. You might also want to share it with your state legislator, and in the case of Special Education horror stories, your member of Congress.

April Gresham Maranto and her boss, Tony, who enters school in 2004!
Finally, while charter schools are still viewed as experimental, seldom are charters actually revoked or denied renewal. Even when these draconian measures are taken, it’s almost always about the school’s financial and management practices, as opposed to student achievement and related matters.

The areas cited above are among those that cry out for additional research, corroboration and debate. Accordingly, the NCSC Review (a quarterly publication) launches its inaugural edition addressing class size and teacher quality, along with certification and related issues. The NCSC Review will provide the charter school community an opportunity to focus on sound research about a variety of issues that we believe make a substantive difference in public education and school reform.

Thus we welcome you and we are looking forward to receiving comments and suggestions as this publication continues its evolution. Thanks for joining us!

By M.S. Kayes, Project Director

**Personnel Policy in Traditional Public, Charter, and Private Schools**

By Dr. Michael Podgursky, a professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Missouri-Columbia. The Following material was originally prepared for the U.S. National Charter School Conference in Milwaukee, WI.

**INTRODUCTION**

A major policy discussion in K-12 education today concerns the issue of teacher quality. Research suggests that one of the most important contributions of schools to student achievement gains is the quality of classroom teachers. The No Child Left Behind Act reflects this concern in its requirement that schools employ only fully qualified teachers by the 2005 school year to be eligible for Title I compensatory education funds.

Much of the policy debate focuses on the issue of teacher licensing. However, recruiting, retaining, and motivating a high quality teaching workforce depends fundamentally on the personnel policies of public schools and not on teacher licensing. One area of innovation for charter schools is in the area of personnel policy. This paper reports preliminary results comparing personnel policies in traditional public, private, and charter schools from a major new national survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education.

**DATA**

The 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) is a representative national survey of schools, districts, principals and teachers conducted regularly by the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education. It is a major source of information on public and private K-12 teachers and schools in the U.S. Earlier waves of the survey were conducted in 1987-88, 1999-91, and 1993-94. However, the 1999-2000 school year was the first time that SASS included a separate charter school survey.

The following are descriptive statistics on the 1999-2000 SASS.

- **Traditional Public Schools**
  - Districts (4,690), schools (8,432), principals (8,524), teachers (42,086)
- **Public Charter Schools**
  - Schools (870), principals (891), teachers (2,847)
- **Private Schools**
  - Schools (2,611), principals (2,734), teachers (7,098)

**BACKGROUND: SIZE OF WAGE-SETTING UNITS: TEAMS VERSUS BUREAUCRACIES**

Before comparing personnel policies across traditional public, charter, and private schools, it is important to note one important difference in these systems. The wage-setting unit in private and charter schools is typically the school, whereas in traditional public schools wage-setting is at the district level. Indeed, most personnel policy concerning teachers - the level and structure of teacher pay, benefits, hiring decisions - is centralized at the district level in traditional public schools. Researchers who study personnel policy in business find that the size of an establishment plays an important role in the type of personnel policies firms use (Brown, 1990).

Figure 1 illustrates the major differences in the size of the wage and personnel units in traditional public and private schools. One quarter of teachers in traditional public schools are employed in districts with at least 2100 FTE teachers, and half of traditional public school teachers are in districts with at least 561 FTE teachers. Thus, the typical teacher finds 16 FTE teachers, barely larger than the average private school (15 FTE’s) - teams versus bureaucracies.
This difference in the size of the employing unit goes a long way in explaining the differences in personnel policies. In small teams, it is much easier for supervisors or fellow workers to monitor job performance. This makes merit or performance-based pay less controversial. On the other hand, large school districts have a great deal of trouble implementing merit pay systems. In part, this is because they must come up with evaluation systems that guarantee horizontal “equity” across the many schools in the bargaining unit - essentially a hopeless endeavor. Private and charter schools are under no requirement that their performance assessments be identical to those of other schools. They need only assure their teachers that they are treated fairly within the school. Teachers unhappy with the pay system at the school can always “vote with their feet” and go to another school with a more compatible pay regime.

A second important difference between traditional public and charter schools is teacher collective bargaining. The percent of teachers covered by collective bargaining agreements in charter schools is far lower than in traditional public schools. (SASS does not bother to ask this question of private schools since very few private schools bargain collectively with their teachers.) Sixty-nine percent of public school districts, employing 73 percent of teachers, have collective bargaining agreements covering their teachers. This contrasts with just 14 percent of charter schools (employing 18 percent of charter school teachers). The absence of a binding collective bargaining agreement is an important source of personnel flexibility in charter schools. Teacher unions in general have been strongly opposed to more flexible market or performance-based pay systems. Grievance procedures in collective bargaining agreements also make it more difficult to dismiss poorly performing teachers.

**RECRUITMENT**

Private schools, particularly at the secondary level, routinely hire uncertified teachers (Ballou and Podgursky, 1997, ch. 6). Many states permit charter schools to hire uncertified teachers. Administrators in the charter school survey were asked a series of question about state regulations from which they were waived (“Does your school’s charter include waivers or exemptions from the following state or district policies?”) They were also asked about various hiring criteria used by the school (e.g., full standard state certification, graduation from a state-approved teacher education program). Figure 3 reports results from a cross-tabulation of these two questions. We split our sample of charter schools into two groups - schools that had the flexibility to hire non-certified teachers and schools for whom this requirement was not waived. Schools for which the requirement was waived were much less likely to use certification as a necessary condition for hiring. For schools with a waiver, 65 percent used certification as a criteria to consider for hiring, but only 23 percent actually required it.
LEVEL AND STRUCTURE OF COMPENSATION

Once source of concern to reformers has been the rigid and inefficient pay structure for public school teachers. Pay for nearly all teachers in traditional public schools is set according to a district-wide schedule that bases salary virtually entirely on years of experience and graduate credits and/or degrees. These rigid schedules have several costs. First, they exacerbate teacher shortages by field, since they do permit differential pay in shortage fields like math, science, or special education. They also act to lower teacher quality and increase shortages in less desirable schools in a school district. Since high poverty schools are typically less attractive places to work and all teachers in a district are paid according to the same schedule, teachers will often use their seniority to transfer out of high poverty schools, or simply quit the district altogether. In either event, the poorest students tend to get the least experienced teachers. Finally, the single salary schedule suppresses differentials by effort or teaching quality. Some teachers, whether due to innate talent or greater effort, are better teachers than others. The single salary schedule rewards all teachers the same regardless of the quality of their teaching performance hence provides no incentive for the best teachers to stay in the profession.

Figures 4 and 5 present data on methods of teacher pay in the three sectors. In Figure 4 we see that 96 percent of public school districts (accounting for virtually one hundred percent of teachers) report that the district has a salary schedule for teachers. In contrast, only 62 percent of charter and 66 percent of private schools report using a salary schedule to set teacher pay.

