The Big Picture on Oregon's Small Schools
The Oregon Small Schools Initiative

November 2010

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nearly a decade ago, the small schools movement in Oregon was limited to small rural high schools and a sprinkling of charter and magnet schools that had sprung up across the state. Never in Oregon's history had there been a statewide effort to deliberately create small high schools whose focus was meeting the needs of all of their students.

Since then, the Oregon Small Schools Initiative—the largest investment in high school reform in the state's history—has produced a cohort of 34 small schools that is closing the achievement gap between minority and low-income students and their majority peers and changing the lives of the more than 25,000 students and 500 staff who have participated in this work.

The Initiative's charge in 2003 was to help Oregon high schools and school districts interested in small school design to create new small schools and to convert comprehensive high schools into several small autonomous schools. The Initiative's goals were: 1) to close the achievement gap experienced by low-income students, students of color, and English language learners; 2) to increase high school graduation rates; and 3) to increase the number of college- and career-ready graduating students. The Initiative represented an initial five-year $25 million joint effort of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Meyer Memorial Trust. An additional Meyer grant of $3 million, plus $1 million of the original Gates investment, allowed the Initiative to continue for two more years. The project grant recipient, E3: Employers for Education Excellence, managed the Initiative during its seven-year history.

The Initiative schools have demonstrated success in achieving important student outcomes. Despite high rates of poverty and other barriers to success, students at these schools demonstrate improved achievement, attendance, high school graduation, and post-secondary enrollment. Since 2004-05, the longest-established schools have doubled the share of their students meeting state math and reading benchmarks, reduced dropout rates by more than 25 percent, increased high school graduation 15 percentage points, and increased the share of graduates enrolling at college by 10 percent.

But, the significance of these small schools exceeds even these gains for students. These schools have produced a core of instructional leaders located throughout the state who will continue to transform the teaching and learning experience of both the adults and the students in these buildings. This capacity for deep-level change followed from the patient pursuit of far-reaching instructional goals embedded in the small school design.

The challenge in the Initiative's first phase was structural—either starting a new school or converting a large comprehensive high school into small schools. In the next phase, school and Initiative staff partnered to reach the more ambitious goal of re-envisioning teaching and learning. Through strong instructional leadership and a focus on personalized learning, each of the small schools came to share a legacy of transformation of the essential components of secondary-level education. Although each school implemented a distinct approach best suited to its context, the resulting changes reflect, collectively, a metamorphosis in Oregon education.

This is only the beginning. The small schools created through this Initiative will continue to evolve, building connections among students, staff, and all facets of secondary school education. For schools in Oregon and across the country that are considering the small school design, they will serve as models for the evolution of more powerful teaching and learning in high school settings for many years to come.

INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORT

This report describes the evolution and accomplishments of the Oregon Small Schools Initiative. Drawing from best practices in small schools across the nation, the Initiative designed a program unique to the opportunities and needs of Oregon. At its height, the Initiative consisted of 38 small schools in 13 school districts; throughout its seven-year history, it touched the lives of more than 25,000 students and 500 teachers. In 2010, as the Initiative formally ends, 34 schools are continuing their small schools mission, either as a small school or a small learning community.

This report begins by summarizing the promise of small schools as described in the research literature. Next, it provides an overview of the Initiative, focusing on key stages and the supports provided to new or converted schools. The report then provides a view of the future for small schools in Oregon, and concludes with the accomplishments of the schools, including student outcomes and the experiences of students and staff. A companion report, *Oregon Small Schools Initiative: Quantitative Analysis 2004–2009*, provides analysis comparing the academic achievement and high school completion outcomes of Initiative and non-Initiative schools from 2004–2005 through 2008–2009.

WHAT MAKES A SCHOOL SMALL?

Small schools typically have fewer than 100 students per grade and are characterized by a high level of autonomy—with each school maintaining control over staffing, curriculum, and other key functions. They are either new starts (i.e., charter or magnet schools) or conversions of large comprehensive high schools divided into multiple schools on one campus.

THE PROMISE OF THE SMALL SCHOOL

Imagine schools where students and their teachers fully immerse themselves in rigorous learning goals that every student is expected to meet. Imagine students engaged in authentic learning experiences that they themselves helped to design and that take place both within and beyond the school walls. Imagine students and teachers developing strong, sustained relationships that connect all learning to the students' strengths, interests, and goals.

This combination of *rigor, relevance,* and *relationships* in schools has been referred to frequently by educators and policymakers during the past several decades. Research indicates that students do better in smaller, more caring and personalized learning environments; links have been uncovered between small school settings and higher test scores and graduation rates (Kahne, Sporte, & de la Torre, 2006; Lee & Smith, 1997; McMullen, Sipe, & Wolf, 1994).

A number of prominent reformers advocate for small, autonomous schools with effective learning programs as a response to the failings of large comprehensive high schools. In far too many of these schools—which have come to dominate the education landscape for the last half century— students become lost and drop out or stay but learn less than they might otherwise. In Oregon and much of the nation, nearly a third of entering ninth-graders fail to achieve a high school diploma, and a significant share of high school students who do graduate are not prepared to succeed in postsecondary education and employment. These outcomes are much worse for students from low-income families and students of color. Such failings for both general and specific student populations diminish the prospects of individuals, communities, the economy, and the nation as a whole.

At their best, small schools increase student achievement and engage students more fully in rigorous coursework. The small school size places the focus on the most important people in the building—the students—rather than the master schedule or the minimum requirements for graduation. Driven by the dedication and vision of committed leaders, small schools can potentially create the ideal conditions for accelerated learning

for every student. In contrast, large comprehensive high schools often perpetuate groups of isolated classrooms where innovative instruction occurs, while tolerating inequities in access and outcomes for students throughout the building overall.

In a small school, students can't easily fall through the cracks. That is the vision; the reality, of course, is more complicated. Some of the small schools across the country have failed to demonstrate the dramatic gains that had been anticipated. Although design elements were weak in some of the schools under study—particularly those created by subdividing large existing schools—and buy-in for changes wasn't fully present in many, some educational leaders have grown skeptical of small schools. Even the Gates Foundation, which spent $2 billion on creating new, mostly urban small high schools, eventually distanced itself from the small school movement. "Many of the small schools that we invested in did not improve students' achievement in any significant way," Bill Gates wrote in his 2009 annual letter. The foundation subsequently shifted its focus to teacher quality and other strategies.

