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Creating a Climate for Learning

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The Big Benefits of Smallness

By Deborah W. Meier

As New York's celebrated Central Park East schools have shown, small schools work--for seven good reasons.

Small schools come as close to being a panacea for America's educational ills as we're likely to get. Smallness is a prerequisite for the climate and culture that we need to develop the habits of heart and mind essential to a democracy. Such a culture emerges from authentic relationships built on face-to-face conversations by people engaged in common work and common work standards.

A good school is a work in progress: a place to tinker, fix, and sometimes even to throw out and start over. Creating such a school requires keeping in mind both visionary ideas and mundane daily details. A good school is never satisfied with itself. As a result, there's never enough time. But it turns out that everything is easier when we get the scale right. Getting the size right is the necessary, though not sufficient, first step.

Until my own school days, small schools were the rule rather than the exception. In a few places, like New York City, rapid population booms and high-priced land produced America's first truly big school buildings. They didn't work then any better than they do now. I have friends who swear they did. When I show them the statistics, they are startled: "But everyone I knew graduated, I'm sure of it." True, but they just never knew all those others who didn't.

Big school buildings are mistakes that are hard to undo, but fortunately, big buildings can house small schools. Of the four Central Park East schools we created in East Harlem's District 4, none ever had its own separate building. The district used every available extra space for the new small schools, while it gradually downsized the larger ones. If four teachers had a good idea, the district said "Go to it." In the end, 52 schools occupied the original 20 buildings.

Big Buildings and Small Subschoools

If one looks closely, big high schools are, in fact, always made up of small schools. The kids create them for survival's sake. The trouble is, only two groups of kids--each a small minority--are able to join the subgroup where the adults are significant people to them. These are (1) the academic stars--who are in the honors and advanced placement classes, leaders of the student government or debating society, or editors of the school newspaper; and (2) the star athletes who belong to various sports teams. The faculties know these kids well; they share common values and aspirations; and the kids and teachers thrive on their mutual admiration and respect. Occasionally there are subschoools for musicians or artists or actors.

But the vast majority of kids--probably 70-80 percent--belong to enclaves that include no grown-ups. A few loners belong nowhere. In the good old days, most of this latter group dropped out along the way to join real grown-up occupations. The problem is, there are no longer grown-up occupations for the dropouts to join. So they stay with us--at least officially. Half in, half out, disconnected from the culture that schools are intended to impart. In short, the schools we've invented aren't organized to assist this other 70 percent. They make do as best they can. And the specialty schools--the honors tracks of one sort or

another--have had to organize themselves against the grain of the school's dominant peer culture. What we small school fanatics are working for is schools that do for all kids what we now do for a few. We want to make that the dominant culture of the school.

Seven Reasons

There are at least seven reasons that smallness--300-400 students--works best and offers probably the only chance of carrying out serious reforms in pedagogy and curriculum.

1. Governance. Ideally, a school's total faculty should be small enough to meet around one common table. Whether it's hammering out a solution to a crisis or working through a long-range problem, sustained attention over time is required of everyone. Studies in group efficacy suggest that once you have more than 20 people in a group, you've lost it. Some people will be marking papers, some writing their lesson plans, and others silently disagreeing.

I'm always puzzled when I hear that a staff of 100 went off for a one-day retreat with parents, district personnel, and sundry others, and came up with a vision, a mission, and some objectives. The power of the ideas behind these rushed jobs is not likely to go far in the tricky business of educating kids. Committees can do useful spade work, but in running a school, committees work only for relatively unimportant decisions. Unless we're all committed to the goal, what we do behind our closed doors won't be implemented just because a committee of our peers decided on it. Further, only in a small school can we try something on Monday, put it into effect on Tuesday, and change our minds on Wednesday.

We teachers went into teaching because we love working with kids, not going to meetings. We thus need a faculty small enough so that knowing one another's ideas and work is feasible within the normal constraints of a 24-hour day, and without putting kids in second place.

2. Respect. Students and teachers in schools of thousands cannot know one another well. And if we do not know one another, we may mishear one another. Families, teachers, staff, and students may assume disrespect where none was intended. ("She *looked* at me." "He didn't even say hello.") The more diverse our students' backgrounds, and the greater the gap between the faculty's and kids' cultures, the greater the misunderstanding may be.

