Interim Report: Qualitative Analyses

Small Schools

September 2010

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Small Schools</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation Questions</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-Depth Interview and Focus Group Data</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Observation Data</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Data Analysis Procedure</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Small Schools</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Practices and Classroom Dynamics</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The qualitative component to this evaluation was an analysis of teacher, student, administrator, and community perceptions of the Small Schools Project as implemented by Olympic and Garinger high schools. Efforts were made to triangulate the data by gathering it from multiple sources (principals, teachers, students, community partnerships and parents) in a variety of research contexts (individual interviews, focus group interviews, surveys). The majority of qualitative data was gathered through in-depth interviews with small school principals and parent, teacher, and student focus groups. Representatives from small school partnerships were also asked to participate in a satisfaction survey to provide feedback on their relationship with small schools and to offer any suggestions for improvement. Additionally, classroom observations were conducted to examine instructional practices and classroom dynamics at the small schools. This interim report is a part of a larger evaluation of the small schools initiative in CMS. The final report (Fall 2010) will include qualitative and quantitative analyses through the 2009-2010 school year. Combined, these quantitative and qualitative analyses will provide administrators and the larger CMS community an overall evaluation of the successes and challenges of these local small schools.

Perceptions of Small Schools

Benefits. For the most part, similar benefits of small schools were discussed at both Olympic and Garinger small schools. Most prominently, principals, students and teachers at both schools praised the family like atmosphere at their small school. Principals and teachers stated that this is helpful in reaching higher needs students. One Garinger teacher stated that “the atmosphere of the school is most important” and that the close knit community “gave us a renewed interest in teaching”. Students reported enjoying the familiar environment. Principals noted the benefits of relationship building with parents and parents liked the opportunities for shared decision making. Students, teachers, and principals commented on improved student behavior. Students found that there is “less drama” and “less chaos” in the small schools, as well as fewer altercations. Students also reported feeling safer at school. Teachers discussed the ability to strategically separate “troublemakers”, how students view teachers as “their personal teacher rather than just a teacher”, and how students are more respectful. Students, teachers, and principals also stated that they took pride in their school and that the ability to share resources between small schools was a benefit as well.

Teachers and principals at both schools talked about the benefits of teacher collaboration, principal collaboration, and close staff relationships which may result in better teacher retention at some small schools. Students, parents, and teachers commented on the strong student-teacher relationships in small schools and the associated benefits. Students stated that teachers try to personally connect with students, give students specialized attention, and establish expectations since they often teach the same students for multiple years. Teachers felt that they were able to motivate students through their relationship, and parents believed that most small school teachers work hard to get to know their students. Students, parents, and teachers also commented on the classroom specific benefits of small schools such as smaller class sizes, the ability to tweak programs to accelerate or remediate, and interventions in place to support students who need assistance. Finally, students discussed unique academic
opportunities afforded to them at the small schools such as international travel, student led activities and the ability to start new clubs.

At Olympic, additional benefits discussed had to do with leadership development and community support. Principals and teachers talked about the opportunities afforded for principal mentorship, how the small schools are great training for assistant principals, and the development of new leaders. Teachers also discussed the support of the community and PTAs. At Garinger, teachers focused on the additional benefit of being able to reduce truancy and improve attendance.

**Challenges.** Several challenges were noted at both Garinger and Olympic. Inequities between small schools were noted, though these inequities differ somewhat by campus. Garinger teachers and students discussed the fact that physical space is not equal between small schools (i.e., some are in trailers outside, some are contained in one wing of the school building). Some Garinger students felt that it was unfair that they had to walk outside in the elements to get to their classes while students at other Garinger small schools did not. Students and teachers at both schools discussed inequities in resource distribution. At Olympic, a student mentioned another small school “stealing our lab”. At Garinger, students felt that some small schools were given better lunch schedules than others, while parents at both schools noted the perception that some small schools are “worse” than others. Garinger teachers discussed inequities in student distribution to the small schools. For example, teachers at some Garinger small schools felt like EC students were more concentrated in their schools than others. Another challenge discussed across schools was the lack of course offerings and the limited ability to cross enroll. Students at both Olympic and Garinger discussed the lack of elective and foreign language courses and the difficulty trying to take courses at other small schools.

Several groups discussed challenges related to outside perceptions of small schools. Principals and students at both schools discussed the challenges in changing community perceptions based on the former comprehensive high school and “overcoming the school’s bad reputation”. At Garinger, the perception of a lack of buy-in/support at the district level was mentioned by at least one principal and discussed in teacher focus groups. Garinger teachers noted that the lack of buy in has been shown through teacher reductions, increases in class sizes, and a lack of flexibility when it comes to changing the curriculum. Within school challenges were noted by several groups at both schools as well. Students talked about the negative aspects of competition between small schools, citing that it can create tension and rivalry. Students, teachers, and parents also stated that it is difficult to create campus-wide school spirit/school unity.

Principals at both Garinger and Olympic found that coordination of school functions, disciplining students from other small schools, and variations in school rules across campuses to be challenging. Principals also had to contend with differences in leadership styles and the challenges associated with reaching consensus on campus wide issues. One Olympic teacher stated that the five Olympic principals “work well together but have five unique styles which is sometimes difficult to mix”. Teacher specific challenges included inadequate staffing which reduced the variety in teaching options, the difficulty of trying to team plan across small schools, and the challenges in linking course materials to their small school’s theme. Olympic principals noted that their teachers were stretched thin trying to
teach a variety of courses and take on non-instructional duties. Garinger principals talked about how serving many roles limits teachers planning opportunities and the number of courses they are able to teach. Students at Garinger noted drawbacks to the “close-knit” environment such as rumor spreading, and a “middle school feel”. They also expressed a desire for more hands on activities, field trips, and engaging classroom activities. Students at both schools felt that the limited ability to communicate with students across schools interfered with making new friends or participating in campus wide activities. Parents noted that communication between the main office and small school offices needed to improve.

**Suggestions for improvements.** Teachers, students, and parents were asked to give suggestions to improve the small schools. Many of the suggestions followed directly from the challenges that small schools face. For example, students and teachers gave suggestions for more equal distribution of resources between small schools. At Garinger, these included rotating lunch schedules and distribution of EC students who are currently disproportionately enrolled in certain small schools. Students and parents at both schools suggested allowing more cross enrollment to increase course variety available to students. Students at both schools also noted several aspects of comprehensive high schools that they believed would be beneficial to integrate into the small schools. These include more whole campus activities, consistency in rules across small schools, and technical/trade courses. Students also stated that they would like for their schools to solicit more student input.

Several possible changes to small school structure were also suggested. At Garinger, some students suggested waiting until the sophomore or junior year before branching into themed schools in order to allow students time to consider their interests and which theme best suits them. Garinger students also suggested reducing the number of small schools to 2 or 3 and improving the physical layout of their small schools. Olympic students discussed the need for better curriculum planning for themed small schools (e.g., a better “fit” between coursework and their school’s theme). Several suggestions focused on leadership. At Olympic, changing the leadership structure to a format in which one principal presided over the whole campus and five assistant principals ran each small school was suggested in the student and teacher focus groups. Teachers at both schools cited a need for support positions that span across small schools. Parents suggested providing a liaison to communicate across small schools, particularly in relation to PTAs, and extracurricular activities.

**Community Partners’ Perceptions.** Overall, community partners at both Olympic and Garinger provided positive feedback regarding their relationship with small schools. A majority of Olympic’s community partners identified with the Olympic Community of Schools (which represents all five small schools) while partners affiliated with Garinger identified working with individual small schools. Olympic had 26 community partners respond to the survey while Garinger had 9 responses. Of those partners who responded, 24/26 reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their involvement at Olympic and 9/9 reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their involvement at Garinger. Community partners suggested that small schools improve communication, visibility, and student opportunities. More specifically, suggestions for improvement included providing partners with monthly updates, maintaining a school liaison position, sending an annual thank you letter to the head of each partner agency to generate support, providing press releases to the media to bring more visibility to partnership successes, and working together to provide more real world job/internship opportunities to students.
**Instructional Practices and Classroom Dynamics.** Three unique themes emerged from the observations of small schools’ classrooms in comparison to classrooms at similar comprehensive schools. Small school classrooms utilized *dynamic instructional practices* by providing students with student-centered, inquiry-based instruction that facilitates higher order thinking. Small schools also demonstrated a *commitment to community building*, both through symbolic community (i.e., individual school mascots) and enacted community (i.e., the ideology and practice of teachers at each small school). Finally, the building of community in the small schools contributed to another theme prevalent across the small schools, *culturally responsive instruction*. Small school teachers were able to tap into the motivations and cultural context of their students in order to motivate them.

**Discussion**

Though it is important to note that convenience sampling was utilized in this evaluation, and that selection bias is recognized as a potential limitation of this study, the results indicate both areas for improvement as well as positive feedback. These results provide grounds for optimism concerning the feasibility of establishing public secondary schools that can engage and challenge historically underserved students. These small schools are said to create very different social environments for high needs students that are explained to be close-knit, supportive, and encouraging. Early stakeholder feedback shows that the rearrangement of staff, students, classes and school focus helped small schools build a stronger sense of school culture. These structural changes were noted to create more personalized student-teacher relationships as compared to traditional high school settings. While there were some notable suggestions for improvement, all stakeholders involved (i.e., principals, teachers, students, school partners, and parents) expressed positive feedback regarding small schools and clamored for their continued existence. This qualitative evaluation documents an important but formative period in examining the success of small schools.
INTRODUCTION

Within the past decade, there has been a highly visible push to reshape America’s high schools. One aspect of this reshaping effort is the small school initiative. Underlying this initiative is a theory of change based on a premise that large, traditional high schools do not serve all students well, especially low-income, minority students. Research has shown that small schools, particularly schools with less than 600 students, are safer, have better attendance rates, fewer behavioral problems, higher faculty morale, and more family satisfaction than larger, traditional schools (Clearly & English, 2005). Literature regarding the direct impact small schools have on academic performance is in short supply, as most initiatives are still in the infant stages of implementation. As these small school environments move forward, they provide fruitful ground for investigating the effects on students’ academic experiences.