But the story is not over. Recently, a Gates-funded study of small public high schools of choice in New York City revealed significantly improved high school academic progress and graduation outcomes for an initial cohort of disadvantaged students (Bloom, Thompson, & Unterman, 2010). Philadelphia's growing network of alternative high schools is starting to produce positive results in student engagement and achievement (Hartmann et al., 2009). In Oregon, the Initiative's small schools show encouraging evidence of success, as described in the independent report, entitled *Oregon Small Schools Initiative: Quantitative Analysis 2004–2009*. Over time, as more chapters unfold, educators, policymakers, and the broader community served by these schools will be watching for continued signs of how the Oregon Small Schools Initiative delivers on the promise of small schools.

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Overview of the Initiative

The Oregon Small Schools Initiative represented the largest investment in the state's history in demonstrating—and igniting interest in—a high school reform model. It started in 2003 as a five-year, grant-funded effort to encourage the adoption of small high schools in a variety of Oregon school districts. The Initiative was initially funded with grants from two partnering foundations: $15 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and $10 million from Meyer Memorial Trust. A subsequent grant of $100,000 was received from the James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation. Recognizing that some schools needed more support and time to achieve deep-level changes in teaching and learning, Meyer Memorial Trust later funded a two-year program extension with a grant of $3 million for schools with the strongest commitment to small school transformation and the best chance of institutionalizing and modeling best practices. More than $12 million was granted directly to schools during the course of the Initiative, supporting site visits, professional development, community engagement, and business partnership development.

Ramping Up

The Initiative in Oregon originated as part of a larger national effort by the Gates Foundation—often with regional foundation or nonprofit partners—to create hundreds of small schools, ranging in size up to 500 students, with most around 400 or below. The majority of these small schools were created by converting large comprehensive high schools into small, autonomous schools within the larger facility. The balance also included new charter or magnet schools, often at a separate site, but sometimes within the larger high school campus. Many schools were based on academic themes such as the arts, business, technology, communication, or the sciences, and many of these were affiliated with specific models of instruction and learning (e.g., project based, inquiry based, technology driven). The idea behind Gates' national effort, directed either at big city school districts or entire states, was to plant the seed for small school adoption by demonstrating that small schools are better suited to foster student engagement and achievement. The high school-focused work placed special emphasis on communities of traditionally underserved students.

In Oregon, funders selected an intermediary organization—E3: Employers for Education Excellence—to organize and administer the Initiative. E3 is a 501(c)(3) organization founded by the Oregon Business Council (OBC) in 1996 to strengthen ties between employers and schools to improve student achievement. Through research, collaboration with education stakeholders, and involvement in policy formation, OBC has advocated education improvement for nearly two decades. As part of that effort, E3 has long helped employers work directly with students to prepare them for postsecondary education and the workforce. E3 has a longstanding and committed roster of employer partners and donors from which it draws an active board of directors.

In May 2003, E3 executive director René Léger recruited Karen Phillips to serve as the Initiative director. A veteran educator and curriculum director at North Clackamas School District, she came on board in July and began building the program from the ground up. In 2008, when Phillips resigned, Kathy Campobasso, an experienced educator, professional development specialist, and school change coach within the Initiative, was appointed to head the effort.

At the outset, funders charged the Initiative to pursue three goals: 1) to close the achievement gap experienced by low-income students, students of color, and English language learners; 2) to increase high school graduation rates; and 3) to increase the number of college- and career-ready graduating students. To achieve these goals, the Initiative set out three operational objectives. First, it intended to implement successful high school models by converting approximately 12 large comprehensive high schools into smaller and more autonomous learning communities, and to create 12 new small magnet high schools or public charter high schools, each serving no more than 400 students with a significant percentage of high-poverty or minority students. Second, it would support replication of the small school models by creating opportunities for other high schools and school districts to adopt the strategies demonstrated at model sites. Third, it would ensure that the change process for creating small schools would be scalable and sustainable. It envisioned doing that by building systemwide commitment, knowledge, and networks to sustain small high school models and support standards-based education reform.

Recognizing the challenges that lay ahead, Phillips and Léger engaged the assistance of an experienced, diverse, and well-respected group of education leaders in Oregon to comprise an advisory cabinet. This cabinet included leaders from the Oregon Department of Education, the Oregon Education Association, and the business sector, among others. Members of the cabinet met regularly and played a significant role in the selection of schools and the continuation or extension of grants. Their advice throughout the Initiative helped the staff and schools deal with both expected and unexpected struggles.

School Selection

By early 2004, 55 schools with at least 1,000 students and at least 50 percent underserved populations were deemed eligible and therefore invited to apply to participate in the Initiative. The Initiative intentionally selected schools in two rounds so they could apply lessons learned in the first

round to the second. In spring 2004, awards were made to first-round sites resulting in six conversions that created 26 small schools and three new starts. Second-round funds in spring 2005 yielded three conversions resulting in 10 small schools, and three new starts.

The table on the following page lists the 32 conversion schools and 6 new starts that were up and running in 2007–2008, the year in which the largest number of Initiative schools was in operation at the same time. Columns at the right show student demographics. Schools identified by their small school name in the table were designed with autonomy in leadership and governance, staffing, budgeting, and curriculum. Schools collectively identified by their campus name, with parenthetical numbers at the right, are conversion high school campuses functioning either as small learning communities or, in the case of North Eugene and Newberg, a hybrid arrangement of semi-autonomous small schools.

An important goal of the Initiative was to eliminate the achievement gap. To achieve this goal, the program was implemented in schools that suffered from persistent gaps, particularly among historically disadvantaged students. In 2007–2008, across all Initiative schools, 55 percent of students were eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch and 42 percent were minorities, while statewide averages were 42 percent and 29 percent, respectively. Indeed, many Initiative schools, particularly the conversions in Portland and Woodburn and most of the new starts, served extremely high-poverty and/or high-minority student populations.

