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# Reinventing High School: Outcomes of the Coalition Campus Schools Project

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*Long-standing critiques of large "factory model" high schools and growing evidence for the benefits of small schools, especially for the achievement of low-income and minority students, have stimulated initiatives in many cities to redesign secondary education. This seven-year study of the Coalition Campus Schools Project in New York City documented a unique "birthing" process for new, small schools that were created as part of a network of reform-oriented schools in a context of systemwide reform. The study found that five new schools that were created to replace a failing comprehensive high school produced, as a group, substantially better attendance, lower incident rates, better performance on reading and writing assessments, higher graduation rates, and higher college-going rates than the previous school, despite serving a more educationally disadvantaged population of students. The schools shared a number of design features, detailed in this study, that appeared to contribute to these outcomes. The study also describes successful system-level efforts to leverage these innovations and continuing policy dilemmas influencing the long-term fate of reforms.*

**KEYWORDS:** *educational evaluation, school organization, school reform, school restructuring, small schools.*

In recent years, the large comprehensive high school has been a subject of growing critique as researchers examine the outcomes of various organizational models. "Factory model" schools have been criticized for their impersonal structures, fragmented curriculums, segregated and unequal program options, and inability to respond effectively to various student needs (see, e.g., Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985; Sizer, 1984). Some studies have found that, other things being equal, smaller schools appear to produce higher achievement (Haller, 1993; Howley, 1989; Howley & Huang, 1991), lower dropout rates (Pittman & Haughwout, 1987), lower rates of violence and vandalism (Garbarino, 1978; Haller, 1992), more positive feel-

ings about self and school, and more participation in school activities (Fowler, 1992; Green & Stevens, 1988; Howley & Huang; Lindsay, 1982, 1984). These outcomes appear more pronounced for students who are traditionally lower achieving (Lee & Smith, 1993, 1995). In addition, the belief that large schools are more cost-effective has been challenged by studies finding equivalent operating costs in small schools (Public Education Association, 1992) and lower costs per graduate (Stiefel, Berne, Iatarola, & Fruchter, 2000).

In response to these findings, there have been a number of efforts to create smaller, more communal school settings, especially in urban school districts where the failures of comprehensive high schools have seemed most pronounced. This article describes the outcomes of one such effort: the Coalition Campus Schools Project (CCSP), launched in New York City as part of a broader initiative to create small, new model schools during the early 1990s. The project replaced two large, comprehensive neighborhood high schools with eleven small schools and redesigned the campuses to include a set of small elementary and high schools, plus other service agencies. Over a seven-year period, the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching collected data about the school creation process, the new schools' designs and practices, and their outcomes.

This article reports findings for the first CCSP reform at Julia Richman High School and identifies policy issues posed by the large-scale redesign of schools in urban school districts. Although some of the schools that inspired this project have been studied previously, this is the first investigation of the outcomes of a second generation of schools that consciously emulated aspects of the earlier ones. It examines whether and how new schools can be created on the basis of successful designs rather than by relying primarily on the efforts of strong, charismatic leaders. This is also one of the first longitudinal studies to examine whether the effects of a group of new model schools are sustained over time. Finally, this study examines the policy context that has influenced the course of the reforms, with the aim of explaining the role of the district and the change process itself.

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## Background and Context

Launched in 1992, the CCSP was a collaboration between the New York City Board of Education and the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE), a network of more than thirty New York City elementary and secondary schools that are members of the nationwide Coalition of Essential Schools. The project was part of the Board of Education's broader school restructuring initiative, begun by Chancellor Joe Fernandez in 1989 and continued through the terms of four subsequent chancellors. More than 150 new model schools were launched and housed in wings of existing large buildings or in small independent sites. The CCSP strategy gradually closed down a large campus by not admitting new students while hot-housing new schools at other sites. Later, some of these schools moved into the original large building with other small schools and social service agencies; the remaining schools occupied sites that served students in the original catchment area.

The CCSP replaced two of the city's more troubled high schools—Julia Richman High School in Manhattan and James Monroe High School in the Bronx—which served about three thousand students each. In a system that allows students to apply to academically competitive high schools or to a variety of schools of choice, these "zoned" schools are schools of last resort for many students not selected by others. In 1992, the city had twenty such neighborhood high schools, most of which exhibited high rates of academic failure. In that year, Julia Richman had a four-year graduation rate of 36.9 percent; the comparable rate for James Monroe was only 26.9 percent.[1]

### Design Features

School size is not the only factor that influences student achievement. A number of studies have found that, all else equal, schools have higher levels of achievement when they create smaller, more personalized units in which teachers work together and students see a smaller number of teachers over a given period of time (Braddock & McPartland, 1993; Gottfredson & Daiger, 1979; Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Researchers suggest that in such "communitarian" schools, students are better known and faculty develop a more collective perspective about the purposes and strategies for their work (for reviews, see Lee, Bryk, & Smith; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

A study of 820 high schools in the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) found that schools that had restructured to personalize education and develop collaborative learning structures produced significantly higher achievement gains and that the gains were more equitably distributed (Lee & Smith, 1995). The schools' practices included creating small units within schools, keeping students together over multiple years, forming teaching teams, assur-

ing common planning time for teachers, involving staff in schoolwide problem solving, involving parents, and fostering cooperative learning.

