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## Small Schools and the Pressure to Consolidate<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Positioned in relationship to reform literature calling for small schools “by design” and interpreting data from a case study of a high performing but low-SES district in a Midwestern state, this paper provides a basis for making sense of the apparent divergence in policies governing schooling structures in rural and urban places. Its interpretation examines the way educational reformers work to valorize a multidimensional set of practices constituting “small school reform.” This reform package is, ironically, to some extent unrelated to what is actually taking place naturally in small schools and districts, where more “traditional” practices are said to be more common. Reformers often regard such practices as deficient, but that judgment seems to disregard empirical findings about school and district size, which typically show that smaller scale itself confers advantages across locales. Moreover, they overlook dynamics such as those revealed in this case study, which demonstrate how smaller scale promotes a close-knit family atmosphere as well as shared commitment to a set of core values. In addition, with smaller scale come structural arrangements that support an ethos of self-sufficiency and openness to

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“outsiders”—transient as well as open-enrollment students. These dynamics enable a small district to weather substantial threats to its existence.

Keywords: small schools; school district organization; school consolidation; rural education; education reform; reformism.

## **Escuelas pequeñas y la presión por consolidarse**

### **Resumen**

Este trabajo proporciona una base para entender la divergencia aparente entre las políticas que gobiernan las estructuras escolares en zonas rurales y urbanas. Tomando posición en relación a la literatura sobre reformas que reclama la creación de escuelas pequeñas, este trabajo interpreta datos obtenidos en un estudio de caso en un distrito en un estado en el centro oeste con un rendimiento educativo alto, no obstante de su estatus socio-económico bajo. Se examina la manera como aquellos a cargo de implementar las reformas trabajan valorizando un conjunto multidimensional de prácticas que constituyen la "reforma escolar pequeña". Irónicamente, este paquete de reformas no tiene, hasta cierta medida, relación con lo que está sucediendo de manera natural en escuelas y distritos pequeños, en donde se supone que prácticas más "tradicionales" son más comunes. A menudo reformadores consideran dichas prácticas deficientes, pero este juicio de valor parece contradecir los resultados empíricos acerca del tamaño de escuelas y distritos, los cuáles mostraron que, de forma típica, la escala más pequeña parece mas ventajosa. Es más, saltan a la vista dinámicas, como aquellas reveladas en este estudio de caso, que demuestran como un tamaño más pequeño (de escuelas y distritos) promueve tanto un ambiente familiar como consensos acerca de un conjunto de valores fundamentales. Asimismo, a la par con tamaños más reducidos aparecen arreglos estructurales que apoyan una ética de auto-suficiencia, tanto como una apertura hacia alumnos "de afuera" y aquellos no inscritos formal o permanentemente. Gracias a estas dinámicas escuelas y distritos pequeños están en condiciones de resistir los embates que representan serias amenazas para su existencia.

## **Background**

Despite research evidence demonstrating the advantages of smaller schools and districts, especially for low-income students (e.g., Howley, 1996; Howley & Bickel, 1999), many states continue to pass regulations that require or strongly encourage small districts to consolidate or to close their small schools and replace them with larger, consolidated schools (Mathis, 2003). Rural and small-town communities perhaps feel the pressure for consolidation most acutely, particularly those with vulnerable economies and limited political leverage (e.g., Dayton, 1998; DeYoung, 1993; Peshkin, 1982). Moreover, with the power of rural caucuses diminishing in state and national politics, the interests of rural citizens—including their interest in retaining community schools—increasingly yield to those of urban and suburban constituencies to whom rural fates are irrelevant (e.g., Eyre & Finn, 2002; Nachtigal, 1994; Schwab, 1985).

Support for extant small schools and districts is also not strong among many education bureaucrats, as evidenced by the official stance taken by state education agencies in places such as Arkansas and West Virginia (Eyre & Finn, 2002; Rural School and Community Trust, 2002, 2003).

In addition, because some educational reformers view small, rural and small-town schools as conservative and uncooperative, they support the modernizing that consolidation ostensibly brings (Chadwick, 2002; Swidler, 2000). Unlike small schools designed that way specifically to achieve a reform agenda, those schools that are “naturally small” (Swidler, 2004) seldom receive serious attention for their positive characteristics (e.g., Bickel, Tomasek, & Eagle, 2000). Sometimes, however, as Swidler (2000, p. 8) notes, these schools serve as an idyll that professional educators draw upon when they recommend small school initiatives for urban communities.

School administrators and teachers in some rural communities and small towns also downplay the relevance of community members’ interest in preserving small, local schools (e.g., Peshkin, 1982; Woodrum, 2004). Focusing on efficiency and accountability, local professional educators often see the concerns of community members as sentimental and unrealistic (e.g., Peshkin, 1982; cf. Lyson, 2002).

Nevertheless, the persistent finding that small schools and small districts confer advantages, especially to low-income students, suggests that small scale must, more often than not and *on its own*, promote conditions that support students’ academic growth. Studies illuminating the dynamics of smallness—divorced from the explicit initiatives of reform—remain, however, few indeed (e.g., Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992).

The case study reported here provides such an analysis. It tells the story of a small K-12 district (which we call “Concordia,” a pseudonym) that operates three small schools, serves an extremely poor and highly transient student body, relies on traditional approaches to curriculum and instruction, and achieves extremely well academically. Despite its success, the district has confronted the threat of consolidation on two occasions and continues to seek ways to ensure its survival in a policy environment that provides powerful incentives for the consolidation of small schools and districts.

## Related Literature

Recent research provides evidence that smaller as compared to larger units (both schools and districts) possess academic merits, particularly offering achievement advantages in impoverished locales. The new conventional wisdom seems to favor the creation of smaller schools, especially in places where schools grew extremely large during the 20th century. Nonetheless, in rural places especially, many states continue efforts to create larger schools and districts (Mathis, 2003). Because it represents the variability of school size as it naturally appears, the present authors prefer the term “smaller schools” over “small schools.” Smallness, on this view, is not a particular enrollment or a particular enrollment category, it is instead a relative concept, and the relative adjective *smaller* captures the fact quite simply.<sup>2</sup> This critical distinction is often lost on practitioners, researchers, and the public alike.

### Warrantable Size Claims

Although many of the claims currently made for smaller schools under the press of the changed conventional wisdom are difficult to warrant empirically, several are comparatively well

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<sup>2</sup> Despite such simplicity, the concept seems a difficult one for many people. Many with whom the authors have spoken insist on knowing the exact size that renders a school “small,” sometimes to determine if their school *is* small and sometimes to make policy.

established: (1) Impoverished children have higher achievement in smaller schools, (2) the link between poverty and achievement is weaker in smaller as compared to larger schools, (3) dropout rates are lower in smaller schools, (4) participation rates in school activities are much higher in smaller schools (see Howley, 2002 for one summary of evidence bearing on these four claims), and (5) smaller high schools can offer appropriate curriculum.

In brief, the evidence for (1) and (2) is based on a line of evidence begun by Friedkin and Necochea (1988) based on a mid-range theory about the interaction of poverty and size, in which smaller size is hypothesized to benefit test scores of students in impoverished schools and larger size benefits test scores of students in affluent schools. The co-authors of the present article are part of a team that has applied and extended the original methods to a series of state and national replications (e.g., Howley & Howley, 2004; Huang & Howley, 1994; see Howley & Howley, 2004, note 9, for a full listing of the relevant studies). An important sidebar here is that (1) and (2) have been shown not only for school size, but for district size, and this fact has particular implications for urban school reform.

