



Consortium on Chicago School Research

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Small Chicago high schools improve dropout rates and attendance, but not test scores

Small high school reform in Chicago is delivering on many of its promises, including a reduction in student dropouts and improvements in attendance, but it hasn't yet shown test score improvements, according to the first comprehensive report on the reform, prepared by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago.

The report, "Small High Schools on a Larger Scale," looks at the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative (CHSRI) from 2002 through 2005, studying both school climate and student outcomes. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, as well as several local foundations, have dedicated \$26 million to the reform, which has led to the opening of almost two dozen small high schools across the city.

These new small schools are intended to range in size from 120 to 500 students and provide both teachers and students with a more personalized environment for teaching and learning. This report covers the first three years of the initiative, in which 16 schools were started.

The report found that the reform works when it comes to keeping students involved in school: 20 percent of the students enrolled in the first cohort of five new small schools dropped out by the end of their junior year, compared with 27 percent of similar students at large high schools (see p. 29 of the report). Author Joseph Kahne notes that "graduating from high school makes a huge difference in terms of employment and earnings. If the promising lower dropout rates noted in this study translate into improved graduation rates, this reform will substantively improve the lives of these students."

Attendance was also better: The students in small schools spent nearly a week longer in classes than those in large schools because their absence rate was lower (25 days compared with 28 days at larger schools for juniors and 20 days for CHSRI freshmen compared with 26 days for similar students at larger schools, see p. 27).

In order for any school reform to be effective, researchers contend that students need more academic rigor. When compared with students in larger schools, this study found that juniors in the small schools felt more challenged by their teachers than did similar students in other schools. The small schools also had both juniors and freshmen more focused on goals for their lives after high school (see pp. 25-26).

Teachers in the schools also reported more collegiality, a higher level of coherence in the instructional program, and a greater interest in innovative classroom approaches (see pp. 20-21).

However, the principals were not viewed as being better instructional leaders than principals at larger schools, and teachers did not report that their professional development opportunities were any better than teachers in larger schools (see p. 21), factors that may be associated with the lack of improvement for test scores.

“We saw evidence that instruction was the same for similar students in CHSRI and non-CHSRI settings. Given that we did not see a CHSRI effect on instruction, it is not surprising that we failed to find evidence that attending a small school promoted higher test scores,” said report author Susan Spote.

The 2005 PSAE scores for students in 9 CHSRI schools that had juniors were similar to those in the large schools. Juniors in these small schools had average test scores of 145 versus 144.6 in larger schools on the PSAE. For mathematics, the juniors had a test score of 139.4, compared with 139.2 in larger schools (see p. 29).

The authors noted that 12 of the 16 schools studied were schools created from larger schools that were on probation at the time of the conversion. The teachers in these small schools mainly came from those larger schools, and the students were largely drawn from the pool of students who would have attended those larger schools anyway. The other four schools started as new schools in some of Chicago’s less

advantaged neighborhoods. On average, students in all 16 schools were more disadvantaged than the typical Chicago public school students. The average reading level tested at 228 (about sixth grade) for the small school students in the study, compared with an average of 240 for all nonselective high schools. The students also were more likely to be old for their grade, and to have experienced multiple moves during their last three years in elementary school.

Report authors are Joseph Kahne, a researcher from Mills College, Oakland, California; Susan Sporte and Marisa de Torre at the Consortium; and John Q. Easton, Executive Director of the Consortium.

The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, founded in 1990, aims to conduct research of high technical quality that can inform and assess policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. By broadly engaging local leadership in our work, and presenting our findings to diverse audiences, we seek to expand communication among researchers, policy makers, and practitioners.

The Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action, but does not argue for particular policies or programs. Rather, its researchers believe that good policy is most likely to result from a genuine competition of ideas informed by the best evidence that can be obtained.