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4,100 Students Prove 'Small Is Better' Rule Wrong

By SAM DILLON

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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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Michele McDonald for The New York Times
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.

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“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.

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