



“Going Small”: Start Up and Early Implementation of Small High Schools in Philadelphia

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“Small schools
are the launch pad,
not the rocket ship”

Michael Klonsky

Introduction and Background

Research for Action is currently engaged in a two-year study, “Going Small: Public/Private Collaboration in Restructuring High School Education in Philadelphia.” Funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Going Small examines Philadelphia’s approach to creating and supporting small high schools, how the district works with partners in this effort, and small schools’ impact on student enrollment and performance.

What is small?—The School District of Philadelphia defines small as under 700 students which is higher than most other cities where 400 or 500 is more commonly the threshold. In Philly, there are 32 district small high schools and 20 charter small high schools.

Since 2002, 26 small district high schools have been newly created or significantly changed. These high schools are the focus of Research for Action’s current research project.

Small high schools typically have “**Three R’s**” **Rigor**: challenging curriculum; **Relevance**: learning that connects to student lives; **Relationships**: personalized learning environment.

National studies about small schools point to the need for them to have greater autonomy and flexibility in order to succeed. Successful small schools are those which provide their leaders with the flexibility to customize course offerings, hire staff and define needed positions, and provide time for common planning.

Philadelphia was one of the first cities in the nation to “go small” in the 1980’s. What looked like a promising venture then, was discontinued. Now, there is renewed interest in small schools not only in Philly but across the nation. It will be important to continue with the work now, especially given the upcoming change in district leadership.

Findings from Year One

The District has made a great deal happen without significant outside funding for systemic change. Philadelphia has created or transitioned 26 small high schools (\$0 for 26 schools) as compared to other cities such as New York (\$70 million for 83 schools) and Chicago¹ (\$25 million for 15 schools). There is concern that more budget cuts and ongoing scarce resources will negatively impact this promising project.

One consequence of the lack of resources has been inconsistent and less than ideal start-up for many of the small schools. Brand new schools did receive the minimum amount of resources needed for a successful launch while transitioning schools did not receive adequate support for start up. Adequate support includes: Principal hired in advance, resources for planning prior to opening, flexibility re: hiring, curriculum, and staffing.

RFA’s early research indicates both promising trends and causes for concern in Philadelphia’s small high schools. Promising trends include innovation, energy and momentum, and new high school options. Anecdotal reports and district data indicate more positive school climate and improved attendance at many small high schools. RFA’s research also indicates that the small high schools have helped inspire some teachers to stay in the profession or choose to become teachers in Philadelphia high schools.

Causes for concern include whether the district and schools will have both adequate resources and the necessary flexibility to fully implement small high schools so that they can impact student achievement. In RFA’s research, Philadelphia school leaders and teachers talk about the need for flexibility in rostering, in creating common planning time, in staffing and in following the core curriculum. It is also crucial for the district to ensure equity across high schools so that all receive the resources they need for success.

¹The Chicago High School Redesign Initiative.