

small talk

The Newsletter of The Worcester Education Partnership

SPRING 2003

From Superintendent James Caradonio

We are pleased to send you our inaugural issue of *Small Talk*, a newsletter designed to highlight the wonderful achievements of our city's innovative small schools initiative. Our small schools emphasize literacy instruction, individualized attention, high standards and flexibility to respond to the specific needs of each student. Most importantly, through the Worcester Education Partnership our small schools are serving as a catalyst to strengthen

our relationships with parents and the community so we can all work together on the same common goal: helping every student in Worcester to achieve and grow to his or her fullest potential. I am grateful for the dedication of our teachers, students, parents and community leaders who have made Worcester a national model in high school reform.

James Caradonio
Superintendent

Small Schools Already Yielding Results

They're still brand new, but small schools are already making a big difference in Worcester.

Students, parents and teachers say that small schools are providing students with a more personal education and special training that can better prepare them for college.

Worcester's innovative small school initiative is one of only seven in the country funded by the prestigious Carnegie Corporation, which has invested \$8 million in the project. The five-year project was launched last year.

The schools are new this year, with one exception – the University Park Campus School (UPCS), which opened in 1997 and is serving as a model for the other small schools.

All eligible students at UPCS passed their MCAS tests in 2002 and not a single student has dropped out of the program. In addition, all of the seniors have been accepted at post-secondary institutions, including some of the country's top colleges.

"Statistically, this defies the odds," according to Tom Del Prete, Ed.D., Carnegie Project Director at Clark University's Hiatt Center for Urban Education. "Only a handful of schools in the entire state have achieved a 100% passing grade on their MCAS and very few have all of their seniors continuing their education. That's the promise that can be fulfilled in the small learning communities that are developing in high schools throughout Worcester."

Superintendent James Caradonio said he is hopeful that Worcester's other small schools, which are being funded with the Carnegie grant and local matching funds, will also show significant improvements. "Combined with more personalized teaching, our small learning communities will ensure that we can help more students reach high levels of achievement," he said.

Matching funds include support from the Stoddard Foundation, the Fletcher Foundation, the Alden Foundation, Fleet Bank and the Central Massachusetts Health Foundation. The Carnegie program is supported in part by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Worcester's grant was made to the Worcester Education Partnership (WEP), a community-wide partnership developed by Clark University's Hiatt Center for Urban Education and the Worcester School District to support high-school reform in Worcester.

"The Carnegie grants were born out of the idea that urban education needs to be more effective, for all students," Del Prete said. "Small learning communities are part of an emerging vision of what high school can be. We're on the leading edge of national reform."

Del Prete added that the high-school reform program is in keeping with the purpose of the Hiatt Center and fulfills the legacy of Jacob Hiatt, the late Worcester philanthropist who provided funding for the Hiatt Center. ♦

What Makes a School Small?

The move toward small schools represents the most significant change in Worcester public schools in decades. But what makes a school small? The New England Small Schools Network uses the following criteria:

Smallness. As the name implies, small schools have fewer students than other schools. The typical small school has 300 to 350 students, compared with an enrollment of 1,100 to 1,600 at the typical Worcester school.

Their smaller size makes it easier for teachers and administrators to get to know their students well and to have a greater influence on their education.

Unifying Vision. Students, teachers, administrators, parents and community members at each small school are united in achieving the same goals.

For example, South High's Information Technology Academy focuses on technology as a learning tool to teach interdisciplinary courses. Students at Doherty's Engineering Pipeline explore connections between math, technology and science, while the Co-Nect Academy at the A.L.L. School uses community partnerships and a mentoring program to educate students in either communications technology, or law and government.

"We do not want to reproduce big schools in a small setting," Del Prete said. "Our mission is to create schools that prepare all students for higher education. We want to make certain that they not only have a good education, but that they have a real opportunity for a meaningful family and community life."

Flexibility. While sharing resources of the Worcester School Department, such as transportation and facilities, the small schools have increased flexibility in how



they can be used, based on what will best meet student needs.

Accountability. Members of the school community—parents, students, administrators and teachers—are held responsible for the quality of the education they provide. In addition to MCAS test results, schools are judged based on other quality reviews and assessment measures. ♦

The Future Every Student Deserves

Why do small schools work?

