

In Cramped Spaces, Small School Benefits

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NEW YORK CITY, N.Y. -- Ben Sherman, principal of the new East-West School of International Studies in Flushing, Queens, was mortified one morning when a fire drill unexpectedly interrupted a cultural program, sending students and visitors from Korea scurrying outside. The drill had been planned by the principal of Intermediate School 237, whose building Mr. Sherman's school shares and who was unaware of the performance because of what both now say was poor communication.

Relations were difficult. "He expected us to throw up our arms and welcome him," I.S. 237's longtime principal, Joseph D. Cantara, said of Mr. Sherman. "I didn't like the idea of another school coming into my building." But after a tense year, Mr. Sherman said he swallowed his ego and started popping by Mr. Cantara's office for daily advice. Over dinner, they found that Mr. Cantara had been a student teacher at Mr. Sherman's elementary school. Lately, when their monthly meeting arrives, "there's almost nothing to talk about," Mr. Sherman said.

Similar dramas are playing out across New York, where 42 percent of 1,577 traditional public and charter schools, with more than a quarter of the city's 1 million-plus students, now cohabit with at least one other school, and as many as five. And throughout the country, as large failing high schools are replaced with small ones and independently run charters, the days when a school was defined by its building, with its principal as mayor, are starting to go the way of the slide rule and card catalog.

In Chicago, under the leadership of Arne Duncan — President-elect Barack Obama's nominee to be secretary of education — sharing space has gone from a rare phenomenon to now include 12 percent of schools, including charters. In Los Angeles, officials plan to break up many campuses with more than 1,000 students starting in 2010 — a task that will be eased by the fact that many consist of multiple buildings. And in Denver, where a decline in enrollment has left many classrooms empty, officials have looked to New York and Chicago for advice on coexistence.

Education officials in New York acknowledged that sharing is not always ideal, but say the benefits of small schools are worth the skirmishes over space. "If we could wave a wand and have different buildings for every school, then we would, but we can't," said Garth Harries, who oversees the Department of Education's array of small schools, charter schools and specialized programs. "The conception of school has outgrown the buildings that we have, so it creates the need for some additional problem-solving and additional work."

Hence the requirement for building councils, where neighboring principals debate thorny questions that often seem to require the wisdom of Solomon, or at least a skilled group therapist. Who gets to eat at noon and who is relegated to 9:42 a.m. at Walton High in the Bronx, where interschool scuffles in the cafeteria last year led the five component schools to establish separate lunch periods? How does the principal at the Bayard Rustin Educational Complex in the Chelsea section of Manhattan explain to her students that they cannot wear hats or pop into pizzerias during school hours, as do their peers at the James Baldwin School, on their building's third floor? Should high schoolers at the Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice near the old Brooklyn

Navy Yard have had privileges at Public School 287's library, with its tiny chairs and picture books?

And how can the principal of P.S. 40 in Bedford-Stuyvesant reassure parents jittery at the thought of their delicate kindergartners traversing the same hallways as the towering teenagers of the Gotham Professional Arts Academy? One senior manager who works with more than two dozen principals around the city, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear that she would suffer professionally, said she was dismayed by the "inordinate amount of their time" that principals spend on such matters, "rather than focusing on teaching and learning." She noted: "A ship can have only one captain."

Getting along is often complicated by a power imbalance between the "host" school and the newcomers. The hosts are often large schools in the process of being shut down after being branded failures, with teachers and students who resent being eclipsed by the favored new small schools. Eva S. Moskowitz, who runs four charter schools inside Harlem school buildings, recalled one principal refusing to unlock closets in her area of the building, and a colleague whose school was not allowed to use a well-kept field on a shared campus. "The D.O.E. talks about the host principal," Ms. Moskowitz said. "I don't think I'm the guest. I'm a roommate."

Among the stickiest situations are those that involve students of different ages. Outside P.S. 40, where first graders with princess backpacks cross paths with Gotham seniors in jeans and puffy jackets, some mothers said they cringed when overhearing the older kids curse within earshot of their children. "There's always some kind of outburst with them," said Patricia Kellman, whose daughter is in fifth grade. "It doesn't feel right."

Mr. Harries said schools were getting better at working together, but acknowledged that conflicts persist. Of the Thomas Jefferson campus in East New York, where four schools split the former home of a school closed in 2007, Mr. Harries said: "That's not a place where the principals would be singing 'Kumbaya' together."

The Education Department has introduced a handbook for cohabitation with discussion questions like "Can you agree to disagree?" and hired a former principal to train administrators in mediation techniques and building council policy. But some principals say they need someone to act as a marriage counselor — or family court judge. "If you have two principals in the building and they disagree about who's going to have lunch at what time, you have to have a mechanism to resolve that dispute," said Seth Andrew, who runs the Democracy Prep Charter School in Harlem, which has its own building this year after cohabitating with P.S. 92 and Middle School 344, which he said barred his students from libraries and computer labs.

Some schools have been perennial nomads. Peace and Diversity Academy opened in 2004 on the first floor of Herbert H. Lehman High School in the Bronx, then moved to the second floor, then back to the first. Last year, teachers once again boxed up books and bulletin-board decorations for a move to a building more than three miles away; some two dozen students stayed at Lehman to continue playing sports or avoid the commute. Now, Peace and Diversity's 328 high school students study alongside the 435 prekindergarten to sixth-grade students of the

Cornerstone Academy for Social Action.

To ease the inevitable tension, the high school principal, Andrew Turay, has his cafeteria-bound students exit the building and pop back in through another door to avoid trampling past the little ones' classrooms. This summer, Peace and Diversity is slated to move again.

Some principals try to spin their corners of the building into insular cocoons. The principal of James Baldwin, one of two small high schools that share a building with the 1,500-plus-student Bayard Rustin, limits his students to one of the five staircases, and keeps them out of the cafeteria, instead letting them lunch off-campus or in a classroom. "Once you start mingling with people that you don't know, you lose the personalization," explained the principal at James Baldwin, Elijah Hawkes. "If you dilute it with 100 strange faces that you interact with on a given day, then you're diluting the degree of interpersonal knowledge in your community."

Another casualty of the changed landscape can be sports programs, which are difficult to maintain when different schools run on different schedules — and some small-school leaders shy away from joint activities. Paul Ferguson, a Bronx gym teacher, thought a lacrosse team would do wonders for the five high schools that coexist inside what was once the mammoth Walton High. But after collecting signatures from 80 supportive students last spring and finding a lacrosse group that would provide free equipment, Mr. Ferguson was unable to get the necessary letter of approval from the campus's coterie of principals.

"If there was one principal, at least we'd have someone to really pin it down to," Mr. Ferguson said. "There's a lot less accountability."

At the Theodore Roosevelt Educational Campus, also in the Bronx, the 22 varsity and junior varsity sports teams have been winnowed to seven since small schools began to sprout in 2002. Wilper Morales, one of six principals at Roosevelt, dreams of uniting all students with a football team and its spirited accoutrements: "A marching band, cheerleaders and dancers and rah-rah-rah, pep rallies."

Though Mr. Morales has to convince his colleagues that the benefits outweigh the costs (roughly \$40,000 over three years), he organized an intramural flag football tournament this fall. On a chilly Monday, a cluster of girls acted as cheerleaders at the final game, between his school, West Bronx Academy for the Future, and Belmont Prep. Jacqueline Quinonez, 15, a bubbly sophomore at West Bronx, mused that a campuswide team might be better. That way, if her team lost — as West Bronx did that afternoon — students would at least not have to face the victors the next day in the hallway