Claims (3) and (4) have been established by consistent findings from varied researchers for at least 40 years (e.g., Barker & Gump, 1964; Fetler, 1989; Morgan & Alwin, 1980; Pittman & Haughwout, 1987), and there is little dispute about these findings. Finding (5) consists of Emil Haller and David Monk's falsifications, in a series of reports (e.g., Haller, Monk, Spotted Bear, Griffith, & Moss, 1990; Haller & Monk, 1993) that address curriculum breadth and depth related to size. According to Haller and Monk, national and state evidence suggests that 9–12 high schools enrolling 400 students easily offer a curriculum of adequate depth and breadth. Still smaller schools can provide a focused curriculum rather than model themselves on the comprehensive high school (see Meier, 1995; Roellke, 1996).

The interaction studies (findings 1 and 2) help explain the overall low correlation of size with achievement: the average masks differential effects by social class. Studies of the interaction effects of size and poverty on achievement suggest that schools that are productive of student learning can vary in size, depending on circumstance, over a considerable range. Up to an upper limit of about 1000, the more affluent the community, the larger the school can be without damaging achievement levels (Howley & Howley, 2004). In schools above about 1,000 students (grades 9–12), however, the larger the size, the greater the damage done to the achievement of almost all students according to the analysis performed by Lee and Smith (1997).

The Howley and the Lee teams view the construct of “optimal” high school size quite differently, but achievement equity according to both teams benefits from high schools that are quite small (see, in this journal, Howley & Howley, 2004, and Lee, 2004, for the dispute). The two teams also agree that much remains to be learned about the influence of size, and that a wide range of issues confronts interested researchers.

What remains unknown seems still to outweigh what is known, and this lack of knowledge is pertinent to the challenges of establishing, as a reform proposition, smaller schools in cities and suburbs on the basis of the extant research. The problem here is that the extant research, with which such efforts have been justified, investigated *already existing* schools of varying sizes on a post-hoc basis. This circumstance means that the exigencies of creating new “small schools” as a *reform proposition* may embed issues not confronted at all in the extant research. The discussion turns next to this problem.

### Misapplications of Warranted Claims #1: Simulations of Smaller Size

Smaller schools are not typically built physically or established separately as part of a reform effort. Instead, within-school grouping arrangements (e.g., into *houses* or *schools-within-schools*) have been the typical response. These arrangements constitute administrative simulations of smaller size, and the record of success for such efforts is not good (Lee, Ready, & Johnson, 2001; Raywid & Schmerler, 2003). The arrangements may be called schools, but they typically lack the autonomy and operational distinctiveness inherent in naturally existing schools (Meier, 1995; Raywid & Schmerler, 2003).

Reformers, of course, are aware of these issues, and they recognize that urban school reform is an inevitable negotiation with huge bureaucracies that maintain a stalwart interest in their own survival. In these circumstances, school size is negotiable, but district size never is (even though the research also provides reasons to value smaller district size). Indeed, in some urban situations the autonomy of naturally existing smaller schools seems to be compromised or disabled by a variety of mandates (e.g., curriculum, professional development, and staffing imposed from the center). Thinking like a researcher, one would not, in fact, reasonably expect that administrative simulations would embed the conditions and relationships prevalent in schools that are naturally smaller.

### Misapplications of Warranted Claims #2: The Reformism of “Small Schools”

Smaller size does not *automatically* or *certainly* make for better schooling in *every* case. Better schooling also requires human agency. This reasonable insight bears on the second misapplication of evidence identified by this review: missteps of reformism. Reform seems always needed, but *reformism* is said by some (e.g., Scott, 1998) not to entail much improvement.

In the context of urban struggles for improvement, the identity of “small schools” *as a reform* helps legitimate their existence. “Small schools” is a reform package. The move to present a smaller organizational arrangement as a reform is arguably part of the struggle, but the move comes with baggage. In the context of urban strife, the baggage is given by this question: “Does the *package* now called ‘small schools’ work?” A fuller recognition of the inherent contradictions might improve the odds of some success in the urban struggle.

Cook (2002) offers the following description of what constitutes a bona fide reform package: Experiments ... designed to describe the effects of a *multidimensional set of activities deliberately manipulated as a package*... They are only explanatory if the manipulations are chosen to help discriminate between competing theories or if the processes mediating between a cause and effect are specified and measured; or if effects sizes vary in systematic ways across outcomes, populations or settings. (pp. 179–180, emphasis added)

If small school size is to be a testable reform, it must, under Cook’s definition, become an intentionally manipulated multidimensional set of activities. Being a smaller school, in other words, is not sufficient, even though their creation is the goal.

Because “not all small schools are successful” (Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Ort, 2002, p. 642), what it takes to *make* a small school successful becomes a compelling research question in the context of urban struggle. Although small size is a seeming *sine qua non*, it must be joined to a set of activities within the province of educators in the way that size, a structural condition, can never be. The goal in this way becomes the reform of educators themselves; structural issues and implications lose their perceived critical relevance.

Has any multidimensional set of activities been validated as constituting “small schools”? Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2002, pp. 653–663) offer an impressive set, even a multidimensional one. The elements of this set include the following: small classes and reduced pupil load, advisement structures, coherent and purposeful curriculum, explicit teaching of academic skills, multiple strategies for active learning, real-world connections, performance assessment, flexible supports, and collaborative planning and professional development.<sup>3</sup> In themselves, however, practices of this sort have remarkably little to do with smaller school size—nothing in smaller size suggests that these things must be done because a school is small. Henceforward, a “small school” properly speaking nonetheless needs not only to be small but it must exhibit a multidimensional set of activities of some sort (e.g., Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Ort, 2002; Fine & Somerville, 1998; Lee & Smith 1995).

The Gates Foundation, for instance, has evidently made the inscription of such practices part of its mandate for funding “small-school” startups in cities. One of the authors was involved with a recent project partially funded by the Foundation. The project concerned construction costs of smaller schools; but the funding organizations insisted that schools studied be represented as good. In this case, project team members negotiated among themselves and with the Foundation to establish a mutually acceptable definition of good that uniquely among such definitions included *naturally smaller rural schools* (see Lawrence et al., 2005, for details).

The association, in a reform package, of size and any set of practices labeled good confounds attempts to study school size by conflating practices with the structural influence of size itself. Our concern is not at all the purity of the research effort, however, but respect for the variety of decent educational practices invented or cherished by local people (patrons as well as professionals); smaller schools can arguably be very good in very different ways. Some of the recommended practices may indeed take place more often in smaller schools, on average, but the research on this possibility is limited, and not encouraging. Lee and Smith (1995) examined the influence of school size in light of “restructuring” practices as reported by principals. Smaller schools were found to exhibit higher achievement gains and better equity than larger schools, but were, ironically, shown (based on the testimony of principals) to use *fewer* reform practices than larger schools.

Wallach and Lear (2005, p. 17) summarizing their concerns with the development of 72 “small schools” from 17 large comprehensive high schools (a Washington state effort funded by the Gates Foundation), find themselves caught in what is perhaps a typical reformist bind:

Our primary worry is whether small school staffs, their administrators, district office leaders, families, and communities will be able to move beyond the “old world” beliefs and practices common to comprehensive high schools to a “new world” orientation of small schools, which places personalization and relationships at the heart of schooling for both students and teachers.

