

Policy 2200: Small Schools for Highline School District and Future Implementation at Evergreen
High School in White Center, Washington

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December 15, 2005

PB AF 560
Dr. Kleit

Executive Summary

Policy 2200 has been officially taken on board in the Highline School District located in south King County, Washington. At the heart of this education policy is the concept of small schools. Through implementation of Policy 2200, the district hopes to harness the benefits of small schools in their secondary schools and raise the quality of education for all students.

For the purposes of this paper, we will examine the future implementation of Policy 2200 at Evergreen High School in the White Center neighborhood. One in six White Center residents lives below the Federal Poverty Level, twice that of King County residents. We assert that neighborhood affects education and that the results of Policy 2200 in Evergreen High School are worthy of long-term analysis.

Our research includes recent education options employed in public schools nation wide, the benefits and risks of small schools and the characteristics of the Highline School District in conjunction with small schools.

Our recommendations to Evergreen High School include:

1. Communication with students after graduation as a network for continued success.
2. On-going professional training for teachers, including time and support from the administration for this training.
3. Contact with community leaders to provide opportunities for employment, internships and civic engagement for current and former students.
4. Gain support of honor student parents to preemptively avoid external resistance.

Introduction

In 2004, Highline School District in Washington adopted Policy 2200: High School Redesign. The policy will convert all high schools in the district into smaller learning communities or small schools. Highline School District implemented this policy in response to the failure of the district's large, impersonal high schools to prepare students, particularly low-income and minority students, for college and/or careers. Highline School District's Evergreen High School serves White Center, an unincorporated community in King County, which has historically been a high-poverty community. The level of neighborhood poverty influences educational attainment and the level of education attained affects the prevalence of poverty in neighborhoods. Country-wide data collected shows that children from poor neighborhoods tend to exhibit more hostile and reckless behavior (Winter, 2002). Early age drug and alcohol use and abuse as well as teenage pregnancy can be classified as symptoms of negative neighborhood effects (Winter, 2002). For the purposes of this paper, though, most importantly is the failure to finish public school (Winter, 2002). Without graduating from high school, children's options are limited and do not include college and/or technical training for future employment. Small schools can decrease the power of poverty over student achievement, and, therefore be part of the solution to high poverty levels in White Center. This paper will provide the educational and economic background of White Center; highlight common educational reform options; illustrate the benefits and potential pitfalls of small schools; and outline the characteristics of successful small schools. Additionally, this paper will elucidate the characteristics of Highline School District's small schools and provide recommendations to the district to ensure the educational success of all students.

White Center Background

White Center is an unincorporated community located between the cities of Seattle and Burien, Washington. From its inception as an informal community in the early 1900s, White Center has never been an affluent area. Its humble beginnings included tent shelters that grew into shack communities by the late 1920s (White Center Briefing Packet, 2005). Post World War II federal funds provided the two rental projects: White Center Heights and Lakewood. These were to be temporary or transitional housing for returning veterans, but soon came to signify the future landscape of public housing (White Center Briefing Packet, 2005).

Coupled with the fact that White Center remains unincorporated, the area was considered one of concentrated poverty until the early 2000s. Although not technically suffering from concentrated poverty, the poverty rate in White Center is large: one in six White Center residents live below the Federal Poverty Level, twice that of King County residents (Solet, Heimann, Glusker, & Ciske). The amount of public housing in White Center leaves future economic growth precarious. Public housing is a theoretical cause for concentrated poverty that posits "public housing continues to play a significant role in concentrating poverty by structurally anchoring poverty into certain neighborhoods" (Holloway, 1998). White Center's public housing projects currently include the Greenbridge Housing Development, Park Lake Homes II and Arbor Heights (White Center Briefing Packet, 2005).