Not all small schools are successful. Those that incorporate fewer personalizing features and less ambitious instruction produce fewer benefits (McMullan, Sipe, & Wolf, 1994; Raywid, 1990, 1995; Wehlage, Smith, & Lipman, 1992). Some school-within-a-school strategies have reinforced academic stratification, producing greater success for some students and less for others (Ready, Lee, & LoGerfo, 2000). Intellectual content also matters. A study of more than two thousand students in twenty-three restructured schools found higher achievement on performance tasks for students who experienced what the researchers termed "authentic pedagogy"—instruction focused on active learning calling for higher-order thinking, extended writing, and an audience for student work (Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1995). The NELS also found that students in schools with high levels of "authentic instruction" experienced greater achievement gains (Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995).

The CCSP incorporated many of the features that, research suggests, should foster increased achievement and commitment to school: small learning communities organized around a common core of principles intended to prepare students to "use their minds well"; common academic standards supported by performance-based assessment; an interdisciplinary, "less is more" curriculum focused on inquiry and intellectual skills; small size and small pupil loads to enhance personalization; family involvement; student and teacher choice of school; and shared decision making (Center for Collaborative Education [CCE], 1993).

The CCSP schools' designs are derived from successful schools launched in the mid-1980s, in particular, Central Park East Secondary School, International High School, and the Urban Academy. The older schools, which mentored the new schools and provided staff for many of them, had established track records of succeeding with students who typically would have failed in traditional New York high schools. The schools routinely graduate more than 90 percent of their students and send 90 percent or more to college (see Ancess, 1995; Bensman, 1987, 1995, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Falk, 1995). Longitudinal research has also found that Central Park East students experience success once they reach college (Bensman, 2000).

All but two of the CCSP schools adapted their designs from the model of Central Park East, a high school of 450 students founded by Deborah Meier in East Harlem in 1985. As at Central Park East, teachers in most of the new schools work in interdisciplinary teams with groups of 40 to 80 students, to whom they teach a college preparatory, core curriculum framed by five "habits of mind." The five habits vary from school to school; a typical list might include weighing evidence, addressing multiple perspectives, making connections, speculating on alternatives, and assessing the value of the ideas studied. Teams of teachers work with cohorts of students for two-year stints from seventh through tenth grade. Class periods last 90 minutes or more,





enabling intensive study and research. For the eleventh and twelfth grades the schools have developed variations on the portfolios developed at Central Park East and the Urban Academy that engage students in performance assessments as a basis for graduation.

Two of the new schools serve students who have recently immigrated and follow the model of their mentor school, International High School. With a population of 100 percent limited-English-proficient students, International's collaborative, activity-based instruction supports students in learning English while engaged in academic study. Clusters of teachers plan for shared groups of students to whom they teach a thematic, interdisciplinary curriculum all day long. Seventy-minute class periods provide time for intensive project work that is evaluated through performance assessments and exhibitions.

A unique "birthing" process allowed older alternative schools to help mentor new schools into existence. The projects also linked clusters of small schools into educational networks of three to five schools that worked together. The Coalition of Essential Schools included the new schools in its technical assistance efforts, and CCE provided direct support for developing curriculum and school policy, securing space and supplies, and negotiating with the Board of Education. As we discuss later, the state and local policy contexts when the schools were created supported the development of these networks and the schools' performance assessment strategies. More recent policy changes make the continuation of these strategies more difficult and may influence the long-term success of the schools.

## Methodology

Data for this report are drawn from New York City school record data on student characteristics, attendance, achievement, and graduation; program and policy documents from the Board of Education and CCSP schools, including samples of curriculum, meeting notes, e-mail exchanges, and Board of Education reports; examination of student work samples (portfolios, transcripts, research papers, and other assignments); observations of classes, faculty meetings, and portfolio presentations at each of the schools; semistructured interviews with students, teachers, and administrators from each school; and interviews with CCSP staff and Board of Education officials.

Data were collected in three waves: documentation of the planning and initiation years (1992–94), collection of record data on student outcomes during 1995–96, and additional on-site data collection during 1997–98, when the first two cohorts of students were ready to graduate. Over the seven years of the study, researchers conducted more than two hundred interviews, observations of classrooms and meetings, and focus groups with teachers, students, and administrators at the schools, as well as more than fifty interviews with administrators and external change agents charged with assisting the school start-up process. In the last round of data collection during the 1997–98 school year, our team conducted a total of 86 individual interviews with 22 Board of Education and school-level administrators, 28 teachers, and 31 students sam-

pled from across the schools, in addition to a larger number of informal conversations with students and teachers during the course of observation. In 1997–98 we observed 15 classes, 14 portfolio presentations, and 7 faculty meetings across the sample schools. We also observed 3 Julia Richman Building Council meetings, 2 CCE meetings, and 4 network meetings.

