

Getting Started: Small-schools Design and Implementation (from the NESSN Planning Manual)

Following is a guide for districts and schools to plan small schools. Each district will take its unique path to developing small schools, but there are some common elements that all districts should consider. While the steps are presented sequentially, districts may choose a different sequence that suits them. Indeed, some districts may already be well on their way in small-schools design and even implementation; this guide can then serve as a checklist to assess progress. In using this guide, districts should also refer to the NESSN Planning Manual to assist in each step, as well as to the NESSN Principles and Autonomies.

As districts and schools use this guide, consider the following:

Ensure Representation of Key Constituencies on Leadership and Design Teams. Small schools cannot be created in isolation from those who will be affected by them. The design of small schools will have greater integrity when crafted with the input of many. Including diverse representation of key constituencies on the district Leadership Team and school-level Design Teams ensures that diverse voices are crafting the new small schools.

Ensure Regular Communication and Opportunities for Input of the Entire School Community. Small schools will be successful when they build support among all the constituencies of the school community – faculty, administration, families, students, and the larger community. While representation helps to accomplish this, everyone involved needs to be regularly apprised

of the process of small-schools development and its benefits, and have opportunities to provide input into shaping the evolving models.

The NESSN Autonomies are Crucial to the Success of Small Schools. The New England Small Schools Network believes that smallness enables greater personalization and conditions that enable high-quality teaching to occur—but small alone is not enough. In order for small schools to attain their individual visions of excellence, they need to have autonomy over critical conditions of schooling, including budget, staffing, curriculum/assessment, governance and policies, and time. This flexibility enables small schools to craft educational experiences that best meet the needs of the diverse students that they serve.

In the End, It Is All About Learning, Teaching, and Assessment. Smallness and autonomies enable schools to focus on the essence of the educational experience for students – learning, teaching, and assessment. Small schools strive to ensure that learning is purposeful, challenging, and has value in the world beyond school. Every student is engaged in learning experiences that ensure students are fully prepared to be productive citizens in a democratic society.

Timeline for Small-schools Design and Implementation

The chart below suggests a timeline for NESSN Design activities to be conducted at school and district levels in order to implement the design.

Design Activity
At the District Level
Establish a district-wide Small Schools Leadership Team to develop a district plan and to pursue the NESSN autonomies.
Develop a district plan for small schools.
Build community support for small schools.
Deliver a clear message to the community on the district's path.
At the School Level
For large school conversions:
Create a design team to guide the conversion. Decide on the framework for the small schools (e.g., theme or philosophy), size, enrollment process, and faculty assignment process (steps d-e below).
For small schools, either single or sharing a facility:
a. Create a planning team for each small school.
b. Develop a vision and design for the small school.
c. Partner with a NESSN founding school.
d. Decide on the student enrollment process.
e. Decide on the selection/assignment process for the school leadership and faculty.
f. Develop a partnership with a NESSN founding school.
g. Design the governance and leadership for the small school.
h. Construct the curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
i. Create the schedule and student groupings.
j. Design the personalized culture of the school
k. Design the professional collaborative culture of the school
l. Plan family and community partnerships.

Steps to Consider in Small-schools Design and Implementation

At the District Level

Establish a district-wide Small Schools Leadership Team to develop a district plan and to pursue the NESSN autonomies. The five NESSN autonomies – staffing, budget, curriculum and assessment, governance and policies, and school calendar for faculty and students – are critical to the success of small schools. Each district should create a district-wide NESSN Team to pursue gaining these autonomies for the projected small schools. The team should consist of those district staff who have authority over the five autonomies (e.g., budget director, human resources director, NESSN coordinator, curriculum coordinator), teacher union representation, and representation from each of the proposed small schools (or, to keep numbers down, representation from each large school to be converted into small schools). The goal is to gain the same level of autonomies for each of the proposed small schools in the district. The team will deal with some areas that merely need Superintendent and/or School Committee approval (e.g., some areas of the budget, curriculum and assessment, governance and policies), while others may also need teacher union approval (e.g., some areas of the budget, staffing, and school calendar). The initial autonomies that each small school will receive should be defined by the June prior to a September start-up date.

Questions to Consider:

- *Staffing:* To what extent will each small school be provided with staffing autonomy to hire and excess staff, and to decide on the staffing pattern that best meets the needs of the school?
- *Budget:* To what extent will each small school be provided with a lump sum, per-pupil budget over which the school has discretion to spend to provide the best services to students and their families?
- *Curriculum and Assessment:* To what extent will each small school have freedom to set its curriculum and graduation requirements?

