

# New York City's Small Schools

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A good part of my life has been involved with small alternative schools. I spent most of the 1970's working in a small high school for dropouts in Newark, New Jersey. In 1970, the New York State legislature enacted the city's decentralized school governance structure to resolve the citywide community control struggle. The legislature created thirty-two community school districts and their locally elected school boards to administer the city's elementary and middle schools. The central Board of Education continued to supervise high schools and run the school system's administration. Before decentralization, small elementary, middle and high school size were often determined by the accidental combination of neighborhood demography and school building capacity. But because the decentralized districts were given the power to create new schools, a small schools movement began in East Harlem's District 4 and quickly spread to District 10 (Northeast Bronx), District 6 (Washington Heights), District 3, (the Upper West Side and Harlem), District 1 (the Lower East Side) and District 13, (Central Brooklyn).

I was elected to the District 15 school board in 1983, and a movement to create a new small elementary school started in my Brooklyn neighborhood in 1986. A group of parents dissatisfied with the lackluster instruction and stark segregation by race and class in P.S. 107, their traditional Park Slope elementary school, mobilized to develop a new small school and asked our school board to support them. The parents were inspired by the several Central Park East elementary schools created by Deborah Meier and her colleagues. I shared the parents' vision of a small school driven by progressive instruction, project-based learning and a parent choice lottery admission process designed to ensure a diverse and representative student population. But I wondered whether school boards should create new schools committed to specific educational philosophies and instructional practices. Shouldn't school creation be based on supposedly objective factors like neighborhood population density and need? But what about how segregated neighborhood housing patterns shaped school location and zoning and produced segregated schools?

Ultimately I decided to support the new school and our school board voted to create it. That school, the Brooklyn New School, joined an increasing number of small progressive elementary and middle schools across the city. Most of those schools are still flourishing today. The Brooklyn New School, for example, is thirty-five years old this year, and both of my younger grandchildren attended it.

Aside from this growing number of small district-driven small elementary and middle schools, a group of small alternative high schools, like my high school in Newark, had been created in the 1960's and 70's to serve students who had dropped out of traditional high schools. These second chance high schools included the Urban Academy, the network of Satellite High Schools, City as School, West Side High School, Lower East Side Prep (originally an Urban League storefront school), Manhattan Comprehensive Night and Day High School, International High School and Middle College High School. By 2000, some twenty NYC transfer high schools were serving some 6,000 overage-for-grade and under-credited students by pioneering new forms of curricula and instruction, innovative school structures and supportive learning cultures.

In 1994, when I was working for the Aaron Diamond Foundation, I met with some of these transfer high school leaders, some school system administrators, and the head of a new non-profit, the Fund for NYC Public Education, which subsequently became New Visions for Public Schools. From these discussions, the notion of an intensive small high school creation project emerged, and in the early 1990's Schools Chancellor Joseph Fernandez and his staff supported the effort. Actually two school creation processes converged. New Visions for Public Schools initiated a competition in 1992 to create some fifteen new small public high schools. A panel of schooling experts reviewed some 280 applications and chose ten finalists, and the city's Board of Education approved their creation as



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grades 7-12 high schools. In the following year five additional New Visions schools were approved, and in 1996 a second wave of New Visions small high schools was developed. Simultaneously the Center for Collaboration Education (CCE), a school support consortium started by Deborah Meier and her colleagues, coalesced many of the small elementary and secondary schools and transfer high schools. CCE's mission was to expand and sustain new small schools across the city, and CCE collaborated with Chancellor Fernandez to create nine new small high schools as part of what it called its Coalition Campus project.

The Aaron Diamond Foundation funded both New Visions and CCE's Coalition Campus efforts, and the scale of participation was unprecedented. More than a thousand parents, teachers, researchers and scholars, as well as representatives of universities, community-based organizations, neighborhood development groups, museums and cultural institutions, unions, health organizations and businesses, developed almost three hundred proposals to New Visions for small innovative schools. The city's public education system had never experienced a similar infusion of energy focused on actualizing a reform vision.