Another important contributor to poverty and financial insecurity in White Center is the level of educational attainment. Twenty-four percent of people twenty-five or older do not have a high school degree (Solet, et.al) The 2002-2003 Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) results for Evergreen High School, which serves White Center and is part of Highline School District, show that 23% of tenth graders met standards in math, reading, writing, and science; 63% of students graduated on time; and 5.3% of students receive free or reduced-price meals (Washington State Report Card: Evergreen High School, 2002-2003). 2002-2003 WASL results for Highline School District as a whole show that 26.8% of tenth graders met all four standards, 57% of students graduated on time, and 50.5% of students received free or reduced-price meals (Washington State Report Card: Highline School District, 2002-2003). In Highline School District 28% of Hispanic students and 26% of black students met standards in reading, less than 12% of students met the math standard, and 40% of Hispanic students graduated on time (High School Improvement in Highline Public Schools – Home, 2005).

Policy 2200: High School Redesign: A Response to Low Achievement

In addition to White Center, Highline School District serves Burien, Des Moines, Normandy Park, SeaTac, and Boulevard Park through three high schools: Tyee, Highline, and Mt. Rainier. By 2010 Highline School District expects at least nine out of ten students to be proficient in reading, writing, and math in grades three through twelve as measured by the WASL; at least nine out of ten students in every ethnic group will graduate on time, and at least nine out of every ten graduates will be prepared for college, career, and citizenship (High School Improvement at Highline Public Schools – Guiding Principles). Based on the 2002-2003 WASL results, Highline School District found that the traditional comprehensive high schools in the district that serve between 1200 and 1600 students do not meet the needs of all students, especially those from low-income and minority backgrounds. In response to this failure of the traditional high school system, in 2004 Highline School District implemented Policy 2200: High School Redesign, which would convert the four large high schools in the district into small schools or smaller learning communities (Highline School Improvement in Highline Public Schools – SLC Home, 2005).

Small school reform is based upon the perceived shortcomings of today's comprehensive high schools. The comprehensive high school as it is known today was created at the beginning of the century to meet the demands of the industrial economy for skilled workers. The large high schools were designed to efficiently educate all students through placing students in different programs or tracks based upon student aptitude (High Schools for the New Millennium: Imagine the Possibilities). Academically proficient students were placed in rigorous tracks to prepare them for college while other students, particularly low-income and minority students, were placed in tracks that were less academically rigorous under the assumption that those students would not or could not go to college. Today's knowledge-based economy demands that all students acquire a college education. In 1990, students with a bachelor's degree earned 27 percent more than students with only a high school diploma. In 2000, students with a bachelors degree earned 61 percent more than students with only a high school diploma (Toch, 2003). Despite the necessity for college degrees, many students do not graduate from high school. Nationally, graduation rates have been between 69 and 73 percent since 1991. In 2002, 56 percent of African American students graduated and 52 percent of Hispanic students graduated

(Toch, 2003). Students who do graduate often do not have adequate skills: one in five seniors cannot identify the main idea of what they have read and two in five cannot compute fractions, percents, and averages (Vander Ark, 2000). Comprehensive high schools do not have high expectations for all students and they foster apathy and feelings of alienation among students. The large bureaucracies of comprehensive high schools also limit faculty collaboration and create unnecessary costs.

Small schools address the alienation, apathy, cumbersome bureaucracy, and low expectations of large high schools. Small schools focus on relationships, which provide teachers and students with specific knowledge of each other and facilitates higher levels of learning. Small schools are personalized to meet the diverse needs of all students through adapting the learning agenda to fit student interests and abilities rather than forcing an educational agenda onto students. Small schools also focus on career and college, allow faculty to collaborate, incorporate families and communities in students' education, have high expectations, and require a high level accountability from teachers and students.

Common Educational Options

Curricular Reform

There have been other options observed and evaluated other than small schools. Wang, Haertel and Walberg observe that reform in existing large, comprehensive schools focuses on curriculum reform, as opposed to management and reorganization of actual class structure (1998). Wang, Haertel and Walberg provide for several curricular reforms for comparison. Core Knowledge centers attention on cultural literacy that utilizes history and literature as well as math and science to serve as a content outline (Hirsch, 1993). Different Ways of Knowing recognizes different kinds of learning and intelligences with a special focus on logical and social talent (Catterall, 1995). Foxfire embraces a teacher community and emphasizes community involvement (Foxfire Fund, Inc., 1992). Higher Order Thinking Skills is kin to programs also known as "talented and gifted" where select students are pulled from classrooms and participate in critical thinking skills exercises (Pogrow, 1995). National Writing Project is a writing intensive program (Smith, 1996). Paideia is a liberal arts-focused program employing Socratic method (Adler, 1983). Reading Recovery uses a reading tutor program with a one teacher to one student approach (Pinnell, 1995). Success for All (Slavin et al., 1996) attempts to head off scholastic failure by emphasizing small group education (Slavin et al., 1996). Although all have linked areas of focus, they do not provide for a comprehensive approach for success for all students and even a combination may not be sufficient for public schools in economically depressed areas such as White Center.

