

Implementing Small Theme High Schools in New York City: Great Intentions and Great Tensions

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In this article, Jacqueline Ancess and David Allen use New York City as a case study to examine the promises and the perils of the small high school reform movement that is sweeping the nation. They analyze the varying extent to which New York City's small high schools have implemented curricular themes in order to promote academic quality and equity. After identifying a wide range in the level of theme implementation in the city's small schools, Ancess and Allen suggest that small theme high schools have the potential to boost student engagement and achievement. However, the authors also express concern about the manner in which curricular themes may serve as socioeconomic, academic, or racial codes that threaten to merely repackage old patterns of school stratification and segregation.

The Promise and Purpose of Themes

From New York City to Los Angeles, Miami to Seattle, and in numerous smaller cities in between, a small high schools reform movement is sweeping the nation. Very generously funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, this reform aims to be the antidote to the failures of large, comprehensive, "shopping mall" high schools, long excoriated by experts for their anonymity, unresponsiveness, and incapacity to prepare American youth for the increasingly competitive demands of the world economy (Boyer, 1983; Darling-Hammond, Ancess, McGregor, & Zuckerman, 2000; Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Ort-Wichterle, 2002; Fine, 1991; Goodlad, 1984; Institute for Education in Transformation, 1992; Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985; Sizer, 1984). These small schools are characterized not only by their size, typically six hundred or fewer students, but also by themes that are designed to

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distinguish them from one another and to attract students and parents within new systems of school choice.

While the components of any reform interact in complex ways, this article isolates the theme component in order to analyze its operation, achievements, dilemmas, and potential as they play out in New York City. Our examination identifies three levels of theme implementation: nominal, marginal, and integral. To illustrate the possibilities of integrated theme high schools, we provide a snapshot of one three-year-old school, which details the triumphs and struggles of small theme high school creation and development. At the school-system level, we consider how equity functions as both text and subtext regarding the issues of themes and school choice. Finally, we raise some questions about the relationship of equity and small high school reform. While our analysis focuses on New York City, we believe that the issues and tensions we find and the questions we raise are relevant for any urban district engaged in small theme school reform. Like other urban districts, New York City's four-year high school graduation rate is low: 43 percent in 2005 (New York State Department of Education (2006). African American and Latino students, who constitute 75 percent of the school system's population (Siegel, Bel Hadj Amor, Zaltsman, & Fruchter, 2005), graduate with standard diplomas at the even lower rate of 10 percent (Gewertz, 2005). The school system's fifteen years of experience creating small theme high schools and addressing the city's racial and socioeconomic diversity offer insights into crucial implementation and equity issues.

Although the theme component of small high school reform has received considerably less attention than its small size component, it would be a mistake to interpret this lower profile as an indication of insignificance. Embedded within the theme component are powerful beliefs and promises: that there is a relationship among student commitment, engagement, and achievement; that the exploitation of that relationship can create meaningful learning experiences and desirable postsecondary trajectories for students; and that these learning experiences can deliver both equity and excellence in school systems where there has been little of either.

Advocates for this reform movement argue that offering students the opportunity to select a small high school on the basis of their interest in the school's theme — whether it is architecture, aviation, or teaching — should engage alienated students, generate their commitment, and drive up achievement and graduation rates. Sorting students by their common interests and aspirations instead of by home neighborhood or test scores is intended to produce schools with diverse and integrated student populations, rather than schools segregated by income, race, ethnicity, or ability level. The appeal of varied themes is also supposed to stimulate competition for students and parents and, according to market theory, increase the number of good high schools, diminish or even eliminate the bad ones, and thereby produce a system of excellence and equity.

However, in any system of high school competition, themes are not only attractors; they are unspoken code. Themes communicate powerful messages about race, gender, class, income, expectations, college-going, future orientations, definitions of success, and more. Indeed, they are often their proxies. The existing state of privilege and inequity routinely affects the ability of students and families to crack the code because what constitutes equity is neither universally agreed upon nor transparent. We find that two views dominate our society's beliefs about what constitutes equity: merit and context. Those holding the merit perspective believe that equity is attained only on the basis of individuals' achievements and that consideration of context variables, such as socioeconomic status, creates inequity. In contrast, those who believe that historic and current societal inequities affect the achievement of particular groups assert that equity is attained only when social and economic disparities are taken into account and counteracted. Which view is operative in any particular conversation is not necessarily apparent to all populations.