Good intentions are abundantly evident in such observations, but there is absolute ignorance, as well, about the existence of “traditional” smaller schools where the last clause in this passage—the operant clause—may actually apply quite apart from any prescribed list of good practices.

The study reported in this paper challenges the judgment that extant smaller schools represent thoughtless approaches to schooling. Indeed, the study we report here does show an impoverished school in which personal relationships are central for students and teachers—and for the adult patrons of the school. As rural education researchers, our dispute with reformism is that *what already exists* is so *relentlessly* construed as the enemy of improvement. This study of a single

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<sup>3</sup> These elements were included in addition to an enrollment of about 300 students in each of 11 schools in the effort under scrutiny in this particular evaluation.

school shows how wrong such a judgment can be, and it hints at what is to be lost in the insistence that the dogmas of reform be followed.

We examined the experience of schooling in Concordia to understand better how a small district that operates existing small schools (i.e., schools that are small by default or, rather, naturally small) has consistently been able to perform well academically. Concordia is not a charter district, and it has operated its three small schools for a very long time. The purpose of the study was to uncover the dynamics enabling the district to perform so well, given the sharp challenges it faces.

## Methods

A team of four researchers gathered data about the Concordia Local School District, primarily through interviews. Additional data were obtained from publicly available archives and from publications produced by the district itself (e.g., board minutes, school and district continuous improvement plans, and student handbooks). To set up interviews, one member of the research team visited the district to identify volunteers from the various constituencies. School secretaries assisted the researchers by letting teachers and parents know about the research project, and by assembling lists of volunteers. Among the volunteers were the district's three administrators, the previous superintendent who had served the district for more than 50 years (with almost 30 as superintendent), and 11 teachers. The teachers included those who had free time during the days when interviewers were able to spend time in the district. With a teaching staff of 34 in the district, the 11 who were interviewed represented about one-third of all teachers.

The 10 parents and citizens who volunteered to be interviewed tended to be people with close ties to the district. Two (one parent and one non-parent citizen) were board members; one was a classified employee as well as a parent. The rest were walk-ins—people invited to be interviewed when they arrived at one of the schools for some other purpose (e.g., to pick up a child). The researchers recognized, of course, that the parents and citizens who were interviewed did not constitute a representative sample or even a purposive sample representing different constituencies in the community. This constraint may have had an influence on what interviewers heard about the district, perhaps providing a more favorable view of the district than would have been revealed by a random sample of constituents.

With one exception, interviews were conducted on school premises. They lasted from 45 minutes to two hours and were audiotaped. Interviewers asked questions included on an interview schedule (see Appendix), but they also posed additional questions to encourage participants to clarify and elaborate their responses. All tapes were transcribed, and the researchers used the transcripts as well as the documents assembled from the district as the basis for identifying emergent themes.

Using an iterative process of coding and recoding data, the team developed a set of linked codes representing the most salient themes. At the first stage in the process, each team member coded data from the interviews he or she conducted. Next the research team met to examine the codes thus generated and to create a composite codebook that included all unique codes and eliminated duplicate codes—for example, merging the codes *proficiency test* and *accountability test*. The first author did the recoding of all data, using the final codebook developed collaboratively by all of the interviewers.

Once data were recoded, the first author also collapsed codes into conceptual categories. This process resulted in the establishment of six categories related to the district's identity and to the conditions confronting it. These categories took into account approximately two thirds of all interview data. The researcher then reviewed the data in each category and looked for conceptual

connections across categories. For example, interviewees who talked about close relationships in the district typically discussed the connection between such relationships and the district's record of academic excellence.

The examination of ideas that made conceptual sense of the data in the six categories resulted in a determination of the degree to which possible emergent themes might be construed as discrete. An interpretation combining data from the six categories into three emergent themes turned out to take all of the categorized data into account as well as producing almost no cross-theme overlap of either codes or categories. In other words, this interpretative solution was relatively exhaustive yet also parsimonious. In addition, the researcher looked for outliers reflecting perceptions of individuals that differed from the general sentiments expressed by most participants. Where such outliers were found, they were discussed explicitly in the findings. Finally, the researcher reviewed data about the district's demographics and its academic performance to contextualize participants' impressions of its identity and the challenges confronting it.

## Findings

In this section, we first report contextual information about Concordia, providing support for the claims that the district serves economically disadvantaged children and academic performance in the district's three schools has been and remains high. Then we turn to a consideration of three emergent themes.

### The Concordia Local School District

Constituting the district are three public schools, enrolling a total of 420 students. In the year in which we collected data (2003–04), West Street Primary Elementary School enrolled 130 students in grades pre-kindergarten through three, Middleboro Intermediate Elementary enrolled 96 students in grades four through six, and East Street High School enrolled 194 students in grades seven through twelve. Not only were school and district enrollments low, so too were class sizes. The pupil-educator ratio in the district was 12.8 to 1—the 11th lowest in a state with more than 600 districts. The district is classified by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as located in a small town in a non-metropolitan county (NCES, 2006).

Based on 2003–04 data, 65% of the district's students were economically disadvantaged (i.e., they qualified for free and reduced-price lunches) and 18.1% received special education services. Student transience rates in the district, moreover, were among the highest in the state: 19% of Concordia students were in the district for less than a full year. Another indicator of the extreme economic distress facing families in the district was the median family income of about \$25,000 (based on 2000 census data) in comparison to a statewide average of about \$50,000. On this indicator of economic stress, the district fared worst in the entire state.

Considering its economic profile and its high level of student transience, the Concordia Local School District performs well academically, particularly at the higher grade levels. According to state data for 2003–04, the Concordia Local School District had an attendance rate of 94% for all grades (compared to the state average of 95%). The state reported the district graduation rate as 96%, which exceeded the overall rate for schools in the state (i.e., 84%) by a large margin. In addition, the district met 14 of the state's 18 accountability indicators (e.g., passing rate on grade-level tests, attendance rate, and so forth), qualifying it for the rating *Effective*. The district also met the state's Adequate Yearly Progress requirements.

Analysis of the qualitative data yielded three emergent themes. The first theme, *smallness*, provided insight into the conditions that enabled the schools within the district to perform so well. Smallness reportedly nurtured close and supportive relationships that in turn nurtured a shared sense of responsibility among school participants. The second theme, *frugality and resourcefulness*, explained an ethos that simultaneously strengthened the district's identity and supported its survival. The third theme, *dynamics of consolidation*, characterized the threats faced by the district and the way the district used its identity (and the practices shaping that identity) to protect itself from these threats.

## Smallness

In every interview we conducted, the participants made note of the small, intimate, and unique character of the village and its schools. Moreover, our visits to the schools confirmed that class sizes were small and that the relationships among teachers and between students and teachers were informal and cordial. Although most participants viewed smallness as a significant benefit, a few focused on the limitations associated with the small size of the schools.

According to interviewees, the smallness of the district enabled all staff members to know all children and to intervene on their behalf, both with respect to academics and with respect to discipline. It allowed staff to take direct action to solve problems rather than entangling them in bureaucratic "red tape." And it enabled the district to maintain a web of cross-generational connections that enriched relationships and perpetuated symbolic practices supporting those relationships.

