



# Community Involvement in Schools

A *MAKING CONNECTIONS* PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE MATCH BETWEEN  
INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA AND DENVER, COLORADO

**PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE LEADS TO ACTION**

*Part of a Series from the  
Technical Assistance Resource  
Center of the Annie E. Casey  
Foundation and the  
Center for the Study of Social Policy*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR THE MATCH.....	1
THE CONSULTATION.....	3
LESSONS LEARNED.....	4
PARTICIPANTS' REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS .....	13
LEAD CONTACTS .....	15
WHAT IS <i>MAKING CONNECTIONS</i> ? .....	18
WHAT ARE PEER MATCHES? .....	19

# Community Involvement in Schools

## Indianapolis and Denver

### Denver, Colorado

August 4-6, 2004

---

## INTRODUCTION

---

Through the *Making Connections* initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation is working with Indianapolis, Indiana, and several other communities across the country, to improve outcomes for children and families living in tough neighborhoods. The principal aims of *Making Connections* are to link neighborhood residents with economic opportunities, enhance social networks, and improve services and supports that can help families grow stronger and achieve what they want for themselves and their children.

As part of this initiative, the Foundation offers participating sites access to technical assistance that can help them reach their goals for strengthening families and neighborhoods. Peer matches, a powerful form of peer-to-peer assistance that allows communities to capitalize on the practical knowledge gained by those who have successfully achieved similar goals in other places, are helping *Making Connections* sites learn about innovative strategies that are useful in advancing their own neighborhood efforts.

On August 4-6, 2004, a diverse team from Indianapolis, Indiana traveled to Denver, Colorado to participate in a peer consultation with partners involved in engaging parents and community members in efforts to convert large high schools to small schools. The Indianapolis team requested the peer match to: 1) learn about the benefits of increased parent involvement in schools; 2) learn about strategies to develop and support parent and community involvement; 3) better understand the challenges of increasing parent involvement; 4) better understand the challenges of converting to small schools; and 5) deepen its thinking about harnessing levers for change.

This report summarizes the results of that peer consultation, highlights the main lessons learned and the next steps the Indianapolis team committed to pursue to engage parents and community members in the implementation of converting large schools into small schools in its city.

---

## SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR THE MATCH

---

Indianapolis has seen a decline in the number of students attending public school over the past ten years. At one time, the Indianapolis school district had a population of 108,000 students, but that number dropped to approximately 40,000 students. In the five public high schools, approximately 56 to 76 percent of students are African-American and 85 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunches. The Indianapolis school board began hearing concerns from people in the community about

the state of its high schools, including declining enrollment and the fact that these schools were not meeting the needs of the students. The school district received feedback from parents, community members, and taxpayers that schools needed to be reformed and, as a result, the school board began researching options for reforming its high schools.

Several years ago, the Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) received a grant from the United States Department of Education to create small learning communities. Building on that initiative, the Center for Excellence in Leadership and Learning (CELL), in collaboration with IPS and the Mayor's Office, submitted a proposal to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to create several small schools from existing schools within IPS, in addition to creating at least ten new small schools within the city of Indianapolis. In 2003, CELL received an \$11.4 million grant from the Gates Foundation. A portion of these funds was earmarked specifically for the conversion of five large IPS high schools to small schools with the goal of increasing the percentage of graduates who are ready to enter college.

Indianapolis spent a significant amount of time building its capacity to orchestrate and manage a shift to small schools. In the past three years the city convened a wide variety of stakeholders to create a strategic plan for the conversion. During the Indianapolis planning process, the stakeholders focused first on the importance of teaching and learning and creating a supportive environment. As an initial step, Indianapolis developed small learning communities (SLC's) and through the SLC's learned the value of smaller learning environments that are more focused on individual relationships. This experience began "shifting the paradigm" of how the school board, teachers, and students felt about teaching and learning in a traditional high school model to a smaller setting.

As part of the Indianapolis strategic plan for conversion, a strong emphasis was placed on engaging parents and community members in supporting and helping to implement this process. Parent and community support is seen as critical to holding themselves, teachers, principals, school board members, and students accountable for the role they each can play in making the difficult transition from large to small schools successful.

While the Gates Foundation provided funds to several communities to convert to small schools, the manner in which Indianapolis chose to convert is somewhat unique. Rather than starting new, smaller schools in free-standing buildings, Indianapolis divided its current high school buildings into several small schools so there are multiple schools within each building. Efforts to convert to small schools, and successfully engage parents and community members in that process, are new undertakings for many communities, and Indianapolis decided to look for other localities engaged in similar efforts that could share their lessons and strategies.

