

## Big Philanthropy, Small Change

Jennifer Welcome to *Have You Heard*. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Jack And I'm Jack Schneider.

Jennifer Jack, today we're talking about an education reform that already feels like a million years old, in reform time.

Jack So, you're talking about, like a decade or two ago.

Jennifer I am, and I'm talking about small schools.

Now, I happen to know that you've written a page or two about this topic, and our guest has as well. We're talking to a writer named Michael Hobbes, who grew up in Seattle. He attended a comprehensive high school that then became an early subject of the Gates funded pilot experiment in taking big schools, turning them into small schools, and watching miracles happen.

Jack [And he wrote a really great piece about it in Pacific Standard](#)

Jennifer So, he doesn't get into this in our interview today, but he had trouble placing that piece, because editors had a simple question: "*Do small schools work?*"

Jack And that's a question that Bill Gates asked many times, and it eventually led to the demise of the small schools movement. And I think this is a great case for us to look back on as we're considering how the influence of billionaire philanthropists shapes the landscape in public education, because it shapes a particular reform movement. But those movements, then of course, have a much broader effect on public education, on the narrative that gets told about the possibilities for change in public schools. On the approach to public education, and on the kind of policy churn that we end-up seeing from reforms being parachuted down repeatedly, over and over.

Jennifer So this story actually starts when Michael Hobbes gets an idea to go back to the high school that he attended. He was very interested, and we all are, about what's happening with today's teens. He had heard that they'd been destroyed by their devices, that they are unlike any generation in recent history, and he decided he would go embed himself at the high school he attended for two weeks to see for himself where teens went of the rails. Here's Michael Hobbes.

Michael I'm still kind of surprised that they actually let me come there, because this is like the kind of thing that like a "real journalist" would never do. But, we all read these articles about teenagers and the state of teens today and so for years I had read about what's happening with teenagers and these new kids and feeling more and more distant from this new generation. So I thought it'd be interesting to go to a high school and spend time there talking to kids, finding out what's really going on.

Michael

That's literally that's what I wrote to the high school: "Hi, I used to go there, I'm kind of a journalist now, can I just come and hang out and talk to the kids and find out how teens are different now than they were when I was a teen." Surprisingly, they accepted my pitch.

Michael I took 2 weeks off from work, I went to Seattle, and hung out at the school. I had no idea what I would write about, so I furiously took notes the whole time. I talked to guidance counselors, to people who made lunch, janitors, the kids, everybody. Within 15 minutes of getting to the school, I realized the kids were not the story. The kids are interesting, fascinating, great, but I am not worried about them, and neither were the adults. The adults were talking about the world they were educating them in, the world was so much harder, the class sizes had gotten bigger, everything became about the structures the minute you started talking to people about what's going on at the school.

When I was a student at Nathan Hale, it was considered the worst "good school" in Seattle. The students there hadn't gotten into Roosevelt, the good school up the hill. A bunch of kids that kicked out of other schools, a lot of potheads... This might be incorrect, but I think the entering class was 700 kids, and then next year that same cohort had 300 kids, the following year 150, and the graduating class was 65 kids. It was one of those schools that hemorrhaged students, no one was proud to go there. The school wasn't very troubled, but it wasn't a school that anyone seemed to want to attend, and that was very obvious when I was a student.

Through various friends' little brothers, I kept hearing about how Nathan Hale was this turn-around story. They had done this thing with academies, an approach I had never heard of. All of a sudden, this school in a white-trash section of Seattle was now really in-demand. People were moving to the neighborhood and really excited about the school. So, a lot of hearsay, as to the school's turn-around, but I didn't know about the Gates Foundation, and the Department of Education. I didn't know that what was happening at Nathan Hale was a model that was being applied nationally. I just knew that the school was bad when I went there and had become good somehow.

Jennifer We're going to pause Michael's story here, so Jack can provide context. So Michael went back to the giant comprehensive Seattle high school that he once attended, and finds that it's been divided up into academies. What does that mean?

Jack The academies are a way of creating a small school without creating a small school. Another phrase for that is a "school-within-a-school". Academies are the "off-brand" version of a school-within-a-school. When there's no money to build a new small school for each of the "academies" they would be breaking a big school into, they kept the "academies" in the same buildings, but now pretended there were several schools within that large school.

