

Rethinking Schools Online

ORDER

Who We Are

[Current Issue](#)[Article Index](#)[Archives](#)[Web Resources](#)[Publications](#)[Just For Fun](#)

Search Rethinking Schools

[Help](#) | [Advanced search >>](#)[Home](#) > [Archives](#) > [Volume 19 No. 4 - Summer 2005](#) > [Not in Our Name](#)

Not in Our Name

Summer 2005

*Reclaiming the democratic vision
of small school reform*

By Michelle Fine

Maybe we weren't clear. The small schools movement was never simply about size.

When committed educators and community activists in New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, Oakland, Boston, and Cincinnati launched the movement, they were desperately seeking alternatives to the failures of big city high schools. They fashioned a vibrant, gutsy social movement for creating democratic, warm, and intellectually provocative schools, particularly for poor and working-class youth of color.

Since the 1980s, across cities, rural communities, and even spots in suburbia, a quiet revolution created schools where students could be known well and where they could develop critical inquiry. Students, faculty, parents, and community engaged in democratic participation.

Over the last several decades, a growing network of small schools has blossomed across the country. Quite a few of these schools are amazing, a number are weak, and most are somewhere in between. At times, I have lauded these schools as "sites of possibility," criticized some as "large schools in drag" and others for "confusing hugs for calculus."

All too many small schools have the same authoritarian principals, disempowered and uninspired educators, dubious high-stakes tests, and Eurocentric curricula as the large schools they were designed to replace. If large schools too often enact the pathologies of prisons, small schools sometimes embody the pathologies of families.

But despite their uneven implementation and wide variation, many small schools consistently and courageously educate a broad band of poor and working-class youth, disproportionately African American, Latino and/or immigrant, who prove more likely than peers in demographically comparable large schools to graduate, move on to higher education, contribute to community life, and continue to be a part of extended school communities well after their graduation.



If large schools too often enact the pathologies of prisons, small schools sometimes embody the pathologies of families.

Illustration: David McLimans

SUBSCRIBE

CONTENTS

[Vol. 19, No. 4](#)

[Small Schools, Big Issues](#)

[Editorial: The Small Schools Express](#)

- [Questions to Ask About Small School Reform Plans](#)

[Not in Our Name](#)

[Standardizing Small](#)

[An Open Letter to Bill and Melinda Gates](#)

[The Gates Foundation and Small Schools](#)

- [Who's Behind the Money?](#)

[Small Schools Doubletalk](#)

[Creating Democratic Schools](#)

['A Little School in a Little Chinatown'](#)

[When Small Is Beautiful](#)

[Tackling Tracking](#)

- [Man, I Feel Sorted](#)

A New Phase

Our nation is facing a crisis in urban education that derives from multiple sources: a disappearing economy for poor and working-class people of color, mass incarceration of youth and adults of color, the underfunding of urban schools, the No Child Left Behind act (NCLB), lack of space, high-stakes testing, and politicized centrist bureaucracies that trust neither communities nor educators. There is no doubt for the need to intervene radically in secondary education in urban communities. And there is ample evidence that "small," when generated by educators or communities, can be a strategic vehicle for democratic reform.

But today, across urban America, we are witnessing a new phase in the small schools movement. Despite many of its profoundly bottom-up ancestors, this new small schools movement is top-down and privately subsidized. It's branded as "systemic reform" but doesn't reform the system. There is an industry afoot to mass produce and export "small" across urban zip codes, without much thinking about how to create a just system of quality schools for urban youth.

This rapid proliferation of mass-produced small schools initiated from the top with private funds — and usually imposed *on* urban communities and educators — is cause for much concern. Bureaucrats and private funders are undertaking reforms without the wisdom and social justice concerns of the early small schools educators.

A quick national scan tells a chilling story of the distortions produced by the rush to small.