Through *Making Connections*, Indianapolis learned about Denver's conversion to small schools and their great success in organizing parents as partners in this process. One of Denver's high schools, Manual Millennium Quest Academy, chose to convert to several small schools in the same way Indianapolis plans to, by dividing one building into three separate, smaller schools. Metro Organizations for People (MOP), a nonprofit organizing agency in Denver, has been instrumental in helping to engage and empower parents in supporting Manual's efforts. Denver's West High School is in the process of converting to small schools, and MOP has begun organizing parents and students there as well.

The Indianapolis team decided to travel to Denver to see parent organizing strategies that are supporting small schools firsthand, learn about challenges and successes, and have opportunities to hear from parents, teachers, school board members, and other key partners.

---

## THE CONSULTATION

---

Before traveling to Denver, the Indianapolis team worked together to clarify the purpose of the peer match and determine who should participate.

### Purpose

The purpose of the match was to provide the Indianapolis team with strategies for engaging parents and community members in the conversion to small schools and to inform the team of the challenges it may face and ways to overcome these challenges. One of the Indianapolis team main hopes was to have a sense of “the possible” in terms of engaging the community in converting to small schools. The team was eager to meet with a variety of peers to hear concrete examples and receive an honest assessment of what is and what is not working in Denver. At the end of the peer match, the Indianapolis team reflected on what it learned from the peer consultation and began sketching next steps for its work in Indianapolis.

### Participants

The Indianapolis team was comprised of a diverse group of key stakeholders, including principals, parents, school board members, and community partners. Indicative of the site’s commitment to increasing community involvement, CELL, with the approval of *Making Connections*, provided additional funding to ensure that the principals and many parents from all five high schools were able to participate in the peer match with Denver. The community partners included representatives from CELL who provide technical assistance and support to IPS in its conversion effort, and GRADES, a group of community and business leaders focused on the Indianapolis Public Schools. The team also included a member of the Indianapolis *Making Connections* site who is an active community leader.

The peer consultant team from Denver included parents, school board members, teachers, members of MOP, and a representative from the Colorado Small Schools Initiative. Staff from the Center for the Study of Social Policy in Washington, D.C. and the Denver *Making Connections* site co-facilitated the peer match.

The consultation took place August 4-6, 2004, in Denver, Colorado at the Westin Tabor Center Hotel. It began with a welcome reception and dinner, followed by a day of facilitated dialogue at the hotel and site visits to the Denver School Board, Manual Academy, and West High School. The peer consultation ended with a visit to the Piton Foundation to meet with staff from the Colorado Small Schools Initiative and an intense, facilitated dialogue back at the hotel, during which the Indianapolis team had a chance to reflect on its experience and create next steps. During the match, the peer consultants from Denver shared their experiences and provided concrete suggestions for organizing parents and community members and helping Indianapolis think through its efforts to convert to small schools.

This summary of the peer match has been organized to share the strategies and activities that Denver uses to engage parents in its small schools effort and the lessons learned from Manual Millennium Quest Academy's conversion to small schools. It concludes with the participants' reflections on what they learned and the next steps they committed to take.

---

## LESSONS LEARNED

---

The consultation focused on two main areas: organizing parent participation in school change and converting to small schools. This section describes how Denver has proceeded in these areas, its successes and challenges and some of its lessons learned.

### Organizing Parent Participation in School Change

To learn about Denver's strategies for engaging parents, Metro Organizations for People arranged for participants to meet with its own director and community organizers and parents and students involved in organizing at Manual Academy and West High Schools.

#### *Metro Organizations for People*

Metro Organizations for People (MOP), a nonprofit organization in Denver, Colorado, is affiliated with the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO), a national organizing network. MOP's mission is to organize low- and moderate-income neighborhood residents to make positive changes in their communities. MOP is primarily concerned with building significant, autonomous power and creating a genuine voice for residents. While it has traditionally focused its organizing efforts in churches, MOP expanded its outreach to include schools and other groups in the community and currently has 32 member organizations in Denver.

#### Organizational Structure

MOP is funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Piton Foundation, Washington Mutual, the Denver Foundation, and a small grants program for food and translation. It also receives funding from churches and schools that provide MOP with a small percentage of their Title I money to support parent-organizing work.

