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Project Title: A Case Study of Resource Use in Two Urban New Small High Schools

My dissertation research is a detailed, structured case study of the first year of two small urban high schools that have been converted from a large comprehensive high school. My research focuses on resource use in the two small high schools and examines the following questions:

- How are the resources of time, people, and money used to support teaching and learning?
- What gets in the way of the strategic use of resources?
- What supports are needed to enable the strategic use of resources?

High schools are currently the focus of much scrutiny in face of glaring evidence that they are not preparing students for success. The graduation rate is around 71%, and is markedly worse for African American (56%) and Latino students (54%) (Greene, 2002). Over one-third of students who enroll in college require remedial coursework. On the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 30% of high school seniors scored proficient or advanced in reading, and 27% scored proficient or advanced in math. Especially appalling is the achievement gap, with African American and Latino high school seniors scoring on average at the same level in math and reading as white eighth graders.

The large comprehensive high school is receiving much of the blame for these poor results. In response, the federal government and private funders like the Carnegie Corporation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are investing billions of dollars in high school redesign. Small high schools have become the primary strategy for improving high schools and closing the achievement gap in many urban school districts, including Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, and New York. Proponents argue that small high schools will lead to better educational outcomes for students, particularly poor students of color (Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Ort, 2002; Lee & Smith, 1997; Gladden, 1998; Wasley et al., 2000; Klonsky, 2004).

As small high schools have surged, two issues have become apparent: 1) small high schools often cost more than large high schools and 2) size is not enough—small high schools are not necessarily going to serve students better just because they're small; they have to do things differently. These issues raise two questions: What do we need to do when small high schools are in their critical start-up phase to maximize the likelihood that schools can and will take actions that close the achievement gap? How do we do that with scarce resources?

In urban high schools, where the achievement gap is widest, educators must strategically use their resources of time, people, and money to both minimize cost and maximize teaching and learning, all while serving a student population that, on average, has significant academic and social and emotional needs. Evidence from high performing schools suggests that efficient resource use is essential for creating conditions for increased student achievement (Miles and Darling-Hammond, 1998; Lawrence et al, 2005; Lawrence et al, 2002; Roza, Swartz, and Miller, 2005). My study examines what it looks like when principals who know how to use resources strategically attempt to do so in new small high schools within typical conditions. What are they able to do, what challenges do they face, and what does this suggest about how likely they are to close the achievement gap for their students?

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