

Teacher Perceptions of Small High Schools

November 2008

Introduction

This research brief is a product of Research for Action’s Going Small study, which examines the development of small public high schools in Philadelphia. The Going Small study began in 2005, during a period of vigorous small school development in Philadelphia - between 2002 and 2007, 26 small schools were created. The Going Small report, to be released Spring 2009, uses both qualitative and quantitative data to examine small schools. This brief looks at teacher perceptions of the schools where they work, focusing on the differences in teacher perceptions between small and large high schools. The findings in this brief are based on teacher responses to a survey administered by School District of Philadelphia in 2006-2007.

Compared to large high schools, a greater proportion of Philadelphia’s small schools have selective admissions criteria (66% of small schools, vs. 24% of large schools).¹ The majority of large high schools are ‘neighborhood schools’ that accept all students living within a catchment area. Therefore, variation in teacher responses between all small and all large high schools is likely to also reflect differences between neighborhood schools and schools with selective admissions criteria. This brief highlights differences between perceptions of teachers in small and large neighborhood high schools.

In our analysis of teacher survey responses, we compared teachers in small neighborhood high schools with teachers in large neighborhood high schools on a variety of indicators that have been identified by past research as key attributes of successful small high schools. While the survey includes seventy questions, our analysis focused on sixteen questions that were most relevant to these indicators, which fell into four categories: Safety and Climate, Teaching and Learning, School Improvement, and Student Engagement.

Key Findings

Overall, the survey responses show that teachers in small high schools have a more positive view of the environment in which they teach than do teachers in large high schools. The differences between small and large high schools are most evident when we compare responses from all small high schools to responses from all large high schools (including those with selective admissions criteria). Although the differences are less stark when we compare only small and large neighborhood schools, the pattern of teachers in small high schools voicing a more positive view of their school environment is sustained, with the most substantial differences in the area of school safety.³

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Key Findings	1
Safety & Climate	2
Teaching & Learning	5
School Improvement	7
Student Engagement	8
Conclusion	10
Authors & Acknowledgements	10

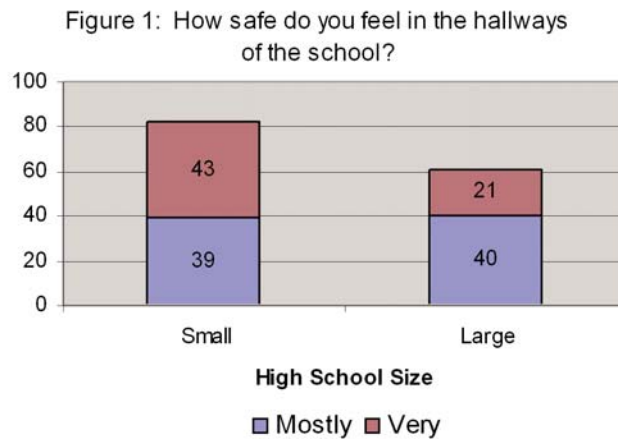
¹In the Going Small study, we use the School District of Philadelphia’s definition of small high schools as those with fewer than 700 students, while large schools enroll more than 700 students.

²Some schools did not complete teacher surveys. 41 out of 59 schools completed the survey. There were 1521 total teacher responses.

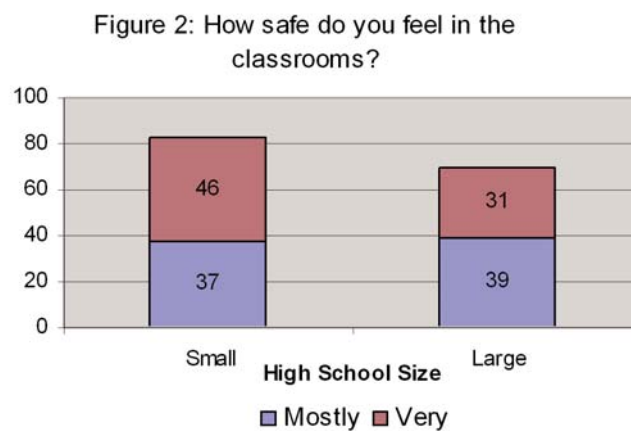
³The mean difference between small and large neighborhood schools is statistically significant for all questions except ‘Figure 6: To what extent do you feel respected by your students?’