In New York City, the small schools initiative has many points of origin and manifestations. Among the more promising is the "autonomous zone," where small schools are granted sufficient autonomy to innovate and flourish, free of excessive bureaucratic control. But many of New York City's new small schools are being squeezed into already overcrowded large high schools, making education virtually impossible for youth and educators in these buildings. Recent reports of a small school principal who was arrested because he protested school police treatment of a student mark exactly the contentious terrain that has been created. Combined with the chaotic "choice" and transfer provisions of NCLB, both small schools and large ones are being suffocated by bureaucratic policies that barely allow schools, teachers, and students to breathe, let alone flourish.

In Oakland, small schools were ushered in with "results based budgeting." Each school is treated as a small business, with funding tied to average daily attendance. Some argue that small school strategies here are being used to encourage school communities to impose austerity on themselves and their students in the name of reform.

In Chicago, Renaissance 2010 encourages the construction of new small schools but suspiciously along the lines of gentrification, offering middle- and upper-middle-class families high-quality schools in exchange for reclaiming once-abandoned urban neighborhoods.

In Philadelphia, CEO Paul Vallas has initiated plans for a series of small "faith-based" public schools, collaborating with Christian colleges and community organizations, with rumors of equal time for other religious denominations.

In Boston, Deborah Meier, founder and director of Boston's Mission Hill School, describes a set of six small "pilot" schools, created top-down with little support from teachers. She also worries that the pilots have been used as a potential wedge for undermining labor: "If the status 'pilot' simply becomes a way in which principals have more authority to decide what teachers must do, and doesn't give teachers any authority over it, then it is simply a union-busting tool."

- [Why Should Only Pre-I.B. Students Be Challenged?](#)

- [Some Resources on Teaching About School Tracking](#)

[Rhetoric or Reality?](#)

[My Small School Journey](#)

[Bargaining for Better Schools](#)

['We're Not Blind. Just Follow the Dollar Sign'](#)

- [Communities Struggle to Make Small Serve All by David Stovall](#)

- [Parents Fight School Closings by Julie Woestehoff](#)

[Youth Take the Lead on High School Reform Issues](#)

COLUMNS AND DEPARTMENTS

[No Child Left Untested: Small Is Volatile](#)

[Strange Stuff](#)

[Short Stuff](#)

[Good Stuff](#)

Letters

[Resources | Small School Resources](#)

[Student Voices](#)

It breaks my heart to see the small schools movement commodified, ripped from its participatory and radical roots, and used to facilitate union busting, privatization, faith-based public education, and gentrification. To be sure, public education has always been a contested space; educational reforms have always blended elements that were potentially oppressive and subversively liberatory. But educational reforms, of late, have been systematically transformed into political efforts to undermine our most inclusive and democratic institutions in the service of privatization and perpetual inequality. And the small schools movement is no exception. Before "small" becomes the vehicle by which top-down, neoliberal reform dismantles the common good of public education, I say — for so many of us — not in our name.

Reaffirming the Vision

This litany of concerns should not signal a retreat from small schools, but it does mean that those of us connected to the movement must reaffirm its democratic vision and reject fraudulent versions. The small schools movement was meant to reclaim the public sphere, not retreat from it. Small schools were a strategy to reinvigorate public education with spaces of antiracist commitment that would inspire, spread, and support other schools — not islands seeking exit. At its best, the small schools movement was grounded in a set of radical educational and political principles that are currently under siege:

- **Access, participation, and democracy.** Small schools were born out of deep, long struggles of educators and/or communities. The small schools in District 4 in New York City, New Visions schools in New York, the original "charters" (not charters as they have come to be known) of Philadelphia, the small schools of Chicago, the Fratney school in Milwaukee, and the network of small schools in Oakland were produced by collectives of educators and community members who insisted that poor and working-class children, largely African American, Latino and/or immigrant, deserve the sense of belonging, the trust, and the intellectual possibilities that the rich routinely enjoy. In Cincinnati, the early small schools were supported by labor's vision for education as it should be, in partnership with the leadership of local teacher unions. Educators crafted elaborate plans for curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment to nurture the minds and souls of youth. They designed schools to be widely accessible, without restrictive entrance criteria. And they built democratic participation into the fabric of schools and communities — although this worked unevenly and sometimes clumsily.

