

*Deborah Meier first attracted national attention as principal of Central Park East Secondary School, one of the celebrated "public schools of choice" in the East Harlem section of New York City.*

*Her challenge was significant: At the time she and a group of teachers formed Central Park East, Community District 4 in East Harlem was among the poorest of New York City's 32 school districts.*

*Dropout and truancy rates were high, and achievement levels were abysmal.*

*Meier and others changed that. Drawing on the principles of Theodore Sizer's *Coalition of Essential Schools*, Central Park East became a well-publicized beacon in urban education. If you could turn a school around in East Harlem, as Meier had done, you could do it anywhere, the reasoning went.*

*In *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem*, Meier discusses her passion for school reform—and her belief in the link between public education and democracy. An opponent of privatization and vouchers, she argues instead that public education can—indeed must—succeed, and she sets out steps others can take to make school reform happen.*

*One of her beliefs, presented in the excerpt that follows, is that small schools are an absolute prerequisite for school reform, especially when it comes to public high schools:*

# Small Schools, Big Results

*An acclaimed former New York City principal says  
school size has a lot to do with students' success*

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BY DEBORAH MEIER

I love big cities. Big schools, I used to imagine, might be like big cities, with collections of inner communities living side by side in uneasy but productive tension.

But reality has taught me otherwise. In schools, big doesn't work no matter how one slices the data. Large schools neither nourish the spirit nor educate the mind; except for a small elite who run the place and claim (falsely) to know everyone, what big schools do is remind most of us that we don't count for a lot.

There are at least six reasons why small schools (to-

gether with a mechanism for choice) are essential today, reasons that take on more powerful meaning if we want to meet the goal of ensuring that all children can and shall learn to use their minds in ways once reserved for a small elite. Small school size is not only a good idea but an absolute prerequisite for qualitative change in deep-seated habits, not just in rhetoric. And it doesn't depend on new buildings, just using the ones we have differently.

School change of the depth and breadth required, change that breaks with the traditions of our own schooling, cannot be undertaken by a faculty that is not convinced and involved. Even when teachers are engaged, it's tough to change the habits of a lifetime, embedded as such habits are in the way we talk about schooling and the way our students and their families expect it to be delivered. Such a task must be the work of the participants themselves in a climate of self-governance.

The kind of changes required by today's agenda can only be the work of thoughtful teachers. Either we acknowledge and create conditions based on this fact, conditions for teachers to work collectively and collaboratively and openly, or we create conditions that encourage resistance, secrecy,

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*Deborah Meier, former principal of the Central Park East Secondary School, is educational director of a major initiative to create small alternative public schools in the New York City school system. The following excerpt is taken from Meier's new book, *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem*, copyright 1995, and is reprinted with the permission of the Beacon Press. All rights reserved.*

and sabotage. Teachers who believe in spelling tests every Friday or [who] are "hooked on phonics" sneak them in, even when they're taboo. And so do those who want good books or fewer workbooks, regardless of school regulations. The braver and more conscientious cheat the most, but even the timid can't practice well what they don't believe in. This is obviously an argument for why teachers (like parents) need the opportunity to work in schools of their choice, but it is also an argument for why these schools must be small. . . .

In a small school we can dare to experiment without feeling we are treating kids like guinea pigs. After all, what doesn't work isn't irreversible. We can reschedule one afternoon and put a new agenda into practice the next morning. We can undo them just as fast. Changes don't require Herculean coordination or time-consuming bureaucratic arranging. In short, smallness makes democracy feasible in schools, and without democracy we won't be able to create the kind of profound rethinking the times demand.

The second reason for small schools is that if the faculty are to be held responsible for their work not individually but collectively, they must have access to each other's work. Only in a small school can teachers know who talks well but doesn't teach well, and vice versa. They know who is late, who is unprepared, and who in quiet and yet unexpected ways comes through for their kids and colleagues, goes the extra mile. They also can begin the difficult task of being as critical of each other as they are accustomed to being of their students, respecting their colleagues enough to ask hard questions of each other. . . . A small school provides the possibility of being accountable for our collective work.

Third, above all, small schools mean we can get to know a student's work, the way he or she thinks. If it's thinking that we're seeking, then it's thinking we must get to observe, and this requires seeing children over time. It means passing them in the hall before and after we have taught them, knowing their other teachers well, seeing them in different settings and guises and thus developing a broader repertoire of ways to approach them. This close knowledge helps us demand more of them; we can be tougher without being insensitive and humiliating. It also means we know their moods and styles—whom to touch in a comforting way and whom to offer distance and space in times of stress. It means that every adult in the school feels responsible for every kid and has insights that when shared can open up a seemingly intractable situation to new possibilities.