For one thing, Jane Grady, the District Coordinator working on the project, said that in a smaller setting, students can be shown that, "It's cool to be smart." Attitude in any school is contagious. Once a core group of students has a positive attitude, there is peer pressure for other students to perform well. Conversely, in some schools, a negative attitude and a feeling that being smart is not cool have a detrimental impact on student performance.

"Students like small schools because the teachers know them better and work with them more"

In addition, according to Grady, when a school is small, "you can't hide." Teachers can better track which students are performing well and do something about those who are not.

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Learning to Read, Reading to Learn

The ability to read is probably the most basic requirement for success in any job. Yet students who need help with reading are often embarrassed to admit it and may even try to hide their shortcomings.

The Worcester Public Schools and the Hiatt Center are working together to improve literacy among Worcester high school students as part of the **Fleet Secondary Literacy Development Program**, made possible by a grant from Fleet Bank. Literacy coaches were appointed for each school last spring, and met with a new district literacy coach and Hiatt Center staff to discuss the requirements for a literacy program.

The result was a 25-hour professional development program held last summer that was attended by teachers from each school. Teachers developed literacy programs designed for each school's needs. Common elements include:

Group discussions. Literature circles and book clubs give students from different backgrounds an opportunity to discuss literature from many different perspectives.

Book choice. When students choose the books they want to read, the books are more likely to hold their interest. Books such as, " Gifted Hands" and "Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens: The Ultimate Teenage Success Guide," by Sean Covey have been especially well received.

Reading and writing workshops. Workshops are being held to teach students the fundamentals of reading



and writing. Students who understand how to write will be better able to read, and vice versa.

"Literacy development is about helping students build confidence as readers, writers and thinkers," according to Lisa Dyer, the district literacy coach working on the initiative. She adds, "They're not just learning how to read, but learning how to make reading meaningful and productive." ♦

The Future Every Student Deserves

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"Students tell us they like small schools because the teachers know them better and work with them more," Grady said.

"It's cool to be smart."

She adds, "They tell us that the principal knows them and keeps them performing to a high standard. They say, 'My teachers believe in me. They believe I can learn.' "

That's why, Del Prete said, small schools can create "the future every student deserves." ♦

LA Times Notes Program's Success

Here's what *The Los Angeles Times* had to say about the University Park Campus School:

"The seniors boast an attendance rate of 98% – and dropout, suspension and expulsion rates of zero. ... The 12th grade class also made University Park one of a handful of Massachusetts high schools to score 100% passage rates on the state's demanding mandatory achievement test."

Along with Clark and various state schools, students have been accepted at Boston College, Dartmouth, Brown, Tufts and Georgetown University.

The Many Sides of Small Schools

Everyone has a different perspective on the small schools program. Here is what students, parents and teachers had to say about the small learning communities in their schools.

Parents

Gomez has Two Perspectives on Small Schools

Maureen Gomez gets to see the small schools program from two different perspectives – as an attorney advocating for children and as a parent with a freshman enrolled in the Information Technology Academy at South High Community School.

“It’s made a great difference for my oldest son, Eric,” she said. “When he was in middle school, he was a C-B student. Now he’s an A-B student. He has much more enthusiasm now.”

One reason for his increased enthusiasm is the exposure to computers he enjoys at the IT Academy, she said, but he has also benefited because of the dedication of his teachers and administrators.

“I’m impressed by the commitment that the teachers and the administration have,” she said. “My son is the type of child who, if he has a teacher he’s interested in, he’ll do well in that class. What’s making the program work is the combination of commitment and dedication the teachers have to the program, and the smaller size.”

“Many of the students have turned around, they’re more engaged in their education.”

She also likes the way computers are integrated into all of her son’s classes. He worked on a multi-media project, for example, showing the impact of climates and geography on animals in different regions.

“I went to a parent-teacher meeting and they used his project as an example,” Ms. Gomez said. “He was asked questions about his project and he was able to answer them on the spot. I was proud of him.”

She also praised the school for the level of communication between parents and teachers.

“They’re really trying to involve the parents,” she said. “There are numerous opportunities where you can go to the school at any time and talk to the teachers. There are a lot of night meetings. There’s training for



the parents. I’ve gone to three meetings, including one about a governance board for the parents.”

The program is working not only for her son, but also for her clients.