At the school level, capacity for theme implementation, personnel changes, and competing system-level curriculum and assessment policies affect the extent and intensity of effective theme integration within the school culture, as well as sustainability over time. All of these complications present challenges to the reform's promise of equity and excellence, but as we see in New York City, the obstacles are not necessarily insurmountable.

The Context for Small Theme High Schools in New York City

New York City first began to create small theme high schools as a systemic strategy to improve students' high school engagement and achievement in 1992, when the Aaron Diamond Foundation gave a generous grant to an intermediary organization, New Visions for Public Schools (then known as the Fund for Public Education). From 1994 to the present, three additional initiatives to create small theme high schools throughout the New York City system were similarly catalyzed by private foundation funding to intermediary organizations. These included the New York Networks for School Renewal, funded by the Annenberg Foundation (1994–1999); the New Century Schools, funded by the Carnegie Corporation, Gates Foundation, and the Open Society Institute (2002–current); and, most recently, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's initiative funded by the Gates Foundation (2003–current). Although there is no direct or formal alignment among these initiatives, there are common threads that point to a changed public school universe in New York City. The millions of private dollars in start-up grants for these initiatives were given not to the school system but to private, not-for-profit intermediaries, the leadership of which usually has not been educators. The assumption that themes and school choice would translate into improved student engagement and achievement has undergirded all of these initiatives. Collaboration and cooperation among the teachers and principals unions, intermediaries,

and the school system have yielded a competitive request-for-proposals (RFP) process to create small schools while modifying teacher work rules and school staffing policies to accommodate the new schools' unique needs.

These private-public high school reform partnerships were built on two powerful grassroots initiatives developed by teachers and administrators within the school system in the 1980s: the small "concept" schools of choice in East Harlem (District 4), and the small, personalized alternative schools for students who had failed in the large high schools. These initiatives were also informed by the research of Ted Sizer, Mary Ann Raywid, and Paul Hill. Sizer (1984) and the Coalition of Essential Schools that grew out of his work provided a vision of schools as personalized learning communities focused on intellectual development for all students. Raywid (1998) emphasized the distinctive identities of the small District 4 middle schools, and Hill and colleagues (Hill, Foster, & Gendler, 1990) described the unifying and galvanizing foci found in successful parochial and private schools.

What is important about this 25-year history is the local context — the traditions, knowledge base, exemplars of success, practitioner expertise, and parent and student stakeholder experiences in small schools — that has provided a resource bank for the subsequent small school initiatives and the current large-scale expansion of the number of small schools in New York City. Over the years, the small school reform movement has evolved from being *policy by exception* (Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Ort-Wicherle, 2002) to the normative response to the failures of traditional comprehensive high schools.

The New York City Department of Education's (DOE) process for starting small high schools requires an application and interview but no explicit theme. However, most school proposals include themes in order to create an identity that will differentiate their school from others so that they can attract students and avoid being assigned those students who may have no interest in or resist the theme.

Today there are upwards of 175 of these high schools in New York City, reflecting the interests of teachers, administrators, students, philanthropists, and external partner organizations who founded them. Most themes fall broadly into a few academic and career categories. For example, forty three schools have arts themes, twenty four have science themes, fifteen business, fourteen law, fourteen technology, and eleven social studies. More specifically, theme schools exist in the areas of social justice, museums, health careers, performance assessment (such as graduation by portfolio), inquiry, military, community service, expeditionary learning, leadership, athletics, English-language learning, gender, and support for gay/bisexual/transgender students. Although they enroll perhaps 25 percent of New York City's high school students, their high profile has made every high school become by default a theme school. Even those schools without self-identified themes have become typed as college prep, zoned, or alternative. But regardless of the theme or

its absence, all high schools are required to comply with the New York State Regents standards and administer the Regents exams required for a diploma, so that, at least technically, all of the schools should be able to graduate students eligible for college.

Degrees of Thematic Integration

Anyone perusing the New York City guide to high schools published annually in multiple languages for students and their parents will be struck by the near dizzying array of choices of high schools described there. Gone are the days when the names of all or most of the city's public high schools were largely great figures in the city's, state's, or nation's history. Students now enroll in schools with names like the Young Woman's Leadership School and the School for the Physical City. However, while a school's name may provide some idea of its theme, there is no guarantee that the theme will have a strong connection to the actual function of the school or to students' learning opportunities. Small high schools in New York City can be sorted into three categories of association with — or separation from — their theme: integral, marginal, or nominal.