MOP's staff members are very diverse, with a variety of educational backgrounds and experiences. The majority of staff are people of color and many are bi-lingual in English and Spanish. One of MOP's organizational goals is to ensure that the staff reflects the populations with which it works. Professional development and training opportunities are heavily invested in and supported, with MOP staff expected to attend national, week-long training sessions sponsored by PICO and to participate locally in weekly staff development activities.

MOP admits it has an organizational bias. It believes that to be successful in organizing, highly trained, professional people must be well supported. As a result, MOP strives to work with organizations that have the capacity to invest in and create the kind of dedicated effort that is needed.

### Involvement with Schools

MOP began working with several schools through its relationship with the Denver *Making Connections* initiative. Three years ago, it started working with parents of students in the elementary and junior high schools that are “feeder schools” to Manual Millennium Quest Academy. It then expanded its work to focus more on parents at the high school. The three small schools at Manual all originally signed a covenant to work with MOP in its efforts to engage parents. Neither MOP nor the schools knew what they were getting into when the parent organizing work first began. Two of the schools decided not to pursue parent involvement once they realized the amount of work it entailed. MOP has continued its involvement because it has found that schools offer stability and provide a sense of shared values within communities. It recently began working with parents and youth at West High School, which will be converting to small schools in the upcoming year.

“Schools are often one of the only institutions with stability in low-income neighborhoods and offer a sense of shared values. Schools can absolutely be a stabilizing force in the community, but not without the critical factor of principal, teacher, and parent involvement.” - *Mike Kromrey, Executive Director, Metro Organizations for People*

### Parent Organizing Strategy

MOP has two key organizing principles:

- 1) Power is in the relationships and
- 2) Self-interest moves people.

These principles provide the foundation for all of its organizing efforts. MOP’s organizing model begins with one-on-one visits to parents that are intended to build rapport and help staff learn about parents’ hopes and concerns for their community. Once MOP staff meet and build strong relationships with a number of interested parents, they form a parent organizing committee (POC). This POC holds a series of exploratory meetings intended to build relationships among the parents and discuss issues that the community wants to address. The POC selects one or two priority issues, and conducts research to determine what possibilities exist for taking action. On the basis of its findings, the POC comes to an agreement on a plan of action, such as making proposals to school officials. After a plan of action is chosen and carried out, the parents in the POC follow-up to ensure that their goals were met. An important component of MOP’s work with these POCs is helping parents look for common ground and allowing them to build strong relationships with each other. The POC eventually becomes its own outreach organization, developing the skills and capacities of other parents to achieve real power.

“Changes cannot happen in the community unless you have relationships with other people in the community and other parents.” – *Yvonne Sandoval, Community Organizer, Metro Organizations for People*

After multiple POCs are formed, common themes often begin to emerge across groups. When MOP’s organizers begin to hearing common issues, they bring the parents from the various POCs together to create a “federated effort” that gives parents more collective power to address specific issues. For example, last May over 600 parents met with the Denver school board and superintendent. The parents had specific short-term demands and also requested ongoing dialogue to achieve a larger, long-term vision.

### Current Organizing Efforts

MOP's current work with POCs at Manual Academy and West High School has helped parents focus their efforts on the specific elements they feel are critical to making small schools work. For example, one POC felt that the school did not do a good job of communicating with parents, and students were not receiving adequate information about academic and extra-curricular opportunities that were available to them. Because many parents are unable to come to school meetings, the POC needed to find an easy way to get information out to both parents and students to keep them connected to what is going on at the school. The POC decided to create a newsletter, and members attended journalism classes to learn how to organize and communicate information. The parents wanted the newsletter to focus on many things, including arts, music, and cultural activities, as well as careers, college scholarships, education programs, and after-school and summer activities. Most importantly, they want the newsletter to let students know that nothing is impossible for them, that they can be successful, and that their parents are supporting them by getting appropriate and necessary information in their hands. The parents are also working on a proposal to ask the school to pay for a college outreach specialist who will be required to visit with parents about their children's futures.

*"We, as parents, want to learn how we can help our children. MOP has really helped parents understand how we can help each other, help our children, and help the school." - Graciela, Parent, POC Member*

A parent involved in another POC highlighted an effort to achieve greater access to public libraries. Her children were given homework to complete over weekends, but were unable to turn it in to the teacher on Mondays because they needed a computer to complete the work and did not have one at home. While their local library has computers available for public use, the library is not open during evenings and weekends. The parent raised this issue with the POC, which decided to further investigate the library hours across the city. As a result of the research, the POC was able to demonstrate that the libraries were open fewer hours in lower-income areas than in higher-income areas and began speaking to local officials about the issue. As a result, more equality in library hours has been achieved.