“Many of the students have turned around,” she said. “They’re more engaged in their education.”

Engineering Academy Provides Supportive Environment

The scale model that James McNamara created of the Elm Park Bridge in Worcester can be viewed from many different perspectives.

It is a work of art, complementing the Monet print of a bridge and water lilies that hangs next to it in the McNamara home. It is an engineering project and a geometry project, with a rounded arch, just like the original, and a history project from America’s oldest park.

But the bridge is also a symbolic bridge, connecting the work James carried out as a student at Forest Grove

Middle School with his work at Doherty High School's Engineering and Technology Academy. Both schools group students in "clusters," so that they learn together throughout the year. Teachers at both schools also meet frequently to discuss each child's progress.

"The teachers know the students better, and the teachers are enthusiastic"

"He enjoyed the bridge project," according to his mother, Jane McNamara, who is a guidance counselor at Forest Grove. "When he finished it, he said, 'That was a lot of fun to do.' "

How can a school provide an education that even a ninth-grade boy considers to be "fun?" Ms. McNamara uses another bridge word to describe the Engineering Academy – supportive.

"It's very personalized," she said. "The teachers know the students better, and the teachers are enthusiastic. As a parent, I like the idea that the teachers meet with us frequently."

She also believes the academy can provide an important advantage to students who may be interested in engineering. In addition to learning about the field, they will have an opportunity to find out whether engineering is a profession they would like to pursue.

"Students have a choice," she said. "As a guidance counselor, having a son in the Engineering Academy, I can explain it to the students. Some are thrilled about the opportunity. I'm very positive about it. I think it's terrific that public schools are offering it."

Teachers

Health Science Academy Warrants Sunny Prediction

The Health Science Academy is still new at North High School, but, based on experience to date, former meteorologist Joseph Marzilli sees sunny skies ahead for the academy.

A physics teacher, Marzilli was part of the team that developed the Health Science Academy and he is part of the team that is developing two additional small schools within North High. The new schools will include the Business, Communication, Design Academy and the Community Academy.

"There's a pathway that's unique to each school," he said, "but students are allowed to cross over. If some-

one should want to take a physics course and they're in the business academy, they could come into the Health Science Academy. We don't want to limit choices."

He describes the separate schools as "states" within "North Nation."

"We want this school to be a family," he said. "We'll keep the traditions we're proud of, yet we'll have three pathways to offer. It will give the students a chance to receive a comprehensive education, as well as to take internships at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, among other things."

Smaller size allows teachers and students to work closely together and to pursue multidisciplinary projects. A project on the '60s, for example, included a study of space and the first moon landing, the Cuban missile crisis, and '60s fashions and music. Such a project could not be carried out in a school of 1,200, but it became doable in the academy, which includes 300 of the school's students.

"The Carnegie grant is training teachers in new ways to teach," Marzilli said. "We're allowed to do a lot more than lecture. There's more hands-on, cooperative learning. We're breaking down the walls of the classroom and inviting the community to help us teach."

"We're a family of learners dedicated to excellence"

Marzilli, who began his career as a meteorologist, was a parochial school teacher for seven years before becoming a physics teacher at North High, where he has taught for the past 10 years. He credits Principal Betsy Drake and the staff at North High for bringing high standards to the school, which now reports MCAS scores that are among the area's best.

"We're a family of learners dedicated to excellence," he said. "It's not just words."

Upward Mobility Common at Patriot Academy

Since the beginning of the school year, as many as 30 students at Burncoat High School's Patriot Academy of Math and Science have advanced to honors-level courses.

What's motivated these 10th graders to achieve a higher level of academic performance? Other students, according to Ian Griffin, a 10th grade English teacher at the academy.

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The Many Sides of Small Schools

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"We have the ability to bring together a level one class and an honors class – to mix them up and see what happens," Griffin said. "We've found that they become more serious. The students get to know each other. They make friends and some of the level one students become motivated enough to move up to honors classes."

In addition to combining classes, Griffin and the team of teachers he works with sometimes combine subjects and let the class run through two periods.

"What I like about it is that they teach what you really need for college"

"We're trying to be as nontraditional as we can within our school," Griffin said. "When we have an interdisciplinary lesson, we can even ignore bells."