The small schools initiative within the CMS district was enacted during the 2006-07 school year at Olympic and Garinger high schools but was preceded by grant-submitting and planning activities during the previous years. Olympic high school received a grant to convert to five, autonomous smaller schools from the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), which is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Olympic was the only school in America chosen during that year to receive money for a conversion from CES. CES provided Olympic with resources to fund the planning process, which took place during the 2005-2006 school year. After the plan was completed and presented to CES, Olympic was given additional funds to begin implementing the plan during the 2006-2007 school year. The Olympic Community of Schools was formed to include the School of Math, Engineering, Technology and Science at Olympic (METS), the School of International Studies and Global Economics at Olympic (International Studies), the Renaissance School at Olympic (Renaissance), the School of International Business and Communications Studies at Olympic (International Business), and the School of Biotechnology, Health and Public Administration at Olympic (Biotech). Olympic was also awarded a conversion grant from the North Carolina New Schools Project. However, since Olympic received the CES grant, a decision was made to award the New Schools Project conversion grant to Garinger high school. Formal plans were created for the formation of the International Studies School at Garinger (International Studies), the New Technology High School at Garinger (New Tech), the Math and Science High School at Garinger (Math and Science), Leadership and Public Service High School at Garinger (LPS), and Business and Finance at Garinger (Business and Finance). However, rather than converting over to the small school format immediately, as Olympic did in 2006-2007, Garinger utilized a staggered roll out approach. In 2006-2007, New Tech and International Studies accepted 9th graders who applied to attend their schools rather than Garinger Traditional. In 2007-2008, Math and Science, LPS, and Business and Finance accepted 9th and 10th graders. Each small school added a grade level until 2009-2010. In 2009-2010, all five Garinger small schools enrolled all 9-12th graders and Garinger Traditional ceased to exist.

Purpose

The qualitative component to this evaluation was an analysis of teacher, student, administrator, and community perceptions of the Small Schools Project as implemented by Olympic and Garinger high schools. Efforts were made to gather data from multiple sources (principals, teachers, students, community
partnerships, and parents) in a variety of research contexts (individual interviews, focus group interviews, surveys). The majority of qualitative data was gathered through in-depth interviews with small school principals and parent, teacher, and student focus group interviews. Representatives from small school partnerships were also asked to participate in a satisfaction survey to provide feedback on their relationship with small schools and to offer any suggestions for improvement. Additionally, classroom observations were conducted to examine the instructional practices and classroom dynamics in small school classrooms. Ultimately, the purpose of this qualitative evaluation is formative. Information gathered from multiple sources will be used to identify strengths and areas of improvement and to solicit feedback regarding the direction that the small schools initiative should take.

Evaluation Questions

1. What are student, teacher, administrator, and community member perceptions of the small schools initiative within CMS?

2. What are the instructional practices and classroom dynamics at the small schools?

METHOD

In-Depth Interview and Focus Group Data

As a qualitative component to the small schools evaluation, all ten small school principals were interviewed individually to discuss how they viewed their role in organizing and managing a successful small school. Aside from these individual interviews, the researcher had the opportunity to observe how principals interact in group meetings during site visits as we discussed potential evaluation components throughout the planning stages of this evaluation.

In addition to principal interviews, a sample of current small school students participated in focus group discussions describing their experiences with respect to such things as student-teacher interactions, peer relations, classroom dynamics, and small school strengths and weaknesses. Students were also asked to comment on their future goals and to provide their perceptions of how well their small school had prepared them to achieve these goals. Student focus groups were conducted for each small school separately, so variance between small schools could potentially be examined. Also, a sample of students who have gone through the small school conversion participated in a separate focus group. These students were provided the opportunity to think of their experiences retrospectively about the school’s conversion process to comment on changes they had personally experienced while these schools shifted to a small school environment. Focus group discussions typically lasted 60 minutes and occurred during regular school hours so as to minimize transportation and scheduling issues.

In order to gather even more insight into the small school process, teachers were also encouraged to participate in focus groups. Much like student focus groups, these discussions also lasted on average 60 minutes and occurred during regular school hours so as to minimize scheduling issues. Teacher focus
groups included teachers who had gone through the conversion process and those that were currently teaching at that particular small school but had not experienced the conversion. These focus groups were conducted for each small school separately, so variance between small schools could potentially be examined.

In addition to students, teachers, and administrators, community members were recognized by small schools as important partners in the education process. The populations of community members selected for inclusion in this evaluation were parents of small school students as well as local businesses/organizations that small schools partner with throughout the school year. Focus groups were conducted with parents of small school students to gain their perceptions of the small school their child was attending. Parent focus groups were conducted for each small school separately, so variance between small schools could potentially be examined. These focus group discussions lasted about 60 minutes and were conducted at the small school site so as to minimize transportation issues for parents. Parent focus groups included 50 total participants; with the average of 5 parents in each focus group. Parents had children who were at Olympic and Garinger pre-conversion and post-conversion. The focus groups were conducted between February and May. Additionally, partnerships developed with local businesses, organizations and higher educational institutions are intended to create authentic projects and opportunities for students. Representatives of these small school partnerships were asked to share their experiences via satisfaction surveys to highlight their perceptions and involvement in the local small schools initiative.

It is important to note that convenience sampling was utilized in this evaluation, where all participants for focus group discussions as well as teachers for classroom observations were hand-selected by the principal of each small school. Selection bias is recognized as a potential limitation of this study, in which an unequal distribution of satisfied (or unsatisfied) small school stakeholders were selected to participate. Though this poses a potential threat to both internal and external validity of this study, because the purpose of the evaluation was to gather feedback for program improvement and participants were more than willing to provide both positive and negative feedback, we believe that issues of bias are minimized.

**Classroom Observation Data**

Observations of instructional time included formal observations of core subject courses (English, mathematics, social studies, and science) in each of the small schools. Two teachers per small school were asked to participate. Selection of the participants was determined by the principal along with the criteria of one experienced (4+ years teaching experience) and one novice practitioner (<4 years teaching experience). Observations lasted the entire class period. Particular attention was paid to a variety of aspects suggested to result in more successful small schools, such as class size, attendance, behavior problems, student/teacher interaction, class material, discussion format, academic achievement, and level of student/teacher satisfaction. These observations were not meant to observe teacher quality, but to examine classroom dynamics to evaluate how CMS small schools utilized the following: “authentic instruction,” “teaching for understanding,” “reform-oriented instruction,” “constructivist teaching,” and “students as active learners.”
Qualitative Data Analysis Procedure

Interview, focus group, and observation data were analyzed according to a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This analysis strategy allowed the principal investigator to generate themes found in the data in order to address the two research questions listed below. While this study was not a formal exercise in grounded theory, it follows this method in some important respects (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The goal of grounded theory methodology is neither to test logically deduced hypotheses nor to provide statistical verification. Instead, this study represents an exploratory investigation into the small schools program. The primary analytic aim is to generate conceptual themes about small schools, as defined by principals, students, teachers, parents, and school partners affiliated with Olympic and Garinger small schools.

RESULTS

Perceptions of Small Schools
Small School Principal Interview Data

Benefits of Small Schools. During interview conversations, Olympic principals suggested some benefits and challenges with functioning as a small school. Principals stressed the family-like atmosphere as a major benefit of the small school setting, in which people knew everyone by name and face. They noted how staff even “act like surrogate parent[s]” at times and how they feel “responsible for all their kids.” This relationship building was noted to extend to parents as well, with efforts made by principals and teachers to reach out to parents and include them in their child’s educational process. These close relationships were explained to result in such things as better student behavior, a more personalized educational experience, and a greater sense of staff support. A smaller school environment was noted to offer the opportunity of addressing problematic student behavior on an individual basis. Additionally, staff members were portrayed as bonding more with one another in this environment. In terms of the student-teacher relationship, principals explained how teachers were better able to personalize curriculum because of their close relationships with students. Principals noted observing teachers who tailored lesson plans to students and to be “as prescriptive as possible,” since they were knowledgeable of their student’s strengths and weaknesses. Another major benefit to small schools is the opportunity for principal mentorship. It was noted that in taking critiques from other principals this reduces time in errors. Furthermore, it was explained that small schools are great training environments for assistant principals since they allow principals to “learn all components in a smaller format” and the “mind-numbing details” (i.e., coordinating busses, discipline). Finally, Olympic principals commented on the human interest stories that you find in high-needs schools, like small schools. They highlighted stories such as gang members with turnaround stories that personally affected them.

Garinger principals highlighted very similar benefits of the small school context. A major theme found in Garinger principal interviews was the family-like atmosphere of the small school. Principals explained how this tight-knit environment made it easier to get more parents involved in their child’s
educational process. Also, the close relationship of the teachers and students was noted, with one principal stating that “between 90% and 100% [of small school students are] comfortable with at least one teacher to approach.” It was explained that “students in poverty like the family concept” and this may even “work to increase achievement.” Some principals made the connection between school context and student achievement, noting that the small school environment could potentially be more conducive to learning. Additionally, students are given a better opportunity to grow holistically, because it is easier for teachers to notice student strengths and weaknesses. Principals were quick to point out that the “smaller the setting the more in tune [principals/staff can be] with problems” (i.e., academic, attendance – “easier to see who isn’t in class”, family issues) and the more you can work to “control them better” and “meet their social needs” (i.e., homelessness). Finally, small schools were noted to allow teachers to work better together and collaborate more often, resulting in an increase in teacher quality.

