

# A Nation of Boutiques

By James Nehring



I teach in a small public charter school in central Massachusetts. In Boston circles, I hear our school referred to as a "boutique." I've seen the label applied to other smallish, unusual schools, along with "specialty shop." The word "fringe" sometimes comes out with the next breath. It's meant as a criticism. We're interesting but inconsequential. Elitist, maybe, and unconcerned about the wider world. Not easily replicated.

Scaled-down, narrowly focused schools allow for reflective learning and stronger student-teacher relationships.

Within an hour's drive of my own school stand a number of other schools to which I'll bet the label of boutique or specialty shop has been applied by at least one frustrated bureaucrat: a district pilot school, a school attached to an art museum, an unconventional vo-tech school, several charter schools, and a big city high school that is, as we speak, reconceiving itself as several smaller learning communities—a single building *filled* with boutiques.

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To the criticism of elitist and unconcerned-with-the-wider-world, I answer for my school and those of my colleagues, Not true. These schools are open to all, and many serve lower-income communities. To the criticism of not easily replicated, I answer, True indeed! Thoughtful schools are never the product of mere replication, to the great disappointment of centralizers and policy wonks. What about the charges of small, unusual, and interesting? I'm OK with all of them. In fact, they make me want to reply, "Let's build a nation of boutiques!"

What all these schools have in common is that we've narrowed our focus and scaled down—both necessary preconditions to being a good school. A narrow focus allows for learning that is thoughtful and reflective. Scaling down allows for relationships among students, teachers, and parents that are meaningful. Theodore R.Sizer got it stunningly right in 1984. Less *is* more. Relationships *do* matter.

But why build from scratch? Wouldn't it be easier and cheaper simply to "reform" our existing high schools? Unfortunately, the record suggests that efforts to get existing comprehensive schools to make learning more reflective and thoughtful tend to stumble, or end up effecting changes that are a mile wide and an inch deep, or ultimately give in to the powerful tug of the status quo. Donna Muncey and Patrick McQuillan's five-year study of such efforts by the Coalition of Essential Schools (*Reform and Resistance in Schools and Classrooms*, Yale, 1996) makes this clear. Any effort to make a school more thoughtful necessarily means narrowing the school's focus in some crucial way. Narrowing the focus of a comprehensive high school will inevitably rub against the forces that made it comprehensive in the first place—its mission (sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit) to be all things to all people, and the programs that have consequently accumulated.

Beholden to multiple interest groups, traditional comprehensive schools accumulate goals like old ships collect barnacles.

Bear in mind that such schools have grown large, unfocused, and sadly impersonal not because they have *striven* to be so. It is, rather, the byproduct of political realities. A school board is elected by the community at large. It is therefore responsive to the polis at large. Every interest with a public constituency must be heard, and, in the spirit of American compromise, every interest ends up getting a little piece of a very big school. The result, as the late Ernest L. Boyer put it in 1983, is that schools have accumulated goals like an old ship that collects barnacles.

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Schools must either be started anew—small and focused—or figuratively torn down and rebuilt as many little schools. The record for start-ups in Ms. Muncey and Mr. McQuillan's study is, in fact, quite promising.

Critics chant that small schools cannot provide a "well rounded" education. Yet I am increasingly of the mind that almost anything learned well is better than many things learned poorly. I would sooner send my daughters to learn a trade in a school that really gets kids to think than to the "humanities" school up the road where the teaching methods are drill-and-kill.

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The crucial mark of high-quality education is not concerned with the topic of study, whether it is in the performing arts, cooking, diesel-engine repair, Shakespeare, or media studies. To serve its students well, the crucial commitment a school must make is that the learning that goes on there is reflective, thoughtful, and connected to the larger world. This can happen as well through the study of food preparation as it can through the exploration of a play written 400 years ago. Each can also be taught poorly, by rote—and too often are. "Well rounded" can be another way of saying dull. I want kids with sharp edges and irregular ways of seeing the world.

The critics grumble: *Such schools defy easy comparison and the measures that testmeisters are wont to subject us to.* Yes, that's true.

Critics grumble some more: *These schools are so small, how can they lift an entire nation?* They can't. Each lifts a significant community, and others, in their own ways, will do likewise. That's democracy.

The truth is that places like these represent our best hope for a public system of schools that are intellectually powerful. By and large, kids thrive in them, as is evidenced by a host of measures, not the least of which is the often-long waiting lists for enrollment. What is needed is continuous support for policies that allow the creation of small, autonomous schools: charter legislation, school choice programs, pilot schools, big schools reconfigured as several small schools in one building, start-up funding.

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Of course, no policy direction is without hazards. There are several crucial caveats for choice initiatives like these: (1) If there is to be choice, then there must be choices for all, not just the privileged; (2) If schools are to be truly public, they cannot be governed by shareholders seeking a profit; (3) Public schools are not religious schools; and (4) Schools must reach beyond district lines to break barriers of class and race, as some charter schools already do.

If such schools can be held firmly within a public arena, then bring on the educational boutiques. To shift slightly Arthur Powell's famous "shopping mall" metaphor, let us imagine, instead of a mall, an educational Main Street of small, interesting craft shops filled with masters and apprentices, opening onto a public sidewalk astride a great, green, democratic common.

*James Nehring teaches at the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, Mass. He is the author, most recently, of *The School Within Us* (SUNY Press), and is at work on a new book, *Upstart Startup: Notes From a Public Charter School*.*

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