School administrators were asked a series of questions about incentive pay. In Figure 6 we focus on one of these: “Does the district (school) use any pay incentives such as cash bonuses, salary increases, or different steps on the salary schedule to … Reward excellence in teaching?” Only six percent of district administrators responded in the affirmative. The rates for charter (37 percent) and private schools (22 percent) were much higher.

DISMISSALS FOR PERFORMANCE

Another contentious issue in teacher personnel policy is tenure. Teachers in traditional public school districts receive automatic contract renewal or tenure after three to five years on the job. After receiving tenure it can be very difficult to dismiss a teacher for poor job performance. Moreover it is not at all clear that public school districts take full advantage of the opportunity to weed out poorly performing probationary teachers. Interestingly, although there has been much discussion of this problem, I am aware of no systematic data collection. The most extensive survey I have found on this is Bridges (1992) who surveyed 141 mid-size school districts in California. He found annual dismissal rates for probationary teachers of roughly one percent.
For the first time, the 1999-00 SASS has included items on teacher dismissals. School or district administrators were asked the number of teachers dismissed for poor performance over the previous year. Respondents were asked about total dismissals of teachers with three or fewer years experience (typically untenured) and more than three years (usually tenured). These totals are reported in Figure 7. The typical public school district dismissed just .9 low experience teachers and only .3 high experience teachers. The average charter school dismissed .5 low experience and .3 high experience teachers. The total dismissals for private schools were lower for both groups (2).

As we saw in Figure 1, the teaching workforce in public school districts is far larger than for charter or private schools. Thus the dismissal rate for traditional public school districts (i.e., dismissals as a percent of the teaching workforce) is far lower than for charter or private schools. The annual dismissal rate for all teachers in traditional public schools is just .6 percent of the teaching workforce. For charter schools, the dismissal rate is 4.9 percent and for private schools the dismissal rate is 2.6 percent. Of course, at the time of this survey, the vast majority of charter schools had been in existence just one or two years. One might expect higher dismissal rates as part of the “shakeout” of staff involved in opening a new school. After all, in such schools, virtually all the teacher are probationary. Multivariate analysis of the charter school dismissal rate finds that it tends to tend to decline sharply with the age of the charter school and approach the rates of private schools after several years of operation.

CONCLUSION

One criticism of charter schools has been that they are not particularly innovative and, in terms of classroom practice, tend to resemble traditional public schools (e.g., Wells, 1998). Whether this is a correct assessment awaits further data collection. However, in the area of teacher personnel policy, preliminary analysis of the 1999-00 Schools and Staffing Surveys suggests that there are major differences between traditional public schools and charter schools. These findings reinforce those found in our earlier survey research (Podgursky and Ballou, 2001). Charter schools seem to be using the regulatory flexibility they have been granted in this area to forge very different policies. Our analysis finds that in many respects, personnel policy in charter schools more closely resembles that in private schools than traditional public schools.

Endnotes

1 There are approximately 15,000 public school districts in the U.S., however, the size distribution of these districts is very highly skewed. In 1999-00, 658 districts (5.5 percent of all districts) enrolled 10,000 or more students. However, these large districts accounted for just over half of student enrollments (50.5 percent). On the other hand 3910 districts (22 percent of all districts) enrolled under 300 students. These tiny districts accounted for just 1 percent of student enrollments (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, Table 90). This skewness is also seen in Figure 1. The average public school district employs 203 teachers, whereas fifty percent of teachers are in districts with at least 561 teachers.

2 Unfortunately, the SASS school survey did not ask school administrators the number of teachers with three or fewer or more than three years of seniority. Thus, we cannot compute dismissal rates for the two groups separately.

References


Wallace Stevens

Wallace Stevens was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, in 1879 and died in 1955. He attended Harvard as an undergraduate and earned a law degree from New York Law School after which Stevens began working at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Co. in Connecticut, of which he became vice president in 1934. His first book of poems, Harmonium, published in 1923, exhibited the influence of both the English Romantics and the French symbolists. More than any other modern poet, Stevens was concerned with the transformative power of the imagination. “The Emperor of Ice Cream” was published in July 1922 in “The Dial 73.”

COMMENTS:

This poem leaves some colder than ice cream. Surely next month’s poem will be...warmer?!! Send in your pick because these guys need help.

I Read all These “Boring Books” So You Don’t Have To

By Dr. Robert Maranto

What American Public Education and the Vietnam War Have in Common: If we put in enough money and enough soldiers, surely someday we’ll win!

Back in 1983, in grad school, I was having a few drinks on a Friday night with Mark Lacy. Mark was a junior history major, one of the smartest and best-read people I’ve ever met. I asked him what went wrong in Vietnam, and he took me across the street to used bookstore and told me to buy The Betrayal.

William Corson’s The Betrayal (New York: Ace Books, 1968) offers the finest account of what went wrong in Vietnam War. It received rave reviews when published, and since has been constantly cited in the best academic work on Vietnam. Political scientists, including me, have felled whole forests about why we lost in Vietnam, but nobody said it better than Marine Colonel Corson did more than three decades ago.

Dr. Corson, a mathematician, Ph.D. economist, and veteran of three wars, wrote a cautionary tale about people who mean well but do wrong, particularly bureaucrats who think that bigger is always better. President Johnson delegated Vietnam policy to his experts, Army General William Westmoreland, Defense Secretary Robert Strange “whiz kids.” Make no mistake that these men—and all were men—meant well. Though lacking originality, Westmoreland was a dedicated, patriotic, and honest soldier. The idealistic McNamara worked harder than anyone in Washington. It is the cruelest of ironies that over McNamara’s long career, with the best of intentions, he screwed up three great institutions: Ford Motor Company, the Pentagon, and the World Bank. Each took a decade or more to recover from his “leadership.”

So what went wrong in Vietnam? Trained in quantitative methods and systems analysis, American policy-makers believed that firepower wins wars: if we used more men and more bombs than the Communists, we would win. American forces patrolled the countryside, calling in massive shelling and bombardment whenever fired on in order to destroy the enemy. To chart progress, the whiz kids counted the number of artillery fired and bombs dropped. Commanders who used more firepower got more promotions. When our forces ran out of targets they shelled or bombed at random, often killing civilians. Most horribly, the whiz kids’ emphasis on body counts led a few unscrupulous American officers and men to commit war crimes. Certain units killed many “VC soldiers” of all ages, men and women, yet captured few weapons.