Of the fifteen New Visions proposals which ultimately became schools, seven were developed by groups of educators, primarily in school district offices and education graduate schools; five by teams from community-based organizations, of which three were already operating after-school centers; two by health organizations and one by a museum collaboration. The Coalition Campus schools were all educator-designed and developed, and the project replaced two large high schools in the Bronx and Manhattan with nine small, teacher-led collaborative high schools. The coalition's Manhattan and Brooklyn International High Schools were modeled on the original International High School at LaGuardia Community College. Most of the other Coalition schools were inspired by Central Park East High School, founded by Deborah Meier.

In *The Transformation of Public High Schools in NYC*, Ray Domanico, Director for Education Policy at the Manhattan Institute, traces part of these small school developments. I have recounted some of the history that Domanico has skipped, because it complicates the overall narrative of how the city's school system became such a diverse mix of new schools.

To be fair, Domanico focuses primarily on the results of the Bloomberg administration's "historic overhaul of its publicly funded high schools" during the 2004-14 decade. The scale of change during that decade was huge. In 2002, after the Bloomberg/Klein administration dissolved the school system's decentralized governance structure, there were approximately 200 high schools. Today,

twenty years later, there are almost 500, most of them developed in that 2004-14 decade, including thirty new transfer high schools. That massive school creation effort was paired with the closing of at least a hundred large traditional high schools which the Bloomberg administration assessed as failing schools.

The Carnegie, Gates, Open Society and Annenberg Foundations funded the creation of these hundreds of new small high schools at a scale that dwarfed the initial Diamond Foundation efforts. No other U.S. school district has created so many high schools so quickly. According to Domanico, some 320 new public high schools created in that decade are currently functioning, and research studies of some of those schools suggest positive student results when compared to the outcomes of the schools they replaced.

Domanico concludes that the Bloomberg era's high school transformation efforts "raised the floor of citywide achievement." But he cautions that "the city's high schools continue to grapple with very real achievement disparities among students from various demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds." I think both claims are valid. The floor of high school graduation has risen, both in NYC and across the nation; the current national graduation rate is just above 85%. But most school districts across the country have neither created new small schools nor closed their large failing ones; other factors have contributed to that national rise. The nation's school systems may be slowly learning how to graduate significantly more of their high school population. The research that developed the Chicago Consortium's on-track metrics, as well as the research New Visions has conducted to implement and track its high school cohorts' progress, are indicative of the successful efforts to increase our national graduation rate.

But New York City's graduation rate increase has not significantly altered the racial, ethnic and economic distribution of the city's students' academic outcomes. A series of studies my colleagues and I conducted at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform indicate that demography is still destiny, in terms of college readiness and other measures of NYC's high school graduates' schooling achievement. A [2017 study by Kirkland and Sanzone at NYU's Metro Center](#) found that the Black and Latino students concentrated in hyper-segregated NYC high schools have significantly lower graduation rates and lower academic outcomes than less segregated high schools, results that have characterized the city's school system for most of the past century. Despite the city's graduation rate rise, the race and class segregation built into the high school system still condemn too many low-income students of color to inferior schooling and dismal schooling outcomes.

Small schools, for all their capacity to focus on the needs of the students and intervene to improve their students' outcomes, are not a panacea. Because of limited staffing, many small schools struggle to effectively respond to their students' poverty, disabilities, homelessness, chronic absenteeism, and need for effective English language instruction. Many small school enrichment programs, athletics, arts and cultural activities and social/emotional supports are similarly constrained. Successful small high schools are structured by clear missions, coherent and effective systems of instruction, and collaborative and supportive schooling cultures. When they are effective, small schools can help us learn how to make more schools of any size more successful. But small scale alone is not enough to power the schooling transformation too many of our students need.