Without bells to interrupt class, the class can debate literature, students can give presentations and literary circles can be organized. Literary circles use brainstorming to involve students and get them to relate to literature.

"We'll have literary circles," Griffin said, "and I'll ask the students, 'What else does this remind you of?' or 'What are you thinking?'"

During a discussion of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, for example, they discussed the idea of Brutus and Caesar being friends before Brutus killed Caesar because of his political beliefs.

"One student compared them to Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G., the two rappers who were killed, and I thought that was a good comparison," Griffin said. "They were both powerful people and one didn't like what the other was doing. Talking about them helped get the students interested and helped them understand *Julius Caesar*."

For the small school concept to work, Griffin said he and the team of teachers he works with have to be able to work together well.

"My only experience teaching has been with teams," he said. "With a small school, we're a lot less alienated than the rest of the staff. There are always four other people you can talk to about your students."

Students

Cardiologist-in-Training at Health Science Academy

Karine Holan may still be a sophomore, but it's not too early to think of her as a cardiologist-in-training.

A sophomore at North High School's Health Science Academy, she can often be found in the library at the UMass Medical School.

"Since I was little, I've always liked science and school," she said. "I still really like science. I'm interested in how the body forms. I'm interested in how cells, and the heart and muscles work."

Karine believes she is getting the education she needs to become a cardiologist by attending the Health Science Academy.

“What I like about it is that they teach what you really need for college,” she said. “I want to go to medical school and I’m learning the science. That will give me an advantage over other students.”

A native of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, her family moved to the United States five years ago because her father thought she and her four brothers would have more

“I love the teachers, they listen to you and give you advice.”

opportunity in America than they would in Brazil. She was speaking English within a year.

“It was not difficult to adapt,” she said, with barely a trace of an accent. “I had friends in school when I started. They helped and my teacher helped, too.”

When she has found it challenging to learn increasingly difficult subjects taught in a language that is new to her, her teachers have offered both help and encouragement.

“I love the teachers,” she said. “Even if you’re not in their class, if you have a problem, they listen to you and give you advice.”

*Writing Papers No Longer Difficult
for IT Academy Student*

Being a big kid with a twin brother, Nicholas Beltre was able to handle the sometimes-difficult social aspects of being a student in New York City. It wasn’t the dangers of the city that made him nervous, but the prospect of writing papers for school.

Now, as a student at South High School’s Information Technology Academy, Nick has no problem writing papers. He has learned graphic arts, word processing and spreadsheet programs, so when he has to write a paper, he can make it look good and write it more quickly than he used to.

His self-confidence and his grades have both improved. He also feels fortunate to have an opportunity to learn about computers while still a freshman.

“I want to work in computer programming or computer maintenance,” he said. “This is giving me a head start on a career.”



Born in San Pedro de Macoris in the Dominican Republic, Nick moved to New York City in 1994. His family moved to Worcester because “my grandparents moved here. We came, because it’s quiet compared

“I like the smallness, we get to know the teachers and they get to know us.”

with New York.” His father’s job took Nick’s family to Lubbock and San Antonio, Texas, but he returned to Worcester last year.

Unlike New York City, he said, “Here, you can walk the streets and no one bothers you. They just say, ‘Hi.’ ” And while teachers in New York City were focused on discipline, the teachers at the IT Academy take more time with each student.

“I like the smallness,” he said. “We get to know the teachers and they get to know us.”

While computers are Nick’s first interest, his favorite class is history. He is especially interested in Texas’ fight for independence. When he’s not in school, he enjoys reading science fiction and fantasy books. ♦

Worcester Education Partnership

Planned High School Small Learning Communities Grades 9-12

School Site

Planned Small Learning Community

*A.L.L. School
Burncoat*

The Co-Nect Academy
Patriot Academy of Math and Science
Fine Arts Academy
Academy of Business and Finance

Comprehensive Skills Center

Comprehensive Skills Center (Grades 10-12)

*Doherty High School
North High School*

Engineering Academy
The Health Science Academy
The School of Social Systems and Justice
School of Technology and Business

School Site

Planned Small Learning Community

South High School

Information Technology Academy
Academy of Education, Service and Government
The Academy of Art and Humanities

Vocational-Technical School

Information Technology Academy
Allied Health Academy
Alden Academy
Construction Academy



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