Along with sending American men and firepower into Vietnam, we poured money into the South Vietnamese Army (Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN), with far lesser amounts going to the more effective local militia. ARVN was a national army, with parochial peasants drafted to serve hundreds of miles from their village homes—even though they didn’t care about people from other regions. Again on the
assumption that more is better, American leaders paid little
McNamara (his real name) and his Pentagon attention to how
our money was (mis)spent. Under good leadership, some
ARVN units fought very well. Others, however, were staffed
with “ghost soldiers” who showed up for payday but not
for battle. Often officers did not report dead or deserted
men so as to pocket their paychecks; thus some ARVN units
were well under their official strength. Some units practiced
“search and avoid” missions, avoiding the enemy (often by
prior arrangement).

Since all resources came from America’s amber waves
of taxpayers, Vietnamese and American military men simply
demanded more rather than thinking about how to better use
the massive money and troops they had.

But there are other ways to fight wars. In most villages, a
few people supported the Communists, a few supported the
government, and most just wanted to survive the war without
paying taxes to either side. As Corson explains, the Viet Cong
had their soldiers serve locally where they knew and cared
about the people. Rather than depend on Hanoi for supplies,
the Viet Cong had to make do on local taxes, forcing them
to husband their resources and to treat the local populations
well so they would not switch sides. (Viet Cong taxes were
often lower than government taxes, and the VC killed land-
lords and government tax collectors; thus peasants had mate-
rial reasons for backing the VC).

Most importantly, since they were local, the Viet Cong
knew whom to kill. The Americans and ARVN did not,
and their methods, bombing and artillery, killed villagers at
random. We killed our friends and enemies alike! In con-
trast, the Viet Cong would come into a village, brutally kill
the handful of people who opposed them as an example,
and leave others alone. Naturally, many or most Vietnamese
backed the Communists. After all, if you backed the Ameri-
cans the Viet Cong would kill you, but if you backed the
Viet Cong the Americans would not even know! (The same
dynamic explains why many ghetto dwellers back drug deal-
 ers rather than the police).

As Corson shows, in the places where the U.S. used Viet
Cong tactics, our side won. Most notably, in 200 villages the
U.S. Marines combined with local pro-government Viet-
namese militia to live among the villagers and aggressively patrol
to protect the villagers from the Communists. In these vil-
lages, the Vietnamese knew that it was safer to go with us
than the Communists, so that is what they did.

APPLICATIONS TO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

So what does all this have to do with education? Quite a
lot. First, our failure in Vietnam reminds us that good people
often do evil. Even with lots of resources and the best of
intentions, very bright men and women can fail spectacu-
larly. As University of Minnesota economist and former
Minnesota State Senator John Brandl put it, “in public affairs
there is far more confusion and far less deviousness than
most people think.” Such idealistic failure typifies education
reform as much as it did Vietnam.

Related to this, leaders must understand those they serve.
The whiz kids in Washington, like big city school superin-
tendents, think they understand teachers and kids. All too
often, they don’t: their pronouncements make little sense to
those on the front lines. Just as McNamara and Westmo-
reland never understood Vietnam, many school superinten-
dents misunderstand how their brilliant ideas play out in real
life schools. Notably, most public high school principals have
not taught for a decade or more, while most private and
charter high school principals still teach an occasional class.
Which sort of administrator has more credibility with teachers?

Third, organizations orient toward their funders and regulators.
Our public schools are hampered by centralization. Like
ARVN, they focus on the district office and the politicians in
the capitol, who send them money and make their decisions.
In contrast, charter schools and private schools are like the
Viet Cong. Their funding derives from the choices of par-
ents and kids, so they orient to serving the parents and kids.
Fourth, an orientation toward the capitol and central office leads to defeatism and inaction. “We can't do that without approval.” “If only they would give us the soldiers [teachers] we need.” “We'll have to study that.” In contrast, smaller, independent organizations (Viet Cong, charter schools) will act rather than react.

Fifth, most people are just trying to survive. Vietnamese peasants cared little about ten-year plans to build democracy. They didn’t care about ideology. They just wanted to survive the war, and avoid high rents and taxes. Similarly, most parents don’t care about the theory behind a school, or the wonderful ten-year reform plan. They only care about whether their kid is safe and learning. And let’s face it, many students just want to do the minimum to get by, though good teachers who really know their kids can often overcome learning-aversion.

Finally, LEARN from your mistakes. For decades after Vietnam, retired General Westmoreland insisted that we actually won since Communism had not spread to India! (Similarly, some of my less insightful professor colleagues insist that the U.S. lost the Cold War!) Smart, idealistic people have the strongest psychological defense mechanisms. They need to admit their mistakes, learn from them, and move on. As educators, we have to learn from our failures. Former soldier and educator William Corson, who died in 2000, would have wanted it that way. Our taxpayers and students deserve no less.

Endnotes

1 “Viet Cong” means Vietnamese Communist. While officially known as the National Liberation Front (NLF) and open to non-Communist, Communists did in fact direct the movement.

Why it’s Tough to do Controlled Experiments in Education

by Dr. Robert Maranto

As Political Scientist John Witte at the University of Wisconsin suggests, it is very difficult to do controlled experiments in education. In contrast, Witte jokes, inmates for second-degree murder at Wisconsin state prisons provide the perfect population for controlled experimentation!

Why inmates? First off, inmates offer no concerns about selection bias. Since all the prisoners are bored out of their minds, all of them volunteer for whatever experimental program you care to test; thus prisoners volunteer for literacy programs whether they can read or not, and for drug programs whether or not they actually use drugs! Accordingly, experimenters need have no concerns about whether those who volunteer for training are more skilled or more motivated than the others. Compare that to trying to figure out whether charter school kids are “just like” kids at traditional public schools.

Second, social scientists can do a perfectly random assignment of inmates to the treatment (say literacy courses) and control (no courses) groups. This is seldom possible for school children, since more motivated parents lobby to get their kids into the “special program,” or conversely, to keep them out to protect them from being “experimented on.” In contrast, prison inmates’ families rarely lobby on their behalf; indeed in some cases the inmates have killed off their families!

Third, in education, children often leave the “special program” when their parents move across town, creating subject “mortality.” We can’t be sure changes have not resulted from who left the program, rather than what the program did for (or to) recipients. Since Wisconsin state prisons ended parole for murderers and have suffered no escapes, the prisoners aren’t going anywhere.

Finally, we rarely know how well school kids do years after their enrollment in a special program—they’re long gone. In contrast, former inmates remain in the parole system for years, meaning that we can track whether they are re-arrested, whether they are employed, and how much money they make.
Charter School Accountability Issues - Pragmatic or Political?

By Dr. Heather Boyer

PURPOSE

Accountability has become the single most important focus in education reform. Increased attention on student performance has sparked an opinion that traditional public schools are failing our nation's children. As a response, charter schools have become one of the most rapidly growing solutions for providing innovative public school systems of choice. Now operating for almost a decade, debates have shifted to how charters can demonstrate their effectiveness and accountability.

