

The Civic Effects of Small School Reform: A Discussion

By Carrie Donovan

On July 6, CIRCLE convened an all day meeting to discuss the civic and academic outcomes of small school reform. Some education leaders are arguing that traditional, large, omni-purpose, relatively anonymous high schools should be transformed into institutions of smaller size, with more coherent focus, more student participation, and more connections to the surrounding community. Students would then have more choice about which school to attend, but fewer choices about their classes and co-curricular activities once they enroll. New York City is building 200 such small schools; Los Angeles, 130, and Chicago, 100. Proponents hope that these schools will graduate a much higher proportion of their students and prepare their graduates better for school and college. It is also possible that they will produce better civic outcomes. On July 6, policymakers, school administrators, teachers, and students all shared their perspectives on the small schools movement. The meeting was held at the National Press Club and covered by C-SPAN.

Participants all agreed that schools can deeply affect the civic attitudes and engagement of students. High schools matter in particular, as they are the last place where messages about democracy can reach all young people regardless of their socio-economic status or future educational goals. Not only civics classes and co-curricular groups matter; the organization, location, and overall philosophy of a school are also important. However, there was uncertainty and some disagreement about the extent to which size directly affects a school's ability to teach civic content effectively and instill the virtues of good citizenship.

A panel of CIRCLE grantees discussed their research findings on the subject. Joe Kahne of Mills College conducted a study in partnership with Chicago Public Schools assessing the relationship between classroom content and students' commitment to civic engagement. He found that civic opportunities in the classroom—including discussion of current events, community service learning, student voice in the classroom, simulations of democratic procedures, and civic role models in the classroom—all had strong correlations with students' civic commitment. Teaching subject matter interesting to students and civic after-school activities had smaller effects on student commitment. Celeste Lay, from Tulane University, considered the relationship between school size and civic outcomes and concluded that students in small schools were more likely than students in large schools to participate in activities and volunteer. While large schools usually offer a wider array of activities, it appears that such opportunities do not always lead to student participation. However, there was no correlation between school size and political knowledge, efficacy, or tolerance, and in fact, students in small schools are, on average, slightly less tolerant than their peers, most likely because the majority of small schools in her sample were rural and fairly homogenous.

Homogeneity in schools was seen by many as a barrier to teaching skills necessary to democratic decision-making. David Campbell, of Notre Dame University, found that students in social studies classrooms that encourage discussion of political and social

issues did better on civic knowledge tests than their peers. But, such discussions are less likely to occur in classrooms that are racially diverse. Diana Hess from University of Wisconsin at Madison added to the concern about classroom composition, citing excessive tracking as a homogenizing factor in high schools. While small schools may have an easier time building trust among students and teachers, they need to consciously create opportunities for students to discuss multiple, and possibly conflicting, viewpoints.

Other participants highlighted hopeful trends from small schools. Michele Cahill, of the New York City Department of Education, described the city's experience with extensive secondary reform. To date, students in New York City small schools have better attendance and a higher promotion rate – 90 percent compared to only 68 percent city-wide. Sixty-seven percent of students in small schools are testing at Level 1 and Level 2 compared to 60 percent for traditional schools. Thomas Toch, the Co-Director of Education Sector, reiterated the potential for small schools to increase attendance for both students and teachers. He emphasized that small schools have been successful at building relationships that reduce anonymity, which he categorized as “the enemy of academic success.” In addition, Toch recommended small schools as a way to bring coherence to a large sprawling high school curriculum.

But some questions about the importance of school size remained. Susan Sclafani, Assistant Secretary at the Department of Education, cited a randomized experiment. RMDC evaluated high school career academies and found no difference in the academic outcomes of students in traditional high schools and those in career academies. Four years after graduation, however, the male graduates of career academies had higher collective wage earnings than their peers. Sclafani cautioned that popular support for small schools may rely too heavily on anecdotes and extraordinary examples from schools that are excellent all-around and may be difficult to replicate. She urged schools undergoing reform to make academics their core focus and ensure that all teachers have content area expertise in the subjects they teach.

