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4,100 Students Prove ‘Small Is Better’ Rule Wrong

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BROCKTON, Mass. — A decade ago, Brockton High School was a case study in failure. Teachers and administrators often voiced the unofficial school motto in hallway chitchat: students have a right to fail if they want. And many of them did — only a quarter of the students passed statewide exams. One in three dropped out.

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All Brockton teachers, including Bob Perkins, the math chairman, incorporate writing lessons. More Photos »

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Then Susan Szachowicz and a handful of fellow teachers decided to take action. They persuaded administrators to let them organize a schoolwide campaign that involved reading and writing lessons into every class in all subjects, including gym.

Their efforts paid off quickly. In 2001 testing, more students passed the state tests after failing the year before than at any other school in Massachusetts. The gains continued. This year and last, Brockton outperformed 90 percent of Massachusetts high schools. And its turnaround is getting new attention in a report, “How High Schools Become Exemplary,” published last month by Ronald F. Ferguson, an economist at Harvard who researches the minority achievement gap.

What makes Brockton High’s story surprising is that, with 4,100 students, it is an exception to what has become received wisdom in many educational circles — that small is almost always better.

That is why the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation spent hundreds of millions of dollars in the last decade breaking down big schools into small academies (it has since switched strategies, focusing more on instruction).

The small-is-better orthodoxy remains powerful. A new movie, “Waiting for Superman,” for example, portrays five charter schools in New York, Los Angeles and elsewhere — most with only a few hundred students — as the way forward for American schooling.

Brockton, by contrast, is the largest public school in Massachusetts, and one of the largest in the nation.

At education conferences, Dr. Szachowicz — who became Brockton’s principal in 2004 — still gets approached by small-school advocates who tell her they are skeptical that a 4,100-student school could offer a decent education.

“I tell them we’re a big school that works,“ said Dr. Szachowicz, whose booming voice makes her seem taller than 5-foot-6 as she walks the hallways, greeting students, walkie-talkie in hand.

She and other teachers took action in part because academic catastrophe seemed to be looming, Dr. Szachowicz and several of her colleagues said in interviews here. Massachusetts had instituted a new high school exit exam in 1993, and passing it would be required to graduate a decade later. Unless the school’s culture improved, some 750 seniors would be denied a diploma each year, starting in 2003.

Dr. Szachowicz and Paul Laurino, then the head of the English department — he has since retired — began meeting on Saturdays with any colleagues they could pull together to brainstorm strategies for improving the school.

Shame was an early motivator, especially after the release of the 1999 test scores.

“They were horrible,” Dr. Szachowicz recalled. She painted them in bold letters on poster paper in the group’s Saturday meeting room.

“Is this the best we can be?” she wrote underneath.

The group eventually became known as the school restructuring committee, and the administration did not stand in the way. The principal “just let it happen,” the Harvard report says.

The committee’s first big step was to go back to basics, and deem that reading, writing, speaking and reasoning were the most important skills to teach. They set out to recruit every educator in the building — not just English, but math, science, even guidance counselors — to teach those skills to students.

The committee put together a rubric to help teachers understand what good writing looks like, and began devoting faculty meetings to teaching department heads how to use it. The school’s 300 teachers were then trained in small groups.

Writing exercises took many forms, but encouraged students to think methodically. A science teacher, for example, had her students write out, step by step, how to make a sandwich, starting with opening the cupboard to fetch the peanut butter, through washing the knife once the sandwich was made. Other writing exercises, of course, were much more sophisticated.

Some teachers dragged their feet. Michael Thomas, now the district’s operations director but who led the school’s physical education department at the time, recalled that several of his teachers told him, “This is gym; we shouldn’t have to teach writing.” Mr. Thomas said he replied, “If you want to work at Brockton High, it’s your job.”

Fear held some teachers back — fear of wasting time on what could be just another faddish reform, fear of a heavier workload — and committee members tried to help them surmount it.

“Let me help you,” was a response committee members said they often offered to reluctant colleagues who argued that some requests were too difficult.

The first big boost came with the results of the spring 2001 tests. Although Brockton’s scores were still unacceptably low, they had risen sharply. The state education commissioner, David P. Driscoll, traveled to Brockton to congratulate the school’s cheering students and faculty.

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“It had become dogma that smaller was better, but there was no evidence,” said Mr. Driscoll, who since 2007 has headed the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees federal testing. “In schools, no matter the size — and Brockton is one of the biggest — what matters is uniting people behind a common purpose, setting high expectations, and sticking with it.”