Nominal theme schools are those in which the theme exists in name only. Although in the school's early years the theme may have been a strong presence, it can become nominal to a school's functioning for several reasons. Over time and changes in leadership and faculty, the initial passion, knowledge, and commitment to the theme can fade in importance and influence. For example, the Academy for Commerce and Industry (ACI)¹ is a small high school that began with partner organizations from the local business community. In its early days, the school and local businesses collaborated to provide students with internship opportunities throughout the community. However, after numerous changes in school and system leadership, defection of partners and their contributions, and the absence of system-level policies for sustainability, the school's curriculum, organization, and culture demonstrate no traces of the initial connection to the world of business. Because no system-level mechanisms exist for theme accountability, a school like ACI can retain its name, giving the false impression of offerings that do not exist and undermining the intention of the reform to improve achievement by engaging students' interests.

Then there are schools in which reflections of the theme can be found in the margins of their curriculum, organization, and culture. For example, the Academy for Public Safety (APS), a small high school that began with a focus on law enforcement careers, offers courses on law enforcement and justice only as electives and only in the junior and senior years. Courses within the core curriculum — English, mathematics, and so on — make no attempt to integrate concepts, skills, or learning opportunities and experiences authentically connected to those careers or the ideas undergirding them. APS fac-

ulty members think of the theme as separate from the core instructional program. Other schools isolate the theme by establishing a “theme room” where students can go to “work on the theme.”

In such schools, teachers of theme courses or extracurricular activities work largely in isolation from their colleagues. In addition to the limited capacity of some schools’ leadership and faculty to conceptualize and operationalize their theme(s), thematic marginalization can also result from DOE mandates for scripted curriculum. The pressure of having accountability for standardized test scores also diverts the faculty from developing strategies that use the theme as a lever for student engagement. Marginalization of themes is likely to persist as long as schools continue to function within familiar top-down, bureaucratic culture, and coercive compliance. In order to integrate themes effectively, school staff need to take collective responsibility and the DOE needs to provide support and technical assistance for strong internal accountability.

Finally, there are some high schools in which the theme is integral to the functioning of the school and the lives of everybody — students, teachers, counselors, and families — within the school community. In such schools, the theme’s influence can be seen in the daily life of students and teachers; in how the school’s leaders talk and behave; in the content of the curriculum, the forms of instruction, and the ways students are assessed; in the art or student work posted on the school’s walls; in unique school rituals; and in how the school interacts with its community, including families and neighborhood organizations.

Snapshot of an Integrated Theme School: Pablo Neruda Academy

The Pablo Neruda Academy for Architecture and World Studies (PNA) in the Bronx is a three-year-old small theme high school whose efforts, challenges, and strategies to operationalize theme integration are transparent.² A close look at the PNA story offers valuable lessons for other schools, and for partner organizations, intermediaries, and the DOE. Although it is still developing, PNA demonstrates how a school’s leadership and faculty, with external support, has sought to create meaningful integration of its themes into its curriculum, organizational structure, and culture in the face of the many challenges new theme schools must address: an over-age, chronically underperforming student population residing in one of the nation’s most economically and educationally disadvantaged neighborhoods; location in a host school with an incompatible set of values about children and learning; competing DOE and state policies, priorities, and agendas (e.g., a one-size-fits-all assessment system); faculty turnover; and many dedicated but inexperienced teachers and administrators.

PNA was created by a group of teachers from International High School at LaGuardia Community College, a small school for recent immigrants that had

developed a strong model of project-based, integrated curriculum and portfolio assessment (Ancess, 2003). These teachers shared a vision for a school community that supported students in becoming active global citizens aware of and engaged with the natural and constructed environments in which they live.

Of the many challenges PNA faces in achieving its vision, the most daunting occurred in its second year, when it was forced to move from its original location in a big but stable high school to one of the city's "impact schools," a large, comprehensive high school that had been singled out for greater police presence because of high levels of gang violence. As a result of this move, PNA lost most of its continuing students. In its new location, PNA shares space with four other small schools and the large high school.