Some contributors to the day's agenda felt that size did not affect the quality of a school at all. Gene Bottoms, of the Southern Regional Education Board, argued that if a school met a set of conditions, it would be a good school regardless of its size. He named strong district leadership as the best way to ensure school success. In his view, strong leaders are committed to improvement, new ideas, and data-based decisions, and still find ways to involve students in meaningful ways. At the school level, he advised that teachers require reading and writing in all classes, plan multi-day units, use modern technology, and share responsibility for helping students meet challenging standards. Schools should offer students opportunities for real work, and provide a comprehensive guidance system with counselors who will work with students for all four years.

The majority of participants felt that while size can be an advantage to student success, other factors were at least as important, if not more. Daniel Fallon, the Chair of the Education Division at Carnegie Corporation of New York, suggested that while small schools are good, they should not be thought of as a “silver bullet.” Teachers and staff have collective responsibility for the learning and development of students, and their

investment is key. Students from Indianapolis Public High Schools who had conducted school-based surveys and interviews agreed and offered additional insight from a student perspective. According to Luke Kashman, a junior at Arsenal Technical High School, “It’s not the smallness that counts, but building relationships with students and having teacher training.” Toya Cosby, a junior at Northwest High School, affirmed that students want open comfortable relationships and added that they also want to know why information being taught is important. In the students’ survey of teachers they found that 64 percent did not think it was their responsibility to keep students in school. Teachers felt they were responsible for content, but not for maintaining student interest or ensuring class attendance. Student researchers Che Jones and Bianca Bullock explained that in a district where only a minority of students makes it to graduation day, teachers need to do more. They need to market education and demonstrate how content is relevant to the lives of students and to their futures. As Bullock stated, “We see that you can make money working, we know that you can leave school and go to the streets, but we don’t always see what school can do for us.”

Two practitioners, a Superintendent and a school founder, offered concrete recommendations for schools to structure civic education. Shelley Berman, the Superintendent of public schools in Hudson, MA, offered the model of Hudson High School where service-learning is integrated into the curriculum and all students take a core civics class that includes both English and Social Studies. Hudson students learn democratic decision-making by doing it. The school is divided up into thematic clusters or small learning communities that allow students to easily engage in dialogue and deliberation. In addition, the school holds town hall meetings and puts key decisions up for discussion and vote at meetings of the Community Council – which is made up of students and faculty. All Council recommendations return to the student clusters where they must be approved before enactment.

Sarah Kass co-founded City on A Hill Public Charter High School in Boston, MA in 1995. Like Hudson High School, City On A Hill operates under the belief that democratic citizens must be made. The school teaches the practices of democracy through town hall meetings, a community internship program for all students, and community-based projects. All students spend their final year researching a civic issue. Their work culminates in a final project that is reviewed by a jury of students and community members who hold them accountable to exceptionally high standards, but standards that are transparent to students from the very start. Kass recommends that schools demonstrate democracy by making authority legitimate and not arbitrary. School staff and faculty need to themselves be committed to constant learning and revision. Standards need to be integral to the school and transparent to students, and academic challenges need to be real so that students “sweat” intellectually and can have a true sense of accomplishment. Kass argues that true democracy requires understanding of tradition and history and not merely concern for the future. According to Kass, “schools need to see the hallways as places for learning.” It is in the hallways where students will understand that their behavior and what they are learning about democracy are related. These things are all part of the disposition of schools, and it is this disposition – linked to internal accountability – that make schools civic, not their size alone.

The Honorable Bob Wise, the former governor of West Virginia and now president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, shared his thoughts in a keynote lunch address. Stating that the opportunity for high school reform is a narrow window that might close, he underlined the importance of citizen involvement in the process. He noted that in order to achieve effective high school reform, we need civic engagement; and to enhance civic engagement, we need reformed high schools.

William Galston, the Director of CIRCLE, ended the day with the suggestion that civic education is a term with two dimensions: it describes a set of distinct curricular practices and it also describes education in general, since the way information is taught has implications for student's efficacy and civic competencies. He concluded that while the research on the effects of small schools is limited, there is hope—particularly for the potential of small schools to counter anonymity and provide internal accountability. While size alone may not guarantee results, the advantage of smallness can give schools a head start in building a school culture and curriculum that model democracy.