Smallness characterized the district as a whole and every part of it. As indicated by the information about the district that was provided above, district enrollment, school sizes, and class sizes were all quite small. The educators in the district found these conditions supportive of academic focus, individual attention, and stringent discipline. A high school teacher commented, "We have very small classes compared to a lot of other schools... and I think it gives an opportunity to know the students a little bit better and to give students more individual attention." With regard to the way smallness affected discipline, the former superintendent noted, "the discipline here is very strict and confined because we had small numbers and everyone knew everyone else." Comments from parents reiterated this perspective. A former teacher put smallness in a policy context when he explained,

I'm not sure what the thinking is at the state level now, but before, bigger was better. If you had one school per county, that's what they had to worry about, and they'd have been happier I think... and today they're probably realizing you better go back to the small school and teach the one-on-one and get the human touch to teaching.

One teacher saw smallness as a particular drawback with regard to efficiency, noting that "it takes just as much to prepare for a class of 10 as it does for 30." His perspective was not shared widely, however. Nevertheless, several participants explained that, regardless of its benefits, smallness also made the district vulnerable. As one community member commented, "We don't get the funding; we don't have a student body to justify a lot of different things."

Caring for students was part of the close-knit organizational culture made possible by the smallness of the schooling enterprise in Concordia. The superintendent—himself a graduate of the district—explained,

You'll see staff throughout the district volunteering to work with our kids in various ways. They go above and beyond. I have people that volunteer their time to take kids on college campuses. And I approve their personal days to do it because it benefits the kids. So that's where I'm saying that the interest has not changed since I was in school. I can remember Mr. Falls saying to me [when I didn't have lunch money], he'd say 'I have something for you to do'... and then I'd go [and to it], and I'd come back and he'd give me fifty cents, and that was my lunch money.

Teachers also commented on the fact that the small size of the district enabled them to maintain strict discipline without being unfeeling. As one teacher commented,

You look beyond a child just having a bad day. We try to find out why that child is having a bad day and understand and try to help them work through their problems instead of just saying, 'you have detention.' You try to give them a lot of... love, and you try to help them. You know, with the small numbers we can help them work through a lot of things.

In addition smallness contributed to what many participants called the "family atmosphere" of the district. Staff, for example, got along well and enjoyed each other's company. According to a high school teacher,

Everyone here gets along, which is pretty rare (laughter). And, like I said, we do a lot of things together outside of school. The women go shopping and the guys sometimes get together and go golfing. And sometimes we just have get togethers at somebody's house, and... men and women will bring their spouses and, like at Christmas one year we had a tour of homes which was a lot of fun and we went to each others' houses and saw the Christmas decorations. Everybody had some kind of snacks and a little token that they gave everybody like a little Christmas ornament or something.

In this kind of environment, there was little need for and, hence, little tolerance for bureaucracy. Personnel issues were dealt with flexibly as were academic matters. Members of the research team, for example, observed the generous way colleagues responded when a teacher had to leave school to attend to a family emergency. Not only did several teachers volunteer to assume instructional responsibility for the affected teacher's class, throughout the day most teachers stopped by the office to receive updates on the family's situation from the school secretary. According to the high school principal,

You've got to be flexible in a small school... you just see them working together. I don't think there's one teacher that dislikes another teacher. I mean we all have our different quirks, I guess that's what you can call it. But yet we all respect the other.

And as the former superintendent explained,

There are very few times memorandums are written. If I have something to say to a teacher I went and talked to them, and in the same token they came and talked to me, and they would even call and say, 'would you come and see me that day' and that day I got to see them.

The close relationships that characterized daily life in the district also extended to the wider community and drew on the district's legacy of academic engagement and shared values. When looking for a commencement speaker, for example, the high school principal called on former district graduates. An elementary school teacher who had herself attended school in Concordia talked about the ease with which she could communicate with many of the parents of her current

students, “It’s funny because I know a lot of their parents too. I went to school with a lot of them. I know a lot of people who just [like] staying in Concordia.”

At the same time, many of the educators commented on the fact that an increasingly large group of transient parents had limited involvement with the schools. Recognizing the value of close relationships with parents, the teachers expressed regret about this circumstance. Nevertheless, they did not use it as a rationale for withdrawing care and attention from the children whose families were transient. As one teacher put it, “We know a lot of them come from homes that are transient or struggling or worse than we want, but... we challenge them, we are not gonna let them get by, like sometimes kids get passed over. But they don’t. We work really hard to challenge every child.”

Smallness assumed a variety of meanings for educators. In the rest of this section, we describe these meanings more fully in five subthemes: focus on mission, high expectations, challenging activities, self-monitoring, and “practicing what we preach.”

*Focusing on the core mission.* Even though the Concordia district served many students who in conventional terms might be seen as difficult to educate, its educators nevertheless set high standards for student performance, designed engaging and challenging learning activities, and monitored their own performance with respect to the academic mission of the district. The value placed on the district’s academic aims was evident in comments from everyone we interviewed: board members, school administrators, teachers, and parents. Participants described practices that revealed the extent to which the espoused value of academic excellence was acted upon in the daily life of the district’s schools. Moreover, members of the research team observed elementary school teachers carrying instructional materials that were at least one year above the grade levels they were assigned to teach. When asked about these materials, teachers explained that they tried to accelerate instruction in reading and math; and most kindergarteners observed by the researchers were already reading primers and simple trade books.

Support for the academic mission of the district started with the board, whose members, though diverse, seemed to trust the districts’ educators and provide them with the resources needed to perform their jobs well. According to one board member,

I feel very confident in the leadership personnel that we have here with the principal and superintendent, [and] you are not going to find better teachers, I really don’t think so, and you might find some that are just as good, but I don’t think you will find any who are better.

In turn, most educators expressed the view that the board was focused on the well-being of the district and was supportive of teachers’ efforts. As one teacher put it, “Board members... they are very supportive of the teachers.” Another explained, “Support starts with the board and the administrators, and that is excellent here, extremely high marks, and I think that within their resources they do everything they can do.” One of the district administrators reiterated this view: “The board was very supportive of everything: the administrators down to the teachers down to the parents, supportive of everything 100%.”

*Holding high expectations.* An important strategy for addressing the district’s core academic mission involved the maintenance of high expectations for all students. Not only did the educators in the district believe that high standards for students’ academic work would influence success in the long term, they also believed there was an important link between stringent standards of conduct and high performance, both in academics and in life. Several of the district’s educators talked about the way the district coupled high academic expectations with a stringently enforced code of conduct. And they made note of the fact that most students in the district were cognizant of educators’ expectations for their behavior, as the following anecdote suggests: “I happened to mention one time that one of the kids if he didn’t do such and such he would go to the office and I said, ‘You know what that means?’ And he said, ‘Yeah, death sentence.’”

The district's educators also held the view that it is especially important to maintain high expectations for children from low-income backgrounds. One teacher's explanation of this commitment seemed to characterize a sentiment shared widely: "I always think somebody sitting in the back of the class, no matter how poor they are, could really reach great heights—maybe especially because of it, honestly." An administrator reiterated this view:

We try to set the bar—we do set the bar—much higher than what I think is expected from us from the parents. And we have noticed that [when] we set the bar higher, then nine out of ten times the children are going to reach that bar.