We will think we have made our point when in fact we've been thoroughly misunderstood. We will sabotage one another thoughtlessly, because we didn't know better. We will be lax and permissive when we need to be tough and demanding; we will nag when that's bound to cause trouble. Toughness that comes from respect and toughness that comes from fear and scorn produce opposite results. A culture of respect rests on mutual knowledge, and even then it's hardly automatic. Small schools make such knowledge a possibility.

3. Simplicity. One of the first things Ted Sizer told us when we started Central Park East Secondary School in 1985 was to keep the organizational side simple. Otherwise, he said, you'll be tempted to simplify the minds and hearts of the children and subject matter you intend to teach. In most schools we've chosen just this; we've created a complex bureaucracy, and then simplified--or standardized--the kids, teaching them a one-size-fits-all curriculum so that we can more easily grade, measure, and categorize them. The larger the school, the greater the temptation to treat one another like interchangeable parts, and our subject matter as discrete and unconnected.

4. Safety. Anonymity breeds not only contempt and anger, but also physical danger. The data are clear that the smaller the school, the fewer the incidents of violence, as well as vandalism and just plain rudeness. Strangers are easily spotted, and teachers can respond quickly to a student who seems on the verge of exploding. Small schools offer what metal detectors and guards cannot: the safety and security of being where you are known well by people who care for you.

5. Parent involvement. Schools are intimidating places for many parents--parents feel like intruders, strangers, outsiders. And nothing seems more foolish than going to parent night and seeing a slew of adults who don't know your kid, have very little investment in him or her, and whose opinions and advice make one feel less, not more, powerful. When kids reach high school, schools usually give up on parents entirely (except to scold them). But high school students don't need their parents any less, just differently.

When the school is small enough, probably someone there knows your kid well enough, and maybe also likes him or her enough, to create a powerful alliance with you. Smallness doesn't guarantee such an alliance, but it makes it reasonable to put time into creating one.

In small high schools like those in our New York City network, each staff member is responsible for knowing well a group of fewer than 15 students over several years. The schools schedule opportunities for the student, family, and advisor to meet--often. The student's work is at the center of these meetings, and the meetings end with an understanding and a plan for what comes next. In large urban schools, by contrast, such meetings are often not useful to any of the parties. This could be why some parents don't show up; they're reserving their time for more important things.

6. Accountability. No one needs long computer printouts, statistical graphs, and educational mumbo jumbo to find out how a teacher, kid, or school is doing when the scale of the school is right. Parents can simply walk around the school, listen to teachers and kids, look at the young people's work, and raise questions. It's not hard to know how many kids graduated, who went on to college, and how many dropped out along the way. (Try finding this out in any big urban high school!) In a small school, the principal doesn't have to rely on bureaucratic data or the grapevine. In a glance, he or she can take the temperature of the school on a given day--see how the substitute is doing, check on a particular kid, and follow up on yesterday's conversation.

How likely is it that a principal of a school with 100 teachers knows how they really teach? Only in small schools can we figure out how to hold a faculty responsible for the work of the school as a whole; to create a responsible community instead of a collection of classrooms. There's no guarantee, of course: teachers can use their greater collegiality to make one another feel good instead of encouraging good teaching (teaching is hard, and we long for a friendly word). But there is a good likelihood of peer accountability--a hallmark of a serious profession.

Finally, scandals and outrages may be no less likely in a small school, but they're a heck of a lot harder to hide. Padded payrolls, ghost students, or missing equipment won't go unnoticed. As in a small town, phony data stick out; secrets are hard to keep. At Central Park East Secondary School, there are no closed meetings. Visitors are invited in almost daily (they're a real-life check on our standards). Schools that are small can more easily take seriously their public character. In doing so, they go a long way toward being accountable.

7. Belonging. In small schools, the other 70 percent belong. Every kid is known, every kid belongs to a community that includes adults. Relationships are cross-disciplinary, cross-generational, and cross-everything else. Kids don't just know the adults they naturally like, or the ones who naturally like them. They may hate some grown-ups and love others, but they recognize everyone as members of the same human club. The good news is that kids like to be members of such cross-generational clubs. (Or at least most do, at least some of the time!) And, if parents are part of the process, they like to join, too--even part-time.

