

**SMALL SCHOOLS: CREATING A MODEL  
FOR SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING IN CHICAGO**

**BY**

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of Sharon Gallowayhall, who died in 1996. Sharon was among the first group of small-schools organizers who joined the Small Schools Workshop in 1992 and went on to inspire teachers and principals to create better alternatives for kids. She, along with four teachers she organized, initiated the creation of Transitions and Transformations (T&T) at Henson Elementary in September, 1994. T&T was one of the first such efforts done in collaboration with community-based organizations like ACORN, with whom Sharon developed close ties. The school offered 175 students early contact with algebra and work on computers. It also allowed students to participate in the creation of school rules and a Code of Discipline. Sharon also led in the launching of Creations, a small school at Nicholson Elementary, another partnership with ACORN which led to a school focused on democratic education. Even after cancer had weakened her to the point where she was bedridden, she continued to gather research on the progress of the small schools. Whenever I feel like giving up on this project, I think of Sharon.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my dissertation committee which was chaired by William Schubert and included William Ayers, Mary Anne Raywid, William Watkins and Ward Weldon. Their thoughtfulness as well as their prodding gave me both an example to model and a source of encouragement. I would also like to acknowledge Susan Kionsky who served as a perceptive advisor, critic and friend throughout the project.

MKK

## SUMMARY

A study of school restructuring using the small-schools strategy, was carried out using mainly qualitative methods of ethno-journalism and case studies. Interviews, observations and action research were all used to document this approach to school reform and develop models for Chicago's public schools.

While no single model was clearly delineated through the study, several emerged that were based upon concepts such as professional community, focus, curriculum integration and democratic decision-making which all built upon the historical and socio-political roots of the present day small-schools movement.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

When a great multitude...are brought together by the concentration of a central government in one place, talents lie buried, virtues are ignored and vices tend to remain unpunished. The rulers, overburdened with work, have first hand knowledge of nothing.  
— Jean Rousseau

Although I have been a participant/observer in the alternative schools movement since it came to life in the 1960s, I first started writing and researching about the Chicago small-schools revolution in 1991 as a contributing editor for *Catalyst Magazine*, the Chicago school reform journal. This coincided with the time when my daughter Amanda was preparing to enter high school. Amanda is creative, artistic and politically aware. Her learning style would probably have been best served in a small environment where she could follow through on her areas of interest and engage and be engaged by a teacher or group of teachers. It was then that I learned that few such environments existed for Chicago high school students. Rather, Amanda would have to opt for a large, factory-type school where the population exceeded 1,500 and ranged to 4,000 students. The best we could hope for was one of the few magnet schools where at least some of her writing and computing skills could be developed with a few explorations into areas of social justice and social transformation. As it turned out, Amanda's high school experience was less than satisfying.

While Chicago's magnet schools select their population from a racially integrated pool of high-achieving students, they are generally distinguished from the comprehensive high schools only by their curriculum (usually accelerated or more intensive presentation of the basic core subjects) with the traditional school structure

and culture left in tact. Its saving grace was the personal rebellion it sparked in Amanda and her friends, which at times took the form of some fine, publishable critiques of high schooling and a commitment to graduate early.

Her struggle for validation and visibility as a student led me to wonder about the rest of Chicago's 410,000 students, the majority of whom faced much more difficult struggles in their pursuit of a successful educational experience. If the factory model high school wasn't serving a child with ample support from home and a relatively rich background in reading and other basic schooling skills, what impact was it having on the great majority of urban students who needed even more to be known and supported by educators and their community? Furthermore, was there a way that school reform could really transform the factory model into a model of small communities of teachers and learners, a way in which to affect the way students learned and felt about their education? This set of problems became the focal point of my dissertation.

About that time, Bill Ayers and Bruce McPherson began putting together a research and school restructuring effort at the University of Illinois at Chicago, which would come to be known as the Small Schools Workshop. I was writing about Chicago Public Schools and the 1988 school reform law as a contributing editor to *Catalyst*, Chicago's school reform journal. The first three years of school reform had focused mainly on the important governance issues, but little impact on the educational core was evident to me as a writer/researcher. Several studies of the first five years of reform showed little impact on student achievement (Niemiec & Walberg, 1993). The idea behind the Small Schools Workshop was to go directly into the public schools and assist teachers who were trying to change the factory model of teaching/learning.