To some extent, the commitment to high expectations represented a way for the educators in the district to rescue children from the circumstances that confronted them. As one teacher explained,

I feel that we kind of push our kids extra hard because we know that the hours that they are here and are with us are maybe the only credible learning opportunities that they have. That's being judgmental. I'm just [getting this] from their comments... about homework, reading at home, and things like that.

This comment and several others like it seemed to suggest that at least some of the district's educators did not see parents as full partners in the educational process but rather as passive recipients of the schools' professional services. Perhaps educators' limited success in encouraging parents to become involved in their children's schooling fostered this perspective, or perhaps parents were reluctant to become involved because they sensed that the teachers disapproved of them. School employees' explanations, however, revealed a complex understanding of the difficulties associated with parent involvement, as the following comment illustrates:

Now we do not have as much involvement as we would like to simply because [some parents are] too lazy to come in or they are too busy to come in. It's not that they don't care about their kids, but, you know, the ones that do care about their kids wish that they could be here more. And of course there are always those parents that count on us to do everything. We feed them, we clothe them, we teach them, not only the academics of it but what's right from wrong, and so sometimes we don't have as much involvement as we would like.

*Challenging activities.* The way district educators put high expectations into practice was by designing challenging lessons that engaged students in active and meaningful ways. In the primary grades, the choice of Accelerated Readers fit in with the belief that Concordia's children need extensive and rich literacy experiences. One school employee described the approach:

We got grants and we bought a lot of books and with those books come tests so the children learn at their own pace. They start from kindergarten and go up [the] levels of reading. On their own they can go to their specific grade level bin, get their book, read through the book, [and] take the test... so they are moving at their own pace with the teacher's guidance.

Focus on literacy started early. Even in kindergarten children were encouraged to learn to read, typically exceeding the standards specified in the state's curriculum framework. And in many classrooms teachers connected what students were reading to concrete experiences. As one teacher explained,

We have a story... and it's about [a] phonograph. I understand that, but my students have been brought up in a generation of CDs, and it means they have no concept of what a phonograph is. I have an antique crank phonograph, and that's what it was [in the story]. The basis of it was [that] after there had been a war and

everything was destroyed, the man, the only possession [he] had was the phonograph and how valuable that became. So that they could understand that, I brought it in, and I had some old record that we played. So that kinda brought it into perspective.

At the high school a challenging core academic curriculum was augmented by electives, which were offered even though the school's enrollment was very small. According to one high school educator, "We push our kids, whether it be special education, whether it be the high category; we offer a lot more classes than the other smaller schools [around] here." The principal noted, "We have six home ec [economics] classes; we have five industrial arts classes. We think that those are very important. We have six business classes."

Moreover, across the grade levels, teachers reportedly made use of pedagogy that engaged students actively in the learning process. One high school teacher reported, "In project oriented classes... the kids are moving around a lot, and I believe in constructive noise. I believe in—not that you have to sit there and be a mouse all day—move around, do some things, go for it." Other teachers talked about field trips, guest speakers, and arts and crafts projects designed specifically to expand students' horizons or to cultivate their self-efficacy.

Despite the fact that the district's curriculum was academically focused, some parents worried that the curriculum was not always sufficiently challenging for their academically talented children. But even these parents acknowledged that the district was flexible in accommodating their children's needs. According to one parent,

The only thing that I see that is negative about Concordia is, he is kind of an accelerated student, and they don't have the opportunity for accelerated students because of the budget, but, you know, the teachers work with him. They give him problems to challenge him so, that is something that they do not have to do, but they take it upon themselves to do. I really appreciate that.

Another parent remarked,

Well, we've continuously pushed our child once it was identified that she was fairly intelligent. We started her on a program. She went [for] about three years... to Purdue University for the... gifted institute program they have up there. And then [when] she was a freshman here we started her [at]... Scottsdale State. She's taking college classes. We let her skip the 6th grade—right from the 5th grade to the 7th grade.

Although Concordia educators worked hard to maintain a challenging curriculum, their efforts were not equally successful in all subjects. With the advent of state accountability tests, however, they have been able to monitor school performance and make changes positioned to produce improvement.

*Self-monitoring.* All of the Concordia educators we interviewed and many parents were aware of the districts' standing with respect to state accountability measures. As one parent reported, I think most of the kids by the time they get to the 9th grade have completed all parts of the proficiency test except maybe one or two parts. So we have a high average. There's usually very few, had not passed parts of the tests by the time they get into the freshman year.

Furthermore, most of those whom we interviewed understood the role that the tests can play in helping the district improve its programs. According to one teacher,

They look at that [the test], and they look at what courses we need to be offering, whether we need to make some changes... like we did this year. We needed the skills classes and certain areas, so we changed the schedule and looked at that where we were weak and made corrections.

Some teachers also made use of test results in an on-going way to gauge the progress of their students. This practice was described by one teacher:

I use test scores in the classroom because I want to see exactly where my children are... I have some children that were low in a certain standard; some children were higher in a certain standard. So the children that were higher in a certain standard I didn't want to bore them and give them you know more work in that. And we also do that with [the students who do not meet a standard]. We discuss it with them, and if we feel like a student needs tutoring or any extra work then we discuss it with them and there is a chance for after school [help].

According to the educators we interviewed, analysis of accountability test results revealed that mathematics achievement was lagging behind achievement in other subjects. As a consequence, the K-6 teachers recently selected a new textbook series and participated in professional development activities designed to help them make the best use of these new materials. As one administrator said,

I think the staff here has done a good job of being pro-active to see that they're not spinning their wheels. What they're doing is connected too, and you know if a red flag went up when we found out we weren't doing that so well, then... they're very willing... if they see they're not meeting a need,... to make the adjustments necessary.

*Practicing what we preach.* Not only did the formal academic program reflect a commitment to excellence, the district also engaged in a variety of other practices that supported this commitment. Two notable examples were the after-school mall and the refusal to interrupt instruction with intercom announcements.

Instead of using an intercom, the district used a practice that personnel referred to as “the nail outside the door,” which literally describes how the approach worked. We observed that written messages for a teacher were hung on his or her *nail*, providing information that the teacher needed but not resulting in any interruption of instructional time. Interestingly, the district had maintained this practice even in face of external pressure to change it. The former superintendent reported that the North Central accreditation team had officially “cited” (i.e., sanctioned) the district because it lacked an intercom. But the superintendent “told them it would be a cold day in you-know-where before they had an intercom put in while *I* was there” [original emphasis].

Whereas the refusal even to install an intercom system is an extremely unusual practice, the implementation of an after-school program to provide academic support is far more common. Nevertheless, Concordia's after-school “mall” was extraordinary. First, the program benefited from the support of almost all of the primary and intermediate-level teachers. Second, it enrolled a large majority of the districts' primary and intermediate-level students, 80% according to one estimate, 95% according to another (i.e., the rate was very high, whatever the true rate). Finally, the after-school mall coupled support with enrichment. As one teacher explained:

There is an hour of tutoring, the first hour, which is “homework haven,” and they work on homework and practice reviewing things the teacher needs to review. Skills that would help the children, like if they are having [an extremely hard time] with long vowels, they would work on the vowels... and then they have classes doing like crafts, karate, sewing, tumbling and cheerleading, exercise, mind games, letter people, its just a wide variety of things they can take the second hour.

