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THE MILL TOWN CASE AND SMALL SCHOOLS REFORM[1]

History

Post World War II educational research touted the benefits of large schools as a means to cope with economies of scale, to provide diverse and differentiated curriculum, and, by reducing the ratio of administrators to teachers, to create more efficient and centralized administrations. As the sizeable baby-boom generation moved through the public school system and began to tax its resources, the creation of larger schools become practical as well as ideological.

The second half of the twentieth century thus witnessed a major consolidation in the number of schools and school districts in America. While the student population increased over 500% in those fifty years, the total number of schools decreased by 70% (Casey Foundation 2001). In 1950 the average American public school contained 150 students. By 2000 the average size had tripled to approximately 450 (Berry 2004). The push for school consolidation was made most famously by then Harvard president James Byrant Conant in his 1959 study, The American High School Today. Conant, among others, argued for the importance of large high schools because of their ability to provide a diverse curriculum at low cost.

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[1] David Diehl prepared this case under the supervision of (and minor funding from) Professor Daniel A. McFarland for the purpose of class discussions. Stanford University grants permission to reproduce and distribute this case for the sole purpose of education and research. Users may not create derivatives of the case without the express written permission of Stanford University and they may not commercially exploit the case or any material derived from it. The case is provided "as is" without any warranty. Stanford University makes no claims on the accuracy or currency of information within the case, and is not liable for how it is used. All copies must include the following notice on the inside cover: "

Figure 1. (Berry 2004)

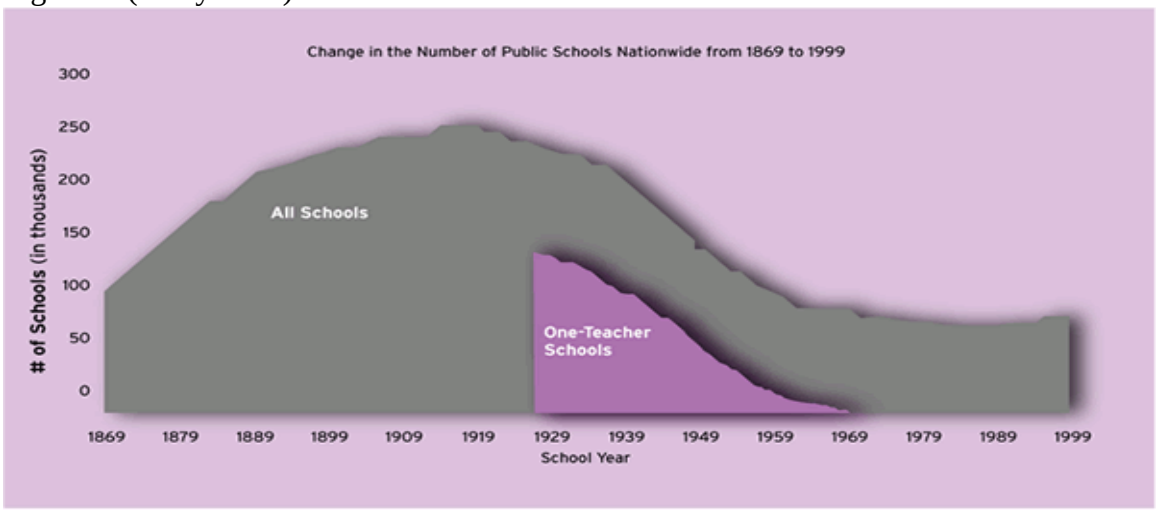
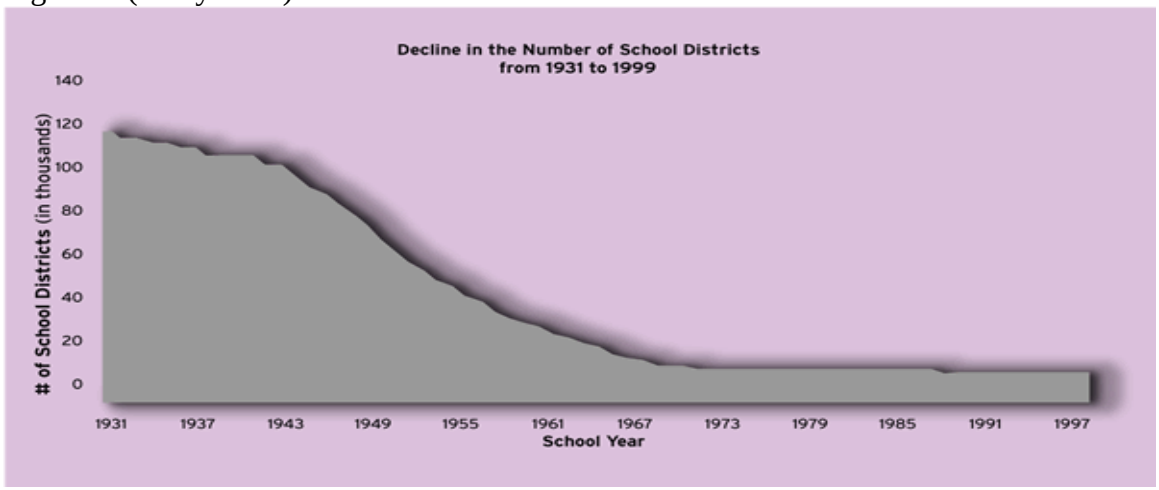