Safety and Climate

There is a clear pattern in the survey data showing that, compared to teachers in large neighborhood high schools, teachers in small neighborhood high schools believe that teachers and students are safer in school hallways and classrooms. This pattern is very strong across all survey questions related to teacher and student safety.



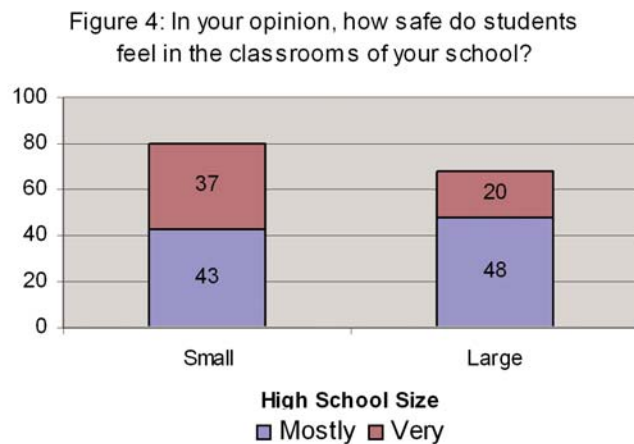
- 43% of teachers in small neighborhood high schools felt that they were very safe in the school hallways compared to 21% in large neighborhood high schools, a difference of more than 20 percentage points.
- Nearly the same percentage of teachers in small and large neighborhood high schools felt that they were mostly safe in school hallways (39% and 40% respectively) (Figure 1).



- 46% of teachers in small neighborhood schools felt very safe in classrooms, compared to 31% in large neighborhood high schools.
- Approximately the same percentage of teachers in small and large neighborhood high schools felt that they were mostly safe in classrooms (37% and 39%, respectively) (Figure 2).



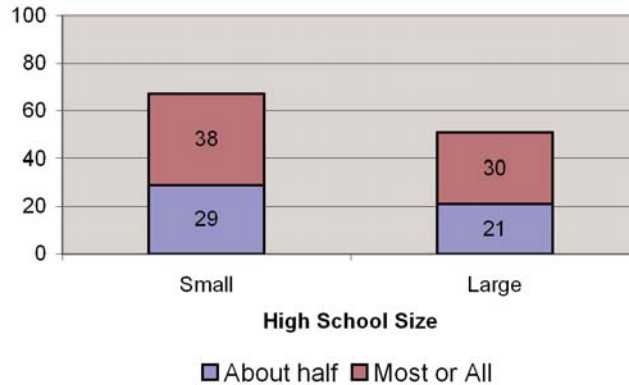
- 24% of small neighborhood high school teachers thought students felt very safe in school hallways, compared to 6% in large neighborhood high schools
- 46% of teachers in small neighborhood high schools reported that students felt mostly safe compared to 38% and large neighborhood high schools (Figure 3).



- 37% of teachers in small neighborhood high schools reported that students felt very safe in classrooms compared with 20% in large neighborhood high schools.
- 43% and 48% of teachers in small and large neighborhood high schools, respectively, reported that students felt mostly safe in classrooms. (Figure 4).

