

# Informing High School Choices: The Progress & Challenges of Small High Schools in Philadelphia

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“Small schools  
are the launch pad,  
not the rocket ship”

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## Introduction and Background

Research for Action is currently engaged in a two-year study, *Going Small: Public/Private Collaboration in Restructuring High School Education in Philadelphia*. Funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, *Going Small* examines Philadelphia’s approach to creating and supporting small high schools; how the district works with partners in this effort; the perspectives of teachers, parents, and students on small high schools; and small schools’ impact on student enrollment and performance. This brief examines questions related to application and enrollment and teacher and student experiences.

What is small?—The School District of Philadelphia defines small as under 700 students which is higher than most other cities where 400 or 500 is more commonly the threshold. In Philadelphia, there are 32 District small high schools and 20 Charter small high schools. The 32 District small high schools serve almost a third of all district high school students.

Small high schools in Philadelphia have different kinds of admission criteria; thirteen are special admission schools, eight are city-wide admissions schools, and ten are neighborhood high schools. Small neighborhood schools are the only small high schools which do not require application; they are open to all students living in the neighborhood catchment area. Neighborhood high schools are consistently among the lowest performing schools in the district with high dropout rates and significant climate issues; therefore, it is particularly important to understand whether neighborhood *small* high schools are a better option than large comprehensive neighborhood high schools. Philadelphia’s neighborhood high schools include ten small high schools and seventeen large high schools.

Philadelphia currently has thirty-two small District high schools. Of these, 26 have been newly created or significantly changed since 2002. These high schools are the focus of the *Going Small* research project. The findings presented here come from the second round of *Going Small* research. Research included both quantitative and qualitative data.

The quantitative research focused on District application and enrollment data—including application trends from 2000 through 2006 to see if the creation of 26 small high schools had shifted application patterns. Future quantitative research will analyze student outcomes across small high schools.

The qualitative case study research explored the experiences of five small high schools with different admissions criteria and start-up experiences.<sup>1</sup> Schools were chosen to obtain maximum variation; this form of sampling means that common elements in the data have more strength and also sheds light on differences in policy and implementation. Among these five small high schools is one neighborhood small high school. We consider this a critical case for beginning to answer questions about how small neighborhood high schools can improve the educational experiences and outcomes for students and teachers in Philadelphia. These questions will be explored in more neighborhood high schools in future rounds of research.

The District’s rationale for the creation of small high schools was to create more high quality options for all students. This rationale was supported by the literature on small high schools. Small high schools typically have “**Three R’s:**” **Rigor**—challenging curriculum; **Relevance**—learning that connects to student lives; and **Relationships**—a personalized learning environment. Research has shown that small high schools demonstrate a range of positive outcomes for students

<sup>1</sup>RFA interviewed 54 students (focus groups at four schools); 20 teachers and other staff, e.g. counselors, NTA; and 3 parents. We also drew on principal interviews from our first round of research and in the latest round of research.

including improved climate and attendance, greater student and teacher satisfaction and, in many cases, higher graduation rates, lower dropout rates, and improved student achievement.<sup>2</sup>

Most recently, New York City's New Century Small High Schools demonstrated a significantly higher graduation rate compared to large high schools. The effect of small size was greatest for students who were under prepared entering eighth grade, as are many students at Philadelphia's neighborhood high schools. When these students attended schools over 1000 with a concentration of under prepared students, their outcomes declined precipitously. However, this group of students surpassed the city-wide average in attendance and test scores when attending small high schools.<sup>3</sup>

## Findings

### High school applications and enrollment

The District's rationale for the creation of small high schools was to create more high quality options for all students. High school applications come from students who want to attend a high school other than their neighborhood high school. Students are automatically enrolled in their neighborhood high school if they do not apply to, or get accepted at, another high school.