PNA's themes are evident in the student work in its classrooms, hallways, and offices, including architectural models of houses, bridges, and skyscrapers and posters of Rosa Parks, Paul Robeson, and other activists. PNA's office door is framed by columns and an archway created by students in a construction class offered as part of the school's Saturday Academy. This environment signals some of the deeper ways the themes are integrated into the curriculum and culture of a school. The school's founders brought not just vision and commitment to the themes of architecture and social justice, but also deep knowledge of curricula and instructional practices through which the themes could be continually brought to life. Their experience provided them with a tested pedagogical model for the new school: instructional teams working together with small cohorts of students; interdisciplinary, inquiry-based projects; external learning opportunities, such as fieldwork and internships; and authentic assessment based on portfolios and student exhibitions. In PNA classes, students are constructing knowledge (Newmann, 1996) — figuratively and literally. For example, in social studies classes, students constructed models of societies at different historical periods; in math, groups created scale models of skyscrapers in Manhattan to understand and manipulate concepts of scale, ratios, and proportion, and used the actual city grid to learn coordinate geometry.

The theme is also manifest in the "Mini-mester," when, for two days a week for one month, the regular schedule is suspended so that students and teachers can work together on large-scale interdisciplinary projects. In the pilot Mini-mester, students worked in teams to design and construct their "dream home," which they presented at the school's Gala, a celebration and exhibition of students' work for the whole school community, including families and partner organizations. The second ninth-grade Mini-mester was a project called "Rebuilding New Orleans." Groups of students researched climate and culture in order to develop energy efficient, low-cost housing for the redevelopment of the city devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

To develop the knowledge and expertise to undertake such curricula, PNA's founders have maintained strong partnerships with two organizations,

the Institute for Student Achievement (ISA), and the Salvadori Center. The ISA partnership provides PNA with ongoing professional development in strategic planning, curriculum design, and instruction through the participation of teachers in summer and winter institutes, ongoing collaboration with ISA coaches, and participation in networks of school leaders and guidance counselors. The partnership with the Salvadori Center, a nonprofit organization that supports schools in architecture and design curriculum, affords PNA an array of resources related to its theme of architectural studies, including connections to the New York City architecture community, regular professional development opportunities for staff, and access to internships in architecture and design for eleventh- and twelfth-grade students.

PNA principal Dina Heisler asserts that “active learning requires active assessment,” whereby students create, present, and reflect on products from their inquiry. These products include the portfolios that students create and regularly present to panels, and exhibitions of their work at events such as the Gala, which culminates the Mini-mester. Implementing active assessment is not easy in the prevailing educational climate of standardized testing and rigid disciplinary boundaries. However, results on both standardized assessments and the authentic assessments PNA staff value are beginning to validate PNA’s commitment to active learning and active assessment. According to the school’s math coach, 82 percent of PNA students passed the Math A Regents exam, required in New York State for graduation, a pass rate 10 percent higher than the other high schools in their building.

For PNA staff, another important measure of success is how actively students engage in the themes that frame the school’s work — how students collaboratively plan, create, and exhibit products that have meaning to themselves, their community, and the world beyond school. For example, the following reflection from a PNA tenth grader illustrates the academic and personal rewards of his internship experience:

I got experience working with architects and using materials like wood, carpet, tiles, and glass. E. [another student] and I went with the architects to renovate a house. First, we went to the house, took photos, and measured the house. We got to use computer programs like SketchUp and AutoCad to make designs. Then we were given a due date and when we all met, we presented our designs. E. and I are still in touch with one of the architects and give our ideas over the Internet. This week I went to get my working papers because they offered me and E. summer jobs. I can’t wait for Mini-mester every year. At the end, we get to show our work and get awards.

As suggested by the Pablo Neruda Academy snapshot, a theme can be a powerful lever for engaging students in intellectually rigorous learning experiences; demonstrating student achievement in multiple ways, including on performance and standardized assessments; increasing students’ performance levels and sense of self-efficacy; promoting teacher collaboration; gen-

erating community ties and social capital; and establishing authentic school-based accountability through which the products of teaching and learning are displayed for public scrutiny. PNA's Mini-mester epitomizes the power of themes to generate organizational rituals that have the potential to invigorate school culture.

