'As Though They Owned the Place': Small Schools As Membership Communities

Ms. Meier shares the wisdom born of experience as she outlines a set of principles and considerations for a move back to small schools.

BY DEBORAH MEIER

SMALL schools were once the norm. When I was born, there were 200,000 school districts in North America. Schools generally averaged under a hundred students. Most people — above all in the vast majority of communities that had only one or two schools in the district — knew their schools and school board members well. Accountability was a thing very close to home and often highly contentious. If you were a member of a community, you had a say — however irritating it might be to your neighbors.

DEBORAH MEIER is a senior scholar at New York University and the MacArthur Award-winning founder of Central Park East School in East Harlem and of Mission Hill School in Boston, where she is emeritus principal. Her most recent books include Many Children Left Behind *(Beacon, 2004) and* Keeping School: Letters from Principals of Two Small Schools *(Beacon, 2005), which she co-authored with Theodore R. Sizer and Nancy Faust Sizer.*

Today, there are fewer than 15,000 school districts serving nearly three times as many children, and most districts have relatively little say over matters that were once their primary responsibility. More and more decisions lie in hands far removed from communities, families, teachers, and kids.

This change has happened within my lifetime. The reasons have been many — including the greater importance of education itself in the future of both individuals and the nation and the struggle for equity and civil rights that reshaped school law with regard to race, gender, and the rights of the handicapped. The change went hand in hand with the diminishing of the role of local life in so many matters, as it has seemed more appropriate to handle more decisions on a state, regional, or national level. Whether all of these changes necessitated larger schools and larger school districts and whether some of the tradeoffs made were truly necessary are issues worth examining.

The pendulum has swung too far away from the face-to-face quality of old-time accountability ("vote the rascals out") and the potential for strong parent and community involvement that went more naturally with greater local voice. The question we face today is how to determine the value of small schools in redressing some of the negative consequences associated with large schools and districts without sacrificing the benefits that came along with them.

If a central, nonnegotiable function of public schooling in the U.S. is to strengthen our democracy, then we must examine all the issues that affect the ability of schools to do so, many of which are at the heart of why we need small schools. Students learn from us; the robustness of our school community, its capacity to exercise judgment on important matters, and its inclusiveness are all part of young people's education. Where else might kids learn about the tradeoffs, critical judgments, and responsibilities

inherent in democratic life — including when and how to resist? If educating young people to make judgments based on credible evidence, reasoning, and collaboration with others is essential to our task, then we must create schools that have the intention of practicing these arts and the time to do so. In order to align the means with the ends, we must ask more probing questions about the ends we desire for our schools. If we seek only to improve scores on tests of standards determined by others, then educating students for democratic life is not necessary — and maybe small schools aren't either.

Some of the consequences of consolidating small schools into larger schools and districts have not only been bad for democracy but have also made all forms of serious intellectual rigor in schools more, not less, difficult to address. The kinds of relationships that can develop in a small school between students and their teachers and between teachers and the school's community turn out to be critical in determining what can be effectively demanded of its students.

While small schools can have a significant impact on the education of our kids, it is not ordained that small schools will achieve the ends we seek. We can have small schools that behave like big ones, or we can have small schools that take advantage of their size to improve the learning that goes on within them in terms of intellectual standards and the development of responsible citizens.

The official distribution of power within a school is always a difficult issue to discuss. But when we fail to do so, we tend to overlook that the unofficial powers often end up undermining the official ones. For example, kids and teachers have the power to sabotage and resist the best intentions of reformers. When a big school, especially if it is in a big district, decides to go small, it is often responding to a struggle over power. Control and accountability with regard to money, safety, personnel, and educational outcomes — far removed these days from the daily life of the school and its immediate constituents — will be more difficult to keep track of and monitor if we quadruple the number of schools. Too often, having more small schools becomes a nuisance instead of an asset and leads to new forms of resistance and new efforts to monitor and control. Are we prepared to tackle this problem?

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Small schools are an idea that will work only if we are prepared to open up and examine the contents of other cans of worms. Is the district ready to reconsider where each of a wide range of decisions is made? How money is distributed? What the line of command is? We've had a history of fads that sputter out because we tend to simply pile one reform on top of another without looking carefully at the foundation. Let me share what I call the "big five" issues that those considering a move to smaller schools would do well to consider.

