

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

***If Small is Not Enough . . . ?
The Characteristics of Successful Small High Schools in Chicago***

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It is widely recognized that changing school size is not the panacea for all that ails high schools today. Researchers agree that size alone will not dramatically turn around a school. Instead, in order for school redesigns to be successful, reforms need to be coupled with meaningful efforts to change school culture, redefine teacher roles and responsibilities, and improve instruction and curriculum.

This recent study conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research confirms earlier research on the characteristics of schools that are necessary to increase student achievement in small schools. Using a sample of both successful and mediocre small schools, researchers examined the characteristics common among schools with high student achievement. They concluded that:

1. Professional development and strong professional learning communities¹, along with deep principal leadership and strong teacher influence are necessary for strong student performance.
2. Deep principal leadership and strong teacher influence help sustain developmental practices.
3. Strong principals initiate and support professional development activities, including fostering a collaborative atmosphere around professional development.
4. Teachers take an active role in and support the focus for professional development. Teachers' active role leads to more meaningful, engaged involvement and more effective, sustained efforts.

Changing school size alone will not automatically result in improved student achievement or a better academic environment. A large part of the reform process must focus on changing how adults work together in a school, from the type of principal leadership to teacher involvement and focused professional development. Researchers conclude that "strong principal leadership, developmental practices, and strong teacher influence are not sufficient individually to produce strong course performance; the combination of all three is both sufficient and necessary to do so." The Chicago study was inconclusive on the influence of academic press and personalized learning environments. However, researchers did recognize that personalized learning may not result in improved student achievement if the other adult-centered changes are not present.

* The above research may be found online at:

http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub_id=123

¹ Strong professional developmental practices in this study were measured as professional learning communities and professional development activities that shared a specific, common instructional focus. They also included strong collaborative components, where teachers work together consistently over time on their shared instructional focus.