**Challenges at Small Schools.** Just as there were benefits to small schools, there were some notable challenges expressed by Olympic principals. Principals explained in detail the complexity of running five small schools simultaneously on one campus. The weighted power of each principal sometimes pulled the community of schools in many directions and decision-making was reluctantly deferred at times by some principals. Principals noted the challenge in coordinating school functions between small schools, with some principals opting out of participating. Also, having to share resources (i.e., physical space, shared service teachers) was suggested to be an issue in a small school setting. Furthermore, in addition to sharing resources, principals ran into issues coming into contact with students from other small schools on their campus. They mentioned that it was challenging to have everyone “on the same page” when school rules sometimes vary by small school. Principals also commented on small school challenges from a student perspective. It was highlighted that students from certain small schools have an “elitist mentality,” based on such things as test scores, school activities, and demographic characteristics of their students. One principal noted that this may even trickle over to PTO’s, since they tend to be divisive and could need to be kept separate as they currently are. Another challenge of small schools expressed by principals involved inadequate staffing. Principals talked about how teachers are pressured by students and administration to offer a variety of classes but have to deal with the added concern of “stretching themselves too thin.” With so few people in support roles at small schools, teachers are asked to take on at least one non-instructional job. Finally, Olympic principals commented on the challenge of community perception related to the former (traditional) school. They highlighted how this is a challenge in revamping the school culture and encouraging community buy-in.

Garinger principals emphasized the challenge of reshaping community and district perception of the former (traditional) school. In terms of district perception, they found it challenging to gain “buy-in of the system at the district level,” with one principal noting that the “system has to buy into it wholeheartedly” (i.e., teacher allotment, gradual stages of conversion). Principals explained the need to better inform people about the benefits and history of the small schools locally. An additional challenge of small schools is in principal negotiations between the five small schools, since they are “very different from each other” and there are “always gray areas.” Principals spoke of historical issues related to voting, writing of school code of conduct, and rule enforcement (ex., “some principals don’t feel you should enforce all the rules…not good when explaining to parents and students”) while having five principals collaborate. Also, principals noted the need for a third-party school audit prior to conversion to divvy
up resources (i.e., money, equipment) equally. Some principals felt this process had room for improvement. In addition to resources being divided equally, principals felt that the standard number of items needed to be a lower ratio or different formula for small schools, with students having access to more resources than their traditional school counterparts. Garinger principals commented on staff shortage as being a further challenge at small schools. They noted how teachers were required to serve many roles, thus, limiting the number of planning opportunities available to them and courses they are able to teach. Also, there may be additional positions that should be available at small schools that are not necessary at other schools. For example, one principal mentioned that the population being served needs to be given more attention (need 1-2 people managing student dropouts, economic situations, and students working to support family).

**Perceptions of Student and Teacher Satisfaction.** Olympic principals had the general sense that students and teachers were satisfied with the small school experience. For students, Olympic principals distinguished between students who had gone through conversion and those who had not. They noted that those who had gone through conversion were more likely to have had a difficult time adjusting. This seemed to have gotten better for students in later years. For example, principals had the impression that seniors who had switched over were more likely to dislike the experience as compared to sophomores who had not known the traditional setting as long. Those students who had come into the small schools following the conversion process were said to have “loved” it. Some principals cited letters from alumni stating how much they enjoyed their small school experience and noted how students actually appreciated getting to know their teachers well. A principal noted that, “historically, there was a push back from the community [during small school conversion]...now they would push back if [small schools were] taken away.” Only one principal noted that some students missed components of a comprehensive high school (i.e., course variety). Finally, principals explained that there was a sense of competition between students of small schools. This was noted to be both a positive (i.e., motivating factor) and a negative (i.e., divisive factor). For the most part, Olympic principals’ general sense was that teachers were satisfied with the small school environment. They noted how teachers like the idea/theory behind small schools and enjoy the intimacy of a smaller staff. Some principals did note they expressed frustration with having less connection between teachers of the same subject, unlike at a comprehensive high school. At a small school, there may be one teacher per subject and the opportunity of teacher collaboration by subject is improbable. On the other hand, small school teachers were suggested to have the unique opportunity to link lesson plans of multiple subjects around the student for a more comprehensive learning experience.

Garinger principals had the general sense that students, teachers, and parents were satisfied with their small school experience. They were mentioned to “love it” and “love having their own little piece of campus…own building…big fish in little pond.” Even comprehensive transfer students were noted to enjoy the small school experience. One principal explained that they’ve heard transfers mention they like that everyone knows people individually. A handful of principals noted some negatives that students perhaps experience in a small school, such as trouble students who might not like the accountability in a small school or the academic competition which may lead to conflict between students. Principals seemed to agree that teachers were satisfied with their small school experiences. They explained that teachers enjoy the small environment because “they know the kids” and they feel that having “access to
a principal is great.” Principals only mentioned two negatives. They noted that teachers were upset that they do not get to have team meetings, because of the small staff. Also, competition between teachers may create rivalries, since teachers want their students to do better than the other small schools.

**Small School Focus.** During interviews, principals briefly described their school’s focus. There did not appear to be any overarching school theme between the foci of small schools on each campus. In addition to describing the school focus, principals explained some enrollment concerns related to their particular schools. A handful of principals felt that their small school students were not readily accepted at other small schools when attempting to cross-enroll, while they regularly took in students from all small schools.

**School Selection (by Student).** The majority of principals noted that small schools tend to recruit future students through feeder middle school visits and introductory letters or brochures. Olympic small school principals explained that representatives from their school (i.e., principal, teachers, and parents) went to “feeder middle schools” to speak with populations of potential Olympic small school students. These students were provided brochures that briefly described each small school. It was explained that prospective students were then equally distributed throughout the small schools. Garinger principals spoke of a similar process with an emphasis on inequity in student distribution. It was principal perception that students had preference for some small schools over others based on academic reputation (i.e., test scores) and in many cases these more prestigious small schools filled up first and the remaining students were commonly placed in other small schools year after year. Principals noted that METS traditionally has had the highest number of applicants and International Studies initially had half of the student population choosing to be there while the other half had been placed. Principals also noted some gender differences by enrollment at small schools, with Biotech being 65% female. Garinger principals emphasized how many of their current students had not chosen to be at their small school. For example, a principal explained that approximately 30% had chosen to be at that particular small school, while another noted that 60-70% of their students chose their school. One school, in particular, noted that they “got kids who didn’t choose other places” and these “students didn’t want to be here.” Some noted that they tended to bring students and parents to feeder schools to help them recruit. One principal offered a suggestion of training someone who could communicate with incoming students the differences between the small schools. Also, one principal explained how a school organization was going to be offered to all students, regardless of their small school affiliation. Thus, allowing students from other focus schools to get experience in something other than their small school’s theme.

**School Selection (by Teacher).** The number of teachers who remained through the conversion varied by small school. As for Olympic small schools, METS, Biotech, and Renaissance principals commented that many teachers remained at their small school through the small school planning phase and the conversion process. Business and Communication teacher turnover was commented to be “dramatic,” in which they lost 11 teachers (3 due to performance, 8 due to other factors) and had teachers from other small schools “filling the gaps”. Like Olympic, Garinger small schools differed regarding teacher turnover. The New Tech principal explained that there had been very little teacher turnover at that particular small school, while LPS, Business and Finance, and International Studies principals noted teacher cuts due to performance and as few as a single original teacher at one small school. Also, there was some notable principal instability at certain schools (Olympic - METS, Business and
Communications, and Biotech; Garinger - LPS, Math and Science, and International Studies) since becoming small schools.

**School Autonomy.** Both Olympic and Garinger principals expressed a sense of small school autonomy but also separateness in school identity, focus and approach to students. Olympic principals all emphasized a sense of autonomy (common language, physical separateness) by small school while also maintaining an Olympic campus feel (i.e., “we all graduate in blue”; “come together through sports”; shared electives). Some small school principals noted frustration with inequity of school resources (i.e., some small school buildings outside and spread between buildings and trailers while others are housed within one hallway of the main building).

Garinger principals reported a sense of school autonomy, evidenced by students’ regular referencing of their schools by their small school name. However, there were some Garinger principals that noted an issue with school autonomy. One principal explained that “the district allows school autonomy over budget/hiring [practices] but not in autonomy of space/location.” It was explained that being on one campus it was difficult to maintain student separation.

**School Curriculum.** Some small schools utilized unique approaches such as project-based classes, hands-on projects, and non-traditional lessons using the computer as a learning tool while other small schools seemed to offer traditional-style classes. Some small school principals noted that their small school took an unequal share of cross-enrolled students than others. Also, some small school principals commented that cross-enrollment was more likely at some schools than others and that due to budget cuts many small schools needed to cut back on their Advanced Placement classes.

**Social Climate.** Principals overwhelmingly agreed that the social climate had improved dramatically on both small school campuses. Olympic small school principals emphasized different strategies for creating and maintaining the social climate at their particular small school. For one principal, breeding a level of respect was most important. This was done by not “yell[ing] at kids” and “treating them like adults.” For another principal, strict enforcement of rules such as going home for two days if inappropriately talking (i.e., “cussing out”) to a teacher. Some principals said phrases like the following to foster a culture of respect: “[it’s] easy to give and it doesn’t matter how much money you have.” A handful of principals noted that since students are invested into the small school environment they have begun to mediate other students’ behavior. One principal explained his/her open-door policy in which students come in and discuss discipline issues going on in the school that need to be addressed. One principal elaborated on the after hours school bonding activities that are available to students that encourage them to become more invested in each other (i.e., brotherhood retreat, pajama-rama).

Garinger principals have observed discipline incidents to have dropped considerably since becoming small schools. They were in consensus that once students began identifying with their small school they began to respect the staff and students as well and year to year change can still be observed. It could be argued that some small schools historically had more of a struggle with discipline issues than others (i.e., LPS on watchlist in 2008) but have all been commented to make observed progress. Also, one Garinger principal explained a strategy to encourage appropriate behavior by having older problem students mentor younger ones.
**Academic Equity.** Olympic principals mentioned the challenge of addressing the needs of low achieving students while also trying to grow those students already on grade level. They emphasized their focus on students that have not mastered their set objectives for grade level rather than targeting certain populations. Although there were some that suggested that there was more of an academic focus on high performing gender and ethnic groups (i.e., white males), most principals spoke of remedial programs that they put in place to decrease the achievement gap between student sub-populations. Similarly, Garinger principals emphasized remedial-type programs (i.e., extended day, Saturday academy) as efforts to decrease the achievement gap between students. One principal explained that “90% of students come to small schools below grade level” so the focus remains more on bringing students up to grade level. For example, technology is used at one small school as a “bridge to close the gap” between students.

