

SMALL SCHOOLS OFFER REAL HOPE FOR COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

America's urban high schools are struggling

by Dr. Augusta Souza Kappner

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Not long ago, I traveled to Seattle to join a group of multicultural scholars and practitioners and the nation's leading small schools (K- 12) scholars. We were meeting to discuss the potential benefits of small schools reform for minority communities. On at least one point we were unanimous: for urban centers and communities of color, most high schools are failing.

The news out of our high schools is bleak: - High dropout rates continue to plague communities of color. -African-American and Latino students are retained (required to repeat a grade) at alarming rates. -Students of color continue to trail their peers on achievement indicators.

Leaders, both within and outside minority communities, have been searching desperately for answers. But surprisingly - at least from my perspective - few have embraced a strategy that offers a tremendous amount of promise: small schools reform.

Small schools work. And they appear to work particularly well with disadvantaged students. Last year, Bank Street College of Education's study, *Small Schools: Great Strides*, chronicled the success of small schools reform in numerous Chicago public schools. The

average school size nationwide is 741 students, and it is not uncommon for urban children to attend elementary schools with more than 1,000 students and high schools with 3,000 students. By contrast, small schools in the Bank Street study enrolled between 200 to 400 students. The difference between the small schools we examined and their larger counterparts was striking.

We found that smaller learning communities diminish school violence, raise academic engagement and performance, and increase attendance and graduation rates - the very issues with which minority communities across the nation are grappling. Our research affirms the mounting mass of evidence of those who have studied small schools over the past decade. Most promising, small schools reform works within a public school framework - an important fact for leaders of color given that approximately 95% of African American and 91% of Latino students currently attend public schools.

Why are there not more leaders from communities of color championing small schools efforts? Why do we allow communities to continue to build the sort of gigantic schools that breed alienation and low expectations? I believe that information about the value of small

schools has simply not reached a broad enough audience. A just-released survey from Public Agenda confirms that the majority of America's parents and teachers do not place school size high on their lists of educational concerns. Small school reformers are now recognizing the need to reach out to leaders in communities of color and welcome them into small schools efforts.

I recognize the honest concerns some have about small schools. Many fear small schools may be prohibitively expensive. Some others - many from African American or other underserved communities - worry that overly sympathetic teachers in highly personalized learning environments, in recognizing the disadvantages faced by their students, may not hold students to sufficiently high standards of achievement.

The evidence gives us confidence that these concerns can be surmounted by a thoughtful, coherent and diligent approach to the creation of small schools. We have seen that small schools can be affordable for even the poorest communities. (Research by Fruchter, Stiefel et al. shows that the cost per graduate is actually lower in small schools than in large.) We have found that most small schools hold high expectations for their students. Small school populations, like large school

populations, generally reflect the ethnic makeup of the communities they serve; where integration is the goal, small schools are often more likely to be able to achieve diverse populations. In systems that establish clear, progressive guidelines, small schools are actually less likely to be segregated than are larger schools.

Interestingly, some minority leaders have recently spoken out in favor of charter schools and voucher plans. Their explanation has been not so much an embrace of these strategies as a rejection of the status quo. The frustration they feel with the ongoing failure of our urban public schools to adequately serve students of color is certainly understandable. But what is needed now is not an abandonment of public schools but rather a commitment to establishing more effective - and smaller - learning communities.

Leaders of color should endorse the small schools movement - within public school systems - because small schools offer the potential for quality education, provide educational opportunities, and foster academic and social success. Small schools may well provide an answer to much of what ails today's most difficult-to-reform educational systems. Consequently, now is the time for leaders of color to propel this movement forward.