MOP also worked with the POC to start a "listening" campaign with over 50 percent of the school's families. The listening campaign was orchestrated by a core of 12 people who met with and listened to these families over an intensive two-week period. The parents raised academic achievement as a critical issue. The POC examined academic achievement to determine what elements small schools had. After months of research, the POC settled on four key elements for all small schools: 1) personalization and communication; 2) professional development for teachers; 3) academic advisement and support for students; and 4) academic rigor. Next, the POC determined ways to measure progress for these four elements. In addition, it hosted a "Night of Excellence" where student's portfolios were displayed, and parents shared ideas about how they could further support their children.

MOP works with students as well, following the same organization model that it uses with parents. The students at Manual Academy worked with parents during report card pick-up to conduct outreach to other youth and parents. Students at Manual are constantly engaged in efforts to visit and connect with other youth in several different ways. Examples of their efforts include using story circles, holding public meetings during a school assembly, and encouraging students to speak up about issues that affect them in school.

Students at West High School formed the Voices Heard committee, a student group dedicated to making positive changes in its school. Students on this committee expressed concern about the availability of advanced placement classes, vandalism in school bathrooms, and the lack of parking for students. Voices Heard conducted outreach during the school's class registration process, holding one-to-one conversations with other students. Voices Heard has also started a "learning community" project so that students know what is happening in their school. For example, the project hung brochures on bathroom doors that contain interesting school facts and activities. It is hoped that by increasing student awareness, the literacy rate will increase and bathroom vandalism will decrease. Voices Heard has a core of 15 very active youth who continue to do outreach and have successfully mobilized hundreds of students.

MOP also is working with Manual Academy and West High School teachers, training them to conduct home visits with parents in the community to listen to parents' hopes and concerns. Many teachers do not live in the community where the school is located, which can cause tensions because of lack of understanding individual, family or student life circumstances between teachers and students. Through home visits, teachers are beginning to see that building better relationships with parents can lead to less truancy, a breakdown of fears, and can begin to build relationships of trust.

MOP's work with a local elementary school also focuses on supporting teacher efforts to conduct home visits. Sun Valley Elementary started the home visit program a few years ago using a model from Sacramento. In the first year of the program, a \$10 stipend was given to teachers for every visit they made. Stipends are no longer given, but each teacher and many of the other school staff are expected to conduct home visits during the school year. Visits are scheduled during times that fit family needs, even if that means visits occur after school hours and/or on weekends.

Twice a year, teachers go to students' homes to hand deliver report cards. Many of the parents are monolingual Spanish speakers and are unable to read the report cards. The visits help teachers explain the report card to parents.

### Lessons Learned

MOP has identified a number of "lessons learned" through their experience organizing parents in schools. A few of these are listed below:

- The process takes time. It takes about a year for parents to meet, decide on issues, take actions, and begin to see results.
- Organizing efforts have to begin where people are and with the priority issues that they feel are most important. "Take people where they are but never leave them there" is a motto that MOP follows.
- The issues parents choose to focus on are secondary to the importance of relationship building. Parents have to spend time building relationships with each other to feel confident enough to take on serious issues.
- School staff and administrators can be resistant to parents' organizing efforts. This is an opportunity to break down barriers that often exist between parents and schools.

## Converting to Small Schools

Like Indianapolis, the Denver public school system has experienced a decline in student population and a shift in demographics over the past ten years. There used to be 100,000 students in Denver's public schools, now approximately 73,000 are enrolled. There has been a marked increase in the percentage of Latino students, and approximately 57 percent of public school students are non-English speaking. The African-American student population has declined, with families pulling their children out due to a perceived lack of attention to their educational needs. The white student population also has decreased significantly. Over 20,000 students live in Denver but attend schools outside the city limits; many other students have elected to attend one of the 17 charter schools created by the Denver school board.

Denver decided to pursue secondary school reform several years ago. Strengthening academics is at the forefront of its efforts. As a first step, the Institute for Learning in Pittsburgh was hired to provide intensive professional development for both principals and teachers, aimed at improving their capability in math and literature instruction.

The city passed legislation for a tax increase to help fund secondary school reform. To guide the reform efforts, the school district established the Secondary School Reform Commission. The Commission is made up of representatives from the business community, school board members, students, teachers, principals, and parents. The Commission is meeting with experts across the country and will review many strategies for high school reform, such as creating small schools, small learning academies, magnet schools, etc. In January 2005, the Commission report to the school board made recommendations for implementing creative new ventures in high school education. While the school board has no obligation to follow the Commission's recommendations, it has signaled its support of the Commission's findings and recommendations.