Knowing one's students matters, including—and perhaps especially—those who are hardest to know. If teachers didn't do this for my son in his 3,500-student school, it wasn't that they were less thoughtful or observant. But he was just one student out of 150 each teacher taught each semester. They didn't chat with other teachers about him, and when I came in for my annual dutiful parent conference, they weren't to blame for being able to provide me only a list of his attendance and his scores on assignments and tests. There are those kids who find the one adult they need



*Deborah Meier (center) says, "Strong relationships between adults and the young are good for kids. They're more important than all the so-called extras big schools can offer."*

to survive, and others who become generally known by one and all—the school leaders, the school genius, the star athletes, and the problem kids. But the vast majority are more like my academically able and likable son. In his senior year he had a hard time finding a teacher who knew him well enough to write a college reference letter for him that would sound authentic. At a school like [Central Park East Secondary School], the shyest and least engaged student would not have suffered the fate that the average big school student takes for granted.

Of course, knowing students and their families well also means it wouldn't have taken three months for me to find out my son was playing hooky. In small schools everyone knows everyone's business. Irrksome, but also critical to rearing the young, and particularly important in a society in which few other safety nets exist for families and children.

Fourth, small schools offer safety—plain, ordinary physical safety. Teachers know when students are likely to explode and can respond rapidly. They can even get the whole school together to quell a rumor or redirect anger. They also know who belongs and who doesn't. They offer what metal detectors and guards cannot: the safety and security of being where you are known well by people who care for



you. And there is less theft, vandalism, and graffiti in settings where people know us by name. The district's Alternative School Division keeps data that shockingly demonstrates the differential rate of incidents for the "regular" big high schools versus the irregular small ones, most of which—unlike [Central Park East Secondary School]—were organized precisely for the most incorrigible and unsuccessful high school dropouts or potential dropouts. It may be shocking, but it's hardly surprising.

Fifth, in small schools the accountability we owe to parents and the public is a matter of access, not of complex governing bodies or monitoring arrangements. In small schools we know quickly which teachers are absent, and [we] don't need to depend on time clocks. In a small school we know which kids are doing their work and which aren't, where work has suddenly taken a nosedive. If supplies are misused or disappear, we know that quickly, too, and can find out why. The school's formal leadership can be held accountable because they don't have the excuse of isolation and distance. They know if kids are reading by reading with them. They know about their staff's teaching not by scanning thick computer run-offs with complex tables, but by observing in classrooms and engaging in direct conversation. And they get to know the parents: In a school of 3,000 no principal could ever shake the hand of every parent during the student's life in the school. Principals in huge schools survive by creating a climate in which most teachers and most parents don't expect to meet them, much less

get to know them. The strategy is a matter of organizational necessity. The result is that administrators can be held accountable only for indirect indicators of performance because that's all they know—"standardized" stuff, easily manipulated and unauthentic.

Finally, only in small schools can we reasonably speak of immersing students in a culture that adults have played a significant role in shaping. In our large high schools, faculty life (insofar as it exists) takes its staff away from, not toward, its students. Students move about bereft of relationships with anyone but their exact age and grade peers. Adult and student cultures rarely interconnect, much less overlap. There is no thick, complex, and powerful counter-culture to balance the one that has been developed for adolescents only, no counterforce representing serious adult ideas and concerns to which these novices might now and then apprentice themselves. In part, after all, we teachers are trying to convert our children to a set of adult intellectual standards and appreciations—our love affair with literature and history, science and math, logic and reason, accuracy and precision, as well as our commitment to justice and fairness in the larger world. This in turn requires joint membership in an attractive community representing such values as well as a myriad of interactions across generations. . . . [Small schools] offer a chance, not a guarantee, that children will glimpse possibilities that make them want to be grown-ups. . . .

We need schools small enough so that we can attend each other's funerals as well as confirmations, notice birthdays and weddings as well as haircuts or a new suit. We need schools small enough so that we don't groan and turn away at the thought of trying to do what professional jargon calls "articulation," but instead eagerly and easily exchange anecdotes and ideas about how to help each other and our children as they pass on from one grade or class to another.

Schooling is part of child rearing. It's the place society formally expresses itself to young people on what matters. We forgot that when we built our schools to be huge factories. Even factories know that workers need teams, gangs, a set of stable colleagues. Even factories don't change supervisors every 45 minutes, not to mention work crews and job tasks. The army knows that the toughest work gets done well if the members of the squad have loyalty to each other, stick together over time, know each other well. Human solidarity is both an end in itself and a means to other worthy ends.

