

# HORACE

***Small schools do better across the board at knowing students well, keeping their work meaningful, and joining with others in collaborative communities. In the push toward higher student achievement, how can we bring their successes into the large schools most of our students attend?***

BY KATHLEEN CUSHMAN

## **Why Small Schools Are Essential**

**S**TRAIGHT FROM THE BURSTING halls of a Sacramento, California middle school, at first Francisco Bustos did not know what to make of the tiny lakeshore community of Northport, Michigan. His father had moved the family there, to work first as an orchard laborer and then in a casino on a nearby reservation; and with only 311 fellow students in kindergarten through twelfth grade, Francisco, 14, felt shy and exposed.

"I had a way of acting, before, that helped protect me from gangs and all," he says. "I had lost a lot of my friends to violence." Schoolwork mattered less than survival, and attitude was Francisco's chief defense.

His self-protective stance began to falter, though, as Northport teachers who knew his name and cared about his nature encouraged him to work harder and risk more. "They give me extra help," he says. "They know I can do better if I try." In a meeting with his parents and adviser, he resolved to prove them right.

Francisco's story could have come right from a textbook describing the advantages of small schools, whose positive effects on student attitudes and achievement have proved especially striking for minorities and those without socio-economic advantages. But students need not move to the country to reap those rewards, Essential schools around the country are finding.

By breaking up into separate units of no more than 500, even

huge urban schools with thousands of students can achieve the personal stake in student success that underlies Essential School principles. Using smaller size as a lever, such units may then gain autonomy over budgets and hiring, forge new links with parents and community, and build thriving support networks of like-minded schools.

The more this happens, argue Essential school leaders like Ted Sizer and Deborah Meier, the more likely that students like Francisco Bustos will experience the conditions necessary for learning: teachers who know their students well, standards generated together by a community, and bonds that hold us to the values we profess.

### **How Schools Got So Big**

Today's public schools grew large in an era that regarded their task as producing large numbers of educated citizens as efficiently as possible. In both curriculum and administrative affairs, economies of scale seemed to dictate more courses in fewer sites; standardized procedures and tests; and, ultimately, the union-management relations that characterized factory production.

Schools not being factories, the product often disappointed. Though teacher credentials may improve and costs decline as schools grow, research shows that at some critical "tipping point" student achievement actually goes down, reports Craig Howley, who has conducted

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a review of the research for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. To gain only 17 percent more curriculum, a school's size must double—and even then, the additional courses benefit only a small percentage of students. As a school grows, too, problems of crowd management undercut whatever economies its large size may confer.

Moreover, what we call "large" has shifted since James Bryant Conant's influential 1959 book *The American High School Today*, argued for consolidating smaller schools into more efficient units that would graduate classes of about 100. But as suburbs, small towns, and cities alike reorganized into dramatically larger districts with many fewer schools, the number of students in a typical school soared accordingly. These days, when a big-city high school might enroll upwards of 4,000 students, researchers tend to regard as "small" an elementary school of 300 to 400 students and a secondary school of 400 to 800.

### **Small Enough to Share**

But Sizer, Meier, and other Essential school leaders would like to see the numbers keep going down from there.

"When I don't know the name of every student, the school is too big," says Sara Newman, principal of the Brooklyn International School, one of several dozen small new Coalition member schools in New York City. Her school works in close

partnership with two others like it in Manhattan and the Bronx, each serving no more than 300 students who arrive with little or no English. She credits their extraordinarily high rates of attendance, graduation, and college acceptance to the close attention these students receive from teachers who know their diverse needs and situations.

Newman's teaching staff can also still fit around one table to talk, which many regard as essential to good schooling. "Teaching is intellectual work," says Bill Ayers, whose Small Schools Workshop at the University of Illinois has sparked a resurgence of small alternative public schools in Chicago. "It happens when reflective people share productive relationships that center on teaching, curriculum, assessment, and the lives of children. Small schools allow teachers—maybe ten, maybe twenty of them—to do that together. When you can't sustain that any more, the school's too big."