OVERVIEW OF OREGON SMALL SCHOOLS INITIATIVE
SCHOOLS PARTICIPATING IN 2007–2008

	DISTRICT	OPENED	ENROLLMENT	% MINORITY	% ESL	% FREE LUNCH
State Total/Average			566,067	28.9%	11.0%	41.9%
32 Conversion Schools						
Crater High School Campus						
Crater Academy of Health And Public Services	Central Point	2007–08	376	15.2%	2.9%	25.0%
Crater Academy of Natural Sciences	Central Point	2007–08	393	6.6%	2.9%	29.8%
Crater Renaissance Academy	Central Point	2007–08	376	11.2%	3.7%	34.9%
Crater School of Business Innovation and Science	Central Point	2007–08	385	14.0%	3.2%	22.3%
Liberty High School (3)*	Hillsboro	2003–04	1,307	42.6%	11.6%	38.9%
Madison High School Campus (3)	Portland	2007–08	860	57.0%	11.1%	64.3%
Marshall High School Campus						
Biz Tech	Portland	2004–05	262	50.8%	18.3%	76.7%
Pauling Academy of Integrated Sciences	Portland	2004–05	220	39.6%	16.1%	66.4%
Renaissance Arts Academy	Portland	2004–05	294	47.3%	8.7%	76.5%
Newberg Senior High School (5)	Newberg	2006–07	1,662	16.0%	6.7%	25.9%
North Eugene High School (3)	Eugene	2006–07	1,073	26.6%	1.9%	28.9%
Roosevelt High School Campus						
Arts Communication & Technology High School	Portland	2004–05	279	51.3%	8.6%	65.6%
POWER Academy	Portland	2004–05	229	62.5%	8.6%	73.8%
Spanish English International High School	Portland	2004–05	222	85.6%	22.1%	82.0%
South Medford High School (4)	Medford	2006–07	1,920	20.8%	4.6%	32.8%
Woodburn High School Campus						
Academy of International Studies	Woodburn	2006–07	336	92.9%	69.6%	76.2%
Wellness Business and Sports School	Woodburn	2006–07	295	74.9%	51.2%	75.3%
Woodburn Academy of Art Science and Technology	Woodburn	2006–07	347	65.0%	36.6%	76.7%
Woodburn Arts and Communications Academy	Woodburn	2006–07	267	57.0%	31.1%	79.0%
6 New Starts						
The Academy of Arts and Academics	Springfield	2006–07	112	13.0%	1.0%	62.0%
EagleRidge Charter High School	Klamath Falls	2007–08	101	15.3%	0.0%	51.3%
Leadership & Entrepreneurship Public Charter High School	Portland	2006–07	147	49.0%	3.2%	63.3%
Media Arts & Communications Academy	McMinnville	2007–08	152	22.0%	15.3%	49.0%
Health and Science School	Beaverton	2007–08	116	54.3%	23.0%	48.0%
Nixya'awii Community High School	Pendleton	2004–05	67	93.2%	0.0%	58.2%
Partner Schools Total/Average:			11,798	42.2%	14.5%	55.3%

*The numbers in parentheses represent the number of small schools on the campus in fall 2007.

Note: Lebanon High School's four small schools had been early partners in the Initiative, but by 2007-08 the partnership had ended.

Source: Oregon Department of Education and E3 school data reports.

The Hard Work Begins
2003-2007

During the Initiative's first three years, when most schools were in the planning or startup stages, an overarching task was to support local planning and implementation. The primary focus for Initiative staff was to assist local education leaders in making structural and cultural changes. The schools were challenged to plan their new format and approach to education, win stakeholder support, put their plans into operation, and then navigate the complexities and inherent difficulties of the change process.

The Initiative's work was a joint effort shaped by school and intermediary staff, and the hard work started long before the new small schools opened their doors.

"The start-up process required courage from many different people in education," remembers Springfield Superintendent Nancy Golden, "because you are asking them to do things very differently, things they have done one way for a very long time." At the Academy of Arts and Academics (A3), a new start which opened in the 2006–2007 school year, academics and the arts are fully integrated. The decision to open the small school was based directly on students' needs. "My dropout data, and my own student advisory committee, suggested that a group of our secondary students—highly skilled in language arts, and very artsy—were disengaged," says Golden. "I started talking to those students, and it became clear that we weren't meeting their needs."

Developing buy-in and support for the new small school was challenging, according to Golden. "We had to help the school board, and the administrators and teachers from the existing high schools, to understand why this school was important because creating a new school requires shifting resources from one place to another." Districts also need to help new school leaders feel supported. "We had to demonstrate to them that if the new school failed, then we as a district would feel equally responsible for that failure," says Golden.

Conversions, on the other hand, faced the daunting task of devising plans for breaking up large schools, reorganizing entire buildings, reassigning and/or hiring staff members, and changing existing school cultures. In addition, they quickly learned that many community members are deeply attached to idealized memories of comprehensive high schools that can inhibit acceptance of, or even raise vocal opposition to, small schools. "So many adults seem to hold dear this mythical vision of high school as they believe it was when they were young," says former Initiative Director Phillips.

Coaching and Professional Development for Small Schools

Direct coaching was the primary method by which the Initiative helped small school principals and lead teachers to develop their leadership skills and navigate the complexities of planning and implementing small schools. The Initiative had two coaches its first year, reached ten in the 2007–2008 school year, and had five for the final year of the program. Coaches were typically assigned to four schools with the expectation that they would spend one day a week at each school and use the fifth day for planning, meetings at the Initiative offices, or professional development. They met regularly as a professional learning community to develop tools and activities, share research and best practices, and discuss the successes and challenges in their schools.

As partners in the planning of small school designs at new and converted schools, the coaches worked closely with principals and staff. As schools launched, the coaches' work became increasingly focused on assisting school leaders to envision, plan, implement, and evaluate the development of their small schools. Daily tasks encompassed a range of activities such as co-creating meeting agendas, facilitating group dialogues, assisting with classroom observation processes, planning professional development opportunities, and offering reflection and feedback about specific challenges.

Coaches also arranged visits to out-of-state small schools and brought together administrators and teachers in annual or semi-annual institutes to share information and common concerns and to engage in conversation and professional development on themes such as cultural responsiveness, instructional leadership, and sustainability. Furthermore, the coaches worked with Initiative leaders to create and strengthen guiding documents and develop tools and operating processes. They were actively involved in the recruitment and selection of partnership schools, hiring new coaches, and offering on-the-ground perspectives that kept E3, as the intermediary, oriented toward day-to-day realities of schools.

