

Small Schools of Choice (SSC) Model Summary

What Are Small Schools of Choice (SSCs)?

Small Schools of Choice (SSCs) are schools that are organized around smaller, more personalized units of adults and students, giving students a better chance of being known and noticed. However, they are more than just small in size and function; they are formed around three core principles: academic rigor, personalized relationships, and relevance to the world of work. In addition, these schools are academically nonselective and provide a realistic choice for students with widely varying academic backgrounds. They are mission-driven and established via a demanding authorization process that requires a prospective school leadership team to articulate its educational philosophy and demonstrate how it would motivate teachers, community members, and partner organizations around it.

New York City is an example of a school district that has successfully created SSCs. In the following sections, we lay out the key elements of SSCs for implementation and implementation resources. At the end of this memo, we provide more background on New York City's initiative, the students that attend SSCs, and evidence of their effectiveness.

Key Elements of SSCs

When establishing an SSC, there are several core elements that should be implemented:

- An SSC should be established via a demanding authorization process that requires a prospective school leadership team to articulate its educational philosophy and demonstrate how it would motivate teachers, community members, and partner organizations around it.
- An SSC should be academically nonselective.
- It is recommended that an SSC have about 100 students per grade.
- The district should demonstrate a commitment to acting as a steward for new schools through the start-up phase by generating a set of supports and protections as these schools get up and running.

In addition to the three core principles of SSCs — academic rigor, personalized relationships, and relevance to the world of work — strong leadership also plays a role in the effectiveness of SSCs. Key elements for implementing these four attributes in SSCs are discussed below:

Teaching and Learning

An SSC should include a rigorous instructional program and set high expectations for all students.

- Offer a standards-based curriculum aligned with state graduation requirements that connects what students learn with college and career goals.
- Develop college-ready standards that exceed basic graduation requirements and emphasize higher-order skills (for example, critical thinking).
- Set high expectations for students: focus on individual students' benchmarks and growth and create an instructional program that aligns with these goals. Doing so will provide clear objectives for school staff to work toward and prompt them to develop strategies for particular student subgroups.
- Develop a school schedule that includes longer instructional blocks that promote interdisciplinary work, teacher collaboration, and smaller teacher-to-student ratios.
- This schedule should be coupled with collaborative team planning and professional development time within the regular school schedule so that teachers can form a professional community. There should be teacher-driven opportunities for continuous assessment, reflection, and improvement of teaching and learning by the entire school community. Professional development that will yield ongoing improvements in student learning is results-driven, standards-based, and embedded in the daily work of the school.

Student Non-Academic Support

An SSC should develop school structures that ensure that students will be known well by their teachers and other school staff.

- Set up an Advisory, a counseling model where teachers, administrators, and other adults in the building act as “advisors” to small groups of students (typically 10-15 students) with whom they meet as part of the regular schedule to address academic and socioemotional issues.
- Each student should have at least one adult who helps coordinate the support needed by that student throughout the high school years to prepare for higher education, employment, or other productive postsecondary plans.
- Organize common planning time in which teachers meet together to discuss their students' progress and problems.

Family and Community Engagement

An SSC should encourage connections between what students learn in school and their lives and communities.

- Organize the school and its curriculum around a theme. The theme can be a broad subject, such as business, law, or performing arts.

- Develop partnerships with business and community members in order to offer learning opportunities outside of the classroom (for example, internships, mentoring experiences, and service learning opportunities) and to infuse classroom instruction with relevant real-world examples. Partners can bolster school capacity in areas ranging from curriculum and instruction to youth development and community outreach.
- Engage students' families and caregivers in the design of the school and its educational program, including school governance. Parents, families, and other caregivers should be welcomed as full partners in school decisions that affect children and families through regular, two-way, meaningful communication and the development of extended learning opportunities that foster active parent participation in student learning, in and out of school.

School Leadership

An SSC should have strong leadership and a mission that teachers, administrators, and students know and support.

- Involve established education intermediaries — nonprofit organizations that serve both as fiscal agents for distributing grant funds to schools and as central sources of experience and technical support related to the creation and of small schools — in the establishment and opening of the SSC. Such intermediaries can especially support teachers and principals who are opening new schools.
- Instructional leadership should be characterized by a school-wide focus on student achievement; support for the improvement and enhancement of the school culture, teaching, and learning; and effective collaboration among school leaders, teachers, parents, students, and partners in the community. The school leader(s) should demonstrate and build among the school community an unwavering commitment to fulfilling the shared vision of the school.
- The district should consider having new school leaders participate in a leadership development process (over 6-12 months) that scaffolds the process for taking the school proposal concept to a completed school ready to open. During this process, new school leaders can complete documents that will be used in their school (such as a mission statement and professional development strategy) and try out their ideas in a laboratory setting.