In small schools, we're more likely to pass on to students the habits of heart and mind that define an educated person--not only formally, in lesson plans and pedagogical gimmicks, but in hallway exchanges, arguments about important matters, and resolutions of ordinary differences. We're more likely to show kids in our daily discourse that grown-ups--models

outside their homes--use reasoning and evidence to resolve issues. We can teach them what it's like to be a grown-up--bring them into our culture, but only if we're part of a world that they find compelling, credible, and accessible. And only if we're better able as adults to make sense of and appreciate the varied cultures our students and their families are committed to. If they can't join our club and we don't know theirs, we're unlikely to influence each other.

No Idle Dream

That, after all, is what school is all about: It's a way one generation consciously tries to influence another--and in turn is influenced. For that to happen, both grown-ups and kids have to see themselves as members of a common club, or at least overlapping ones. Those who try to create such shared communities where they don't exist will run into resistance aplenty--from faculty, family, and kids themselves.

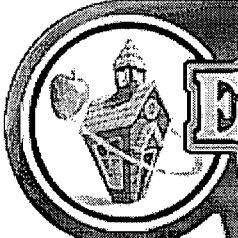
But it's not an idle dream. In New York City, nearly 50,000 youngsters now go to small schools, and the number is growing every day. Recently, New York supported the phasing out of several big comprehensive high schools and gradually replaced them with new smaller schools. In several cases, these schools mix age groups, so that a big building now houses schools for students ranging from infancy to adulthood. The Annenberg Foundation, through its Challenge Grant, proposes not only to help foster such small schools but also to tackle the systemic issues they bring to the fore.

The routes that can take us from big to small are as varied as the communities and schools are. In New York, for example, some of the new schools that share a building keep close ties with one another and share a single administrative leader. In other cases, they act like co-tenants of the World Trade Center. Some are located in a wing or a floor with an otherwise "unreformed" school.

No single formula works best, but postponing a decision until everyone in the building agrees on change--at the cost of educating kids better--is a mistake. One starts wherever one can. Young people are eager for grown-ups to be grown-up enough to stick with what matters, however uncomfortable it may be. Growing up to be smart, thoughtful, and responsible citizens is a lot easier in schools organized in favor of such principles.

If it's the right thing to do for our kids, they'll recognize it. It's adult resistance that's hardest to overcome. Once we do, we will see that small schools allow us, too, to put our effort into what matters most to us: building a true community for teaching and learning.**

Deborah W. Meier was founder and director of several small New York City public schools--Central Park East Elementary School in 1974 and the Central Park East Secondary School from 1985-95. She is now a Senior Fellow of the Annenberg Institute at Brown University and works with the New York Networks for School Renewal, 1573 Madison Ave., Room 318, New York, NY 10029.



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SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS ARTICLE**Are Smaller Schools the Answer?**

Michael Klonsky, of the University of Illinois (Chicago) College of Education says, "A compelling body of research shows that when students are part of smaller and more intimate learning communities, they are more successful." This week, Education World takes a look at some of that research.

A compelling body of research shows that when students are part of smaller and more intimate learning communities, they are more successful.

--- Michael Klonsky, College of Education, University of Illinois at Chicago

For much of the latter half of this century, big schools were seen as the academic environment of choice for most of our country's school districts. Large schools, it was said, are more efficient and more economical to build and run. They offer a broader range of course offerings and a wider variety of extra-curricular activities. They provide students with more opportunities for specialization and with more special services. So persuasive were those arguments that, between 1940 and 1990, as the U.S. population increased by 70 percent, the total number of public schools declined by 69 percent -- and average school enrollment rose more than 500 percent!

Today, however, the pendulum is swinging -- if not quite back to the days of the one-room schoolhouse, certainly to a widespread belief that smaller is better, and that, despite their reputed fiscal inefficiencies and curricular deficiencies, small schools can provide a solid -- even *better* -- education for all students.

SMALLER IS BETTER!

The Chicago Task Force on Small Schools characterizes "small schools" in the following way:

1. They are small, with enrollments of less than 300 for elementary schools and 500 for high schools,

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2. They consist of like-minded teachers and families.
3. They are sufficiently autonomous to control key curricular, budgetary, personnel, organizational, and student decisions.
4. They have an agreed-upon focus or theme.
5. They are inclusive, rather than selective.
6. They are effective in preparing and graduating students.