**Classroom Dynamics.** Principals were asked to comment on the teacher-student relationships at their particular small school. Olympic principals were in consensus that the teacher-student relationship has improved yearly since small school conversion. They noted observing the following: “students see how much work goes into their planning,” “students go to teachers in times of crises,” and “the relationship is the strongest I’ve seen at any high school…students call teachers, text, Facebook.” It was explained that, although some teachers are more approachable, all staff are encouraged to know all students well and an effort to do this is made regularly. Garinger principals echoed similar comments of how teachers have “intimate knowledge of [students’] home life.” Principals noted observing teachers pulling students aside and sometimes even having lunch with students. Principals mentioned that it is difficult for students to hide personal issues because of the close relationship they have with staff. This close working relationship was also noted as a potential negative if in the situation a student does not have a good relationship with a teacher and must remain in their class for multiple years.

**Shared Decision-Making.** Olympic principals were quick to point out some formal (i.e., “sweet tea chats,” “forums with parents,” “status meetings with teachers,” “muffins for moms donuts for dads,” “Connect Ed/blackboard to communicate with parents,” “PLC’s,” “board of trustees – students selected based on GPA, leadership skills and teacher/parent recommendation…wrote freshman 101 class lesson plans for 9th graders where upper classmen taught the class,” and “end of course surveys”) and informal (i.e., impromptu talks with teachers and students, students write notes to principals) collaborative opportunities that they use at their small schools. Additionally, principals meet regularly to discuss and plan campus-wide efforts. Garinger principals also emphasized formal (i.e., “student advisory council,” “faculty advisory council,” “PTSA designing website to collect parent feedback,” and “end of course surveys”) and informal (“door always open” policy, classroom principal visits to show availability, student proposal policy, and informally teachers overhear students and inform the principal) processes to share decision-making processes and foster collaboration. Garinger principals explained that they also meet regularly to discuss and manage campus-wide efforts.

**Principal Interview Summary.** From a principal perspective, some major benefits of a small school included: family-like atmosphere; opportunity for relationship building with parents; better student behavior; teacher collaboration; opportunity for principal mentorship; inspirational turnaround stories of students; and friendly competition between small schools. Some challenges specific to small schools included: complexity of running five schools on one campus; coordinating weighted power of five
principals; sharing resources between small schools; hierarchy in small schools; inadequate staffing; lack of district buy-in; and changing community perception.

All principals felt that teachers and students were generally satisfied with the small school setting. Teachers were commented to have intimate knowledge of students’ backgrounds and principals observed students to like and benefit from this close relationship. At many of the small schools, teachers were noted to follow up regularly with struggling students following an RTI process to personalize the curriculum. Experience in utilizing such programming varied by small school, with some small schools just rolling out this process while others had been regularly doing it for formally or informally for years.

There did not appear to be any overarching themes between the small schools on each campus that tied them together. All principals felt that their small school maintained a separate school identity than others on their campus (i.e., through school language, formal rules, curriculum focus, informal approach to students), while simultaneously maintaining a larger campus feel through sports, electives and graduation (i.e., “we all graduate in blue”). Principals on both Garinger and Olympic campuses felt that autonomy of space was an issue making it challenging to keep students separate and created an issue of morale for students whose school was spread between buildings and trailers.

Principals suggested that there was more teacher turnover at some small schools than others (Business and Communications at OHS; LPS, Business and Finance, and International Studies at Garinger), as well as principal instability at certain schools (Olympic - METS, Business and Communications, and Biotech; Garinger - LPS, Math and Science, and International Studies) since becoming small schools. Even with such instability, principals overwhelmingly agreed that the social climate had improved yearly on both small schools campuses following conversion.

Principals at all schools had a connection with feeder middle schools in which they went to recruit incoming students. There was a consensus that students perceived some small schools as better than others. It was noted that the more prestigious small schools filled up first and the remaining students were filtered into other small schools regardless of their first preference.

Principals reported that they met regularly by campus to discuss and manage campus-wide efforts. Additionally, principals from all small schools explained having both formal and informal strategies in place for seeking parent, staff, and student feedback specific to their small schools in efforts to share decision-making.

**Small School Student Focus Group Data**

Current small school students participated in one focus group per small school. Each student focus group included a mix of students from various grades and an equal ratio of males to females. An additional focus group was also conducted by small school, which included alumni students who had transitioned through small school conversion. Alumni students did not voice dramatically different opinions regarding small schools than their current small school student counterparts. Although difficulties were noted during the conversion process and the initial years, current and alumni students reported that they were generally satisfied with the small schools as opposed to the idea of a more traditional setting.
**Student Perception of Small School Mission.** Students from each small school were able to articulate their school’s mission effectively and school pride was evident in their school description. Students emphasized a hierarchy existing among small schools. Students from a few of the Olympic small schools noted feeling separate from METS (i.e., “METS do their own thing,” “they segregate METS,” “they stay separate…have their own events and give rewards”). Students were observed to be frustrated with this distance between small schools. On the opposite extreme, Business and Communications at Olympic was articulated as being the small school where “dumb students” went. Students pointed out stereotypes for each small school, but when probed did not seem to have a deep knowledge of school functioning at neighboring small schools.

**Student Perception of Small School Positives.** Olympic and Garinger small school students reported many similar positive attributes regarding small schools. Major positives included the following: close-knit environment (i.e., close relationships resulting in principal access, individualized lesson planning, and more career opportunities for students) behavior change, unique academic opportunities, competition between small schools, shared resources between small schools, and school spirit.

The most commonly talked about benefit of small schools was the close-knit environment between students and between students and small school staff. Students verbalized this in a variety of ways. They felt the small school environment allowed them the opportunity to meet and create friendships with people that they might not have talked to while in the traditional school setting. Students reported liking the familiar environment of the small school setting. They felt that it was “comfortable,” “easier to meet people,” and that “seeing people that you know makes you feel good.” Some students compared the small school setting to a family structure by stating that the school “has become a family unit over the past four years” and it “will just get better.” Students noted that in the small school setting there was more opportunity to bond with role models (i.e., principals, teachers, and upperclassmen) and this type of environment was more welcoming to incoming freshmen. Some students commented on how opposite the small school setting is from the traditional setting (i.e., overcrowded classes, halls disorganized, distant interpersonal relations with teachers, feel of being “just a number”). A handful of students commented that they would not have applied to college if it weren’t for the specialized attention they received from their small school. Students were quick to point out that smaller classes were advantageous to them and that since teachers had so few students they were able to approach teaching in a more holistic way (i.e., teaching life skills). One student noted that s/he was depressed and resentful while at the traditional high school and that the small school was a positive influence. Moreover, s/he noted that it “changed his/her attitude and the value [of education] that was learned was more than just calculus.”

Students felt that an example of this close-knit environment was the teacher-student relationship at a small school. This frequent and consistent interaction between students and teachers was commented to result in individualized lesson planning for students, a quality teacher-student relationship and more career opportunities (i.e., resumes from teachers, SAT & college admission tips) for the student. In an attempt to individualize the curriculum, students referenced teachers taking the following approaches: personally connecting with students; implementing acceleration and remedial programs; linking course material across subjects; and setting consistent expectations. Students noted how teachers worked to provide “one-on-one learning.” Students were observed to be impressed when speaking
about the efforts made by teachers. Many commented that “teachers know your weaknesses” since you are with them for multiple years and this extra support “helps you do better.” Students were positive about acceleration and remedial programs, noting how teachers are able to focus on specific strengths and weaknesses when they have fewer students. Also, unique to small schools, teachers have the opportunity to coordinate and plan with teachers outside their subject area in order to link lesson plans. Furthermore, teachers across small schools may plan within subject areas. Some students commented on liking the “accountability” built into small schools, stating that “you are held more accountable for your education.” Finally, students noted that since they are with teachers for multiple classes, they “know what to expect” and “expectations set early tend to drive up [test] scores.” Students also commented on how the quality of the teacher-student relationship has a big effect on them. They noted that this connection tends to result in the following: builds confidence; makes students more comfortable in the classroom; encourages better attendance; and increases student engagement. Students mentioned that small school teachers “care more,” “keep you involved,” “try to interact with students more,” “know your potential,” and “remember everything about you.” One student noted that “a big part of small school success is the teachers…they go out of their way.” Students highlighted how teachers continue to help them even beyond high school goals. They noted how small school teachers not only help you focus on your career goals, but they are willing and able to write you more personal letters of reference. Also, the structure of a small school was commented to better prepare students for college because you are able to “study a specific interest” and this “gives direction.”

Another example of this close-knit environment was the principal presence that was felt at a small school. A handful of students commented on the ease of access to principals as a benefit in attending a small school. Students noted that their principal is “supportive,” “knows everyone,” and “creates the culture.” Students spoke of appreciating a visible and interactive principal. One student mentioned that their principal would even be willing to make a teacher wait while attending to a student’s concern.

Students explained that this close-knit environment tended to result in better student behavior, with “less chaos,” “less drama,” and “fewer altercations.” Students felt that the expectations changed after school conversion and students were no longer able to “hang out in the quad.” This resulted in students feeling safer in and out of the classroom.

Another major benefit of small schools recognized by students was the unique opportunity available to them. Students noted international travel opportunities, student-led activities (i.e., fashion show), scholarships, and video conferences available to them that might not be easily accessed or coordinated in larger high schools. Small school students noted the perception of “having first dibs” in activities because the schools are so small and the opportunity of starting up new clubs so easily.