That approach was part of The Gates Foundation's effort to turn all of America's big high schools into small high schools. This, of course, came after they realized that even Gates' money could not produce that kind of infrastructural change. [The US Department of Education also spent about \\$1B USD to apply school-within-a-school model.](#)

Jennifer Let's go back to Michael. He embedded himself at his former high school, and picks up pretty quickly that the changes there go way beyond dividing the school into smaller clusters of kids and teachers. He discovers his former principal and teachers at Nathan Hale spent years reimagining what that school could look like.

Michael What I found out once I began hanging out at the school, is the academies/school-within-a-school approach was very complicated, and there were a lot of issues that didn't get noticed when the idea got scaled up. One of the things that the principal, Mr. Benson, did was 3 or 4 years before they undertook any reforms, he started asking teachers what don't you like about the school, what do you think the school needs. When I was a student at the school, I didn't know this, but my teachers where meeting on Saturday morning at each other's houses to brainstorm what the school could become: What do we want to be different, what do we fail at, what are we good at, etc.

The teachers came up with changes that were more than just clustering the kids into 90 students. They had way more teacher collaboration, a lot of peers sitting in on one another's classes. They called it "teaching with the door open". Teachers attended other teachers' classes and gave critiques...they had 20 minutes of silent reading; they created a homeroom period so they could get to know students. They started the school day later because a lot of the kids were really sleepy. They focused tons of attention on freshman to put them on the trajectory towards college as soon as possible.

So there were all the supporting actions that had been taken that were above and beyond the structural changes, but no one really noticed those things when the idea of academies/school-within-a-school gained traction as a reform approach.

Jack I want to inject here. What Michael is describing is not the small schools movement as it was carried out, just in case podcast listeners say *"Gosh, my school got changed into a small school, but we didn't experience focus group-style rethinking of what we wanted to do as educators."*

What Michael is describing at Nathan Hale is similar to what [Debbie Meier](#) wrote about. She is often referred to as the "godmother" of the small schools movement. She wrote a book, [The Power of Their Ideas](#), where she described her successes at Central Park East in NYC, a small school, but one that was democratically run, was highly diverse socio-economically, where teachers were empowered to shape their own curricula, where they were working with families, where they were up-ending traditional notions about ability. That is a much richer portrait of what needs to happen to turn a school around. Smallness is one part of that the successful experience Debbie Meyers writes about, but that was not the message pushed by the Gates Foundation.

Jennifer There's a particularly telling moment in Michaels's story, when he mentions the reason why Nathan Hale High School lost its Gates Foundation funding: They took too long to implement the reforms. The reason they took too long is the teachers saw the structural changes they were making as a way to address challenges that went beyond fixing the school itself.

Michael What's so interesting when talking to the teachers is they were concerned about splitting the kids into gifted and general population tracks. Such a move was generally accepted in public education. The teachers may have questioned the practice, but not very many parents or district administrators question whether it was good for the kids.

Michael What I would hear from teachers is that there were these kids that were in the normal track, and they were really gifted, and they would push and cajole to get the kids into the gifted classes. The kids would be in the gifted classes for a week or two, and then they'd ask to go back to the normal classes because that's where all their friends were.

So the teachers would see the way tracking students was perpetuating all of the structures of segregation or separation they saw in the culture around them, and they did not want to be part of that. Seattle is one of the most segregated cities in America, and teachers were concerned segregation was occurring in the schools, too, so that was one of the problems they wanted to solve.

Another thing that is important about the changes at Nathan Hale was the extent to which the teachers did them themselves. To have spent 3 years brainstorming and have your staff come up with wild and wacky ideas to change the school. They were talking about having no time periods, no principal, one teacher teaching a bunch of different subjects. They really thought about every single structure that you could imagine and they made a bunch of small tweaks, too. They got rid of bells, which is not a game-changing thing, but reinforced the authoritativeness of the school, and made the teachers and the kids on-edge.

It's because the teachers came up with the changes themselves there were able to implement them. It wasn't being imposed from above. The teachers designed the reforms themselves because Benson was letting them, and the district was letting Benson, [and that turned out to be really consequential](#).