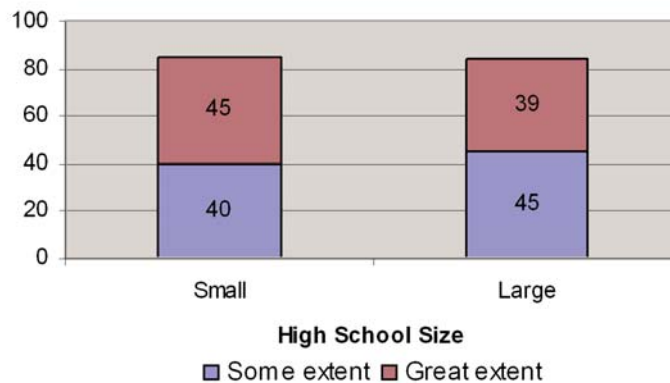
In addition to feeling safer, teachers at small neighborhood high schools indicated that they had stronger relationships with students.

Figure 5: How many teachers at this school talk with students about their lives at home?



- 38% of teachers at small neighborhood high schools reported that most or all teachers talk with students about their lives at home, compared to 30% at large neighborhood high schools.
- 29% of teachers in small neighborhood high schools reported that about half of teachers talk with students about their lives at home, compared to 21% of teachers in large neighborhood high schools. (Figure 5).

Figure 6: To what extent do you feel respected by your students?

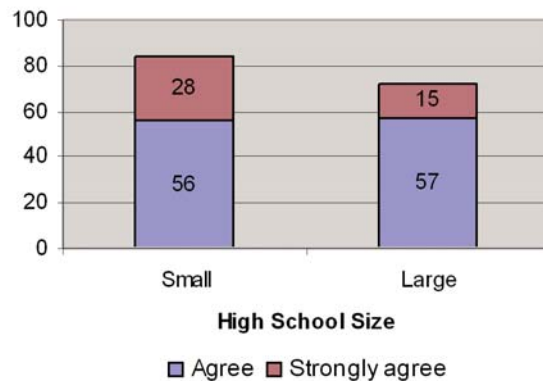


- 45% of small neighborhood high school teachers reported that they feel respected by students to a great extent, compared to 39% of teachers at large neighborhood high schools.
- 40% of teachers in small neighborhood schools reported that they felt respected by students to some extent, compared to 45% in large neighborhood high schools (Figure 6).

Teaching and Learning

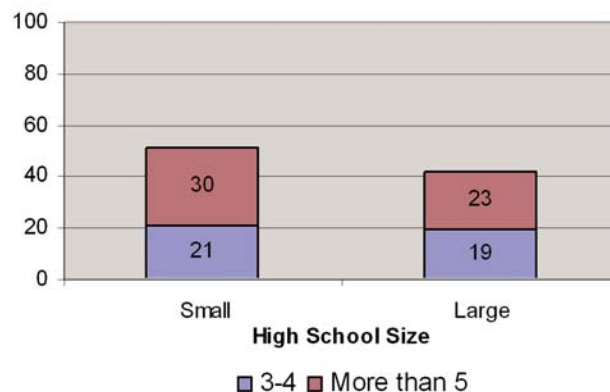
Compared to teachers in large neighborhood high schools, teachers in small neighborhood high schools were more positive about the conditions for teaching and learning in their schools. However, most teachers in both small and large neighborhood high schools reported that some of their students do not have access to appropriate instructional supports.

Figure 7: The leadership at this school sets high standards for learning?



- For example, 28% of teachers in small high schools strongly agreed that their school's leadership sets high standards for learning, compared to only 15% of teachers in large neighborhood high schools.
- Nearly the same percent of teachers in small neighborhood and large neighborhood high schools agreed with this statement - 56% and 57%, respectively (Figure 7).

Figure 8: In the past 12 months, how many times did you participate in regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers on issues of instruction?