Other benefits that students mentioned occurring at small schools included: competition, shared resources, and school spirit. Students explained that “small schools compete” which can be a positive thing (i.e., to increase test scores or raise money for Haiti). Also, the ability to stay small but still function as a large school in some respects (i.e., sharing resources – cross-enrollment and flexibility to permanently switch between small schools) is a benefit. Some students noted that school spirit and school pride even increased after school conversion, even though they were originally worried this may decrease.
**Student Perception of Small School Negatives.** Students voiced their opinions about a few negatives that they have experienced related to being in a small school. Many of the negatives cited by students made comparisons to traditional high schools. While only a handful of students explained that they would rather have the traditional high school setting over the small schools, most students expressed satisfaction with the small school setting. Also, students negatively commented on the difficulty in overcoming the reputation of the traditional high. Students also expressed dissatisfaction with aspects unique to small schools, such as administrator communication/collaboration, teacher-student relationships, physical school design, lunch scheduling, inequity/inconsistency between small schools, competition between small schools, and the inability of implementing all small school principles.

The traditional high school aspects that students expressed missing included: course offerings; school activities/big events; friends; and school spirit. Small school students expressed frustration in the courses offered at their small schools. Additionally, they felt they couldn't cross-enroll as often as they would have liked. Students were either interested in seeing more foreign language and elective offerings by small school or having more flexibility in cross enrollment. There was some debate on the idea of themed high schools. Of the students who agreed with the concept, some felt that more school-related electives should be available. Others felt that the themed high school helped prepare them for college so much so that they felt they were a step ahead. Although it was noted that a few small schools were too similar to each other in their focus. On the other hand, there were small school students who had issues with the idea of themed high schools. Of those students, a few felt that they would have benefited from having more variety in courses to help them better decide their future careers. Students expressed that their courses were “all the same” and that it was possible to “keep unity [of small school] without forcing everyone to take the same electives.” One student even felt that high schools should just teach core classes and electives shouldn't be a focus until college. A handful of students were frustrated with guidance counselors signing them up for classes that were not even needed and they expressed that they had little to no say in choosing their classes. Small school students also expressed disappointment in not having pep rallies, big events, and clubs typical of a traditional high school, since these could be beneficial in getting students into college. Small school students who had gone through conversion commented they were unhappy to be separated from their friends. For students who only knew the small school setting, they expressed dissatisfaction with the limited number of and type of people they were able to meet. Some felt that they should be able to communicate more with students of other small schools on their campus. A few small school students commented on the lack of school spirit at small schools the embarrassment in the length of their school name (i.e., “International Studies and Global Economics at Olympic…try fitting that on a t-shirt!”). Another negative related to small schools is that students from both Olympic and Garinger commented on the frustration of overcoming the stigma related to their traditional high school. This was expressed by both small school students who had gone through conversion and those that did not.

Students also commented on experiencing administration issues related to having five small schools on one campus. Students mentioned conflict between principals in that they “all wanted to step into other schools” which ultimately “hurts the kids.” They noted the politics surrounding cross-enrollment, activity planning (i.e., Homecoming), and resource allotment (i.e., cafeteria time). Also, principals vary in their discipline procedures resulting in tensions between small schools and within small schools and their students.
Although students noted the close-knit environment of small schools to be a major positive aspect, they explained this could also have its drawbacks. Some drawbacks included the “strictness” of the principal, “nosiness” and “pressure” of teachers, and the strong influence of peers. Students felt that when principals and teachers know students so well they may be stricter, nosier, or expect more out of them. Some students made negative comments like the following: [teachers] “go through your files,” “call you out on things,” “bring their personal stuff to school,” “some don’t transition well from friend to teacher,” “it’s like…don’t touch me,” “you’re more left alone at traditional,” and “you don’t want to disappoint teachers…it’s aggravating…they expect too much out of you.” Students also noted that peer pressure is felt more in the small school setting and “if there are rumors…everyone knows.” Some small school students even compared their high school to a middle school.

A few students had concerns regarding the physical design of the small schools. Many students felt that the small schools were too close to each other. Some expressed boredom of having to remain only on their side of campus and annoying of the fact that they would be considered “trespassing” if they entered another small schools’ hallway. It was explained that sometimes the “separation of schools is over-the-top.” Students perceived building conditions to be unequal between small schools (i.e., walking outside in rain to trailers) and commented on the inequity of resources between small schools (ex., one school “ganged up” on another and took away their lab).

Many students expressed dissatisfaction with the lunch schedule. They commented that lunch time was too short. They realized it was an effort to maintain lunches by small schools but they suggested that they would rather share lunch times with other small schools so lunch time could be extended. At the very least, they explained that lunch schedules could be rotated at some point. There was student perception that the same small schools got the worst lunch time slots year after year (i.e., 1st or last lunch).

Competition between small schools was seen as a negative as well. It was noted that competition between small schools works to reduce school unity and create tensions and rivalries. One student explained that it “starts more fights than motivates.” Achievement difference between small schools is felt by small school students – works to encourage small schools doing well, demoralizing for those that aren’t doing well. For example, students from high-performing small schools were observed to quickly point out their successes, while those at the lower-performing small schools on campus were observed to be embarrassed by their distinction of being the worst small school.

Students also expressed dissatisfaction with their small school not consistently living up to the small school principles. They explained that their small schools need to have more hands-on projects, take more field trips, and have more engaging activities to motivate students. Students explained their frustration with being “CMS test dummies” and how they were the first to try small schools and they didn’t know what was expected out of them.

**Student Suggestions for Improvement.** Students from both Olympic and Garinger offered some suggestions for improving small schools. On one hand, students voiced some issues regarding the small schools not following the small school concept closely enough. On the other hand, other students commented to the effect that more comprehensive high school aspects would be beneficial to include in small schools.
Students expressed concern with having too large of core classes to be considered a small school (“25-28 students [are] too many”). Other students noted that small schools need more funding to buy resources in order to be successful, since there is inequity of sharing resources between small schools. Students felt that small schools should take more field trips, offer more hands-on learning, and should be based more on the name or theme of the school. One student even noted that there should be fewer schools on one campus, such as two to three small schools per campus. In terms of curriculum, students felt that it could have been better planned out at some small schools. It was noted that advisors sometimes placed students in classes they did not need or that did not always fit in their intended program of study. They also noted that the physical design of the school could have been different to better accommodate separation of small schools. Students did not wish to be completely isolated on their very own small school campus though. Also, students felt that student input should be considered more valuable and should be used to improve small school functioning, since shared decision-making is a principle of the small schools model.

In contrast, some students voiced comments that seemed to suggest a move away from the small school concept. The majority of students who voiced issues with small schools suggested that there be more joint activities between the small schools on each campus. These included both fun activities typically held at more traditional high schools as well as more joint academic activities such as more flexibility in cross-enrollment between small schools. As for fun activities, students suggested such things as the following: “let students…get together more,” “should promote school spirit more…don’t have separate mascots,” “need to see principals working together,” “hold separate pep rallies by classes not schools…this shows division,” “need to hold more events together as a campus…because we’re all going to walk across the stage together,” “do more fundraisers to bring small schools together (ex., end of year barbecue).” Students also thought it should be easier to permanently switch between small schools, more electives should be shared between small schools, and more flexibility in cross-enrollment would be beneficial to students. Many students had issues with Advanced Placement (AP) classes. These students felt that AP classes were not offered equally by small schools and there were issues with cross-enrolling oftentimes between small schools that would not happen at a traditional school (i.e., “why does one school have all the AP courses while others don’t have any?”). Students also noted that there should be consistency between small schools in rules and functioning (i.e., having another small school on a different schedule limits possibility of cross-enrolling; some schools have more flexible rules). One way to accomplish this consistency between small schools was to “have one principal rather than five personalities with equal seniority or five assistant principals guiding the individual small schools.” A final traditional high school aspect that small school students wished they had available to them was technical/trade classes. It was mentioned that not all students are college-bound and there should be opportunity for students to gain skills while in high school prior to entering the job force.

A handful of students made some suggestions advocating changes to the small school structure. For example, all students should be together freshman year and then they can branch off to particular small schools after they have had a chance to think about their options more. Similar to this, another student mentioned that maybe small schools should only be for upperclassmen and for a student’s first two years they could take core classes in which they can refine their career interests. Finally, a handful of students offered the suggestion of converting back to a traditional high school.
**Student Perception of School Dynamics.** The majority of focus group participants had self-selected their small school. Many students commented that they felt their small school was like a middle school, in the sense that they knew all students and teachers so well. Students from all small schools were observed to be happy about these close relationships, but did note jokingly that “teachers know students maybe too well” and it “can be annoying when [teachers] make personal comments [regarding students].” Student perception of how much staff valued student feedback varied by small schools. Some students felt their principal and staff valued and incorporated student suggestions into school functioning (i.e., “feel like I have a voice,” “have to make my suggestion marketable,” “one teacher worked with students to help shape class activities”) while other students felt that they were ignored (“voice is never heard,” “we’re used to getting ignored,” “we are professional about it…we write it out and even had a round table and were not listened to”). Most students felt their small school continues to struggle with parent involvement. Only a few schools were commented to have strong, functioning parent support.

**Student Perception of Career Options.** Many students felt that they should be offered more hands-on opportunities related to their small school focus (i.e., Discovery Place exhibit – organic vs. non-organic food). It was clear to the researcher that certain small school students were more aware of potential careers that were related to their small school focus. These careers ranged from being an interpreter (International Studies) to a civil engineer (METS). Also, students who had originally intended to go into a career that was thought to be somewhat unrelated to their small school found value in their small school’s focus. For example, one student noted that “no matter what you originally wanted to be…if you go to New Tech you will change what you want to do to add a technology focus.” Most students felt their small school was preparing them for college. Most students explained that information regarding college was disseminated and that teachers have helped prepare them for the rigor of college.

**Summary of Student Focus Group Data.** Overall, students were knowledgeable about the mission of their small school. Although students were aware of a clear hierarchy amongst small schools on their campus and school stereotypes of each, when probed to elaborate on other small school functioning they did not appear to have a deep knowledge. Students offered both positives and negatives related to small schools. Major positives noted by students included the close-knit environment, behavior improvements, unique academic opportunities, competition between small schools, shared resources between small schools and increased school spirit. Some negatives expressed by small school students included the lack of certain traditional high school attributes (i.e., lack of courses; school activities; opportunity to meet more friends; and school spirit), overcoming the bad reputation of the traditional high school, and issues with certain characteristics unique to small schools (administrator communication; close-knit environment; physical school design; inequity in resources between small schools; lunch scheduling; competition; small school model efficacy).

