

## **Organizing and Designing Small Schools through Conversions of Large Comprehensive Schools**

We often think of large comprehensive high schools as the natural and sensible way of organizing places of learning for adolescents. Certainly they predominate the landscape, and, certainly, they are one way to organize students for learning.

Just as certainly, there are other ways as well, as the list below demonstrates. Here are a dozen workable ways a building housing 1500 students might be organized:

1. One school of 1500 students
2. Two schools of 750 students
3. Three schools of 500 students
4. Four schools of 375 students
5. Five schools of 300 students
6. Six schools of 250 students
7. Eight schools of 188 students
8. Ten schools of 150 students
9. Fifteen schools of 100 students
10. One school of 500 students, three schools of 300 students, one school of 100 students
11. Two schools of 300 students, six schools of 150 students
12. Eleven schools of 100 students, two schools of 200 students

While this listing might seem whimsical at first glance, all options are feasible. From this example, we can see almost limitless possibilities for organizing places for learning. The list also reveals something important about our 1500 student design. While such a design may be typical, we see also that organizing all 1500 students assigned to one building into one school represents an extreme position on a continuum, just as having 1500 “schools” of one student each represents the other extreme.

The point of this exercise is to prompt readers to think about other possible ways of organizing high schools than our current prevailing form. It would be simpler to come up with other designs if we had more and smaller buildings, but we don't. So we need to imagine how they might be organized and operated in shared space. We can draw some helpful suggestions from research, from other efforts at conversion, and from successful examples of small schools.

### ***First – and most important – small size itself does not guarantee a good school.***

There are lots of mediocre and lousy small schools in this country. So size is best understood as a necessary but insufficient condition for creating powerful schools. (The corollary to this is that being large doesn't mean that a school is bad. But the reality is that very, very few large, comprehensive schools serve even most of their students well. After almost a century of very large schools – first in urban areas, and now almost everywhere – we can reasonably conclude that large schools will always mis-serve many of their students.)

### ***Autonomy matters a lot when small schools share a building.***

Separate schools need to build their own culture and norms, determine their own instructional program, and design their school days based on what each school community believes it needs. Autonomy and respect for school differences should be the norm. The primary goal of collaboration should be to preserve one another's autonomy. Competition should be avoided.

Schools that allow students to take courses in one another's schools or share staff probably aren't autonomous. Sharing people (especially teachers) will almost certainly “lock” two or more schools' schedules to one another. Sharing is really seductive because it solves certain problems. Don't do it.

One possibility for cross-school activity is the creation of common activity time before or after normal school hours. Many comprehensive schools have a “0” period before school starts in the morning; sports and other activities typically take place after school. What would be critical is that the time designated as “normal school hours” be longer than a typical school day to allow each school in the building to design its own school day.

***Discrete space for each school increases the likelihood of creating and maintaining strong small schools.***

When people share space – particularly when they may know one another well – their inclination is to blur boundaries. Doing so makes the work of small schools more difficult. Whenever possible, schools sharing a building should have their own space, and students and teachers from other schools should respect that space. That will allow each school to develop its own schedule of classes and activities rather than to conform to a building-wide bell and passing schedule, or be distracted by students from other schools outside their classroom doors when classes are meeting. Some schools are able to “divide” the building quite effectively by hallways; others create physical separations in parts of the building.

Sharing some space is almost inevitable: physical education facilities, the auditorium, library, and cafeteria are primary examples. Schools sometimes share science labs, but over time, are able to have rooms in their own space converted to usable workable labs.

***Don’t be held hostage by sports, band, and other extracurricular activities.***

Although extracurricular activities are an important and valuable component of high school life, they aren’t essential to a school’s purpose. Restructuring a large comprehensive school into many smaller schools within the same building doesn’t have to mean the end of the football team. Some small schools that share a building have one sports team for the entire building. Other schools opt to each have their own teams, which guarantee that more students have an opportunity to play.

***School size both creates and limits possibilities.***

Two key issues come into play here: high personalization and comprehensiveness. Personalization is based on the sustained adult relationships described below. Personalization also creates the necessary conditions for customizing learning opportunities for students, which is often a major component of small schools. At the same time, small size limits the school’s opportunities for meeting student needs through a large selection of courses.

Some research suggests that good schools cannot be both small and comprehensive. It is likely that schools of 500-600 can feel more personal and be safer, for instance, than a school of 1500 students. It is unlikely that it can reach the degree of high personalization found in a school serving 150 students. For schools of 600 or more, behavior control remains a significant issue, the school tends to meet student needs through adding course offerings to the curriculum, and teacher specialization remains high. Schools of 400 students can provide most of the key services of a comprehensive high school, though with some compromises, but miss many of the benefits of smallness. Schools with an enrollment of 200-400 are likely to try to remain comprehensive, but don’t really have the necessary numbers of students and staff to do so.

Schools with 200 or fewer students are clearly unable to be comprehensive, so they must decide on their focus, and put all their energies into doing that very, very well. In small schools, individual student needs are met by providing options within courses (rather than in a separate course with a different teacher), or through customized internships, or through project-based learning, or even by independent study.

***Sustained adult relationships for each student are critical.***

The power for kids of such relationships is known and understood very well by coaches, drama teachers, band directors, and others who also work with students in extracurricular activities. Many adults would say it is the existence of such relationships that allows them and the students they work with to be successful.

Creating sustained – and reciprocal – relationships with each student is a key factor to the success of new small schools. Most often, the primary relationship is with an advisor, who typically works with a student and his/her family for several years. An advisor typically helps the student think about goals and identify appropriate learning activities, whether they are classes, internships, community service, or tutoring opportunities. Advisors build relationships with each family, and serve as the primary school contact for families. They serve as advocates for the student within the school and community as necessary, and help students build a plan for life after high school. Over time, advisors also acquire the moral authority to challenge students and help them become accountable for doing high quality work.

In small schools, teachers typically have the same students in their classes for two or more years, not merely one semester or a year. Teachers come to know a student's strengths and weaknesses in ways rarely possible in a larger school. Teachers who work with the same students for a second year also report considerable gains in useful instructional time. Since they know one another well, teachers and students can hit the ground running in September.

***Small schools are able to create powerful cultures that support all students.***

In small schools, powerful relationships replace many rules as governors of behavior. In good small schools, students and teachers appear to build trusting relationships, as do students with other students. These relationships form the basis of a school culture that is respectful of differences between and among students, and which builds support for students who are struggling. Every student is known by every adult, and by his/her fellow students. Cliques are diminished substantially in small schools, and school tone is most often inclusive.