

Book Review



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Small High Schools that Flourish: Rural Context, Case Studies and Resources. Craig B. Howley and Hobart L. Harmon (Eds.). Charleston, WV: AEL, Incorporated, 2000, 199 pp., ISBN 1-891677-06-3.

Not So Easy Going: The Policy Environments of Small Urban Schools and Schools-Within-Schools. Mary Anne Raywid and Gil Schmerler with S. E. Phillips and G. A. Smith. Charleston, WV: AEL, Incorporated, 2003, 108 pp., ISBN 1-880785-26-9.

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These two books tackle the challenging problem of sustaining small high schools in both rural and urban environments. Using a series of case studies, the authors show-case in context the benefits of small high schools that have been suggested in the literature and have been the subject of numerous policy initiatives in recent years. The funding initiative of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is perhaps the most visible of these at the present time.

Both books build on the growing literature that small schools, particularly small high schools, enable and support student achievement in ways not readily available to larger schools (Fairman, Allen, & Bolster, 2003). Such supports often appear to offset the deficits in social capital experienced by students from families and communities with low socio-economic status (Bickel & Howley, 2000).

In the rural school setting, Howley and Harmon show-case three reasons for improved student performance in small schools. The first of these is the organizational capacity for small schools to include marginal students, who in a larger

setting might find it easier to remain disengaged. In a small school, coaches often need to recruit all potential team members in order to field a team; similar dynamics prevail in filling band seats or chorus sections.

The second reason is the improved prospects for faculty collaboration. Paraphrasing Deborah Meier, the authors suggest that “[o]nly small schools give their faculties a chance to collaborate closely; in large schools the requirements of keeping order prevail” (p. 13). Meier’s definition of the right-sized school—where the faculty is sufficiently small to sit together around one table—is in a sense hard-wired into the small school. Another take on the faculty dimension of small schools is the greater likelihood that teachers will know their students well. Ted Sizer has lamented the tyranny of the high school schedule in this regard (Sizer, 1996). The six- to seven-class teaching load multiplied by class sizes of 20 or more puts the personalization of learning beyond the reach of the average high school teacher. Sizer calls for a maximum student load of 80 students to counteract the anonymity of the typical high school class. However, this goal is beyond the budgetary reach of many high schools. But the small high school resolves this dilemma in another way: Most students will have the same teacher two or more times in the course of the 4-year experience. From Howley and Harmon:

One of the surprising benefits of teaching in a very small high school is the opportunity to teach the same students every year from grade 9 through graduation. “You really get to know your students after teaching them for four years,” [English teacher Ellen] Shelton said. (p. 107)

Finally, a key benefit of the small rural school is its imbeddedness within the community. For the student, community and parental support is more abundant. The authors deal extensively with the benefit to the community of having its own school (e.g., Lyson, 2002). They propose three frames for evaluating these benefits, each with its own literature: the entrepreneurial community, stewardship,

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and social capital theory. Regarding the latter, Howley and Harmon quote Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam: “Certain communities do not enjoy a more vital civic life because they are prosperous but they are prosperous because they have a vital civic life” (p. 146).

The book goes on to develop these themes through four case studies of rural high schools. Oneida High School, for example, is located in northern Tennessee. With 340 students, it provides an intimate and caring environment for students. It has a detracked curriculum, thus holding all students to common academic expectations. A survivor of numerous consolidation and budgetary crises over the years, Oneida has experienced strong community support both on the political and fundraising side.

The researchers found an intermingling of both academic and community goals in the school: “Citizens did not put academic achievement above all else. . . . The school should prepare, and was preparing, students to live in the community” (p. 71). Thus, a role of the school is to teach students, in addition to succeeding in the global economy of the 21st century, how to live and work successfully in the community of Oneida so that it might be sustained by its young people.

A final feature of Oneida—and one that tells importantly in other cases both rural and urban—is that it resides within its own dedicated municipal school district, which is surrounded in turn by a larger county district. A dedicated governance structure with its own funding stream has been critical to sustaining Oneida High School as demographic, and consolidation trends come and go in rural Tennessee.