Jennifer I am sitting here watching my co-host Jack Schneider, get more and more excited, agitated...

Jack Apoplectic.

Jennifer What Michael is recounting is like many of your books rolled into one.

Jack It's a book burrito.

Jennifer We're hearing about something that worked, and yet, the idea that you could go and pitch this to a foundation...

Jack Can you imagine that pitch meeting? *"We want a billion dollars to let educators think through stuff for a few years, and we don't really know what the outcome is going to be, but we think it's going to be good for kids."*

Jennifer So, what do you think when you hear Michael describing the teachers getting together and envisioning how they might change not just problems within the school, but how they might change problems within the city?

Jack They are like unicorns leaping over my heart, when I hear that. But, then the unicorns are immediately falling into a deep chasm because I am imaging some philanthropist hearing this pitch and saying *"OK, but what's the part that's going to lift human achievement?"*

The teachers say *"We're going to do all these different things, and teachers are going to meet, and part of it is that the schools going to be a little smaller..."*

Jack The philanthropist goes, *“So, we’re going to do small schools, and the result is going to be increased student achievement?”*

You can just see the reform dying. It has, to use one of your turns of phrase, “the seeds of its own demise sown into it from the very beginning.”

Jennifer And that’s a pretty good description of where Michael’s story goes next. He starts to investigate the “chasm”, as you just called it—there are no unicorns, but there is definitely a chasm—between the re-imagining of Nathan Hale High School and what happened when the Gates Foundation set out to take their small schools idea to scale.

Michael That chasm occurred in a lot of places. After I spent time at Nathan Hale, I pulled evaluations for about 1,200 new small schools established across the country, and 800 schools-within-a-school, based on grants made by Gates Foundation and the US Department of Education.

When looking at the evaluations, it was fascinating how fast reform was implemented. A bunch of schools in Florida closed in June as large schools, and then opened in September as small schools. So, they had 3 months to make change, where Nathan Hale had 3 years.

A lot of the teachers didn’t know why the change was being made at their school. Some consultant wearing a suit would come in and say *“Hey, from now all the kids are going to be in clusters.”* But it wasn’t clear the changes were really responding to the needs of that particular school or responding to the concerns of the teachers.

The small school reforms at Nathan Hale were based on teachers who were really concerned that the kids weren’t getting to know each other and weren’t getting role models. As for other schools, it’s not clear the teachers diagnosed that to be the problem.

Jennifer So there’s one little detail that I have not shared yet. Michael mentioned at the very beginning of this episode that he’s pretty new to journalism. He’s only been writing professionally for a couple of years, and this particular subject, education reform, was brand new to him when he started this story. His background is actually in international development. The more he learned about the small schools experiment and the efforts to “super-size it, the more familiar things felt.

Michael What it really reminded me of was the same mistakes we make in international development.

Michael Something happens, it’s a small pilot program done by really committed people that really love their work and care about the communities they’re in, and they get these great results. When everyone from outside starts looking at these great results, they don’t skeptically look at why those results happened, or what the key components of what those reforms really were.

Michael Example: Microfinance, something that everyone was really excited about for years and years. Then it gets scaled up to almost every country in the world, and in more than half of them it doesn't work all that well. That's because we never looked at why does microfinance work in South Asia so well, why it works when it's implemented by these people that care really deeply about it. Nobody really asked what it was about microfinance that really helped.

That's what happened with small schools movement. No one asked why they were working, and what are the conditions for their success. They became simply a structural reform, so when it scales up to these hundreds of others schools in the country, it becomes about smallness. Not "*Are the teachers and parents on board, is this the correct diagnosis, do people feel in control? Do people have the funding to roll-out changes? Are they being done effectively?*" All of those important considerations were overlooked in favor of structure, but structure was 1/10 or 1/5 of why it worked at Nathan Hale.

No one was really interested in how a small school really worked or skeptically trying to roll-out that reform slowly, to figure out is this really the right solution for every school.

Maybe small schools was the right reform for Nathan Hale and maybe it wasn't. I have this belief that the control that the teachers had, the ownership that the teachers felt is why it worked. It's not really the idea, it's the fact that every single teacher in the school really felt strongly about it.