1. *Acknowledge that there will be tradeoffs.* If we opt for small schools, we are making choices, accepting tradeoffs that big schools do not have to make. The big comprehensive high school can teach five foreign languages, even if no one really learns any of them. They can have honors tracks and semi-vocational tracks large enough so that each segment can feel like a school of its own, not a marginalized group. Large schools can afford orchestras, bands, a newspaper, and lots of other exciting stuff — even if only a small elite group of students actually experiences the wide range of electives and extracurricular activities. Each of these "extras" has a constituency ready to go to the mat for it.

Small schools force us to ask: What matters most? What are kids not getting in the larger educational world of media/TV/screen/etc. or from their busy families that is essential to the good health of the public sphere? What's altogether out of balance now without the intervention of schools? What aspects of being "well educated" must the school provide in order to create an appropriate balance? For example, schools can provide intergenerational relationships; thoughtful and long-standing personal ties; communication across otherwise alienated and separated communities of heart and mind; direct, authentic experience with the natural world; experience with books, with writing, with scientific tools and experimentation; the nuances of mathematics; civil debate and disagreement; experience with compromise; and on and on. None of these come to us naturally today, but they are all naturals for small schools. But at what price? And it is a price that must be considered so that it doesn't spark a

backlash that we're unprepared for.

2. *Pay attention to genuine outcomes.* We should assess and graduate kids based on their real capacity to show us what they know and can do. Real-life projects, portfolios, auditions, exhibitions, oral defenses, and so on are natural demonstrations of solid academic work, well suited to small schools. In addition, building our assessment around long-term impacts is another obvious approach that has been neglected. But even if the roots of such practices predate standardized tests, we will need to sort out the proper balance between these types of assessment and the ones most communities are now accustomed to.

We must keep coming back to the basics. The power of smallness lies in the effectiveness of learning through the company one keeps — the oldest teaching method on earth. We know that most important adult occupations have historically been passed on in just this way. We abandoned the apprenticeship model of learning at a price that we needn't have paid.

Smallness allows young people to learn again in the company of powerful adults. Learning to be a citizen, like learning math or science, is best accomplished by observing adults engaged in the same kinds of activity. Young people today have little experience seeing what makes adults powerful and effective. But even here the realities need to be monitored. How do we know that ownership of learning is being shared? Or that kids are interested in the adults (and vice versa)? Is there the same percentage of kids who are not noticed and fall through the cracks in a small school as in a big school, or are there fewer of them? In short, the forms of accountability need to be broadened to embrace the school's mission.

3. *Be sure important constituents are on board.* If not, go slower or offer choices. Even if you can "make 'em," it doesn't last.

Start only as many small schools as you have people to staff them and families to choose them. Avoid choices that divide haves from have-nots or the "gifted" from the "others." Otherwise, go for whatever is legal and exciting, even if it's just a group of adults who want to work together. Give those involved maximum autonomy, which is what will grease the wheels for otherwise reluctant faculty members and maybe even for families. People will tend to exploit their capacities to the fullest in the interests of proving that their own ideas work. Above all, give schools their own per-capita budgets, so that they can make choices that reflect their own priorities. And don't believe it when people say such changes won't cost any more. At least for starters, they will.

4. *Avoid false efficiencies.* Speaking of money, start counting what a small school costs not per student but per graduate. Remember, a new practice that drives up the dropout rate is anything but an efficient use of scarce dollars. Be sure that the methods you have for keeping track are consistent with your purposes.

5. *Reassure the recalcitrant.* Tell folks that over the next decade you expect to gradually increase the number of small schools and the range of choices — but only as people are persuaded to want them. There may always be room for one big school in a district with 25 small ones. Don't, I repeat, don't mandate smallness so that everyone must do it. Who knows? Let the old schools and the new schools speak for themselves. If I'm right about small schools, it will get easier and easier to persuade folks.

But even if you keep these big five

principles in mind, going small still will not be easy. Here are some other hints for getting a change to small schools off on the right foot.

It takes time. How long? Three to five years, at least. And don't start with a whole school at once. Begin with one age group of 60 to 80 kids and three or four adults, with a plan to grow, year by year, into a school of 200 or so. Or start with a sixth and ninth grade and let the school grow over the years until it includes grades 6-12. Set a realistic time line for when you expect to have the start-up glitches fixed. It can easily take three to five years for you to grow a school to its full size, build communitywide understanding of its mission, and tweak it as needed. It will require a few more years to make sure a school's approach doesn't need more than tweaking. This is where external school reviews are so useful in giving the public some feedback.