- *Governance and Policies:* To what extent will each small school have increased governing authority over budget approval, principal selection and firing, and programs and policies?
- *School Calendar:* To what extent will each small school have the freedom to set longer school days and years for both students and faculty, with a particular focus on creating greater time for faculty to meet?

Develop a district plan for small schools. This plan should articulate a rationale, design, and timeline for creating small schools in the district. The plan should articulate each of the small schools and its basic construct and philosophy. For large school conversions, the plan should articulate the small schools to be housed within the larger school facility. There should be a defined roll-out plan for each of the district’s small schools.

Question to Consider:

- *Key Tenets to the Plan:* Is the plan clear to the public?

Build community support for small schools. Small schools are not necessarily what most adults have experienced; in particular, adults are most familiar with the large, comprehensive high school. They may not see the immediate benefits of small secondary schools. Each NESSN district should have a plan for building community support for small schools. This could include community forums, newsletters sent to families, and business roundtables. The research on small schools needs to be shared in lay terms, as well as include district data revealing that significant student populations are not currently being served well with large schools.

Question to Consider:

- *Building Support:* How will this plan build community support for small schools?

Deliver a clear message to the community on where the district’s path. In order to build momentum and commitment to the transition to small schools, a strong message needs to be given to the larger school community stating the district’s intent to move to small schools (e.g., how many in which facilities), the reasons why, the plan for district

roll-out of small schools, and the timeline, as well as a commitment to seek public input along the way. This message is best delivered by the Superintendent and is especially critical in building faculty commitment to small schools.

Question to Consider:

- *Community Message:* What is the critical message that you want to communicate to the community?

At the School Level

For Large School Conversions:

Create a design team to guide the conversion. This team should comprise representative faculty constituencies in the school, as well as district representation. This team should be responsible for deciding how many small schools there will be, the guiding framework for each small school (e.g., theme or philosophy), the size of each small school, the student enrollment process (see step d below), and the faculty selection/assignment process (see step e below).

Questions to Consider:

- *Design Team Composition:* Who will the Design Team consist of? What constituencies will be represented? How big will the team be? How will members be selected?
- *Role of the Design Team:* What will be the charge of the Design Team (e.g., developing a design framework for breaking down a large school into smaller schools)? What are the parameters of the Design Team (e.g., their role is completed once the design is finished and approved)?
- *Communication and Involvement with Key Constituencies:* Who are the key constituencies that need to be kept informed and have opportunities for input? How will you ensure that these constituencies are regularly informed about the Design Team's progress? At what key junctures will you gain their input, and how will you do this?

- *Timeline:* What is the timeline for developing the design plan? For gaining input from key constituencies?
- *Design Framework:* How many small schools will there be? What size will each small school be? What will be the guiding framework for each small school (e.g., theme or philosophy)? What will be the student selection process for each small school that ensures equitable enrollment across race, income, and achievement (see step d below)? What will be the faculty selection/assignment process for each small school that ensures each small school has a core group of faculty committed to the vision of their particular small school (see step e below)?

For Small Schools, Either Free-standing or Sharing a Larger Facility:

a. Create a design team for each small school. Each small school to be created should have a Design Team that guides the design phase through to the launching of the small school. This Design Team could consist of the new small schools leader, faculty who will be working in the small school, and prospective parents and students. Alternatively, instead of having students and parents on the team, the team could conduct focus groups for parents and students to gain their input. Ultimately, the team should consist of 7-10 members. The Design Team is responsible for guiding all aspects of small-school design, through to implementation (e.g., vision, governance, teaching and learning, professional support, family and community partnerships).

Questions to Consider:

- *Design Team Composition:* Who will the Design Team consist of? What constituencies will be represented? How big will the team be? How will members be selected? Are members of the Design Team automatically members of the new small school (in most cases, yes)?
- *Role of the Design Team:* What will be the charge of the Design Team (e.g., developing a design for a designated small school within a large building, developing a design for a small, free-standing school)? What are the parameters of the Design Team (e.g., their role is completed once the design is finished and approved)?