The importance placed on testing by The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 has led legislators and policymakers to support holding charters to the same accountability systems as traditional public schools. Concern rises that charters are being compared and equated to the same system they were designed to improve upon, creating tension between the purpose of charters—providing innovative flexible programs—and the political challenges of public choice and charter regulation. This results in a one-size-fits-all evaluation system limited by standardized test-scores that penalizes educational programs that vary from the norm. This paper informs policymakers and practitioners about accountability challenges of charter schools and illustrates how politics and policy can affect the evaluation of charter schools. This case study of one charter campus—the Texas Campus—demonstrates the dangers of comparing charter programs to traditional public schools, and contributes to the knowledge on charter school accountability from inside an actual charter school district.

PERSPECTIVE

The charter school movement utilizes the premise of “building innovative programs for specific types of students with minimal adherence to the rules and regulations of traditional schools” (Education Week, 3/21/02). Charter school accountability for most states is built upon three rationales: a) bureaucratic oversight and efficiency, b) performance accountability and c) market efficiency (Garn & Cobb, 2001; Manno, Finn, & Banourek, 2000). Fusarelli (2001) and Hess (2001) assert a fourth rationale, political responsiveness, which drives charter accountability systems.

Bureaucratic accountability is a system driven by compliance to a standard set of rules or practices that can be easily linked to behavioral rules, which in turn produce desired outcomes (Garn & Cobb, 20001). This focus, driven by easily defined bureaucratic inputs produces little public agreement on desired outcomes. Outputs drive performance accountability by applying standardized tests to “reliably and validly measure student achievement” (Garn & Cobb, p 118). Some researchers criticize the judgment of performance by standardized tests as leading to unfair comparison between schools, thus potentially leading to a narrowing of the curriculum. The third accountability framework, market efficiency, relies on consumer control, the assumption being that if parents or children do not like a school, they can leave that school the next day. A more veiled form of accountability, political accountability, describes an accountability system driven more strongly by political rather than technical issues (Fusarelli, 2001). On the surface level, charter schools in Texas adhere to the same state accountability standards and policies as public schools, which are largely driven by performance indicators. However, politics have played a strong role in the charter school movement for the past few years, primarily in terms of limiting expansion. Representatives of the Texas House Education Committee on Charters assert that Texas charters with campuses rated as Low-Performing should not be allowed to add additional campuses, or, in some cases, be granted renewal. Although everyone agrees that the charter system needs a measure of quality control, these high-stakes policies hinging upon one performance output alone ignore the differences in inputs between charter and traditional programs. Representing fewer than 1% of the public school enrollment statewide, charter schools have markedly less students taking state accountability tests, and almost two-thirds more at-risk students (Fusarelli, 2001). For a charter school district serving primarily at-risk students, this system can at best, judge campuses using questionable statistics, and at worst cause irreparable damage not only to campuses and districts, but to students as well. Based almost solely on the issue of performance and comparison to traditional schools, performance accountability ignores the differences between the two systems.

METHODS:

This study differentiates from other research on charter schools and charter school accountability since the perspective comes from a practitioner in an actual charter school district, rather than an outside researcher who might be either influenced by special interests or biased against change in public education. Developed as insider research, the researcher is a “full participant;” a functioning member of the community undergoing investigation (Glesne, 1999). The researcher’s role in the context is as an administrator who completed the comprehensive charter renewal application, frequently consulted the state agency with accountability concerns, attended legislative sessions to analyze political motivations surrounding accountability issues, and worked closely with the director of the case study school.

Built as a descriptive case study of a charter district, there are no prescribed methods for data collection or data analysis.
Campus recognition for high performance and signifi-
cant accountability system; district and campus ac-
countability; district and statewide curriculum, the state criterion-referenced assess-
ment of the accountability system include integration of the
2002). The statewide curriculum, The Texas Essential Knowl-
edge and Skills (TEKS), was implemented in 1998. Compos-
te of the accountability system include integration of the
statewide curriculum, the state criterion-referenced assess-
ment system; district and campus accountability; district and
academic accountability system will transition from the TAAS test to the
newly developed Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills
(TAKS).
The Texas public school accountability system grew out of
a 1993 mandate by the Texas Legislature to create a system
to rate school districts and evaluate schools. The system was
built upon a pre-existing student-level data system (PEIMS)
an assessment system, the Texas Assessment of Aca-
demic Skills (TAAS) that tested knowledge of the state cur-
riculum defined by the State Board of Education (TEA,
2002). The statewide curriculum, The Texas Essential Knowl-
edge and Skills (TEKS), was implemented in 1998. Compo-
te of the accountability system include integration of the
statewide curriculum, the state criterion-referenced assess-
ment system; district and campus accountability; district and
campus recognition for high performance and significant
increases in performance; sanctions for poor performance;
and school, district, and state-level reports. The 2003 account-
ability system will transition from the TAAS test to the
newly developed Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills
(TAKS).
Accountability information is compiled into the Academic
Excellence Indicator System (AEIS). The base indicators in
the AEIS include TAAS rating standards for reading, writing,
mathematic, and added in 2002, 8th grade social studies. For
all subject areas except social studies, district and campus rat-
ings fall under four basic categories:

- **Exemplary:** at least 90% of “all students” and students in
each group meeting minimum size requirements must pass
each section of the TAAS.
- **Recognized:** at least 80% of “all students” and students in
each group meeting minimum size requirements must pass
each section of the TAAS.
- **Academically Acceptable** (district) or Acceptable
(campus), at least 55% of “all students” and students in
each group meeting minimum size requirements must pass
each section of the TAAS.
- **Academically Unacceptable or Low-Performing:** Those
districts or campuses not meeting the standard for
Academically Acceptable.

Social studies standards are similar except that Academi-
cally Acceptable or Acceptable was lowered to 50%.

In Texas, charter schools are rated by the accountability
system after two years of operation. They must meet the
same standards as traditional public schools on the statewide
test, the TAAS/TAKS, including the requirement that they
pass the test to graduate (Fusarelli, 2001). One main differ-
ence between charters and traditional districts is that chart-
ters receive campus-level ratings only to date. However, the
state agency is considering assigning district-level ratings in
the future.

**BACKGROUND ON “TEXAS CHARTER DISTRICT”**

The Texas Charter District (TCD) represents a successful
charter system that suffers from the consequences of a per-
formance accountability rating system. Beginning its fifth year
serving students with unique needs, the majority of TCD
campuses serve students in residential treatment facilities.
Included in the student population at TCD are: teenage
mothers and their babies living in residential facilities, adjud-
cicated teenagers in residential centers, abused and neglected
children residing in facilities at the request of the Depart-
ment of Protective and Regulatory Services, and children
with medical disorders living in private hospitals.