Agreeing with that sentiment, the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) in New York launched the Coalition Campus Project, working with the Board of Education to dismantle several of the city's enormous public high schools and reconstitute them as small autonomous schools inhabiting the same building. The old Julia Richman High School site on East 67th Street, for example, now houses several Essential Schools, a professional development center, a Head Start program, and a program for teen-age parents. In the Bronx, the former James Monroe High School is heading along a similar path, with two Coalition high schools already in place.

But a new set of issues crops up when several smaller units share a space, observes CCE co-director Heather Lewis. Ideally each tenant would benefit from a building-wide network that shares a philosophy, spans the path from early childhood to adulthood, and provides joint learning opportunities for teachers. In practice, though, both the Julia

Richman and the James Monroe sites include schools outside the Coalition approach, and even some within the Coalition prefer to network elsewhere. (Manhattan International School, for example, shares the Julia Richman site but networks with the Brooklyn and Bronx International schools.)

To help resolve neighborly issues, the Julia Richman schools established a site council, and Lewis highly recommends some such arrangement. But each of CCE's schools must also belong to a small collaborative network, even if not at its site, through which teachers give critical feedback to each other. At Julia Richman on Election Day, teachers from Urban Academy, Vanguard High School, and the Ella Baker School gathered to hash out new ideas together. A few miles away, the three International Schools were making plans to visit and critique each other's graduation exhibitions and portfolios.



### **HORACE**

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**Editor:**  
Kathleen Cushman

**Managing Editor:**  
Susan Fisher

## What Research Has Found About Small Schools

For both elementary and secondary students of all ability levels and in all kinds of settings, research has repeatedly found small schools to be superior to large schools on most measures and equal to them on the rest. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Oregon recently made available Kathleen Cotton's digest of 103 studies of the relationship of school size to various aspects of schooling.

The studies Cotton reviewed focused on issues of achievement (31), attitudes toward school or particular school subjects (19); social behavior problems (14); levels of extracurricular participation (17); students' feelings of 'belongingness' versus alienation (6); interpersonal relations with other students and school staff (14); attendance (16); dropout rate (10); academic and general self-concept (9); college acceptance, success, and completion (6); teachers' attitudes and collaboration (12); the quality of the curriculum (10); and schooling costs (11). Their chief points:

- Academic achievement in small schools is at least equal—and often superior—to that of large schools. Achievement measures used in the research include school grades, test scores, honor roll membership, subject-area achievement and assessment of higher-order thinking skills, and greater achievement and years of attained education after high school.

In reporting these conclusions, researchers are careful to point out that they apply even when variables other than size—student attributes, staff characteristics, time-on-task, and the like—are held constant; and smaller schools showed long-range effects independent of rural school advantages. The effects of small schools on the achievement of ethnic minority students and students of low socio-economic status (SES) are the most positive of all.

- Student attitudes toward school in general and toward particular school subjects are more positive in small schools. The attitudes of low-SES and minority students are especially sensitive to school size and improve greatly in small schools.
  - Student social behavior—as measured by truancy, discipline problems, violence, theft, substance abuse, and gang participation—is more positive in small schools.
  - Levels of extracurricular participation are much higher and more varied in small schools than large ones, and students in small schools derive greater satisfaction from their extracurricular participation. The single best-supported finding in the school size research, this holds true regardless of setting and is most applicable to minority and low-SES students.
- Because research has identified important relationships between extracurricular participation and other desirable out-

comes, such as positive attitudes and social behavior, this finding is especially significant.

- Student attendance is better in small schools than in large ones, especially with minority or low-SES students. Not only do students in smaller schools have higher attendance rates than those in large schools, but students who change from large schools to small, alternative secondary schools generally exhibit improvements in attendance.
- A smaller percentage of students drops out of small schools than large ones.
- Students have a greater sense of belonging in small schools than in large ones. Feeling alienated from one's school environment is both a negative in itself and is often found in connection with other undesirable outcomes, like low participation in extracurricular activities.
- Student academic and general self-regard is higher in small schools than in large ones.
- Interpersonal relations between and among students, teachers, and administrators are more positive in small schools than in large ones.
- Students from small and large high schools perform comparably on college-related variables such as entrance

examination scores, acceptance rates, attendance, grade point average, and completion.