- **Commitments to equity.** While small schools vary in theme, origins, and structure, at their best they are designed to encourage sustained, critical inquiry among heterogeneous collectives of youth who are being educated toward college. With high standards for intellect, civic engagement, and soul, these schools take the lives, biographies, communities, and histories of youth and their families as starting points. Because students enter these schools with varied academic strengths and needs, it may take four, five, or six years to graduate. But students engage in a context of big ideas, tough questions, exhausting persistence, real-world relations and projects, and unprecedented accomplishment.

- **Sophisticated systems of assessment that support better teaching and learning.** The small schools movement has historically resisted high-stakes tests and simple-minded, externally generated assessments as fundamentally anti-intellectual. Educators have nourished creative assessment practices that promote better teaching practice and more appropriately serve students and their communities. Small school educators hold themselves personally and collectively accountable to a mix of outcome and process measures including attendance, persistence, graduation, quality of student work, depth of student inquiry, relations with educators, performances and exhibitions of knowledge, rates of college-going and college persistence. They design systems of assessment that are public and transparent, inspired by high standards and produced through collective professional wisdom.

A compelling example of this assessment work comes from a

network of 40 small schools throughout New York State who formed the Performance Assessment Consortium. Students attending consortium schools are educated toward an intriguing menu of high performance standards. Panels of university and secondary educators, parents, community, policymakers, and corporate and philanthropic representatives visit these schools to review



It breaks my heart to see the small schools movement commodified, ripped from its participatory and radical roots, and used to facilitate union busting, privatization, faith-based public education, and gentrification.

Illustration: David McLimans

student work, assess school culture, observe and comment upon teaching and learning processes, and judge the performances of graduates. These schools maintain and report data on student persistence; dropout and graduation rates for four, five, and six years; college-going; and college follow-up for graduates. The schools and their parent communities have initiated lawsuits, delivered legislative testimony, and undertaken extensive lobbying in New York State to protest the high-stakes testing regime (which has spiked drop-out rates, especially for students of color) and to garner state support for their system of assessment. Under the leadership of Ann Cook and supported by research by Martha Foote, these schools are committed to transparency and the highest forms of accountability. The Consortium schools just published a longitudinal follow-up study of their graduates and found that they were attending college at significantly higher rates than peers, and persisting with better than average grade-point averages. But the state education leaders have not been willing to grant permanent legitimacy to this alternative system of assessment. New York Education Commissioner Rick Mills continues to resist and slander these schools. Ironically, the minimalist standards of the Regents threaten the intellectually thick assessments of New York's small schools. This struggle reflects the many ways that bureaucratically imposed standards and tests can trump the very work of committed educators needed to make higher academic performance a reality.

- **Schools for social justice and social responsibility.** Defining schools as public institutions with deep social responsibilities for intellectual, economic, and civic well-being, many in the small schools movement originally conceived the schools as a movement for educational justice. Like the Mississippi Freedom Schools and the best of popular education, these small schools take questions of social justice and responsibility seriously, in the classroom and beyond. Students in small schools on both coasts have been engaged in studies of and struggles around a series of civic issues: finance equity, voter registration, sexuality education, police brutality, high-stakes testing, the Patriot Act, and the building of juvenile prisons.

Developing skills of social analysis and public action, students at El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice have conducted lead paint, blood pressure, and asbestos studies in their neighborhood, Williamsburg, Brooklyn. [See "When Small Is Beautiful," page 35.] But questions of justice have not been addressed simply *within* small schools or *between* schools and communities. Educators working within small schools also have dedicated themselves to larger questions about the inequitable distribution of resources, educators, and students across schools. Small school educators have not been blind to large-scale problems. In New York City's District 4, for instance, when new small schools dotted the district, educators from across schools met to assure the equitable distribution of youth in terms of Title I entitlement, second-language learners, and special-education needs. More recently, small schools educators from established New York City schools have incubated a series of new small schools, both within their walls and through shared professional development activities, to grow the next generation of schools that beat the odds for poor and working-class youth of color. While this cross-generational nesting of new schools is complicated by many factors (the massive overcrowding of large schools, the absence of systemic rethinking about how to work with small and