TCD’s profile includes over 94% at-risk, 60% special edu-
cation, and 55% mobile students. This challenging student
body is served by certified administrators with many years of
service in public schools, and nearly 100% certified teachers,
with most certified in special education. Despite TCD’s suc-
cesses in raising overall achievement, moving students to less
restrictive environments, and stabilizing challenging behav-
iors, our evaluation hinges upon standardized test scores. Texas
does have an Alternative Education Accountability
system designed primarily for programs serving at-risk stu-
dents; however, TCD does not qualify, as our campuses
cannot meet the attendance requirement of 85 consecutive
days due to students moving in and out of residential care.
Additionally, the state agency has indicated that the Alterna-
tive Accountability system may be abolished under new regu-
lations coming out of the No Child Left Behind Act.

TCD constantly runs the risk of having campuses labeled
Low Performing due to the few numbers of students who
fall within the accountability capture date. To date, two cam-
puses have received Low Performing ratings because one or
two residential treatment center students on a given campus
score below 70 on the state achievement test. Relative to the
total student population of that campus, in Spring 02, a single
student not passing one exam represents a 20% campus fail-
ure rate. Although the state agency asserts that our rating
brings useful ideas, humor, and non-boring scholarship to the charter school community (for over seven weeks).

presents no problem, and they understand our dilemma, the fact remains that we are still being punished by the accountability system. We are not eligible to apply for certain grants, we lose instructional time preparing for monitoring visits, and could potentially lose the capability of adding campuses. Individual campuses suffer the greater risk of losing their financial supporters, forcing them to leave our system of experts for a less regulated and possibility unaccredited private system. And finally, students feel they are failing their schools and ultimately, themselves.

**BACKGROUND ON “TEXAS CAMPUS”**

Housed within the Texas Residential Treatment Center, Texas Campus (TC) serves boys with moderate to severe behavioral issues. The treatment center program can accommodate up to 22 boys in three campus residences, with an average stay of two years. Parents or legal guardians voluntarily place their children in the program and are required to participate in program activities on selected weekends. In addition to the director and treatment personnel, house-parent couples reside with the boys and guide them in their daily family-style routines at the facility. Lessons at Texas Residential Treatment Center - cooperation, trust, and family values - often begin with their day-to-day routines. In addition, core subjects for middle school and high school students are offered, as well as a full range of courses in agronomy, raising livestock, and horticulture. Finally, students are required to participate in a daily routine of horsemanship skills and activities that require self-discipline, patience, and practice.

According to the TC director, who has over twenty years of experience in childcare and over twenty-six years using therapeutic animal programs, horses have the ultimate ability over other animals to bring about positive changes in children and youth. He asserts that horses can:

- Bring smiles to their faces and happier hearts during periods of the day. The boys become more confident in relationships and bonding issues and they relate it to Education. Socialization and communication skills and bonding start with the horses and allows them to relate that to their families, which has been very exciting to us. They learn how to catch a horse and not get stepped on, they do competitions and team roping, and we see them grinning from ear to ear.

In addition to many challenging activities and academics, family involvement and counseling provide an important component of the program. Counselors work individually with the boys and their families on an ongoing basis. Four-day interactive workshops are scheduled with parents and boys on a quarterly basis to prepare the boys for their return home.

Many TC boys have learning disabilities or challenges such as attention deficit disorder or hyperactivity disorder. Frustration with these challenges has often led to extreme behavioral problems in the classroom. Many are behind their peers in at least one subject, and have fallen below appropriate grade level in their overall achievements. With this in mind, Texas Residential Treatment Center provides a unique, on-campus school program to help the boys to progress academically and move up to grade level. The boys attend classes year-round each weekday morning directed by certified teachers. They complete self-paced learning materials to earn Texas public school credits. As they discover that they can perform academically, the boys become more motivated to succeed. The boys can receive transferable public school credits, and can test for a GED or receive a high school diploma if they finish their curriculum while in residence.

The TC director affirms that his program has been developed from years of experience in working with troubled youth, and describes many successes his students have achieved as they graduate from the program. The data he has gathered over the past five years shows that an average of 80% to 90% of the students completing his program graduate from high school or complete their GED. One graduate...
from TC became a talented horseman, joined the military, and was the single selection out of five hundred candidates to join the Washington Honor Guard Program. The director attributes this student’s successes to his “ability to control his emotions and apply himself.” Clearly this and other students exemplify the successes of this program.

ACCOUNTABILITY CHALLENGES

The TC program at Texas Residential Treatment Center illustrates an example of a highly successful educational program for at-risk students that has fallen victim to a one-size-fits-all accountability system. By serving so many “non-traditional” students, TCD continually falls between the cracks of Texas accountability policies. Limited numbers of test-takers per campus allows the state agency to use a “Special Analysis” of our test scores, which analyzes trends and makes rulings based on professional judgment. For charter schools with less than or equal to three students in each TAAS subject and fewer than ten dropouts reported, the charter school is assigned a “Not Rated” due to insufficient data (communication-TEA Accountability, 5/02). TC had six students take the TAAS exam in Spring 01. The students did well on all the exams except the composition section of the Writing exam, where two of the six failed, earning that campus a rating of Low-Performing. This year TC had one student out of five fail the social studies TAAS exam, again earning an accountability rating of Low-Performing. According to the state agency, TC was allowed a Special Analysis, however, a trend could not be established because the campus has only been rated for two years and a trend cannot be established on one student. If that campus had been registered as “Alternative Instruction”, TC would have received a “Not Rated” because the allowable minimum limit of three students would be raised to ten or fewer students. We have applied for that status for Spring 03.

The unique needs of our students and the environment of a residential treatment facility warrant, in our opinion, the need for a different type of assessment system. However, TC does not qualify for the Alternative Accountability system, (which would allow us to select an additional indicator for assessment) because our students do not all attend for 85 consecutive days, due to their high movement rate to other treatment programs and back to the mainstream. Thus the policies written to accommodate small numbers and unique student populations do not seem to help our district.

REALITY CHECK

When asked about the impact of being rated Low-Performing, the director of TC responded that he had to explain to parents, who have seen exemplary academic performance from their children prior to the Spring TAAS, why their campus is rated Low-Performing. Although the parents seem to understand the issues with small numbers, the programs’ financial supporters still show concern. However, the loss of funding pales in comparison to the director’s concern about the students themselves. As stated by TC’s director:

The worst outcome of all of this last year was with the two boys that failed the composition portion of the writing exam. Everyone knew who failed, and it set those boys back at least three to six months. They have since graduated, but I really believe it lowered their self-esteem. That’s the worst part of all this, is how it affects the kids.

When we explain our dilemma to the state agency, they claim that they understand our unique situation. The monitoring team sent to evaluate TC last year showed no concern with the program, and verbalized their understanding, and in fact admiration, for the program. However, their comments to us remain unpublished and do not offset the effects of press publications labeling the campus Low-Performing.