Students had some suggestions for improvement. Their comments fell into three categories. Some students explained that their school was not following the small school model as closely as it should. They noted the following issues with how small schools are currently functioning within CMS: core classes too large; resources are not divided equally amongst small schools; curriculum could be linked better to school theme; too many schools on one campus; school buildings could be redesigned to better accommodate separation of small schools; student input should be considered more. Other students
commented on how some traditional high school aspects would be beneficial to small schools (i.e., more joint functions; consistency in rules across small schools; one principal; and technical trade classes). Some students made suggestions to improving the small school structure as well (i.e., having students take cores classes together during their first years and then branch them off to small schools; and convert small schools back to a traditional high school).

Students had some comments related to the general feel of school dynamics. The majority of students had self-selected their small school and therefore, were happy with their placement. Many students commented on the “middle school” feel of their small school. Also, the value of student feedback was explained to vary by small schools, with some schools incorporating it very well into school functioning while others had not. Parent involvement was also commented to be an issue at most small schools.

Students were asked their perception of career opportunities. Many students felt they should have access to more hands-on learning. Most students felt that their small school was preparing them for college (i.e., college information disseminated, rigor of coursework on par with college prep work). Also, some schools appeared to better prepare students for linking their school theme to potential careers. Based on student feedback, students from particular small schools seemed better able to answer career-oriented questioning.

Small School Teacher Focus Group Data

Small school teachers participated in one focus group per small school. Each teacher focus group included both teachers who had experienced the conversion process and those that did not. Conversion teachers were able to describe their experiences through the small school conversion process. Although difficulties were noted during the conversion process and the initial years, current and conversion teachers reported that they were generally satisfied with the small schools as opposed to the idea of a more traditional setting.

Teacher perception of small school positives. Garinger and Olympic teachers commented on similar benefits of small schools. Benefits included: the close-knit environment of small schools, classroom-specific benefits (i.e., smaller class size; individualized teaching resulting in better achievement and more accountability; consistency in expectations; and better discipline), teacher-specific benefits (i.e., teacher collaboration; professional development; teacher retention; reliance on other small schools if necessary), shared resources between schools, increased school pride, and healthy competition between schools.

The majority of both Olympic and Garinger teachers commented on the close-knit feel of the small schools. It was explained that there was a real “culture change” and that the “identity formed organically” between the small schools. Most teachers focused on the student-teacher relationship as making the most dramatic improvements following conversion. Teachers explained how “you know all students well” and “relationships run deeper” with teachers having a “more intimate connection with students.” They noted that students oftentimes confide in teachers and “like a family…[are] able to sit down and talk about issues.” Teachers explained that they are aware of family or personal problems of the student and they work to create a “safe space” or a “comfort zone” in the classroom for them. Some noted this
is particularly good for the demographic attending small schools since these students “never get seen by others.” Another teacher commented that a small school is the first environment “where [students] are respected.” Teachers reported that having the same students for multiple years helps in gaining their trust. Teachers additionally expressed having a close connection between other staff members as well as parents. They were pleased regarding the “team atmosphere” being at a small school. Having opportunities to co-plan and bond with staff were recognized as major benefits available at small schools.

Teachers also recognized benefits of small schools occurring within the classroom setting. They were appreciative of the smaller class sizes at small schools and commented on being “able to give positive reinforcement easier.” It was noted that “if students aren’t motivated by grades…students need to be pushed by relationships.” One teacher noted that a small school classroom is the “best academic way” since we are “graduating more” and the “dropout rate is lower.” Olympic and Garinger teachers explained that achievement has improved since converting to small schools and that students even hold each other accountable now. For example, students ask questions like “why are you not in class?” or “why don’t you have a pencil?” This helps to reinforce the idea that students are involved in their own educational process and their efforts are noticed by teachers as well as peers. Teachers commented on the individualized lesson planning that is able to take place at a small school. One teacher explained that “the more you know students the more they open up and want to impress you.” In terms of adaptability, teachers commented on being better able to tweak programs to accelerate or remediate achievement.

Consistency in academic and behavioral expectations was commented to help students also. Students know what to expect from teachers since they’ve had them for multiple years. This consistency from year to year was mentioned to be comforting to students. Teachers noted that it is easier to discipline in small schools because “you know your students so well” and “they see you as their [personal] teacher” rather than just a teacher at their school. Some teachers commented that their principal typically looks through class rosters to separate out troublemakers from each other – a clear bonus of the small school environment. Also, it was explained that if there are issues with a student’s behavior teachers have the ability to sit down and make a plan to counteract. Overall, teachers feel that behavior and language has improved over the past few years and students are often observed being more respectful in the small school environment.

Some teacher-specific benefits observed in small schools include teacher retention, opportunity for collaboration and varied professional development. Some small schools noted retaining a high percentage of teachers through conversion and initial years as small schools. Teachers have the ability to team teach across subjects to reinforce particular curriculum for students. They also have the opportunity to meet regularly for Professional Learning Committee’s (PLC’s) across small schools. Furthermore, teachers are offered the opportunity to learn new professional roles (i.e., scheduling) since all teachers are expected to perform one non-teaching role. Even with no principal, one small school functioned well for months. This was noted to be accomplished due to “teachers pitching in.” Some other benefits commented to be observed by teachers include an increase in school pride, healthy competition between small schools, and sharing of resources between small schools.

**Teacher perception of small school negatives.** Many teachers commented on the lack of course variety available to students at a small school. A limited number of electives and extracurricular clubs (i.e.,
languages, school theme-focused courses, vocational classes, art classes, and debate) were explained to be offered to students. They noted that these are classes that students are particularly interested in. One teacher commented that course variety is necessary to give students options. S/he posed the following question, “are we setting them up for failure” when considering those students who are forced to take college prep courses but do not intend to pursue college. Furthermore, teachers mentioned the bureaucracy of cross enrolling between small schools. Some noted that it has become more common because of budget cuts, since students need to cross enroll at other small schools for certain graduation-required classes. On the other hand, some explained that cross enrollment procedures have become stricter, with some small schools letting it occur more often than others. Teachers also noted how it is difficult to team plan across small schools because teachers may be teaching totally different course levels (i.e., Spanish IV vs. Spanish I) and/or have access to completely different resources (i.e., computers vs. 5-year old texts).

An additional challenge recognized by teachers was linking class topics to the school theme. It was explained that some topics aren’t so easily linked to a small school theme and that teachers may need to work together to better strategize how to create this linkage. Also, teachers emphasized the unequal process of distributing students by small schools. Teachers explained that this is partly due to school themes that are not equally appealing to students. While some explained this process has become more equal in recent years, others noted that students need to be better placed in small schools. Recruitment of top students was even said to occur between the small schools, resulting in varying populations within small schools on the same campus.

Another challenge teachers had observed in small schools was principal coordination. Teachers explained that principals tend to work well together but have five very different styles of leadership. A few commented that during the initial small school years principal interaction was worse than it currently is. Most teachers agreed that communication could be improved between the small schools, regardless of principal collaboration difficulties. Teachers also commented on the separation of small schools as a challenge. Some noted that there needs to be more separation and that it is difficult with small schools sharing buildings. Others explained that small schools shouldn’t be so separated and they should at least be brought together for school-wide events more often. Some mentioned that there has been a decrease in school pride since conversion.

Although most conversion teachers were observed to be happy with their small school assignment, a few explained that it was initially awkward to be hired for a small school other than the one they had worked to design. Also, teachers felt that resources between the small schools could have been more equally distributed amongst the small schools. For example, more planning needed to occur if it was known that a particular school would be receiving the majority of EC students. Teachers explained that services were not properly in place to accommodate small schools receiving unique populations.

Finally, a handful of teachers pointed out frustration with the school district not embracing the small school project. Staff members were originally told that they had flexibility to create their small schools however they had wanted but they were later told they were not able to change the curriculum. Teachers expressed frustration with class size and teacher reductions in force. Many felt that teachers are now “stretched too thin” and there is “so much paperwork to keep up with a traditional high school.” It was
suggested by teachers that CMS increase teacher allotments for small schools, since “25 level 1’s and 2’s are different than 25 level 3’s and 4’s.”

**Teacher suggestions for improvement.** The majority of teacher suggestions centered around the following three topics: district acceptance of small school model; leadership improvements; and better coordination of resources. Teachers explained that CMS, as a district, needs to better embrace the small school model. It was explained that “students and parents get the impression that CMS doesn’t care about them because of the lack of resources” provided to them at their small schools. They felt that they need to speak on behalf of their students because “we are their voice” in the community. Furthermore, they expressed that they are emotionally invested in their students and they want to help them, which presents an additional pressure that their counterparts at traditional schools may not face. To achieve better small school success, teachers offered a variety of suggestions. They felt that more support staff (i.e., graduation project coordinator to be shared between small schools) and teachers would help. More staff would then allow teachers to teach a greater variety of courses. Teachers also noted that small schools need to be better separated and the physical design of the current small schools is less than ideal. Another suggestion by teachers was to implement the small school model in other low-performing traditional high schools to show greater CMS acceptance of the small school model to communities. Finally, teachers expressed that there needs to be less emphasis on EOC’s when evaluating small schools, particularly in their initial years. Small schools are meant to approach students in a different way than more traditional styles of teaching (i.e., project-based learning to foster critical thinking). Like the small school model emphasizes, a more flexible focus on quality of learning needs to be valued by CMS, rather than more standardized benchmarks.

Another major topic that teachers centered on when offering suggestions was leadership. A few teachers advocated for one principal to administer each small school campus, with five assistant principals to coordinate each of the small schools individually. Others noted that there at least needs to be better communication and collaboration between small schools, particularly between principals. They emphasized that this working relationship between the principals needs to also be more visible to students and teachers. Also, it was noted that resources need to be more equally shared amongst small schools.