Choice and Equity: The Complex Challenges for Theme Schools

As mentioned earlier, themes are not simply about student interests. As revealed by PNA's student population, which is 75 percent boys, themes also function as code. PNA has many more boys than girls, not intentionally, but because architecture signals "male." PNA's principal has actually been counseled to add the word "arts" to the school name in order to attract more girls. Themes are also code for social, economic, and academic status, race, post-secondary opportunity and ambition, and peer-group composition, and they are read differently by different constituencies that have varying degrees of access and varied perspectives. Math and science themes are code for academically high-performing students, particularly boys. Career (or vocational) themes such as health or business are code for workforce orientation rather than college ambition, and in some cases preparation for entry-level, dead-end jobs for large corporations. Social justice and leadership themes are often associated with poor communities. Arts themes send mixed signals; their academic standards are seen as less demanding, but the arts themes, especially if accompanied by talent screening, confer elite status. Small, nontheme liberal arts schools that offer access to high-stakes knowledge and enrichment signal preparation for competitive colleges and a particular peer group: middle class and upwardly mobile, comprising all races, but Whites in particular. Many middle school principals and counselors have reported to us that in their conversations about high school selection with students and families, the questions, comments, and preferences of middle-class parents demonstrate knowledge of the code, in contrast to many members of typically marginalized groups.

Although advocates for small high schools hope that themes and choice can integrate schools by race, class, and achievement level, interest in a theme is but one criterion students and their families use to select a school. Of equal and in some cases more importance are peer-group composition, school and neighborhood safety, school reputation, transportation, and family need. A number of middle school teachers and counselors tell us that for immigrant families, particularly where English is not their native language and economic stress exists, the priority is often proximity to home rather than interest in a theme. These families may depend on older children to care for younger ones. Constituent pressure sometimes generates the creation or expansion of a category of schools. When middle-class parents recently complained about excessive emphasis on remediation (a code word in itself), the DOE pro-

duced a plan to create several new theme schools in collaboration with local colleges and campus locations; for example, Columbia University is creating a math and science school. These schools will screen students by standardized test scores (a proxy for socioeconomic class), so that remediation presumably will not be necessary, and students who require it will be excluded.

New York City's laudable strategy of creating small theme high schools to achieve equity and integration risks becoming a variation on the old pattern of stratification by income, class, ability, and political capital. Indeed, Kirp (1992) and Ready, Lee, and LoGerfo (2000) have documented tracking in theme school choice systems. The resilience of complex competing agendas and priorities of diverse constituencies complicates efforts to achieve equity and raises questions that need to be investigated not only by the DOE, but by our society: We know what inequity looks like, but what does equity look like, not theoretically but in operation in a big-city school system? And who decides what equity looks like? What are the solutions when equity for some competes with equity for others? Recent U.S. Supreme Court affirmative action decisions demonstrate national ambivalence on equity in education. Closer to home, New York's governor and state legislature have stalled distribution of the \$5.63 billion New York City won in its Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit to redress chronic education underfunding by the state.

No less challenging for the school system is its process for providing students with school choice. If themes can influence achievement by engaging student interest and generating student commitment, then there have to be enough themes that attract students in order for the school system to have the capacity to give all students their top choices. School choice has a chance of being equitable only if there is broad constituent consensus that all of the choices are good. Since they are not, the DOE is committed to establishing additional small theme high schools.³ Unless enough attractive theme schools exist, the policy risks promoting even greater inequity if those who do not get their top choices are the usual suspects: the system's most vulnerable and needy students.

The huge number of New York City students entering high school each year (over 94,000 in 2006) also makes designing and implementing an effective and equitable choice policy a formidable task. In order to provide every student with a choice, the DOE's high school selection process requires all students who want to enter any New York City high school, even the one for which they are legally zoned, to complete an application on which they are asked to rank up to twelve schools they might want to attend. Through a centralized computerized process, students are matched with their highest-ranked school that has also ranked them. Students who are not matched initially select up to twelve new choices and are matched to one of them in a supplementary round. Students who remain unmatched are assigned to an underenrolled high school — with or without a theme — on the basis of proximity to their home (NYC DOE, 2006a), not necessarily their interest in

the theme, as happened to Pablo Neruda when forced to move from one location to another. The matter of students being assigned to schools they have not selected is also an equity issue for students who have selected the school. As one New York City high school student pointed out at a recent Coalition of Essential Schools conference, assigning significant numbers of students to schools they have not chosen and do not want to attend is unfair to the students who have chosen the school and want to be there.