Many educators today believe that such schools provide significant advantages over large schools in a number of important areas. Those areas include:

- **Personalization:** Perhaps the most important characteristic of small schools is the personal relationships established between teachers and students. In small schools, teachers are closely involved with each student. They know who students are, they understand their backgrounds and their interests, and they have the opportunity to spend large blocks of time with them. In such an environment, it's harder for a student to fall through the cracks. "Anonymity is the greatest tool an adolescent can use against you," says Mary Butz, principal of Manhattan Village Academy, a 330-student high school in New York City. "In small schools, students lose their anonymity and have to produce."
- **Climate:** In small schools, teachers and students know one another personally. Such knowledge fosters a sense of community and promotes a climate of mutual respect. The result is fewer discipline problems and an environment that's tolerant, caring, and safe.
- **Student Achievement:** Smaller classes at smaller schools promote improved pupil performance. In addition, small schools allow for the development of a clear school mission and a consensus of goals. Common expectations are clearly communicated, home-school relationships are close and supportive, and the evaluation system frequently includes parents, students, teachers, and staff. Learning is more likely to be learner-centered and students are less likely to drop out and more likely to graduate.
- **Morale:** In small schools, both teachers and students often have a more active role in decision-making and, therefore, a greater sense of belonging and community. Teachers often design instructional programs, schedule classes, and help set disciplinary policy. Greater teacher empowerment elicits stronger school affiliation, more effort, and stronger commitment to the school and to the students. Empowered students are more academically productive and more likely to participate in school events and activities.
- **Extra-Curricular Activities:** Small schools provide students with more incentive to participate in extra-curricular activities and with greater opportunities to develop leadership skills by their participation. Both the number and variety of extracurricular activities in which each student participates are significantly

higher.

- **Governance:** Small schools generally require less red tape, establish fewer rules, and allow greater flexibility. They are better able to make changes and to innovate.

In addition, many researchers now believe that the disadvantages ascribed to small schools may be more perceived than real. A recent study of 128 New York City high schools, conducted by the Institute for Education and Social Policy, found that schools with fewer than 600 students spent \$7,628 a year for each pupil, about \$1,410 more than schools with 2,000 or more students. But, when higher graduation rates were taken into account (63.2 percent for small schools, compared to 55.9 percent for large schools), the small schools spent only \$25 more per graduate. The study concluded: "We find that the size of the student body is an important factor in relation to costs and output and that small academic and articulated alternative high schools cost among the least per graduate of all New York City high schools. Though these smaller schools have somewhat higher costs per student, their much higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates produce among the lowest costs per graduate in the entire system."

Regarding the argument that big schools can offer more comprehensive programs, researchers have found that "it takes a lot of bigness to add a little variety. On average, a 100 percent increase in enrollment yields only a 17 percent increase in variety of offerings." (Pittman and Haughwout). Moreover, researchers say, the broader curriculum supported by larger schools often consists of introductory courses in non-core areas rather than of higher-level core courses. Furthermore, studies show that only five to twelve percent of the students in large schools avail themselves of those extra courses. (McGuire 1989; Monk 1992; Rogers 1987)

BIG BUILDINGS, SMALL SCHOOLS

The trend toward smaller schools has presented a dilemma, however, for many districts that cannot afford to abandon buildings intended for much larger student populations. Educators who want to downsize large schools are often forced to develop a number of creative solutions. In Taking Stock: The Movement to Create Mini-Schools, Schools-within-Schools and Separate Small Schools, Mary Anne Raywid identifies the three most common plans.

- **House Plans**, which assign students to groups, or houses within a larger school. Students attend classes with their housemates and are taught by teachers assigned to their particular house. The house is generally governed by the larger school, however, and does not develop its own programs or curriculum. Houses usually participate in the extracurricular programs of the larger school.
- **Mini-Schools Plans**, which are similar to house plans in that they operate within a larger school structure, but which generally establish their own curriculum and instruction, and maintain programs different from those of the larger school. Mini-schools have their own students and teachers, although they are usually dependent upon the larger school for their budget and support staff.

- Schools-within-Schools, which are autonomous units that plan their own programs, have their own staffs, and receive their own budgets. Although they often use common space, there is generally no further connection with other programs operating in the same building.

THINKING OF DOWNSIZING?