Jack: We've talked a bit about why big-money philanthropists would be interested in small school as a reform because it's so scalable, so seemingly replicable. But, the thing Michael is talking about is an equally important part of the puzzle, the belief that improving schools is simple work that requires only common sense thinking. That belief is something you begin to see in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and carries into today. It's a really arrogant notion that schools aren't that complicated, that you can look at schools to see what works and scale it up.

With small schools, you have Bill Gates publically saying something along the lines of "[\*I went to a small school, and that seemed to really work\*](#)" when he went to Lakeside, a very elite private school. And then Tom Vander Ark, who was then the number-one education person at the Gates Foundation saying "*My wife and I went to small schools in Denver*". Those also were private schools.

So you can almost see the cogs turning in Gates and Vander Ark's brains, them concluding that small equals good. They got 100% correlation from 3 cases, so turn all the schools into small schools. "*We've solved this, baby!*" It so amazing to hear that process come across is such nitty-gritty detail in Michael's' story.

Jennifer And because Nathan Hale is in Seattle, it isn't just a story about big philanthropy, it's a story about a big philanthropist. It's not just any school makeover, there in Bill Gates' backyard...

Jack Right. So, it's a really interesting case study in what we do and don't see depending on who we are.

Michael It's a bummer. I don't know how else to put it. You would think that being so close that Gates Foundation could have stopped by the school and talked to Mr. Benson about why the reforms worked and how he came to the reforms, and talk to teachers about how important it was they were on board for the reforms. But it seemed like what happened is what always happens, what I see in international development so much, the reform becomes a totem. There's this obvious idea--let's split up all the schools into smaller ones--without really figuring out or asking or being interested in why the reforms worked in the first place.

It's important to note that at the same time the small school reforms were rolling out, No Child Left Behind was rolling out. So when small school reforms became this big totem the whole country was looking to, what they were interested in was graduation rates, drug use, kids knowing teachers, and the idea of "drop-out factories": That kids were going to these giant schools not really knowing any of the adults within them.

But by the time the Gates Foundation lost interest in small schools reform, everything was about standardized tests. So, when you read the original evaluations of the small learning communities reforms, they're not really talking about standardized tests that much. A lot of it is about attendance rates, graduation rates, and drop-out rates, but by the time they are over, they are saying the small school reforms have failed because they are not affecting standardized test scores, but no one set out to affect standardized test scores.

Part of the foundation-ization of education in America, one of the bad effects of that is they keep moving the goalposts. The diagnosis of what ails education in America used to be graduation rates and the culture-of-poverty stuff, and now it's moved on to standardized test scores. The schools are saying, *"The problem we were trying to solve is no longer the problem you want us to solve, so you're blaming us for not solving this new problem, and that wasn't what we set out to accomplish."*

Jennifer As Michael dug into the "metrics" of the experiment, he found a lot of evidence that the small schools experiment resulted in measurable gains for students, but there was a catch.

Michael Some of the evaluations I was reading about schools around the country that implemented small learning communities, the reason they were seen as "failures" was schools weren't hitting their targets.

Schools had targets for graduation rates, or targets for attendance rates, targets for standardized test scores they needed to reach. When you read the consultants' reports, you find out schools were setting targets at 100% graduation rates, because it's a tragedy if any kid doesn't graduate, so our target is a 100%.

Michael So, when schools had been graduating only 50% or 60% of students, and improved the graduation rates, they weren't given credit for the gains they did achieve, because it was less than the completely unrealistic target of 100%. The consultants were telling the schools they failed because they weren't looking at the improvement holistically.

Another effect of philanthropists getting into education: Consultants who are brought in to evaluate school reforms are not looking at things holistically. They are ticking boxes and auditing the school for somewhat arbitrary improvements without looking at whether the school got better after all. They are just looking for targets being reached and it becomes a binary distinction.

Jennifer What is appealing about huge, scaled-up reforms is idea they can happen anywhere. What's amazing about Michaels's story is he goes to the school and spends 2 weeks listening to people and learning everything about it, but he feels the city and the state encroaching. He realizes what a powerful effect that has, that you can't separate the school from the environment it's in, from the neighborhood and the larger community.