TC now has received two years of Low-Performing ratings, based on the performance of two or fewer children each on one test subject. In addition to the potential loss of financial support and confidentiality due to public notice, TCD and TC also waste valuable time gathering documents in preparation for monitoring visits that occur long after the students in question have left the program. Worse yet, if TC does not win their appeal to the rating based on one student, the program will be put on a “Student Improvement Program” by the state agency, meaning they will be required to work with a team of outside consultants on their educational program, a practice that is not feasible within a specific treatment program based on individual student needs.

We must also consider what this case means to the many statistics put forth in publications and touted by legislators about charter performance. Literature counting the number of Low-Performing charter schools compared to Low-Performing traditional campuses claim their evidence points to the failure of the charter school movement. In the Texas Subcommittee meeting on Charter Schools (June 27th, 2002) a senator continual quoted statistics on the number of low-performing charters compared to low-performing traditional schools when discussing charter school performance. Stating that a moratorium should be placed on charter schools until “the state tightens its grip on them” the same senator suggested that public schools are “dumping” at-risk students into these programs (Embry, 2002). However, this case study shows that statistic includes cases similar to TC’s--a Low-Performance rating based on the performance of one student with severe behavioral issues residing in a residential treatment center. As for being “dumped” into the program,
the director will attest that his parents of their own free will placed the student voluntarily.

Fortunately not everyone believes the comparison of charters to traditional schools represents a fair or reasonable comparison. In the same session, State Rep. Harold Dutton retorted that we should not compare charters to the “system that previously failed these students (June 27th, 2002),” as many students seek out charters for a different type of program to help them gain back ground lost in public schools.

As stated by one TCD administrator “It’s not that we don’t want to be held accountable and provide the best education possible. It’s just that the traditional system doesn’t work when you are talking about highly mobile special needs students.”

CONCLUSIONS:

TCD has suffered from the current state accountability system. Although the state system has policies to address specific issues such as low numbers of test-takers, or alternative assessment for high percentages of “at-risk” students, TCD does not qualify for these exceptions due to other stipulations associated with these policies. Future plans by the state agency to reform these exceptions may be hampered by political pressures to limit charters, or go completely ignored, as energies are focused on implementing new regulations from the new No Child Left Behind education policy.

This study illustrates the need for a charter accountability system that evaluates programs by more comprehensive methods than state assessment scores. One suggestion would be to use an abbreviated form resembling the state’s multifaceted charter renewal application, which reviews fiscal practices, governing practices, instructional methods, test scores, and alternate measurements defined by the charter. Rather than the current method of limiting the performance rating to state achievement test scores, absences, and dropout rates, charters could align their evaluation system to their overall purpose and focus. The possibility of developing such a system would require politicians and policymakers to become more familiar with the operations and programs of different charter schools beyond statistics on paper. Such a system would also need to acknowledge that charters, developed as a different method of educating students, cannot be effectively compared to the traditional public school system using state accountability exams as the only measuring method. Charters should be held accountable, and even compared to traditional schools, with comprehensive, valid measures.

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NCSC wishes to thank our friends at Valpar International who offer individualized internet and computer based solutions for academic assessment, career assessment and transition planning.

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Book Review: Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform

By David Tyack and Larry Cuban (Harvard University Press, 1995) 184 pages (paperback).
Book Review by Liane Zimny, Charter Schools Coordinator at Oakland Unified School District, Oakland, California.

Bringing useful ideas, humor, and non-boring scholarship to the charter school community (for over seven weeks).
Horace Mann (In an address to the graduating class of Antioch College, June 1859, two months before his death.)

First Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education—the nation’s first State Board of Education, President of Antioch College, a.k.a. “The Father of American Education.”

PART I.

Why is education tough to reform?

Education reforms share much in common with dieting: Both are easy to launch, hard to sustain, and subject to interpretation and adaptation during implementation. Both are likely to achieve varied results depending on the individuals and unique circumstances involved. Both are subject to faddish enthusiasms for easy quick-fixes that may demonstrate some initial success, but not healthy, sustained improvement.

Both education reform and dieting are most likely to be successful when the implementers are not only internally motivated, but also supported by the life systems around them. Implementation is likely to continue when the essential changes are easy to understand and implement, and do not require dramatic changes from known behaviors. Both are most likely to achieve and maintain their long-term desired outcomes when undertaken as a long-term sustained effort to implement changes that feel fun, offer variety, and generate high self-esteem and energy in the implementers.

Which reforms have had the most impact over time?

The reforms that have had the most impact over time are the reforms that reflect a deep understanding of how humans behave in relationship to each other and to their institutions. Tyack and Cuban isolate the main institution and the key people in education reform when they emphasize the need for “a sophisticated understanding of the school as an institution [and] insight into the culture of teachers.” [underscore added] (113)

Throughout their book, Tinkering Toward Utopia, Tyack and Cuban identify specific factors that enhance the impact of educational reforms:

- Propitious timing.
- Political support from powerful sponsors.
- Freezing reforms into regulations and laws.
- Interlocking reforms with other systems.
- Linking reforms to broader social movements.
- Clearly demonstrable advantages that outweigh the burdens of implementing change.
- Easy replication. (107-108)

The presence of these factors has helped assure the continuing impact of Horace Mann’s reforms from the first half of the 1800’s, for example. Of these factors, interlocking reforms with other systems and linking reforms to broader social movements were the most critical to the endurance of his reforms. Education reforms have the most impact when they promote philosophies that are in harmony with a broad array of values in other institutions. Education reformers may succeed at the front of a wave of change, but they will not endure if they remain disconnected from other political, economic, social or religious values.

Mann led efforts to standardize the offering of American education in the 1830’s and 1840’s as a means of securing the Protestant-republican ideals of a literate, moral citizenry. (1, 2, 141, Tyack & Cuban) Mann’s selection as the first Secretary of Education to the nation’s first State Board of Education (in Massachusetts) was the result of propitious (and probably political) circumstances. Mann was a Senator at that time and voted in favor of establishing the new board, but he was not the primary promoter of the concept.

As Secretary of Education, Mann linked his reforms to broader social movements in a dozen annual reports on “the integral relationship between education, freedom, and Republican government.” Mann believed that the primary goal of the school was to promote the social harmony that he believed would result if schools were available and equal for rich and poor alike. Poverty would decline as education tapped natural abilities and led to greater economic prosperity. He also expected a more broadly educated populace would be less likely to engage in crime, violence or fraud. Mann wanted a system of public common schools that would be a “wellspring” of freedom and a “ladder of opportunity.” (8, Cremin)

Mann’s desire to create a system of education that would foster a critical thinking populace had the powerful political support of Daniel Webster, notable orator, lawyer, and U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, who entreated, “Make them intelligent, and they will be vigilant -- give them the means of detecting wrong, and they will apply the remedy.”