The schools to which coaches were assigned were purposely shifted during the course of the program. "Contrary to what I anticipated, moving coaches to different schools actually strengthened our capacity to support the schools," says Kathy Bebe, a coach at the Woodburn and McMinnville small schools. "We were forced to learn quickly about different contexts, and the variety gave us a much broader perspective from which to draw during our team problem-solving meetings."

A Clear, Shared Vision

The Initiative held the same expectations for all its schools, but implementation of the small school design differed at each campus. Among the many guiding documents developed through the Initiative to support this implementation, the *School Change Rubric* was paramount. Based on attributes of high-achieving small schools frequently cited by the Gates Foundation and suggestions from the Initiative's advisory cabinet and expert faculty, the rubric contains the criteria used by the Initiative to determine school eligibility and readiness to change, to select schools for participation in the Initiative, and to benchmark progress in small school development. Initiative coaches relied on the rubric as a framework for their work with the schools. Each school was required to complete a yearly action plan aligned with the four strands of the rubric, and their progress was reviewed annually.

During the planning years, coaches worked primarily with administrators and teacher leaders on rubric indicators related to school structure and culture, leadership development, and community engagement. As schools opened, teaching and learning, the second strand of the rubric, became a higher priority and remained the most critical and, in many ways, challenging aspect of the small school design.

As an instrument for school reform, the School Change Rubric has had an impact beyond the Initiative. Its four main strands are incorporated in the Oregon Department of Education's *Guiding Principles for Middle School-High School Improvement*. It has become the basis of school reform criteria in Maine and has been adopted and applied to school improvement efforts as far away as Australia. These and other tools used in the Initiative, as well as program information and results from schools, are currently maintained on the Initiative website (www.e3smallschools.org), which will serve as a repository of resources for those interested in small schools.

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"The rubric represents one of the most critical things we did. It created a vision for our staff and schools, and it became part of our school selection criteria. It was useful to schools as a self-assessment tool whether or not they were selected. For us, it became the basis for our annual review of progress."

—former Initiative director Karen Phillips

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The figure on the following page describes the four overarching strands of the rubric and the components of each strand. Each component is broken down into specific actions and developmental descriptors in the full rubric document.

OSSI SCHOOL CHANGE RUBRIC

STRAND 1: School Structure and Culture

Components
1.1   Equity
1.2   Autonomy
1.3   Personalization
1.4   Scheduling
1.5   Collaboration
1.6   School Climate

This topic was often a point of entry for schools in the early stage of conversion or development. Issues of school identity formation, autonomy over budgets, scheduling, and facilities were often negotiated here. The initial design of the small school is established through this work.

STRAND 2: Teaching and Learning

Components
2.1   Equity
2.2   Focus on Powerful Teaching and Learning
2.3   Personalization
2.4   Academic Rigor
2.5   Expectations and Accountability
2.6   Assessment and Evaluation

This area focused on teaching and learning and student outcomes. Disaggregated student data, instructional frameworks, curriculum choices, culturally responsive instruction, and differentiated learning shaped these dialogues, as well as how to build on students' knowledge and interests.

STRAND 3: Leadership Development

Components
3.1   Equity
3.2   Distributed Leadership
3.3   Effective Governance
3.4   Learning Community
3.5   Professional Development

Instructional leadership was central to supporting teaching and learning. Distributed leadership, effective governance, staff feedback, supervision, and professional development, including professional learning communities, influenced these conversations. Student, parent, and teacher leadership were also discussed.

STRAND 4: Community Engagement

Components
4.1   Equity
4.2   Community Awareness and Support
4.3   Parent Involvement
4.4   Student Involvement
4.5   Employer and Community Partnerships

This topic focused on community awareness, family involvement, and support for small schools. Student voice and employer and community partnerships also played a role. Leaders ensured that communication and design plans involved parents and community members from all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

New Commitments from Education Leaders

The Initiative quickly recognized that the commitment of district leadership to the small school concept would strongly influence small school success. Initiative coaches worked directly with district and school leaders to help them develop their infrastructure to support the new schools.

In schools that flourished, district leadership was strong from the start. Crater High School, in the Central Point School District, had been recognized in the 1990s for its innovation in establishing four schools-within-a-school. In the ensuing decade, these programs had met with varying degrees of success, and they impacted only a small percentage of Crater students. In 2004, through the Initiative, district leaders revisited the promise of small schools with members of the community. They traveled to other states to talk with small school leaders and students at demonstration sites, gathering information and lessons. Like their peers in Springfield, Oregon, when Central Point district leaders returned home, they talked at length to parents, teachers, students, and others to share what could be accomplished in small schools.

"Countless parent and community meetings—some quite difficult—made the difference," says Bob King, principal of Crater Renaissance Academy. These conversations eventually galvanized renewed support for small schools, and the work moved forward. "It never would have happened without the district's commitment to small schools," says King.

When implemented well, district-level commitment to small schools also means doing business differently, including finding the right people to work at each school. In some conversions, for example, administrators of the comprehensive high school were not guaranteed positions in the small schools simply because they'd held leadership roles previously. Asking them to apply for new positions reflected the district's commitment to autonomy. Moreover, it ensured a fair process and a good fit. Additionally, in most conversions, principals from each small school on the campus met regularly to work out the technical details of their conversion, including how to share common facilities such as the cafeteria, library, and gymnasium. Collaborating with other principals about these issues was new for many large high school administrators.

Even though all school staff had been warned about challenges to implementing the small school design, these obstacles were tough to overcome for some conversions. A lesson gleaned by Initiative staff from these experiences was that it may be more difficult to convert educational philosophies than to create new ones. New starts often represent a fresh start and a break from what came before; they frequently offer more choices than conversions, which can be constrained by design details made early in the process.

THE FORGOTTEN CHILD SURVEY

Central Point school and district leaders had moved to small learning communities in the 1990s and believed they had created an environment in which they knew all of their students. But in 2004, Crater High School's approximately 70 staff tested their knowledge of 100 randomly selected students. They were surprised to learn that more than a few of their students were unknown to anyone. "This activity really shocked Crater," remembers Initiative Director Campobasso. "Every adult on campus participated in the activity. Not only were they stunned to learn there were students no one knew, but they were surprised that the students they knew well represented a very small group of adolescents." This newfound awareness gave the school the impetus to press on with autonomous small schools. Recently, staff at Crater Renaissance Academy, one of Crater's small schools, redid the activity, and every student had at least six adults who knew him or her well.