**Nearly three quarters of all eighth graders attending District schools participated in the high school choice process in 2006 and 2007. However, only half of those students were accepted to a school of their choice.**

Applications to high schools from students enrolled in a District K-8 or middle school have been rising steadily since 2000. In 2006, almost three quarters of eighth graders (73%) applied to at least one high school outside of their neighborhood. At the same time, half of the high school students (51%) who attempted to take

advantage of choice did not get admitted to any school to which they applied.

**There is great interest in small high schools and new selective admissions small high schools are receiving large numbers of applications.**

Of those District eighth graders who applied to a high school, over half (56%) applied to a small high school, suggesting great interest in these schools. However, only 28% were accepted to a small high school.<sup>4</sup> The brand new small high schools received the most substantial increases in the numbers of applications received from 2006 to 2007. This meant that the admissions rate for brand new schools was only 15%. At the same time, the applications to some of the pre-existing selective high schools declined slightly. While two years of data is not enough for us to draw strong conclusions, it may be that new special admissions schools are drawing away some of the applications from more established and competitive small schools.

### Perceptions of schools

When students and parents at the small high schools we studied in depth were applying to schools, the small size of the school was a factor although not the most important factor. Students and parents were more concerned about whether the school had strong academics and/or was "college prep." They were also concerned about location and safety inside and outside of the school. Most students and parents in our focus groups preferred high quality choices in or close to their neighborhoods for reasons of safety as well as convenience. A few students and one parent preferred that students leave their neighborhoods to go to school—feeling that their neighborhoods were not safe. When students and parents talked about size, they equated smaller schools with safety, fewer "distractions" and more individual attention and support. Some students had more mixed feelings about small size, appreciating the safety and sense of community it created while missing the opportunities for a greater variety of extra-curricular activities and a wider pool of peers for friendships and dating available in a larger high school.

**Strong positive relationships exist between teachers and students, and students and students, in all case study schools, including the neighborhood high school.**

The greatest benefit of small size reported to date, across all the schools we studied, is positive relationships

<sup>2</sup> Recent studies of New York, Boston, and Baltimore include: Huebner, Corbett, and Phillippo. (2007). *Rethinking High School: Inaugural Graduations at New York City's New High Schools*, San Francisco, CA: West Ed and Tung. R. & Ouimette, M. (2007). *Strong Results, High Demand: A Four-Year Study of Boston's Pilot High Schools*. Boston, MA: Center for Collaborative Education. Baltimore City's High School Reform Initiative: Schools, students, & outcomes. (2007) Education Policy Center, Urban Institute.

<sup>3</sup> Foley, E.M., Klinge, A., & Reisner, E.R. (2007). *Evaluation of New Century High Schools: Profile of an Initiative to Create and Sustain Small, Successful High Schools*. Washington, DC: Policy Studies Associates, Inc. and Theroux, Karen. (Fall 2007). "Small Schools in the Big City: Promising Results Validate Reform." *Carnegie Reporter*, 12-23.

<sup>4</sup> This does not include the students who attend the ten small neighborhood high schools that do not require an application.

between teachers and students. This finding is particularly important to pay attention to for students at small neighborhood high schools. Large neighborhood high schools typically have had significant safety, climate, and attendance problems and higher drop out rates.

In general, students, teachers and parents across all types of schools reported very positive relationships and an improved climate in small case study high schools compared to their own knowledge and perceptions of large high schools. Teachers know most of their students and students feel known and recognized by their teachers, not only when they have challenges but for their successes as well. Teacher-student relationships are often close, caring, and supportive and a sense of family/community exists in these case study schools. Students were also known and felt known by other students. They described fewer fights, feeling safer, and feeling more trusting of their classmates. Positive relationships between teachers and students and students-students characterized all small high schools in our study, including the neighborhood small high school.

### **Positive relationships support improved climate**

Teachers and students perceived that better relationships supported a better climate in small high schools, compared to large high schools. Students, teachers, and parents felt that climate was better because teachers and other school staff know all students and this made it easier to enforce policies and to correct student behavior. In addition, students and teachers described closer monitoring of students. While climate was definitely described as improving at the neighborhood small high school as well, more problems were mentioned at this school than at other schools. Teachers described the problems as stemming from lack of consistent policies and lack of common planning time needed to establish consistent policies.