Whatever form they take, the Small Schools Workshop -- based at the University of Illinois at Chicago -- advises that educators who are considering establishing small schools in their own districts use the Eight Steps to Creating Small Schools as a planning tool. The steps provide additional insight into the problems and challenges of creating and maintaining small schools by posing a series of questions educators should ask themselves when considering restructuring larger schools into smaller units. Those questions include:

1. Understanding The Need for Change

- How will restructuring impact teaching and learning in the classroom?
- How will it help teachers?
- How will it help students?

2. Creating a Vision of Smaller Schools.

- What could a small school look like?
- How would it be different?
- What should it have?
- What shouldn't it have?

3. Teacher Self-Selection

- How can a group of multi-skilled, like-minded teachers come together to form a school?
- What do teachers need to have in common?
- How can differences strengthen or weaken a school?

4. Choosing a Focus

- How can focus tap into students' interests and experiences?
- How can focus tap into teacher knowledge and interest?
- How can a focus be chosen that leads to a high-level, serious program of education?

5. Integrating and Aligning Curriculum and Instruction

- How can the subject matter be de-compartmentalized and brought to life around the focus?
- How can state standards, and graduation and college requirements, be fulfilled?
- How will the school day be organized?

6. Building a Professional Community

- How can teaching be de-privatized?

- How can peer coaching and evaluation become part of the school's culture?
- What is the role of leadership?

7. Getting a Buy-In From Students and Parents

- Who are the students in the small school?
- How can students and parents have some choice as to which small school is best for them?

8. Assessing Progress

- How are teachers and students doing and how do we know?
- How can a small school tell its own story?
- What is a testing strategy for continuous improvement?

WHY NOW?

Many factors have contributed to the movement toward smaller schools in recent years, including falling test scores, rising drop-out rates, increased school violence, an impetus toward career and character education in schools, and a trend toward more learner-oriented educational strategies. Perhaps the answer to why small schools are often seen as the panacea that will cure all these ills can be found in The Big Benefits of Smallness, an article by Deborah W. Meier published in the journal *Educational Leadership*.

"In small schools," says Meir, founder and director of several small public schools in New York City, "we're more likely to pass on to students the habits of heart and mind that define an educated person -- not only formally, in lesson plans and pedagogical gimmicks, but in hallway exchanges, arguments about important matters, and resolution of ordinary differences. We're more likely to show kids in our daily discourse that grown-ups use reasoning and evidence to resolve issues. We can teach them what it's like to be a grown-up."

ADDITIONAL "SMALL SCHOOL" INTERNET RESOURCES

- The Small Schools Workshop Based at the University of Illinois at Chicago, this workshop helps create innovative learning communities in public schools. This site provides links to relevant articles.
- New York City's Small Schools: Here to Stay By David Sherman, this AFT article examines small New York City schools.
- Bigger Oak Hills High School Aims for Small Feel An article about one house plan, from the Cincinnati Enquirer.
- Safe, Rigorous, Personalized: Rhode Island Small Schools An article by Dan Corley, from the Providence Journal.
- State Concludes Small Schools Serve Students Well Provides the results of a study of small schools conducted by the Vermont Department of Education.

- In Education, Size Seems to Count An article on New York City's small schools, from the Seattle Times.
- What a Town Will Do for a School A Christian Science Monitor article on rural classrooms.

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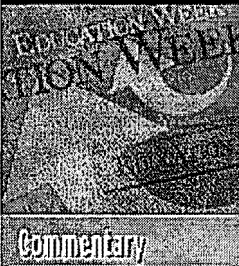
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When It Comes to School Size, Smaller Is Better

By Andrew Rotherham

In his State of the Union Address last month, President Clinton again called on Congress to pass school construction legislation. As a result of rising enrollment, aging buildings, federal mandates, and deferred maintenance, the nation's schools face an infrastructure crisis. Mr. Clinton is proposing interest-free school bonds subsidized by federal tax credits to address the problem. And, after several years of bitter opposition, Republicans in Congress have unveiled a competing proposal. Clearly this is an important issue, but before politicians from both parties rush to outspend each other they should discuss the long-ignored issue of school size.

As a result of rising enrollment, aging buildings, federal mandates, and deferred maintenance, the nation's schools face an infrastructure crisis.