- Teacher attitudes toward their work and their administrators are more positive in small schools than in large ones.
- Poor students and those of racial and ethnic minorities, who continue to be concentrated in large schools, are more adversely affected—academically, attitudinally, and behaviorally—by attending large schools than are other students.
- Despite the common belief that larger schools have higher quality curricula than small schools, no reliable relationship exists between school size and curriculum quality. Even a small school can offer a curriculum that compares favorably in breadth and depth to that offered in larger settings.
- Larger schools are not necessarily less expensive to operate than small schools. Small high schools cost more money only if one tries to maintain the big-school infrastructure. Average per-pupil costs do decline as enrollment increases, but then reach a minimum and begin to rise with further school growth.

*From Kathleen Cotton, "School Size, School Climate, and Student Performance," Close-Up Number 20, 1996. Portland, Oregon: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Tel: 503-275-9618; Web site: <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/10/c020.html>*

## How Much Autonomy?

In Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York one can find plenty who favor breaking large schools into small units along these lines. But they differ on just how much autonomy such schools need.

"Once a small school organizes around teaching and learning, it needs the authority to hire its own staff and decide on allocating its resources," Heather Lewis declares. "If the district and union do not support the teaching and learning piece this way, new schools end up structured in the same ways as the old big schools." The first Coalition Campus schools have appreciably lowered their costs by using staff differently than do larger schools, early data show. But regulations on seniority transfers for teachers can trip up such plans, she notes, as can policy issues like budgeting, space, and contracts or licensing.

For Chicago's Essential schools the issue of autonomy looms less large, says Jack Mitchell, who directs their network, the Chicago Forum

for School Change. "We favor any way in which we can get our schools to be more personal," he says. "If teachers can improve their practice, it creates stronger bonds between teachers and students, which motivates students to improve their effort and performance. If we can do that by breaking a big school into separate academies under one principal, we'll do that."

The Chicago school system defines a small school as having a cohesive, self-selected faculty with substantial autonomy, a coherent curricular focus that provides a continuous educational experience, and inclusive admissions. The unit may be fully autonomous, with a principal, a Local School Council, a unit number, and a separate budget. Or it may exist in a "multiplex" building that houses a number of semi-autonomous small schools, each with a lead teacher but sharing one principal and Local School Council.

Such a unit may also be a school-within-a-school "academy," located either in a larger host build-

ing or in a satellite location, but served by the host school principal and Local School Council. Schools-within-schools may share facilities, but have their own names, faculty, students, curriculum, schedule, and budget.

At DuSable High School, one such academy opened its doors in September, focusing on television and radio broadcasting and video production. Students couple their academic coursework with projects that might include producing a radio talk show or interning at local media stations.

The Chicago Essential high schools now teach all ninth graders in transitional "freshman academy" units, and many section off other units as well. The 4,000 students at Chicago Vocational High School, for instance, choose from eight specialized programs oriented toward different careers, from banking and finance to transportation, manufacturing, or the performing arts.

In Philadelphia, the district recently asked all its large schools to break up into "small learning communities," an approach first tried in "charter" units now well established in comprehensive high schools such as Simon Gratz, a longtime Coalition member. But extending the practice to elementary and middle schools, the district has found, takes more attention than simply telling staff what "small learning community" means. (See sidebar at left.) So along with establishing clusters of schools that can share teaching and learning strategies, the central office is revising its accounting and reporting functions to support autonomous decisions made by the new small units. Soon it will be able to chart spending and student achievement patterns not just by school but also by small learning community.

Because the school-within-a-school has not proved an effective approach to whole-school change, the Coalition now discourages schools from using "pilot programs" to launch Essential school ideas. (See

## Philadelphia's "Small Learning Communities"

Funded by the Annenberg Challenge, in late 1994 Philadelphia's school district adopted the ambitious "Children Achieving" plan that included reorganizing its schools into neighborhood clusters, and breaking every big school up into "small learning communities." Virtually all students in comprehensive high schools were affiliated with such a unit during the 1995-96 school year, and hundreds more were beginning in elementary and middle schools. Philadelphia defined small learning communities as having the following traits:

- Heterogeneous, including all children
- Multi-year, providing a close relationship among students, parents, and teachers lasting longer than one school year
- Unified, built around a theme or an instructional approach
- Instructional, promoting strategies that help students reach high standards
- Collaborative, providing time for teachers to work together and grow professionally
- Connected, with students and teachers spending most of their time in one community
- Empowered, having the authority and resources to design their own instructional program
- Accountable, responsible for improving student performance
- Small, having fewer than 400 students

*From the Consortium on Policy Research in Education, Evaluation of the Children Achieving Initiative: Report on Year One, May 1996.*

sidebar, page 6.) Efforts like those in these cities, though, mark a full-scale initiative to bring the well-documented advantages of small and autonomous schools—an intimate learning environment and a strong community connection—not just to a select few, but to all of the vast majority of United States students who are served by large school systems.