Mann froze his reforms into regulations and laws and interlocked them with other systems. He persuaded the Massachusetts legislature to establish a six month minimum school year in 1839 (15, Filler) He also reinvigorated a Massachusetts law establishing high schools and stimulated the creation of 50 new high schools during his 12 year tenure. (21, Cremin) These schools, and others that would follow, would need qualified teachers. To provide for this need, Mann led a movement to set up teacher institutions (called normal schools) throughout the state. The normal schools provided prospective teachers with a laboratory for learning, using model class rooms as a place to practice their skills. The emphasis was
on common everyday learning, rather than on the classical studies being taught at colleges. Graduates of Massachusetts’ normal schools easily disseminated their pedagogy as they took positions in other states. Thus the normal schools, and the common schools where they taught, became interlocking institutions.

Swiss education reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi’s philosophy of pedagogical methods, inspired by Jean Jacque Rousseau, was gaining popularity in the United States and Europe. This approach became the dominant pedagogy in teacher education at the Massachusetts’ normal schools. Rousseau’s approach stressed directing the child in the unfolding of one’s latent powers and emphasized the harmonious development of the individual’s faculties into a complete personality. This was far different from the rote memorization and strict discipline paradigm that had previously dominated schools in the U.S. and Europe.

In order to implement Rousseau’s teaching approach, schools could not rely on four months of schooling (between farming responsibilities) provided by whichever young, single woman would accept the low status and low pay of this position for a short time until marrying. Pestalozzi believed there was a unified science of education that could be learned and practiced. Teacher training, he thought, should include a broad liberal education followed by a period of research and professional training.

This approach was widely adopted throughout the U.S. and Europe and continues to be the standard practice today. As normal schools expanded, their graduates readily replicated their knowledge and pedagogic philosophy in the schools where they taught. As “teaching” evolved into a profession whose members shared a common philosophy, ethical code, training experience, and body of knowledge, “teachers” became a new social institution and, thus, an important force to be considered in any subsequent educational reform movement.

At the turn of the 20th century, our nation’s leadership elite sought ways to absorb another tidal wave of immigrants from other countries, many who were fleeing famine and oppression in their homelands, and to cope with the flood of people migrating from our farms in search of greater opportunities. While adults found employment in newly emerging factory-model workplaces that efficiently produced interchangeable products, public education began to implement a similar production model to produce uniformly educated students. In Tinkering Toward Utopia, Tyack and Cuban discuss at length how “scientific management” and the “social efficiency model” supported the adoption and persistence of certain institutional trends (e.g., higher percentages and a greater diversity of students enrolling and graduating from high school; larger and more elaborate curricula, an expanding range of course offerings, and increasing per-pupil expenditures) in the 20th century for reasons that parallel the bulleted factors (above) supporting Mann’s success a century earlier. (47-54)

PART II

What will be “the next big thing” in American education?

The next big thing in American education will actually be small- The Small Schools Movement. This movement qualifies as an education reform, by Tyack and Cuban’s definition, because it is a planned effort to change schools in order to correct perceived social and educational problems (4). The educational leaders of New York City, Chicago and Oakland, CA, have been in the forefront of implementing this movement that is taking root nationwide.

Growth of support in the Small Schools Movement represents a steady turning away from the “bigger is better” (or at least more cost effective) theory that dominated the mid-20th century in the United States. The books, theories and practices of notables such as Ted Seisal and Deborah Meier have helped articulate what, why and how small schools benefit students and teachers. Organizations such as the Small Schools Organization (headquartered in Chicago), the Coalition for Essential Schools, the Bay Area Coalition for Essential Schools, the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools, the Center for Education Reform, and the Center for Collaborative
Education lend their voices to promote the benefits of small schools.

Research demonstrates that small schools produce more equitable outcomes. They decrease traditionally large achievement gaps between white and non-white students (Lee and Smith, 1994; Friedkin and Necoechea, 1988), and between those of higher and lower socioeconomic status (Lee and Bryk, 1989; Lee and Smith, 1994; Lee, Smith, and Croniger, 1995). At-risk students in smaller learning environments are more likely to meet graduation requirements, have higher attendance rates, and engage in fewer risk-taking behaviors. (Kemple, 2000). Test scores for poor children increase, as school size decreases (Howley & Bickel, 2000). Smaller schools reduce the negative effect of poverty on school performance by as much as 70% (Howley & Bickel, 2000).

Small Schools have a demonstrably better chance of improving outcomes for poor children and students of color. Urban parents are demanding choice, in particular the option of sending their children to new small, autonomous schools with high expectations in their own neighborhoods. In Oakland, we believe that this is the single, most effective strategy for dramatically improving student outcomes in urban schools. (“What’s Good About Small Schools?” by Mark Gordon, BayCES, 2001)

The Oakland Small Schools Initiative (SSI) is a community-based reform led by Oakland parents and teachers. This effort intends to systematically transform the design and culture of the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and its schools to dramatically improve the educational experiences and outcomes of students and their families. Initial emphasis is on relieving large, over-crowded schools in neighborhoods primarily serving racial and ethnic minority and lower income students and on improving the quality of their learning environment. Three organizations, Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES), OUSD, and Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), work in alliance to implement this initiative. On May 24, 2000, the Oakland School Board unanimously passed a New Small Autonomous Schools Policy, drafted by the Bay Area Coalition of Schools (BayCES) in collaboration with educators and community members working through the Oakland Community Organizations (OCO). The policy allows for the creation of ten new small autonomous schools during the first three years. These schools are each granted charter-like autonomies in exchange for increased accountability, while operating within the District’s support system and benefiting from its economies of scale. Oakland established the maximum enrollments for small schools at the mid-range of researchers’ definitions, as follows: K-5 = 250; K-8 = 400; K-12 = 500; 6-8 = 400; 6-12 = 500; and 9-12 = 400.

The nation’s Small Schools Movement is likely to have a dramatic and sustained impact on education over time for the following reasons:

- **Interlocking reforms with other systems.**

  The Small Schools Movement does not presume that the present system is in ashes. Rather, it strives to create environments in which teachers can be more effective. The small schools philosophy does not assume that teachers have been incompetent or lazy. It does not blame these institutional reform implementers for the present system failures. The structural change (not precisely an “add-on”) to smaller learning communities can be implemented without disturbing standard operating procedures at school sites and without demanding fundamental changes in teachers’ behaviors. The change to small schools is readily understood by lay people, school boards and legislators. (57).

- **Linking reforms to broader social movements.**

  Participants in the Small Schools Movement consistently link their efforts to goals of achieving excellence and equity. Small schools are not promoted as the quick-fix silver bullet solution to all of society’s ills, or even to the challenges facing the nation’s education system. Supporters of the movement consistently try to manage expectations (and forestall disillusionment) by emphasizing that being small does not guarantee a high quality school.