The student sample was selected, with principals' assistance, to represent diversity in terms of gender, age, race-ethnicity, socioeconomic group, and the full range of academic achievement. The sample included special education students, limited-English-proficient students, students with stable academic achievement, and others who had histories of failure. The teachers interviewed and observed were selected to represent each major content area, a range of years of experience and teaching histories (including some who had taught only in alternative schools and some who had previously taught at large, comprehensive high schools), and a balance in terms of gender, race-ethnicity, and grade levels taught. We observed classes in all academic areas. We randomly selected exhibition dates for observation and selected exhibitions representing a balance across content areas. We reviewed additional portfolio work of the students who were presenting.

Descriptive statistics were generated for the quantitative data on student characteristics and outcomes, and *t* tests were used to compare data from the new schools with comparable data from the school that they replaced (in the first wave of data collection) and from state-designated "similar schools" (in the later waves of data collection when similar schools had been identified).

Qualitative data were analyzed through an iterative process in which specific findings and themes from interviews and observations were culled from field notes and transcripts and then triangulated in reviews of data from different sources. The findings were organized according to several categories of research questions: evidence about school start-up strategies, issues, and obstacles; evidence about school organizational policies and practices (e.g., the organization of resources, time, and people); evidence about school practices in key areas such as curriculum, teaching, assessment, and advisement; and evidence about faculty and student views of their experiences of the schools. A process of conceptual clustering and open coding was employed to generate a series of potential themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These were then evaluated by examining their salience and consistency across data sources and respondent types, and a recursive process of coding was conducted to highlight the degree of consensus in different views and respondents' attributions of particular outcomes to specific school features.

## The Launch: Replacing Large Schools With Small

In 1993, the Board of Education began phasing out Julia Richman. No new ninth graders were accepted at Richman, and the first six CCSP schools were launched to serve ninth graders who would have gone to Richman. The new schools—the Coalition School for Social Change (CSSC), Landmark High School, the Legacy School for Integrated Studies, Manhattan International





High School, Manhattan Village Academy, and Vanguard High School—were "hot-housed" off-site. The tenth-through-twelfth-grade students already at Richman continued through to graduation. As each class graduated, space was allocated to new schools that moved in.

The pioneer cohort worked under difficult circumstances: a short start-up period during a year when New York was experiencing budget cuts, asbestos removal crises, and burgeoning enrollments combined with shortages of space (Ancess & Ort, 1999). The project encountered snafus regarding space, student recruitment, hiring, purchasing, and other logistics. Four schools had to move at least twice during the first year. Nonetheless, six schools were launched with initial classes of ninth graders ranging from 57 to 91 students. By year 3 of the project, all eleven schools had been launched, and CCE was involved in creating fifty more schools as part of the Annenberg Challenge grant.

The early problems affected student recruitment. Late admissions, guidance counselors' reluctance to recommend schools that did not have a site, and the Board of Education's complex assignment procedures[2] produced a student body comprised mostly of students who had not applied elsewhere or had been rejected by their chosen schools in the normal admission process. Thus the CCSP student population included much greater proportions of low-income, low-achieving, and limited English-proficient students than the city-wide average or the old Julia Richman High School (see Table 1). The first

*Table 1*

**Characteristics of Students at Julia Richman High School, 1992–93, and Coalition Campus Schools, 1993–94**

| Student characteristic | NYC average | Julia Richman | CCSP average | CSSC | Landmark | Legacy | MIHS | MVA | Vanguard |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| % Minority | 81.9 | 98.3 | 89.4 | 96.7 | 95.2 | 94.7 | 65.8 | 89.5 | 94.6 |
| % Free lunch–eligible | 36.3 | 32.3 | 69.6 | 73.6 | 64.3 | 58.1 | 97.4 | 64.9 | 59.3 |
| % Chapter 1–eligible | n/a | 36.2 | 48.1 | 41.8 | 45.2 | 46.1 | n/a | 31.6 | 75.7 |
| % LEP | 14.7 | 4.8 | 19.3 | 5.5 | 4.8 | 5.3 | 92.1 | 4.2 | 4.1 |
| % Special education–identified | 6.6 | 7.3 | 2.25 | 9.9 | 3.6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| % Resource room participants | n/a | 4.2 | 10.6 | 11.4 | 9.7 | 7.4 | n/a | 9.4 | 15.3 |
| % Entering 9th graders reading at or above norms | n/a | 41.1 | 34.1 | 37.5 | 28.4 | 35.7 | n/a | 47.1 | 21.7 |

*Note.* NYC = New York City, CCSP = Coalition Campus Schools Project, CSSC = Coalition School for Social Change, MIHS = Manhattan International High School, MVA = Manhattan Village Academy, LEP = Limited English Proficient, n/a = not applicable.