### How Small Schools Help

"We see our responsibility in terms of respect," says principal Jim Bodrie, speaking of how Northport High School teachers worked to raise Francisco Busco's motivation level. "Once we know you well enough to know that you can do it, it's disrespectful not to ask the best from you."

Because teachers here spend 80 minutes a day together planning and regularly work together across school levels, they can exert considerable effect on a student's experience in class. This district's size not only helps them align their philosophy, curriculum, and teaching practice with Essential School principles. It also makes possible an enviable research project by superintendent Shari Hogue: following every Northport graduate's progress into adult life, and documenting whether the schools' goals and strategies have lasting effects.

If the consistent findings of over 100 research studies hold true, Northport's small size alone will make an enormous difference. Along every measure of student attitudes—attendance and graduation rates, extracurricular participation, attachment to school, disciplinary incidents, and more—students in small schools do better. And their academic achievement goes up, whether one looks at test scores, grades, or critical thinking skills. (See sidebar, page 3.)

For these reasons, many districts establish small alternative schools to serve students who have struggled in larger settings. The 155 students

### Why Do Students Do Better in Small Schools?

Kathleen Cotton's comprehensive review of research for the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory distilled the chief factors to which researchers attribute the superiority of small schools:

- Everyone's participation is needed to populate the school's offices, teams, clubs, and so forth, so a far smaller percentage of students is overlooked or alienated.
- Adults and students in the school know and care about one another to a greater degree than is possible in large schools.
- Small schools have a higher rate of parent involvement.
- Students and staff generally have a stronger sense of personal efficacy in small schools.
- Students in small schools take more responsibility for their own learning; their learning activities are more often individualized, experiential, and relevant to the world outside of school; classes are generally smaller; and scheduling is much more flexible.
- Small schools more often use instructional strategies associated with higher student performance—team teaching, integrated curriculum, multi-age grouping (especially for elementary children), cooperative learning, and performance assessments.

*From Kathleen Cotton, "School Size, School Climate, and Student Performance," Close-Up Number 20, 1996. Portland, Oregon: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Tel: 503-275-9618; Web site <http://www.nwrel.org/>*

at Frederick Douglass High School in Columbia, Missouri—a university town experiencing an influx of rural poor—spend part of their days in jobs with community business partners, including a newspaper publisher and a student-run deli. Virtually all graduate, and most of them go directly to work, notes Jill Barr, who coordinates the work-study program.

"They come to us with low self-esteem and not many positives," she says. "We teachers serve in a way as surrogate parents, and our kids know and love us. We point out the positive, and give them the skills they need to succeed as citizens."

"Our vision works because it's personal," adds special education teacher Dawn Dickel. "Any school can have a good philosophy, but I don't know how you can carry it out over a certain size. For us, 200 kids would be pushing it."

Douglass regards itself not so much as an organization but as a community—an important distinction, according to educational

philosopher Thomas Sergiovanni, who spoke on this subject at a recent meeting of the American Educational Research Association. When a school's members are so few, everyone's presence and contribution becomes more important to the functioning of the whole. A student newspaper or a sports team in a small school may easily depend on a single student's choice to participate, which can only increase his or her sense that coming to school matters. Parental involvement, too, rises along with the visible need for every pair of hands. To cultivate and nurture learning thus without succumbing to bureaucracy, Sergiovanni declares, a school must not exceed 300 students.

Tiny Gideon, Missouri presents a rural example of this theory, particularly striking because its school enrollment has sharply dropped since the town's main business, a crate factory, folded in the 1970s. Now the school is Gideon's biggest employer and its prime source of hometown pride, from basketball

games to the student-made sign that welcomes visitors and their business interests into town.

