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Getting Smaller to Improve the Big Picture
By Elissa Gootman and David Herszenhorn

The Central Park East Secondary School, one of New York City's first small public high schools, was once a beacon of educational innovation. But in the two decades since it opened, the graduation and attendance rates have plummeted to below citywide averages.

Even the founding principal has not visited in years, saying she finds the school's fate heartbreaking.

In Chelsea, the New York City Museum School, another pioneering small school, is thriving, even as it struggles with financial difficulties.

Students there make regular pilgrimages to museums throughout the city, though they spend less time on such trips than they did a few years ago.

One of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's chief strategies for transforming the city's school system is the creation of 200 small schools, including 53 secondary schools that opened in September. But the idea is not new - there was an explosion of such schools in the early 1990's - and a look at this older generation of small schools shows that size itself has not been a silver bullet.

There has been no long-term comprehensive study of the outcomes of New York City's early small schools. But interviews with teachers, current and former principals and parents indicate a wide range of results and suggest that even the hallmarks of small schools - better attendance and graduation rates - are not guaranteed.

"If I look at the small schools that existed at that time, about half are mediocre or worse than mediocre, and half are better than mediocre," said Deborah Meier, the founding principal of Central Park East, who is now an author, lecturer and consultant.

Some of the small schools fell victim to their own success, like Beacon High School on the West Side, which, with more than 1,000 students, is no

longer so small. Some reaped praise for years, only to struggle when their founders were replaced by administrators who did not quite get the school's mission.

In some cases, partnerships with community organizations fell apart. In others, the private money that helped get special programs off the ground dried up, forcing cutbacks.

These varying outcomes - including the experiences of some small schools that had to be closed - offer cautionary lessons that some of the most vocal champions of small schools say have not been heeded by officials leading the current initiative.

"Every school reform comes as if it has no history," Ms. Meier said. "We just recycle a previous reform package, we give it a slightly different name, sometimes not even a different name, and we don't go back to look at what happened the last time we did this."

Still, officials working on the current initiative say that a vast majority of old small schools, if not ideal, are better than the large failing ones now being replaced. At the big schools being transformed into small school campuses, four-year graduation rates for the class of 2002 ranged from 23 percent at Bushwick High School, in Brooklyn, to 46 percent at South Bronx High School. Citywide, the average was 51 percent.

In endorsing small schools, Mayor Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein have cited a wide body of research and local statistics showing that smaller schools yield higher attendance, promotion and graduation rates. But the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has financed hundreds of small schools across the country in recent years, has found some of the academic results disappointing.

Michele Cahill, a chief architect of Mr. Bloomberg's small schools plan, said that she and other city education officials had taken steps to ensure that the new schools would fare better - by improving principal training, requiring rigorous curriculums, demanding high-quality teaching, building stronger community partnerships and imposing strict accountability measures.

"We're doing it differently," Ms. Cahill said.

Robert L. Hughes, the president of New Visions for Public Schools, a nonprofit education reform group that has been at the forefront of New York City's small-schools effort for more than 15 years, said that the early small schools suffered from inconsistent support. Among past chancellors, Joseph A. Fernandez and Ramon C. Cortines were cautious supporters, while Rudy Crew was a vocal skeptic.

This time, the city has created a special Office of New Schools, headed by a chief executive, Kristen Kane, who reports directly to the chancellor. But critics say much remains the same. The city's earliest small school efforts included several ill-fated attempts to break up large, dysfunctional high schools, a precursor to many of the troubles that the Bloomberg administration has faced in its own effort to phase out big schools over the last two years.

In 1994, for instance, the city turned Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn into three schools. All were placed on the state's list of failing schools and are now being phased out for poor performance. At the four small schools created in 1994 to replace Andrew Jackson High

School in Queens, four-year graduation rates now range from 53.8 percent, about the same as the citywide average, to a more impressive 75.5 percent. Research by, among others, Jacqueline Ancess of the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching at Columbia University's Teachers College, found that small schools suffered when forced to take root in large school buildings, alongside other schools with conflicting cultures and incompatible approaches to learning.