Figure 2. (Berry 2004)



Bigger Isn't Always Better

The push for smaller schools in urban areas began as one of many alternative education strategies utilized by reformers in the 1970s. These reformers saw small schools as a means to create more democratic environments and to return to local communities the control that had been lost in the consolidation of previous decades. These early small schools were linked with progressive and liberal politics, and seen as part of a larger effort of democratizing schools.

Advocates for small schools remained largely peripheral to the education mainstream until the early 1980s when the federal report 'A Nation at Risk' catalyzed a new wave of education reform to reverse the perceived decline of American public schools. Among

these advocates was Theodore Sizer who in 1984 founded the Coalition of Essential Schools, an umbrella organization for progressive (and almost always small) schools. Among the early Coalition schools was Central Park East in Manhattan. Central Park was founded by Deborah Meier, widely considered one of the founding members of the modern Small School Movement.

Meier's book 'The Power of Their Ideas' became an educational bestseller, and the idea of small schools became increasingly popular among progressive minded educators. The argument for small schools was firmly grounded in rhetoric of democracy, community, and equity. It was with the tragedy of Columbine in 1999, however, that small schools movement moved into the mainstream of education reform debates and only then because it took on a new meaning.

While progressive advocates of small schools had built their arguments on a foundation of democracy and equity, new advocates for small schools in the late 1990s and early 2000s spoke more of safety and student alienation. Widespread concern about school violence, and its perceived cause in the anonymous and uncaring nature of large high-schools, served as a catalyst for an increased focus on small schools. While these two rationales for smallness – size as a facilitating factor in democratic education, and size as a factor in school alienation and violence – had different focuses they shared a common concern with the relational side of schools, especially the importance of adult-student relationships.

While Columbine and other late 1990s instances of school violence thrust the idea of small schools into the national spotlight, it was not until the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation made the creation of small high schools and the breakup of existing large schools the cornerstone of its domestic educational philanthropic giving that the number of small schools exploded. The Gates Foundation has, since just 2000, given almost a billion dollars worth of grants in order to create approximately 850 new small schools and convert about 750 large schools into small ones. This amount of funding and influence arguably makes the Gates Foundation's emphasis on small schools the largest attempt at public school reform by private investment in American history. And many of the early advocates of small schools, Meier included, have expressed concern about the movement being now largely controlled by corporate investment, especially given the strong emphasis on democratization and local control by the movement's early leaders.

Despite the enormous financial investment in the creation of small schools, the Gates Foundation seems to be backing off as the early evaluation has found disappointing results. The Foundation chose not to renew the grants of several school districts and is shifting much of its grant-making into teacher professional development. A brief review of the research on small schools, including the Gates funded research, appears below.

Research on Small Schools

While advocates and researchers are not always clear in making the distinction, the term 'small schools' is frequently used as an umbrella term to describe three different types of schools. The first are (typically rural) schools that are small by virtue of the size of their local community. These schools are, in other words, small not because of a purposeful reform decision, but simply for population reasons. The second type is known as an autonomous small school. Theses schools have their own administration, faculty and budget. When several autonomous small schools are housed in the same building, this is known as a 'multiplex.' In contrast is the third type of small school, a school housed within a larger school that retains part of its identity as a single unit. These are known as schools-within-schools (SWS). SWSs operate autonomously in many respects but share a principal and typically are bound to each other in aspects of scheduling, curriculum, and certain budgetary issues. SWSs are often theme based or magnet schools located in large high schools. A final variation worth noting is Small Learning Communities (SLCs). While the term is not always used consistently, SLCs generally refers to the partitioning of large schools into smaller divisions, but without creating new autonomous schools.