Assessment Testing

The Standards/High-Stakes Assessment Approach is a popular option as it has been taken on in some form or another in forty-nine states (Clark and Wasley, 1999). This approach includes teaching standards and assessment tests for students. While superficially comprehensive, red flags that have risen are the time span of implementation for positive outcomes and the fear of teachers losing options to teach outside of assessment level (Clark and Wasley, 1999). This

variety of standardized testing does not allow for the differences from neighborhood to neighborhood and assumes equal public education is being administered, whether it is or is not.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are schools set up separately from existing public schools that possess a curricular charter. Such schools choose an emphasis on arts and language or math and science. The concept is based on competition providing higher quality education and stimulating new ideas for the teaching community (Clark and Wasley, 1999). Public schools are funded by property taxes and in poorer areas, this means schools suffer from less funding. The fear is that charter schools will not only usurp the already under funded schools, but fracture the students and teachers socially (Clark and Wasley, 1999).

Small Schools: Benefits and Potential Problems

Small schools have been found to be particularly beneficial for low-income students. Howley and Bickel's (2000) research of all regular schools and districts in Georgia, Texas, Montana, and Ohio found that as a school gets larger, student performance (based upon standardized tests in each state) improves the higher the income in the community. In low income communities, increasing school size corresponds with diminishing achievement. Also, the power of poverty over student achievement is greater in schools above median size than schools below the median size. The relationship between school size, poverty, and student achievement does not depend on race, but minorities often live in communities of high poverty and would benefit from small schools.

In addition increasing achievement for low-income students, small schools have many other benefits. Fewer staff and faculty and less bureaucracy facilitate improved communications and more personalized learning environments for students (Meier, 1996). Parents are more likely to know the teachers and have a role in decision-making; staff and faculty satisfaction improves, and students feel a greater sense of belonging (Meier, 1996). Small schools have also been found to improve students' attitudes towards school, mitigate disciplinary problems, increase student participation in extracurricular activities, and decrease drop-out rates (Cotton, 1996). Student achievement and curricular quality in small schools is greater than or equal to student achievement in large schools (Cotton, 1996). Small schools cost more per student than large schools, but small schools cost less per graduate than large schools because they graduate more students than large schools (McComb, 2000).

Skeptics of small school reform are concerned that small schools can pave the way for privatization and resegregation (Editorial: The Small Schools Express, 2005). There are also concerns over how small schools meet the needs of the disabled and students who speak English as a second language (Editorial: The Small Schools Express, 2005). Others view small schools as an important educational reform, but believe it is insufficient in light of funding inequities, lack of multicultural curriculum, poor school management, and weak community-school alliances (Editorial: The Small Schools Express, 2005).

Attributes of Successful Small Schools

In order to obtain the many benefits of small schools and avoid the possible pitfalls that concern skeptics, small schools must have a number of important attributes. First, small schools must be autonomous. They need to have control over curriculum and budgeting in order to develop educational materials that support the small school's focus and the needs of the students (Vander Ark, 2002). Hierarchies and control from central offices limit the abilities of small schools to meet students' needs. Although school districts should grant autonomy to small schools, they should also implement well-defined systems of accountability that define goals, how success is measured, and steps to be taken in the case of poor performance (Vander Ark, 2002). In addition to autonomy and systems of accountability, small schools should also have teachers who can serve as generalists. If teachers are allowed to incorporate different subjects into one class, they can better facilitate the individualization of courses for students (Warner-King and Price, 2004). In order to meet the highly qualified teacher requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, Washington State requires teachers to have full state certifications in core academic subjects, which necessitates a bachelor's degree and demonstrated competency in the subject area. These requirements make it very difficult for teachers to teach multiple subjects. However, Washington law provides several ways for teachers who have bachelors degrees and teaching certificates to demonstrate their competencies in subjects (Warner-King and Price, 2004).