Commenting on the current effort, Dr. Ancess said she has been dismayed to see small schools crippled by their placement in buildings with metal detectors and a strong police presence. "When they're put in a building with a school that has an antithetical culture," she said, "this is a recipe for failure."

Some successful small schools were forced to grow over time or to take on a different mix of students, defeating their original purpose. In 1993, for instance, Beacon High School opened as a college preparatory program, intended for a mix of students with varying abilities. Enrollment was supposed to be capped at 500.

But it quickly became one of Manhattan's most popular schools. To get in, many top students exercised a special provision in city admissions rules granting them automatic seats. Over time the school swelled to more than double its originally intended size, and this year officials formally switched it to a "screened" program, meaning that only top students are admitted.

Middle College High School, on the campus of Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, had a similar experience. The school, which opened in 1993, was supposed to have 640 students. It now has nearly 1,000, and its schoolyard is filled with portable classrooms.

The school was designed to provide an intensive academic program for college-bound students. But last September, the central administration sent more than 100 of the city's lowest-performing students to the school without any extra support.

Still, some small schools have experienced far worse problems. The Local 1199 School for Social Change opened in 1993 in partnership with the hospital workers union, was so troubled that it had to be shut down. The union and New Visions for Public Schools, which helped create the school, had clashed with education officials, including Chancellor Crew, over staffing, admissions and other issues.

In Brooklyn, Metropolitan Corporate Academy's partnership with the investment bank Goldman Sachs was of no help this school year, when the computer lab and the boys' bathroom were in such disrepair that they had to be closed temporarily.

Another issue raised by the early small schools was how to define "small." Experts still disagree.

Some of New York's earlier small schools with the best results had 200 or fewer students. But the majority of new small schools will eventually serve more than 400 students - 108 per grade.

The Humanities Preparatory Academy, which enrolled its first students in 1993, has only 185 students, all of whom can cram into a single large classroom for special occasions, like a recent awards ceremony in which students were lauded for such attributes as "commitment to humanity."

During staff meetings, the principal, Vincent P. Brevetti, and the school's 18 teachers sit in a circle, deciding policies by consensus - something that would be difficult with a larger group.

One common thread among the more successful early small schools is a core theme or mission. International High School in Long Island City, Queens, which opened in 1985, has enjoyed consistent success, focusing closely on serving recent immigrants. The school, which was intended for 460 students, has a student body of 468.

Another example of success is the Museum School. Shortly after it opened in 1994, The New York Times reported that it "could become the theme school par excellence," and in many ways it is.

After lessons on Darwinism that incorporated trips to the American Museum of Natural History, Devenia Brathwaite, 18, who said she hated biology in middle school, decided she wanted to major in it in college. Laura Fearon, 18, who said she was failing at the huge Benjamin N. Cardozo High School in Queens, transferred to Museum, and credits its intimate environment with her subsequent success.

"Your teacher knows you," she said.

One March afternoon, a group of students boarded the subway for the Brooklyn Museum, where they pondered Buddha sculptures, Last Supper paintings and Muslim prayer rugs as part of a lesson on world religions. But in recent years the school has wrestled with difficulties that are emblematic of other small schools' struggles. Museum's founding co-directors were both hired away to help create and support other small schools, resulting in a rocky transition.

Then there was a reliance on outside money and resources. Just as today's small schools are opening in partnership with nonprofit groups, like the College Board and the Roundabout Theater Company, the Museum School teamed up with several museums. Now that the school is no longer new, it receives less attention from the museums, some of which are helping newer small schools.

"It takes real work to not only establish a new institution, but to maintain the institution," said Pat Conway, a parent. "The Department of Education doesn't seem to be learning from the experience of having dealt with our schools and learned that it really is more expensive to run a small school than a large school."

Still, if every new small school were like the Museum School, parents would almost certainly be pleased.

The same cannot be said, however, of Central Park East Secondary.

"One by one, various quality-control issues at the school became harder to uphold," Ms. Meier, the founding principal, said, citing increased enrollment, the departure of experienced teachers and the watering-down of special programs in reaction to a greater emphasis on standardized testing.

"I stopped visiting," she said. "It was too painful."