The importance of continuity. Make sure a school has a plan to enroll kids for four or more years. Such grade spans as K-3, K-6, K-8, 4-8, 5-12, etc., can all work. It's in knowing kids year after year, and gaining in the process the trust of families and the understanding in the larger community, that big changes become possible — and successful. This continuity allows reforms to be sustained.

Be inclusive. Make sure each school has a plan that can handle both those students who make running a school easier and those who make it harder. It's okay to have a focus or theme, but not one that rules out kids who might be hard to teach. (Figuring out how to be sure every kid has real freedom of choice is the district's task.) From the start, think through what small schools can offer to the full range of kids and which kids, if any, might be better served separately. Be sure the funds for special needs go with the kids.

Physical space. Small schools waste space. Of necessity. So bear that in mind when planning. Make sure each small school has turf to call its own — including a bathroom and a way to get into and out of the building without bothering others. Make sure that the offices aren't all centralized; guidance staff and school heads need to be close to the action. If necessary, settle for science labs that are less fancy, so that each school has its own labs. Create spaces where different constituencies and different ages can interact — large faculty rooms where everyone has a desk or "central" offices with computers, copying machines, and phones in which principal, office manager, parents, teachers, and kids can congregate. This kind of use of space creates a sense of community and ownership.

Don't be missionaries. Make sure that new and fragile schools are not expected to carry the burden of convincing others — beyond their own community of kids and families — that they are doing good work. Those who are struggling to create a good small school can't be proselytizers for the small schools movement. That's the district's job. When the time seems ripe, arrange for visiting days, led by parents and kids as well as by staff members.

Keep lines of communication open. Be sure to build in ways for the new schools to interact with one another and with the schools not in the project. Arrogance can kill the whole program off. Beware the "one true way," and don't abandon the ones "left behind" in the traditional schools — or they'll get their revenge.

Keep lots of data. Keep a wide range of data — who signs on, who leaves and for what reason (kids and teachers), what the evidence is for student achievement, who gets in trouble. Pay attention to trends. Since longitudinal data on cohorts of kids are the only truly reliable data, build in a way to collect such data right from the start. And keeping in touch with families and kids who leave the school or who graduate is the best source of feedback a faculty and other families can get. Make sure it's in the district's plans to shoulder part of this burden of accounting for results.

Different data are needed for different audiences. For kids and their parents, data drawn from a sample of students won't do; this audience needs information about individual students. On the other hand, the larger, more anonymous public wants information on the overall performance of schools, so sample data are appropriate because they provide a richer and more accurate picture of student achievement across schools.

Accountability. The kind of data a school and district keep will determine the kind of accountability that can be pursued. Make sure that the form of accountability recognizes the special nature of these new schools.

So be sure that standardized test scores are only part of, not the complete definition of, the school's standards. Make sure that the school says up front what it's aiming for and works out within a few years some ways to provide evidence of its success or failure. Schools should also report the means they are using to improve practice when faults and flaws are discovered.

School review can be a form of accountability. From the start, build in a process for reviewing school progress that's consistent with the reform itself. This means that you will need some form of school review that allows judges to get to know a school well enough to comment knowledgeably on its strengths and weaknesses and to have access to a wide range of evidence. Such a process is more costly than just printing out test scores, but it's the district's most critical task.

In Boston, the new, small Pilot schools are reviewed every four years by five educators from different fields and areas of expertise. They examine specified documents ahead of time and spend three days visiting a school. Then they prepare a document for the school's own board and for Boston's superintendent, who has ultimate authority. The process leads to one of three ratings: all's well; the school should be placed in a probationary status while certain specific issues are addressed; or the district should consider closing or reorganizing the school.

Professional development. No plan is any better than what's actually happening inside schools — first and foremost in classrooms, but also in all those shared spaces and the places where key actors interact and at meetings with families. Keep large-scale districtwide (or even buildingwide) professional development to a minimum — at least at first. Instead, give schools the time to build a community of adults as well as youngsters. That means providing time for staff to meet daily — even for a short time. Also provide for more extended weekly gatherings and for less frequent prolonged "retreats." Since faculty stability is at the heart of building a school culture (and constantly recycling staff is costly and inefficient), having the funds required for internal professional development is key. Make sure professionals have a week to talk among themselves before the school year, as well as a week during the year and one afterward. This is a practice any summer camp thinks necessary, but many schools don't. Involve faculty members in the selection of their colleagues, as well as in observing and critiquing one another. Treat staff morale as central; it is not a luxury item.