### **Positive relationships support academic success and student engagement**

Positive teacher-student relationships in small high schools are supporting a greater focus on learning and student engagement, including the neighborhood school that was part of this round of research. Closer relationships enable teachers to push students academically, monitor student work, and provide more individualized attention. In addition, teachers and students described how a positive climate allowed them to focus on learning. This was true at all schools but

least strong at the neighborhood high school.

Throughout all our interviews we heard about a sense of student engagement—students described better attendance at one school, a sense of belonging and recognition at all schools, and a feeling of emotional support at all schools. More research would be necessary to learn whether these more positive learning environments are affecting student achievement.

### **Addressing the next set of issues**

Teachers and principals at the five small high schools in our case study sample identified several areas they feel must be addressed in order for small schools to be rigorous academically. These areas were: instructional leadership; adequate staffing; common planning time for teachers; flexibility (especially in rostering & budgeting); dedicated staff; and time and resources for start-up planning before the school opened or reopened. Teachers emphasized the importance of having a principal who is an instructional leader, and teachers at some schools particularly spoke of the importance of having an assistant principal. Teachers also described understaffing at small high schools, and called for greater flexibility for small schools to meet their staffing needs. In this context, it was particularly important at small schools for teachers and staff to be committed to the mission of the school. Teachers at several schools said that the school functioned well because a significant number of teachers took on extra work. Indeed, the most successful schools in our sample sought and found creative ways to meet their staffing needs; yet even in these cases, certain key staff areas were unfilled outside of core subjects.

A solid relational foundation has been laid at all five of the case study high schools. However, teachers expressed that going to the next level to improve teaching and learning requires common planning time for faculty. Teachers at four schools spontaneously described the need for common planning time so that they could collaborate within and across subject areas and integrate the school's theme throughout the curriculum. At two schools, partners enabled common planning time and at two other schools a lack of flexibility in scheduling prevented common planning time. At the fifth school, teachers banked time during the week in order to have weekly faculty meetings. Our research also revealed the importance of having adequate time for start-up planning. While new small schools in our study benefited from such start-up planning time, the schools which *transitioned into* smaller schools did not receive this same benefit.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we see an increase in high school options and high interest in high school choice, with 73% of eighth graders applying to high schools outside their neighborhood in 2006. At the same time, this choice is still limited. Half of the eighth graders who applied to high schools in 2006 did not get accepted to a school of their choice. These students attend their neighborhood high schools.

Our research suggests that small high schools are a promising reform for neighborhood high schools and for high schools with other admissions criteria. In particular, relationships between adults and students and within the student body are generally trusting and supportive. Students feel visible to teachers and each other. This is particularly important to pay attention to at neighborhood high schools which traditionally have had high drop out rates. But while students, teachers, and principals at the one neighborhood high school in our study reported great improvements in climate compared to its previous large configuration, this school also had more lingering climate challenges than other small schools in the study. This finding suggests that neighborhood small high schools may need additional supports.

Staff at all small schools voiced a concern that a “one size fits all” approach to high schools would not allow small high schools to move beyond positive relationships to reach their full potential in developing a rigorous and relevant academic program. In particular, teachers and principals felt that the formulas for staffing and allocation of resources based on enrollment left small high schools without sufficient staffing. Consequently, these schools relied on very committed staff who willingly gave extra time and effort to ensure the school’s success. Teachers and prin-

cipals were willing to work creatively to address their needs with the resources they were given but they desired greater flexibility and common faculty planning time to truly make their schools into rigorous and supportive learning environments.

RFA will continue to follow the development of small high schools in the city. Our next report will focus on outcomes for students in small high schools and take a closer look at the strengths and challenges of neighborhood small high schools.

## Authors and Acknowledgements

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