Small schools should have no more than 900 students and no fewer than 300 students to be effective. The most suitable size depends on the school (Irmsher, 1997). Small schools should also allocate time for teacher collaboration and professional development: teachers need time to plan and consult with each other in order to maintain the focus of the small school, develop relevant curriculum, and learn teaching tools that would be most useful to meet the needs of students (Warner-King and Price, 2004). Small schools should provide personalized and performance-based education. Students should receive credit and graduate only if they demonstrate competency. The problem with awarding competency-based credits is that colleges and employers do not know how to interpret such credits. Most high schools in the country (including high schools in Washington) award credits and diplomas based upon Carnegie Units, which are based upon time spent in class rather than demonstrated competency (Warner-King and Price, 2004). Colleges review applications for admission based upon Carnegie credits. Currently, Washington colleges review competency-based credits on a case-by-case basis and the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board is working on developing admissions standards based upon competency-based credits (Warner-King and Price, 2004). Small schools must also provide equity for all students, not just those who will probably succeed. Decreasing class size and ensuring focus and support on an educational program based on student needs can ensure that every student succeeds (Copland & Boatright, 2004). Additionally, small schools must have the flexibility to meet the needs of special populations such as the disabled and students who speak English as a second language. Because small schools are narrowly-defined and have small staffs, it is not generally possible to operate separate programs for students with special needs (Warner-King and Price, 2004). Small schools should work with the school district to provide appropriate services for special needs. To ensure the long-term support of and success

of small schools, teachers, parents, local businesses, and community members should have an input in the direction of education for high school students.

Characteristics of Highline School District Small Schools

In the fall of 2003, Highline School District received a \$200,000 Department of Education planning grant to study the benefits of small schools and how to implement small schools in the district (Crossman, 2005). After obtaining 85% approval from district staff and faculty, Highline School District applied for and received a \$1.3 million implementation grant from the Department of Education in 2004 (Crossman, 2005). Highline School District also received a \$5.6 million implementation grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2004 (Highline Public Schools: Educate Every Student and Expect Excellence – Home). The district received a \$300,000 grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to encourage community members served by Highline School District in designing small schools through hall meetings, forums, and small group sessions (Semedo, 2005). By 2007-2008 all students in Highline School District will be in small schools.

Through the financial support of the Department of Education and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Highline School District is laying the foundation to create a small school system that meets many of the aforementioned criteria of successful small schools. Redesign teams that include students, parents, teachers, union representatives, staff, and community members are in the process of determining how to best implement small schools in Highline School District. Each small school in the district will enroll no more than 400 students and each school will have its own staff and ability to control budget and curriculum (Crossman, 2005). Highline School District also assures that “each student’s cultural background and experiences are respected and connected to the curriculum. Resources are equitably distributed to ensure success for every student, regardless of background” (High School Improvement in Highline Public Schools – Guiding Principles). The school district also assures that “an accountability system will be developed that clearly measures progress of each high school’s redesign plan focused on student learning outcomes, and ensures credibility, trust, and support from our parents and community” (High School Improvement in Highline Public Schools – Frequently Asked Questions) Redesign teams are determining the specifics of each school’s accountability system.

Each student in the district will have an individualized education plan and students will be placed in schools based upon their interests and needs. Highline School District is implementing a total of sixteen small schools in the district. Three of those small schools are in Evergreen High School. At Evergreen High School, The Arts and Academics Academy will allow students to explore artistic and academic disciplines; The School of Technology, Engineering, and Design will assist students in gaining skills related to technology, engineering, and design; and the Health Sciences and Services School will educate students interested in health and human service professions (Evergreen High Schools: Life Unlimited, 2005). Students in all Highline School District schools will be awarded credit based upon demonstrated competency. Each school must “identify measurable student outcomes and outline methods by which students progress in meeting identified student outcomes will be measured” (High School Improvement in Highline Public Schools – Guiding Principles). Each small school in the district will also have an advisory program: staff members will assist students throughout their high school experience