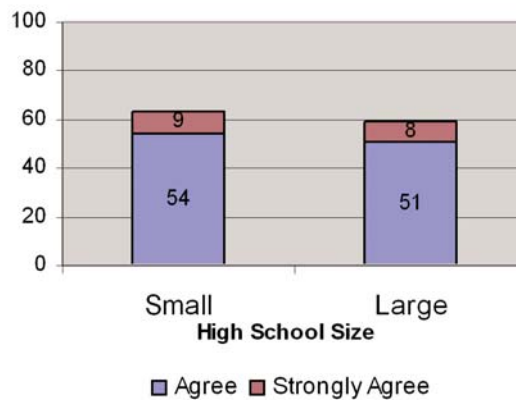


- Teachers in small neighborhood high schools were more likely to have collaborated with other teachers during the previous 12 months than were teachers in large neighborhood high schools (Figure 8).
 - o While 30% of teachers at small neighborhood high schools had collaborated more than 5 times in the past 12 months, 23% of teachers at large neighborhood high schools had collaborated this frequently.
 - o Nearly the same proportion of respondents from small and large neighborhood high schools participated 3-4 times.

schools collaborated 3-4 times in the past 12 months – 21% in small and 19% in large neighborhood high schools.

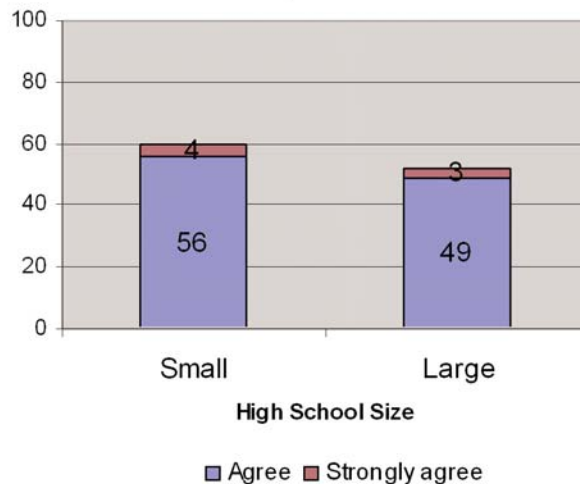
- o Only 16% of teachers in small neighborhood high schools reported that they *never* collaborated with colleagues, compared to 27% of teachers in large neighborhood high schools (not shown).

Figure 9: All students have access to appropriate instructional supports



- 9% of teachers in small neighborhood high strongly agreed that their students have access to appropriate instructional supports, and 54% agreed.
- 8% of teachers in large neighborhood high schools strongly agreed that their students have access to appropriate instructional supports, 51% agreed (Figure 9).
- Therefore, less than two thirds of teachers in small or large neighborhood high schools reported that all of their students have access to appropriate instructional supports – 63% of teachers in small neighborhood high schools and 59% in large neighborhood high schools

Figure 10: When necessary, students will seek extra help from teachers

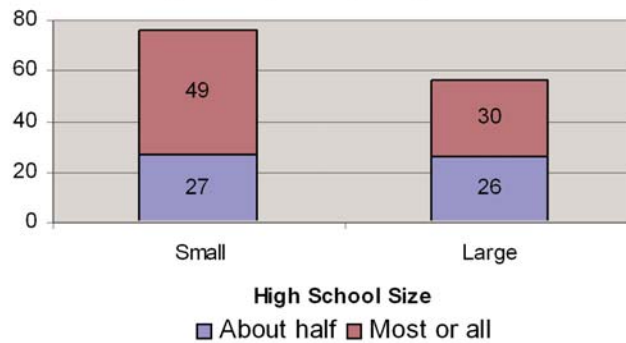


- 60% of small neighborhood high school teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “When necessary, students will seek extra help from teachers,” compared to 52% of teachers at large neighborhood high schools (Figure 10).

School Improvement

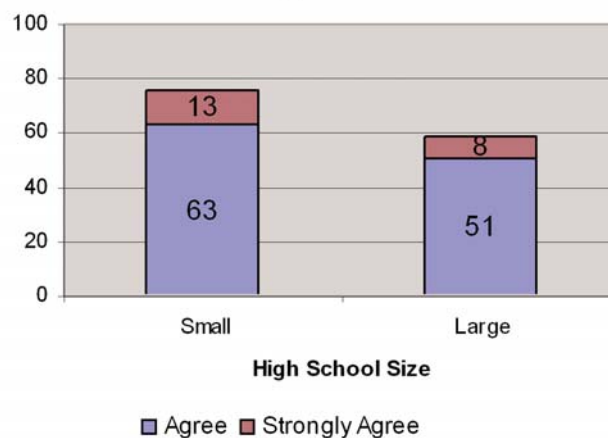
Teachers in small neighborhood high schools reported that teachers and principals in their school were invested in school improvement efforts at a greater rate than did teachers in large neighborhood high schools.