According to the DOE, of the 94,037 students who applied to the city's public high schools in 2005, 82 percent (77,428) received one of their choices and 45 percent (42,431) received one of their top three choices (NYC DOE 2005b). However, 18 percent, or 16,609 students (the equivalent of the entering ninth-grade class for 150 small schools), were assigned to an undersubscribed school they did not choose. So much for the forces of choice and competition regulating the school market! Not included in the DOE's analysis are an additional few thousand students who fall through the cracks of the application process and are assigned to undersubscribed neighborhood theme and nontheme schools at the beginning of the fall semester. Data do not differentiate between students who were matched with one of their first twelve or one of their second twelve (which means they have ranked twenty-four) choices, nor are data disaggregated by student demographics or achievement.

Aware of and concerned about the potential for racial or socioeconomic inequity in its school choice operation, the DOE continues to revise its process to increase the percentage of students who are matched to a school of their choice. In order to ensure equitable access to information about theme high schools, the DOE also provides a variety of resources: a high school directory in multiple languages; open houses at schools; parent workshops; access to middle school staff; and high school fairs in each borough (NYC DOE, 2006a). These policies all help students and families learn about theme school missions, courses and program highlights, graduation rates, Regents test performance, partnerships, and extracurricular activities so that they can make informed choices (NYC DOE, 2005a).

However, these resources cannot compete with the deeply embedded societal inequities as reflected in the social, human, and material capital — the insider knowledge, connections, and money — that middle- and upper-middle-class parents bring to the high school choice enterprise, ensuring the continued advantage of their children in a system where the demand for good schools is greater than the supply. Before these families even see a high school directory or application, they know the names of the schools to consider and avoid. They and their children use their middle school network of friends to learn the insider information about the “desirable,” “acceptable,” and “not to be considered” schools. They talk to parents whose children attend high schools they are considering. Their children visit schools with friends who are enrolled. Families pay for private tutoring and courses that prepare their

children for standardized tests, art portfolios, and auditions to screened high schools. As Noguera (2002) has said, "You can't force middle class parents to send their children to bad schools. You can only force poor parents to do that." Although some middle schools actively advocate for the admission of their graduates to select high schools and provide some of these services to students whose parents cannot do so, such a commitment does not occur through mandate, so many schools do not.

Complicating matters further, another DOE policy rewards students with the highest standardized test results by granting them preferential access to the school of their choice. Students who score in the 98th and 99th percentiles of a citywide seventh-grade literacy test automatically receive their first choice high school. As a result, it is possible for some small (and theme) schools to be 100 percent enrolled with students who score in the top 2 percent of the city's test. Since these scores correspond to socioeconomic class, old socioeconomic and academic stratification patterns could be reproduced. In the small theme school movement, strategies designed to safeguard different kinds of equity — equity related to access and equity related to merit — clash.

Results and Challenges

New York City's not-so-simple small high school reform, including its large theme school subset, is at once a highly imperfect and dazzlingly bold initiative that is attempting to offer opportunities for successful schooling to students who historically have rarely had them. As Eric Nadelstern, the DOE's pragmatic visionary on this reform, has so cogently explained, the school system's choice has been either to continue the expensive tinkering with big high schools that has had a twenty-year history of failure and steroid-strength immunity to reform, or to create new small schools from scratch under the existing imperfect conditions. These imperfect conditions include insufficient space and capacity and a large number of inexperienced teachers and leaders. These new pioneers have to learn the job on the job as they create new organizations. New principals, many without any prior administrative experience except perhaps a few months' internship (often with a new principal), need to learn the technical knowledge of organization-building and DOE operations, as well as how to lead and manage an educational organization, all while bringing a school into existence. Similarly, teachers with limited or no teaching experience are learning how to teach vulnerable and challenging students in the most fragile of organizations. It's a roller-coaster learning curve, with the riders hanging on with their hearts in their throats.