When Carolyn Cornman graduated here in 1968, the Gideon school had 1,700 students from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Today it enrolls 400, and Cornman teaches English to the children of her former schoolmates. Unemployment and poverty rates equal those in Missouri's worst inner-city schools, yet stepping into this school's culture feels like stepping back 30 years, teachers say.

"When class ends, the relationship doesn't end," says Allen Winchester, who moved his family here after retiring from the Army several years ago. "You go into town and people say, 'There's a teacher.' It's a way of life."

Gideon's secondary teachers recognized their own convictions in Essential School ideas and took fire, applying for grant money to rethink their curriculum and teaching practices. Only around 20 percent of Gideon's graduates go on to college; most head for the city to look for work. In that context, deepening what they would experience here took on even more importance.

"For a child in this town, this school is your best chance—your *only* chance—for a better life," Cornman says. In her long-block semester course students write résumés and letters to the editor, read short novels like *The Scarlet Letter*, and prepare argument papers on topics like women in the military. Math teacher Shawn Pyland, a 1977 Gideon graduate herself, gave up all

"general math" courses to teach algebra concepts to everyone. Students do research on the Internet and post information on Gideon's own Web site, which they helped design in order to attract new industry to town. And Allen Winchester's government classes have launched a full-scale effort to revitalize and clean up their town.

### Can Curriculum Compete?

When schools like Gideon's engage in community development and community-based learning, what we think of as schooling "costs" actually become investments in the community's future, asserts Paul Nachtigal, who directs the Annenberg Rural Challenge. And such authentic connections between their schoolwork and their community exemplify the Essential School philosophy of "student as worker."

But can a small school's curriculum provide enough breadth and depth to satisfy the needs of every student? "Less is more," those who belong to small Essential schools reply; and both Kathleen Cotton's and Craig Howley's reviews of the research cite at least a dozen studies that back up this belief.

Some of these analyses take a mathematical approach: the relationship between a school's size and the number of its curricular offerings, for example, diminishes as schools become larger. Quantity does not equal depth, others note as they analyze what the "shopping-mall high school" offers the majority of students.

But the most persuasive evidence resides in those small Essential schools that have crafted a rich and deep curriculum—often integrated across subject-area lines, and often led by teachers who are willing to explore areas outside their specialty.

Started by neighborhood parents and teachers under the aegis of their local school district, the Oakland Charter Academy makes its home on an industrial pier in this

California port city. Its 150 largely Latino seventh through ninth graders face poverty and social barriers, and its staff confronts bureaucratic and financial obstacles at every turn. Yet on a shoestring budget this school has provided better conditions for high quality learning than many of its larger neighbors.

In a state where teacher loads of 150 are the norm, Oakland Charter's five full-time and five part-time teachers need know fewer than 50 students well each year, because they integrate their curriculum into two long core blocks. Language arts and social studies are taught together; academic teachers also teach physical education; classes are taught in both Spanish and English. Everyone stays after school for social and cultural activities, from dance to chess. The school enjoys not only close ties with its parent neighborhood but a relationship with the University of California at Berkeley, which sends student tutors to help out in math. A family therapist works at the school four-fifths time, and "teachers are on the phone with parents pretty much every day," says principal Martha Acevedo.

Other small Essential schools in less adverse circumstances have found that a narrowly focused academic curriculum can produce high levels of achievement even when enrollments are quite small. The Brown School in Louisville, Kentucky, which enrolls 600 students in kindergarten through grade twelve, prides itself on a rigorous course of study, for example. And Grass Lake Junior-Senior High School near Ann Arbor, Michigan, with 370 students, offers an interdisciplinary, project-based curriculum that any larger school might envy. "It is possible to offer at the 400-pupil level," concludes a 1987 study by D. H. Monk with which many other studies concur, "a curriculum that compares quite favorably in terms of breadth and depth with curriculums offered in much larger settings."

**The size of schools seems often to have more to do with politics, economics, and social factors than with what works best for students.**

This often goes hand in hand, other research shows, with flexible teaching practices: teaching teams, multi-age grouping, cooperative learning, alternative assessments, and an experiential learning focus. The small school typically gives both staff and students more responsibility for their own learning. Classes are smaller, activities are tailored to the individual, and scheduling is much more flexible. The learning needs of students, not the organizational needs of the school, tend to drive school operations.