Several other practices, made possible by the small scale of the district and its schools, supported the core mission. Important among these was the active involvement of district

administrators in the daily life of the schools. One teacher's description of an administrator illustrates what participants said about all of the district's school leaders: "I don't know how he did it, but he was everywhere. He knew everything that went on.... I mean everybody loved him and you would see him several times in the day, in the halls or the office." Other notable practices were teachers' willingness to extend the work day beyond the required hours, educators' use of personal funds to purchase materials for low-income students, collaborative planning among teachers, careful selection of new personnel, teachers' dissemination of weekly syllabi to students and their parents, and the use of peer-tutoring and other cooperative learning strategies.

### **Frugality and Resourcefulness: "We're Not Above Begging"**

Although the Concordia school district worked with some of the poorest students in the state, its funding level was close to the state average (\$8,700 per pupil in comparison to a state average of \$8,400 in 2002–03). Nevertheless, to maintain small classes and a rich and varied curriculum, the district chose to limit other costs, including teachers' salaries, which averaged about \$36,000 per teacher, compared to the state average of about \$46,000 per teacher.

While the board demonstrated commitment to providing the funds needed for professional development and for instructional materials, it has resisted the temptation to seek funding for new buildings. According to participants, new construction in the district would inevitably come at the cost of consolidation with another district. And that bargain has not been one that appears to interest most residents or school personnel. In fact, according to some interviewees, the former superintendent's preliminary investigations into possible consolidation options were so threatening that they produced a significant rift between him and the board.

Despite concern about limited funding, the board and school employees created a culture that seemed to reward the wise use of resources. Teachers, for example, chose instructional materials with the greatest chance of influencing students' learning: "books for my students to read—to share with them, books with tapes... math manipulatives, maybe even school supplies for home, books for home." And despite the fact that in comparison to teachers in other districts teachers were not given large amounts of money to spend, they believed that they were amply supported. One teacher commented,

You know what, we have never lacked in any kind of material or anything we needed to use because the board has always—since I've been here, 21 years—they give us so much each year to spend ourselves. It's always been the same for all these years. We have computers; we've had computers for 12 maybe years and... we have got a whole room full of brand new ones sitting out there now, I have seven in my room now and each room has about that many. I know of no supplies that we need. In fact this year we get \$125 teacher to spend on classroom supplies. I didn't spend all [of] mine.

Not all participants, however, found the instructional resources sufficient to support a high quality education. According to one parent,

[In] one of her science classes, they had too many kids so they couldn't do experiments themselves... the teacher did the experiment and everybody watched, which... kind of defeats the purpose, of course. There were too many kids and weren't enough resources to do it.... The kids learn a lot more if they are the ones that pour the stuff and make it foam up and all that stuff.

That same parent concluded, “They’re trying to do as much as they can with what’s available to them.”

The school leaders, moreover, were willing to support the requests that teachers made. As the former superintendent explained,

I’ll put it to you this way, one time the board came in and said they were going to cut supplies, and I said, “No, I’m not cutting. If we are to the point where the teachers don’t have what they need to do their job, you ought to be closing the doors; that’s my philosophy.” In other words there are other places to cut rather than supplies. I always told teachers don’t ever burn me, because you’ll only burn me once on supplies: if you need it, you order; if you don’t need it, you don’t order.

Nevertheless, where it was possible to cut corners, administrators were quite willing to do so. The superintendent, for example, commented, “We’re not above begging,” then told the following story:

Case in point; we had a large influx this year of 7th grade students, and the principal said, “I don’t have enough desks; we need to buy desks.” Well I priced ’em and it was going to cost about five thousand dollars. I said I don’t have five thousand dollars I can spend.... As a result I started checking with colleagues to see... who might have furniture to sell. Fortunately, I was able to find a district that sold me 35 desks for a dollar apiece. So to show you the community support and effort, a local business has a big truck he uses for his deliveries... and we don’t have anything like that. So what we ended up doing was borrowing his truck, gassing it up, using it.... The mayor even helped, and, of course, with things that needed to be unloaded and disposed of, he took care and saw that that was done.

Stewardship over the buildings was also part of the district’s commitment to the wise use of resources. As one parent noted, “This is a very old school. But as you can see, everything has been kept nice here, and we take, the people in this school system take, a lot of pride in the school.” Teachers, moreover, expressed satisfaction with the physical plant despite its age, older fixtures and furnishings, and relatively Spartan provisioning.<sup>4</sup> One teacher characterized the perspective shared by most others:

New buildings are wonderful. They are great, but our building functions fine as far as we have the rooms we need, we have the books, and it’s not the building that makes the school. It’s the teachers, the kids, the administration. We would love to have a nice building that is air conditioned, but we do fine with what we have. And a lot of parents think... that they were fine here; they were okay... even without air conditioning, and their children will be okay. Like I said, it is not the building; it’s what is in the building.

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<sup>4</sup> One member of the research team noted that the facilities were meager even by comparison to schools in her native country of Botswana.

## Dynamics of Consolidation

Participants reported that there were two times in recent memory when consolidation proposals had been made. In both cases, the community expressed strong resistance to the proposals. A parent commented, “This community would rather stay as it is.” According to another parent,

You know, two years ago there was talk for consolidation with another school. Well, I wasn’t in support because... I think smaller is better. You know, just personal opinion, you know; it’s the way I feel.

Some participants voiced concern that consolidation would compromise the quality of the education that students received in Concordia. According to one teacher,

[Community residents] had a meeting at the high school that packed up the auditorium, and they did not want it. They wanted their kids here in their building, close by, not having to ride on the bus for half hour, forty-five minutes.

Other participants described the struggle to maintain the school district as a struggle to retain the community’s identity. According to one administrator, “I think they’re afraid to let the schools go, because without a school, there’s a good chance to lose what we have here.” One parent summarized this perspective:

I think it is because, it is kind of like we have been a family for so long, and they [i.e., the other districts] have been kind of like a foreign territory, and we don’t want to merge. You know, we have our own identity and we don’t want to merge those two.

Despite community resistance to consolidation, many feared that it was inevitable. One teacher’s comment characterized a concern we heard often:

A concern for me and some other staff members that I’ve talked to is we are so small that we’re afraid that somewhere down the line the state is going say, “OK, you need to consolidate with this district” or something to that effect. That’s a big concern.... You keep hearing, “the State’s gonna do this, the State’s gonna do that.” They’re *gonna* consolidate the small districts, and so it is a concern [original emphasis].

*Benefiting from open-enrollment.* According to many participants, the district’s ability to attract non-resident students through open enrollment provided some protection against consolidation. One administrator called it, “our lifeline.” Another noted, “If it wasn’t for open enrollment, we couldn’t function.” From the perspective of these administrators, the district would not be able to remain solvent if it lacked the funds brought in through the voluntary enrollment of non-residents. Moreover, 2003–04 financial data reveal that the district received approximately 33% of its funding from open enrollment.

In a sense, reliance on open enrollment reinforced the district’s commitment to its core academic mission by providing it with a financial incentive for maintaining high standards. According to one teacher, “we keep getting more and more all the time so... I think that’s a reflection of the job that we’re doing.” One administrator explained parents’ decision to send their children to Concordia in the following way: “I think it is because academics or our high standards, academically.”