In many areas of American life, a defining mantra of this century has been "bigger is better." Education is no exception and actually has typified this trend. During this century, the size of schools has grown tremendously, particularly in urban areas. Nationwide since World War II, the number of schools declined 70 percent while average size grew fivefold. More than one in four secondary schools nationwide enrolls more than 1,000 students, and enrollments of 2,000 and 3,000 are not uncommon. In New York City, there are nine schools with more than 4,000 students; John F. Kennedy High School in the Bronx enrolls 5,300.

The thinking behind large schools was that bigger meant more extracurricular opportunities, a more diverse curriculum, and more resources for students as a result of economies of scale. Intuitively, this makes sense; however, a growing body of research and public opinion indicates that it is misguided and that, when it comes to school size, smaller is actually better.

Most important, research now shows that oversized schools are actually a detriment to student achievement, especially for poor children. Even assuming that larger schools did equate to more fiscal efficiency, diverse curriculum, and extracurricular activities, those factors have not translated into better student achievement. In fact, the research is pretty clear on this point: Smaller schools help promote learning. And, contrary to the prevailing wisdom, research shows that small schools are able to offer a strong core curriculum and, except in extremely small schools, a comparable level of academically advanced courses.

Additional research has shown that students from smaller schools have

better attendance, and that when students move from large schools to smaller ones their attendance improves. Smaller schools also have lower dropout rates and fewer discipline problems. A 1992 study by Jean Stockard and Maralee Mayberry stated that "behavior problems are so much greater in larger schools that any possible virtue of larger size is canceled out by the difficulties of maintaining an orderly learning environment."

According to researcher Kathleen Cotton, larger school size hasn't translated into more extracurricular participation. In a 1996 study, Ms. Cotton found that in smaller schools students are more likely to be involved in extracurricular activities and to hold positions of responsibility in those activities. Moreover, she found that as school size increases, opportunities for participation increase as well--but not proportionately.

Nor are larger schools more efficient. A 1996 study by Valerie Lee and Julie Smith reported that large schools are actually more expensive because their sheer size requires more administrative support. More important, additional bureaucracy translates into less flexibility and innovation.

Taxpayers have a right to expect that their tax dollars are being invested in effective, research-based ways that maximize the benefit for children.

Research shows that economically advantaged students can achieve in large schools. Paradoxically, it is underprivileged students who are likely to be concentrated in oversized schools.

Education researchers are not the only ones picking up on these problems--parents get it, too. When asked in a 1997 study by the Hudson Institute why they had chosen charter schools instead of traditional public schools, 53 percent of parents cited small school size. It was the most frequent response, ahead of higher standards, educational philosophy, greater parental

involvement, and better teachers. It is also telling that urban parents, whose children are most likely to be in excessively large schools, are also the parents most likely to express dissatisfaction with their public schools.

There isn't agreement about what school size is ideal, although the consensus of researchers is that no school should serve more than 1,000 students and that elementary schools should not exceed 300 to 400 students. There is also a general acknowledgment that the huge 2,000-, 3,000-, and 4,000-student schools now in use are much too large.

As a policy matter, the federal government can't and shouldn't get involved in specific decisions about individual school design. On the other hand, taxpayers have a right to expect that their tax dollars are being invested in effective, research-based ways that maximize the benefit for children. Congress should include broad guidelines in any school facilities legislation to encourage construction and renovation designs that benefit kids. Districts building smaller schools or converting existing oversized schools into smaller ones should be given priority for this funding. And the federal government should collect more data and sponsor more research on this issue.

Some congressional Republicans will continue to balk at any federal involvement in school construction, and others will object to attaching any federal guidelines to funding. Liberal Democrats will cringe at even common-sense standards being attached to federal money flowing to a favored constituency. They are both wrong. Federal resources are needed to address the facilities crisis that public schools are facing, but should be invested in the most effective way possible.

All aspects of our education system should be designed to facilitate high academic performance; school buildings are no exception. Smaller, more autonomous, flexible, and accountable schools should characterize education in the next century.

Building and renovating schools in a vacuum will not strengthen America's public school system. But adequate resources are as important to effective schooling as high standards for students and teachers and strong accountability. Too often in Washington, debates are framed purely in quantitative terms. We certainly need to build more schools, but in many cases, not simply more of the same.

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