When the fledgling Workshop asked me to be their writer-researcher, I jumped at the chance. School restructuring seemed like a reform approach which would get us beyond the narrow channels, directed at teacher professional development. These seemed to me to be nibbling around edges of curricular issues. The Workshop appeared to be focusing instead upon the creation of democratic communities of learners which could become empowering passageways to the successful student learning experiences which I dreamed of for Amanda and all of Chicago's children.

I also used the opportunity to pursue postgraduate work in education leading towards a Ph.D. in Curriculum. This created a near-perfect union for me between my writing (research) and my interest in the school change process. My writing expanded to include ethnographic studies of groups of teachers and community members trying to bring about change. This also led me to a form of action-research I had never before experienced. It gave me ready access to hundreds of teachers, principals, parents and administrators who were working to restructure their own schools. For example, I was able to interview a group of small-schools principals on video. I also surveyed the literature on school size and student achievement and simultaneously began observing the first wave of Chicago's new small schools. I interviewed the change agents, sat in the back of classrooms and followed teachers and parents to dozens of meetings, conferences and social gatherings.

My observations and interviews supported the literature which was fairly conclusive. It showed that "smaller is better", particularly for inner-city and especially poor, minority and female students. But gathering this evidence was the easy part. More difficult was discovering how this research could be used, not only to help change

individual schools but to impact the entire Chicago public school system. I wasn't sure what I was looking for in terms of a central question. Rather I was studying the phenomenon and drawing from it whatever meaning I could. Some of the initial questions that began to emerge as the change process deepened were:

1. How would small schools be defined?
2. Which forces within the school community would drive the change?
3. Would restructuring be just another passing fad or another good idea turned cliché? Or worse, could it turn into a political scheme to be used as a stalking horse to push vouchers, bust the teachers union or promote privatization of schooling?
4. What response would be forthcoming from the school bureaucracy?
5. Could school restructuring bridge the growing gap between school reformers and community residents, especially in African-American and Latino neighborhoods?

As my study unfolded, it seemed to me that *small schools* shouldn't be defined simply by a set of population numbers, but rather metaphorically as learning communities. *Small schools* in that sense is a metaphor for a community of teachers and learners; in other words for turning the factory model of public education on its head. As for the forces who could bring about such change, I would argue that it must be done by primarily by teachers in alliance with the broader school and outside community, including students, parents, community leaders and activists, business persons and professional educators. This approach runs counter to narrow notions of teacher autonomy, on the one hand, and "teacher-proofing" the curriculum, on the

other.

Finally, despite the criticisms of researchers and cynics within the school reform movement, I believed that school restructuring was a realistic and worthwhile endeavor and that such a movement could have deeply transformative effect on schooling and that the effort would even draw significant support from within the school bureaucracy itself. Moreover, this positive assessment of school restructuring was contingent upon bridging the serious gap between the organized school-reform groups on the one hand and Chicago's African-American community, which has historically been a force for social and educational change.

I felt certain that something significant was happening and that soon Chicago's small-schools movement could be on the cutting edge of radical social and educational change. In 1992, this movement consisted mainly of small groups of rebellious, teachers trying to take advantage of the decentralization caused by the School Reform Act. These teachers, along with a few principals, seized at the new openings being created by local control and a by a weakened central office. They began opening their classroom doors to each other, doors which had traditionally been shut to conceal their own individualized experiments with good teaching and to protect themselves from punitive "accountability" measures. They began finding each other at school reform conferences and staff-development meetings. By the end of 1992 there were more than a dozen serious efforts aimed at creating small, semi-autonomous schools. Some were led by far-sighted, innovative principals like Charles Mingo at DuSable High School, Yvonne Minor at Dyett Middle School, Betty Despenza-Green at Chicago Vocational High School, Martha Silva-Vera at Philip Sheridan Elementary and Barbara

Moore Pulliam at Harper High School.<sup>1</sup> Others were initiated by teachers in revolt against traditional top-down leadership, at times leading to outright secessionist movements with groups of teachers packing up and moving elsewhere.

This first wave of small schools was created with little help and often resistance (and even outright sabotage) from the Board of Education under Superintendent Ted Kimbrough, who was pushed to resign in 1992 before completing a brief term in office. Mayor Richard Daley was calling for the closure of small schools (like the successful Metro High School) because of their supposed cost inefficiencies and was promoting vouchers and privatization of the public schools. Downstate legislators were talking about breaking the Chicago Public Schools system into many smaller districts while strangling it financially.