A second rural case study is Thrasher High School located in Northeastern Mississippi. With 155 students, it is half the size of Oneida and, by any standard, is a very small high school. The high school staff represents 11.3 FTEs. The school is racially diverse: 73% white, 22% African American, and 2% Asian. Unlike Oneida, Thrasher is one of several high schools in a county district; one larger high school is only 5 miles away. Yet the district superintendent has been a strong defender of Thrasher autonomy and that of the other high schools:

The Superintendent saw consolidation as a way of destroying not only the Thrasher school but its community as well. He felt that maintaining four high schools in one county gave four times as many kids a chance to get involved in activities, sports and school life in general. (p. 110)

However, the authors point out that Thrasher currently flourishes because of the philosophy and approach of this particular superintendent; they speculate what would happen if his eventual replacement has a different approach. The governance structure for Thrasher is thus less robust than that of Oneida.

In the second book, Raywid et al. provide a status report on the small schools initiatives in New York City, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Portland (OR), and Hawaii. As the title suggests, each initiative had been launched with enthusiasm and strong political and financial support but have since encountered challenges.

Stephen Phillips describes his experience, from 1983-1997, as the superintendent of alternative schools in the New York City school system. This superintendency was established by Chancellor Antonio Alvarado to circumvent the High Schools Division, known for its rigid and bureaucratic approach to schooling. It has been responsible for close to 100 alternative schools serving 16,500 students scattered throughout New York’s five boroughs. During these years, the alternative schools introduced multiple innovations such as the learning gym, integrated curricula, and extended release time for faculty development. While Phillips provides no data, he states that the schools have been enormously successful. However, they have taken a strong stand against state-level testing, filing a class action suit to block the use of test results for graduation purposes.

The authors describe also the Julia Richman Education Complex in New York City, which houses six separate schools in a former, failing high school building. Each school functions as an autonomous unit and is physically separated by its neighbors. Cross-building matters such as technology are settled by a governing council made up of principals and program heads, supported by a building manager. The Complex has experienced greatly improved graduation rates and extraordinary gains in student safety.

Initiatives in the other cities have been less extensive than those of New York City. Boston has launched 11 pilot schools that have achieved high attendance and low suspension rates; student performance on state standardized tests is at or above state average. However, the program has been kept small and remains on the periphery of the school system. In the mid-1990s Philadelphia, under Superintendent David Hornbeck, restructured all schools into 400 (or fewer) student “small learning communities.” While the new structure produced student achievement and attendance gains, funding and other difficulties resulted in Hornbeck’s resignation after 6 years. Also in these years Chicago initiated a small schools program with limits of 300 for elementary and 500 for high school. These 130 schools are reported to have produced attendance and achievement gains in comparison to the average. However, they have remained on the periphery as well and have in many cases functioned more like programs within existing schools. In these cases, turnover and intermittent support of district leadership have threatened the sustainability of small schools, a threat hanging over Thrasher High School as mentioned above.

The challenges faced by these urban small schools primarily are ones of organizational integrity and support. Typical is this complaint by Phillips: “There are almost

daily attempts to advance the move toward uniformity and standardization. Some way has to be figured out to institutionalize diversity” (p. 32). Some of these daily attempts also result from district-wide labor contracts so that teachers displaced elsewhere in the system can “bump” teachers in small schools with less seniority, thus destabilizing the faculty collaboration that small schools foster so well.

In conclusion, the case studies from these two books support—in both rural and urban settings—the claim that small schools hold promise for increasing student attendance, achievement, and persistence, especially for poorer students and communities. An ongoing challenge for small schools in both settings has been sustaining financial and political support. Energy and time is drained from teaching and learning by periodic, even daily, efforts to fend off standardization and consolidation. Of the cases presented, Oneida High School seems to have found the most robust solution to this challenge. It is the beneficiary of its own school district, thus ensuring governance by citizens from its own community and presumably its own taxing authority and dedicated funding stream. The way to “institutionalize

diversity” called for by Phillips may thus be the radical one, going forward, of launching each small school within the protective shell of its own independent school district.

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