Some teachers made suggestions based on how to better coordinate resources amongst small schools. It was suggested that lunchtimes could rotate between small schools so that certain schools don’t always have first or last lunch. One teacher commented that “eating lunch last mentally messes them up.” Cross-enrollment was another issue in sharing resources between small schools. Teachers felt that it should be easier to cross-enroll, especially for electives. Also, it was suggested that with cross-enrollment EC students could be better dispersed throughout the small schools.

**Teacher perception of small school dynamics.** In thinking of small school dynamics, teachers emphasized the student-teacher relationship as being the strongest. Teachers felt their students had more of a voice at small schools and more opportunities for leadership (i.e., freshmen 101, where students design a course and teach tips for being freshmen). Also, teachers noted collaboration efforts made between small schools and core planning meetings that are helpful. E-mail sharing of course materials was also explained to occur, allowing teachers to communicate efficiently. Teachers commented that parent involvement continues to be a struggle at small schools like it had at their traditional high schools.
Some teacher and principal efforts to help parents become more invested in their child’s education were also highlighted. For example, one small school regularly hosts monthly “family meetings” in which cultural events are held and parents are invited to attend.

**Teacher perception of school conversion process.** Teachers that had gone through small school conversion generally focused on the positives that they have observed schools to have experienced over the course of the conversion process. Only in a few instances did they point out how things could have been improved or done differently if converting today. Some topics that teachers positively commented on included: class size; discipline; culture change; community perception; school pride and personalization in the classroom. Teachers noted the decreased class size was a dramatic difference experienced following conversion to small schools. Although, they did explain that due to budget cuts these numbers have unfortunately begun to increase. Due to smaller class sizes, teachers commented on having more personalization in the classroom. They noted “know[ing] all students well,” which makes them “better able to meet all their needs.” One teacher explained “you can track students mentally and emotionally and they like that their absence is known.” Students were observed to “come more for help” at small schools and classrooms were more “discussion-based” as opposed to a “military-type at traditional” high schools. Teachers who had gone through conversion also noted improvement in student behavior. Teachers reported having more disciplinary issues prior to conversion and fewer every year since. It was argued that in small schools students are able to be held more accountable. In fact, a cultural change was explained to occur at both Olympic and Garinger. Teachers commented on having a “renewed interest in teaching” following conversion. It was explained that “change happened quickly” and has been longstanding. For example, teachers tell their students “Garinger traditional’s reputation is no longer an excuse anymore.”

Teachers also voiced some issues they had experienced through conversion. Teachers highlighted experiencing an awkward feeling when new teachers were brought into their small schools and took on leadership positions. Also, the equity in resource distribution was noted to have been an issue between small schools. Finally, teachers have noticed that it has become easier to contain students between small schools than it was initially following conversion.

**Summary of Teacher Focus Group Data.** Garinger and Olympic teachers commented similarly on the perceived benefits of small schools. Benefits included: the close-knit environment of small schools; classroom-specific benefits; teacher-specific benefits; shared resources between schools; increased school pride; and healthy competition between schools. Teachers also listed some small school negatives as well. These included: lack of course variety; cross-enrollment bureaucracy; team planning across small schools; challenges in linking certain course material to small school theme; recruiting students to less popular themed schools; principal collaboration/communication; separation of small schools; decrease in school pride; conversion teachers assigned to schools they weren’t on the design team for; unequal distribution of resources amongst small schools; and CMS acceptance of small school project. Some suggestions that teachers had offered involved arguing for more district acceptance of the small school model, implementing leadership improvements, and facilitating better coordination of school resources. Teachers recognized the close student-teacher relationships occurring within small schools, as well as the opportunities available for teachers to collaborate. Teachers also commented on the struggle to encourage parent involvement at most small schools. For the most part, conversion
teachers emphasized observed positive experiences since conversion. These included: decreased class size; improved discipline; culture change; improved community perception; more noticeable school pride; and more personalization in the classroom. In terms of conversion issues, teachers pointed out some awkward feelings that were felt when new teachers were brought in to a particular small school to replace those who had helped in school design. Also, teachers noted inequity in resource distribution between small schools. Finally, teachers noted how the separation of small school students was initially a challenge.

Small School Parent Focus Group Data

The parent focus group interview format included standardized questions that were asked of all focus groups. The groups were structured to represent each small school at both Garinger and Olympic high school. Each question resulted in themes that surfaced based on parents’ responses.

**Parent Involvement.** Parents shared the many ways they were actively involved. Examples included volunteering at school, communicating with teachers via phone, email, or face to face. Parents also volunteered via extracurricular activities held at school. The question was asked if parents thought teachers knew students’ family culture. Responses reflected that parents didn't think teachers knew nor understood their family culture. Parents did acknowledge that teachers worked to get to know most students and determine what they needed to be successful. Parents also shared that the teachers knew the culture of teenagers, and that spoke to knowing who the students were.

**Adequate interventions.** Parents concurred that students have multiple opportunities to get help if they needed additional support academically. There were options for Saturday school, tutoring during and after school on Tuesday and Thursday, and teachers tutored students one-on-one if they needed to.

**Opportunities for shared decision-making.** Parents said there were limited opportunities for shared decision making with their children. However, there weren’t many instances where shared decision making needed to take place, with the exception of course schedules. When shared decision making needed to occur, parents cited multiple methods in which the school communicated, such as phone calls, email, letters sent home, and face to face meetings, when needed.

**Suggestions for small schools.** Parents had recommendations for the small schools that their children attended. Parents suggested providing more opportunities for students to cross enroll in courses that may be offered in other small schools. Another recommendation was to provide a liaison to improve communication better between parents, the main office, and the small school offices. Parents also believed that there needs to be a high school identity first, then a small school identity to reduce competition. Parents agreed that they like the small schools model, were impressed to see how well it is working with limited resources, and wanted to see it continue.

**Differences between comprehensive school (pre conversion) vs. small school (post conversion).** Parents who had children who attended Garinger or Olympic before the small school conversion were able to compare and contrast the schools. They noted that, before the conversion, students had discipline issues, that “behavior was out of control”, students “had to be failing to get attention”, and that principals were less accessible. These parents also believed that the former comprehensive high school “had a
bad reputation”, and was deemed unsafe. After the conversion, parents felt that there were less management problems, failing students were able to get attention, which resulted in academic and behavioral improvements, the school was more proactive in preventing students from failing, principals were more visible and accessible, there were multiple student opportunities (extracurricular, scholarships, awards) to excel, and the perception of school improved.

**Differences between small schools.** Parents shared their comments on what they thought the differences were between small schools, based on their observations. The perception of some small schools were worse than others due to demographics of students, management issues, or perceived caliber of students. Oftentimes the expectations of students were higher in one small school than in other small schools. Parents noticed that leadership and/or management style is different from principal to principal. Comments were shared about the focus or attention on some small schools, versus neglect in others, based on academic and behavioral performance of students in certain small schools.

**Recommendations for Small Schools.** Parents offered recommendations for the small schools their children attended. Parents advocated for a liaison to communicate across schools (for events, PTA, extracurricular activities) and increased parental participation. Parents also acknowledged that there are great things going on at school, and that they needed to be publicized so the perception of the schools can improve. Parents shared that there need to be more resources poured into the school, although that may not be realistic with budget constraints. Finally, parents said there are some great teachers here – keep up the good work! Children who were at risk of failing are now successful due to great teaching.

**Small School Community Partnership Data**

Small schools at both Olympic and Garinger campuses solicited feedback from their partnering agencies as part of this evaluation. The goal was to explore the satisfaction of the partnering agencies and gain feedback as to the critiques and suggestions for improvement in relationship building with small schools. The majority of Olympic small school partners identified with the Olympic Community of Schools (which represents all 5 small schools), while partners for Garinger small schools commonly identified with an individual small school. Additionally, on each campus there were small schools that had more community partners identify solely with their small school than any other. For example, at Olympic community partners that identified solely with one school tended to identify with either METS or Business and Communications. Likewise, at Garinger community partners tended to identify with New Tech and LPS. Small school campuses differed in the number of community partners that responded to the survey. Olympic small schools had 21 community partners respond to the survey, while Garinger small schools had 9 respond. Small schools at both Olympic and Garinger had partnerships specific to their small school and, as a campus, had a variety of community sectors represented (i.e., health, banking, theater, engineering club and local non-profits and businesses). It is important to note that there may be selection bias present in these results since small schools identified which partners were sent the survey. For example, those partners that had responded might have different experiences than those that were not offered the survey or those that were offered the survey but chose not to respond.
All Olympic partners provided positive feedback regarding their relationship with small schools. As for their degree of satisfaction in the involvement with small schools, 13 out of 26 Olympic partners responded that they were very satisfied while 24 out of 26 partners responded that they were either very satisfied or satisfied. Only one partner commented that they were dissatisfied, but this was based on wanting to reconnect and redefine their relationship with the small school better.

Only one partnering agency was unsure of their role in connection with an Olympic small school. Most partners cited supporting the schools financially in some way or serving in a leadership capacity on advisory-like boards. Additionally, they supported schools with technical support or training (i.e., computer training, carpentry skills, and website support), internships, professional advice (i.e., judge presentations, guest speakers, leadership forums, financial literacy training, success skills), volunteer coordination, and facilities for events and essential supplies (i.e., clothing, food, and school supplies).