Research has generally supported the proposition that smaller schools provide certain important benefits for students and teachers. Critics, however, have contended that many of the conclusions are based on limited samples, or are attempts to make unwarranted generalizations about all types of small schools based on research about only certain kinds. Nonetheless, a body of research has been steadily growing that suggests small schools are more equitable ethnically and racially (Raynid 1999); foster a greater sense of student affiliation with school (Wasley 2000); are safer and less violent than large schools (Raywid & Oshingame 2000); have higher attendance (Gregory 2000); have higher rates of extracurricular participation (Cotton 1996); and foster a greater sense of teacher satisfaction compared to larger schools (Lee & Loeb 2000).

Recently the Gates foundation released an independent report on the results of the small schools it has funded (American Institutes for Research 2005). Overall, the researchers found that conversion schools had a more 'positive' academic environment, but not a more 'effective' one. This means that students felt more cared for by teachers and believed that teachers had higher academic expectations for them. This did not translate, however, into improved academic outcomes. The Gates report found, in contrast, that while conversion schools did slightly better in language arts, they did significantly worse in math compared to control schools. Moreover, they found there was a lag in changes in teaching and learning behind structural changes, and even suggested that new, redesigned high schools might be *less* rigorous academically than they were before conversion. The Gates report argues that one of the major reasons behind this is that teachers are not receiving adequate professional development to make substantial changes in their practice. Restructuring into small schools seems, in other words, to facilitate stronger relationships but that by itself does not improve teaching or learning.

Mill Town High School

Mill Town High School (MHS) is located in a working class city of 45,000 people approximately 40 miles northwest of Boston. Mill Town has traditionally been a working-class city primarily composed of Irish and Italian-Americans, but due to a major population shift almost 20% of its public school students are now Latino. Like many of the former manufacturing towns that make up the industrial urban belt around Boston, Mill Town has undergone significant economic and demographic changes over the past several decades. The loss of its manufacturing base has meant a rise in unemployment and underemployment. Along with the substantial new immigrant population, the loss of traditional jobs has created a situation of unemployment well above the state average. Twenty-four percent of adults in Mill Town have not completed high-school, and the four year drop out rate for MHS is estimated to be 19%.

As a traditional manufacturing town, Mill Town had never competed academically with the wealthy cities in suburban Boston, but it has been doing progressively worse in recent years. Facing an uncertain future due to the economic and demographic conditions described above, beginning in 2000 MHS underwent a process of major restructuring with the goal of better meeting the needs of its changing student population.

Bill Spade was hired in 2000 to become the principal of MHS. Upon beginning the job, Spade reported being surprised at the lack of a strategic long-term view for the school, especially given the large ongoing changes in the surrounding community. Spade, along with teachers, parents and community members, undertook a self-assessment of MHS. This eventually led to the creation of a 'Three-to-Five Year Strategic Plan' by the School Council, which was adopted in December 2001. The plan called for the school to adopt a comprehensive reform model, and in 2002 and 2003 teachers and administrators visited schools that represented various models throughout the eastern seaboard.

After exploring many potential models, the committee narrowed the possibilities to three: Atlas, Paideia, and the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES). In spring 2003, the faculty voted on which model to adopt. Dr. Spade was a public advocate of the Paideia model, and many teachers feared he would push it through in spite of the actual outcome, but the CES model received the most votes. There was a sense among many of the administrators and staff members that CES won because it was the least proscriptive program in terms of what it asked teachers to do, and therefore become the favorite of those least enthusiastic about reform.

Mill Town began its relationship with CES by applying for, and eventually receiving, a Smaller Learning Communities Grant from the US Department of Education in October 2003. This DOE grant was used to create four Freshman Academies as a way to improve what had become a difficult transition for many students from the town's middle schools

to MHS. While the Freshman Academies were being planned, MHS applied for a separate grant from the Coalition of Essential Schools Small School Project. The Small Schools Project was at this time acting primarily as an intermediary between The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and school districts and was using Gates money to create conversion schools. With CES' help (and The Francis Parker Charter School, CES founder Ted Sizer's school, acting as a mentor) MHS began planning for a full conversion into small schools.

In March of 2004, however, the faculty narrowly voted not to move ahead with a full school conversion. Instead, a pilot small school was created to be implemented in the 2004-2005 school year. Many teachers expressed frustration that while this vote may have put off full implementation, Spade was determined to go ahead the next year regardless of the results of the pilot small school or teacher sentiments. That spring teachers and students were recruited for the pilot school and eventually one of MHS' most respected veteran teachers was hired to be the headmaster.