However, outcome data seem to support the DOE's strategy. Although most of the current wave of small schools have not yet had a graduating class, early results look promising, especially considering that 67 percent of entering students scored below standard in literacy, compared to 60 percent citywide. In

2004, 93 percent of students in the small schools were promoted from ninth to tenth grade, compared to 68 percent in high schools citywide. Their average daily attendance was 91 percent, compared to 82 percent citywide (NYC DOE, 2006c).⁴

A recent ten-year study of small schools by NYU's Institute for Education and Social Policy (IESP) also suggests promise for the current initiative. Compared to the big high schools, the more than one hundred New York City small schools (most of them theme schools) created from 1993 to 2003 have in the aggregate *significantly* higher graduation rates, *significantly* lower dropout rates, and *cost the same as* big high schools. They have more Latinos, the same percentage of Black students, fewer Whites and Asians, and lower eighth-grade literacy and math scores (Fruchter, 2006). Another recent study, conducted by Policy Associates, examined seventy-five of the city's small schools in their first three years and found that students in these schools were making better progress toward graduation than students in comparable large schools (Herszenhorn, 2006).

As the New York City school system continues its fast-paced creation of new small high schools and simultaneously takes on the conversion of big high schools into small learning communities, themes will continue to play a prominent role in student choice. But will themes play the powerful role we know they are capable of in eliciting student engagement, commitment, and achievement? To have them do so, the DOE will need to release schools from current curricular, instructional, and assessment mandates, such as the current plans for six-week benchmark tests that leave little or no space for developing thematic integrity. At the same time, the DOE will need to provide schools with access to professional development that enables them to integrate their themes into instructional programs that provide academic challenge and support for all students. Instead of evaluating schools solely on the basis of standardized test results, the DOE will need to embrace and encourage multiple assessments that are consistent with the integration of themes, such as the performance assessments used at Pablo Neruda Academy. Additionally, the DOE will need to develop program assessment mechanisms, such as critical friends or school quality reviews that rely on the collective perspectives of multiple stakeholders and provide schools with data for improving instruction and student support systems. These initiatives would hold schools accountable for demonstrating not just achievement, but progress toward program and student performance goals. The school system also needs to develop policies and safeguards that protect against the degeneration of themes to the point that they exist in name only; nominal theme schools deceive students and parents, they undermine confidence in partners, and they reduce the initiative to an advertising gimmick.

While New York City has demonstrated its commitment to equity by distributing new small theme schools in the communities of greatest need — we count fifty-eight small theme schools in the Bronx, fifty-one in Manhattan,

forty-seven in Brooklyn, twenty-two in Queens, and one in Staten Island — other equity issues are more complex and demand deeper investigation: the distribution of school choice matches and assignments; the multiple explicit and implicit meanings and consequences of themes; the unintended consequences of well-intentioned policies, such as the reproduction of tracking and privilege by theme; and external partner accountability.

Kozol (2006) has recently warned that New York City's "magic pill" of small theme schools has the potential to replace "large, segregated, and unequal schools" with a system that increases inequity by offering "small schools that cater to very artistic, upscale Greenwich Village families" and are attractive to White families, and "small academies for Black and Latino students with names like Academy of Leadership, or the Academy of Business Enterprise."

Although the PNA snapshot, IESP's data, and Policy Associates' findings demonstrate the potential of small theme schools to make a substantive difference in students' engagement and achievement, Kozol's caveat points to the need for conversations about the unexamined equity implications of the hidden curriculum embedded in themes, of who gets to go to which schools and why, and what the relationship is between themes and postgraduation opportunities. If we are not careful and, as Maxine Greene (1995) likes to say, "wide awake," good public education will continue to be rationed as a scarce commodity and the familiar pernicious patterns of inequity will be assured, with the advantaged protecting their privilege and those less socially powerful continuing to get shortchanged.

Notes

1. Academy for Commerce and Industry and Academy for Public Safety are pseudonyms.
2. We know PNA well from our work at the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching at Teachers College, a strategic partner to the Institute for Student Achievement, one of the school redesign organizations supporting small high school development in New York City.
3. The DOE is also expanding the number of high schools that will be able to become "Empowerment Schools" from fifty-eight to over three hundred. In Empowerment Schools, school staff agree to increased accountability in exchange for increased fiscal autonomy and relief from DOE professional development mandates perceived as undermining to the rich development of their theme (NYC DOE, 2006c).
4. These data are for all of the new small schools because the DOE does not disaggregate data by theme schools.

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