The union. Don't start off by assuming that union leaders won't love this idea. In many places, unions have been the initiators of small school reform. As long as the development of small schools doesn't become a tactic for union busting or for undermining teachers' collective power, it can be viewed as a perfect tool for providing a strong professional base for teacher unions. Make sure to have an understanding with the union of what a living contract could be like — one that leaves most details to the school site and can be changed as conditions change. School staff members need to be able to shape aspects of the contract to match their school's design and governance style. Bring these issues down to the school level, where all parties can reach the best understanding of how strong unions lead to good teaching and learning.

Leadership. The success of small school reform depends on a different kind of school-based leadership, a kind more collegial than administrative. There are many different models of such leadership, but all require principals who think more like teachers than they do in big schools and teachers who think more like principals. There must be co-ownership

of the reform. Teachers and principals must be eager to see what their colleagues are up to. Most would-be principals have never experienced such co-leadership and will need help in doing so. If we don't provide models, they may view such a style as "weak" leadership. They need to interact with colleagues in the same situation: handling the problems that come with being half colleague and half school head. We need new forms of training in leadership for small schools.

It's also important, as small schools are phased in, that one strong and respected member of the district-level team be there as a trusted ally and resource for the school-level leaders. Having a strong advocate in the central office is key to making sure folks feel they are being heard.

Parent involvement. If parents are to be our allies — which is possible when they know their children's teachers well — we need to tackle another can of worms. In the past, when we've decried the lack of parent involvement, we've mostly not meant it. Few schoolpeople really feel comfortable when a group of parents starts hanging around asking questions and wanting a voice in decisions. We want parents there when we need them, but we don't spend a lot of time imagining what it would require if we were to be there when they need us. We need a different view of time. How can we ensure that parents will have the time to attend to their children's school issues without losing their jobs? What would we need to put in place so that parents could reach us easily and comfortably with information about family emergencies or just to share their worries about their children? While some of the necessary changes will be at least partly beyond our control, they ought to be on our agenda. However, one thing within our control is reducing the number of adults parents must get to know well to one or two individuals over two, three, or more years.

Probably each school will find that what it needs is not more guidance counselors, but a wise family/school coordinator, trained to help allies with different kinds of tunnel vision to work well together. This position is not a throwaway to hand over to an active parent as a reward. It requires real skill and training. At best, it requires someone with experience as a family therapist and as a consultant and advisor to organizations.

Buildingwide issues. Finally, never let small details go unnoticed. One that sometimes gets overlooked when small schools share a building is: who's minding the physical plant?

A plethora of details will crop up daily as different autonomous schools with different styles share a building. How kids and adults who attend different schools in the same building relate to one another is important. It helps a lot if the students are not all of the same age, so wherever possible schools serving different age groups should be placed in the same building. Sometimes parents worry about this idea. Can young children be assigned to the same building as teenagers? Actually, in my experience, this almost always is mutually beneficial to both groups.

It helps if the heads of all the small schools in a building meet regularly to discuss shared issues, with someone responsible (perhaps on a rotating basis) for following up on decisions made. A plant manager will probably be needed to deal with the kitchen, security, and custodial issues. It also helps to figure out how to use shared spaces and to remember that any decision must be sufficiently flexible to allow for the kinds of lives that schools live — full of emergencies, unexpected crises, joyful celebrations, and more.

These fledgling new schools need to see one another as allies — even though at times they may bump into one another. They need to take pride in the "complex" — the site — as a whole and in all its parts. They need to appreciate their diversity, not their sameness. There are some practices that may help in this regard, such as common sports teams and after-school activities or shared fund-raisers to build a common photo lab, ceramics studio, or dance room.

Putting all of this down on paper scares me. I hope it doesn't scare readers. It's a lot to do at once. Fortunately, some of it will come naturally, while other aspects will bedevil you for years. And who knows which will prove to be which?

But this much I know: it will be exciting, and kids will thrive in the excitement of being part of a new venture. A colleague at a new small school in San Francisco complained to me recently, "The trouble is the kids walk around the school like they own it." And then after a pause she added, "And I suppose that's the good thing too. But it takes time to get used to it and get the balance right." Ditto for parents and, blessedly, for teachers too. And that's why it works.

The more complex, centralized, distanced, virtual, and diverse the larger world, the more important it is for young people, their parents, and their teachers to feel the power of their own ideas; to embrace their own capacity to influence and have an impact; to learn to hear, to listen, and to argue; to check out abstractions through metaphors that they have experienced together. It's the solid foundation they need in order to move into the larger world with confidence, "as though they owned the place." ◼