People sometimes criticized us at [Central Park East] for our devotion to smallness, saying it might lead to over-coddled, dependent kids who couldn't cope with the big bad cold world. We said they were wrong. Now the evidence is in. On a national scale, our 90 percent college attendance rate is 50 percent *above* the norm, although predictions based on the demographics of our student body in terms of race, class, or family circumstance would have put it below. Strong relationships between adults and the young are

## *Small schools mean we can get to know a student's work, the way he or she thinks*

good for kids. They're more important than all the so-called extras big schools can offer. That shouldn't be a surprise.

Small schools are not more expensive. We get the same per-student budget, dollar for dollar—minus the extras for dropout-prevention and drug-prevention programs that we don't qualify for! If we count the cost per graduate, we're amazingly cheap compared to many of our large sister schools. There are more than 20 large high schools in New York City (including all but two of the zoned high schools in the Bronx) in which only about one out of four students who enters ninth-grade graduates. There are a half-dozen in which it's more like one in 10. Consider the cost per graduate in such schools, which is a legitimate question given that a diploma from high school is a minimal survival tool today. No method of building autos, no matter how "efficient," would be deemed economical if three out of four cars that came off the line didn't run.

Smallness, to be effective, must be accompanied by at least one other element, this one so intimately connected that I've been taking it for granted: sufficient autonomy to use one's smallness to advantage. It doesn't do us much good to know each other well if we can't use that knowledge. Nor do adults modeling good discourse serve much point if the discourse is only about the details, not ever about the big picture. Loyalties aren't engendered in schools that can't protect their own, that are controlled by rules that view adults and children as so many interchangeable parts.

In our large cities, at least, such autonomy is mostly nonexistent. Principals are urged to "share power" with their parents and staff as though they currently have power to share. They don't. Schools need to have power in order to share it. Of course, good principals covertly find ways to exercise power. But precisely because they're covert, these are powers that can't be shared publicly. We don't need to ask what power schools need. We should start with giving it all to them, including full power over budgets, and then ask what larger social good requires us to remove any of this power and lodge it in another place, and at what cost.

A small school must be a school—not a school-within-a-school (whatever that is) or a "mini-school" or a house of a family. It can be just one of many housed in a shared building, but a building does not equal a school. A school must be independent, with all that the word implies, with control over a sufficient number of parameters that count—budget, staffing, scheduling, and the specifics of curriculum and assessment, just to mention a few. And power indeed to put toilet paper in bathrooms. And mirrors, too.

Many parties have a right to a voice in decisions about public education—parents and the larger public being two obvious parties. But whatever their rights and responsibili-

ties may be, we won't get the kinds of schools we need by focusing only on who has the right. Unless the people who live in schools day in and day out, principally the kids and staff, are entrusted to use their intelligence on behalf of the task at hand, we'll not get change for the better. Anything else is inefficient, a waste of our precious time and resources. . . .

Long before we have figured out how to redesign classrooms, use computers and other advanced technologies, or do any of the other overwhelming innova-

tions being daily touted, we can do away with one foolish mistake and proclaim that the day has come when every child is entitled to be in a school small enough that he or she can be known by name to every faculty member in the school and well known by at least a few of them, a school so small that family can easily come in and see the responsible adults, and the responsible adults can easily and quickly see each other. What size is that exactly? It can't be *too* small, but surely it can't be larger than a few hundred! If that strikes us as shocking, we might for a moment look at the size of the average elite independent private school and wonder why we haven't learned this lesson until now.

On the question of size, there are no difficult trade-offs of the sort which so often accompany worthy experiments. I'm told—I *know*—that smallness means we can't offer as many different courses. But the average high school student in many large cities never makes it to the grades in which such choices become available. Furthermore, in a system of small schools, in close proximity to each other, nothing prevents a group of schools from freely choosing to collaborate in offering specialized courses. Or joining together to create a stronger athletic team or choir. Or using other community resources.

The one trade-off that sometimes may worry us is in its way also a blessing. Small schools are more vulnerable. Their very intimacy means personal relations can sometimes interfere with professional life. They need to guard against this, reminding themselves (as they remind their students) that you don't have to like all the people you work with. It can be tricky. Factionalism has even killed some small fledgling schools. . . .

Schools, big or small, can't create local economies, provide people with decent shelter, or stop the drug dealers, but smallness combined with self-governance can help educate the young to better cope with the present and find solutions for the future. . . .

It's exhausting work, at best. Still we dare not rest until we can look about us and say that there is not a *single* school to which we would not willingly—I don't say gladly, just willingly—send our own children. Small, self-governing public schools are the quickest and most efficient route to such an end. . . .

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