

In the seven years spanning the Oregon Small Schools Initiative it has made an indelible mark on the landscape of education. ECONorthwest analysis revealed that student achievement levels are notably improved, often dramatically and especially so for historically disadvantaged students. ECONorthwest also concluded that the small schools model does not necessarily require a significantly greater investment per student than would a traditional high school serving the same students.

Although the Initiative officially ended in June 2010, E3 will track the schools' performance for an additional three years to contribute to the growing body of national research about the small schools model. Meanwhile, two new reports summarize the program design and its results, with excerpts below and full reports available online. We congratulate all participating schools, and offer our gratitude to the hundreds of dedicated educators who ushered in a legacy of transformation in student achievement.



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### E3 REPORT: THE BIG PICTURE ON OREGON'S SMALL SCHOOLS – EXCERPTS

Nearly a decade ago, the small schools movement in Oregon was limited to small rural high schools and a sprinkling of charter and magnet schools that had sprung up across the state. Never in Oregon's history had there been a statewide effort to deliberately create small high schools whose focus was meeting the needs of all of their students.

Since then, the Oregon Small Schools Initiative—the largest investment in high school reform in the state's history—has produced a cohort of 34 small schools that is closing the achievement gap between minority and low-income students and their majority peers and changing the lives of the more than 25,000 students and 500 staff who have participated in this work.

The Initiative's charge in 2003 was to help Oregon high schools and school districts interested in small school design to create new small schools and to convert comprehensive high schools into several small autonomous schools. The Initiative's goals were: 1) to close the achievement gap experienced by low-income students, students of color, and English language learners; 2) to increase high school graduation rates; and 3) to increase the number of college- and career-ready graduating students. The Initiative represented an initial five-year \$25 million joint effort of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Meyer Memorial Trust. An additional Meyer grant of \$3 million, plus \$1 million of the original Gates investment, allowed the Initiative to continue for two more years. The project grant recipient, E3: Employers for Education Excellence, managed the Initiative during its seven-year history.

**The Initiative schools have demonstrated success in achieving important student outcomes. Despite high rates of poverty and other barriers to success, students at these schools**

**demonstrate improved achievement, attendance, high school graduation, and post-secondary enrollment. Since 2004-05, the longest-established schools have doubled the share of their students meeting state math and reading benchmarks, reduced dropout rates by more than 25 percent, increased high school graduation 15 percentage points, and increased the share of graduates enrolling at college by 10 percent.**

These schools have produced a core of instructional leaders located throughout the state who will continue to transform the teaching and learning experience of both the adults and the students in these buildings. This capacity for deep-level change followed from the patient pursuit of far-reaching instructional goals embedded in the small school design.

The challenge in the Initiative's first phase was structural—either starting a new school or converting a large comprehensive high school into small schools. In the next phase, school and Initiative staff partnered to reach the more ambitious goal of re-envisioning teaching and learning. Through strong instructional leadership and a focus on personalized learning, each of the small schools came to share a legacy of transformation of the essential components of secondary-level education. Although each school implemented a distinct approach best suited to its context, the resulting changes reflect, collectively, a metamorphosis in Oregon education.

This is only the beginning. The small schools created through this Initiative will continue to evolve, building connections among students, staff, and all facets of secondary school education. For schools in Oregon and across the country that are considering the small school design, they will serve as models for the evolution of more powerful teaching and learning in high school settings for many years to come.

## ECONorthwest REPORT: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS, 2004-2009 - EXCERPTS

Initiative organizers committed to rigorous statistical analysis of outcomes. [Our] report presents our analysis of five years of these data, evaluating the work of 35 small high schools that opened in three cohorts, or waves, between 2004-05 and 2007-08. We avoid drawing strong conclusions about overall Initiative outcomes because, as of 2009-10, a majority of Initiative students were

enrolled at schools open for four or fewer years—for 25 of the 35 schools, the most recent available data (2008-09) do not include even a single cohort of graduates who started in 9th grade as Initiative students. Nevertheless, this report contains good news for small school advocates, and even the newer schools show promise.

### Are Initiative outcomes significantly better than those predicted by student characteristics?

OUTCOME	WAVE 1	WAVE 2	WAVE 3	STUDENT SUBPOPULATIONS
Math benchmark attainment	10.5 percentage points higher			Possible additional benefits for African American students
Reading benchmark attainment	7.0 percentage points higher		4.3 percentage points higher	Possible additional benefits for special education students
Attendance	Below average	19 percent fewer absences per year		Additional "Initiative effect" benefitting Hispanic students
Student withdrawals	At Oregon average, but improved by 25 percent			Additional "Initiative effect" benefitting Hispanic students
12th grade graduation	3.0 percentage points higher		3.9 percentage points higher	
Post-secondary enrollment of graduates	At Oregon average, but improved 10 percent		Below average	

Note: Empty cells in the table indicate that no statistically significant difference exists between Initiative students and otherwise similar non-Initiative students. Wave 1 improvements reflect changes between 2004-05 and 2008-09.

By design, schools selected to participate in the Initiative enroll significantly higher numbers of students of color and economically disadvantaged students than the averages for other Oregon high schools. [The table above] summarizes key findings from the regression analysis, identifying statistically significant improvements in student outcomes associated with Oregon Small Schools Initiative enrollment. In general, all students benefit about equally

from Initiative enrollment. But we also find some evidence that the Oregon Small Schools Initiative model specifically benefits historically disadvantaged populations for some outcomes, suggesting success towards closing achievement gaps. In terms of cost per student achieving a desired outcome (e.g., cost per high school graduate), small schools may be even more cost effective than larger, comprehensive high schools.

FULL REPORTS ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE AT  
[WWW.E3SMALLSCHOOLS.ORG](http://WWW.E3SMALLSCHOOLS.ORG)



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