How Were SSCs Originally Developed?

In the early 2000s, New York City — which had a long history of small school reform — launched a large-scale, systemic, district-wide school reform effort that phased out large high schools judged to be failing their students and replaced them with small high schools created via a carefully structured prescriptive process. This program, called the New Century High Schools

(NCHS) Initiative, worked to create small, personalized high schools in communities that were formerly served by large, low-performing high schools.

The NCHS Initiative was a partnership between New Visions for Public Schools and the NYC Department of Education (DOE). Together, New Visions and the NYC DOE's newly created Office of Small Schools, which over time assumed full responsibility for managing the creation of new small schools, designed principles and practices that school planning teams had to meet in order to be selected as new small schools and to open and operate. These principles and practices covered a range of areas, including teaching and learning, student non-academic support, family and community engagement, and school leadership. The three core principles of the new small schools were academic rigor, personalized relationships, and relevance to the world of work.

As a result of this initiative, during the first few years of the Bloomberg administration, key officials in the NYC DOE closed 23 schools that graduated less than 45 percent of their students — generally, zoned high schools concentrated in low-income neighborhoods that enrolled thousands of mostly minority students. The NYC DOE closed these schools by phasing them out — that is, ending enrollment of new groups of freshmen while letting the remaining cohorts of sophomores, juniors, and seniors remain until they graduated. Resources were added to enrich services — both academic and support services — for students remaining in the high schools being phased out.

The NYC DOE opened more than 200 new small high schools, each with approximately 100 students per grade in grades 9 through 12. The phasing out of the closing high schools allowed these new small schools to grow gradually (or to be “phased in”), adding a grade each year, while preventing existing larger schools from being inundated by a flood of students from schools that had been closed. Of these new small high schools, over 100 are “Small Schools of Choice,” or SSCs, a term coined by MDRC researchers to emphasize the fact that these nonselective schools are open to and chosen by students of all academic levels.

Today about 94 percent of students attending SSCs in New York City are black or Hispanic, 84 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and 75 percent enter high school performing below grade level in reading or mathematics. Over half of the new small schools created between the fall of 2002 and the fall of 2008 were intended to serve students in some of the district's most disadvantaged communities and are located mainly in neighborhoods where large, failing high schools had been closed.

SSCs Raised Graduation and College Enrollment Rates

Over the past five years, [MDRC](#) has found that enrolling in an SSC has large, positive, and sustained effects on students' high school graduation and college enrollment rates:

- SSCs in New York City increased high school graduation rates by 9.4 percentage points and college enrollment rates by 8.4 percentage points.

- SSC effects were experienced by students who entered high school below grade level in both reading and math and by students who entered high school at grade level, by students who were and were not eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, by students who were male and female, and by Black and Hispanic students. The positive graduation effects were also experienced by special education students.
- SSCs achieved these gains at a lower *cost per graduate* than that of the high schools attended by their control group counterparts — roughly 14 percent to 16 percent lower. This is in large part because more students successfully graduate from small high schools and fewer need to attend an expensive fifth year of high school.

See the Sources and Resources section for links to reports that include these findings.

Sources and Resources for Districts Seeking to Implement the SSC Model

- Rubrics used to evaluate proposals for new small schools in New York City: The New York City Office of Portfolio Development’s *Elements of Effective Schools* (see Appendix H of [Transforming the High School Experience](#)) and [New Visions’ Ten Principles of Effective Schools](#).
- Past MDRC reports on New York City’s Small Schools of Choice (SSCs): [Transforming the High School Experience](#), [Sustained Positive Effects on Graduation Rates Produced by New York City’s Small Public High Schools of Choice](#), [Sustained Progress, Headed to College](#), [The Relative Costs of New York City’s New Small Public High Schools of Choice](#)
- Established partners for new small schools in New York City: [New Visions for Public Schools](#) and [The Urban Assembly](#)
- You may contact Rebecca Unterman at MDRC directly for additional resources by either calling 212-340-8897 or emailing Rebecca.Unterman@mdrc.org.