The next superintendent, Argie Johnson, came to Chicago from New York, where she claimed to have been involved in the small-schools efforts in District 4. While she gave some verbal support to restructuring and near the end of her tenure became an active supporter of small schools, she never found a way to give leadership to this incipient movement. She was ultimately the victim of a coup d'état engineered by Republican legislators and a Democratic Mayor which overthrew the traditional superintendency and school board, replacing them with a politically accountable group of officials under new reform legislation in 1995. The new group, responsible to the

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<sup>1</sup>For wonderful accounts of the early effort by Dr. Pulliam and a band of her Harper teachers to create COMETS school-within-a-school, see Mike Rose's (1995) book *Possible Lives* and Susan Klonsky's (1994) "Success on the Highway to Change."

Mayor, took a much more aggressive posture, reflecting the growing public consciousness of school restructuring. Mayor Richard M. Daley, who previously had supported Republican calls for school vouchers, shifted his position and recognized the political possibilities of school restructuring, promoted Charter Schools and shifted to a pro-small schools stance. Whether this epiphany came as part of the deal with the Republicans, pressure from the Small-Schools coalition or from the Mayor's earnest study of the research, we will probably never know.

With the new change in leadership, part of a nationwide trend away from the leadership of the professional educator class<sup>2</sup> and an influx of funding from the Annenberg grant, restructuring moved to a new stage. From an experiment by a few dozen teachers and a handful of administrators, restructuring became a sign of hope for hundreds of schools struggling for survival in the midst of a conservative political climate where "accountability" and severe financial cutbacks were the watchwords. This new phase brought a wealth of problems of its own and much confusion to the new small-school teachers since it called for new tactics, alliances and pacing.

For me as a researcher, the new phase expanded the size of my "laboratory." It gave me a rich source of new data as dozens of schools embarked on the path of small-schools restructuring. Increasingly, my study of small schools became action-oriented. For example, I helped organize the Small Schools Principals' Circle, a group of 18 principals who were trying to lead restructuring efforts at their own schools. This

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<sup>2</sup> See G. Alfred Hess Jr., "Chicago's New Perspective on District Management" in *Education Week*, November 29, 1995, p.28.

created opportunities for me to have a constant interchange with principals on the front lines of restructuring.

As a leader of the Small Schools Teacher Leadership Academy, the Small Schools Initiative training effort and the Board's School Intervention Project, I was part of a process that gave me access to a rich lode of information, statistics and anecdotal material. This approach, however, has created difficulties in organizing my time and knowing when and how to integrate research into organizing and vice versa.

Different organizational models emerged from practice. These models include: houses, school (or schools)-within-a-school, schools-within-a-building, whole school restructuring, satellite schools (attached to an existing school but at a separate location), free-standing small schools, scatter-plex (several free-standing small schools all with the same principal), charter schools (freed by legislation from state mandates), reconstituted schools (reopened with new teachers and students), and the small-schools multiplex (several new schools in one building).

But the emergence of an array of models also brought up the issue of replicability. Could a successful attempt at one school be copied at another or at hundreds of others? What role would the community and its organizations play in school change? Most important, how can school restructuring be fully implemented and work in huge, urban school systems like Chicago's? While not the immediate focus of this study, all these questions loomed large during my investigation.

As many followers of John Dewey have found out, great pedagogical notions don't easily translate into the practice of public education, and, as Brown University educator Ted Sizer (1985, p.224) says: "A public relations campaign is easier to stage

than a serious attempt to reform schools--and, alas, the education establishment today is full of hype on behalf of things as they are."

By 1995, with Mayor Daley's team running the schools and political considerations running high, the air was full of PR campaigns. Each week there was another revelation about the importance of direct instruction (as carried out by a school in Houston, Texas), extended day and more time-on-task, ninth-grade academies, summer bridge programs and small-school initiatives. Would *small schools* turn out to be just another program? Just another educational cliché?