- *Communication and Involvement with Key Constituencies:* Who are the key constituencies that need to be kept informed and have opportunities for input? How will you ensure that these constituencies are regularly informed about the Design Team’s progress? At what key junctures will you gain their input, and how will you do this?
- *Timeline:* What is the timeline for establishing the Design Team? For developing the design plan? For gaining input from key constituencies?

b. Develop a vision and design for the small school. Each small school should have a coherent, well-articulated vision of what the school represents, and what students are expected to achieve. The vision should be shaped by and reflect the NESSN Principles for small schools. This should be developed by the planning team, with wide input. Once developed, it should be manifest in all documents created for the school (e.g., handbook, curriculum guide, orientation material), and present in the small-school’s decision-making, policy development, instructional practices, and other planning.

Question to Consider:

- *What is the vision for your school that will drive all aspects of the school?*

c. Develop a partnership with a NESSN founding school. Each NESSN new school should partner with a NESSN founding school to receive mentoring support in the form of two onsite consultation days and two school visit days per school year.

Question to Consider:

- *Goals:* What do you hope to learn and gain from the partnership?

d. Decide on the student enrollment process for the school. The student assignment and enrollment process should ensure equitable enrollment by race/ethnicity, income status, and gender, and result in enrollment of these categories that reflects their relative percent within the district at that grade level. For this reason, controlled choice, with a 5 percent plus or minus range of the district averages of the grade level, is recommended for all NESSN schools, including large schools converting into smaller schools. The enrollment process should also include a wide distribution of information about the

school so that students and families may make an informed choice about selecting the school.

Question to Consider:

- *Student Assignment:* What student assignment process will be adopted that will ensure equitable enrollment among the small schools?

e. Decide on the selection/assignment process for the school leadership and faculty.

Ideally, the school's leadership should be selected by the governing body, with approval from the Superintendent. Because this may not be possible in all cases, there should be a process in place that ensures the leadership embraces and is committed to the vision of the school. It is preferable to have faculty voluntarily select the small school in which they work, while ensuring in large school conversions that each small school receives an equitable distribution of faculty by race/ethnicity, academic discipline, and other local considerations. In all cases, this selection/assignment should be accomplished in concert with the local teacher's union.

Question to Consider:

- *Faculty Selection:* What faculty assignment process will ensure a critical mass of faculty committed to the school's vision within each small school?

f. Develop a partnership with a NESSN founding school. The NESSN founding schools are eight of the Boston Pilot Schools and Parker Charter School, successful existing small schools that abide by the NESSN principles and autonomies. They are committed to host two school visits from NESSN schools each year, and provide two days of consulting to paired NESSN new schools.

g. Design the governance and leadership for the small school. Each small school should have a clear governance and leadership structure to guide it.

Considerations to Discuss:

- The governance and leadership structure reflects the NESSN principle of democratic decision making.

- Each NESSN school should have a school council governing body that reflects the respective state guidelines for representation (this usually includes administration, faculty, parent, and community representation, and sometimes student representation at the high school level). This body helps guide the school in all phases, and takes on increased governing responsibilities, including principal selection, supervision, and firing (with final approval by the superintendent), budget approval, and setting of school policies. This body usually meets no more than once per month.
- Each NESSN school should also consider having a Leadership Team, a faculty-administration body that meets more often (twice per month) to focus more deeply and in greater detail on guiding the school's implementation in all aspects. The team should be representative of all faculty constituencies.
- The decision-making process should include input and decision making by the full faculty for any significant decisions to be made that affect the small school.
- The governance structures should ensure access of students, faculty, and families to bring issues forward for consideration, for making decisions in a timely manner with sufficient input, and with communicating effectively with the entire school community.
- The leadership of the school should be clearly delineated – whether it be a principal, director, or teacher leader. If the small school is housed within a larger facility that houses multiple small schools, and there is a building-wide principal or administrator, the relationship between the small-school leader and the large-school leader should be clearly defined for all.

Questions to Consider:

- *Leadership:* What will the leadership of the school be (e.g., principal or some other title)? How will this person be selected? If the small school is sharing a building with other small schools, will there be a building principal, and if so, what will be the delineation of roles between the building principal and the small-school leaders?