After that early triumph, remaining resistance among the faculty gave way, Dr. Szachowicz said. Overnight, the restructuring committee gained enormous credibility, and scores of once-reluctant teachers wanted to start attending its Saturday meetings, which continue today.

Brockton never fired large numbers of teachers, in contrast with current federal policy, which encourages failing schools to consider replacing at least half of all teachers to reinvigorate instruction.

But Dr. Szachowicz and her colleagues did make some teachers uncomfortable, and at least one teacher who refused to participate in the turnaround was eventually dismissed after due process hearings.

Teachers unions have resisted turnaround efforts at many schools. But at Brockton, the union never became a serious adversary, in part because most committee members were unionized teachers, and the committee scrupulously honored the union contract.

An example: the contract set aside two hours per month for teacher meetings, previously used to discuss mundane school business. The committee began dedicating those to teacher training, and made sure they never lasted a minute beyond the time allotted.

“Dr. Szachowicz takes the contract seriously, and we’ve worked together within its parameters,” said Tim Sullivan, who was president of the local teachers union through much of the last decade.

The committee changed many rules and policies.

The school had an elaborate tracking system, for instance, that channeled students into one of five academic paths. It was largely eliminated because the “basic” courses set low expectations for poor-performing students.

The committee worked to boost the aspirations of students, 69 percent of whom qualify for free lunches because of their families’ low incomes. Teachers were urged to make sure students heard the phrase, “When you go to college ...” in every class, every day.

When the school began receiving academic awards, they were made into banners and displayed prominently.

Athletics had traditionally been valued above academic success, and coaches had routinely pressured teachers to raise the grades of star players to maintain their eligibility. Dr. Szachowicz said she put an end to any exceptions.

But the school retained all varsity sports, as well as its several bands and choruses, extensive drama program and scores of student clubs.

Many students consider the school’s size — as big as many small colleges — and its diverse student body (mostly minority), to be points in its favor, rather than problems.

“You meet a new person every day,” said Johanne Alexandre, a senior whose mother is Haitian. “Somebody with a new story, a new culture. I have Pakistani friends, Brazilians, Haitians, Asians, Cape Verdeans. There are Africans, Guatemalans.”

“There’s a couple of Americans, too!” Tercia Mota, a senior born in Brazil, offered. “But there aren’t cliques. Take a look at the lunch table.”

“You can’t say, those are the jocks, those are the preppy cheerleaders, those are the geeks,” Ms. Mota said. “Everything is blended, everybody’s friends with everyone.”

Over the years, Brockton has refined its literacy curriculum. Bob Perkins, the math department chairman, used a writing lesson last week in his Introduction to Algebra II class. He wrote “$3 + 7^2 - 6 \times 3 - 11$” on the board, then asked students to solve the problem in their workbooks and to explain their reasoning, step by step, in simple sentences.

“I did the exponents first and squared the 7,” wrote Sharon Peterson, a junior. “I multiplied 6 x 3. I added 3 + 49, and combined 18 and 11, because they were both negatives. I ended up with 52-29. The final answer was 23.”

Some students had more trouble, and the lesson seemed to drag a bit.

“This is taking longer than I expected, but it’s not wasted time,” Mr. Perkins said. “They’re learning math, but they’re also learning to write.”

Brockton’s performance is not as stellar in math as in English language arts, and the committee has hired an outside consultant to help develop strategies for improving math instruction, Mr. Perkins said.

Dr. Ferguson said Brockton High first “jumped out of the data” for him early last year. He was examining Massachusetts’ 2008 test scores in his office in Cambridge, and noticed that Brockton had done a better

job than 90 percent of the state's 350 high schools helping its students to improve their language arts scores.

Since then, he has visited Brockton intermittently and invited some of its faculty to the Harvard campus for interviews. The report he wrote with four other Harvard researchers includes an analysis of exemplary performance not only at Brockton, but also at 14 other schools in five states.

The report noted one characteristic shared by all: "Achievement rose when leadership teams focused thoughtfully and relentlessly on improving the quality of instruction."

Brockton was by far the largest, but only five of the exemplary schools had fewer than 1,000 students, while six had more than 1,700 and two in Illinois had more than 3,000.

"I never bought into the dogma that a huge school can't be great," Dr. Ferguson said