Figure 11: How many teachers in this school take responsibility for improving the school?



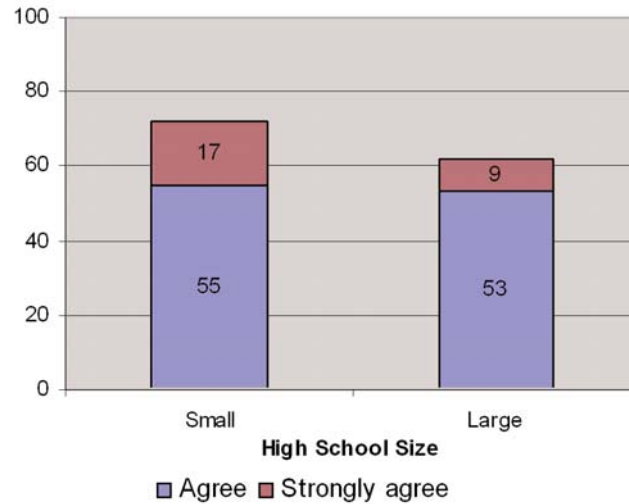
- 49% of teachers in small neighborhood high schools perceived that most or all of their colleagues take responsibility for improving the school, compared to 30% of teachers in large neighborhood high schools – a difference of nearly 20 percentage points.
- Nearly the same percentage of teachers in small and large neighborhood high schools, (27% and 26%, respectively), reported that about half of the teachers in their school took responsibility for improving the school (Figure 11).

Figure 12: Teachers have opportunities to influence what happens in this school



- 13% of teachers in small neighborhood high schools strongly agreed with the statement “Teachers have opportunities to influence what happens in this school” compared to 8% in large neighborhood high schools.
- 63% of teachers in small neighborhood high schools agreed with this statement compared to 51% in large neighborhood high schools (Figure 12).

Figure 13: The principal, teachers and staff collaborate to make this school run effectively

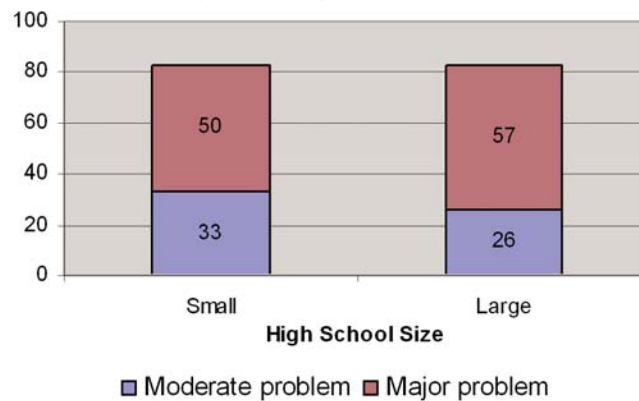


- 17% of teachers in small neighborhood high schools strongly agreed with the statement “the principal, teachers, and staff collaborate to make this school run effectively,” compared to 9% in large neighborhood high schools (Figure 13).
- Nearly the same percentage of teachers in small and large neighborhood high schools agreed with this statement (55% and 53% respectively).