Currently, only one high school in Denver, Manual Millennium Quest Academy, has converted to small schools. West High School is beginning their conversion process. The Colorado Small Schools Initiative is working with both schools to provide support, including funding, technical assistance, and other resources.

### *Manual Millennium Quest Academy*

Manual Millennium Quest Academy is a public high school located in one of Denver's low-income neighborhoods. The area's demographics have changed from being mostly African-American to mostly Latino, and many of these families are monolingual Spanish speakers. Approximately 1,200 students attend the Academy. Fifty percent of the students are Latino, 30 to 40 percent are African-American, and 85 percent of all students receive a free or reduced-price lunch. Manual Academy also has a very high mobility rate among its student body, with students moving to different neighborhoods within Denver itself and the surrounding suburbs.

In 2000, in an attempt to shake off the label of "worst high school in the state" and address issues such as low test scores, poor attendance, and low graduation rates, Manual decided to make a series of changes, converting from one large high school to three small schools. With approval from the school board, Manual created three independent small schools in one building, Manual, Millennium, and Quest. The school was awarded a grant from the Gates Foundation to fund this transition. The planning period before implementation was very short, and Manual opened as a converted school in the fall of 2001. As a result, school staff did not have much time for advanced planning and problem solving, and they have

learned many lessons over the past three years. However, they have seen some immediate positive changes. For example, in the first year, attendance increased by ten percent, from 80 to 90 percent.

While it has been difficult to transform an existing high school, Manual is beginning to “hit its stride”. The following sections describe the new structure of the school, benefits of the conversion, challenges faced, and lessons learned about transformation.

### Organizational Structure

When Manual converted to three small schools, each had a different focus: leadership, math and science, and arts and literature. Initially, there were no shared classes, and the three schools were intended to remain separate. Over time this has changed. The three schools now have a combined athletics department, and all students are allowed to take cross-over elective courses, which promote more integration among the three schools.

In most respects however, each school remains autonomous. Collaborative decision-making groups for each school helped select their principals. Each of these groups was comprised of four parents, four teachers, representatives from the business community, and other principals. While each school now has its own principal, none has assistant principals. Instead, one assistant principal is employed to manage the shared facilities. Schools report their test scores separately and, thus, are independently evaluated and held accountable for student achievement.

The schools worked with the teachers union to change work rules to align with the small schools philosophy. The school board developed a memorandum of understanding with the teachers to outline changes in their scope of work.

Each school has its own budget, but the majority of the budget is established by the school district, leaving the schools little flexibility. The district no longer receives funding from the Gates Foundation, but those funds were originally used to cover costs of technology, materials, out-of-state trips, and a lead teacher position at each school.

### Benefits

According to its peer consultants, one of the biggest benefits Denver received by converting to small schools (each school with an average of 400 students) is that principals can personalize their relationships with students and build stronger connections to parents and community members. Students feel more engaged and empowered, feel more comfortable raising questions and discussing issues that really matter to them. As one teacher observed, “small class sizes provide students with opportunities for ‘vulnerability and challenge,’ as they become more willing to share openly with the teacher and their peers.” The small schools structure also has helped teachers to better recognize and support their students’ different learning styles and to better develop plans for motivating positive behavior.

Another benefit that the peer consultants attribute to small schools has been increased parent involvement. Parents are involved in a variety of ways, from researching and becoming champions of the idea of small schools, to holding teachers accountable to the small schools philosophy. Parents have organized roundtable meetings between teachers and the parents of struggling students and been supportive of home visits by teachers. Parents have become advocates for the school, with an increased sense of ownership and engagement in what takes place there.

One of the teachers at Manual Academy identified a number of new activities resulting from the conversion to small schools. Changes in the learning atmosphere have led to a number of innovative student research projects. Unique class offerings, day and overnight field trips, and student portfolios are also new activities at the schools. Teachers completed an analysis of their curricula to identify areas that fall outside of their fields of expertise, which is helping the schools look at opportunities for more comprehensive teaching and learning.

Student attendance has seen marked improvement, but Manual's graduation rate continues to be low, particularly with Latino and African-American students. The school board hopes that, over time, small schools will be able to raise their graduation rate.

### Challenges

Initially, Manual faced a number of challenges including a short planning process that resulted in insufficient front-end support and an inability to anticipate and plan for some of the challenges that would arise throughout the process.