Several participants, however, offered a different explanation, which focused on families’ ties with the district. One parent of an open-enrollment student explained,

[It's] a base of people that have their kids here and bring their kids back generation after generation here. Because we like the school district, we like what it stands for, and there is longevity here.

A teacher, herself a native of Concordia, reiterated this perspective: "Some of the parents were born and raised in Concordia, and so that's where they went, and so that's where their kids... I mean they know what the district is like."

Although we questioned participants about the extent to which open-enrollment reflected white parents' desire to remove their children from racially integrated Hopewell City<sup>5</sup>, we did not get a sense that this was a primary motive. An interview with one teacher did, however, suggest this possibility:

Interviewer: So why do you think Hopewell kids come here?

Teacher: I don't know if it's because of racial prejudices or what it is for sure.

Interviewer: Why?

Teacher: There's much more black population in Hopewell schools than there are here.

Interviewer: So here is it predominately white?

Teacher: Predominately white, yes. As far as I've seen.

Interviewer: So you think there's some families that prefer that?

Teacher: Yes.

We also heard mixed opinions about the extent to which open-enrolled students and their families contributed to or detracted from community identity. A teacher's comment characterized one perspective as follows: "At least half of our students are open enrollment. That makes it a little different because you don't have that sense of community." But an administrator painted a different picture: "Our more stable kids are from open enrollment from other districts... it tends to be the open enrollment parents who call in and have meetings."

*Treating transients as community members.* Whereas there seemed to be stability among the students who attended Concordia schools under the open enrollment provision, resident students tended to be much more mobile.<sup>6</sup> High mobility among resident students seemed to be a condition associated with the poverty of many families who resided temporarily or intermittently in Concordia. As one parent explained,

We have a very poor area and our population of children is very transient here.

Children move in and out of the district. So even though we keep the same number, our students about all year round, these are different students that move in and out of the district. We have apartments in the area. That's where most of our students live, and usually it's a single parent. Because the parent's job leads to another area or for certain reasons, they move in and out of the area.

An administrator offered a similar explanation:

There are mostly rental properties. Our school is very transient as in, an adult leaves today, three months from now we'll see them again, and they'll leave a couple months later and then we might see them next year. And so they come in and out. In fact I don't know if it was last year's graduating class but the year before that [in] the graduating class I think [there were only] three kids who have gone K-12 here.

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<sup>5</sup> Hopewell City enrolls a student population that is about 10% African American, according to NCES data.

<sup>6</sup> District financial reports over several years showed relatively stable open enrollment figures, and administrators indicated that these numbers represented the same children year after year.

For some families, the schooling experience of the child seemed itself to be a cause for transience. A teacher provided insight into this dynamic:

I had one kid who went to East and got in trouble there, had a fight with a kid or something and transferred back here. So it's pretty common, you don't find that with many other schools.

Despite differing explanations of the phenomenon, there was little dispute about the consequences of mobility: it was said to magnify the difficulty of promoting academic excellence among children from low-income homes. Participants explained these difficulties in a variety of ways. According to one administrator, "It is harder to raise test scores when children are only here for a short period of time... constantly changing." Another administrator remarked, "When you have a district that has a transient population, it's very difficult to work with a moving target." And a board member commented, "That is real interesting when it comes to proficiency testing and the grade cards, you know the report cards for the school district... because you are always trying to keep up with who do we have in the district right now."

Even though they viewed it as a challenge, district personnel were nevertheless committed to providing care and a rigorous instructional program to all students. In part the commitment was grounded in respect for the fundamental decency of the district's clientele, whether they were the ones making use of open enrollment provisions or the ones moving their families in and out of the district<sup>7</sup>. A comment from the superintendent characterized this sentiment, which was reiterated in some form or other in most of the interviews:

This district has presently the lowest social economic income [of] any district in the state... so, it has changed dramatically. When I was a kid, people made good money; now they don't. But they still care about the kids. They still want the best for them, and I think this district is striving every day to provide that.

By extending care and holding high expectations for even those students who remained in the district for a short amount of time, Concordia educators were able to sustain the district's record of high performance. Although this approach was not motivated by self-interest, it nevertheless served the interest of district survival. Given a political climate favoring the consolidation of the smallest districts and schools in the state, survival did seem to depend on the district's ability to maintain sufficient enrollment, which it was able to do by nurturing a reputation for high-quality education. At the same time, district educators shared the belief that the smallness of the district was what enabled it to perform so well.

## Discussion

The case study of Concordia illustrates dynamics that link smallness of the district and its schools with the high academic achievement of its low-income students. These dynamics, moreover, do not depend upon explicit engagement with school restructuring or reform. Instead, *smallness itself* seems to promote professional collegiality and a shared commitment to accountability (Meier, 2002). Reformists might find some things to approve in Concordia, but the practices observed there seem to follow from the small scale of the district and its schools. These practices were certainly not imposed to "make small schools work."

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<sup>7</sup> Housing insecurity is common in impoverished rural places: Families move their households when unable to pay rent or when threatened with eviction for non-payment (see Schafft, 2005).

## Interpretations of Specific Findings

The district's educators feel responsible for providing a high level of care to whatever children arrive in their classrooms. Such care, moreover, includes cultivation of an identity associated with residence in the district. Even when students stay in Concordia for just a short time, their schooling experience seeks to transform them into Concordians. And being a Concordian confers pride and distinction.

The educators in the district also hold one another accountable. The high level of participation by teachers in the "After School Mall," for example, suggests that peer pressure is being used to good advantage in the district. Smallness also contributes to the district's ability to maintain a clear and coherent focus. Required to respond to the interests of a small and fairly homogeneous constituency, the Concordia School District avoids problems associated with more complex and contentious communities: unproductive power play, proliferation of goals, and bureaucratization.

Smallness also permits educators to engage efficiently in activities that improve their performance. Discussions of individual students, the curriculum, and teaching methods take place daily. Furthermore, important information is carried from one office to another with ease. The superintendent, for example, moves from building to building, listening to concerns, sharing information, and providing encouragement. In his role as communicator, moreover, he strengthens the district's core values by restating them frequently as well as by solving problems and celebrating accomplishments in ways that are consonant with those values.

Arguably, smallness of the educational enterprise does, in some circumstances, contribute to less productive dynamics (e.g., Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). In Concordia, however, the practices that promote high performance *depend* upon smallness because they are bound up with socialization to the norms of this distinct and the self-aware community that sustains it and which it sustains. As is the case in many small communities, moreover, heterodoxy is not well received in Concordia. Administrators talk about teachers who "do not fit in" and quickly leave the district. Open-enrollment students who fail to adjust to the district's code of conduct are asked to withdraw.

Interestingly, though, district residents—both children and families—are viewed with much greater tolerance. Despite the fact that many of these families live in the district only temporarily, educators view them as the heritors of an important legacy. High-quality education is practiced *on their behalf*; their obligation (as an abstract group) is merely to be there to receive it. Whereas this feature of the Concordia culture may well strike some readers as paternalistic, it nevertheless effectively restrains educators from disparaging the low-income families whom they serve. Unlike the typical treatment that poor families receive from local schools (e.g., Kozol, 1991; Tittle, 1996), the treatment received by Concordia's families is respectful and generous. Because the children—however poor—represent Concordia's future, educators see them as deserving of their very best efforts.

