

EDUCATION WEEK

Vol. 28, Issue 36

June 18, 2009

N.Y.C. Small-Schools Push Found to Hurt Big High Schools

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Replacing large, underperforming high schools in New York City with dozens of small new ones has kept many teenagers from dropping out, a new study has found , but also has lowered graduation and attendance rates at some of the remaining large schools by diverting hundreds of at-risk students into their classrooms.

The report, issued Wednesday by the New School's Center for New York City Affairs, examines the impact of one of the signature initiatives of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and his schools chancellor, Joel I. Klein, since 2002: closing 21 big high schools and opening nearly 200 smaller secondary schools. New York has a decades-long history of opening small schools, but the pace skyrocketed in the past seven years under the Bloomberg administration as it sought to improve student engagement, boost achievement, and maximize choice.

A team of researchers from the New School spent 18 months studying data and interviewing school staff members, parents, and students to produce the report. While they found that the new crop of small schools offered important early advantages to their students, they conclude that opening so many caused "collateral damage" to the existing large high schools as they absorbed the students displaced by closures of their large schools. The researchers offered a note of caution for administrators mulling the role small schools might play in their portfolios.

"Any gains of the small school movement must be weighed against this collateral damage," the report says.

The researchers noted that only one-fifth of New York's 297,000 high school students attend the new small schools, making it crucial for policymakers to have effective strategies to use in improving large high schools.

"Nationally, everybody has been trying small schools," said Clara Hemphill, who has written a series of guidebooks to the city's schools and who served as a co-author of the study. "What nobody looked at is how that affects the system as a whole. While we are encouraged by what small schools do for their students, we were discouraged by their effect on the system as a whole.

"Overall, I still think the small schools initiative is a good thing. It kept kids in school who might otherwise have dropped out. On the other hand, there was a cost to the big schools."

'Growth Pains'

Interviewed by the study's researchers, Mr. Klein said he planned to pursue the strategy of replacing big, ineffective high schools with small ones, although the process has had its "growth pains."

Melody Meyer, a spokeswoman for the city's department of education, said the initiative was complicated by a 15,000-student bump in the high school population between 2001 and 2005. Also, she said, when the administration first started closing big high schools, there were fewer small schools to absorb those students. That is changing as more small schools open.

But Ms. Meyer acknowledged that the city's small schools initiative has placed stress on some of the nearby large schools by channeling so many high-need students to them, and that the education department has been "more mindful" of that as it gets further into the initiative. One factor officials examine more closely now before closing a big school, she said, is whether there are "transfer" schools nearby that are specially designed to serve the overage, undercredited students who are often the ones displaced when large, dysfunctional high schools close.

"It's a thoughtful report on an important topic," she said of the New School's report.

Ms. Meyer said that despite the stresses experienced by some large high schools, the city's overall graduation rate has risen by 10 percentage points since 2002.

The large schools that struggled to absorb the displaced students showed varying levels of success coping with the influx, according to the report. Case studies illustrate their responses, and the researchers found that those with strong leadership often endured the transitions the best. But those with weaker leadership or a particularly high concentration of at-risk students could be destabilized, some even to the point of being shut down.

David Bloomfield, a Brooklyn College professor of education who serves on a citywide parent advisory group for high schools, said in an interview with the researchers that while "everyone agreed" that the big, dysfunctional high schools had to be fixed, the education department's approach created unanticipated consequences for the existing big schools.

"Their problem is, they didn't plan enough for the contingencies," he said. "They actively made the [remaining large high schools] worse. They created a death spiral, where the graduation rates and attendance rates go down

further, violence increases, and there is even more excuse to close the schools.”

Questions About Small Schools

The researchers studied 34 large high schools that took on students displaced when their schools closed, and found that 26 saw significant enrollment increases, from 150 to 1,100 students. Of those 26, 19 saw attendance decline, and 15 saw graduation rates decline. Fourteen had both rates drop.

In examining the small schools themselves, the researchers found that they offered their students a number of advantages, but also grappled with struggles of their own that raise questions about their futures.

For instance, the new schools initially produced higher graduation rates than the big ones they replaced, but as time went by, those rates decreased. The research team examined 30 new, small schools that had graduated at least two classes, and found that in nearly half, graduation rates fell sharply in the second four-year cohort of students. They found declining trends in attendance as well, and high turnover among teachers and principals.

Ms. Hemphill said a mix of dynamics can produce the declining numbers. As a small school adds more grades each year, it becomes more difficult to track and tend closely to more students, she said, and younger, relatively inexperienced staff members can burn out from working 80-hour weeks.

The research team also found that in graduating their students, the new small schools relied more heavily on the “local” diploma, which requires students to score at least a 55 on five state regents exams, as opposed to the standard diploma, which requires a minimum score of 65. That could be a potential problem, the report notes, because the state is phasing out the local diploma. This fall’s sophomores will be required to earn a standard diploma to graduate.