

COMMENTARY

Learning From the Mavericks: Lessons for Districts From Small Urban High Schools

By Regis Shields & Karen Hawley Miles

Creating new small high schools out of large failing ones continues to be a popular strategy for tackling high dropout rates and low performance in urban high schools. But, too often, districts create high-cost mini-versions of their large failing high schools because they do not have a vision of how small schools might “do school” in new ways, or how they would have to change their own practice and systems to support them.

Case studies of resource use in nine leading-edge small urban high schools can offer lessons for districts that are not satisfied with just a few examples of outstanding schools, but want to create entire systems of them.

We **studied**  a set of widely recognized small urban schools—all with enrollments of 500 or fewer students—that represent a range of instructional, organizational, and governance models. These “Leading Edge Schools” serve student populations similar to their districts’, but outperform most local large high schools. Our sample included two state charter schools, four in-district charter schools, and three district-run schools located in Boston; Chicago; San Diego; Oakland, Calif.; and Worcester, Mass.

Here are four of the most salient lessons gleaned from our findings:

- **There’s no one way, but there is a strategic way to organize schools.**

Schools can best create high-performing organizations — or strategic designs — when they have the flexibility to organize resources along with guidance and support on best practices.

Rather than accept traditional schedules, staffing ratios, and job descriptions, Leading Edge Schools deliberately organize people, time, and money to support their instructional models

and meet their students' needs. Operating largely with public funds, they make tough resource trade-offs to prioritize teaching quality, core academic time, and individual student attention. Though these schools look very different from one another, they share a set of common practices that distinguish them from typical large urban high schools.

Principals carefully select teaching-staff members to fit their specific school needs, for example. Students spend an average of 20 percent more time in school each year—and 233 more days over four years—on core academics than their peers in traditional high schools do. And teachers devote an average of five times more hours to collaboration and professional development than local districts require.

- **Strategic school design depends on resource-savvy principals.**

The principals of Leading Edge Schools are savvy resource managers. They understand that deftly crafting resources to align with their instructional models and ever-changing student and teacher needs is key to their schools' success. Not all principals bring these same skills to the job. To create strategic-resource schools at scale, schools leaders need help in figuring out and implementing new approaches. This suggests a new paradigm for supervising and supporting schools—especially as they are outlining their improvement plans, budgets, and staffing needs each year.

In this new paradigm, supervision would be less about enforcing a specific use of resources, and much more about enabling schools to more effectively match hiring, staff assignment, student grouping, and schedules to their particular challenges. This will require training for both principals and school supervisors in strategic resource use. It will also require districts to create templates for school designs that work within their funding levels at different school sizes and student populations. Though the Leading Edge Schools create their strategic designs from the ground up, there is no need for all schools to begin with a blank slate.

- **Small high schools will require a workforce shift to include more-flexible teachers of core academic subjects.**

Small size creates its own set of opportunities and constraints. Leading Edge Schools capitalize on smallness to create vibrant professional learning communities. But small size limits resources in two ways. First, the smallest schools—those with under 250 students—spend a significantly larger portion of their budgets on leadership and pupil support than

larger schools do, leaving less money for teachers. In addition, the smaller staff size makes it harder to hire full-time teachers to play highly specialized roles teaching electives and advanced subjects or serving students with special needs.

Leading Edge Schools have three conditions that enable them to create their strategic designs. First, they are able to select core academic teachers with the expertise and desire to play the range of roles their small-school designs require. In eight out of nine Leading Edge Schools, 84 percent or more of all classroom teachers are “core academic” teachers. In contrast, at the typical high school, 60 percent or fewer of the teaching-staff members play these roles. Second, Leading Edge Schools can define teaching roles, allowing core academic teachers to play multiple roles and using community partners to expand course offerings and services. Third, they have the flexibility to define their own limited set of course offerings to maximize academic courses.

These conditions have implications for district practices around recruiting, staffing, course requirements, and partnerships. Schools will need far more math, science, history, and English teachers and fewer who teach only electives. Further, systems must find more cost-effective ways to deliver noncore subjects, including partnerships and part-time teachers.

- **Union contracts and administrative practices need to change.**

Given that the common practices described above often require significant flexibility to depart from teachers’ union contract provisions and administrative policies, it is not surprising that most of the Leading Edge Schools are charter or in-district charter schools. The lesson for school systems is that teachers are not interchangeable parts, and that teacher and student schedules cannot be universally or rigidly defined. Supporting schools will mean changing district policies and union contracts that control hiring, staffing, and scheduling.

The important idea here is that it’s not about creating flexibility for the sake of freedom. The goal of allowing more school leader discretion is to enable more effective school designs and empower leaders to make adjustments that balance limited and always-changing resources in ways that fit constantly changing student needs. Not all urban principals have the high level of expertise and experience that Leading Edge principals do, and they will require training, support, and, potentially, templates of organizational models.

As the Leading Edge Schools show, creating high-performing, successful small high schools is about so much more than size. Schools can best create high-performing organizations—or strategic designs—when they have the flexibility to organize resources along with guidance and support on best practices. They need resource-savvy leaders, who have the flexibility to hire whomever they need, and to organize their available student time and teachers effectively.

While the Leading Edge Schools are all small urban high schools, these lessons for practice apply to schools of all sizes and types—making small school reform a powerful lever of system change.

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