## Implications for the Wider Debate on School Size

The Concordia story does not solidly confirm the view that smallness alone confers benefits. The findings, however, also do not confirm the view that fashionable "best practices"—the shibboleths of reform—enable success. Instead, at Concordia we see a variety of "default" practices often frowned upon by educational reformers. The district, for instance, uses a mathematics series (Saxon) considered hopelessly old-fashioned and directive by mathematics education reformers. Its focus on strict behavioral compliance seems less "child-centered" than many reformers (e.g., Meier,

1995, 2002) prefer. In its charming adherence to “the nail on the door,” it repudiates an inscribed technology so common as to be considered essential—though scholars have indeed decried intercom *interruptions* as the bane of many teachers’ classroom lives (e.g., Good & Brophy, 1987). Refusing even to install classroom intercoms is a radical innovation, in one sense, but a very conservative refusal, in another.

At the same time, some of the activities that are occurring “naturally” at Concordia bear some resemblance to practices touted in the annals of reformism. For example, on-going conversations among Concordia’s teachers focus on teaching and learning, although these conversations are far less structured than the activities explicitly invoked as part of a professional learning community (e.g., Wald & Castleberry, 2000). In addition, because they are not overburdened by the bureaucratic requirements of large-scale schooling, administrators in Concordia are able to pay attention to the schools’ instructional program and to cultivate meaningful relationships with members of the school community. Although they do not set out to be “instructional leaders,” structural conditions in the district—principally small school and district size—very clearly facilitate this role.

Indeed, given what we saw at Concordia and what we heard from members of the school community, we have come to the conclusion that its educators did not purposefully undertake any set of practices that might be classified as a “school reform package.” Instead, over an extended period of time, they have made sense of schooling in ways that are responsive to, and effective within, the conditions they confront.

Just as people pursue many paths toward a decent life, schools can pursue many paths toward a decent education. The existence of one-best forms of schooling—optimal sizes, most effective curricula, and so forth—is as improbable as the existence of a one-best type of human being. Without such variety in schools and lives, minds and life itself become increasingly similar, increasingly standardized, and increasingly less thoughtful and vigorous (Scott, 1998). Concordia’s schools are, in our view, excellent small schools, and their excellence is the more miraculous for being realized in a frugal and conservative mode entirely suited to its modest situation. When we have told its story informally to students and at professional gatherings, we have seen this small miracle disparaged as conservative, possibly oppressive, uninformed about “true” best practice, over-reliant on test scores and behavioral compliance, and, for all of these reasons, a disturbing if not repugnant phenomenon.

To us, by contrast, Concordia’s remarkable success suggests the folly of the tendency to misinterpret smaller size as a container for transportable best practices. Concordia’s practices are clearly unappealing to many of our colleagues, no matter how surprising its success. For us, criticism of such places seems at best misdirected in the absence of objective studies that unpack the dynamics of school size. At worst, such thinking deflects effort away from relatively simple policy initiatives, such as resisting the temptation to close smaller schools (where they already exist) and struggling to establish autonomous smaller schools (where they do not yet exist). The alternative, often advised, directs attention to far more ambitious and difficult projects, such as changing the beliefs and practices of school teachers and administrators across the nation.

From a systems perspective, by comparison to the structural influence of smaller size, the expected influence of a particular small school reform package is *distinctly unpromising*. Change of this sort (the reform package) has, at any rate, so far proven remarkably costly and ineffective, at least in the estimation of such astute critics as Richard Gibboney (1994) and David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995). Whereas many of us favor at least some of the reforms included in the vaunted “packages,” it seems that the purposes of and expectations for such efforts ought to be substantively reconceived. As Scott (1998) carefully documents, the best intentioned reform efforts tend to

disregard and disable local initiative, even when local initiative fits in well with its context and produces results that correspond to widely accepted definitions of effectiveness.

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For the past several years, **Aimee Howley** has worked on research that explores the intersection between social context and educational practice, and she has used both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate a wide range of questions relating to instructional improvement, recruitment and retention of school administrators, school size, rural education, education of the gifted, and parent involvement. In addition, she has written numerous critical analyses of educational policies and practices focusing on topics such as the intellectual aims of schooling, the sense in which rurality constitutes a social context, and the relationship between educational theory and practice.

**Craig Howley** has researched rural education and published widely in that field. He has taught mathematics at the University of Charleston and has evaluated mathematics professional development projects in rural schools. He is coauthor of *Small High Schools That Flourish* (AEL, 2000) and (with Aimee Howley and Edwina Pendarvis) *Out of Our Minds: Anti-intellectualism in American Schooling* (TC Press, 1995). He currently co-directs the research efforts of the NSF-funded “Appalachian Collaborative Center for Learning, Assessment, and Instruction in Mathematics” (ACCLAIM) and is an adjunct professor in the Educational Studies Department at Ohio University. The Howleys are coauthors of *Thinking About School Administration*, forthcoming from Lawrence Erlbaum in Fall 2006.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview Schedule**

#### **Superintendent**

1. What are the characteristics of the teachers in your district?
2. How is information shared in your district?
3. How does professional development work in the district?
4. What role do the board members play in the district?
5. If you were suddenly given some additional funding for the district, how would you use it?
6. What do students from around here do after they leave the district – either graduate or drop out?
7. How do you determine what is taught and how it is delivered in your district?
8. What's going on in the district about student achievement?

#### **Board Members**

1. What are the characteristics of the teachers in your district?
2. How is information shared in your district?
3. How does professional development work in the district?
4. What role do you play in the district?
5. If you were suddenly given some additional funding for the district, how would you use it?
6. What do students from around here do after they leave the district – either graduate or drop out?
7. How do you determine what is taught and how it is delivered in your district?
8. What's going on in the district about student achievement?

#### **Principal**

1. What are the characteristics of the teachers in your building?
2. How is information shared in your district?
3. How are parents involved in your school?
4. How does professional development work in the building and in the district?
5. What role do the board members play in the district?
6. How are resources used in this district?
7. What do students from around here do after they leave the district – either graduate or drop out?
8. How do you determine what is taught and how it is delivered in your building?
9. What's going on in your building about student achievement? How about the district?

### **Teacher**

1. What are the characteristics of the teachers in your building?
2. How is information shared in your district?
3. How are parents involved in your school?
4. How does professional development work in the building and in the district?
5. What role do the board members play in the district?
6. How are resources used in this district?
7. What do students from around her do after they leave the district – either graduate or drop out?
8. How do you determine what is taught and how it is delivered in your classroom?
9. What's going on in the building about student achievement? How about in your classroom?
10. How do you use assessment results?

### **Parent**

1. What are the teachers like in your child's school?
2. How is information shared in your district?
3. How are you involved in your children's schools?
4. What are the schools doing to help the teachers learn new things?
5. What role do the board members play in the district?
6. How are resources used in this district?
7. What do you envision your children doing after they leave school?
8. How does your child's school determine what is taught and how it's taught?
9. What's going on in your child's classroom or school about student achievement?

### **Citizen**

1. What are the teachers like in your district?
2. How is information shared in your district?
3. How are you involved with the schools in your district?
4. What are the schools doing to help the teachers learn new things?
5. What role do the board members play in the district?
6. How are resources used in this district?
7. What do students from around her do after they leave the district – either graduate or drop out?
8. How does the school district determine what is taught and how it's taught?
9. What's going on in the district about student achievement?

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