large schools, and NCLB) the movement remains committed to sustainability. Small school reform efforts that respect teachers would honor and build on these hard-earned connections, rather than replace them with bureaucratic blueprints and consultants' contracts. We have learned much in the last 20 to 30 years about growing, deepening, and sustaining the complex and exhausting work of small schools. Small schools are not a quick fix, an easy strategy, a silver bullet. As a simple idea alone, they are certainly not sufficient to transform a whole district. Sitting beneath "small" lays a set of inextricably connected commitments about curriculum, pedagogy, equity, sustainability, teaching, and learning. Taken together, these elements can help provide answers to the devastating failures of large, comprehensive high schools in urban America.

As small schools are appropriated as "systemic reform" we are witnessing the collateral damage of top-down reform without educator and community participation, fracturing along the fault lines of inequity. Some now view small schools with suspicion as they justify the inequitable distribution of soft money and student bodies. History shows us that small schools can be designed and sustained with labor's blessing as we have seen in Cincinnati, or they can be used to undermine teachers' contracts as we have seen in Oakland and Boston. They can embody a collective vision enacted with commitment by educators and community, or they can represent a mandate enacted by the 'entrepreneurial,' imposed on a community that has neither been consulted nor respected, with none of the collective passions of more authentic efforts. Small schools can be crafted with an eye toward broad-based equity, or they can become creaming "tracks" within public secondary education. Small schools can be the door to a revitalized public sphere for poor and working-class students or they can usher in privatization in the form of privately managed charters, choice, and religious affiliation. Small schools can stand strong as a project dedicated to poor and working-class youth, or they can be a bonus for young, gentrifying families.

At the moment, small schools run the risk of being severed from their radical roots and the vibrant movements that birthed them. We've all seen Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, César Chávez, Paulo Freire, Audre Lourde, and others celebrated as though they acted alone. Amputated from the massive social movements of which they were a part, they've been respectively trivialized as tired, charismatic, desperate, innovative, and courageous. But the deep commitments and masses that moved with these men and women are obscured. So, too, with the small schools movement.

The small schools movement has been carried by the force of students, educators, and community activists working within and across schools, late into the night and into weekends, who have dared to imagine quality education for poor and working-class students of color; dared to ask hard questions of educational policy, practice and politics; and have dared to resist and organize subversively for educational justice.

Small schools are no longer "under the radar." The small schools movement has been thrust into a new phase. By virtue of necessity and their commitment to defend their work for educational and social justice, many small school educators have begun coalition work with large school activists, labor, finance equity lawsuits, community-based organizations, and testing reform campaigns. There is a widespread recognition that if we don't work in coalition we will indeed be split off and ultimately subverted.

We know too well that islands of possibility will not float for long in the sea of deep inequity we call public education.

Long involved in urban school and prison reform movements, Michelle Fine (mfine@gc.cuny.edu) is Distinguished Professor of Psychology, Urban Education, and Women's Studies at the Graduate Center, CUNY. Thanks to Bernadette Anand, Nancy Barnes, Janice Bloom, Lori Chajet, Ann Cook, Héctor Calderón, Stan Karp, Olivia Lynch, Kavitha Mediratta, Deborah Meier, Linda

Powell Pruitt, Peter Steinberg, and participants in the Graduate Center, CUNY panel on small schools and centralized reform and participants in the Coalition of Essential Schools.

Summer 2005

[ORDER](#) | [Current Issue](#) | [Article Index](#) | [Archives](#) | [Web Resources](#) | [Publications](#) | [Just For Fun](#) | [Who We Are](#) |

© 2002 Rethinking Schools * 1001 E. Keefe Avenue, Milwaukee, WI 53212 * Phone(414) 964-9646, or (800) 669-4192,
FAX: (414) 964-7220 Email: webrs@execpc.com