At the beginning, the Gates Foundation required each school to be completely autonomous, create its own schedules and have its own athletic program, with no cross-over classes allowed. This had several unanticipated results:

- English as a Second Language (ESL) classes were placed at the arts and literature school, forcing a majority of the Latino students into this school.
- Drama and choir were offered only in the arts and literature school and, without shared electives, students were forced to choose between disciplines and creative activities they wanted to pursue.
- The overall school lost many of its proud traditions of the past, causing frustration from many prominent alumni who fondly remembered the school the way it was.
- Juniors and seniors were upset about having to be separated from fellow students.
- The prom was changed from being one event to three separate ones.

These circumstances have since been reconciled, with shared electives and combined athletics, and other school functions such as the prom. Yet, over time, each school also is beginning to develop its own proud identity.

There are challenges that still need to be addressed, but not all can be attributed directly to converting to small schools. Many students still do not take academics seriously, and the faculty does not always agree on how to respond to student behavioral problems. Some teachers are supportive of the concept of small schools, but many teachers feel that it was imposed on them. Thus, some teachers resist the idea that, given the right environment and support, the students can succeed. Many continue to hold on to a "these kids can't succeed" mentality. And, even after three years, there are teachers who are unsure about the small schools concept and how to implement it. Another challenge has been a high turnover rate among principals. Without consistent leadership, it has been difficult to get faculty to agree on a shared sense of what small schools mean to them. While all agree that personal relationships, academic rigor, and student academic advisement and support are critical elements, there is not clarity about what these elements mean for how teachers and students can change their actions.

Manual Academy continues to struggle with its large school mentality and is looking for ways to restructure the faculty to utilize them differently in the small school environment. Three years into this effort, Manual's focus is more on embracing the small schools concept and creating autonomy and has not yet addressed the need to improve classroom instruction.

Another challenge was the school's failure to engage and involve the community at the beginning of their effort. By not taking enough time to explain the small schools conversion to parents and the community, the idea was met with much resistance. The school was hesitant to involve parents because they thought the parents would not understand the conversion idea. The parents' lack of involvement led to a communication gap between parents and the school, and reinforced the perception held by students and parents that teachers and administrators do not understand or value students. The organizing efforts of Metro Organizations for People has been crucial to easing this tension and has helped create a community of stakeholders that are working in partnership to improve outcomes for students.

"We haven't made it yet, but I'm not saying don't do it. I'm saying embrace it, truly embrace it, and create ownership among the principals, teachers, parents and students to make it work." – *Laura Stuckey, Teacher, Manual Millennium Quest Academy.*

#### Lessons Learned

The peer consultants shared the consistent overarching themes from their work. While all agreed that they strongly support the idea of small schools and would repeat the experience, they recommended that anyone interested in converting to small schools consider the following lessons learned:

- *Have a shared vision.* The most important element of small schools is having a clear, and agreed upon, notion of where you are going and why. In addition, clarity about roles and responsibilities of principals, teachers, students, and parents is critical to creating a shared sense of ownership and collective responsibility for the success of small schools. This means thinking long-term and reaching agreement on the definition of small schools, the underlying philosophy, and changes necessary to reach the vision.
- *Share the vision with parents and community members from the beginning.* Parent and community involvement is one of the most important elements in converting to small schools. Have a consistent message about the change to small schools and what it will mean for the students, parents and the community and share this information at the beginning of the process. During the planning process, a strategy for involving the community should be mapped out, including efforts such as home visits, holding parent nights, and partnering with an organization like Metro Organizations for People. In order to get community members' support and "buy-in", a public relations campaign may be necessary, and different audiences may require different messages. Educators tend to speak their own language, while the business community and parents, for example, may be listening for different types of information. Often parent groups and neighborhood organizations can be engaged to educate others through their existing networks.
- *Devote time to advance planning.* A significant amount of time is needed for planning and thinking strategically about a variety of factors: cost, structure, governance, autonomy,

classroom instruction, student services and supports, “buy-in” and engagement of the community, parent involvement, and other relevant stakeholders.

- *Be flexible.* In the face of declining state and local budgets, embracing new initiatives like small schools can be difficult because the initial costs may be higher than the costs prior to a change. For example, at Manual Academy principals were asked to accept the lower salaries of middle school principals to offset the increased costs of adding principal positions. As the implementation of small schools progresses, school districts need to be supportive and agreeable to conducting business differently.