(High School Improvement in Highline Public Schools – Frequently Asked Questions). In addition to having roles on the small school redesign teams, parents and community members will be able to share their ideas about small schools through town-hall meetings. Tyee High School hosts “Tyee Small Schools Community Conversations.” Each forum has foreign language interpreters and attract up to 500 parents and community members. The three other high schools in the district will implement similar town-hall meetings (Crossman, 2005). Additionally, community organizations and businesses will be involved in student learning in small schools through mentoring and internship programs to assist students in exploring college and career options (Evergreen Schools: Life Unlimited, 2005).

Washington State law requires that districts have a 180-day school year minimum (Warner-King and Price, 2004). . The state Superintendent of Public Instruction waived the 180-day requirement to allow Highline School District to have nine non-school days for teacher development and collaboration. In order to meet No Child Left Behind’s highly qualified teacher requirement, Highline School District’s teachers will teach within their areas of certification (Crossman, 2005). English Language Learners (ELL) and Special Education instructors support Highline School District high schools to small schools. The district is in the process of determining how to differentiate instruction for ELL and Special Education students (Crossman, 2005).

The implementation of small schools has received large support from the community, businesses, school administrators, the Highline School District School Board, students, and many parents and teachers (Crossman, 2005). Some teachers in the district are concerned about the extra work and time that will be demanded of them and some teachers worry that they do not have the training or the skills necessary to work with the advisory programs and/or manage other teaching challenges that may arise (Crossman, 2005). However, the district intends to provide adequate professional development for teachers and the district will negotiate with unions to ensure that teachers are supported and treated fairly (Crossman, 2005). The greatest opposition to the transition to small schools comes from many parents of honors students. The parents fear that the achievement of their students may decline or their students will have fewer opportunities after college if they are integrated with lower-achieving students (Crossman, 2005).

Recommendations

In order to ensure the success of small schools, Highline School District must overcome several challenges that can limit the efficacy of small schools. The district needs to ensure all teachers that they will be provided with sufficient professional development and preparation time. The district also needs to gain the support of parents of honors students. The support of parents and teachers is imperative to the long-term success of small schools: Policy 2200 will not succeed if parents or teachers feel that the policy has been forced upon them. Small schools need to be a long-term resource for the communities they serve and community members need to continually be included in how students are educated. Additionally, considering Highline School District’s intention to prepare students for career and college, the district needs to have a method of tracking student progress after high school. The district’s high schools, including Evergreen High School, need to continue to a resource and support for students after graduation. Providing a list-serve for e-mail communication provides efficient, inexpensive continued communication

between faculty and students. Students would have a network through which to share experiences and gain information about jobs, internships, apprenticeships, and volunteering opportunities. The relationships built by small schools should serve as a long-term resource for social and educational networking and support.

Conclusion

In 2004, Highline School District in Washington adopted Policy 2200: High School Redesign, which will convert all high schools in the district into smaller learning communities or small schools. Highline School District adopted this policy in response to the failure of the district's large, impersonal high schools to prepare students, especially low-income and minority students, for college and/or careers. Highline School District's Evergreen High School serves White Center, an unincorporated community in King County, which has historically been a high-poverty community. The level of neighborhood poverty influences educational attainment and the level of education attained affects the prevalence of poverty in neighborhoods. Small schools have the potential to decrease the power of poverty over student achievement and can be part of the solution to high poverty levels in White Center. After considering the educational and economic background of White Center; common educational reform options; the benefits and potential pitfalls of small schools; the characteristics of successful small schools and the characteristics of Highline School District small schools, we believe the Policy 2200: High School Redesign will be successful in improving student achievement, increasing the graduation rate, and preparing students of all economic and cultural backgrounds for career and college. Through successfully increasing student achievement and graduation rates, Policy 2200: High School Redesign can contribute to the future economic vitality of White Center. Through being provided with strong community connections and the necessary skills to go to college and/or find good jobs in high school, the children of White Center will likely become successful adults and they will help disrupt the cycle of poverty in White Center.

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