



Raising expectations in urban schools while cutting class sizes

In state's Abbot districts, 'small learning communities' proposed for adolescents, teens

Monday, September 13, 2004

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As New Jersey tries to improve its urban high schools, the state is preaching a new message: Smaller is better.

From Jersey City to Pleasantville, state officials are pressing districts under the Abbott vs. Burke school equity rulings to focus on smaller, more personalized programs for older students.

A state task force finalized a proposal this summer calling for "small learning communities" in the Abbott districts' middle and high schools. They would be in separate schools or within existing ones, each as small as 250 students.

But hoping to get beyond numbers, the proposal also demands more individualized and rigorous academic programs for students, including mentors or "advocates" for each child and more honors and advanced placement offerings.

A pilot program following some of the guidelines is expected to be announced this fall in four yet to be determined districts, officials said.

"The message we want to send is the importance of personalization in the schools," said Gordon MacInnes, assistant state education commissioner overseeing the Abbott mandates, which required the state to improve the quality of education in its 31 neediest districts.

"These are adolescents and they need adults to talk to, and not just about school work but just how they are doing," MacInnes said. "That kind of relationship is more assumed in a smaller learning community."

The push for smaller schools has been around for years, but only gained momentum in high schools over the past few years. New York City and Philadelphia made it a focus of reforms, and the Columbine shootings in 1999 also highlighted the impersonal nature of large high schools.

Several New Jersey high schools already are moving toward smaller settings.

Paterson has a series of small academies, including the Panther Academy, which opened this month in collaboration with NASA.

Elizabeth High School, by far the state's largest with 5,300 students, will be split when the

district builds three high schools, each of which will be no larger than 1,000 students. The smaller schools also likely will be divided into smaller "houses."

Jersey City this fall will try to extend the success of its selective McNair Academy High School -- consistently among the highest achieving schools in the state -- by creating small honors academies in all its high schools.

At Jersey City's Lincoln High School, an honors academy opened last week with a dozen freshmen and the school is opening a separate building for freshmen this winter. Lincoln also has specialized programs in legal studies, cosmetology, math and technology, among others.

"You can't negate the research and literature that this works," said Michael Winds, principal of the 1,200 student school. "It's just natural. And especially with at-risk students and the issues they can face, you especially want those benefits of a smaller setting."

But Lincoln is also proof of risks and limits of the approach. Half its students still fall short on most state tests, and Winds said small learning communities are no miracle cure. They also typically require more staffing, as well as staff training.

"You can't think it will be successful without training for the teachers," he said. "You can fix the numbers all day, but you need the staffing, classrooms and resources."

In a recent legal studies class that is part of one of the magnet programs, students raised their own questions. One boy had been accepted to the exclusive McNair Academy but opted for the larger Lincoln High School so he could play football without having to travel between McNair and Lincoln.

One girl said more dynamic and advanced courses would help. A friend said counselors don't always encourage students to even try more challenging courses.

"I like to be challenged," said Zuley Rigo, 16. "Just because I'm from the city or I'm Hispanic, it doesn't mean I don't want to go to college."

That is where the second piece of the Abbott proposal comes in. The state's task force wants a culture change in urban secondary schools, including raising expectations and demands on students.

Michelle Fine, a professor at City University of New York, has led efforts to create small schools in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago and said the smaller communities help raise attendance and lower drop-out rates.

"But that's not the same as rigor," said Fine, who served on the committee of educators and academics pulled together by the state department. "You can't confuse hugging for calculus."

She and others said it means not just more AP classes but also Algebra I classes that truly teach algebra and not just serve as a catch-all freshman class.

"When you teach what standards require, guess what, they'll learn it," MacInnes said. "So much has to do with exposure, and instruction and expectations, and that hasn't always happened."

The hardest part remains in trying to dictate such changes, and officials said they hope to

learn more through the pilot districts. David Sciarra, director of the Education Law Center and lead advocate in the Abbott case, said it will take years of work both in schools and within the state government itself.

"There has to be a culture change in how the schools operate and a culture change in how the state operates," he said. "This has to be seen as a larger initiative that focuses on high schools and middle schools statewide."

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