“Small schools require a change in mentality, not just a change in structure.” – *Mark Harsley, Parent, Arlington High School, Indianapolis*

- *Create clear lines of autonomy.* The ability to make decisions at the individual school level, including having the authority to control budgets and staffing, is a necessary component to small schools. For this to occur, schools need the support and flexibility of the school district. However, mechanisms for accountability need to be in place for both school principals and the school district. Often at the school district level, this may require letting go of traditional views of management to allow schools to be accountable in new ways, and focus on indicators of academic success.
- *Ensure strong leadership.* A key to success is having a strong leader who can champion the idea of small schools. Principals need support from the school board, teachers, and parents to be truly effective in carrying out the small schools vision.

“The real key is having a dedicated principal of the high school who is energetic, understands the benefits of small schools, and goes after achieving those benefits”

- *Focus on teaching and learning.* While a major focus of the work is creating a structure for converting to small schools, the goal is to support academic excellence. Teachers should be encouraged to “own” the small school concept, but they also should be given the tools and resources to support academic rigor, student academic advisement, project-based learning and to build personal relationships with students. Each small school should be allowed to develop its own literacy plans based on the needs of its student population. The peer consultants cited one of the most critical aspects of the conversion effort is what goes on in the classroom between the teachers and students, and the accountability measures for improving educational outcomes.
- *Evaluate progress.* There are few communities focused on evaluating the implementation of small schools, but evaluation is a critical component in measuring the effectiveness of this effort. There are many ways to measure progress, such as looking at leading indicators like attendance, graduation, and suspension rates and conducting a qualitative analysis of student, teacher, parent, and principal experiences. The evaluation should be tailored to each small school, based on what the school deems most important to measure.

---

## PARTICIPANTS' REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

---

At the end of the peer consultation, the Indianapolis team took some time to reflect on what they had learned and had a chance to share their reflections in small groups and then with the large group. A summary of the team's reflections is captured below:

- *Advanced planning at the school district, individual high school, and parent and community levels is imperative.*
- *Getting stakeholders on board can be daunting, but is ultimately a rewarding task.*
- *Barriers to parent involvement should be explored and eliminated.*
- *Public relations and broad communication about small schools is essential to community support and the success of small schools.*
- *Clarification of roles and responsibilities is critical, as is collaboration between principals and the school district.*
- *High school principals need to be actively involved in all phases of planning and converting to small schools.*
- *Having a common vision is very important.*
- *All necessary stakeholders should be identified and involved early in the planning process.*
- *Community leaders and resources should be engaged and utilized.*
- *Maintaining a focus on teaching and learning is important.*
- *Flexibility will be necessary in terms of hiring, allowing for transfers, and revising teacher responsibilities.*
- *Attention must be given to follow-through, setting and meeting benchmarks, and creating a system of accountability.*
- *New resources may be needed or developed to support this work.*

### Next Steps

After the Indianapolis team members had an opportunity to share their reflections, the team began thinking about some next steps they would pursue upon returning home. Some of these activities are highlighted below:

- Explore getting access to reliable, current, and meaningful student data that can be (hopefully) sorted by "small learning communities."

- Create an ongoing communication mechanism to ensure key stakeholders are aware of progress and can participate in decision-making.
- Decide on a shared definition of small schools and create a shared vision of success.
- Decide on a definition of parent and community involvement.
- Explore methods to increase parent and community engagement and look for opportunities to partner with existing organizations.
- Involve critical stakeholders from the school district to ensure they have a clear understanding of school reform efforts.
- Develop a financial carry over plan to support present education reform in the district, and decide how to utilize current resources.
- Explore connections with public relations experts to develop a comprehensive communications plan.
- Establish clear lines of authority and accountability.
- Explore options for creating a parent advocate position at each high school.

The Indianapolis team members acknowledged that although they have made much progress over the past three years in planning for the conversion to small schools, they benefited greatly from the opportunity to learn new strategies and explore new options for strengthening their efforts.

---

## LEAD CONTACTS

---

### Indianapolis

#### Lynne Weisenbach

Executive Director  
Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning  
21 Virginia Ave.  
Indianapolis, IN 46204  
317-791-5911  
[weisenbach@uindy.edu](mailto:weisenbach@uindy.edu)

### Denver

#### Mike Kromrey

Executive Director  
Metro Organizations for People  
1980 Dahlia Street  
Denver, CO 80220  
303.399.2425  
[mike@mopdenver.org](mailto:mike@mopdenver.org)

### Peer Match Facilitators

#### Juanita Gallion

Associate  
Center for the Study of Social Policy  
1575 Eye Street, NW, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20005  
202-271-1565  
[juanita.gallion@cssp.org](mailto:juanita.gallion@cssp.org)

#### Kit Williams

TARC Liaison  
*Making Connections* Denver  
7362 Sourdough Dr.  
Morrison, CO 80465  
303-697-3390  
[kit@mho.net](mailto:kit@mho.net)

---

## WHAT IS *MAKING CONNECTIONS*

---

*Making Connections* is the Annie E. Casey Foundation's initiative to improve outcomes for some of the nation's most vulnerable children and families. The initiative is conducted through deep and durable partnerships with selected cities and neighborhoods across the United States (for more information, visit [www.aecf.org/mc](http://www.aecf.org/mc)).