Going Deeper With the Small School Model
2007-2010

After the initial implementation phase ended, the new small schools put more emphasis on making fundamental changes in teaching and learning. These changes built upon the strengths of smaller school size, including bringing together members of the entire school community to analyze data, identify areas of need, and develop a strategic plan for professional development. A laser focus was placed on individual student needs and achievement, causing educators to consider what it really takes to educate all students.

During the last several years of the Initiative, grant funds were targeted toward activities and supports that reached into the classroom. They were used, for example, to fund a part-time Teaching and Learning Facilitator (TLF) position. The TLF was a master teacher charged with leading the instructional improvement of the small school from within. These instructional leaders have been crucial to the success of the small schools, and in many schools continue to be supported with district funds. In addition to providing individual support to schools, the coaches also offered more in-depth workshops and other training opportunities to staff. These supports focused on adding depth to the small school design.

The Instructional Framework

After small schools had completed their early implementation stages, school and Initiative staff commenced perhaps the most demanding and ambitious work of the program: transitioning from changing structure and culture to changing teaching and learning. After all, small school size isn't inherently beneficial to students; rather, the Initiative's intent was to use small school size to implement more powerful teaching and learning models that improve student achievement among the traditionally underserved.

In this period, Initiative staff began to focus more purposefully on supporting each school's capacity to improve and personalize instruction. Although all intentionally created small schools offer a form of personalized learning, a deeper concept for how to improve instruction on a fundamental level needed to be developed at each school. This concept had to penetrate into classrooms, guiding every instructional decision, including curriculum and instruction, assessment, professional development, and school culture. Ultimately, it needed to be owned by staff and students alike.

Initiative staff referred to this concept of change as an "instructional framework" and worked hard to support each school in developing its own. Instructional leadership teams were formed at each small school—comprising the principal, the Initiative coach, and the TLF. These teams were charged with supporting a professional learning community at the school that engaged in peer observations and regular discussions on classroom

practice. This focused work on teaching and learning helped each school to define, elaborate, and extend its instructional framework into classrooms. For example, the vision for instruction at the School of Business, Innovation, and Science on the Crater campus is to use the three themes in the school's name as a way to establish workplace expectations and prepare all students for college and the world of work. The instructional framework, however, indicates how students will achieve that vision, and focuses on communication, teamwork, and problem-solving.

For schools that implemented a strong instructional framework, the results were powerful. These schools exemplify a key advantage of the small school design, according to Initiative Director Campobasso, because their size aids staff in bringing transformative teaching and learning to scale throughout the school rather than in isolated classrooms or pockets.

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"Restructuring a large high school into small schools was difficult," says Geri Federico, principal of the Woodburn Academy of Arts, Science, and Technology, and former assistant principal of the comprehensive high school. "But what I find even more challenging—and exhilarating—is the radical change in instruction that occurs after structural changes take hold."

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Targeted Professional Development

To support school leaders in making deep-level changes, the Initiative staff developed a plan for targeted professional development. These opportunities included Leading for Educational Equity workshops provided by Initiative staff (discussed below), and training in implementing project-based learning, offered by Swanson & Cosgrave Consulting, which engaged students in hands-on and sometimes out-of-class learning experiences. The Initiative also contracted with the Teachers Development Group to provide workshops in best practices in mathematics. During the final year of the Initiative, the work of the coaches lessened in the schools, but increased in three other areas. A comprehensive Site Visit Guidebook was developed to help Initiative schools meet the increasing demand from other schools to visit their

sites and learn about their work. The guidebook, also available on the Initiative web site, helps school leaders design structured site visits that not only will inform others about their work, but will reinforce the successful practices that make their school worth visiting. Additionally, concentrated, on-site instructional coaching in project-based learning was made available to schools. Finally, the Initiative web site was updated to include coaching tools, resources, and other coaching documents that are now available as open source materials.

Viewing Schools Through a Lens of Equity

In 2006–2007, the coaching program began to deepen its commitment to shaping school culture by directly addressing equity. This shift was inspired and influenced by training in educational equity received by Initiative leaders and coaches. The Initiative subsequently engaged the Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools (BayCES), an Oakland-based organization (now The National Equity Project) with a track record of closing the achievement gap experienced by minority students. The BayCES staff provided intensive professional development and equity coaching to Initiative staff members, who then utilized their increased skill and knowledge to focus more intentionally on the equity-related challenges in the schools they coached.

Addressing the causes and consequences of the persistent academic achievement gap was one of the primary goals of the Initiative from the beginning. But, as Campobasso puts it, "We realized we had some work to do to articulate and actually live out our commitment to addressing educational equity." One of the most important realizations was that the Initiative needed to convey that equity was not an add-on to instructional or leadership practices, but a way of understanding and adapting all practices to meet the diverse learning needs of all students. Inequitable practices that exist in most schools and are often hard to detect must be identified and changed.
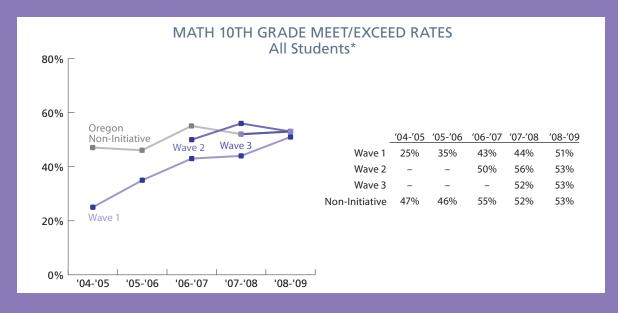
To fulfill its commitment to equity and social justice and genuinely address the needs of disadvantaged students, Initiative leaders decided that professional development in educational equity should be a priority, resulting in the development of the Leading for Educational Equity Institutes. Efforts to define equity and understand the causes of the achievement
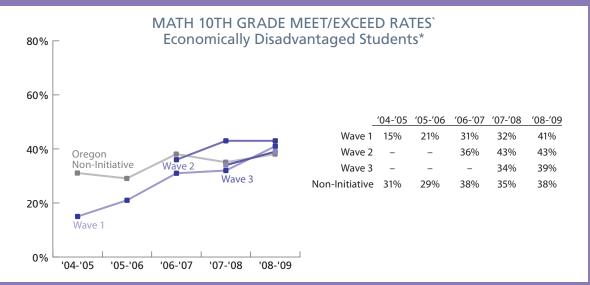
gap provoked many courageous conversations among coaches and school leaders. Examining how systems of power and privilege have created and maintained the current educational picture became a serious undertaking. "We were honest with the schools, explaining that we were engaged in uncovering inequitable practices and biases in schools that we had not identified before," says Campobasso. "It meant taking a very hard look at what was happening in each school, which could have been quite threatening. But, rather than jeopardizing our relationships with schools, this acknowledgment seemed to deepen the trust between coaches and school leaders."

