

Small high school reform boosts districtwide outcomes

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Larkmead School. Credit: CC-BY-SA-2.5,2.0,1.0

Creating small high schools improves outcomes for students in the overall school district - both in new small schools and existing larger schools - according to a study of New York City schools by researchers at New York University, Syracuse University, and Arizona State University.

The findings, published in the April issue of *Educational Researcher*, help to answer questions of whether introducing small high schools comes at an expense to the rest of the school district.

"Our findings suggest that there was real, meaningful improvement in New York City's high school outcomes as small school reform was implemented," said Leanna Stiefel, professor of economics at NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service and the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, and associate director of the Institute for Education and Social Policy. "Small school reform lifted all boats."

Small school reform, in which new, small high schools replace large, comprehensive high schools, has been adopted by major U.S. cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, San Diego, and Boston. Studies in New York and Boston have found that small high schools deliver better outcomes - including higher [graduation rates](#) - than large high schools for urban students.

While research shows that students attending new small schools fare better than those attending old schools, little has been done to explore changes to districts as a whole. The question remained: is better performance at small schools gained at the expense of losses elsewhere, or does small school reform lift the whole district?

Stiefel and her colleagues examined New York City's small school reform, in which hundreds of new small high schools were built in less than a decade. They studied four cohorts of [high school students](#): two groups set to graduate in 2001 and 2002, before school reforms began, and two expected to graduate in 2007 and 2008, after small school reforms were underway.

Using demographic data on individual students, as well as measures of student outcomes - graduation rates, rates of students taking the English and math Regents tests, and English and math Regents scores - the researchers estimated effects of the school reform on student outcomes. They found that introducing small schools improved outcomes for

students in all types of high schools: large, small, continuously operating, and new.

New York City's graduation rates increased from 51 percent in 2001 to 64 percent in 2007 and 68 percent in 2008. While students in small high schools had the highest graduation rates, roughly 13 percentage points higher than their peers in continuously operating schools in 2007 and 2008, the graduation rates increased across all types of schools. Regents test taking and passing rates also improved significantly from 2001 to 2008 across new and existing high schools.

The researchers noted that other changing factors in New York City and New York state, including increased spending on education and new teacher certification regulations, may have influenced their results. However, the findings still suggest that small school reform can play a role in systemic reform.

"Our evaluation is relevant for policymakers who aim to initiate small high [school reform](#) in an environment - like that found in many urban school districts in the U.S. today - where change and reform is ongoing and 'business as usual' involves continual change," said Stiefel.

Provided by New York University

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