Several core ideas underlie *Making Connections*:

- *Making Connections* is based on the recognition that the greatest number of American children who suffer from “rotten outcomes” live in city neighborhoods that are in many ways cut off—disconnected—from the mainstream opportunities of American life. Thus, *Making Connections* is “place-based”—it focuses on specific neighborhoods in specific cities.
- *Making Connections* has a simple theory: that children do better when they grow up in strong families, and families do better when they live in supportive neighborhoods. Thus, *Making Connections* strategies are aimed at helping families obtain what they need to be strong, and helping neighborhoods gain the resources they need in order to support families well.
- *Making Connections* focuses on three major types of “connections” that help families grow stronger and achieve what they want for their children. The first of these is helping families connect to **economic opportunities** and to jobs that provide income, assets, and an economic future. Research and experience suggest that this type of connection is unlikely without two others: strong connections to the **social networks** of kin, neighborhood groups, and other informal ties that sustain families when times get tough, and to high-quality, **effective services and supports** that help families reach their goals.

*Making Connections* focuses on improving results for children and families in tough neighborhoods. Core results that *Making Connections* communities are mobilizing around include:

- Families have increased earnings and income;
- Families have increased levels of assets;
- Families, youth, and neighborhoods increase their participation in civic life;
- Families and neighborhoods have strong informal supports and networks;
- Families have access to quality services and supports; and
- Children are healthy and ready to succeed in school.

A key task in ensuring the success of *Making Connections* is making available the learning and technical assistance that the participating sites need to move forward with their work. One of the ways that the Foundation provides this kind of support is by making peer matches available.

---

## WHAT ARE PEER MATCHES?

---

Since 1995, as part of a broader effort to rely more intentionally on the experience of people working in the field, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) began working with several partners and funders to develop and offer a rather intensive form of peer technical assistance known as peer matches. Peer matches are structured opportunities for teams of people from two or more jurisdictions who are working on a similar issue to exchange experiences and practical knowledge toward resolving a particular challenge that has been identified in advance.

The rationale behind peer matches is straightforward. Often, the people best able to provide hands-on help are the “doers” themselves—people from states and communities who have successfully addressed a problem or created an effective new policy or strategy. These are the people who have an acute sense of what has and hasn’t worked, and why and why not. They have developed good tools and strategies they can share. And they are usually eager to help others because of a strong sense of shared mission. But while good peer matches are informal, they are never casual, using a carefully designed process and structure to focus the common interests, roles, and goodwill that exist among peers on producing meaningful change for a community.

Peer matches are a resource and time-intensive strategy. Careful consideration of when, where, and how to use this approach is, therefore, always warranted. Experience has shown that careful preparation and execution of the matches are critical factors for their success. This approach tends to work best when the following conditions are in place:

- A specific problem or issue has been identified, and the people looking for help are at a key decision point with respect to the design or implementation of a state or community strategy;
- Stakeholders are invested in and have a high degree of ownership in solving a problem;
- The timing is right—e.g., a decision or action that will affect the community’s family strengthening agenda is going to be taken and/or someone needs to be convinced to take action; and
- A reasonably small number of people have the authority and ability to act on what they learn in the match.

To date, CSSP has brokered more than 60 peer matches on topics ranging from creating resident-led community development corporations and governance structures, to establishing multilingual homeownership assistance centers, to building integrated services models. As illustrated in the case summaries that are part of this series, peer matches help spread good policies and practice, build relationships among different stakeholders who may not always have a chance to work together, and enable people to put changes in place that improve results for children, families, and neighborhoods.



The Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation  
701 St. Paul Street  
Baltimore, MD 21202  
410 547-6600  
410 547-6624 fax

**Center**  
for the  
**Study**  
of  
**Social**  
**Policy**

1575 Eye Street, NW, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20005  
202.371-1565  
202.371-1472 fax

June 2005