Accomplishments of the Schools

"Our findings indicate that when well implemented, the Oregon Small Schools Initiative model can measurably improve student outcomes."

—ECONorthwest report, *Oregon Small Schools Initiative Evaluation, Quantitative Analysis 2004-2009*

MATH 10TH GRADE MEET/EXCEED RATES
All Students*

	'04-'05	'05-'06	'06-'07	'07-'08	'08-'09
Wave 1	25%	35%	43%	44%	51%
Wave 2	–	–	50%	56%	53%
Wave 3	–	–	–	52%	53%
Non-Initiative	47%	46%	55%	52%	53%

MATH 10TH GRADE MEET/EXCEED RATES`
Economically Disadvantaged Students*

	'04-'05	'05-'06	'06-'07	'07-'08	'08-'09
Wave 1	15%	21%	31%	32%	41%
Wave 2	–	–	36%	43%	43%
Wave 3	–	–	–	34%	39%
Non-Initiative	31%	29%	38%	35%	38%

Student Performance Outcomes

Despite the higher-than-average percentages of disadvantaged students served, the small schools in the Initiative are already producing tangible gains for students. The accomplishments of the schools are also obvious in the schools themselves, where students have become the focus of teaching and learning.

To definitively determine the success of the Initiative in achieving its goals, Initiative staff incorporated rigorous data analysis into the project. The program hired a full-time master's-level data analyst. It also contracted with ECONorthwest, an economics firm in Portland, Ore. Researchers were able to systematically assess how students at Initiative schools fare relative to students with similar demographic and other observable characteristics at non-Initiative schools, thanks to wide access to student-level data from the Oregon Department of Education. The results, described fully in *Oregon Small Schools Initiative: Quantitative Analysis 2004–2009*, demonstrate that on a variety of measures—including student achievement, graduation rates, and dropout rates—Initiative schools have demonstrated traction in closing the achievement gap. More specifically, researchers found the following:

- While variation exists across schools, a well-implemented small school model can significantly improve student outcomes.

- Math and reading scores both showed statistically significant improvement for students enrolled at the first wave of Initiative schools.

- While the Oregon Small School Initiative model benefits all student populations, there is evidence to suggest that it specifically benefits historically disadvantaged populations.

- School outcomes did not typically improve until the second year of operation.

Finally, information about the ongoing costs to run a small school will be useful to school districts in Oregon and elsewhere considering the small schools model. According to ECONorthwest research:

- Findings do not suggest the need for a massive additional investment to achieve what has been fairly remarkable success at some of the Initiative schools. If a model [Initiative] school can, for example, boost graduation rates by three or four percentage points, as have the Wave 1 and Wave 3 schools, the model becomes less costly to operate, on a per graduate basis, than a traditional high school.

- The model does not necessarily require a significantly greater investment per student than would a traditional high school serving the same students. In terms of cost per student achieving a desired outcome (e.g., cost per high school graduate), small schools may be even more cost effective than larger, comprehensive high schools.

Reorganizing a school takes time; indeed, in new high schools, it takes four years before cohorts starting in ninth grade can graduate and before their experience can be evaluated. Because many Initiative schools have yet to reach this milestone, Meyer Memorial Trust has dedicated funds to ensure that Initiative schools' results are tracked for several more years. This commitment to continued study represents a strategic effort to ensure that the progress of these small schools is integrated into the fabric of education reform throughout the state and the region.

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*Schools are grouped into 'waves' according to the year they opened as small schools. This year does not necessarily correlate to when they joined the Initiative.

Wave 1 schools include: The small schools on the Liberty, Marshall and Roosevelt High School campuses, and Nixya'awii Community High School

Wave 2 schools include: The small schools on the Newberg, North Eugene, and Woodburn High School campuses, and the Academy of Arts & Academics (A3)

Wave 3 schools include: The small schools on the Crater and South Medford High School campuses, as well as Eagle Ridge, Health and Science School, Leadership and Entrepreneurship Public Charter High School (LÊP), and the Media Arts and Communications Academy (MACA)

The Future of Small Schools in Oregon
2010 and Beyond

Drawing from best practices in small schools across the nation, the Initiative designed a program unique to the opportunities and needs of Oregon communities. Viewed independently, each school adopted an approach best suited to its community context. Viewed together, they reflect a rich collection of small school models.

When asked about the Initiative, students and staff speak confidently: the vast majority would never choose to go back to a large high school. Not that it was easy. School and Initiative leaders say they learned to be patient to do this work well. "This work represents a huge culture change for schools," says Campobasso. "Schools that eventually flourished did so because they took the time to create a clear vision and bring it to life with shared ownership." Schools that instilled and capitalized on autonomy were the most successful in raising student achievement, particularly for traditionally underserved students, and lowering dropout rates.

Support for and learning from small schools will persist in two ways. First, schools in the Initiative have been invited to stay connected through the Oregon Small Schools Network. As members of the network, schools will continue to receive networking and professional development opportunities, delivered through E3.

Second, school progress will be monitored with the active involvement of the Oregon Business Council (OBC) and Meyer Memorial Trust. OBC

President Duncan Wyse makes clear the importance of tracking the performance of these schools: "We absolutely need to reinvent learning experiences for teens. The initial performance of Initiative schools has been strong, showing great promise in helping us reach that goal successfully. Now, we want to follow the schools' progress as they go forward without extensive funding from the Initiative."

Seven years ago, the Oregon Small Schools Initiative sought to inform the conversation about small school adoption for interested school districts in Oregon. These reforms blossomed into more than two dozen vibrant small schools that provide innovative, personalized learning experiences for all students and, in particular, address the needs of those traditionally underserved in large, comprehensive high schools. With their reconstitution, many of these schools are outperforming large schools and demonstrating their capability to address seemingly intractable inequities in education. The real legacy of the Initiative is the schools' individual and collective determination and ingenuity in creating learning environments in which all students succeed.

