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Backlash Builds Against the "Small Schools" Project in Lebanon, Oregon

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Once-popular, quiet backlash builds against small schools

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LEBANON, Ore. -- Hopes were high in this small Oregon city two years ago when the local high school, dogged for years by a worrisome dropout rate, formally broke up into four small schools-within-a-school.

AP Photo

Lebanon High School journalism students Dallas Oeder, left, Hannah Bartlett and Jennie Marshall, right, discuss a page layout as the school year comes to a close in Lebanon, Ore.

The small schools movement was all the rage in school districts across the country, and had a powerful financial godfather in Microsoft founder Bill Gates, who has consistently called for sweeping reforms in the nation's high schools.

But just two years later, the future of small schools in Lebanon is in jeopardy, with a Gates-backed nonprofit pulling a grant of hundreds of thousands of dollars from the district after students, parents and teachers across the district complained about the change.

Similar disenchantment with small schools has cropped up across the country, in districts including San Francisco, Denver and Milwaukee, in the first small signs of a fledgling backlash against small schools, a concept that's been spreading rapidly since its beginnings in urban districts like New York City and Oakland, Calif.

In Lebanon, scheduling problems abounded, frustrating teachers who were already skeptical after years of seeing new fads in education tried, then discarded. Test scores and other academic indicators haven't budged, and there were widespread fears that the school was fragmenting too fast, a particularly touchy subject in a smaller city where community is forged on the football field and at graduation ceremonies.

"We made a mistake trying to push autonomy really hard, and the community blew back at us" said Mark Whitson, a journalism teacher in the "information technology" academy at Lebanon High School. "Parents want us to slow our pace of change until they know what we are doing. They are waiting to come back to this high school."

The idea behind small schools conversion is simple: Students in large, anonymous high schools are separated into groups of about 300 apiece, often according to academic interest, and go through high school together, with the same group of teachers for all four years. The idea is for teachers to get to know students beyond just a name that disappears after nine months slouching at the back of the classroom.

In practice, the concept has made for some bumpy transitions. In San Francisco, the Gates foundation reduced its financial support of seven small schools in the city's Unified school district this year, resulting in some public grousing that the district had never created a master plan for the schools. The Denver Public School system closed down a small-schools academy there after disagreements over how much autonomy should be granted to the school.

And in Milwaukee, two high schools that had gone small lost a combined $300,000 in grant money, after officials from a local nonprofit organization administering the Gates funding said they hadn't created a "rigorous and relevant" curriculum.

In Lebanon, trouble over the small schools began almost immediately. Students were upset at being separated from friends who had been assigned to other "learning academies", annoyed that they could no longer arrange to be in a particular teacher's classroom, and worried that their choice of courses had been narrowed.

"It really ticked me off," said Dallas Oeder, 16. "I couldn't take all the classes I wanted to."

Parents also fretted that their children were being asked to make decisions about their potential future career paths at the tender age of 14. And in a town where grandfathers and fathers once went to work in the mills straight out of high school, there was outrage that the high school's new incarnation was more focused on collegiate prep classes, and less on vocational education.

Clara Hemphill, the director of insideschools.org, a project of Advocates for Children of New York, said troubles can begin with what she called "small schools in drag," or schools that are small in physical design only.

"It sometimes happens when you impose change from the top," she said. "The school becomes these four 'Groovy Academies for Esoteric Studies,' but the kids still call it 'Roosevelt' or whatever. The teachers aren't really interested and the building stays the same, and they just rename the floors. What does work is when teachers and principals are enthusiastic about the change and want to change the culture."

Even the biggest local boosters of small schools, like Lebanon Superintendent Jim Robinson, concede that some changes will need to be made, like restoring some vocational emphasis. Still, Robinson said Lebanon will forge ahead, even without the Gates grant.

"They walked. We are staying with it," he said. "My personal opinion is that they skated too quickly. It never feels good to have people give up on you, especially when we are on the cusp of seeing people risk more of themselves."

Others are not so certain. School board chair Rick Alexander said he had long been concerned about the higher administrative costs that small schools bring, since each of the schools-within-a-school has its own principal, and with replication of core curriculum courses in each of the four academies.

"The Gates Foundation is not going to throw good money after bad," Alexander said.

Still, some at Lebanon High School and elsewhere say that losing the Gates money may be a blessing in disguise.

"It's like losing a ball and chain," said Whitson, the journalism teacher. "Teachers were always out of the building, going to professional development workshops or doing reports."

The small schools movement has posted some high-profile successes -- in New York City, for example, the graduation rate shot up to 73 percent at the 15 small schools in the district this year. But Marie Groark, a senior policy adviser at the foundation, said going small is not "a magic bullet."

Early results do clearly indicate that small schools that are starting from scratch will have an easier time than school conversions like Lebanon, she said.

"In cities where things for some reason or another things haven't gone as planned, in large part it is because somewhere along the way, there wasn't full support," she said. "There's a finite amount of dollars to work with. Sooner or later you have to fish or cut bait."