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Success at Small Schools Has a Price, a Report Says

By **JAVIER C. HERNANDEZ**

Replacing large, poor-performing high schools with smaller schools in New York City has led to lower attendance and graduation rates at **other large high schools**, which have struggled to accommodate influxes of **high-needs students**, according to a report to be released on Wednesday.

Small schools, which cap enrollment at several hundred students and boast themes like environmental science and the performing arts, have emerged as a hallmark of Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#)'s education reform efforts. Over the past seven years, the city has closed more than two dozen large comprehensive high schools, which typically enroll thousands of students, and replaced them with smaller schools, which are supposed to foster more intimate relationships and higher student achievement.

The report, conducted by researchers at the [New School's Center for New York City Affairs](#), does not dispute the success of small schools in improving graduation rates of needy students. But it argues that the **city should do more to support comprehensive high schools**, which have been saddled with large numbers of the high-needs students who do not enroll at small schools.

The [18-month study](#) examined 34 large high schools and found that 14 of them had decreases in attendance and graduation rates from **2003 to 2008**, when the number of small schools in the city multiplied.

Based on interviews with principals, teachers and parents, the report concluded that the reason for the decreases was that the comprehensive high schools were overwhelmed by influxes of students who had histories of **poor attendance, behavior problems and low academic achievement**. Many of those students came from closed failing schools that were replaced with small schools, the report said.

"Small schools have really made remarkable gains for thousands of kids, but there's a price, and the price is a lot of the large schools have gotten worse," said Clara Hemphill, an author of the New School report, who is known for her guidebooks on the city's best public schools.

The city's Department of Education disputed several of the report's findings, saying decreases in graduation and attendance rates at large high schools could not be linked to the creation of small schools.

Melody Meyer, a spokeswoman for the department, noted that demographic changes alone could account for an influx of 15,000 high school students from 2002 to 2005, and that graduation rates had improved citywide over the past seven years.

In an interview with the researchers, Schools Chancellor [Joel I. Klein](#) defended his small-schools strategy, saying that even if schools were burdened with high-risk students, it was better than leaving those students in failing schools.

“There were some growth pains,” he said. “The process is not over.”

Stephen M. Duch, principal of Hillcrest High School in Queens, which serves 3,200 students, said that his school had instituted small learning environments — with themes like pre-med, theater and health careers — partially in response to an infusion of higher-needs students after the opening of small schools in the area.

“Given the deflection of students, it was even more paramount to change the way we ran the school,” he said. “You bring over 3,000 kids into a building of 200 teachers, and it can be very anonymous. Students could fall through the cracks.”

One point of agreement between the city and the researchers was the looming challenge posed by a state mandate to impose more rigorous graduation standards, which affects this year’s ninth graders. The report noted that a disproportionately high number of students at small high schools might have difficulty satisfying requirements for the more rigorous state Regents diplomas that will soon be required.

The [City Council](#)’s Education Committee is expected to discuss the new graduation requirements on Thursday.

The report expressed caution about the future of small schools, which boast an average class size of 27, compared with 34 citywide. It found high rates of principal and teacher turnover at the schools, and said that attendance and graduation rates had declined each year at many of the schools that opened since 2002, though they still outperformed the schools they replaced.

“It’s partly that they burn very hot and fast,” Ms. Hemphill said. “They start out with a huge level of enthusiasm among teachers and staff, but it’s really, really hard work, and after a certain number of years of 80-hour workweeks, the teachers get tired.”

Critics of small schools have argued that much of their success can be attributed to the fact that they serve populations markedly different from the failing schools they replace. The New School report, however, indicated that while disparities had existed in the past, most small schools matched citywide averages in the number of students who were from low-income families, were in special education programs or were struggling with English.

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