There have been dozens of studies of school restructuring, with many exploring the relationship between school size and student learning outcomes (see literature review). My work coincided with a major study on school restructuring nationally (Newman & Wehlage, 1995). After studying more than 1,500 schools throughout the country, the authors concluded that small, restructured schools can contribute heavily to authentic pedagogy and a strengthening of professional community, both of which are vital to successful student learning experiences. While this and most other previous studies can be useful to teachers and others involved in school restructuring, they most often are broad statistical studies or meta-analyses, revealing the positive impact restructuring has on student achievement or cost efficiency. Teachers or reform activists may find the results of these studies useful as selling points in making their case for restructuring to school boards, administrators, parent groups or other teachers. But what I hoped to add to this body of work was the development of a model or models for school restructuring based on the experiences of Chicago educators and school reformers. These models could be seen as a part of the democratic

movement for social change—an emancipatory movement of and for students (especially those in struggling inner-city communities) and teachers, who have become, in many ways, slaves of alienating, bureaucratic institutions over which they have little control. While this study doesn't succeed in creating a Chicago model, it does explore the implications of at least two: the *community model* and the *autonomous teachers model*.

## II. THE PROBLEM

"If all parents wanted smaller, safer schools for their children, we'd have nowhere to put them." – Charlene A. Green, Chicago's associate superintendent for special education. Quoted in *Education Week*, October 5, 1994

"If we can't create a sense of community with 2,700 students, how can New York survive?"—Former Ford Foundation leader and Newton, Mass. superintendent Charles E. Brown. Quoted in *Crisis in the Classroom* by Charles Silberman.

Problem 1. Given the failure of Chicago's public school system to provide a high-quality and purposeful education for the majority of its citizens, is small-school restructuring a worthwhile and viable alternative?

Problem 2. If it is indeed a viable and worthwhile alternative, what is the best model or strategy for restructuring Chicago's factory-model schools?

My working hypothesis is that restructuring schools for more successful learning experiences is primarily a matter of changing the internal relationships within those schools from those resembling a factory to those more resembling a community. This strategy breaks from many traditional approaches to school change where the initiation of some new curriculum package of "best practices" or the "retooling" of teachers through programs of professional development plays the leading role.<sup>3</sup> It also moves beyond decentralization and site-based-management strategies which have been high on the reform agenda since the 1980s.

While professional development is vitally important to any change strategy (and

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<sup>3</sup> A Chicago proponent of the "retooling" strategy is the Teachers Academy for Mathematics and Science (TAMS) created by Leon Lederman and led by Mayor Daley's Deputy for Education, Lourdes Monteagudo. For a favorable evaluation of this strategy, see Robert Stake's *Strategies: Teacher Professional Development in Chicago School Reform*, University of Illinois, CIRCE (1996).

a noticeably missing part of Chicago's 1988 school decentralization), in its traditional form it has not been able to have a major transformational impact on schools or on urban school systems. Such approaches have increased the skill and perhaps the commitment of teachers already drawn to them. But the question remains: How do you change a system of schools, not just with the minority of highly skilled, advanced teachers, but with the majority of 24,000 teachers in the Chicago Public Schools system as well as with students and parents involved?

Site-based management and more local control at the school level has shown itself to be an important democratic reform, particularly in Chicago where it is mandated by state law. However, by itself, site-based management has failed to have significant impact on student achievement in its first seven years in Chicago public schools.<sup>4</sup>

The restructuring strategy holds great interest for teachers. However, they have also been a strong source of resistance to restructuring. And this resistance has sometimes reflected their good sense as well as some conservatism. The point here is to find ways of changing not only the size and shape of schools, but of reconsidering teachers' work as well, so that the push-pull cycle where outsiders push for reforms and teachers resist (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995) is avoided. Building a professional community within the school requires a conscious effort which redefines teacher and administrator relationships as well as those between the teacher and the student. Chances for success may be increased within a smaller school.

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<sup>4</sup> For an unfavorable, if premature, assessment of Chicago school reform's first three years in terms of student achievement, student attendance, graduation and dropout rates, see Niemiec & Walberg (1993). In the same volume see Hess, Flinspach and Ryan's "Case Studies of Chicago Schools Under Reform.

The problem begins with a critique of the *factory model*. Too many students are falling, not through cracks, but into a giant abyss. It is not just a curricular or instructional crisis that can be patched up by this or that new program or by offering some way (vouchers, e.g.) to allow a small percentage of students to escape the system. How does a community actually restructure its schools to meet the needs of students, particularly of those students who populate our oversized and often overcrowded urban public schools?

Previous research has uncovered few replicable models of systemic school change. While individual effective schools have been created, large factory model schools (especially high schools) still dominate the urban landscape and have since the post-Sputnik era when James B. Conant (1959), former president of Harvard and the leader of the Manhattan Project declared that "bigger is better." Throughout the nation, politicians rushed to embrace Conant's cold-war agenda of big schools focusing on science and math.