Although partners expressed extreme satisfaction with how Olympic small schools have a school liaison that is a contact point for all initiatives, they offered a handful of suggestions to improve partnerships. Most of the suggestions centered on wanting communication improvements. Partners suggested receiving a monthly update (i.e., either through a monthly future events calendar or monthly email with a link to a website). This was noted to be a way to share good news about partnerships and also advertise the opportunities the community or other businesses can serve in future events. Consistent feedback from small schools was explained to be essential for successful partnerships. Also, partners felt that small schools should feel free to be more open with any suggestions, questions, and/or concerns as these are welcomed in an effort to improve the partnership. To lessen miscommunication and reduce bureaucracy, partners also suggested combining individual small school PTO’s and having one principal to make all final decisions related to partnership initiatives. Other suggestions included spotlighting partnership collaborations more, increasing the number of small school and business partnerships, and creating more real-world job opportunities for students. Partners explained that if Olympic small schools wrote an annual thank you letter to the Board of Directors/President/CEO of each partnering organization and sent it from CMS leadership this would generate more “top-down” corporate support and more bottom-up grassroots interest in assisting the efforts. It was noted that “companies love positive press.” Additionally a press release to the Charlotte Observer or letter to the Charlotte Business Journal would serve the same function. Partners commented that Olympic small schools could increase the number of partnerships as well, particularly soliciting more support from the business community. A final suggestion from the partners was to offer students more real-world job opportunities and to foster more frequent school and business interactions.

All Garinger partners expressed positive feedback regarding their relationship with small schools. As for their degree of satisfaction in the involvement with small schools, 7 out of 9 Garinger partners responded that they were very satisfied while 9 out of 9 partners responded that they were either very satisfied or satisfied.

Garinger partners offered some suggestions for improving their partnerships. All of their suggestions were related to improving communication between partners and small schools. Some partners noted that they would like to be able to partner for a longer period of time. Others suggested that they would like the opportunity to have student volunteers throughout the year and the chance to speak publicly
with more of the student population. One partner in particular mentioned that their program was not successful due to challenges with the email system. It was explained that mentors and mentees should be able to email each other without a 3rd party (teacher or administrative assistant) reviewing their email.

Overall, Olympic and Garinger partners expressed that they were satisfied with their school partnerships. Although Olympic appeared to have a greater number of community partnerships, both small school campuses had similar types of resources coming into their schools. That is, Garinger did not seem to differ in the type of resources provided to their small schools even though they had fewer partnerships than Olympic. Partners offered both Olympic and Garinger small schools some suggestions for improving their partnerships. A need for improvements in communication between partners and small schools seemed to be the most recognized issue at both Olympic and Garinger small schools. Other suggestions included increasing the numbers of partnerships, lengthening the collaboration time period, offering more internships to students, offering more public speaking opportunities to address the student body, and finally, spotlighting successful partnership news more regularly.

Instructional Practices and Classroom Dynamics

Small School Classroom Observation Data

In addition to interviews and focus group discussions with stakeholders, we conducted formal observations to determine how the small schools mission is actualized through classroom activity. Three unique themes emerged from the observations of small schools: dynamic instructional practices, a commitment to community building, and cultural responsiveness.

Dynamic instructional practices. One of the integral goals of the small schools movement is to provide students with student-centered, inquiry-based instruction that facilitates higher-order thinking. We observed pedagogical practice that is demonstrative of this aim. At the Garinger site, biology teachers at the New Technology School encouraged students to learn the standard course of study via a “project-based method.” Students were challenged with a particular project that they had to develop. The instructor provided resources and computers for the student to engage the project. In order to develop the final product, students had to engage knowledge and concepts essential to the standard course of study. Interestingly, these projects were teacher-authentic and not pre-packaged material. In engaging the materials, observed students appeared on-task and generally motivated to complete the assignment. Students in an Algebra II class in the Business and Finance school competed in groups via a jeopardy-like game designed by the teacher. In groups of two to three, students were given a question to respond to. In groups, the students discussed possible solutions to the problem, then placed their answers on a sheet of paper and turned it in to the teacher. Points were awarded for correct answers in this team-building, competitive environment. Unlike the ubiquitous model of didactic instruction common in mathematics classes, this instructor encouraged students to deconstruct the process of finding the correct answer. As such, the process (as opposed to the outcome) was the emphasis of instruction. Consequently, when students worked individually, they were observed having greater effectiveness solving problems. In the Leadership and Public Service school at Garinger, a Civics and Economics
class engaged in simulations to demonstrate understanding of the business cycle. Incorporating cooperative learning schools with socially relevant examples, students offered their own interpretation of the abstract concept. After group performance, the teacher allowed fellow classmates to critique one another; thereby offering feedback on students’ understanding of micro-economic concepts.

Student-centered instruction was also highly visible at Olympic-site small schools. In the Renaissance school, we observed a teacher-led Socratic seminar on the play, Medea. Ninth-grade students read from the play to support their positions. In addition, students’ made literary comparisons between Medea and another Greek heroine, Penelope from the Odyssey. Students were able to discuss the differences between the characters’ motivations. In addition, the teacher challenged students to empathize with Medea’s situation and decide how her actions should be judged. In the business and finance school, biology students took part in a cell simulation activity in which they pretended to be proteins passing colored balls around the room. As the teacher demonstrated through the activity, protein receptors are constantly engaged in activity. The students appeared to appreciate this large scale representation of a biological activity that is too miniscule to observe readily with the human eye.

**Commitment to community building.** We observed two distinct facets of school community within the small school programs, symbolic and enacted community. Symbolic refers to the surface level, façade of the school community. At Garinger High, this form of symbolic community manifested in individual school mascots. While all of the students at the building competed on the same athletic teams, extra-curricular activities, and elective programs, they shared the identity of “Wildcat.” However, each of the individual small school communities developed a mascot of their own: the New Technology High School (Chargers), International Studies school (Dragons), School of Math and Science (Navigators), School of Business and Finance (Jaguars), and School of Leadership and Public Service (Wolves). These individualized identities provide students with a cosmetic sense of separation from their peers in other schools within the building. At Olympic, symbolic community was also apparent. Walking the halls in the School of Global Studies and Economics, one is surrounded by flags of various nationalities. At the Renaissance School, teachers decorated their rooms with various pieces of art, providing the environment a humanistic motif.

In addition to these artificial community building symbols, the ideology and practice of the teachers at both Garinger and Olympic sites demonstrated enacted community-building opportunities. Walking into one geometry class at the International Studies School of Garinger, we witnessed enacted community as the teacher challenged students to develop mathematical projects focusing on a topic of international interest. A science teacher at the School of International Business and Communication studies partnered with CPCC and the local community in a landscaping, fundraising activity that engaged students in business development and implementation. A teacher at the New Technology High School developed an after school club where students designed model racing cars for competition among the schools. In addition, the small schools more intimate community approach allow teachers to develop cross-disciplinary lessons. At Olympic High School of International Business and Communication Studies, a biology teacher developed a writing activity to prepare students for their 10th grade writing exam. This cross-curricular communication was a common trend across the small schools observed. Because the number of students within each school community is smaller than the average of CMS, teachers know their students, parents, and understand the peer relationships. One
The chemistry teacher at the Garinger School of Math and Science was recognized as teaching the same students in biology the year before. These close-knit educational systems permitted teachers to share knowledge of students’ strengths and weaknesses. From a discipline standpoint, our observations noted that teachers seemed to know all of the students within their small school. This familiarity allowed for more personal relationships between teachers and learners. One of the most striking examples of community-building in action was observed at the Olympic School of International Studies and Economics. On a semi-daily basis, students receive a “snack time” in which they are allowed to take a break from their classes and buy snacks from a mobile cart pushed throughout the building. Students appeared to enjoy this respite. Teachers were able to use this time to administer other duties or help with instructional remediation.

**Cultural Responsiveness.** The building of community in the small schools contributed to another theme prevalent across the small schools, cultural responsive instruction. Demographically, the small schools of both Olympic and Garinger are situated among diverse populations. Consequently, many of the teachers observed did not share the ethnic background of the students they taught. From their community building, teachers were able to tap into the motivations and cultural context of their students in order to motivate them within the standard course of study. At the International Studies School of Garinger, we witnessed English students working in cooperative writing circles. They were responding to a writing prompt, “Hip-hop is…” Using music from their Ipods, this predominately urban, non-White class developed articulate examples of how hip-hop influenced their lives. In developing their ideas, they were required to write five paragraph essays including a thesis statement. In what appeared to be almost subversive, the teacher challenged students to express their love of music while simultaneously preparing them for their 10th grade writing test. This same teacher uses Black and Latino authors to engage students in reading, challenging them to read above their expectations with literature relevant to their own cultural identities.

Across the city at Olympic’s International Business and Communications school, a teacher preparing students for the same 10th grade exam used the expression of hip-hop to teach students how to best confront their upcoming assessment. Referred to as “Stomp the Prompt,” students shifted eagerly in their seats as the teacher selected the appropriate “beat” in his Ipod. Once the background music began, students took turns reading out original verses that they wrote to help them remember how to construct an essay. Laughing as they shared their rap, students re-framed a banal concept of grammar and syntax into an engaging exercise that emphasized their own strengths of language and composition. This “stomp the prompt” activity was viewed as extremely popular among students across classes. We observed teachers in other disciplines developing their own versions of the activity. Within small school environments, we observed several teachers who with intimate community interaction, where able to elicit culturally appropriate instruction to better motivate students in their classes.
DISCUSSION

The qualitative component to this evaluation was an analysis of teacher, student, administrator, and community perceptions of the Small Schools Project as implemented by Olympic and Garinger high schools. Qualitative data was gathered through in-depth interviews with small school principals and focus groups with parents, teachers, and students. Representatives from small school partnerships were also asked to participate in a satisfaction survey to provide feedback on their relationship with small schools and to offer any suggestions for improvement. Additionally, classroom observations were conducted to examine observed differences in instructional practices and classroom dynamics between small schools and their comparison high schools.

Overall, the positive experiences reported from these stakeholders is grounds for optimism concerning the feasibility of establishing public secondary schools that can engage and challenge historically underserved students. These small schools are said to create very different social environments for high needs students that are explained to be close-knit, supportive, and encouraging. Early stakeholder feedback shows that the rearrangement of staff, students, classes and school focus helped small schools build a somewhat stronger sense of school culture. These structural changes were noted to create more personalized student-teacher relationships as compared to traditional high school settings. While there were some notable suggestions for improvement, all stakeholders involved (i.e., principals, teachers, students, school partners, and parents) expressed positive feedback regarding small schools and clamored for their continued existence. This qualitative evaluation documents an important but formative period in examining the success of small schools.
REFERENCES


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