Jack Totally. It's like dropping down a new species into an ecosystem, and expecting that is going to thrive in the same way it did in the ecosystem you wrenched it out of. Of course, nature is going to act upon this little reform you've dropped down, and it's going to shift the context, in a ways that perhaps completely undermines the goals of the reform.

Michael That's another thing that was so depressing about spending time at the school. It's not the ideas have failed, it's that everything supporting them has failed.

In 1992 , Seattle passed an anti-tax referendum--the kind that always win elections but completely cripple every city in the state—that said the revenue from property taxes can only grow at 1% per year. So if the city wants to do anything above that rate, they have to send a levy to voters to top-up their funding.

Inflation is 2% every year, and since city revenue can only grow at 1% every year that means every year is a budget cut. Seattle is one of the fastest growing cities in America, and yet in every year the city's budget funds are decreasing. The only way we can fund our schools is through these education levies they put to the voters, and they always pass, but according to the Washington state constitution, the levies can only fund special projects, they can't fund basic operation.

So, the school I am profiling, Nathan Hale, got an \$80 M renovation over the last couple of years, but it can't keep the heat on past 3:10 pm every day because you can't pay for that with levy funding.

So what that means for the schools is ballooning class sizes. Class size used to be 23-25 kids, and that was a huge goal of the reformers to keep class sizes small, but now some of the classes are 35 kids, and in general 28,30,32 kids, and that's just a completely different classroom. You've got kids of very different abilities, that speak different languages, kids on the autism spectrum...20% of the school has IEPs, what we used to call Special Ed, so in a class of 32 kids, that is 6 kids that need special assistance, and it's really hard to run a classroom like that. Individual tailoring to student needs is so much easier at 23 kids per class than it is at 32.

Michael Over and over I heard teachers say kids were falling through the cracks, but they didn't know what they could do about it. Seeing 150 kids per day, not being able to remembers the needs all of them have, and not being to slow down...The teachers have to keep going, which breaks the hearts of the teachers, but it's not the ideas that have failed, it's just that there isn't enough time, there aren't enough resources to really take care of these kids in the ways that the teachers originally wanted.

Jennifer That was Michael Hobbes. He's the author of "[The Afterlife of Big Ideas in Education Reform](#)", a story that ran this summer in *Pacific Standard* magazine

Jack Speaking of afterlives, I think it's worth returning to talk about the way the Gates Foundation transitioned away from this. It was a big deal when Bill Gates announced the Foundation was going to drop its small schools initiative.

Jack Instead of seeing some flaw in their own design, Gates and others really doubled-down on this approach to school reform. In fact, Gates said the letdowns of the small schools movement “[underscored the need to aim high and embrace change in America’s schools](#)”, which is so illustrative of the commonsense approach to school reform.

I have in front of me a [2014 study by MDRC](#), which found that graduation rates in NYC improved by 9.5% at its high schools, and that was across every student demographic group. [Another study by a team at Northwestern University](#) found similar increases in high school graduation rates in Chicago’s public schools.

Small schools, as it turns out, do exactly what you might think: They allow for stronger kinds of relationships, which ultimately may help keep kids in school, and build school culture. But, small schools probably don’t radically transform a school on their own and produces the kinds of gains in student achievement as measures by standardized test scores, which became the coin of the realm.

Instead of recognizing the importance of context, or the inescapable complexity of education, the said small schools failed, they had picked the wrong horse and were going to place their bets on something else. That is a recipe for policy churn that distracts us from the real work of school improvement, which as Michael described is so much slower and messier and bottom-up than using common sense and trying to take something to scale.

Jennifer There is so much in Michael’s’ story that really stayed with me, but the image I can’t shake is our recent history of bold education reform might look different had some officials from the Gates Foundation visited this school in their back yard, and actually talked to administrators and teachers about what was working. If they went back there today and was how Seattle is straining against political spending limits that have been imposed, perhaps Gates might change course again.

Jack Although, that of course would depend on a foundation designed with a particular purpose, and a particular kind of purse, being able to see in particular kind of way, which would be surprising to me.

Jennifer Well, on that grim note, I’m Jennifer Berkshire.

Jack And I’m Jack Schneider.

Jennifer Thank you for listening to *Have you Heard*.