A Legacy of Transformation

The history of the Initiative underscores that small size is just the start. Small schools create the conditions under which staff and students can do the real work of improving student learning. Small school size in and of itself does not improve rigor, relevance, or relationships. It's what staff and students do within that structure that can really make a difference. The significant changes in teaching and learning carried out in these schools lay out a bold new vision for secondary-level education. In each site, the experience has transformed many of the individual administrators, teachers, and students involved in the changes. The following examples, representing a range of Initiative schools, illustrate how principals, teachers, and students, as well as entire schools, were transformed by the small school experience.

Transforming Teamwork and Instructional Leadership

Geri Federico, principal of the Woodburn Academy of Art, Science, and Technology (WAAST), had worked in the Woodburn School District for more than 30 years when the conversion process began. "I really wondered how we would do this. We were the only high school in the district, with a strong Hispanic culture that values *la familia*. I figured breaking up the school would be quite a dance," she recalls. But in 2006, Woodburn High School converted to four autonomous small schools that have been highly successful at raising student achievement, keeping students in school, and supporting their transition to college.

By the second year of WAAST's involvement in the Initiative, Federico and her staff began thinking about how to substantially improve teaching and learning. School size and daily advisories had strengthened relationships between students and teachers, but according to Federico, "Our classrooms were still isolated from one another. Teachers weren't learning together."

Now, even students at Woodburn's small schools know that all the teachers meet Wednesday mornings to discuss classroom practices. The school became a professional learning community, where instruction is shared, or "deprivatized." Most recently, these conversations have led to the staff's use of classroom walk-throughs, or "learning walks." In the beginning, Federico and the Initiative coach visited the classrooms to look for features identified by teachers as inherently important to improving instruction, such as classroom arrangement. But soon after, teachers decided they would learn more if they participated in the learning walks to observe each other's classrooms for themselves. Now, every teacher is assigned to do several learning walks a year.

In most schools, teachers offering to observe in each other's classrooms would be considered an impressive accomplishment. But the advantage of a small school, with its more closely connected staff, is that teachers can work together more intensely and drill deeper in instructional improvement work. To go beyond learning from learning walks to actually shifting practice, the WAAST leadership team has developed a concept for a studio classroom, a kind of teaching laboratory guided by use of a formal protocol.

Federico says that the Initiative's focus on equity drove her to push for personalizing instruction more fully. "We had been patting ourselves on the back for our students' achievement gains. But as we talked about how to meet every student's needs, we realized these successes came from students who were already doing fairly well before. A group of students wasn't making any strides at all," she notes. That is when Federico had a second realization: that in a small school, she had to be a different kind of leader. She couldn't do this work alone. She told her staff that to confront the language and poverty challenges remaining among their students, each teacher must question his or her most deeply held beliefs. "Are your head and your heart working together to do what's best for these students?" she asked them. "If not, then we should talk about whether you belong in this school."

Through this risk-taking experience, Federico found her voice as an instructional leader. She spoke unequivocally to her staff about what was needed, and even addressed the possibility that some may not share this commitment. In doing so, her leadership came to reflect greater clarity about her vision. Federico believes the transformation of her position was the direct result of working in a small school, where she was compelled to become an instructional leader. "Now, I cannot imagine not being in a small school," she says. "Even though I was a little skeptical back in 2006, now I can say, from the bottom of my heart, this is what's best for kids."

> "All of my friends have different interests, so I was worried about losing them. Some of my best friends I met this year, people I knew a long time, but wouldn't have had a relationship with if it hadn't been for small schools. That, and seeing the teachers working so hard to make this work was the turning point. Now, I'm 100 percent in support."
>
> —Crater Renaissance Academy student

Transforming Relationships and Students' Lives

For some of the students, the education system has never been easy. "Before I came to this school, I figured I would end up dropping out like my sister and brother," says Kelly, who as a freshman skipped most of her classes when attending a comprehensive high school. The goal of small schools such as Leadership & Entrepreneurship Public Charter High School (LÊP) is to create the conditions that transform the lives of students like Kelly. LÊP, a charter school in Portland, serves a population of students looking for options not offered in the current school system. Leadership and entrepreneurship are key themes in all classes. Students graduate surpassing Oregon diploma requirements and with some college credits.

Now, Kelly plans to go to college and become a veterinarian. Her transformation stemmed from feeling cared for, connected, and supported at school. She and others who attended traditional high schools in the past describe their shock, on their first day at LÊP, when students they didn't know walked up and introduced themselves or provided a welcoming hug. There is more intimacy and less bullying at LÊP than at a large high school, Kelly says with a proud smile.

Even students who succeeded in large high schools say that they would never choose to go back to one. Ashley, a senior at the Wellness, Business, and Sports School on the Woodburn campus, says nearly all students at Woodburn's small schools will say the teachers are why they love their schools. "What it really comes down to is being loved," she says, then laughs. "Not in a weird way. It's just that when you're with people you love, and you know they love you, you know they want you to succeed, and you push yourself to do better because of that."

Students can provide many examples of how their teachers demonstrate this commitment. "I wasn't going to take chemistry until my teacher started following me around the building urging me to change my mind," says Alexa, a senior at Woodburn Arts and Communications Academy. Maria, at Woodburn's Academy of International Studies (AIS), recalls when her history teacher handed her an application for student council. "She knows I'm a

pretty outspoken person. Even though my English isn't perfect, I can still connect with others", she says. Maria told her teacher she didn't want to try out for student council. "My teacher said, 'You're going to do a good job on it. Just try it.' And that's what pulled me in." Last year, Maria served as president of her senior class.

Students in a summer program at LÊP laugh when asked what would happen if students said they were just going to fail a course. "The teachers would hunt you down for the rest of your life," says Will. Failure simply isn't an option. Jose vividly describes the contrast at large high schools: "If you're failing your classes, they still let you have lunch off campus. There are no consequences. You feel as if you're carrying this big boulder on your back. And then every time you fall a little more behind, it gets heavier. Eventually you just drop out and find a job."