  However, the characteristics of effective schools happen more often and more readily in a small school. In a small school, it is more likely that the following conditions that support effective schooling will occur:

  - Everyone will be seen as a meaningful individual (probably wearing several “hats”), not hidden behind a role.
  - Each student will be known by many adults who all take responsibility for the student’s progress.
  - Staff members understand and share a common vision.
  - The school is more maneuverable and flexible than a larger institution in order to meet its goals.

- **Clearly demonstrable advantages that outweigh the burdens of implementing change.**

  A growing body of research (see the late Kathleen Cotton’s overview in New Small Learning Communities: Findings from Recent Literature, December 2001, available online at http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/nslc.pdf) supports the hypothesis that smaller schools achieve better results. Research is demonstrating that small schools achieve the following benefits:
Higher student achievement, especially among students facing more socioeconomic challenges.

- Improved student attendance rates (generally a precondition to academic achievement) and higher graduation rates (some times phrased “lower dropout rates”).

Greater student visibility (a function of both the smaller absolute number of students to be known by teachers, staff and other students, and the greater percentage of students with an opportunity to participate in leadership roles and extracurricular activities when the total school population is smaller.)

Increased teacher satisfaction (arising from increased teacher visibility, more supportive professional relationships, closer ties to students, and higher student achievement that smaller school structures foster).

Greater cost effectiveness (when calculated on a cost-per-graduate basis, rather than a cost-per-warehoused student basis).

Although several implementation controversies still engage the Small Schools Movement, proponents are taking care to build a solid base of support on clear evidence of benefit. Supporters introduce models to revise the public notion of what a “real school” ought to be by recalling images of schools in the recent past—the early-to-middle 20th century—rather than directly challenging current trends, in order to implement the small school reform at a pace that does not exceed the pedagogic speed limit for change. (57)

Entire districts are not asked to overthrow existing school designs and facility assignments. Instead, a few model schools are established in a community, with plans to add more small schools or to gradually break-up large schools. Oakland, for example, opened five New Small Autonomous Schools (NSAS) in 2001. Two more opened in 2002. Another two are approved to open, but are seeking facility space. The Superintendent coaches the NSAS. An Executive Director coaches a cluster of traditional schools that happen to already be small. His mission is to help them adopt the autonomy and accountability features of the NSAS models. The district has a Charter Schools Coordinator working directly with Oakland’s thirteen independent charter schools, all of which are small enough to meet the model’s size criterion, but which do not all meet the quality education goals of the Small Schools Movement.

The District is also discussing other small autonomous school models with school design teams that may fill additional places on the continuum between traditional schools and independent charter schools. District leaders want all Oakland parents to be able to choose a small, high quality public school for their children to attend in Oakland. District and community leaders estimate that meeting this demand will require the creation or restructure of at least forty small, high quality public schools.

Propitious timing.
The Small Schools Movement has patiently developed demonstration small schools and conducted research studies. Now it has data-based research to demonstrate how small schools address the national horror over student violence at large middle class schools like Columbine High School, growing demand for parental choice, and the federal government’s demand that all schools help all students perform academically—leaving no child behind. The Movement benefits precisely because it has been willing to make progress slowly and build allies in many sectors.

Political support from powerful sponsors. According to Parent Powers: an electronic newsletter published by Center for Education Reform (“Why We Need Small Schools.” October 1999, Vol. 1, Issue 5)—“everyone from Hillary Clinton to George W. Bush” is calling for smaller, more personal, more responsive learning places, and for kids to have stronger ties to adults. (http://edreform.com/parentpower/99oct/99oct2.htm)

Because the Small Schools Movement calls for systemic reforms that will enhance the teaching and learning environment, it is generally supported by large and powerful constituencies of teachers, counselors, their unions, and parents. This reform effort currently benefits from strong financial support from nonprofit public benefit foundations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Annenberg Foundation.

In some communities, principals and their unions may object to the reform if they feel their opportunities for salaries and prestige will be reduced because they will serve smaller populations. Some parents may fear their children will unduly suffer from reduced course offerings or fewer extracurricular opportunities at smaller schools with smaller overall budgets. The Small Schools Movement must explicitly address these concerns in order to maintain the support of these constituencies in local communities.

Freezing reforms into regulations and laws.
This is the next area that the Small Schools Movement needs to address. Small classroom sizes for K-3 and ninth grade students became the norm when California law provided a financial incentive for keeping these class sizes small. (It also had the unintended outcome of further stressing teacher shortages.) State legislation that provides a financial incentive for keeping school enrollments small would be welcomed, especially by fiscally challenged urban districts. Meanwhile, OUSD, for example, adopted its Small Schools Initiative policy that encourages the creation of small schools, but no OUSD policy prohibits the creation, consolidation, or continuation of large schools.

Bringing useful ideas, humor, and non-boring scholarship to the charter school community (for over seven weeks).
As OUSD implements its Small Schools Initiative, it discovers many policies must be reviewed and revised to implement the initiative. At a tipping point of approximately 40 small autonomous schools, the different service and monitoring demands that small autonomous schools place on central systems are expected to generate an irresistible need for internal system changes. After District central office systems are redesigned to serve small autonomous schools, then that institutionalized change will become positive inertia to forestall the District’s backsliding into former service relationships.

- Easy replication.
The concept of small autonomous schools is easy to envision. What community members, school leaders and district staff in Oakland discovered, however, was there is no guarantee that we are all sharing the same understanding. What is important is for all partners in Oakland’s Small Schools Initiative (or similar coalitions in communities throughout the Small Schools Movement,) to stay the course. Clarifications and compromises will occur over time. Oakland was initially inspired by small schools in New York, Boston and Chicago. Now our small schools offer another variation on that theme. Each community adapts the concept to fit local conditions, and each school adapts the model to serve its own students, parents and teachers.

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Any opinions, findings, or conclusions are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the ED, NCSC, or any government agency, IIA, AIBT, or RCB.

Call for Participation

Bridging the Gap to Community Empowerment
Developing New and Effective Strategies for Educational Reform
Thursday, May 8 through Saturday, May 10, 2003
Detroit, Michigan

Ring a Bell for Education Reform
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Thursday, July 31 through Saturday, August 2, 2003
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The National Charter School Clearinghouse (NCSC-www.NCSC.info) is a Field Initiated National Assistance Project funded by the United States Department of Education as a generous grant to AIBT/IIA/RCB High School. Now in our second year of operation, NCSC is building upon first year successes by hosting conferences and seminars located strategically across the United States, of special interest and importance to charter schools.

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The NCSC Review masthead was designed by a student from the New School for the Arts (NSA). The designer, Mike Schonert, is a 19 year-old student at the NSA in Tempe, Arizona. Mike will be graduating in June 2003 from NSA and plans to attend a university in California where he will study the techniques of graphic design and film editing. Mike’s design was chosen out of all submitted entries in an NCSC sponsored contest.

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