In Chicago, there have been wave upon wave of reform efforts. Most have focused either on trying to align the different bureaucratic components of large public educational systems ("systemic reform") or, again, upon upgrading the skills of teachers through professional development. Some social critics of public education see outside social problems as so overwhelming that significant improvement in student achievement is impossible under current conditions.

I was impressed by an article that appeared in a Kenosha, Wisconsin,

newspaper<sup>5</sup> describing a meeting of that city's school board. Like many urban districts with high concentrations of poor and minority students, Kenosha's results were less than satisfactory. Board President James Twomey displayed test score results which showed the following:

- Out of every 10 ninth graders entering Kenosha public high schools, five will graduate on time and three will end up on the street.
- Among ninth graders, 58.2 percent of the white students pass algebra or a tougher math course. For Hispanics, 27 percent. For African-Americans, 18.4 percent.
- Where you go to school makes a difference, said Twomey. 74 percent of the black students at Lance Junior High succeed in algebra. The rate for black students at Lincoln Junior high is 11 percent.

"If you are fortunate enough to have light skin," said Twomey, "you live in a better world." The board president then took the report a step further, taking personal responsibility the district's failure. "I have failed," he told the meeting. "I cannot serve on the school board knowing these numbers and defend the status quo. It is time to put money into instruction where it belongs."

The relevant points to be drawn from this story are: 1) urban public schools aren't working well for the majority of their students; 2) for black and Hispanic students, the schools are a miserable failure, denying the young people their democratic right to a

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<sup>5</sup> "United adds funds for classrooms" by Dave Engels, *Kenosha News*, August 21, 1996, p.1.

good education and their access to society's benefits; 3) there is something that can be done to make a difference in schools, as demonstrated by the fact that two junior high schools drawing from the same student population achieved remarkably different results; and 4) someone in a professional community is taking responsibility to change schools.

These four points get to the heart of this research problem. Embedded within the small school movement is an ideal of democratic education. *Small schools* is not simply a restructuring maneuver designed to align the present system or keep it afloat a while longer or raise its capacity (although these may be some of its unintended results). Neither is it seen, as large schools were seen by their architects, as a plan to overtake the Russians in space or bring U.S. reading and math scores up to those of the Dutch. Rather it is part of a larger effort to democratize schooling, expand the options for learning in every urban community and especially for non-white children and the urban poor (Ayers & Klonsky, 1994) and to build in a sense of community or responsibility for all our children.

Kenosha's problems are like Chicago's, New York's and Philadelphia's, except on a smaller scale. Since the 1983 report, "*Nation At Risk*," we have been bombarded with reports and studies showing that we Americans are lagging behind the other industrialized nations of the world in math or science; that our achievement levels have fallen dramatically, that we are getting less bang for the educational buck, and that the very life of our nation is threatened by public school failure. And while many of these charges come unsubstantiated, often from the ideological and political right, and are being hurled freely and loosely to push forth the conservative school agenda of

vouchers and privatization of schooling (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Bracey, 1993), there are plenty of valid critiques of public education as it exists today in its factory-school mode. Some of the most important have to do with a system of what Jonathan Kozol (1991) called the "savage inequalities" of educational opportunities between the wealthy and the impoverished in American society.

#### Doubts and Reservations

While the current school restructuring movement has been defined by David Conley (1993) as a radical or "fundamental" shift that changes schools' "assumptions, practices and relationships" to the benefit of "essentially all students," Kozol and other critics of public education, like Harvard's Richard Elmore (1996), tend to look at school reform as ineffectual "linkering" around the edges without getting to the core of the problem. For Kozol, the core is a fundamentally corrupt and racist social and political system. For Elmore, the core is what goes on in the area of teaching and learning: "...it is possible to alter organization and practice in schools dramatically," says Elmore, "but it has thus far never been possible to do it on a large scale. The closer an innovation gets to the core of schooling, the less likely it is that it will influence teaching and learning on a large scale" (p.4).

These critiques may lead to a sense of hopelessness on the part of teachers and reformers in the trenches, despair which has been echoed by many educators since the Coleman Report. James Coleman and his colleagues (1966) found the socio-economic status of the families of students to be head and shoulders above differences in schools as a determinant of student success. While the report generated government Title I support for educational and nutritional opportunities for deprived