During the 2004-2005 school year, the Pilot School was implemented. At the same time, the rest of the teachers were assigned to and began working with their own small school. By the spring, headmasters for these new schools had been brought on, all of whom were external hires. This meant the existing student population was divided into four small schools of approximately 350 students. In addition, the Center for Vocational Education (CVE), the city's vocational high-school, became a fifth small school (though its student population is almost 650). Until the conversion, CVE had been its own school even though it shared the same facilities. As part of the conversion, it officially became part of MHS. Thus, in September 2005, MHS opened the school year as five small schools.

Changes in the Organization of Teaching

The most significant, and immediate, changes at MHS were structural. The school consists of five wings which in the past had each been dedicated to a specific subject area. With the exception of the science wing (which because of its labs could not be altered), each wing of the building became home to one of the small schools. Several of the schools painted and decorated the doorways leading into their wing. Each small school had its own staff lounge, and these were often located next to the departmental lounges that signaled the subject area the wing once housed. During lunch period some teachers would eat in the small school lounge, some in the subject area lounge, and others in the full-school teachers' cafeteria. Many staff members saw this choice as representative of a teacher's orientation toward the reform.

The structure of teaching time changed dramatically after the conversion to small schools. The school's rotating schedule changed from a seven class schedule to a six class one. The individual day schedule changed as well, from a six period day to a five period one (see fig. 3). This decrease in the total number of classes allowed for an

increase in class length from 57 to 73 minutes. It also meant that, while class size stayed approximately the same, the number of students a teacher saw per semester decreased on average from 125 to 104.

Fig 3

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Class 1	Class 2	Class 1	Class 1	Class 1
Class 2	Class 3	Class 3	Class 2	Class 2
Class 3	Class 4	Class 4	Class 4	Class 3
Class 4	Class 5	Class 5	Class 5	Class 5
Class 5	Class 6	Class 6	Class 6	Class 6

The nature and amount of teacher professional development also changed dramatically. In the past, professional development (PD) time was limited to four in-service days per school year. After the conversion, the number of PD hours per year increased from 28 to 100. Most of this increase came in the form of Common Planning Time (CPT) when groups of teachers would meet to share teaching practices once per schedule cycle. These groups were assigned by the school's headmaster and were typically led by an outside coach or a teacher trained in CES protocols. However, there was little consistency in the kind of work done by each CPT group and in how frequently they actually met. Teachers generally reported enjoying their CPT group because of the opportunity to work with other teachers, but did not find them useful in terms of improving practice. The major exceptions to this were groups led by veteran teachers (as opposed to outside coaches) that concentrated almost exclusively on trading teaching tips.

Curricular Changes

MHS traditionally had a tracked curriculum, and much of the reform work attempted to move away from that. The lowest level track, known as 'E-level', was essentially eliminated in math and English and folded into the middle track. This left an honors and a non-honors track. Several of the schools began to experiment with ways to incorporate honors and non-honors students into the same classroom. One small school, for example, began piloting an 'Open Honors' program in the 2006-07 school year. This program allows non-honors students to be in honors level classes, but be given non-honors level work. The elimination of the E-level classes remained, throughout the year, one of the most controversial aspects of the reform. Teachers frequently complained that students who would previously have been in E-level classes were not prepared for the regular track they now found themselves in, and many parents saw the elimination of classes (both low and high) as a major harm to their children.

This attempt to incorporate honors and non-honors students into the same classroom is emblematic of the larger attempt to create a more personalized and equitable learning

environment for students. MHS converted to small schools in order to improve the teaching and learning that happens there. To this end all the small schools, in slightly different ways, have focused on how to personalize learning and move away from didactic forms of teaching. As will be discussed later, many teachers felt that they did not receive adequate training, however, to put these abstract ideas into classroom practices.

Changes in School Culture

At the end of the first year it was almost universally agreed among teachers and administrators that the small schools had yet to develop enough of a sense of identity or community for students to be able to differentiate between them. Juniors and seniors took classes across all schools and so had little reason to identify with their designated school. The schools had no themes and so could not be differentiated that way. In fact, the schools were known simply as School 1, School 2, and so on. A constant tension in the reform was between, on the one hand, the knowledge that the schools must develop a unique sense of identity to form a community, and on the other, the fear that certain schools may gain a reputation as better than others and created a public backlash. Many of the headmasters began expressing a desire to move toward themes, but Principal Spade has said that will not happen.