### When a School Grows

So what happens when a small school used to these norms confronts the demands of a growing student population? California's Oceana High School more than doubled in size over the last few years because a neighboring school closed, and its current size of 770 students "makes a heck of a difference," according to its new principal, Dick Morosi. "The sheer numbers are tougher to deal with."

The smaller Oceana worked hard to develop a very personal school culture, Morosi says, and that has paid off. The faculty of 37 still meets together weekly; the campus is still quiet and safe; classwork is still organized around individual or small-group learning; portfolios and projects characterize the curriculum and assessment practices. Teachers use "tuning protocols" to reflect together on student work, and seven standing committees address ongoing governance issues.

"Some people find our new size unwieldy," Morosi says, "and perhaps we do have less sense of community now. But we still use consensus, and we observe definite norms and procedures in our meetings. And even though our graduating class is around 140 now, for the most part the students still know each other."

Because of its larger size, he notes, Oceana can now offer more electives without losing sections

### What About School-Within-A-School Plans?

Research on the effects of school-within-a-school arrangements is less extensive and conclusive than that on the relative effects of large and small schools, Kathleen Cotton's review from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory reveals. But it suggests that students do benefit from this form of organization, as long as the school-within-a-school is sufficiently separate, distinct, and autonomous in its vision, culture, environment, and administration.

That autonomy may not come easily, given the variety of forms that schools-within-schools may take. Sometimes a larger school will organize into cross-grade-level "houses" of several hundred students, each with its own discipline plan, parent involvement, student activity program, student government, and social activities. Other schools establish "houses" for particular student groups, such as ninth graders, students whose first language is not English, or particular interests such as technology or publishing.

But such houses do not achieve the central ends of small schools, argues Deborah Meier, who founded the Central Park East Schools in East Harlem, New York and serves as vice-chair of the Coalition of Essential Schools. "A small school . . . can be just one of many housed in a shared building," she writes in her 1995 book *The Power of Their Ideas*, "but a building does not equal a school. A school must be independent, with all that the word implies, with control over a sufficient number of parameters that count—budget, staffing, scheduling, and the specifics of curriculum and assessment, just to mention a few. And power indeed to put toilet paper in bathrooms. And mirrors, too."

Moreover, when a school-within-a-school exists as a "pilot" for reform ideas, it can create harmful divisions within a school culture and actually lessen the chances for whole-school change, research on Coalition member schools by Donna Muncey and Patrick McQuillan shows.

Still, Cotton observes, whether school-within-a-school students are compared with non-school-within-a-school peers in large schools or with their own prior performance, the research shows benefits in their academic achievement, social behavior, attitudes, satisfaction, student-teacher relations, and attendance.

from its academic core. And its extracurricular program is more varied. "Open enrollment in our district means we have to vie with other schools for students," Morosi says. "The district will simply not support us as a smaller school; in fact, in California your average daily attendance figure determines how much money per pupil you get. We have to compete."

In truth, despite unequivocal research in favor of small schools, the size of schools across the country seems often to have more to do with politics, economics, and social factors than with what works best for students. And the cycle perpetuates itself. "The larger and more anonymous are the institutions that come in contact with the community,"

asserts Bill Ayers of the Small Schools Workshop, "the more likely that individuals—parents, business people, community organizations—feel like part of a mob."

Young people respond to the same factors, he adds; when schools are impersonal, they drop out. "Kids need a place where they are known and valued by adults they care about," Ayers declares. "They drop out when they feel that 'nobody cares if I stay.' Educators see that as an indictment of parents, but it is an indictment of us—our structures don't let us tell kids it matters to us. We have too many kids and too little time. That's a structural issue, and it undermines our intent. We need to create a new structure to tell 200 kids it matters." □

## Helpful Resources on Small Schools

### Reviews of the Research

Cotton, Kathleen, "School Size, School Climate, and Student Performance," Close-Up Number 20 in the School Improvement Research Series, produced by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory under a contract with the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Contact: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory Document Reproduction Service, 101 S.W. Main Street, Suite 500, Portland, Oregon 97204; tel.: (503) 275-9519. Web site <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/10/c020.html>

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Coalition of Essential Schools  
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