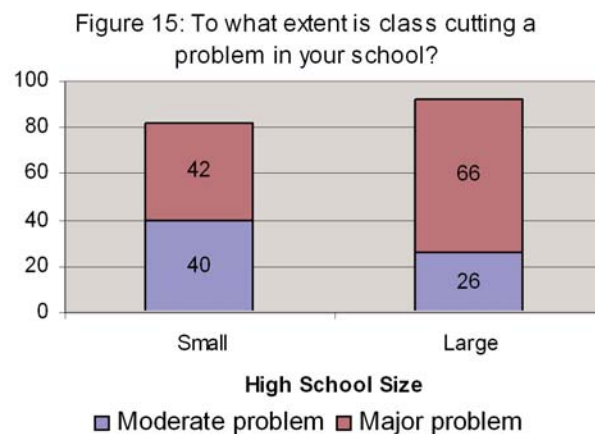
Student Engagement

The teacher survey data suggest that teachers at small neighborhood high schools believe that their students are more engaged than do teachers at large neighborhood high schools. However, teachers in both small and large neighborhood high schools think that student engagement is a problem.

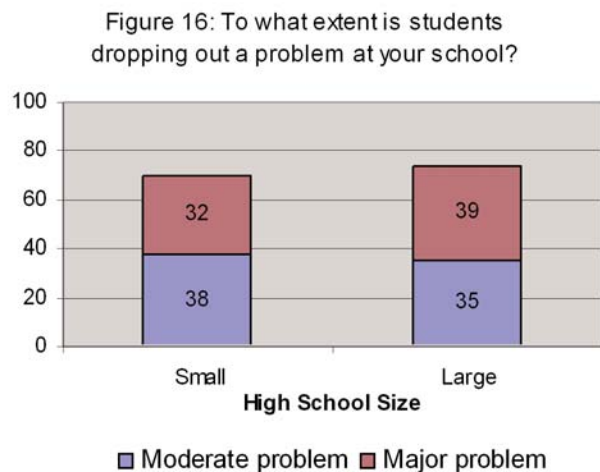
Figure 14: To what extent is student apathy a problem at your school?



- Teachers at small neighborhood high schools reported that student apathy is a major problem at a lower rate than teachers at large neighborhood high schools (50% compared to 57%).
- 33% of small neighborhood high school teachers reported that student apathy is a moderate problem, compared to 26% in large neighborhood high schools.
- Therefore, at both small and large neighborhood high schools, 83% of teachers reported that student apathy is a problem (Figure 14)



- 42% of teachers at small neighborhood high schools reported that class cutting is a major problem compared to 66% of teachers at large neighborhood high schools.
- 40% of teachers in small neighborhood high schools reported that class cutting is a moderate problem, compared to 26% of teachers in large neighborhood high schools (Figure 15).
- Therefore more than 80% of teachers in small and large neighborhood high schools reported that class cutting is a problem – 82% at small neighborhood high schools and 92% at large neighborhood high schools.



- 32% of teachers at small neighborhood high schools reported that dropping out is a major problem at their school, compared to 39% at large neighborhood high schools.
- 38% of teachers in small neighborhood high schools reported that dropping out was a moderate problem, compared to 35% of teachers in large neighborhood high schools (Figure 16).

Conclusion

This brief presents findings from an analysis of responses to sixteen questions on the 2006-2007 School District of Philadelphia teacher survey. Across all questions, we found that teachers in small neighborhood high schools perceived their schools more positively than teachers in large neighborhood high schools. The most significant differences between small and large neighborhood high schools were found on questions relating to school safety. On questions about school improvement and teaching and learning, differences between small and large neighborhood high schools were smaller, but consistent. Although teachers in small neighborhood high schools were more positive about student engagement than teachers in large neighborhood high schools, it is important to note that overall, most teachers reported that apathy, class cutting, and dropping out were problems at their schools.

Authors and Acknowledgements

Shani Adia Evans is a senior research assistant at Research for Action.

Tracey Hartmann is a senior research associate and the co-team of the *Going Small* project at Research for Action.

The *Going Small* research was made possible by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. We would like to thank the staff of the School District of Philadelphia Office of Research and Evaluation for their support. This study is one of several RFA research projects that are following high school reform efforts in Philadelphia.



3701 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104
TEL (215) 823-2500
FAX (215) 823-2510
www.researchforaction.org