For some, there's no way to catch up without a teacher's help. "Some people learn slower and need more time," explains Jose, "and teachers at this school give us that time." In the process, these teachers change their students' attitudes toward learning, something that outlasts any grade or credit earned.

Transforming Teaching and Learning

Although A3 was created to meet the needs of students especially interested in the arts, Director Mike Fisher says that personalizing teaching and learning is more than giving a school a theme. The deeper instructional framework of A3 rests on a creative process the school identifies as Explore, Design, Create, Refine, and Own, or EDCRO. This process permeates lesson design, instruction, assessment, and even the relationship between teacher and student. "Teachers serve as the students' coaches," explains Teaching and Learning Facilitator Aaron Molyneux, with each student going through the same steps. "We're also quite transparent about the process when we're teaching. For example, we'll tell them when we've moved from exploring and designing to creating. The kids have heard about EDCRO so often now, they kind of roll their eyes." A3 students reflect on their academic and artistic learning at least three or four times a year using portfolios and conduct an "EDCRO review" at the end of each year with a family member, a mentor, and a community member present.

"A3 gives students more latitude in how they can express their learning," explains Initiative Coach Elaine Rector, "but staff had to tackle the rigor question early on because many of their students were really struggling in the other Springfield high schools." A3 embraced a focus on depth rather than breadth, "proudly proclaiming that less is more, believing this is more valuable than covering many standards superficially." Clear learning targets serve as the foundation for work at the school, which is individualized and connected to the students' interests. One student might be assessed by creating a collage or painting while another might examine works of art. This approach has attracted students who not only are focused on art, but are just as interested in the non-traditional teaching and learning strategies that are integral to carrying out the school's instructional framework, including project-based learning, arts-integrated instruction, internships, and exhibitions of student learning.

Every A3 student, explains Molyneux, is involved in at least one large-scale project that results in a public exhibition. In 2009–2010, freshmen and sophomores at A3 collaborated on a humanities investigation of revolutions throughout history. Many students chose their own topics, conducting research and creating displays and documents, including a video, to tell the stories of revolutionary figures and their impact on their environment. They held a film festival and shared it with the community. Students also conducted an engineering inquiry based on the city's revitalization effort. They invited city planners to the school to describe their plans and projections for the future. Students proposed the creation of an eco-friendly building that fit well with the city landscape and environment. The students consulted with architects on the design and use of natural resources to create three-dimensional models of their proposed building, which they then presented formally in a public meeting.

"When I was hiring," remembers Fisher, "I looked for people who weren't afraid to work really hard. Stewardship had to be at the heart of this school." For Molyneux, the experience has been transformational. "I've never worked so hard in my life," she says, "but I've also never felt it was so worthwhile."

OREGON PROFICIENCY PROJECT

Oregon Business Council and Employers for Education Excellence, with the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, launched the Oregon Proficiency Project in the spring of 2009 in two small schools within the Oregon Small Schools Initiative: Health and Science School in Beaverton and the Academy of International Studies in Woodburn. The Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Washington provided technical expertise to teachers, principals and district leaders. During the 2009-10 school year, OPP expanded to include a number of comprehensive high schools in Oregon. A policy panel was convened during the school year to examine system issues. To date, the project has produced a video, written report and open source tools available online. Visit www.k-12leadership.org.

LESSONS FROM THE OREGON SMALL SCHOOLS INITIATIVE

An initiative of this magnitude and duration yields countless insights along the way. As the Initiative draws to a close, leaders have condensed key learnings into a short list, intended to highlight issues of primary importance to districts considering conversions or start-ups using a small school structure.

- **Small is just the start.** The structure of small schools creates the conditions for focusing on improving student learning and confronting the need for equity. While the structure is necessary, a small school—in and of itself—does not improve rigor, relevance, or even relationships. It's what the adults and students do within the structure that makes the difference.

- **A shared vision for the school, including a clearly outlined instructional framework, is critical for success.** The small school's vision and instructional framework must guide the development of curriculum, professional development, professional learning communities, school culture, and policies and practices. They are not add-ons, but vital components of the school's identity, without which a small school is just smaller than a large one. With the vision and framework in place, schools don't lose their focus on students, even in the sea of possible new programs, interventions, and theories that come their way.

- **Leadership matters and must be shared.** Small schools require strong instructional leaders, from the district office to the school office to the classroom to the community. It's important that everyone know, understand, and own the school vision so they can share the responsibility of leading and sustaining that vision. There is a clear difference between "managing" a school and "leading" a school. Managing requires one person who holds others accountable. Leading requires people at all levels assuming responsibility for student learning.

- **"Deprivatization" of teaching is needed.** In small schools, teachers work collaboratively. In teams and in professional learning communities, teachers share best practices, analyze student data, and develop new classroom strategies to meet the needs of every student. Classroom doors are open. Teachers regularly observe and provide constructive feedback to each other to strengthen instructional practice and student learning.

- **Personalized learning shapes small schools but can take many forms.** Schools can personalize learning within structured learning periods (often called advisories), but they can also personalize learning within core content areas by offering choice of content (e.g., literature that is relevant to the student's culture). They can also offer choice in how a student demonstrates his or her learning (e.g., some students can articulate understanding of a novel through a piece of art, while others prefer to write a report). In a small school, students are known well by several adults, including the principal. In this supportive atmosphere, staff can create many new and varied opportunities that help students connect to their learning, and students are more likely to take intellectual risks in such schools than in environments they perceive as judgmental or punitive.

- **Small schools shouldn't attempt to do or be everything.** Small schools have the ability to be innovative and creative. They can respond quickly to student needs, and they can use and assess new approaches to teaching and learning. But they cannot, and should not, try to offer the large menu of course offerings that a large high school does. Choices for students at small schools come from personalization—individual options for going broadly and deeply within a particular subject—rather than from a catalog of densely packed courses.

- **Results take time.** Some small school reform results, such as better attendance and decreased discipline referrals, are apparent early on. Others, such as increased student achievement and graduation rates, take time. Many schools implement small schools in stages, starting with grades 9 and 10 and then adding grades 11 and 12 in subsequent years. Before the full benefit of a small school can be realized, teachers need to learn how to collaborate with one another, which requires trust building, professional development, and practice. For these and a host of other time-dependent reasons, academic results aren't entirely evident (or reliable) until after at least four years following an initial conversion or new start.