At the staff level, however, cultural differences did begin to emerge, many of them due to the divergent approaches of the headmasters. For example, one of the headmasters, Rachel (School 1), tended to focus on long-term issues and so her staff was more likely to engage in discussion about school vision and mission. At staff meetings Rachel would sit in the circle along with her teachers and facilitate their discussions. In comparison to the other headmasters she also spent the most time at meetings doing relationship building activities, and her staff gained a reputation in the school as being the most gregarious and the jokesters. In contrast one of the other headmasters, Carol (School 3), tended to be impulsive and her staff often felt bullied into doing things they did not want to do. In stark comparison to the other small schools, Carol's staff reported on surveys not being as happy with the conversion, or even with each other. Teachers in other small schools would comment to each other how lucky they were not to be in Carol's school, or how badly they felt for a colleague who was. Overall, at the staff level, schools began to create different norms and expectations for everything from whether they sat in a circle or rows during staff meetings to whether they collectively focused on administrative tasks or vision building.

Trends

Most of the major trends among MHS teachers were consistent with the findings of research on other small schools. Affectively, there was a large change for teachers. Over the course of the year, they came to feel more positively about their job and their

colleagues. But, like other research indicates, this increase in job satisfaction and sense of community did not consistently translate into changes in teaching practice. At the end of the year, teachers were no more likely than at the beginning to say they related their subject matter more to student interest, and they reported using workbook exercises just as frequently as before. When asked about how often they have students work individually, work together as a class, listen to a teacher lecture, debate each other, or work in small groups, the only significant change was that teachers reported being *less* likely to use small groups by the end of the year.

Disciplinary data from the school also suggested that the number of disciplinary incidents decreased from the previous year. Overall attendance seemed to have increased as well. It was not clear at the end of the year if there were any significant changes in student academic outcomes.

Lingering Problems

Several issues became reoccurring problems during the first year as small schools One concerned the status of subject areas. Before the conversion, the school (both structurally and, for teachers, socially) was arranged around subject matter departments. Each department was housed in a separate wing of the building and most teachers interacted primarily with other teachers in their own subject area. The conversion to small schools disrupted this in several ways. First, the amount of time subject area teams were able to meet was greatly reduced. Many teachers complained that they were no longer able to talk and plan with teachers who taught the same subjects. Within each small school there were typically four teachers in each subject area, but they almost always taught different classes. Secondly, the conversion greatly disrupted the previous social networks of the teachers. Because teachers in each subject were divided evenly among the schools, many teachers saw their friends much less frequently after the conversion. Many teachers expressed frustration that they no longer knew all the teachers across the whole school.

A second reoccurring problem was the issue of school autonomy. That each school achieves full autonomy in the areas of hiring, curriculum, administration, and budget is seen by CES as a key component to successful conversion. For reasons both logistical and political, however, the small schools received only partial autonomy. Logistically, all the schools are tied to the same bell schedule which prevented them from individually making decisions about class lengths and times. Instructionally, while each school had a fair amount of autonomy, this was somewhat limited by the ongoing tensions with subject area departments described above. The headmasters expressed the most amount of frustration about their lack of autonomy and control when it came to budgetary and staffing decisions. The central public school office had line-item power over budget decisions, and so headmasters had to clear any decisions with central office administrators on a line-by-line basis. Many expressed frustration about what they perceived as a contradiction in the district's stated goal of achieving school autonomy

with the largely top-down approach to the budget. Issues more political than logistical also made achieving autonomy difficult. While staff and teachers wanted each small school to form its own identity, there was also fear about too much differentiation among schools. There was a desire for schools to become distinctive in order for students to feel a connection, but not to become so distinctive that the larger community would raise issues of equity and fairness.

A third ongoing issue for teachers during the first year of implementation was the connection between the broad visions they were creating for their schools and their classroom practice. Largely based on the proclivities of the specific headmaster, the schools differed greatly in how much they focused on long-term vision versus nuts-and-bolts teaching practice. Across all schools, however, teachers expressed frustration in understanding how to link the ideas and terms used in staff meetings and trainings (such as 'differentiated instruction' and 'heterogeneous grouping') with actual classroom practice. This frustration was also felt in many of the CPT groups, where some teachers felt like coaches were leading them in discussions too abstract to help with teaching. Without the coaches' help, however, shared planning time by teachers frequently consisted only of complaining and gossiping about students. Scheduling difficulties also made it hard to create CPT groups with obvious commonalities. Frequently these groups shared neither students nor subject area, making it difficult to find common instructional issues to work on. An ongoing debate among both teachers and administrators was the best composition for CPT groups.

In many respects the first year of implementation at MHS was reflective of the larger body of research on small school conversion. Major structural changes had significant impact on the daily school experience of both teachers and students. This includes both intended and unintended consequences of the reform. And at MHS, as can be seen in other small schools research, the social and affective side of school changed more than the academic one. While in survey responses teachers, and to a lesser degree students, reported higher levels of satisfaction with school the evidence for academic improvement was weak. The relationship between the social and affective improvement that research consistently finds associated with small schools and academic outcomes remains largely unclear.

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