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C A R N E G I E Results

Carnegie Corporation of New York is pleased to introduce this inaugural issue of *Carnegie Results*, a quarterly newsletter that will report on Corporation-supported organizations and projects that have produced reports, results or information of special note.

From Large to Small: Reinventing the Urban High School

A new report from Carnegie Corporation grantee Jobs for the Future offers strategies for personalizing large urban high schools: help them become small, learning communities where students and teachers are both engaged in meaningful, challenging work.

In large, depersonalized urban school districts across the nation, the need for high school reform is urgent and challenging: of the students who enter high school, only 68 percent earn a diploma. This rate drops as low as 50 percent in many districts, especially those in the largest cities. Only 75 percent of high school graduates go to college.

[Jobs for the Future](#) (JFF), a Boston-based, nonprofit organization founded in 1983, has recently released *From Large to Small: Strategies for Personalizing the High School*. In the report, JFF shares the latest information about successful new models of urban high school reform and describes some pitfalls of redesign. (To read the entire text of *From Large to Small*, [click here](#).)

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*Written by: Joyce Baldwin. Baldwin, a former high school teacher, now writes about education from a wider perspective; she also writes about health and medicine and is the author of *DNA Pioneer: James Watson and the Double Helix* (Walker Publishing Company, 1994).*

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From Large to Small was developed with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York for JFF's From the Margins to the Mainstream initiative, which focuses on identifying emerging models of high school education that not only meet academically rigorous standards but also help young people who are not well served by mainstream high schools to succeed. The report is a result of what was learned and offers concrete guideposts to leaders of comprehensive high schools who wish to implement a small-schools strategy, one promising model. It also, includes "snapshots" of small high schools that have dramatically improved the rates at which their students succeed. For example, 90 percent of students from Fenway High School in Boston, a small school that personalizes the student experience, now continue on to college. The Met, a high school in Providence that blends college preparation and vocational studies, sent 85 percent of students from the school's first graduating class to college. Two years later, 82 percent of these students are still in college. (To read about From the Margins to the Mainstream online, [go here](#).)

Why Small Schools

For many youngsters, the path to success is a straight line, with a high school diploma leading to a post-secondary education that opens vistas for a financially rewarding career and fulfilling life.

For many other youngsters, especially those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and who attend large, depersonalized, urban high schools, the world of education and the world of work are opaque entities, uncharted territories that do not yield clues about how to chisel out opportunity and shape a meaningful life.

Students at highest risk are those of color, those who come from low-income families, those who are the pioneering members of their families to attend college and those who are currently learning to speak and write English. Upper-income students are seven times more likely than low-income students to earn a Bachelor's degree by age 24. Only 18 percent of African Americans and 10 percent of Hispanics complete a four-year college degree by age 29, compared with 34 percent of whites. Native Americans are more likely to drop out and less likely to complete college than any other ethnic group in the United States.

Reforming High Schools

JFF found that one of the key elements of successful high school

education is the development of small learning communities, achieved either through free-standing schools or small units within larger facilities. Within these small schools teachers can get to know students well and to know their strengths and needs. The small framework also enables teachers to focus on student work and to collaborate on developing instructional strategies.

Another characteristic of effective high schools is the concept of blending that allows youngsters not only to achieve academically, but also to have the chance to develop social skills, to explore who they are and to have opportunities for self-expression. Blending between learning levels, blending in-school and out-of-school experiences, and blending education and employment are strategies that help ease all the transitions that are currently so difficult for many young people. The difficulty of these transitions is documented by statistics that indicate that half of the students who enter college fail to ever complete a degree, and one-third of the students who enter college do not continue to the sophomore year

JFF also presents information about the pitfalls that some schools experienced in moving "from large to small," so that other schools can learn from their experience.