- *Governing Body:* Who will make up the school's governing body? What constituencies will be represented? How will they be selected?
- *Decision Making:* What will be the shared decision-making structure of the school? What decisions will the school governing body make? The head of the school? The school's Leadership Team? The faculty? Parents? What will be the process for making decisions?

h. Construct the curriculum, instruction, and assessment for the small school. This is the heart of the small-school planning process, and should include as many faculty that will be teaching in the small school as possible. It is recommended that NESSN schools construct their curriculum, instruction, and assessment to be competency-based; that is, the goal is to have every student master a set of defined competencies and to demonstrate this mastery in a variety of ways in order to graduate from that school. The construct of curriculum, instruction, and assessment for the small school should be driven by the following NESSN Principles:

- Habits of mind
- Less is more
- Student-teacher loads of no more than 80:1 at the secondary level and 20:1 at the elementary level
- Student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach
- Assessment by exhibition
- Equity in access to knowledge

Considerations to Discuss:

- Design of the curriculum
- Competencies for graduation (at the elementary, middle, or high school level)
- The school's habits of mind
- Design of the assessment system
- Academic support for students

Questions to Consider:

- *Habits of Mind*: Will the school have overarching habits of mind that drive the curriculum? If so, by what process will they be developed?
- *Less Is More*: How will you construct the curriculum to focus on less is more, and depth over breadth?
- *Lower Student-Teacher Ratios*: How will the schedule be constructed to lower student-teacher ratios to 80:1 for secondary teachers?
- *Student-as-Worker*: How will the curriculum be constructed to emphasize project-based learning, opportunities for application of learning, and students' engaging in purposeful and meaningful work?
- *Assessment by Exhibition*: What will be the graduation requirements from your school? How will graduation requirements ensure that students demonstrate mastery of key competencies? How will portfolios and exhibitions be embedded in both graduation requirements and the ongoing curriculum?
- *Schedule*: How will the schedule support less is more (e.g., longer learning blocks), student-as-worker, and assessment by exhibition?

i. Create the schedule and student groupings for the school. The schedule and student groupings should reflect the NESSN Principles.

Considerations to discuss:

- How to ensure significant common planning time for faculty teams.
- How to create longer learning blocks of time for academics, in order to focus on the NESSN Principles of less is more, student-as-worker, and assessment by exhibition.
- How to create teams of teachers that are responsible for and accountable to a defined group of students.
- How to ensure equity in access to a high quality curriculum for all students and avoid tracking or ability grouping.
- How to create student-teacher loads of no more than 80:1 at the secondary level and no more than 20:1 at the elementary level.
- How to create sustained student-teacher relationships over time, for example, advisories, looping, and multi-age classes.
- How to integrate special education and bilingual/ESL students.

j. Design the personalized culture of the school. A key characteristic of small schools is their ability to better create personalized cultures in which each student is known well by at least one adult. This characteristic is one critical correlate to students successfully completing their school career.

Questions to Consider:

- *Personalization:* How will you ensure that every student is known well by at least one adult over time (e.g., advisories)? What supports will be available for students who need it (including special education), and how will the supports be managed and delivered (e.g., Student Support Teams)?
- *High Expectations, Trust, Respect, and Decency for All:* How will you establish a school culture of high expectations, trust, respect, and decency?

k. Design the professional collaborative culture for the school. There are direct correlations between having a professional collaborative culture that focuses on teaching and learning, and seeing increases in student achievement. Each NESSN school should design the structures, schedule, and culture of the school to guarantee significant, sustained time for faculty to meet and discuss teaching and learning, and to provide them with the support to learn and practice tools for doing so.

Considerations to Address:

- Create significant blocks of time weekly for faculty to meet in various groupings – full faculty, academic teams, Critical Friends Groups, or study groups.
- Specifically, identify a time for Critical Friends Groups to meet. These groups meet regularly, with consistent group membership over time, to engage in collaborative practices focused on improving teaching and student learning.
- Provide training to teacher leaders to become Critical Friends Group facilitators, experienced in facilitating groups to look collaboratively at student and teacher work, peer observation, and action research.
- Design a formal process for supporting and assessing teacher performance.

Questions to Consider:

- *Professional Collaborative Communities:* What structures and activities will be put in place to ensure the building of a unified professional collaborative community (e.g., Critical Friends Groups, looking at student work, peer observation, action research)? When will faculty meet, how often, and in what groupings?
- *Schedule:* How will the schedule and staffing pattern be constructed so as to create time for teachers to meet?
- *Staffing:* What will the staffing pattern of the school look like? How will staff be selected for the new small school?

1. Plan family and community partnerships . In considering ways to involve families, the small school should identify strategies for reaching out to families. These strategies can include involving them in ongoing efforts to improve student outcomes, keeping them engaged in meaningful dialogue about student learning, and providing multiple roles and opportunities for families to participate in the school, particularly in its academic programs and its governance. Each small school should also seek to establish substantial community partnerships that support the achievement of the school's vision.