"There is a fair amount of research that shows a positive impact of small schools on student outcome, but that research is based on free-standing small schools. It doesn't give a blueprint of how to go from a large school to a smaller one," says Adria Steinberg, co-author of the report and a program director at JFF. "From Large to Small addresses that," she adds, "drawing on emerging lessons from schools and districts that have begun this difficult work."

"One pitfall," Steinberg points out, "is when schools sometimes try what we call 'layering.' This means layering different forms of small learning communities onto the already very complex structure of a comprehensive high school."

By simply layering small learning communities onto an already intricate structure, high schools have become increasingly complex and diffuse, with faculty pulled into many differing directions.

Emerging Lessons

"Instead of layering, the goal of a small learning community is to have a clear focus on mission. In some cases this is organized around a theme or an academic mission to make sure that youngsters get the skills they need in a timely way to move on," Steinberg says. "The idea of a very clear focus is important and is often missing in a large comprehensive high school that is trying to be all things to all people."

From Large to Small also describes emerging lessons that delineate the importance of:

- assessing the needs of the school and its resources, including data regarding faculty and students

- enlisting the help of the district office and teachers' union
- building community support and mobilizing the resources of the community
- addressing issues related to autonomy and equity for bilingual and special education students
- developing a schedule that is consistent with the goals of personalization and faculty collaboration
- instituting measures for holding a school accountable for student improvement

The concept of community involvement is pivotal to the success of the learning experience and is apparent in many of the models. Community partnerships can offer the kind of real-life, engaging learning situations--including introducing students to a workplace environment--that cannot take place solely within a school building.

"It has always been true that the high school years are a key developmental time for kids to figure out who they are," says Hilary Pennington, chief executive officer of JFF and its co-founder. "They can only do so much of that in relationship to their academic pursuits, so very often it is through sports, community service or the arts that they get the chance to develop a different dimension. In the current climate of fiscal constraints and budget deficits and a determined focus on academic achievement, sometimes those other things don't get integrated as well as they should be into the concept of what education and schooling can be about."

Seeing Around the Corner: The Mission of JFF

"The overall mission of JFF is to accelerate the career and educational advancement of low-income youth and adults," says Pennington. "Our Corporation-funded projects explore how we do that for young people by identifying and incubating models and practices that work and then building the supports necessary to make these models and practices available equitably, and on a large scale." The Corporation, too, is concerned about the dissemination of successful teaching and learning models. It has followed through on its earlier support to JFF with another grant in 2002 aimed at keeping the momentum going by enabling the organization to continue its work on documenting and distributing information on successful high school redesign efforts.

One of the cornerstones of JFF's mission is to seek innovative solutions to difficult problems. "It's very hard for people to create what they can't imagine, so we have always tried to combine 'seeing-around-the-corner' research and idea development work with policy and practice work," Pennington says. "In many ways, what has been so wonderful about working with Carnegie Corporation is that they share our interest in 'seeing-around-the-corner.'"

[READ AN EXCERPT: "From Large to Small">](#)

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Excerpt: From Large to Small

With large numbers of students at risk of not meeting high school exit requirements, community leaders are searching for new ideas and opportunities. In response, an increasing number of large urban districts are seeking to personalize their high schools by creating small schools and breaking up larger schools into smaller learning communities. This "small is better" movement has been fueled by well-publicized research indicating that small high schools generally have higher achievement levels, higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates, and that they are safer than larger high schools. Most encouraging to urban leaders has been the finding that small schools make the most differences for low-income and minority youth.*

The move to smaller learning environments is also supported by a body of resiliency research on the personal and social assets young people need to make a successful transition into adulthood and on the features of environments that are likely to help them build those assets. Although less well-known to educators, the resiliency research points to a number of features of positive developmental settings--such as high expectations, supportive relationships, community membership, and opportunities for youth service and leadership--all of which are much more likely to be found in smaller learning environments.

* Howley, C.; Strange, M.; and Bickel, R. 2000. *Research about School Size and School Performance in Impoverished Communities*. ERIC Digest. Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools (ED 448 968).